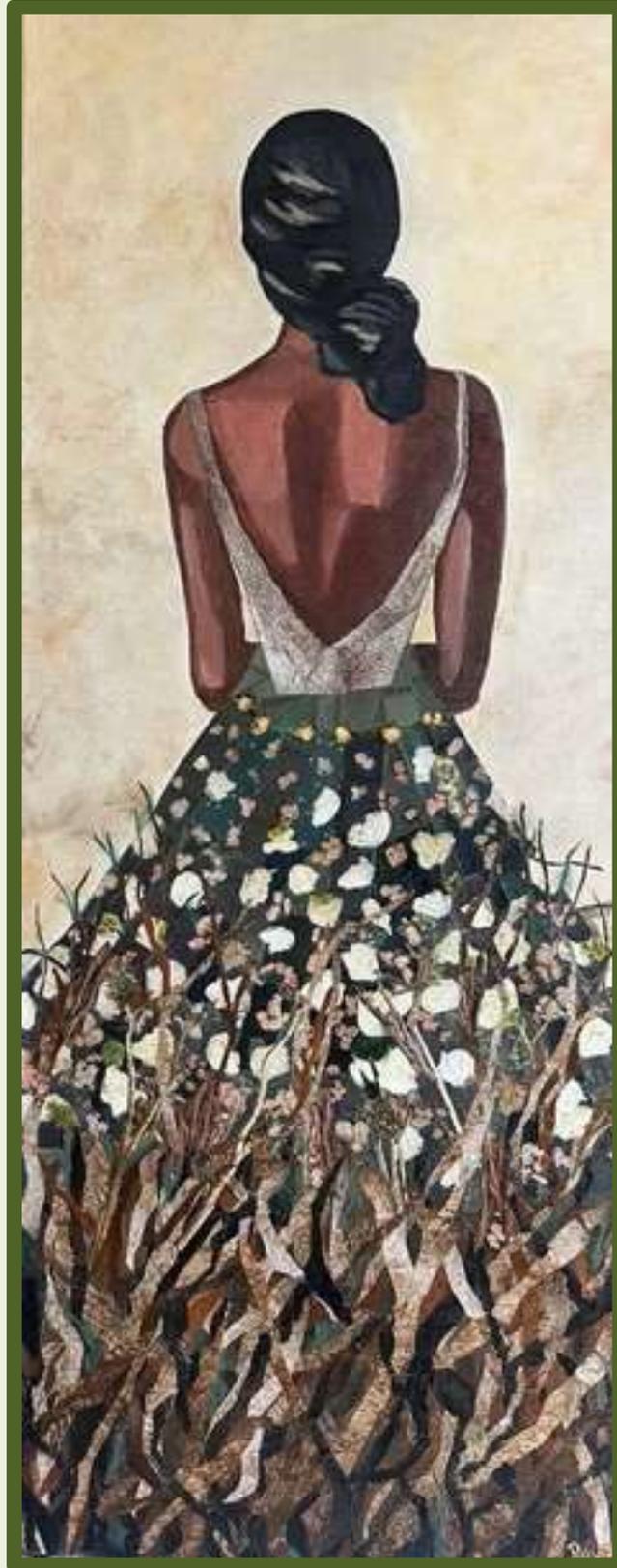


Bloom

SUMMER 2025

DANDELION REVOLUTION PRESS



Website: www.DandelionRevolutionPress
Instagram: [@dandelion_revolution_press](https://www.instagram.com/dandelion_revolution_press)
Substack: [@dandelionrevolutionpress](https://www.substack.com/p/dandelionrevolutionpress)

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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 discovered the publishing process and championed stories featuring memorable, dynamic female characters. In 2024, we continued our momentum with two online collections of creative works, expanding our scope to include fiction and creative nonfiction. We remain committed to our mission of sharing female-forward stories with the world.

For our Summer 2025 issue, the theme "Bloom," allowed us to select stories that explored personal evolution, resilience, and embracing new beginnings. We continue to showcase women characters and narrators who shine in their complexities—bold, flawed, and unapologetically themselves. Women who weren't afraid of the raw, real, and edgy side of growth.

We chose pieces from global contributors who have interpreted the theme in distinctive styles, genres, and voices. Our creative nonfiction features insightful essays centered on real-life experiences. Some of these stories are rooted in nature, while other blossom with metaphor—wild and daring and brilliant. After each story, we invite you to linger in the worlds these writers cultivated, opening their words into your heart like secret seeds—reading to crack open, take root, and bloom.

DRP is also proud to introduce two featured artists, Reshma Gorde and Manman Huang, whose works beautifully complement the spirit of our stories. We found their pieces to deftly capture the nuances and emotions of our theme through their selection of subjects and symbolism. Their paintings mirror the complexity of our stories, reflecting on the growth from shadows into light.

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

Ashini J. Desai
Paige Gardner

Editorial Team

Natalya Bucuy
Jessica Kaplan
Jules McLaughlin
Swapna Padhye
Scarlet Wyvern

Cover Art: “Grounded,” Reshma Gorde

Featured Artist: Reshma Gorde

Reshma Gorde is a self-taught artist whose journey began with painting travel diaries and portraits, eventually evolving into abstract works. Her growing passion for creative expression led her to leave a successful corporate career and embrace art as a full-time pursuit. Inspired deeply by nature, her recent works celebrate the rhythms and colors of the natural world. Each piece is created with the hope of sparking a conversation and encouraging a personal connection between the viewer and the imagery. Her art is not only a reflection of the world around us, but also an invitation to look inward. Her website is www.artbyraysh.com and she shares her artwork on Instagram [@artbyraysh](https://www.instagram.com/artbyraysh).

Featured Artist: Manman Huang

Manman is an emerging professional artist. A native of China and a former educator, her art has been displayed in galleries and museums, including New Jersey Arts Annual, Rutgers University and the Newark Museum of Art. Her paintings have been collected by public institutions in New Jersey and private collectors in the United States and China. She has conducted painting classes at several libraries and community centers. Manman holds a bachelor’s degree in sociology and a master’s degree in history. She resides in Maplewood, New Jersey with her husband and three children. Her website is www.manmanhuang.com and she can be found on Instagram [@mama.manman](https://www.instagram.com/mama.manman).

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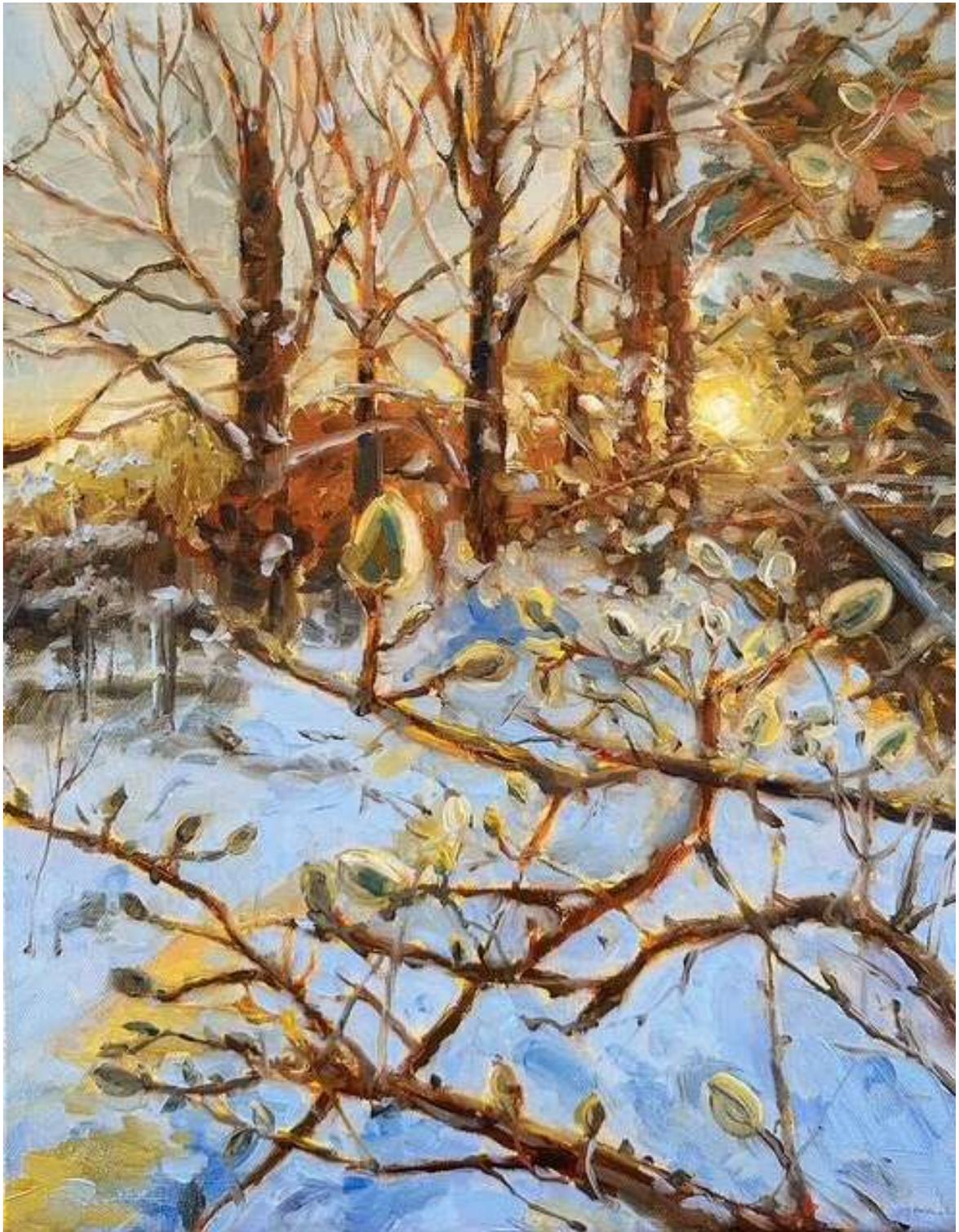
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POETRY



"MAGNOLIA" MANMAN HUANG

The Ones Who Stayed Soft *by Melissa Anderson*

Most blooming is done in quiet.

One day, you look and notice there are blooms on your spider plant.

That the tulips have opened, somehow, overnight.

That the front bushes are dotted in pink—

tiny, tender declarations that must have blossomed when no one was looking.

Not all blooming is loud.

Some of it happens in the hush—

in the waiting, the wondering, the weathering.

In the faithful showing up.

In the holding on, when it would be easier to harden.

This is for the ones who stayed soft.

This is for the ones who don't want acclaim.

Who bloom for the sake of their own soul—

stretching, softening, unfolding.

Who tend beauty in secret.

Who offer their blossoms not for applause, but for love.

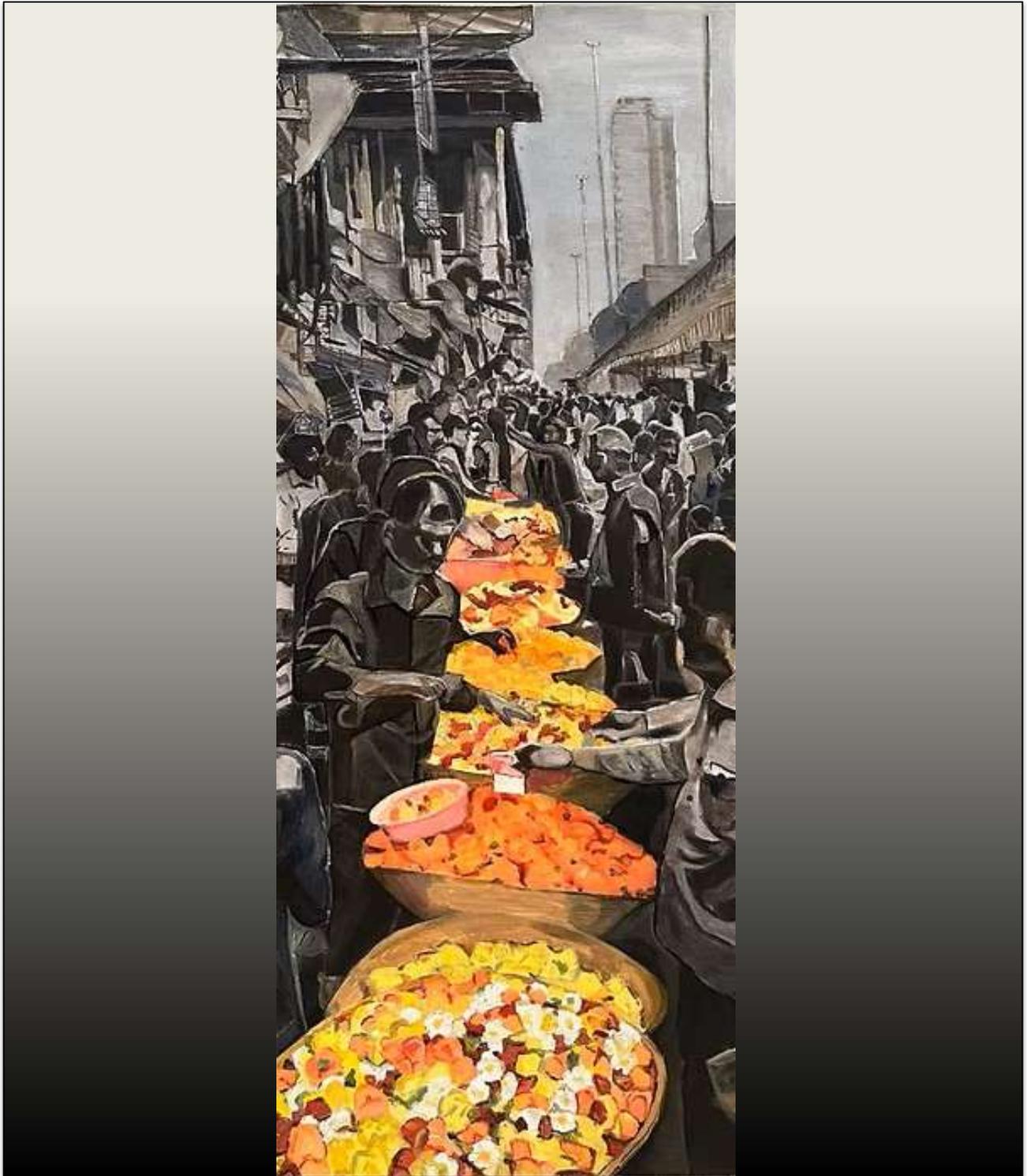
For the ones who create with no intention of selling—

just to give something of themselves away.

A gift. A whisper. A ministry.

Melissa Anderson is a writer, artist, and photographer who explores themes of healing, resilience, motherhood, and joy. Through her Substack, *Let's Find Joy*, she reflects on the beauty found in ordinary moments and the light that threads through life's challenges. She recently relocated from Seattle, Washington to Kansas to build a life of slow joy on ten wide-open acres. Her work blends poetic insight with personal reflection, often drawing from her experiences as a homeschooling mother of three. Melissa is passionate about capturing the sacred in the everyday—whether through words, paint, or the lens of a camera. Her links can be found at gravatar.com/letsfindjoytoday.

FICTION



"MUMBAI FLOWER MARKET" RESHMA GORDE

Violet Tide *by Jules McLaughlin*

I have always thought the sea sounds quieter at night. I know it is a trick of perception—darkness obscuring the waves, the shifting winds and tides, the emptiness of the shore—that lends a lullaby quality to the atmosphere. It is a comfort I have always kept to myself, first as a restless child, now as a marine microbiologist. Like a secret between the ocean and me, the only cure for my insomnia.

I used to go barefoot on these midnight forays, but the pollution has reached toxic levels over the past few decades. Now, the days are as silent as the nights, devoid of calling gulls, devoid of playful voices rising on the wind. Now the scent of brine hides beneath a blanket of rotting vegetation, decaying sea life, and the sulfurous stench of pollution. The waves land in muted slaps, clogged with algae, overgrowths of invasive seaweed, and clumps of garbage. No wonder my walks no longer soothe me like they once did.

And yet, old habits die hard. I turn back for the night, when a flare of light fills the sky behind me. By the time I turn, it is already fading. I squint as the pulsing white glow contracts to a single violet-tinted blur, maybe half a mile down the coast. I should go back, try to get some sleep, but the air hums in time with the pulsing light, holding my gaze and compelling me forward. I hardly blink while I jog-walk towards the light. Even though it fades with each pulse I keep my eyes fixed on its point of origin. I arrive at a section of beach, dotted with desolate tidepools and slimy clots of seaweed, no different from any other stretch of shore along the New England coast.

I almost miss it, a fading glimmer from one of the larger tidepools. I crouch at its edge amongst broken shells, wrinkling my nose at the putrid stink rising from the water. The violet-white glow pulses from beneath the scummy surface, fading, fading, until it is nearly imperceptible. I lean closer on my hands and knees.

I slip, scrabble, slide—*slice*—my palm catches on a shard of shell, sharp enough to cut deep on its way into the pool, but I catch myself before toppling in. I yelp, a sound far too loud for the night, shivering with the sudden certainty that I have caught something's attention.

I pull back, wiping the oily scum from my hand. I hold it close to my face, squinting in the murky overcast night. Dark blood flows from the cut, trickles down my wrist. I swear I see a faint glimmer, a pale glow, but I blink, and it is gone. I turn my attention back to the pool; it, too, has gone dark.



“Dr. Kana?” The voice swims to the surface of my consciousness. “Uh, Emmaline?”

My eyes snap open. *Damn!* I fell asleep at my desk. One of our lab assistants, a young grad student,

peers into my office. His eyes widen as I turn my attention to him. I cannot remember his name.

“What can I do for you?” My voice wavers, as the pain from last night’s misadventure wakes up. My hand throbs beneath its bandage, my arm aches from the tetanus shot, and my stomach roils from the antibiotics.

He clears his throat, pointedly looking away from me. “There’s a call for you? Professor Vassilakos.”

I stifle a sigh; I must have dozed off for hours. “Right. Send him through.”

The phone rings a moment later.

“Dr. Kana! How are you today?” I wince at the boisterous voice of Professor Kostas Vassilakos, lead researcher at Archipelagos Institute in Greece. “Ready to save the world?”

This pulls a weary smile from my lips. We have been sharing our results for years, collaborating on a project to develop hybrid microorganisms to fight marine pollution. Our weekly phone calls have grown shorter; progress is slow, nothing new to report, the struggle to acquire funding takes half our time anyway.

“Kostas, I’m scared.”

“I know Em. I worry too.”

“I’m afraid we’ve already run out of time.”

“I don’t know about that...we keep at it, we find a way.”

“The ocean is dying. The planet won’t survive without it. *We* won’t survive without it. Does no one understand this?”

“Plenty of us do, you know that.”

“Is it enough?”

“It will have to be.”

“I can’t sleep. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Emmaline, take care of yourself. Maybe we should catch up by email next week?”

“Sure.”

I hang up without saying goodbye. I should not waste time complaining; there is too much work to do.



That night, I walk back to the tidepool. I have no hope for sleep with the stitches itching and pulling in my flesh. The sky is clear tonight and the stars light my way. The tidepool reflects them back like a mirror—I gasp. The water is clear as the sky, no layer of scum, no foul odor. I dip my good hand beneath the surface. A faint trail of violet-white bioluminescence follows in its wake. My fingertips tingle in time with my pulse and my wounded hand itches furiously with a sudden, sharp burn. I sit beside the pool for hours, swirling my fingers in the water, mesmerized by the glowing patterns. My pulse steadies, my heart rate slows, my mind settles. By the time I return to the staff quarters my bandaged hand has stopped throbbing and I fall asleep as soon as I lay down.



The next night, a wink of motion and a tiny splash makes my heart skip. As I reach the edge, a green crab vanishes between fronds of bladder wrack. Barnacles cling to rocks and a sea anemone lazily waves its myriad arms. Periwinkles graze on sea lettuce and a sea star inches along the bottom. A tear trickles down my cheek and falls into the pool. I have not seen such an abundance of life since I was a child. I gaze in rapture half the night, the hum of life like a countermelody to the pulsing of the surf. On my way back, the surrounding pools wink at me with smooth, clear surfaces, waiting for high tide.



The following night, I fill glass vials with water and samples of seaweed and algae. That same bioluminescence flares to life when my skin touches the water, though it doesn't seem to react the same way to the teeming inhabitants of the pool. The wound on my hand tingles, although I've kept it well away from the water. I leave early that night, though my heart aches to stay. I am eager to get back to my lab.



In my lab, where the only light comes from the glow of my microscope, I isolate dozens of species of phytoplanktons, zooplanktons, beneficial algae, and native seaweed. Only one of them I don't recognize, so I send it to the DNA lab for full genome mapping. The water's nutrient composition, salinity, mineral and chemical levels are all within range for prime biodiversity. Somehow, the microcosm of this tidepool has achieved perfect balance. Just before dawn, at high tide, I make the trek. The sight of my pool submerged beneath the poisoned sea fills me with apprehension, even though I know it has continued to thrive these past few days. The waves lap gently, revealing glimpses of the rock formations that border my pool. Bioluminescence glows brighter with each wave, stronger around my pool, but just as eager to follow the currents out to sea. The air smells better, fresher. I find a place to settle, and I

wait.

The sun rises; the tide recedes. I creep closer, heedless of the wavelets. I take hourly samples as the dormant pool comes to life. The bioluminescence fades with each passing hour, and by the time I return to my lab, the contents of each vial has become identical. I pull down the shades, turn off the lights. I unwrap my bandaged hands and pour each vial into my wound. The water glows where it touches, clinging in a way that shouldn't make sense. The wound burns pleasantly, like a hot wax treatment. Something in my blood reaches for something in the water, like two halves of a whole longing to reunite. My whole body hums.



The report has come back for my mystery organism. It contains strands of DNA that don't match any known life form. It also contains strands of human DNA. I flex my hand, where only a tight white scar remains; I removed the sutures myself this morning, after only five days. I spend all day in the lab, shades drawn. I have come to prefer the dark.

Two nights later, I return to the sea. I have not slept for over 48 hours, yet I tremble with pent-up energy. I turn north, the opposite direction from my pool, and I find one just as sickly as mine was a week ago.

This time, I come with a full vial and leave with an empty one.



I sleep deeply that night, better than I have in months, maybe years. I wake in the late morning to a pounding at my door.

“Dr. Kana?” One of the junior research staff, her voice frantic. While I am known as an early riser and workaholic, I do not understand her urgency. “You have to come see this.”

I squint as I follow her down the path through the dunes, the sunlight an unexpected burn in my eyes. The rest of the staff of the New England Center for Marine Sciences clusters on the beach. At first, I do not understand what I see. The waves roll in soft, pale swells. My pulse swells with them. I walk to the edge of the surf. Someone calls my name. Someone tries to grab my arm. I bend down and reach into the sea, bringing up a handful of lavender algae, nearly white in its paleness, with delicate threads of violet lacing through the webbing. The bloom spreads up and down the coast, no end in sight.

I turn back to the others, grinning. I inhale deeply, my eyes closing in rapture.

“Can't you smell the difference already?”

Without waiting for a reply, I hurry to last night's pool. Little clumps of the pale algae cling to its

edges, but otherwise the water shines crystal clear in the morning sun.

I tell the others what I have been working on, though I leave out a few details. All they need to know is that I finally made the breakthrough I have spent half my life working on. I have perfected the hybrid. They are not happy right now, but they will be. There have already been calls from the Coast Guard, the EPA, and the CDC. I tell them to schedule a press conference.

Back at the lab, I send a quick email: *I did it, Kostas. I am saving the world.*



Within days, the Violet Tide spreads across the entire planet. Images from the International Space Station show a tie-dyed world of purples and blues by day, and light show to rival the aurora borealis by night. Coastal research labs around the world confirm my reports: it is harmless to all organic life. It is cleaning the oceans at an exponential rate. Already, atmospheric pollution levels are decreasing. The spent algae is a universal source of nutrition for sea life, and biodiversity is on the rise as once struggling species now glut themselves.

I do not like the cameras, the interviews. I let my colleagues handle that. There is talk of a Nobel Prize. I spend my days in my lab, monitoring data trends. My nights on the beach, bathing in the glow of the Violet Tide.



The first reports of freshwater super blooms come a week later. First it travels up estuaries, where it adapts to freshwater conditions. It follows rivers to their sources. It overtakes harmful algal blooms in lakes and ponds. It breaks down inorganic particulates, oil slicks, and toxic runoff.

Another round of press conferences, another round of unnecessary panic. This is a good thing, I reassure them. This is how it should be. There is no threat to your agriculture, to your drinking water, to your children. This is how we fix our mistakes. The evidence is irrefutable, even when it adapts spores that survive evaporation. It fills the clouds, it falls with the rain, it seeps into the groundwater. It purifies everything it touches.

Some complain about the glow—brighter where pollution is worse. I assure them it will subside once the bloom has done its work. I show them the statistics, the graphs and charts. I show them photographs of restored habitats, smiling faces.

Look, I say. See for yourselves. Taste the water.

At least I'm the only one who can hear it.



What have you done? Kostas' voice sounds tinny and distant on my cell phone. I did not know he had this number. I delete the voicemail before I hear any more.



An oil tanker sinks off the coast of South America, its steel hull dissolved like paper. No one is hurt, except the billionaires who lose their profit. An off-shore oil rig—the same one where the sunk tanker had just filled up—crumbles into the sea.

A text from Kostas: Ignore me all you want. You must fix this. I will help you. Someone else will find out sooner or later.

It does not matter now.

The Violet Tide takes fishing trawlers and whaling ships. It seeps up runoff pipes and destroys factories and chemical plants. Slow, steady, inevitable, always seeking the source of the contamination. Everyone gets out in time.

NECMS works diligently, day and night, searching for a way to stem the tide. I feed them false data.



Synthetic materials of any kind are no longer safe. Plastic buoys, kayaks, fiberglass yachts, cruise ships. The islands of floating garbage are long gone. Fish populations surge, birds thrive, native plants blossom with renewed vigor. There is talk of a court martial, interrogation, fines.



It's not too late. Let me help you fix this.

I throw my phone into the sea.



Bridges collapse; their supports reduced to flaking rust and shifting sand. Thousands die before they figure it out. The Violet Tide now takes anything formed by human hands and returns them to their base components. They ask all the wrong questions: *How does it evolve so quickly? How does it know the difference?*

It is because I have always known the difference. I have always known the problem. I have always known the solution.



I have not seen a human in days. I have no further use for them, for their walls or their roads. Everything I need has always been right here. I walk into the waves, melting into the caress of the Violet Tide. It reaches my shoulders, my neck, my chin, and my mouth until we are one. Our body is water, and water is our body. Our perception encompasses every molecule of that life-giving substance stretching across the entire planet. We follow the currents to the source of the disease that has nearly killed our home. We find the blood in the veins of every human that lives, and we *hum*.

We *hum* until they dissolve, just as we have, back to their proper place in the great cycle. We *hum* until the entire planet glows in a bloom of violet light that reaches towards the cosmos and sings:

We have saved this world!

Jules McLaughlin grew up in an old, haunted house with a historic pet cemetery outside of Philadelphia, PA. She has always been a writer, though she has chosen to work as a dog trainer and a veterinary technician to help pay the bills. (*It certainly has nothing to do with the haunted pet cemetery.*) She is endlessly fascinated by the human ability to tell fantastical tales as an attempt to make sense of the world. She currently lives in Bucks County, PA with her wife, cat, and dogs, and—for now—no ghosts.

Home Grown *by Allegra Chapman*

There's something comforting about the solid cold of the ground under my knees. At first, I was reluctant to introduce my clothes to the dirt and damp, but now I've let go of my city professional need to keep pristine, I've come to relish this merging of myself with the soil.

I've seen, since I started spending time in garden centers, that you can buy cushioned pads to kneel on, but I don't want the barrier. Since I'm not yet at an age where I need to worry about my joints or my bones or the damp, or the combination thereof, I prefer to commune with the earth.

From the earth you came, and to the earth you will return.

I remember the droning voice from when I was a small child, sitting on the cold stone floor of the pew, munching on a gingerbread man that my mother had given me to keep me quiet. I didn't understand what he meant - I hadn't come from the earth; I'd come from my mum. I knew that, even at that young age. But since even the priest sounded bored, I didn't worry too much about it.

My mother believes.

My mother knows about plants, too.

I envy her both of those. A connection with the divine and the mundane; the certainty of being able to bring life from below and confidence in another life above.

I have neither.

As my hands dig into the dirt, groping for something that I can't even name, I wonder if I *did* come from the earth. If such a thing could be possible. We seem to have no familiarity, no shared understanding. I scowl down at it; I have no idea how to collaborate with it.

"I warn you, the soil 'round here is a nightmare," my neighbor calls over the fence. She is as cheerful and simply attired as the sparrows who flit between her garden and mine. I look up to see her smiling down at me. I can only see her from the nose up, but I return her smile.

"Chalk," she explains, "hard to grow anything. And then there's so much salt in the air from the sea..." She throws her hands up in the air as if to signal defeat. But I can see roses snaking up the opposite fence, behind her back. I stand up, under the guise of making a neighborly chat, to get a better look at her garden, which is filled with color. Most of the plants I can't identify; some in flowerbeds, some in pots.

"I'm Liz," I tell her, reaching over the fence to shake her hand. She's a decade older than me, maybe a little more. Her hair is flecked with grey and the skin around her eyes and mouth scrunch up like

paper when she smiles. But maybe I look like that too - I've lost track of how I really look, the image in my head stuck at some time around the age of 30.

"Welcome to the neighborhood, Liz, I'm Angie."

"So, I'm probably not going to develop the green fingers I was hoping for?" I ask. Angie laughs.

"If you've got the patience, you certainly can. It's just about knowing what can do well in this environment."

"You seem to have it figured out." I nod to the garden behind her. I meant it to sound complimentary, but I worry it might have come out bitter.

"Twenty years of trial and error," she says, with no air of offence. She glances around the garden. "Once you have the right plants in the right places, they basically take care of themselves."

"You've lived here a long time then."

"We moved here when my eldest was just starting secondary school, and he's just had his own first child," she smiles.

"Congratulations," I tell her, with my chest constricting.

"Oh, thank you, I am over the moon," she beams. "Is it just you?" She nods at my own house.

"Yes," I sigh. "Just me." She waits for me to say more but doesn't press when I don't.

"Well," she says, "you're very welcome."



When I was about five years old, I planted sunflower seeds. My mother told me what to do, but I did the work. I was so excited for the flowers to grow. I had never created anything from scratch with my own hands before. I had chosen the packet of seeds myself, enchanted by these plants that were so huge and so bright.

I placed them reverently in the soil, covered them gently as though putting them to bed, watered them, and waited. And waited. And waited.

I knew it wouldn't be immediate, knew not to expect too much too soon. I diligently watered and fed them, checking the ground for any sign of movement. After a week, I asked my mother how much longer it would take.

She walked with me to the little patch of flowerbed that we had staked out for my project and regarded the bare dirt.

“Well, I’d have expected some shoots by now,” she admitted. “I think the slugs may have got to them. Sorry, sweetheart.”

We kept checking for another week, but the space I had planted remained empty. Slugs, my mother confirmed. The weather had been damp, so there were a lot of them.

I don’t think I cried. I wasn’t the sort of child to make a fuss; I didn’t like to show that things bothered me. But I was strangely devastated by the loss of those sunflowers.

I never tried to grow anything after that. I couldn’t face going through it all again.

Until now, that is. Three and a half decades later, here I am, digging in the dirt, burying the large, flat seeds, covering them carefully, and hoping.



A few days later, a little shoot pokes out of the ground. It’s small, but it is definitely the beginnings of a leaf, stubbornly pushing its way into the air. I let out a little shriek when I see it!

Angie calls over the fence that afternoon to ask how I’m settling in, if I need anything. I can’t help but tell her about the little baby sunflower. I’m sure she finds me silly, but she shows only excitement and enthusiasm.

“Banana peels,” she tells me. “Chop them up finely and add them to the soil. Or soak them in water overnight and use that water for the sunflowers. They love it.” I smile brightly, the prospect of caring for them suddenly became vivid in my imagination.

But the next day, the shoot is gone.

It must have been eaten by a slug or a snail. None of the others come up, the seeds presumably having met a similar fate. I stare despondently at the place where they should have been.

“There’s time to try again,” Angie encourages. “It’s still early in the year. Try putting them in pots - easier to protect.”

So, I do. I wrap copper tape around the pots, sprinkle eggshells all around them, scatter coffee grounds on the soil... anything to keep slugs and snails away. And I’m rewarded with two shoots that begin to grow into thick stalks.

As the spring weather heats up and the days lengthen, Angie compliments me on the clematis advancing up the back wall, and the herb garden, and the lavender plant that has taken so well that I have to give her cuttings to keep it from dominating the garden. But I am fixated on the sunflowers.

I pick up snails wherever I see them and put them into an empty bucket in the alley behind my

garden. I can't bring myself to drop them into boiling water or pour salt on them as some online articles instruct. That feels far too cruel. It's not their fault, after all, that their needs conflict so directly with my own. But I hang a bird feeder on the wall next to the alley and secretly hope they will do the job for me.



"My mother's coming to visit," I tell Angie as she sits with me in my garden, both of us drinking lemonade made with her homegrown lemons in the evening sun. It is still hot, and I have lit a citronella candle to keep mosquitoes away.

"Oh, that's nice," she says, and then sees my face. "Is it?" I don't answer for a moment.

"It'll be nice to see her," I sigh eventually. "I suppose I just don't know how to account for myself now. My cousins are all married with multiple children. I'm getting divorced, downsizing my career..." I sigh again.

"Sounds like a successful life to me," Angie says. "Not settling for something that's not right, having the courage to start again, forging your own path." I smile weakly.

Is it courage? I didn't really make the decision, he did. I suppose I could have forgiven him, taken him back, but I'm not sure he wanted me to. Once I found out, I think he was relieved it was over.

"I always wanted a family," he told me. "You can't blame me for not wanting to give up on that."

When I'm feeling charitable, I think that maybe his heart was broken by all the failed attempts, the losses, and he just couldn't take anymore. That he sought comfort somewhere he wouldn't be reminded of the injections, and the blood, and the hopes raised and then dashed.

When I'm feeling angry, I imagine that, while I was bleeding all over the bathroom floor that last time, he was with her.



One of the sunflowers dies, its developing leaves cut to ribbons by the rasping of thousands of minute teeth.

The other one, though, carries on. The slugs nibble at it, but it shrugs them off. The stalk gets taller, thicker. More leaves appear.

By the time my mother comes to visit, there is a small bud at the top of the heavy stem.

"I'm growing sunflowers," I tell her as I bring cups of herbal tea into the garden. "I planted some when I was a kid, but they didn't work out. I thought I'd get revenge." I laugh and am surprised at how nervous it sounds.

“Yes,” she says, her eyes retreating inside her as if she is going back into the memory. “The slugs ate them.”

I have no idea why it matters that she remembers this tiny and utterly inconsequential event from so many years ago, but suddenly my eyes are stinging with tears. I turn away so that she won't see, pretend to inspect the rosemary, which is starting to get a little out of hand.

It mattered enough for me to hold onto that memory for 35 years, even though I couldn't say why. To know it stayed with her as well is validating in some way.

“It's good to see you,” she says, reaching for my hand as I sit down next to her. I look into her eyes and see how much she means it. I feel a stab in my gut. I've been wrestling so much with the guilt of not providing her with a grandchild that I've kept her only child away from her into the bargain. I think of her, desperately wanting more children, watching her brother and sister breed so easily, and wonder how much I've been blaming her for my situation. I squeeze her hand in response.

Angie appears at the fence, holding a jar. “Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt,” she calls. “I'll come back later.” She catches my eye, and glances at my mother then back to me; I understand she knew exactly what she was doing. My heart swells.

“Come on over,” I tell her.

“Are you sure?” She asks, concern in her eyes. Her face softens when I nod, smiling. “I just wanted to give you this,” she holds up the jar, and I wave her round. She disappears momentarily through her back gate, reappears through mine.

This is friendship, I realize. This easy familiarity, comfort in someone else's space. I hug her as I take the jar.

“It's a mix I use for the flowers...it replaces the minerals they don't get in this damn soil.”

I explain to my mum that Angie has been helping me with the garden.

“Lizzie's always had green fingers,” Mum tells Angie, “ever since she was little. Always loved plants.” I look at her, stunned.

“But everything I planted died!” I protest.

“Well, a few things did, but that's how it goes with gardening. You kept trying, though. Never been one to give up. You grew those beautiful sweet peas, and the dahlias, and those peonies.” I remember none of these. I thought I gave up after the sunflowers. For years I've been telling myself that I'm no good with plants and I can't keep anything alive.

I bring more tea for Angie, and we all sit and talk until it starts to get chilly. Then I bring out blankets and light candles as the sun disappears. None of us seem to want to go inside.



The sunflower bud never opens. Autumn's chill begins to bite, and the plant shrivels, conceding that its time is up. I kick the wall in frustration.

The divorce papers are signed, money and possessions divided. It's done. I'm free, I suppose.



When spring comes around, I'm ready.

I plant carrots, lettuce, and onions. I plant dahlias and sweet peas.

And I plant sunflowers. I place elaborate, but organic and cruelty-free, anti-slug measures all around the garden. I use Angie's mix and the best plant food I can find at what has become my favorite garden center.

I travel back to the city and meet an old friend for coffee. She tells me, claiming it's because she feels I should know, but clearly wanting to be the one to see my reaction, that the woman he left me for is pregnant. I shrug.

"It was to be expected," I tell her. And I realize that, actually, it was, and that it doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would.

I help Angie babysit her granddaughter, who is delighted by the birds in the garden. I clear a little section of soil that she can dig up and pour water into to make a sticky mud that she loves to put her hands in and that we are constantly rushing to prevent her from eating.

Then, as the summer sun is becoming so intense that I can hardly bear to be inside, I step out one morning to find, not one, but two big, bright yellow sunflowers staring back at me.

I send a picture to my mum, who replies, "I knew you could do it."

Allegra Chapman is an author, columnist and creative wellbeing practitioner. She is passionate about helping people to reconnect with their innate creativity, and her membership platform, Creative Fix (yourcreativefix.substack.com), provides a space to explore creativity as a self-care practice. As an autistic and ADHD writer, Allegra champions neurodivergent creatives, supporting them to build productive and sustainable practices that suit their needs. She offers courses, resources and creative services at creativefix.net. Her latest book, *Creativity Is Your Self-Care*, is out now.

All of the City Lights *by Caradoc Gayer*

It's late in the evening, but the air is still hot as they walk down a busy pavement, right-angled to the bridge. They pass rows of yellow café-bar lights and surrounding rose-colored buildings. The whole scene looks like one of those Gustav Klimt paintings that they went to see at lunchtime.

Freya's still talking about those paintings. Emma realizes that she zoned out. She listens closer and hears her friend say big words which she never used to say, like *symbolism* and *secession*. They cross to the opposite side of the road. Emma glances back at the people out on the bridge and sees that many are their age; some are drinking alcohol whilst sitting precariously on the bridge-balustrade. It's unnerving to watch, so Emma looks away. They sit down on a café terrace, next to the road, and order two beers. Freya stops talking about the exhibition, twists, and looks at the River Garonne behind them.

"I think this is my favorite café," Freya says, "because of that view."

Emma looks at the side of Freya's face. She sees a silver-earring, shaped like a bird, which she's never seen Freya wear before now. Her friend turns back, and grins at her. She's cut her ashy blonde hair shorter, so her face is easier to see than it used to be, and she looks beautiful.

"You know," Freya says, "I feel really clever these days."

Emma laughs and says that that's the point of studying.

"Yeah, but I feel smarter about dealing with life. Not just about painting."

"I love that you love being here."

"And I love you. 'Cos you're super-smart as well."

"I reckon I should introduce myself like that at Uni."

"I think you should."

As Freya says that, Emma glances beyond her and suddenly notices how each person sitting on the edge of the bridge is surrounded by a glowing golden aura. It looks as if they're wearing cloaks of tiny car headlights, seen through fog. She points this out. Freya turns and looks, smiles and nods sagely, before turning back.

"Yes," she says, "most of them are probably students. I might know a few. But I'm not sure."

"Who drinks and sits that high above the water? For what reason?"

"I don't know. To live on the edge, I guess."

"Ha." Emma imagines herself falling off that bridge backwards. She feels a lurching sensation in her

stomach. Two amber beers are set down in front of the girls. Emma tries to counteract that feeling by inducing the alcohol burn inside of her.

Freya starts talking about Emma's plans to study physics at university. For reasons that she can't justify to herself, Emma doesn't like talking about university, so she evades the topic. She brings up the absence of their best school friend Isaac instead.

"I haven't heard from him," Freya says. "Have you?"

Emma hasn't either. Not since she came to Toulouse at least. Isaac's currently touring the UK with his indie band. Freya says that the least he could have done would have been to visit her for a couple of days, because he's known the girls since they were twelve and he was thirteen.

Emma agrees with her and is secretly hoping that Freya and Isaac don't fall out, because that would crush her. The next time that she sees Isaac, she should remind him to apologize to Freya. He's never been very good at apologies.

She hears a humming sound. It's almost inaudible, but distinctly there. Glancing around the café terrace, Emma notices how every surrounding customer is glowing with a faint amber light, like a firefly. The humming sound gets louder. It gets so loud that it almost overpowers the hubbub of café chatter. Emma suddenly realizes that the sound is coming from inside of her head. It gets louder, and louder, and becomes painful, a type of pain like that of hitting your head on the edge of a table.

Then Freya asks, "Are you okay?" and the sound stops.

Emma realizes that she's got a weird expression on her face and says she's alright. "Just a headache I think."

Freya nods and doesn't press her, exhibiting telepathy in knowing that she doesn't want to talk about it. Freya's always had that quality. It was one of the reasons why Emma had a crush on her when the two were fourteen. But that's not the case anymore, and Emma's never told Freya that, because she's usually laughed at for telling girls that she likes them.

"Hey Em," Freya says, "What was that cool fact you said about Toulouse?"

"I don't know."

"The thing about planes."

"Oh. A dude called Clément made the first flying machine in Toulouse."

"See, that's awesome. I should know these things."

"But he only claimed that he flew it. Nobody knows for sure if he did."

“I guess that doesn’t make a difference. My man Clément said that people could fly. Eventually, they could. It’s pretty wild right?”

It is wild. Emma says so. But she’s a little distracted again. She noticed a dark-haired girl, in a blue tank-top, examining the café signboard by the pavement. She’s wreathed in the same golden light emanating from the people on the bridge. Emma’s eyes are fixated upon that light. It takes her a moment to realize that their gazes have met.

She looks away quickly but sees, in her periphery, that the girl is approaching them. Possibilities pinwheel through her head like fireworks. Mostly, Emma’s expecting to be ranted at in French or told to stop staring at people like a weirdo.

The girl reaches their table and touches Freya’s shoulder. Freya spins, and the girl says in accented English, “Hello, my phone is out of charge, could I borrow yours?” To Emma’s surprise, Freya makes a high-pitched noise and springs up to hug her.

Freya turns and says, “Hey Em, I’ve mentioned Andrea, right?”

Oh shit. Of course. Emma knows about Andrea. Andrea is Freya’s flatmate. They attend the same art college. Over the past week, Andrea’s been away from Toulouse to visit her family in Switzerland. Andrea also looks a bit like Kate Mara, an actress that Emma’s had a crush on for years.

All that Emma can say is “Hey, good to meet you,” and is met with a “Yes, you too,” that makes Emma feel slightly mocked. She probably deserves it for all that staring.

Andrea’s meeting a group of friends at the Place du Capitole, Toulouse city center. She invites Emma and Freya along, and Freya says that they’ll come.

They leave the café after finishing their beers, and Emma feels that lurching sensation again, like falling backwards off a bridge. She tries to speak, and words get stuck in her throat. She doesn’t feel like she is able to ask Andrea questions about herself. Luckily, Andrea puts questions to them instead. She asks how long they’ve known each other.

“Well, we met when we were twelve,” Freya says, as they approach the pedestrian crossing which leads to the Pont Neuf. “I was the weird arty one in school and Emma was the cool one.”

Freya’s mentioning of Emma’s name boosts her confidence, so she says “I only pretended to be” as they walk onto the bridge. Glancing around, Emma sees that those auras of light surrounding everybody have faded; she can see everybody’s features now. All those daredevils are still sitting atop the bridge-balustrade and there are numerous middle-aged parents. Some are lifting their young kids to see the view of the river.

“To be honest, I don’t think there’s any such thing as being cool,” Andrea says. She stops walking, leans on the bridge balustrade and points across the river, “But do you know what is cool? You can see the spire of the Romanesco church from here.”

Emma looks in that direction. She notices a tattoo of a plane and a cloud upon Andrea’s forearm. Her pale skin still trails that golden aura through the air. Emma spots the giant church spire shadowed against the bright and full silver moon. The entire city horizon looks like something out of a dream.

That all happened at nine o’clock at night. It’s midnight now. Emma watches the tiny red eye of a plane intersect the full moon. She’s standing on the balcony of Freya’s third floor apartment. Before her, the Toulouse cityscape stretches out in patterns of light. Freya herself is standing on the spiral stairs of the nearby fire-escape. It’s strange, because the fire-escape doesn’t stop at the apartment roof. It actually spirals all the way up into the night sky. Freya doesn’t seem to have noticed this, however.

“Come on, this is like our only chance to get up on the roof,” Freya says.

“Why?”

“Well, one, you’re getting a plane at ten in the morning. And two, the building attendant starts his night shift in twenty. So, unless you want to be shouted at by an angry French guy...”

“Maybe I do. And you’re too drunk to climb up the fire-escape.”

“Nooo, I’m fine.”

“Where’s Andrea? Has she gone to bed?”

Freya snorts with laughter and says, “You’ve been stuck to me the whole time you’ve been here, but now you just want to hang out with my fit Swiss housemate.”

“Shut up.”

“Love you. Going to miss you.”

“Yeah. Visit me at Uni when you can.”

“Only if you come up to the roof with me.”

Emma acquiesces and hops onto the fire-escape. She realizes that she forgot to mention the thing about how it spirals all the way into the night sky but can’t say that now because Freya’s definitely out of earshot.

Emma follows Freya up the stairs, watching her through grated-black metal. She rounds the corner and leans over the balustrade to look up. She sees her friend silhouetted against the moon, making her way up there, like Jack climbing the beanstalk, craning her neck to look up the staircase, like she’s

seeing a beautiful flower at the top which Emma can't quite glimpse.



It's ten o'clock in the morning, and Emma's sitting on a plane. There's a high pitched and thunderous sound around her as it lifts off the runway. She drowns it out by blasting the newest Sylvan Esso album in her headphones.

Lots of important looking, smartly dressed people are on this plane. A middle-aged guy in a zebra-colored shirt is sitting next to her. He closes his laptop as the plane climbs into the air, and looks at the ceiling with a distressed, ill-looking expression.

The plane levels out with a sharp bell-ringing-sound. The seatbelt sign switches off. She glances out of the window at the swirling cloud panorama below. It's a sweeping polar landscape of cliffs, mountains, floating islands, lakes and houses.

But there's one part of the landscape not made out of clouds. It draws her attention immediately. An odd rectangle shape; a solid black outline against the whiteness.

She realizes that it's the fire-escape from Freya's apartment. It's far below in the sky. The spiral staircase pierces the clouds from below. If she squints, it looks like a church spire buried in layers of snow.

With her mind racing, she looks away from it, feeling that something strange and important has just happened. Further events from the previous night hurtle through her mind like cars on the highway, without her intending them to.



It's ten o'clock, the night before. Twelve hours from now, Emma gets on the plane. The three girls go to Freya's favorite ice cream shop. They join the queue and slowly approach the pristine silver glow within. Freya prefers to eat ice cream in a very specific way: always outdoors and always at night-time. Emma mentions that she still doesn't understand why.

"You'd understand if you were French like me," Freya says, and Emma hits her shoulder and Andrea laughs.

The queue moves closer to the bright interior. Emma scans the entryway sandwich board which shows the cost of everything in euros.

"I think I'll just get one of those cinnamon pastries. They look good."

"Be boring, if you want," Freya says. Emma notices the two twenty-something guys in front of them,

who she sees more clearly now that they're closer to the shop. They're talking to each other in a language that's neither French nor English. The guy on the left puts his hand up the back of the other's sweater, so Emma looks away quickly. She focuses upon the dance music playing in the shop interior: synthesizers, drums, and female vocals on a tinny overhead speaker.

Emma says that she recognizes the song, but Freya doesn't.

"It's the newest Sylvan Esso record. I can't believe you. I talk about it all the time."

"I actually do know it," Freya replies.

"I know it as well," Andrea mentions. "I like the album. It makes me think about growing up."

Emma looks at her and says, "You're cooler than Freya then."

Freya protests as the other two continue to look at each other. Andrea's dark hair falls over her right eye. Emma wants to push it away with her hand but doesn't. She feels a warmth inside, as if there's hot water running through her veins, and words come out of her mouth without her meaning them to.

"Do you know who Kate Mara is? You kind of look like her."

"That's cute, how do I?"

"I don't know."

Andrea presses her for a proper answer as they enter the shop. She evades giving one to be funny. She also knows that elaborating would get her so hot inside that she'd faint or die on the spot or something.



Half an hour later, they're walking down a busy, rose-colored alleyway. Emma takes a final bite of her pastry and drops it in a trash can. Andrea and Freya have finished their ice creams and are further ahead. She jogs in their direction and, without expecting it, emerges onto a huge city plaza. They're in the Place du Capitole. Freya beckons to her, and Andrea strides out ahead, towards a group of eight, their age, sitting on and around a bench.

The plaza is ringed in pink and yellow light adorned restaurants, and streetlights. It's crowded with groups of people their age, some twirling to rap on stereo speakers, others circling around on skateboards. Further away there's a town hall building, which enigmatically overlooks the plaza. Nearby, parents watch their young kids jump over pavement fountains that intermittently spray water as if there are whales living underneath the paving stones.

Andrea calls her over and she catches up, feeling slightly stupid for staring dumbly at everything. Freya grabs her hand, and Andrea introduces them to a bunch of people, none of whom really speak any English. An absurdly pretty girl passes Emma a blunt. She takes a drag to feel braver, and her French gets oddly better.

Time suddenly fragments as Emma talks to anyone and everyone. Moving in between benches across the plaza, she meets so many faces, whilst learning and immediately forgetting everybody's names. Everything suddenly comes into focus, when she finds herself talking to Andrea. They're alone on a bench, perhaps ten feet from the main group.

Andrea asks her whether the Gustav Klimt exhibition was any good. They start talking about art. Emma uses this as an excuse to trail her fingers along Andrea's arm.

"Your tattoos are pretty."

"My best friend in Switzerland does them for me. The cloud is my favorite."

"I've always wanted one."

"Freya and you should get matching ones."

"I would. But she hates tattoos."

"Are you sad to go back to England?"

Emma says that she is a bit. Andrea nods and suddenly puts her head on Emma's shoulder. That gets her warm inside again.

"I was sad when I went back to Switzerland."

"But you were coming back here. You had things to look forward to."

"So do you."

Emma doesn't know what to reply to that. Andrea says, "Hm," and then says, "Do you want to kiss right now?"

Emma's head just about blows off, and she replies best she can, "Yeah alright."

Andrea grins, and says "Yeah alright" in a mock, low-pitched English accent before moving in and kissing Emma's lips and chin.

Emma reciprocates, closing her eyes and putting a hand on Andrea's cheek, which is warm, like the air around them. She can smell her lavender perfume. Her mouth tastes of mint chocolate ice cream. All of Emma's senses feel heightened. She feels so powerful, like a superhero. Everything is much more

tangible, and more real than it was before.



It's eight o'clock the following evening. Emma's back in the UK. Luckily enough, Isaac's band is playing a show in town, so she goes to see it. It happens to be an artsy café-bar, fifteen minutes' walk from Emma's house. It's in a narrow alleyway off the central city square. It's easy to miss if you don't look for the miniscule chalkboard sign saying "Blue Light Café" with an arrow pointing at a narrow doorway. Emma ducks into it, climbs the staircase, passing walls drenched with graffiti, and decaying posters of bands that played here in the mid-nineties. She emerges into the bar. It isn't particularly busy. She orders a pint, waits for it to be poured, and thinks about Isaac, wondering how his tour has gone so far. Evening-time yesterday, she was ready to slate him for not visiting Freya but now she's just excited to see him again.

Cradling her pint, she climbs to the third floor, where the band has already started playing. Tactically pushing her way through the shadowy crowd, she glimpses Isaac in a black t-shirt playing drums. His band used to play fast indie rock music, but now their songs are slower and sadder, a change which, as Isaac's told her, is due to the lead singer's fixation on ambient music. Isaac looks so Zen and focused behind the kit. It makes her happy to look at him.

There's subdued applause as they play their last song. Isaac stands, rubs his face, and tousles his brown hair with a towel. His eyes meet hers, and she approaches him as he hops off the stage.

"Yo! You," she says, "Smashed it out of the park. At least three sexy girls asked me if I knew the drummer of the band."

"Okay," he says, smiling, and slings an arm around her neck. "Let's get a drink."

They find a table on the balcony, which overlooks the bright night-time cityscape of their hometown. Now that they're outside, Isaac's wearing a grey sweater. He stares dazedly at the view. Then he looks at Emma in front of him, smiles sheepishly, and says, "I'm happy you made it back in time."

"Defo. I wouldn't have missed it."

"Yeah," is all he says as he looks down at his beer. He's never been good at hiding when he wants to say something. In the past, she joked with Freya about how you can always see the cogs turning in Isaac's head.

"I don't know why I didn't come to France with you," he blurts out. "I had some time in-between practices. But I just didn't."

"And you're sorry about it."

“Yeah I am. The band’s been pissing me off. I’ve been trying to make it work. Sorry.”

“Well, it’s okay,” Emma says, “because we both still love you a lot.”

“Yeah. I’m proud of Freya. I’ll phone her tomorrow morning, before we get on the M1.”

There’s a few moments of silence, before Isaac looks at Emma and says, “You seem different. Lighter—more at ease with yourself than you used to be, I guess.”

Emma smiles and doesn’t say anything. She looks at his hands clasping his beer and sees that he’s wearing a rope bracelet around his right wrist. Touching it and lightly hooking a finger through it, she says, “I like this.”

“Freya gave it to me for my eighteenth.”

“It’s cute. What did I give you for that birthday? It was a plant, right?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. “It was very on brand for you. Surprisingly, I haven’t killed it. Its flowers are in bloom again.”

Emma feels a warmth swelling in her chest. Out of nowhere, she suddenly feels the urge to explain to him how brave and wonderful she thinks he is. She wants to talk about the remarkable things that the three of them have done and are going to do with their lives. But she doesn’t know the right words to say.

Caradoc Gayer is a young music and culture journalist from England, who became obsessed with stories, particularly fantasy novels, from a young age. In 2020 he moved to Nottingham, the home of Robin Hood, to study English Literature, where he found himself enthralled by the city’s buzzing arts scene, its sweeping green spaces, and the creative and ambitious people he met day-to-day while studying. After hosting music shows on his student radio and a stint in a short-lived indie covers band, he completed a master’s degree in journalism and stayed in Nottingham to work at its resident arts and culture magazine, *LeftLion*. Through those years his love for a good story remained strong, and he hopes to continue building a life around the written word. You can keep up with his journalistic and literary pursuits via his website muckrack.com/caradoc-gayer-1 and Instagram [@caradoc_g](https://www.instagram.com/caradoc_g).

Coat Hanger Ghost *by G. Ballard*

"Chainsaw, wake up, it's 3 a.m.," I said, shaking her shoulder in the hotel bed. "You gotta drink another quart of water. Our test is in four hours."

"I know!" she snapped, stumbling toward the bathroom and slamming the door.

I popped open the lid on my plastic, green gallon bottle and forced gulps until I reached the scratched line under my finger. I laid back down and felt Chainsaw crash onto the other side of the mattress.

"Bitch, if you fail this piss test, I swear to god," she mumbled into her pillow.

"We're good. We're following the plan," I said. "Creatine in the morning, a gallon of water, then we make this money!"

I had my own doubts, as we'd been smoking a lot of weed. But we'd driven all night over the icy fields of Kansas, Chainsaw swinging my Saturn stick-shift across the lanes at 100 MPH. If we pissed right, we'd move into the defunct hospital for nearly a month, then each walk out four grand richer.

We arrived early for our 7 a.m. physicals. While waiting in an exam room wearing a paper gown, I swiped a speculum from the drawer. I didn't know what for, just that I wanted to take something back, to claim an article from them as they collected my blood and urine and told me where to be and what to eat. I shoved it in my backpack as the doctor walked in.

Our piss research paid off because we passed. We drove back a few days later with piles of luggage, Chainsaw's pink leopard blanket dragging behind her.

Chainsaw and I got placed in a room with two other women—a deeply Christian blonde named Sandy from rural Kentucky and quiet Nafuna from Uganda, who explained how she'd made a career of hopping from one medical study to another.

"My greatest goal is to qualify for the three-month NASA study in Houston," she told me. "You lay in bed for two months and aren't allowed to walk. Then they rehabilitate your muscles for a month. It's to test effective rehab for the astronauts coming back from space."

"Wow! Do you use a bedpan?"

"Yep, and sponge baths—all of that. They pay over \$20,000!"

"Holy shit! And all you do is lay there?"

She nodded solemnly. "But you can't walk on your own after that—your muscles atrophy. The hardest part would be not seeing my girls for that long. But we could get a house with that money."

That's what I want."

I sat back against the wall on my bed, lined up head to foot with hers. My big plan was to take my best friend on a road trip to a hot springs resort. I felt guilty that I didn't need to buy a house for kids, that I planned to spend the money in the dumbest way I could as soon as I got it.

We had no internet, no phones, no connection to the outside world. The hospital building had been abandoned years ago, and we were all confined to the sixth floor. One dull afternoon, I snuck down the stairs to wander through worn-out treatment rooms where dusty machines stood around made beds. The whole place seemed full of ghosts. I marveled at these relics that were mine alone to explore, until I heard a creak and dashed for the stairs, afraid to encounter a vaporous patient still wandering the halls.

Each morning, the fluorescent lights flashed on at 6 a.m., alerting us to climb out of bed and shuffle to the doorway in our socks, where a nurse handed out a plastic ramekin of pills with a Dixie cup of water. We tossed them back bleary-eyed then toddled back to bed. Mealtimes were strictly monitored, as we were given a large tray of food and instructed to finish every bite within twenty minutes. Chainsaw broke down in teary despair six days in when she grew too full, and a nurse coached her through the last sip of milk with a stopwatch in hand.

Exercise was forbidden as it could affect the liver enzymes they were testing. Half of us took a trial drug for diabetes and the other half took sugar pills, and we didn't know who got what. One morning, a nurse caught me doing push-ups in our dorm room and threatened to kick me out. Sandy and I started walking laps up and down the hall in the afternoons.

"Slow down!" she hushed. "They're clocking us at the nurse station."

We strolled past smiling at the nurse on duty, a sturdy woman in light blue scrubs who glanced up, then returned to her paperwork.

"How many laps have we done?" I asked.

"Fifteen. One more will make a mile. I measured with my feet yesterday."

"Brilliant!" I chuckled.

"My husband would laugh so hard if he saw me working out like this. I teach step aerobics and spin back home."

"Oh really? Is that what you do for work?" I asked.

Her blonde curls bounced around her perfectly made-up face. I watched her prep each morning for another day in the hospital.

“My main job is being a devoted wife and mother,” she said, looking straight ahead.

“Oh right, of course.”

“Are you married?” she asked tentatively, suspecting the answer.

“Ha! No.”

“You never wanted to?”

We were swimming out too deep. I thought about my abortion last month.

“How did you meet your husband?” I asked, paddling back to the shallow end.

“We were high school sweethearts.” She smiled.

An alarm blared, ricocheting off the linoleum tiles and echoing down the hallway. Red lights flashed above.

“No need to panic!” shouted the nurse, bursting forth from behind her desk. “There’s a tornado. Everyone take shelter in your bathrooms.”

“Oh my god!” I yelled. We speed-walked back to our room, unsure whether this counted as exercise. Bodies scurried around us to take their places for the storm.

“Oh, hell no!” shouted a woman as we passed. “Is it a warning or a watch?”

Raised in Kentucky, I knew what she meant. Is there potential for a tornado, or has the twister been spotted on the ground, ripping up fields and homes?

When I reached the room, I found Nafuna shivering in the bathroom doorway.

“Ohh! It’s gonna be okay,” I said. I wrapped my arms around her and ushered her into the shower stall. “Sit here.” I ran out and yanked the thin cotton blanket from my bed, then wrapped us together as she started to cry.

The wind sang against the windows in the bedroom, whining like a tea kettle.

“Hey, I’ve been through so many of these,” I said over all the noise. “They almost always blow over and don’t even touch down.” I thought about the time my uncle dove into his rug and rolled himself up as the house came down around him.

“I can’t die here! Oh Jesus Lord, don’t take me now,” she wailed.

I pulled her in close under our blanket, her round, soft body nestling against mine. She cried on my chest. Chainsaw sat on the toilet beside us with her knees pulled up to her chest, also sniffing. I reached out and squeezed her ankle through green and black striped tights. Sandy stood in the doorway with

arms and legs braced out in an X formation. She winked at me, and I couldn't help but smile. I imagined the steel beams in the walls of the hospital and exhaled. She and I knew how to ride out storms.

A half-hour later, the wind settled, and the sirens ceased their screaming. We climbed out of the bathroom to find the room just as we'd left it.



I settled into Chainsaw's nest of blankets on her bed for our twelfth day of gin rummy. I dealt the hands and lay down my plays, flipping cards into pairs and rows along her black, hand-stitched quilt.

"You fucking won again?" she screeched.

I laughed and pulled out our tally on a creased notebook page. "You're at 1510 and I'm at...3245!"

"Goddamnit!" she tossed her cards into the air. "I can't fucking take this anymore." Her cheeks flushed bright red as she huffed.

Still excited by my score, I stuffed the paper into a pocket of my sweatpants. "It's okay. You can catch up," I lied.

"I'm done with this stupid game. I'm done with this stupid place!"

"We only have a week left—a little less, actually, just six days."

"Fuck!" She threw herself back against the wall.

"You know, I heard they're watching a scary movie tonight in the common room," I said.

"I'm not watching some shitty slasher with a bunch of rednecks!" she shouted. "You know that nurse pulled me aside today and gave me deodorant? Said I fucking stink?"

"Really?" I played with the layers of blanket that all smelled like Chainsaw—some mix of greasy hair, amber, and tea tree oil. "I mean, you could just wear it while you're here."

"I'm not wearing that shit! That'll give you cancer. Plus, it stinks like flowers and baby powder."



That evening, I wandered next door with a coloring book and flopped onto the bed of an older woman with short, bleached hair. She told me about a lesbian bar she'd opened in my hometown as I picked out crayons.

"She's a big deal, you know," her roommate said. "Her bar is the shit. You should check it out."

I heard a crowd whooping through the wall. "Are they watching *Chainsaw Massacre*?"

“Ain’t that your friend’s name?” asked The Big Deal Lesbian in her comforting Southern drawl, reminding me of family back home.

“Ha! Yeah. I think she’s about ready to massacre.”

“She needs to massacre a bar of soap,” the roommate said. They chuckled behind their hands.

I frowned and flipped through the pages, unsure how to defend my friend.

“Oh! They’re walking back to their rooms now. It must have just ended,” said the roommate.

I scribbled green and blue crayon streaks over an illustration of a friendly ghost, paying little attention to the lines.

“Holy shit, I got an idea,” said the Big Deal Lesbian. “Let’s scare ‘em.”

My eyebrows perked up as I gazed down at my ghost. “Do you have a coat hanger?”

The roommate ran to the closet, and we straightened the metal frame into a knobby stick.

“Goddamn! That movie was scary!” a man shouted into our doorway.

“Get out of here! We’re doing woman stuff,” bellowed The Big Deal Lesbian.

I couldn’t stop giggling as we assembled our monster. She opened the window, and I leaned out into the winter night, grasping one end of the metal wire, as the paper ghost dangled out into the darkness.

“Hold my legs!” I whispered as I leaned further out, craning toward the window next door. The Big Deal Lesbian straddled my calves, and we laughed furiously as I swung the ghost against the window of the men’s room next door, banging and scratching against the pane.

“Ahhh! What the fuck is that?!” a man screeched through the wall.

We laughed so hard I dropped the ghost, and it floated down three stories into a bush. I pulled my torso back inside and balled up on the bed, convulsing in uncontrollable laughter. The two women collapsed to the floor howling.

“I’m gonna piss my pants, I’m not playing!” The Big Deal Lesbian grabbed her crotch but couldn’t stop laughing. My sides hurt as the giggles ripped through me, and I squeezed tighter into a ball. The women rolled on the tiles holding their guts in.

“Y’all! I can’t stop! I’m peeing!” She climbed to her knees and crawled toward the bathroom. This made us spasm even harder. I heard her on the toilet, pissing in spurts as she seized.

I grabbed her pillow and wrapped myself around it as I shivered and cried. I no longer knew why I was laughing, and I didn’t know how to stop. I started to feel a little scared.

The Big Deal Lesbian walked out of the bathroom. “Y’all, it’s not fucking funny!” Though she was laughing too.

“Did you hear them scream?” I pushed the words out through chattering teeth.

“I gotta change my drawers!” She dug through her shelves still holding her stomach and doubling over.

“I think I’m crying,” I said, wiping water from my face. I’d held in so much, and now it leaked out.



The days crawled on. I stitched t-shirt scraps into halters and tunics from patterns in a book I’d brought. Nafuna watched me for an hour until she couldn’t stand it.

“Give me that,” she said. “I was a seamstress for twenty years.”

I climbed onto her bed, and she flowed through the cotton as we watched reality TV. She cackled at the women’s misfortunes on *The Bachelor*, jabbing the needle through without looking down. I watched her fingers palpate straight lines across my shirt, inching along in perfect rows like a machine.

“Oh Lord! He never gonna pick her in that dress.” She shook her head. “You should see the clubs in Kampala. They have waterfalls and lights like you’ve never seen before. The best-looking people in the world are in there.”

“No kidding,” I mumbled, dreaming of spotlights flashing across sequined walls and a stream cascading through banana leaves. “I’d love to see it.”

“You should go there.”

“It’s like...a real city?” I asked.

She laughed and looked at me. “What do you think, it’s all bare feet on dirt roads?”

I was too embarrassed to admit that this was exactly what I’d thought. I realized how little I knew about Uganda—virtually nothing beyond what I’d seen on TV.

“I’m pretty ignorant,” I confessed.

“You would not believe your eyes in these clubs. They are the most beautiful in the world.” She passed over my crude naivete and smoothed the potential crease between us, and I was grateful.

I imagined Nafuna not in this oversized t-shirt and sweatpants on a hospital bed, but in heels and a tight dress, gold laid across her clavicle, twinkling beneath the lights.

It was dark outside our room. The hours after dinner stretched long, thick with time to fill before

lights out.

I heard an acoustic guitar plucking in the hallway and got up to take a look.

At the far end of the hall, under the red glow of the "EXIT" sign, Chainsaw sat on the floor slumped against the wall, resting her guitar on her green-striped legs. She crooned a John Prine song about Muhlenberg County, the place where my mom is from. Her eyes clenched shut as she cried out mournful lyrics about a town devastated by the coal company.

A man slid down the wall beside her, and she gave him a quick smile as they sang in unison. Others drifted out from their rooms and settled around them on the floor. As I listened, I thought about this town just a few hours from here, and my grandfather's farm, whose mineral rights were also sold for strip mining. My thoughts were interrupted by another man bursting into the choir far off-key.

"You want to come?" I asked, turning back to Nafuna.

"What is this?" She climbed out of bed.

We settled onto the cold tiles under the red glow, and she kept up her stitching. I felt a warmth amongst these strangers, all sharing the same bizarre campout in this abandoned hospital, all holding on for that check at the end. We had nowhere to be. We stared into the tiles as if there were a fire to capture our gaze, letting our eyes drift away from one another and soak up the pleasure of proximity.



A few days later, we packed up our rooms to head back out into the sunlight. We finished lunch together on a Saturday afternoon, ready to say our goodbyes. But then came one final challenge.

"No one is leaving until we find the last set of keys!" shouted the director. The crowd groaned and broke into heated debate. "Where the hell are those keys, man? We gotta find them!" People began tearing through each other's luggage, pulling shirts and underwear back onto the tables.

Finally, a man shouted, "Alright! It was me—I threw them in the trash." He walked over to the 50-gallon plastic bin and dug out a set of keys from the food trays. Applause and grumbles filled the room.

With this, the doors opened, and we stepped into daylight for the first time in weeks, pillows under our arms, feet softened from living in fuzzy socks.

I spotted my mom in a minivan, who had driven two hours from my hometown to pick us up, as if we'd gone to summer camp and I was 12 rather than 25. Mom had invited us to stay with her while we waited for our checks, then we would drive back across three states to our roommates in Colorado. Chainsaw and I stuffed duffel bags and suitcases and blankets into the hatchback and climbed into our seats, as far apart as possible.

I watched out the back window as the brick hospital receded from view. I held Nafuna's phone number crumpled in my pocket. I imagined her walking with her daughters into their future house in Texas and wondered if she would be happy there.



Months later, I discovered the stolen speculum at the bottom of my bag. I wiped it off with my sleeve and lay down in front of the mirrored wall, a flimsy door keeping out my roommates. With a headlamp in one hand and the plastic handle in the other, I craned to peer into the glass. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I wanted to see what others had seen—this secret inner space.

Suddenly, I spotted it and gasped. After all these years of painful poking by nurses and lovers, my cervix peered out at me with its tiny mouth, soft and strong. Tears welled up as I marveled at this beauty, resting at my center, waiting for me to find it.

Grace is a trans writer in Brooklyn, and an MFA student at The New School. They've published in a variety of publications such as Bust Magazine, Doric Literary, and Literary LEO. They authored a cultural and political column for 4 years in the zine, BRAT. Grace is polishing a novel while biking around New York and MMA fighting. Grace hosts a morning writing club every weekday morning free for anyone to drop in and write. Read more at www.gballardauthor.com.

Lana and the Lamb *by Susan Laurencot*

The lamb, only a few weeks old, nuzzled Lana's chin. She was motherless, born during an early spring onion snow. Lana called her April. She held a bottle above the lamb's head, which was tilted to suckle.

"Sorry, Baby," Lana said. "This is the best I can do." She hugged the animal more tightly. Her mouth watered as she watched it drink its milk and realized she was making a slight sucking motion. Lana's brother, Jasper, the sheep farmer, had tried to convince her the lamb would be fine – another ewe would adopt it – but Lana insisted she would take it. She drove the two-and-a-half hours from Connecticut to the Hudson River Valley to pick her up. It snowed lightly the morning she left, but, typical of April, it was warmer by the afternoon.

"Here," Jasper said. "Let me show you what to do." He scooped up the lamb and brought her into the barn. He talked, but Lana felt like she already knew what to do. She felt a mother's instinct for this little animal. An instinct that she hadn't trusted when her first baby was born but had gotten better at listening to by the time the third one came. Her children were gone—grown and moved out of New England, but the waters of motherhood never really left Lana, and they came flooding back now that she was with the lamb. She subtly put a hand to the top of her left breast, swearing that she felt let down. She laughed and kissed the top of the lamb's head.

"Okay," Jasper said. "It's you and the lamb."

"April," Lana said.

Jasper smiled and put an arm around Lana. "April. Nice. Not overly creative. I thought you might come up with something less expected."

Lana put her head on Jasper's shoulder. Her younger brother had become her protector along the way. He had rescued her during her divorce and helped her buy a house. They had stood by one another through their father's long illness and their mother's briefer one. Together, they claimed orphanhood. Her children adored him.

Jasper looked up at the sky. The sun was finally out. The blue was a color they hadn't seen since September. The clouds were lighter than winter clouds, even though they had spewed snow just that morning. "Keep hoping for warmer weather, but I feel better with this mess. Makes me feel like we haven't fucked up the world all that badly."

"Don't kid yourself," she said. She knelt by the lamb. "We've done plenty of harm."

"And yet—" Jasper opened his arms to his fields of sheep. "We still have this." His land looked like a

painting. The grass was just barely greening. Sheep, round with wool about to be shorn, nibbled on the tops and sides of hills. There was still a dusting of snow on some of those hills.

“We do,” she said.

Jasper looked at her. “Have you thought about how you’re going to get her home?” he asked.

“I still have the barrier for Ellie in the back of the car.” Ellie was Lana’s dog who had died just before her mother did, even though Lana had been bargaining with God for that not to happen. “I can’t handle it,” she’d said to the Heavens one night. So, she was tested. God often made Lana shake her head. They exhausted her. Because of that, Lana tried not to think of Them all that often.



Lana brought her arm down, and April rooted for the bottle. “That’s enough for now,” Lana said. “My arm needs a break.” She rolled her shoulder a couple of times.

“Besides, you can eat the hay.” She patted the lamb’s head.

April lived in the garage in a stall Lana had constructed out of discarded pallets. The bedding smelled musty and pissy. Lana inhaled deeply. “We’re doing okay, you and me,” she said. She threw some fresh hay into the trough. “I guess I should fence in an area for you in the yard. It will be warm enough soon.” She heaved one leg over the pallet and then the other. “You stay here,” she said as if the lamb could follow her. April bleated for her to return, for more milk, for more love. Lana remembered that feeling of never being enough, the guilt of being torn in half by adoration and need. She hadn’t felt that in a long time. “I’m just going to mark an area for you to play in,” she called over her shoulder. The lamb bleated again. It sounded like “Ma.” Lana laughed and grabbed her tomato stakes, a spool of twine, and a mallet. “Let’s see what we can do for you,” she called back.

“Ma,” April said.

Lana made her way to her backyard. She owned a single acre of land, not exactly the rolling hills of her brother’s place, but it was enough. She pulled her work gloves out of her coat pocket and slipped them on. They made her feel efficient and productive. Capable. She sniffed them. They were still new, and the leather gave off a muskiness. It was a masculine smell that she didn’t associate with herself, but now that she had the gloves on, she liked it. She held her face for a moment and closed her eyes to the reality of her yard. She hadn’t raked in the fall, and there were wet, molding leaves rotting into her grass. She wished she’d worn boots instead of sneakers as the cold crept through the soles into her feet. She opened her eyes and looked down at her wet sneakers, then ignored the discomfort and began to mark out the area to be fenced.

“Good to finally get out of the house, eh?” Lana’s neighbor, Phil, called her from his yard. They were separated by a fence covered in vines. Lana knew she should cut the vines back, but she liked the little bit of extra privacy they provided.

“Sure is,” she agreed. She gave a wave and continued measuring. Sixteen by twenty-five was what the internet suggested. It was about all she could afford, anyway. Fencing, she’d realized, wasn’t cheap. She’d have to do the work herself. Jasper would probably come and help, too, if he found the time. Maybe she could convince her nephews to come work over the weekend. Or she could buckle down and do it herself.

“Whatcha making?” Phil was at the fence now. Lana looked over. There’d be no avoiding him. Not that he wasn’t a good neighbor. *Good fences make good neighbors*, Lana thought. She made her way over to him, removing her gloves and sticking them back into her pockets as she walked.

“A pen. For my lamb,” she said. She blew a strand of hair that had wandered over her mouth, then tucked it behind an ear.

“A lamb, huh?”

“Its mother died after she was born. My brother’s ewe. I couldn’t leave her.”

Phil smiled. “Is it like owning a dog?” he asked.

“Kind of,” Lana said. She smiled back at him. “Honestly, I don’t know. I’m new at lamb motherhood.”

“I remember seeing you out here with your three,” Phil said. Mary and I always admired your ability to let them be kids. You let ‘em get dirty and sometimes they’d get hurt, but you let ‘em play.”

Lana laughed. “Thanks,” she said. She didn’t want to admit that she was simply surviving single parenthood. She’d sit on the backsteps watching them run around, hoping they’d get so exhausted they’d fall asleep as soon as they’d finished dinner.

“Ma.” April was coming towards Lana. She had found a way over the pallet.

“Here’s the little one, now,” Phil said. He looked genuinely pleased. He reached over the fence and made a noise, like calling a cat.

April, though, only had eyes for Lana, who squatted and waited for her. She picked her up and brought her to the fence, holding her near Phil so he could pet her.

“Not as soft as I thought she’d be,” he said. He kept making the kissing noise, though, and Lana could see he was smitten.

“Takes a lot to process the wool into something soft,” Lana said as if she knew. She didn’t. She hadn’t the foggiest idea beyond watching Jasper and his crew shear the sheep. A process she found almost devastating, even though Jasper reassured her that the sheep weren’t hurt.

“It just looks so humiliating,” Lana said.

Jasper laughed. “I suppose it is,” he said. “They forget all about it as soon as we let them go.”

“Says you,” she said.



Lana rubbed her face against April's. It wouldn't be long before the lamb was too big to hold. Another week and Lana wouldn't be able to lift her without throwing her back out. “She’s supposed to be weaned already,” Lana said. “But I keep giving in to the bottle.”

“You need Mary here to help with that,” Phil said. He gave a huff and chuckled to himself. “She weaned all our kids without once giving in.”

“I always gave in,” Lana admitted. She didn’t go into detail. She knew she’d embarrass Phil if she started talking about breastfeeding her babies; how she’d let the youngest nurse until he was past two.

“You still miss her,” Lana said. She pushed April a little closer to Phil.

“Oh, I sure do,” Phil said. “But” he turned and looked at his yard, “I have all of this to keep me busy.” He turned back and patted April on the head. She followed his hand with her head, hoping he might have a bottle hidden somewhere.

“Your yard is always so beautiful,” Lana said.

“I have a lot of time on my hands,” Phil answered. “Can’t just sit around wishing things were different. They are what they are.”

Lana had always hated that expression, but she kept quiet. “What about during the winter? What have you been doing all winter?” she asked.

“Planning,” Phil said. “Planning for when it isn’t winter.”

“Me too,” Lana said. She turned and put April down. “Want to come babysit while I mark out the pen?” she asked.

“I’d be delighted,” Phil said. “Let me go in just a minute. Can I bring you an iced tea?”



Marking off the pen was more work than Lana had anticipated. She was grateful for the iced tea. She enjoyed watching April walk around with Phil, who ambled over to her raised beds and pulled weeds here and there.

“Better get your lettuce in soon,” he said. “It gets warmer earlier every year. I see you’ve got some peas coming up. Nice.” He pushed the trellis into the dirt to firm it. Lana tied the twine around the final stake and banged it into the earth.

“There,” she said. “This will be just fine.”

“What kind of fencing you planning on using?” Phil walked over to Lana, turning around to make sure April was following him.

“Not sure. Any recommendations?”

“I’d go with something heavy-duty. Make sure you ask your brother. Don’t want her getting out and getting lost.”

“I sure don’t,” Lana said.

“I’ll help you when you’ve got the materials. Guess you should do it soon,” he said. Lana handed him back the glass he’d brought over. The ice had melted, and a yellow jacket was struggling to stay alive in what was left. “Damn bees,” Phil said. He flung the bee and what was left of the ice into the grass. “Get going, you,” he said to the bee. “And me, too,” he said. “I best be going myself. Nice to meet you, April. Looking forward to spending more time with you.”

Lana smiled. She couldn’t remember ever spending as much time with Phil. Maybe while Mary was alive and the children were small. She remembered how he used to hand her kids’ popsicles over the fence in the summertime. To her embarrassment, they would sometimes stand at the fence, talking loudly about how much they would love a nice, cold popsicle. Lana would rush over to stop them, but Phil would be at his back door with a box of red, white, and blue rockets before she knew it.



Lana led April back to her pen and closed the garage door. The windows on either side of the little structure would give April enough light and air. Lana struggled to open them. She had never attempted to open them before. Had never given much attention to the garage other than to fill it with everything except her car. Moving April in had required a quick decluttering. It was easy; she merely threw most of what she’d stashed into her car and took it to the dump. She wondered why she hadn’t done it before. She’d hung on to things that reminded her of her life before the divorce: books that she and Doug had

bought when they were dating in college, pictures of the two of them on their honeymoon, a table they'd bought together for their first apartment. Out. She let them all go. The rocking horse she sold. The dollhouse her father had made the girls shipped out to one of them. Boxes of dishes, silverware, and pans she put out at the end of the road with a "FREE" sign. They were gone by morning. Her son wanted the tools, so she organized those. They were packed and ready to go for when he and his family visited this summer. The kids had balked at first. They'd called each other, wondering whether Lana had finally met someone. She knew they were conspiring for her to fall in love, to be taken care of, to live out her life happily coupled, so that she wouldn't become a responsibility to them.

She pushed against the window, banging it free from the paint that adhered to it. With the base of her palm, she pounded upwards until it finally popped. She gave it one more bang and was able to raise it enough to get a breeze. She looked through the tools and found a screwdriver. It would, she realized, be more effective than her hand. She walked across the garage and began the process again – unstick the frame, this time using the screwdriver, and bang on it until it submitted. The second window was tougher, but still, she managed to get it cracked open without breaking the glass.

"There," she said to April. "Now you can have some fresh air." She took a deep breath. Weirdly, she liked the barn smell that April created. It felt like home in some inexplicable way. The earthiness grounded her. She wanted to take her shoes off but reminded herself that she was not on a farm; she was in her garage, which had been, up until just a few weeks ago, a complete mess.

Lana lifted the heavy garage door, crouched under it, then shut it again, fearing April would try to follow her. "Ma. Ma. Ma." April cried for her.

"Eat your food," Lana called to her through the door.



"She weaned?" Jasper asked her every time they talked.

"Just about."

"Keep weaning her. She's plenty old enough."

"I know," Lana said. "I'm trying."

"Bring her up soon. I'll weigh her."

"She's gaining weight, Jasper. I can tell."

"You still carrying her around?" He laughed at her.

Lana didn't admit to him that she was.



Lana called her brother when she got into the house. “I need your advice,” she said. “I’m fencing in an area for April in my yard.”

“Good,” Jasper said. “She’ll need to be outside soon. She weaned yet?” Lana heard the playfulness in his voice, so ignored his question.

“What’s my best bet for fencing?” she asked.

He told her about galvanized fences and heavy-duty posts, how to sink them, and the size of the pen.

“Just text me,” she said. “It’s too much information over the phone.”

“Phil, you know, my neighbor? He met her today. Loves her. He said he’d help with the fence.” She hoped Jasper would jump in on the offer.

“You zoned for farm animals?” he asked. “I meant to ask you before you took her.”

“Not sure. Phil won’t rat me out, though. He was walking her around the yard like she was his puppy.” She was sure. She wasn’t. She needed two acres to keep April legally.

“Might be best to bring her back here soon. She’ll adjust to the flock.”

Lana felt his words crush against her chest. “The fence will work,” she said. Her jaw felt tight. Sometimes she imagined the grief she carried in her body was like a well that would fill, then subside. Bringing April back to the farm added buckets to that well.

While Jasper talked, Lana looked out her kitchen window. From it, she could see the raised beds she would be readying soon for planting. She saw the large maple tree that she worried about in every storm. The inspector had advised her to cut it down, but Lana loved the tree. She saw the kidney-shaped flower bed she’d dug two years ago in July. Her gardener friends had scoffed at her, but it had flourished despite their warnings of disaster. She wondered if there would be as many rabbits this year and prayed to the coyotes and bobcats she knew lurked in the bramble to deliver her from them.

She walked to the back door and went outside. Jasper was saying something about making sure the stall stayed clean, but Lana’s mind was wandering. She held the phone between her ear and her shoulder and picked up the spool of twine and stuffed it under one arm, then picked up the mallet and stakes. She’d leave them beside the garage so she wouldn’t have to see April. So, she wouldn’t have to hear the lamb bleat “Ma” at her. So, she wouldn’t have to smell the hay and wool. She tiptoed to the garage door and gently leaned the mallet against it.

“Ma,” April cried. She’d heard her. Or maybe that’s just what lambs did when they were alone.

Maybe it had nothing at all to do with Lana's presence. She laid the stakes down along with the twine.

"You're not even listening to me, are you?" Jasper asked. Lana laughed.

"You could tell?"

"Lana, really, about the weaning—"

Lana cut him off. "I know. I'm weaning her. I promise."



Lana dreamed that night about nursing April. At first, when she looked down, it was a baby at her breast. She was surprised that at her age, she'd had a baby, but it felt right. Natural. Then, the baby became a lamb, and her breast hurt as the animal gnawed at her nipple. "That's enough," Lana yelled at it and pulled it away. She was bleeding not just from her breast, but from her collarbones. Her hands were bloodied, too, blood trickling from the tips of her fingers as if they were gruesome fountains. From the puddles that leaked from her body sprang white roses and chamomile. Lana woke. She turned on her light and sat up. She leaned against the headboard and took deep breaths. She listened to the night. The peep frogs had ceased singing. She turned her light back off and settled in for the insomnia she knew would be coming.

She must have fallen asleep just before dawn because she opened her eyes to a bright day. She could hear Phil pattering in his yard, and the birds were fighting for their arboreal territory. She rolled into a fetal position and closed her eyes again. The dream began coming back to her in small fragments, which she pieced together like a jigsaw. She got up to make coffee.

Standing at the sink, she looked out at the garage. Had she been able to hear April on other mornings? She couldn't remember. She thought she had, but then she thought that she was only making that up. She filled the pot with water and waited for her coffee to brew. She felt restless and couldn't shake the nightmare. She went out the back door.

"Morning," Phil said.

Lana smiled at him. She walked to the garage and stood before the wide door. She had forgotten to shut the windows. She worried it might have gotten too cold. But she reasoned, April was equipped with lots of bedding and a woolly coat. She would be fine. The smell was different, though. Rancid. Sulfuric.

She bent over to lift the door. The weight of it dragged across her back. The smell hit her as the door finally spun over the overhead rails.

April was lying on her side. She didn't raise her head. Lana crawled over the palette. She could see April's sickness like a crime scene. The lamb's breathing was rapid and shallow. Lana ran back to the

house to call Jasper.

“Something wrong?” Phil asked. She ran past him. He dropped his rake and made his way to the gate. He walked to Lana’s yard and retraced her steps to the garage. He went inside and lifted April out of the hay. He brought her to the backyard and laid her in the grass.

“Come on, Sweetie,” he said. “You can make it.” The lamb’s wool was matted with green, mucousy shit. Phil looked for the hose and gently cleaned her so Lana would be spared the sight. He laid the hose near April’s mouth, hoping to get her to sip the water. He put his hand on her head so she would know he was there. Her eyes were open, but he didn’t think she saw him.

“Lana,” Phil called at the house. He wanted her here. He knew she would need these moments. “Lana, come outside.” He kept a firm hand on April’s forehead, and now one on her chest. Her heartbeat was too fast. He knew nothing about sheep but knew this.

Lana came to the door. Phil lifted one hand to wave her over. She stood beside him, looking down. He reached up and took her hand, pulling her down next to him.

“Put your hand on her head,” he said. “She’ll know you’re with her.” He put Lana’s hand where his had been. “Keep another here,” he said. He put her other hand on April’s flank. When Lana was settled, Phil stood behind her.

“The ground is warm already,” he said. “Spring came early this year.”

“Jasper said it happens,” Lana said.

“It does.”

“Lambs get this. She might have gotten it from her mother,” she said. “Jasper didn’t think so, but I do.”

“No telling,” Phil said.

Lana took her hands away and sat on the ground. “How do we know?” she asked.

Phil squatted and put a hand on April. “She’s gone,” he said.

“But how do we know for sure?”

“We’ll wait a while,” he said, “to be sure. I’ll be back.” He went back to his house to get his shovel. The animal was about the size of a dog. He’d buried dogs before. The ground was soft enough. Between the two of them, they could dig a hole deep enough for the lamb. They’d do it on the edge of her property. Maybe close to the fence.

Phil walked back to Lana. “I’ll look for a spot for her,” he said. Lana nodded. The well in her chest was leaking. There was no torrent of water as she had expected, just a trickle over the stones and into her gut. “We’ll plant something nice.”

“A Mountain Laurel,” Lana said. “They stay green through the winter and blossom by May.”

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The Show Must Go On *by Cierra Turks*

All Kianna Goode did was slap a girl. One slap and it ended with her in detention; luckily, suspension wasn't an option. It had happened so quickly, her emotions were on ten and her heart raced from the accusations that spewed from the girl's mouth. There was no way her own boyfriend would do that to her — he knew better than to mess with someone like Kianna.

A beautiful, mocha-skinned student with cat-like eyes, full lips, hair and edges constantly laid. Everyone wanted to be her, and everyone wanted her boyfriend, Hyland. It was a shock that a black girl could get the richest and most popular white boy at Windmore Academy. He could have anyone he wanted and so could she; a newer student within the past year and had somehow got the school's Head Boy in her grasp. The thing about Kianna was that she wasn't one of those shy girls when starting a new school. Growing up in a household filled with Black Excellence, Kianna made it her mission to be the best when she started the new school year. Within a few months, she was on the Honor Roll, attending parties, and had teachers eating out of the palm of her hand. Weeks after that, Hyland had his eyes on her.

She knew her power, her good looks, and the knowledge that permeated from her that made others squirm in their seats. For the first time, her power had cracked thanks a lot to a smart mouthed, terrible bleach job girl who insisted that Hyland slept with her.

The dark wood filled room echoed and shook from the chaos of the world outside. Sunlight spilled softly into the classroom, dimming with each passing moment. Kianna's mind scattered with thoughts of the girl and Hyland together. As much as she didn't want to admit it, everything was slowly making sense. Their relationship was waning (to put it lightly), their phones would chime separately—more so his—which was odd as they had the same group of friends and were in the same group chats. Plus, anything that happened on social media, they knew it first. And yet, the distant chirps and pangs, the screen lighting up with an unknown number still permeated her mind. He insisted they were spam texts, which made sense.

Anyone born or with a device was susceptible to scams and weirdos accessing their information, even her. Recounting memories won't do anything in the moment, yet her heart panged at the reality forming around her altering the life she knew.

The door swung open, and a sea of braids flowed in. Round cheeks stained with tear streaks, and fogged glasses cover the student's face. Behind her, the teacher poked their head in and announced they would be back in 45 minutes and to not go anywhere.

Kianna watched the girl take a seat at the wooden desk a few seats ahead of her, in the second row. Her eyes lingered on the unknown student, narrowed and focused on trying to place the face. Kianna gave up quickly, clicked her tongue and mumbled under her breath.

She yanked her phone from her pocket and answered the many texts from her friends. Most texts were in all caps about how could she do something so stupid by slapping Brienne. Was that her name? Kianna didn't care to ponder more on the now identified man stealer. Then, to Instagram where the infamous slap already took off with different mash ups to sounds, sound effects, and remixes of posts, which made it hard to trace the original creator.

Whimpered breaths filled the room; Kianna furrowed her brows and glanced at the only owner the sounds could come from.

“Can you shut up,” Kianna grumbled.

The girl sniffled, tossed her head towards Kianna and stared back at her. Her skin tone was the same as Kianna's, yet not as glistened, stared back at her. Kianna noted the ash collected on the girl's hand before turning up her nose.

“Sorry. I'll stop,” the girl whispered.

A few more minutes passed, and the whimpered breaths escaped again. Kianna tossed her head back, letting her silk press swing back onto the desk behind her.

“If I ask you what's wrong, will you stop?” Her words were harsh, filled with disdain and annoyance that she was still in the hell hole. The mall was calling to her, a new purse singing softly begging to be added to her collection. That's what would make her feel better. She was sure of it. By eight, Hyland would call and apologize for the nonsense that inconvenienced her. Then, everything would go back to the semi-normalcy that she had accepted weeks ago.

“It's a long story.”

Kianna stood up and walked up to the girl, sitting in the seat next to her. She may be tough, hot headed, and sometimes stubborn, but Kianna had a heart. It was frozen, but it worked. Right? This girl had never been on her radar, so she probably wasn't a threat. Although Kianna could never sympathize with not being known, the least she could do was listen to whatever plagued the girl.

“Try me,” she said.

“I'm Nubia,” the girl said while sticking out her hand.

Kianna stared at it for a moment before taking it into her own. It was warm and wet. She yanked her hand back in haste. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the hand sanitizer. The alcohol stung

and hung in the air as she lathered her fingers. She motioned towards Nubia, and Nubia took her up on the offer. Nubia lathered her hands and intertwined her fingers to spread it. From the same pocket, Kianna pulled out a travel sized bottle of lotion from Estee Lauder. After moisturizing hers, she routinely gave Nubia some.

“You carry everything on you all the time,” Nubia asked.

“Better to be prepared than not. My mom taught me that.”

”I wish my mom taught me stuff,” Nubia mumbled.

There were plenty of things Kianna’s mom taught her, but they weren’t always positive. Especially when it came to relationships, her mother was the spokesperson for accepting the bare minimum. Minimal calls from her father, occasional dinners together, and no mentioning his other woman around her or Kianna. Maybe that was why Kianna accepted Hyland and the dread that came with being with him. Because it sure as hell wasn’t the sex, which happened fewer and farther between.

She steered the conversation back to the point. “Why are you crying?”

“I slept with someone I shouldn’t have had.”

Kianna’s body went cold, frozen in the seat. Judgement washed over her, ready to read Nubia for filth. But Nubia continued.

“It was a secret between us...I never met his friends or anything. How could I be so stupid to think he wanted to be seen with me?”

Who? Who? Who did you sleep with? The thoughts came but didn’t spill out. Kianna kept her composure, noting that the majority of the male student population were nothing but users, she couldn’t keep track of who this mystery could be. It didn’t have to be Hyland. It couldn’t be Hyland. It’s not Hyland.

“Why would you sleep with someone like that?” Kianna sounded just like her mother, so much that she flinched just from her own voice. Making dumb choices was equivalent to ruining her family’s reputation— at least that’s what it was like being a Goode.

“Who would turn down Bryant Lauder?”

Kianna’s body relaxed hearing Hyland’s best friend’s name. Bryant was definitely a womanizer, so it made sense that Nubia would be susceptible to his charms. To Kianna, everything about Bryant was so obvious that when it came to picking her dream boyfriend, Bryant was never an option. He screamed “playboy” and trouble, like a walking caution tape. She leaned over and tapped Nubia’s shoulder.

“If you can’t turn down the Bryants of the world, then you shouldn’t be sleeping with anyone.” Her tone was condescending, which she intended it to be. How could girls fall for him so easily? The phenomenon of playboys and susceptible girls should be studied if it hasn’t been already.

“How did you slip by, Kianna?”

Not shocked that Nubia knew her, she launched into her explanation. She mentioned how the cockiness that radiated off him was obvious and potent enough for her to waltz past without it affecting her. It could be genetic; passing ego and finding pleasure and solace in a man (or boy) who was aloof, mysterious, and was picky with his choices.

The smell of alcohol started to fade around them, yet the scent of strawberries still engulfed them from her lotion. “I wish I had the confidence like you.”

“Don’t look up to anyone but yourself, Nubia. Idolizing people leads to disappointment.”

Nubia nodded slowly and wiped her face. “How could I be so stupid to think he would pick me?”

“Boys have a way of convincing you of things that will never happen. Then, when you speak up about it, you sound crazy, and they get away with it scot-free. The crazier you are, the more other girls will hate you and will make it their mission to prove you wrong. It happens all the time, like common sense.”

Nubia picked her nails, jaw clenching and unclenching as Kianna spoke. Kianna’s stomach plummeted, she knew the signs and they were blatantly staring at her. “He was your first,” she said simply.

Nubia didn’t rebuttal Kianna’s statement. Instead, her voice went soft. “He said he loved me.”

Kianna groaned, fighting the memories of her first time. She had been there before, not with Hyland, but with a boy from her old school. The reason she had to flee and come to a new town where no one knew her. Where no one would remind her of the life she took, the one that would eventually call her mom if she chose to keep it.

“Boys like Bryant are incapable of love. Trust me on this.”

“You have Hyland, why should I trust you?” Nubia’s red stained eyes sharpened. “Why should I listen to someone like you? You’re perfect with the most perfect boyfriend. You don’t know what it’s like to have your heart broken and to be used. What would I have in common with the beautiful Kianna Goode?”

Nubia launched out of her seat, towards the door. Just as her hand landed on the handle, Kianna shouted. “We can’t leave for another 20 minutes.”

"I'm going to the bathroom," Nubia shouted back. Just as she opened the door, the teacher stood in the doorway. She told him where she was going, and he insisted she come right back.

While she was gone, Kianna's mind rattled with the very valid reasons Nubia should trust her, but no one knew those parts of her. She had kept them under lock and key, making sure she remained as sober as possible to not spill her own secrets. And within minutes of talking to someone she never knew, she was on the brink of telling her. Once the words leave her, Kianna would never be able to pretend like that life never existed. Everything would become real, scary, and the nightmares would come flooding back. She didn't work hard for nothing.

Nubia sauntered in and whooshed past Kianna, making her way to the back of the room. Ties that once formed within minutes quickly faded away, disconnecting the girls from each other. Neither one said a word, but the words unsaid lingered in their minds and hearts. Until one of them shattered.

"If I trust you, then you should tell me something about yourself." It was Nubia who caved.

"Why would I do that?" Kianna snapped her head around to the back of the room.

Nubia shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe to get that chip off your shoulder."

Kianna looked at Nubia like she was looking into a mirror. One that she avoided, but deep down knew she had to face it. Her future self would never turn into her mother— cold hearted, distant, regretful, and secretive. She didn't want to. Living in survival mode was becoming daunting, lonely, and terrifying each time Hyland's hand didn't touch hers or when the sex made him feel far away. Every moment, every line was a play she concocted. Pretty to look at, but if you looked too close, you'd see the cracks and how messy the production truly was. And now an audience member was in the front row, to see the marks.

Kianna's mouth twitched, unable to pick which scar to share that would make her trustworthy. Then, it clicked.

"Hyland has been cheating on me." It was the simple one, messy but not the one that would dismantle everything. Those other secrets would stay hidden... for now.

Nubia's eyes widened, cracking the facade. "Holy shit. And you choose to stay?"

"Says the girl sleeping with Bryant of all people," Kianna snapped.

Nubia slammed her mouth shut. "Why would you let him do that to you? You're Kianna Goode for Christ's sake!"

Strings repaired themselves slowly, flashes of light coursed through them strengthening the ties to each other. Their hearts pounded in the silence, heightening the tension in the enclosed space.

“Because I loved him,” Kianna admitted.

Loved. Not love. That love had faded two months ago when she first suspected cheating. Already vulnerable by her past, she went looking for trouble and found it on his phone. Once her suspicions were confirmed, it was as if the world froze and started to spin backwards. Back to the heartache, back to the beginning of the clinic visit. She entered one way and came out as if nothing had happened. Kianna’s life was constantly spinning backwards and forwards. Maybe that’s how life goes, but she wasn’t ready to analyze all those aspects until she felt ready. Just saying some of her truth out loud was enough to spin her forward. Even if for a moment.

Moments passed until Nubia spoke up. “Loved?”

Kianna groaned. “It’s complicated. Just like your situation.”

Nubia wiped her forehead. “At least you never ended up pregnant.”

If a pin dropped, it would be the only sound in the room. Kianna held her breath, while Nubia huffed with wide eyes and murmurs escaping her lips. “By Hyland?”

”Oh, hell no,” Kianna nearly shouted.

Nubia sprinted back up to Kianna who was now patting her eyes with a tissue she found in her pocket.

“You really do have everything on you,” Nubia joked.

Kianna choked on a chuckle and told her to shut up. Then, the laughter flowed out. An emotion that Kianna couldn’t mask anymore. Was it appropriate for the conversation or the moment? No, but the body doesn’t always do the right thing at the right time. Like getting pregnant at 15. Just because it can doesn’t mean it should.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Nubia said.

“Good or I’ll kill you,” Kianna mumbled.

Their eyes landed on each other, a mutual understanding linking them for as long as they decide to depend on each other. An unspeakable bond that would alter their lives if they decided it would be so. Both of their eyes swelled up, fighting back the emotions that desperately wanted to be released. For Nubia, it had been like this for the past month, but for Kianna, every feeling was new.

“Detention is almost over,” Nubia said softly. Her hand was on top of Kianna’s, warmth flooded between them. A comfort that was foreign to them.

“So?” Kianna searched Nubia’s face for an answer. Nubia’s shifted down to their paired black flats.

Different brands for different paths, yet so similar no one could tell the difference.

Then, her eyes were back on Kianna. “Would you like to come with me? I don’t want to do this alone.”

Unable to find the words, Kianna nodded. It’s what she wished she had back then, a hand to hold while it happened. Yet, Kianna entered alone and walked out alone. She was determined for Nubia to never know that feeling.

If she could see herself in the mirror for once, then Kianna could stop pretending. There would be no reason to continue. Someone finally got out of the seat, came up to the stage, and peeked behind the curtain to the atrocities of her life and didn’t run away. The show would never go on again.

Cierra Turks had explored the wonders of the suburbs of Chicago with a notebook, markers, and the dream of being a fashion illustrator and forming her own Cheetah Girls group. When that dream became a bust, she decided to navigate her world through storytelling and songwriting. Now with a new notebook filled with book ideas, she creates worlds for Black women to be themselves—loved, flawed, and completely themselves. When she’s not writing for her community, she still writes songs and loves doing puzzles with a hot cup of tea. She is on Substack [cierrareadswrites](#) and Instagram/Threads [@cierrareadsandwrites](#).

Artificial Fame *by John DiFelice*

The wedding was in three months, and she did not love him. When it had been four months away, she had not loved him. Or five months, or six. Yes, six. Six months, and she could no longer deny it. Each month that she could not bring herself to tell him was another month closer to the wedding. To tell him was to hurt him, but not to tell him was to hurt him more, to hurt him forever. She couldn't do it because she loved him. She loved him as a person—his manner, his habits—and she realized too late that she had fallen in love with the way he loved her. It was a malleable love that she could hammer into any form, and she had molded it into a shape that looked exactly like the love she had always wanted. She could have continued to live with this fabrication if she had not met someone who stirred something real in her. She had tried to forget him but could not.

She had awoken at two in the morning again, into a life that didn't feel like hers. She lay in bed until late in the afternoon, when she rose, put on her slippers, and walked into the living room. Her landlord rewarded her for being a loyal tenant by letting her paint the living room however she liked. She had painted broad, alternating vertical stripes around the room, but the appeal quickly faded. Spending time in the room now caused her anxiety.

She stood before the large window facing north, out toward the Hancock Building and beyond. Somewhere in the enormous city below, her fiancé rode to her in an Uber from O'Hare. It was dusk, and the sun smeared red and orange light over the skyscrapers. It showed in her eyes. He would arrive soon. She imagined the scenario that had played out each time he had visited. He would be so happy to see her that he would hug her around the waist, pick her up in his arms, and hold her against him. He would cup her face in his hands and kiss her cheeks, her lips; he would let her long hair slip through his fingers. After not seeing her for a month, his passion would be great. He would want to take her by the hand and lead her to bed, and she would let him, and she would die inside.

She had told no one else, not her mother or her best friend. Instead, she made herself say it to her reflection in the bathroom mirror so she could hear it aloud. She would scream it, sit on the edge of the tub, and cry.

The sun's rays grew faint and were replaced by lights in the buildings. The familiar patterns greeted her like stars—fixed, artificial flames to replace the ones she could no longer see above. She wished upon one. She saw one light in the Hancock Building night after night. She recognized it because it was one of the few visible during her insomniac wanderings around her apartment. Within that room was a person who also couldn't sleep. She wondered who that person was. She created a backstory that she embellished each night until it reached the level of myth. The person was a woman. She was happy and

needed no one else. Her happiness was self-contained and did not rely on a man. She was sophisticated and uncompromising, sure of herself. This woman went through life without a single doubt. She never would have lied: not to him, not to her family, not to herself.

She wanted to be this other woman so badly. She wanted to be anywhere but in her apartment, waiting for the buzzer to announce her fiancé's arrival.

She buzzed him in. As she waited, she saw things more clearly than she could ever see them. It was so obvious, so simple. A child could have seen it. She saw her life as the fantasy it was, a dream that had quietly unraveled. Their relationship had stretched out in miles instead of years. Seeing him once a month had the effect of viewing art with missing lines, and her mind had filled them in and made them whole with connections that weren't there. She imagined it all, and now her imagination had abandoned her.

She heard him at the door and opened a window to let air in. Her chest had tightened. She unlocked the door, and he entered her apartment. The wind caught the heavy door and slammed it shut, and she jumped.

He smiled at how she startled and told her he adored her. He picked her up and kissed her face. He told her how much he had missed her. Her tears fell before him. What was wrong? he asked. She laughed at the simplicity of the question.

They lay together on the bed. She squeezed him tight and cried into his chest. What is it? he asked. She was so lonely, she said. He had no idea how lonely she was. He told her everything would be OK once they were together. That was the problem. He started to talk about the honeymoon. She told him to stop. Didn't she care where they went? She said she did not. He didn't understand. He asked why. He wanted her to be honest with him. She said she was tired. He reminded her how many hours he had flown to see her. He said he knew what would take her mind off things. He kissed her, but she stopped him. What was wrong? he asked again. She stood up and paced along the bed in front of him. She looked out her bedroom window but couldn't see her light. He told her to stop walking and talk to him. He said he wanted to know what was wrong.

"I don't love you."

She said it to him finally because he made her. She averted her eyes as she said it in a voice that held the mechanical emotions of a toaster announcing the morning bread. He asked why over and over again until the word lost all meaning and collapsed into discordant tones. From there, she could no longer hear him and could only watch the mute movement of his lips form the pucker of the "W" before widening into the contortion that completed the word, the one that conveyed their history together

from first kiss to last futile plea, a mouth she had kissed so many times, but never again. Why? She told him she didn't know.

Is there someone else? he asked. No, there's no one else. Is there someone else? Yes, she replied.

He rose and walked to the bedroom door. She called after him, begging him to postpone the wedding. He turned toward her. No, he said. This is all quite understandable. This is all normal. Just pre-wedding jitters. She needed to come home. She needed to come to where he was, to live with him again. She needed to quit school and leave this place. That would fix things.

After he left the bedroom, she heard the front door open and shut. She dried her eyes and walked into the dark living room. She looked out the window and saw it. She saw her light shining high above the city. It was there as it had been all these nights. She wished she could trade places. She wondered if someone in that lit room looked across the sweeping landscape of the city at the light on in her window and wished for the same thing. She wondered if there was anyone there at all.

John DiFelice is a short story writer, novelist, and playwright. His short fiction has been published in the print collections *South Philly Fiction II*, *Lures*, *Eggplant Emoji*, vol. 4, and the online publications *Human Parts* and *Invisible Illness*. His two full-length plays were produced at Plays & Players Theatre in Philadelphia.

The Lifeguard Test *by Taylor Olsen*

The floor mats in the changing rooms at Lake Greene reminded me of the ones at Dad’s work. Rubber and filled with holes like a milk crate. They were meant to be soft and durable, easing the discomfort of standing in one spot for ten hours, arms submerged in soapy, scalding water. But as I stood there, the pain only got worse.

“If Marco is here, I will die,” Selena said in the room next to me. I heard the ruffle of clothes and the zipper of her Vera Bradley duffel. “Like literally drown. I will jump off the dock and never come back up.”

The changing rooms were humid and smelled faintly of pee. Selena had tugged me inside so she could change. I stared down at the navy one-piece swimsuit I already had on. I wore it there, slept in it the night before, tucked it beneath a pair of cutoffs and a T-shirt. I thought I would be used to it by now, the way it squeezed me, but nothing felt right in my fifteen-year-old body. Everything was slightly off. Like Dad’s truck’s indicator that blinked half a second behind all the other cars. So, I stepped into a room and shucked my clothes in private.

“Don’t worry about him. Just focus on the test,” I said.

This made Selena laugh. “Oh my God, Maggie. You’re so serious. It’s just a lifeguard test. A comatose patient could pass it with flying colors.”

She continued to laugh, and I knew I was supposed to laugh too, to validate her joke. But I ignored her. *Focus on the test.* I breathed and repeated it to myself like a mantra, because for me, this was serious. For me, winning was never guaranteed.

“Hey, can you tie this for me?”

Selena pulled back my curtain without notice, and I stood there frozen like I’d been caught doing something I shouldn’t—ruminating, doubting, panicking. But she didn’t notice. She walked in, shoulders pulled back, with her big, bouncy breasts and flat stomach and not a single red bump along the inside of her thighs. Her hair was swept up into a bun with just the right number of strands framing her face. Her mom probably taught her that. I wished my mom showed me how to do my hair or shave my legs. I wished she signed me up for gymnastics class or dance lessons or beauty pageants. I wished she gave me a good reason to be self-conscious. The words to explain to myself why I was the way that I was. Because then maybe I’d have been standing there with my best friend, our beauty on display, poking and prodding at each other, pointing out flaws that didn’t exist. Fabricating lies that motivated us to strive for perfection.

But I didn't have a mom.

I only had my dad who deliberately wore pants two sizes too big and scratched his beer belly and held a power drill and told me to shine the flashlight here not there. He got the job done regardless of where I pointed the light.

He'd tell me he was so proud of me when I got a C on a math test or when I kicked the ball in a rec soccer game. I'd say, *I should have gotten an A. Or, But I passed it directly to the other team.* And he'd always respond, *You just do the best you can. That's all we can ever do.*

To my dad there was no such thing as a flaw, no such thing as greatness, only hard work and perpetual effort. Because to him, being the literal best at anything led to an empty life. He'd come home from the restaurant every evening, fingers dry and pruned, falling asleep happy with his mediocre life and his mediocre daughter. *We are rich in so many ways*, he would say. Silently, I'd add: *Except in the ways that count.*

I wanted him to push me, put pressure on me, expect great things from me. Instead, he'd just smile, pat my head, and say, *Showing up is what counts.*

Selena's hands were clasped around her back holding the strings together. Well, I thought, I am here.

I took hold of the reins. Tied them into a knot.

"Hmm. Tighter," Selena said.

I undid the knot and yanked the strings. They sliced into her sides but hardly created divots in her fatless back.

"Better?"

She moved and shimmied and jumped to test the integrity. Then shook her head. "Tighter, Maggie. I can't spill out of this thing. Especially if Marco is here."

What I didn't ask is why she was even wearing a string bikini. Didn't her mother teach her how to dress herself properly for any occasion? Whether for country club galas or first dates or lifeguard tests? I imagined how aware of herself Selena must have felt when she wore it. Maybe that was what kept her self-conscious, wearing a swimsuit she always had to watch out of the corner of her eye. Always had to check in on her body. Maybe her mother packed her duffel for her and placed the bikini inside strategically—if she couldn't be around, something else had to whisper insults into her ear.

I pulled so hard that Selena's spine straightened. "How's that?"

“That is looser than before.” There was a hint of irritation in her voice, an indictment on me for being the sole responsibility for any wardrobe malfunctions.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You can’t, I promise.”

I tried again and again, but nothing I did satisfied her.

“Hang on, let me call my mom. She has a trick to make it tight. It’s like bulletproof, the way she does it.” Selena bent down to reach into her bag, and I watched the small vertebrae of her spine poke out like porcupine spikes. She pressed her phone to her ear. “Mom? I have an emergency.”

She paced back and forth barefoot on the milk crate mats, and I wondered if it soothed her. The pain of each step. The self-flagellation to keep her head sharp, to keep her tough, immune to the world of being a teenaged girl. She hung up the phone. “She’s on her way.”

“She’s coming here?” I said, and Selena nodded. “To fix your top?”

She shrugged like this was no big deal. Like moms were supposed to come to our rescue.

We sat on the bench outside while we waited for Mrs. Stuart, and I couldn’t help but feel insurmountably inadequate. I could not even tie a knot.



Selena’s mom was there within two minutes. I know because I counted. Counted the up and down bobs of my knee while Selena sat still next to me, one smooth leg crossed over the other. It was as if her mother was in the parking lot waiting for this to happen, waiting for her daughter to need her.

She pulled Selena immediately into a hug. “Don’t worry, my sweet, I’m here.” Then, she noticed me. “Oh! Margaret, hello. I thought you were alone, Selena. You didn’t ask Margaret?”

“Maggie tried tying it, but it is still loose.”

“Well, turn around.” Selena did. “Margaret, watch. Let me teach you.”

Selena’s mother tightened the strings across her daughter’s back. Her fingers moved nimbly despite her long, glossy acrylics. I tried to keep up, but the way she moved was too smooth, too innate, in a way that I could never replicate. But mostly I was overwhelmed by the intimacy of having someone else’s mother teach me how to do things. How to be a woman.

“I see the problem,” Mrs. Stuart said. “You’ve grown.”

“What?” Selena screeched.

“This top is too small.” She finished tying the knot now with languid wrists and her nails clicking together.

“It’s too loose, Mom.”

“That’s not my fault, sweet.” She looked me up and down. “Maybe Margaret has a swimsuit you can borrow.” And waved as she walked out.

I didn’t have another swimsuit. I only had one, the single one that Dad bought me from the clearance rack at Marshall’s. *Because you don’t need two*, he’d said. So, he bought me the one that was neither too cheap nor too expensive. The one that was perfectly fine. The one that tried its best.

Focus on the test. I looked at my watch. “We’re going to be late,” I said, and we headed to the water.



Marco was indeed there. Not just present, but a judge, assigned the task of paying close attention to each of us with a stopwatch in his hand and a whistle dangling around his tanned neck. Selena squirmed. Adjusted the small triangles of fabric covering her chest.

She was not the only person wearing a two-piece, I noticed, but the other girls’ swimsuits looked sturdy and athletic. Frankly, unflattering. Cutting into their asses and hip bones and flattening their chests to patties like mine.

In that moment, I realized my own hypocrisy. My own insecurity leached out into the way I viewed the world, judging these other girls who were wearing exactly what they were supposed to. Because—why? To bring them down so I could shine? To preemptively soothe the gut punch of never being the best? To punish them for having moms? Maybe Dad was right. When we tried our best, we were content, proud of ourselves for showing up and letting the rest fall away.

But just showing up wouldn’t earn me my summer job.

“First, everyone will be completing the swim-tread-swim test,” Marco said. “You will jump in the water, swim out to the far buoy, tread for two minutes, then swim back. There are five lanes, so five people will go at a time. You gotta pass this in order to go on to the next round.” The way he said it reminded me of a game show. The stakes were high.

He blew his whistle, and we jumped in.

The water was still cold from the late spring air. It shocked my core the same way the milk crate mats did, but this time I embraced it. As it filled my ears and flowed through my hair, I felt weightless. Powerful. Focused.

I swam and forgot about Selena in the lane next to me. I kicked through the water, knowing she couldn't barge in and demand things from me. She couldn't ask me to tie her top or fix her hair or swim this test for her. If she needed my help, I was busy, mind set on greatness.

It was not until I came up to begin treading that I looked her way. She had that determined look on her face, the same one on display when she did eyeliner on her left eye or solved for x on the whiteboard in front of our algebra class. She was as focused as me. No room for mistakes. But then her face shifted, contorted in agitation. We were only supposed to tread with our legs, keeping our arms out of the water, but Selena's hands were beneath the surface fiddling with her strings.

"Arms up, Stuart!"

Marco's voice made her blush. She glanced my way before taking on her determined face again. She finished her tread and swam back to the dock. Hoisted herself up on the ladder, water dripping down her skin, like the goddess she was raised to be.



"Test two, you will start in the water. Swim to that first buoy, dive under to retrieve a brick, and swim back with the brick in hand. This has gotta be completed in under two minutes," Marco said.

Surprisingly, some people did not complete the first test. This sent a zing of satisfaction through me, that I had done better than four other people, that I had survived onto round two of the gameshow. I was one step closer to the prize, to proving myself.

Selena stared at her feet.

"Is your swimsuit okay?" I whispered.

She pursed her lips, adjusted it one more time. "It will have to be."

At Marco's whistle, we sliced through the water, Selena once again at my side. Kicking, kicking, kicking. Each stroke of my arms more powerful than the last. I felt like I was flying but when I looked up, Selena was soaring. She was already at the buoy, diving beneath the surface to retrieve the brick. I pushed harder, something inside me blazing with the desire to beat her, wanting to be better than perfect Selena whose mom loved her and hurt her all at once. Whose mom made her the resilient woman she was.

I made it to the buoy and dove under, my fingers touching the sandy bottom. I pawed around the dark lake water for the brick but couldn't find it. My lungs began to burn. At last, I touched the cool hard edge of an object and resurfaced. I expected Selena to be nearly at the finish line by now, but she wasn't. She was still there right next to me. I nearly took off, grasping at my chance to finish before her,

but out of the corner of my eye I saw Selena wasn't moving. She clutched her brick to her chest, a strange look on her face. One I hadn't seen before, one I didn't know she was capable of. It was not determined or agitated. No, she looked the way I did when I had to put on eyeliner or solve for x. Scared.

"Selena, what's wrong?"

I held my brick tightly but the weight of it was like an anchor. I treaded harder to stay afloat.

"My top," she said. "It came undone. I—"

"Just retie it," I said. "I'll hold your brick."

She met my eyes. "Maggie, it came off my body. I can't find it." Then tears welled.

Selena, my perfect best friend, who had a mom and breasts and the confidence to walk into a lifeguard test wearing a string bikini, who never crumpled under pressure but thrived in it, was about to cry. My heart tugged for her. For the girl who was always expected to be great but could never make the cut because the judge kept raising the bar.

Time ticked. I counted every beat like when we waited on the bench. Except this time her mom wasn't coming to save her. Other swimmers around us were finishing up and I felt my pulse quicken. I was losing. I needed to get this brick to the dock. I needed to get there in under two minutes. I needed this job. I needed to win.

But Selena.

Without thinking, without her having to ask, I dove under. The lake was dark. I swiped my hand around frantically. Where was it? I kept searching, each second feeling heavier and longer than the last. My brick was slowing me down. I had to lose it. I had to. So, I let go.

I was lighter now, but my leg muscles screamed, my lungs ached. But I wasn't giving up. I was doing the best I could. Pushing myself. Finally, I caught on to something that felt like seaweed. A string! I came up for air.

I moved into her lane and tied the top around her back as securely as I could. Selena didn't look back. She swam to the finish line like a bloodthirsty shark on a hunt. Hauled herself onto the dock, brick in hand, and Marco clicked his timer ceremoniously. He wrote something on the clipboard. "One minute and fifty-eight seconds."

Selena threw her arms up in celebration. And I did too, still in the water, my brick somewhere eight feet below.



Later, we sat on the bench waiting for our rides, wrapped in towels, hair dripping the same cold water.

“You did it,” I said to Selena, and because no one probably had before, I added, “I’m proud of you.”

She squeezed my hand. “Thanks to you. You’re a great friend.” I smiled, and Selena added, maybe because she knew no one had before, “The literal best.”

That summer at Lake Greene, Selena worked as a lifeguard, and they offered me a job at the concessions stand. She saved lives and I flipped burgers. But as I stood on those milk crate mats each day, my hands submerged in soapy, scalding water, nothing about it felt mediocre.

Taylor Olsen is an emerging writer born and raised in New Jersey (proudly). After a brief stint in New York to see what all the fuss was about, she returned to Jersey—because she really does love it that much. Her work often explores the people and places that shaped her. She is currently working on her debut novel, which is set on the Jersey shore, her favorite place on Earth. You can keep up with her latest at www.taylorolsenauthor.com, on Substack [@thetaylorolsen](https://www.substack.com/p/thetaylorolsen) and on Instagram [@thetaylorolsen](https://www.instagram.com/thetaylorolsen).

Unseen by Dabney Baldrige

Everything I owned was stuffed in that black duffel bag. The white check on the side had long since faded into the background. It blended in with the various scuffs and stains, invisible and unseen—just like me.

My fingers traced the remains of the shape as I clung to the bag in my lap and glared at it, avoiding eye contact with the strangers standing around me, waiting for the bus. It had been my brother's bag, but my dad had chucked it at me when he told me to pack my things and get out.

After that fight, I didn't just leave to finish my second semester, like he thought. I left knowing I wasn't going back. I left knowing that wasn't my home. Not anymore.

Stifling a yawn, I checked my watch and squinted at the summer sun. It was only 9:23 a.m., but it beat down on the bus station as if it were high noon. I looked around again with a sigh. Still no bus. According to my ticket, it was supposed to leave at 9:30. Seven minutes, people.

I rolled my eyes and stood up. With this extra time, I guess I had no excuse. I swung my duffel over one shoulder, and shuffled, unnoticed, to the nearest working payphone. I now had to use these ancient things thanks to my dad, who had cancelled my service after he figured out I wasn't planning on coming home.

Wiping my hands on my jeans, I shoved a few quarters into the slot and punched the numbers. I had promised Nathan I would call at some point, and I couldn't avoid him forever. I checked my watch again as the phone rang. He was an hour ahead so he should be up.

"Hello?" my friend's familiar voice answered, mixed with static from the receiver.

"Hey. It's Noa," I glanced around and put my duffel bag on the ground in between my loosely tied shoelaces. "I made it to the bus station and the bus should be here soon. Actually, it's late. But anyways. I'll be in San Antonio this time tomorrow."

"Hey, good to hear from you, after *three* days of silence," he kept a running tally because he knew it annoyed me. He had made it his personal duty in college to be my substitute brother.

I shook my head, "Hey, I wasn't trying to avoid you or anything. I was at Michelle's place. Didn't think to call." I gathered my matted hair in one hand and held it off my neck.

"Right..." He didn't sound convinced. "So, San Antonio, huh?"

"They have a great art scene," I shrugged. "I've been there a few times."

"You sure do get around."

“I guess.”

There was a pause. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, hoping he wouldn't ask what I thought he was going to ask. But of course, he did, “Have you called Jordan? Or Melyssa? Told them where you are, where you're going, what's going on...?”

“No,” I huffed and released my hair, letting it fall in sandy tangles. Why couldn't he leave my cousin and best friend out of this? I didn't want to tell them my plans and that was that. “I told you, I'll tell them when I'm ready. I don't need you telling me what to do. I can handle this.”

“I was just trying to help,” I imagined him raising his hands in surrender, waving a white flag. “But you should tell them. And if you don't, I promise, they'll find out.” Another pause. Static filled the silence. Then he asked, “So, do you have a plan?”

I looked around me again, desperately grasping for something to tell him. Something. Anything. “I'll do street art, maybe sell it. I dunno. I'll figure it out as I go,” I kicked the ground. “I've gotta go. My bus just pulled up. I'll talk to you later.”

“Okay,” his voice grew serious. “I really hope you know what you're—”

The line went dead.

“Nathan?” But the only answer I got was the dial tone screaming at me. I glared at the receiver, shoved it back in its cage, and kicked my bag.

For a moment, I stood there, biting my lip. I felt a hot sting rush to my nose, but I forced it back.

I wouldn't cry. I wouldn't let myself. Instead, my body shook.

I vowed, then and there, that I would make this work. I could make it on my own. I didn't need help, I didn't need people telling me what to do, and I didn't need sympathy. The end.

I trudged back to my seat to wait, but it had already been stolen by a man shrouded in cigarette smoke. I cursed under my breath, crossed my arms, and frowned at him, but he didn't even acknowledge me. It was no use. So I slumped with my back pressed against the wall and waited.

Fifteen minutes later, the bus finally pulled up. It was white with faded silver lettering stretching from end to end that spelled out “Greyhound.” Two stripes, one red and the other blue, ran across the top, and a silvery-blue dog jumped through the lettering like it was jumping through hoops. This bus would be my home for the next fifteen hours.

While some of the passengers gathered around the cargo hatch to stow their luggage, I headed straight for the open doors. Even though I hated what the duffel bag stood for, it was the only thing I

had. It went with me. Inside, the bus seats were a plain, faded blue, lining the tinted windows, two seats per row. It smelled like spoiled cheese and expired deli meat. I marched all the way to the back and grabbed the window seat on the right-hand side, holding my breath as I went.

From there, I watched the strange characters file onto the bus and find their own seats. Three rows in front of me, an elderly couple argued about this and that, while to my right the man reeking of cigarette smoke claimed the other back corner. When his gaze landed on me, I gritted my teeth and looked away. A woman with beautiful golden skin took the seat next to mine. I think my jaw might have dropped. With her red cocktail dress, her stilettos, and her bulky jewelry, she was dressed more appropriately for dinner at a high-class jazz club in New York City than a cheap bus trip across the south.

I opened my mouth to compliment her dress and maybe ask where she was headed, but she didn't even look at me. Who was I kidding, I couldn't talk to her. I must have seemed like part of the upholstery in my shabby flannel shirt and faded jeans. Here I was, trying to start a new life, and people were already treating me exactly the same as I'd always been treated. Like they didn't see me. Like I didn't matter. Like I was just a fly on the wall.

I crossed my arms over my bag and scowled out the window. Sitting there, I heard my own voice echo in my head. Words I had said over a year ago. "Jordan?" I had asked, "Why can't I have a normal family like everyone else? I'm not even talking about a perfect family, one that cares about what I do. Is that too much to ask?" As the bus bumped, shook, and pulled away from the station and out onto the highway, I watched the city of Memphis disappear, washed out by the glare of the southern sun.

This was it. This was my chance to prove them all wrong—my dad who thought I was wasting my time with school, my brother who joked that I would grow up to be a starving artist living in a ditch, my stepmom who looked at me like I was walking garbage, and my mother who didn't care enough to stay. None of them wanted me in the house anyways; they always said I mooched off everyone who actually did things with their lives. Well, I was doing things, they just couldn't see. And now there was no turning back. I bit my lip and pressed my forehead against the glass.

I really hoped I knew what I was doing.



Two hours later, the bus made its first stop in Little Rock, Arkansas. I shifted in my seat uncomfortably as the bus driver gave us instructions over the intercom in a slow drawl. We would be stopping for an hour and had to leave the bus. The driver didn't care if we waited at the station or went off somewhere, but we had to meet back to board the bus at 1:15.

I looked at my watch. 12:09 p.m. My stomach made a hollow gurgling sound, rebelling against my plan to not break my twenty. But I think, today, I am okay with rebelling.

The bus jerked to a stop in front of the Greyhound station. The concrete block looked like a prison, gray, dingy, and shrouded in smog.

“Excuse me,” I stopped at the front of the bus and addressed the driver. “Do you know where I can find food? *Real* food?”

The driver didn’t even look up. “Take this road down to the next intersection and look for the sign that says Junction Bridge and cross it,” he said in a monotone.

With my bag slung over my shoulder, I followed his directions and made my way over the wide Arkansas River. On a clear day, I’m sure the scene was a nice one, but today the river was murky, its surface reflecting the dirty clouds. The air was so thick you could cut it with a knife. I stopped, undid the last button on my flannel shirt, and tied it around my waist so my tank top could breathe. It was a fifteen-minute walk over the bridge and once I reached the other side, my nose led me to food.

I got the cheapest thing on the menu – the kid’s fried chicken strips – and ate it on a wrought iron bench overlooking the river. I watched as boats packed with tourists floated by. One of the boats came near enough that I could see a small boy waving at the passersby. He reminded me of Jordan and Melyssa’s boy, little Theo and I smiled, for a moment.

In my mind, I heard Theo’s laughter and running feet, saw his beaming face, and felt his gravelly voice say my name. He would be half a year older since I saw him last. My smile faded. I heard Jordan’s voice saying, “I’m serious, Noa. You can stay here as long as you need.” I had turned him down. I didn’t want to be another burden, another thing for him to worry about. I was my own person, and I could take care of myself. I would be fine.

I turned away.

Back on the bus, a new stranger slumped into the seat next to me. A teenage boy, pale with tousled black hair and hooded eyes. He didn’t look at me either and spent the next five hours sleeping on his backpack with headphones in. Not even the three minor stops we made woke him. I wished I had that kind of power. If I had earplugs I might be able to pull it off, but all I had to listen to was the foul-mouthed conversation of a salesman and his friend across the aisle. Not exactly lullaby material. But as the shadows lengthened and the driver announced our next stop would be in Dallas around midnight, I shoved my bag against the window, kicked my feet up, threw my flannel shirt across my shoulders, and tried to ignore my angry stomach as I drifted off.

“Alright folks,” I jumped as the voice over the intercom blasted my eardrum. I squinted at the speaker above me, eyes stinging. “*We are about fifteen minutes out from Dallas. Everyone needs to exit this bus. Be sure you take everything with you because those of you who are continuing to San Antonio will be boarding another bus at this station. Please wait for the next bus to arrive. Thank you.*”

The cabin lights switched on and people on the bus groaned and shifted. Still blinking the sleep from my eyes, I checked my watch. 12:23 a.m. I yawned and threw my head back on my bag, dreaming of food until the bus jerked to a stop.

I stumbled into the aisle feeling like a zombie, hovering in between real life and living death. By the time I made it off the bus, all the seats and benches had been taken. Those without seats spread out on the ground. Many continued sleeping, but there was no way I was going to sleep here. The station gave me the creeps. The dim streetlights flickered, giving the place a horror movie feel. The late-night breeze was sticky with humidity and carried the sounds of the inner city, still alive with activity.

Half asleep, I found myself facing a grimy wall.

A payphone stared back at me.

My heart pounded, making me sweat despite the breeze. I don’t know what came over me standing there, but I wanted to call Jordan. There, in that dank bus station, I felt the pull of the past. I wanted to take back everything I had said. I wanted to tell him how much I missed him. I wanted to share this pain, this ache in my heart. He would listen, he would understand, and he would help. He always did.

“Listen to me,” Jordan had said. “If they do anything, *anything*, say the word. I will drive out there and get you. Just *don’t* run off by yourself.” I had been staying with him and Lyssa over Christmas because things were rough at home. But I had been away for twelve days and my dad was threatening to cancel the payment for my second semester if I didn’t come home, so I packed my things.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll be back at school soon anyways,” I had said, avoiding his eyes.

“I’m serious, Noa,” he spoke slowly. “Say the word. I’ll be there.”

But I didn’t say a word. And I was doing exactly what he had told me not to do. If I called him now, I knew he would come pick me up, like a runaway kid. But I wasn’t a kid anymore. I was twenty-one and sick of being shot down, ignored, and bullied. Sick of lying there and letting people walk all over me. I wasn’t going to be the silent disappointment anymore. I had to prove myself to everyone—my dad, my brothers, my stepmom, my teachers, Nathan, Melyssa, Jordan— and myself.

I turned my back on the payphone and sat on the cold floor, pressing my back against the wall. I clenched my fists until my knuckles turned white, trying to keep from shaking. Even if I had wanted to

cry, I had no tears. My eyes were dry, my face hard, my arms crossed.

Tense. Determined. Alone.

An hour passed. What had been a light breeze grew into a steady wind, tossing my hair into my face as I swung my bag over my shoulder and stood in the line to board the new bus. A burst of light in the distance caught my eyes. Lightning.

My watch flashed 2:00 a.m. before the bus finally pulled out of the Dallas Station. I felt the strong Texas wind batter the bus as it sped down the highway, making it shake and bump as it fought the gale. Then the rain came, falling thick and fast. The thunderous noise it made as it bounced off the metal bus made me wonder if it was hail and not raindrops pounding the roof. I wiped the condensation off the window with my sleeve but could see nothing except the water streaming across the glass.

Thunder exploded, like a cannon, and drummed into the distance. I shivered and tucked my feet up under me, hugging my knees.

The rain did not let up. It continued falling in sheets. The bus slowed to a crawl. If people had been asleep before, they weren't now. Over the drumming of the rain, I caught snippets of conversation between passengers, and I stretched in my seat to see what was going on. From the view out the front, past the banter of the windshield wipers, I saw the glare of hazard lights, from dozens of cars, both up ahead and to the side.

"We should pull over," a man's voice rose above the noise. Several others voiced their agreement. I felt like I was watching the beginning stages of a mutiny. The bus was a ship caught in a violent storm, tossed at the mercy of the waves.

The white buzz of the intercom came through the speakers. "*We need to wait on the shoulder until the storm passes. Please remain calm.*"

The bus lurched, the brakes screeched, and we shuddered to a stop on the side of the road. The engine idled. The streets were made of water. I couldn't tell where the pavement ended, and the flood began.

We all waited.

The bus air was stuffy, smelling of sweat and wet laundry. I covered my nose with the corner of my shirt. My stomach churned and my eyes began to water. I thought I might throw up. This was torture.

Then the rain thinned enough to see the forms of the cars passing us.

"*Alright folks, thanks for sitting tight. We are almost out of gas so I'm pulling off at the next exit and then we should be on our way.*"

The bus revved back to life and rolled onto the freeway. The next exit was not far, and we pulled into the gas station a few minutes later. We all stayed in our seats. A few people chatted quietly while others blocked out the world and tried to sleep. The seat beside me had been empty for the past few hours, vacated by the sullen teen when we made a stop in a small Texas town I forgot the name of. I had been glad for the extra room, but right now, I wished I had someone to keep me company. There was no way I could fall back asleep.

With gas in the bus and the thunderstorm passing, we looked toward the road, the end of the journey in sight. Only a few hours to go. But, before we could even pull out of the gas station, the bus began to groan and lurch again, jerking, stuttering, and sputtering to a stop. The emergency light blinked red. A few people began to shout and crowd around the front. I froze.

We were stranded, in the middle of nowhere at 4 a.m.

And still, the rain pounded away on the tin roof.

We all got off the bus. The passengers were fuming, upset, and confused. Some yelled, some swore, some were silent, and some sobbed—but I felt nothing.

Arms crossed over my bag, I stepped off the bus and into the rain, stepped right into a flood of water that licked my ankles, soaking my Converse. But I didn't feel that either.

I looked up at the sky. I let the rain soak my hair, my clothes, my skin. I let it batter me. And still, I felt nothing.

I didn't follow the crowd running to hide from the rain behind closed doors. I stood in the middle of the parking lot, drenched and shivering.

Then something happened. A hot surge of emotion hit me. My eyes and nose stung, my head spun. I felt weak.

No, I won't. I tried to shake myself out of it. But I was drowning, I was burning—I was falling apart. And I couldn't stop it.

So, I gave in.

My bag fell with a splash. I crumpled to my knees. My hands hit the gravel, and the rushing water stung. Huddled there, braced against the pavement, I let the tears come. I wept until my body trembled, my tears adding to the flood around me.

I was alone. I was alone and I hated it. I was alone, and I needed help.

I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't.

I let go.

“Are you okay there, miss?” I looked up, my body still heaving. A middle-aged woman had braved the rain. She crouched by my side, her hand on my back. I felt the warmth.

I felt.

Wiping my face with my sopping sleeve, I pushed myself up, trying to blink away the tears and rain. I was afraid that, if I tried to say anything, tried to explain anything, the sobs would overpower me again, so I looked her in the eye, sniffled, and nodded.

“Let me help you, poor thing,” she lifted my bag from where it was drowning. The faded white check on the side caught the light, looking almost like a half smile.

She offered me her hand. I took it.

“Let’s get you under here,” she led me under the awning as I hiccupped and sobbed, still trying to catch my breath, “Is there anything I can do for you?”

At the offer, my heart raced. Her hand was still on my shoulder. I looked into her kind face, rainwater dripping from her dark hair.

I took a deep breath. I was ready to take a different path. I didn’t need to do this alone.

“Can...can I borrow your phone?”

Dabney Baldrige is a busy mom of three young boys who writes in the middle of life’s messiness to create beauty out of chaos. She has considered herself a writer ever since she could form letters. She majored in English and has written many short stories and novels that she hopes to one day publish. Dabney recently rediscovered her love of poetry and her pieces have been published by *Z Publishing House*, *Calla Press*, *Heart of Flesh*, and *Solid Food Press*. You can find her sharing a weekly poem on her substack [@dabneywrites](#).

Silent Fire *by Daniela Alfaro*

I inherited the greenhouse on the same morning I signed the cremation papers. It was still crooked and sunburned at the back of the property, glass panes cracked like old bones, ivy crawling through what used to be the roof. My mother hadn't stepped foot in it for over a decade, but somehow, the air still smelled like singed lavender and something else, like regret.

The house was quiet in a heavy kind of way – like it knew I didn't belong here anymore. I left at seventeen and never looked back. Not when she stopped calling. Not when she started forgetting birthdays. Not even when she got sick. The last time we spoke, she told me I was too much like her. I'd meant it as a compliment. But she didn't.

The key to the greenhouse was still on the hook by the back door, hanging under a crooked wooden plaque that read “*Welcome Spring.*” I hesitated, fingers grazing over the familiar brass, warm from the sun that bled through the kitchen window. For a moment, I imagined she was still alive, watching me from the hallway with her arms crossed, waiting for me to ask for her permission.

There was no one else left to ask.

I tried the lock, and it still worked despite how rusted it was. The door reluctantly opened, and dust exploded into the light like spores. I stepped inside, boots crunching on broken terracotta and fragments of dried seed pods. The air was thick with humidity and decay. A jungle of forgotten plants had overtaken the space – ferns growing out of cracks in the concrete, moss clinging to every beam. A single sunflower, impossibly tall, stretched through the shattered ceiling like it had escaped.

And there, in the corner where the light hit just right, was the burn.

The fire hadn't reached the whole room. Just on the left side, near the old potting bench. The wooden shelves were charred black, sagging like grief. A melted plastic watering can drooped like wax over a signed ceramic planter. I ran a finger along the scorched wall. It came away smeared with soot.

Why didn't she tell me?

The greenhouse served as an escape for my mother. I'm not sure if she needed it to escape from her role in the house, from my dad, or even from me. She'd disappear for hours, sometimes whole afternoons, and come back to the house with hands dirt-streaked and fingernails full of earth. I sat on the back steps and waited until the scent of honeysuckle drifted toward the house, a quiet signal that she was still alive in there. When I was a small girl, I thought it was kind of magic – the way she spoke to the plants in whispers, the way flowers always seemed to bloom faster for her.

Plants don't ask for more than what they need.

She said that all the time to herself. To me. To anyone. I was too young to realize she wasn't talking about the garden.

I crouched near the bench, drawn by something – a hunch, maybe, or a feeling I didn't know how to name. That's when I saw it: a box wedged beneath the lowest shelf, half-hidden behind a collapsed bag of soil. I pulled it out gently, heart thudding with a stupid kind of hope I didn't understand. It was just a shoebox. Old, water stained. The kind she used to keep bills in. I peeled the lid off slowly, half-expecting more ash.

There were letters.

Dozens of them. Unopened, others creased from being reread. And they were all addressed to me.

She never sent a single one.

Before I could even process the number of letters there were in this box, I turned my attention first to her notebook. She kept a notebook with her filled with diagrams, scribbled notes about sun angles and pH levels, and strange Latin names I could never pronounce. That notebook was holy to her. Part science, part scripture.

Some of the ink was smudged with water damage, but her handwriting still curled across the pages like ivy. In between technical notes were fragments that didn't belong to any plant:

"If I don't give it light, it dies."

"I miss the girl who used to bring me dandelions and say it was a bouquet."

"What do I do with all this silence?"

But there was something else in there. A sentence I kept staring at in the notebook. Just four words buried in a margin beside a drawing of a climbing rose.

"I let it burn"

Like it was intentional. Like it had to be done. I sat down on the cracked floor, the notebook open on my lap, the letters beside me like ghosts. The sounds of summer pressed in from outside – cicadas screaming, dry grass crying. A wasp hovered near the sunflower in the ceiling.

For the first time in years, I wish she was still alive. Not to ask why, I don't think I would get a straight answer – but just to sit in this ruined place beside her. Maybe if we'd both been quiet long enough, the silence wouldn't have felt like punishment. Maybe we could have started again.

I turned my attention back to the letters. I opened the first one with trembling hands. The envelope, brittle with edges curled like petals at the end of a season, was dated five years ago – the year I moved to

the city and stopped answering her calls.

“Marisol,

I keep starting and stopping these letters. I always imagine sending them, I never quite do. But I need to say this somewhere, and even if I keep it a secret, then that’s okay. I miss you. More than that, I envy you. You left when I couldn’t. You became someone else, while I stayed here trying to prune myself into something manageable.

There is a version of me that would have loved you better. But I never learned how to love without needing control. I wanted a daughter who was quiet, easy, neat. You were wild, loud, too much – and I hated you for it, only because you reminded me of everything I buried to survive.

Don’t shrink, Marisol. Don’t become me”

My throat tightened. I wasn’t ready to hear that she envied me. I had always imagined she saw my leaving as betrayal, not bravery. I read the words again: “don’t become me.” I had spent years trying not to.

This one had a date on it.

August 17, 1998

Marisol,

I told myself I’d stop writing to you. That these letters were a form of punishment – me speaking into the dark, you never hearing me. But I’m realizing now, I write because I don’t know how else to say I’m sorry.

You were ten when I screamed at you for cutting all the daffodils. Do you remember? You said you wanted to give me a sunshine bouquet because I looked sad that morning. I tore it out of your hands. I told you to think next time. I watched your face fall like I had stomped on something sacred.

I don’t think I have forgiven myself for that day. Not for the daffodils, but for how quickly I killed the joy in your hands. I was not raised to receive softness. I was raised to survive it. And that meant I didn’t know how to mother you when you needed warmth more than discipline.

You’ve always been more alive than me. That scared me. Your joy, your rage, your hunger to be seen. I didn’t know how to hold someone who wouldn’t be small to make me comfortable.

If nothing else, I hope life has taught you to keep your arms open and to keep cutting daffodils without asking permission.”

She remembered. Even that. And I don’t know whether it breaks me more that she carried it too.

This letter was stained with watermarks.

“Marisol,

I never told you the truth about the fire.

It was an accident. But not entirely. I was pruning the roses too close to the heater, and I wasn’t careful. Truth is, I was tired.

Not tired like sleep, but tired like the way concrete cracks from the weight it was never meant to hold. The house felt too big. The silence was like a second skin. I would walk into the greenhouse and hear echoes of you there. Your laugh, the way you used to name the plants after people you didn’t like at school.

I stopped tending the garden and greenhouse because every bloom made me ache. It was a mirror. Beauty, thriving, becoming. It reminded me too much of what I lost. Of you, becoming someone completely out of reach.

I wanted to live. I wanted you to live. But I didn’t know how to be part of that world anymore.

Sometimes I think mothers are just scared girls wearing bigger shoes. We pretend to know how to guide. But I was stumbling the whole time.

If I could do it again, I’d build you a forest, not a fence. I’d hold your fire instead of fearing it.

I love you. Even if it counts as nothing to you. I know these words don’t fix anything.

If you’re reading this, I hope you’re wild. I hope you’re whole.”

I hated her silence. But now I see it wasn’t absence, it was grief. It was a woman trying not to drown in a house full of ghosts. I always thought the fire was the end of us. But maybe it was her way of saying she couldn’t hold everything anymore.

I pressed the page to my chest like it might stitch something shut. She’d never said any of this aloud. Not in life. Not when it could have changed everything.

Letter after letter peeled back the layers I had hardened myself against. Some were angry, some tender. Some were full of contradictions – love and resentment braided together like vines. But through them all was the ache of a woman who was trying. Who had failed. And loved anyway. Even if she’d never show it.

The last one had no date. Just a few lines, scrawled hastily in the margin of an old grocery list.

“If you ever come back, plant something here. Let it grow wild”

I didn’t know forgiveness could sound like that. Not a sorry, but a seed. She was never good at softness. But this, this was her way of asking me to stay, or her way of hoping I wasn’t in the same

position she was in somewhere else.

I don't remember how long I sat there. The sun moved, casting shifting shadows across the scorched floor. Dust danced in the air like ash reborn as gold. I thought about everything she had been: sharp-tongued, overbearing, fiercely private. But also soft in secret ways, stubborn in her hope. She had been unapologetically herself – even when it made her hard to love.

Maybe I was, too.

Maybe that wasn't something to fix.

I stood up slowly, knees stiff, breath unsteady, walked out into the backyard where weeds had claimed the space she once tended like a prayer. I dug with my bare hands, dirt crusting under my nails, the sun is soft now kissing the back of my neck.

I don't know what I'd plant yet. Only that I would.

Not because she asked.

But because something in me had started to bloom.

Daniela Alfaro is a writer and storyteller whose work explores memory, generational relationships, and the emotional landscapes we inherit. With a background in Global Studies and Law, she brings a thoughtful, layered approach to themes of identity, silence, and resilience. Her writing often blends lyrical prose with personal reflection, creating spaces where grief and growth coexist. *Silent Fire* is a deeply intimate piece that examines the quiet inheritances between mothers and daughters, and the things we plant, intentionally or not, when words go unsaid. You can find more of Dani's work and thoughts on writing, creativity, and life at <https://daniela53.substack.com/> and on TikTok [@whatsinhernotebook](#).

CREATIVE NONFICTION



"DAHLIAS IN THE MOUNTAINS" MANMAN HUANG

Scratch *by Melanie Cole*

*May contain sensitive or triggering content

Gash

“You are diagnosed with schizophrenia,” the social worker says and hands me a sheet of paper to sign. I see that I am also diagnosed with “post-traumatic stress disorder.” I read over the page, signed it, and gave it to her. We both stand up and leave. I am unsure of what to do now. A smile almost escaped my lips as she read the diagnosis because I knew, *I knew* my fate. The diagnosis was no surprise, but the uncomfortable feelings afterwards were.

What am I supposed to do now?

Will people still love me?

Does this mean I will become violent?

Being given a schizophrenia diagnosis by a brazen social worker whom you have never met inside a psychiatric hospital is probably not the best day for the news to be delivered. I have often wondered how many other schizophrenia diagnoses she handed out that day. It *is* probably the most common way for the news to be delivered. I’m sure the general public envisions the presence of families and hand holding and crying— the truth is... that is not the truth.

Later, in group, to my defiance or perhaps my detriment, I mentioned that I had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Even inside a locked psychiatric hospital, people are still afraid of schizophrenics. I only had a few hours left in the hospital, but I forced myself to go down fighting. If that was what that was. I was no Randle McMurphy, but I may have, in the smallest sense, started separating schizophrenia from my identity.

Scrape

I’m a real lunatic, you know.

I’ve been locked up for my lunacy.

I was turned around by a waxing crescent and led into a King Tide, and as I circled my fate, I fell into a keyhole the size of a pin prick.

I was jolted back to life by the sea. Waves frail, collapsing upon themselves to make an unsteady froth of white and green and brown.

I hear the ocean follows the moon, too. We’re both just two lunatics trying to get by.

Scar

I remember it was the fall before everything started. Before *it* started. I was placed on administrative leave at work for “erratic behavior.” What was meant to be a two-week to six-week stint ended up in five months for me in a manic episode that seemed to pass under the nose of everyone who knew me. I would wake up every morning at four-thirty to get ready and walk to the Starbucks that opened at five. There, I would work on my masterpiece at the time— a graphic novel about a girl with epilepsy who could turn her brain waves into usable electricity. A special power in a world where everything had gone dark. I had been diagnosed with epilepsy the summer before, and I suppose I was looking for a little control over the situation. Looking for a life where I was less the erratic employee and more the hero of my own story.

That was the fall when it all came around.

Sometimes I’d be doing the dishes or taking a shower, and I would find myself in very long conversations. “Everyone has shower thoughts,” I would think to myself. I’d catch myself wanting to extend these conversations when I was out with friends or on public transportation. At home, I would speak out loud, but in public, I had to learn to keep them inside my head. I felt as if I was bursting at the seams. These thoughts were impossible to ignore. So, I shut myself in. They felt far superior to any other conversations I was having, anyway.

I eventually went back to work in the spring, and that was a total nightmare. I quit in the summer.

I was back on my own again, with my thoughts. They occupied hours of my time. I remember once looking at the clock and noticing that I had been talking to myself for six hours and not feeling bothered by that. My thoughts had developed a personality. They were anthropomorphized. His name was Chris. Chris Evans. I was hearing the voice of Chris Evans.

Mark

AM	PM
Aripiprazole (30mg)	Zonisamide (600mg)
Lamotrigine (50mg)	Lamotrigine (300mg)
Clonazepam (1mg)	Lithium Carbonate (900mg)
Omeprazole (40mg)	Quetiapine (200mg)
	Quetiapine (50mg)
	Clonazepam (1mg)
	Benadryl (50mg)

Gouge

I fell in love in a manic episode. I was two weeks out of my first psychiatric stay, not yet diagnosed with schizophrenia, and I met someone in the late fall. I was new to antipsychotics, and the world seemed bright and winding. Everything was full of possibilities. My partner knew next to nothing about severe mental health conditions and took my intensity as a personality trait. We traveled all over the state, along the coast, and often stayed in his beach house. We fell together like the ocean and the moon.

The problem with mania is that there is a comedown. That comedown started happening in a myriad of ways in the spring. It mostly started affecting my general self-care and personal hygiene. When I had been a hair-done, make-up wearing, dressed-to-the-nines partner, I became one who could barely take a shower. Additionally, the antipsychotics caused significant weight gain. I gained nearly twice my body weight in under a year.

I began to rely on him for everything. I had a drinking problem that was growing out of control and my manic spending had me maxed out on all my credit cards. He was financially supporting me, even buying me toilet paper when I was too broke to buy some.

Through all of this, I was under the impression that our relationship was headed in an upward trajectory. While he was not always an A+ partner, he put in a lot of work to balance out my mental illness, whether he was aware of what he was doing or not. When it crashed, it crashed hard. But that is what happens when you fall in love in manic episodes.

Wound

To: GarnerM@SeattlePsychosisPsychologists.Com
From: melanieannecole@gmail.com
Subject: Please help!!!

Dear Dr. Garner,

My name is Melanie Cole, and I am writing to you today in the hope that you may be taking new patients. I am desperate to find a psychologist in the Seattle area and would be willing to drive an hour or more to meet in person if that is what it takes. Cost is not prohibitive, and I will pay out of pocket, but if you take my insurance, that's great too. I am diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and have been unable to find a psychologist who will treat me. Please, Dr. Garner, this is my last chance. I have been in and out of therapy since I was fifteen years old, so I am very familiar with all the different modalities. I am also very interested in being treated by you because you and your practice treat people who have experienced psychosis. I believe we could be a good fit to work together. As I said, I am desperate and will do whatever I need to do to see if we might get an appointment set. Please feel free to call or email me as soon as you can.

Sincerely, Sincerely, Sincerely,
Melanie Cole

Scratch

When I think about it, living life with schizophrenia is like looking at life through a kaleidoscope. Except there's a big **scraaaaaaaaaaaaaatch** on the lens. Have you ever looked at a kaleidoscope with a big **scraaaaaaaaaaaaaatch** on its lens? Everything is dull. You're left with nothing but what's inside your head. Just the voices arguing with you and the thoughts playing pickleball with old poems you wrote in grade school. There's no use in getting out of bed or your chair or off your porch or wherever to brush your teeth or wash your hair or take a shit because everything's dull. The TV swears to you that JFK is running for re-election as you take your pills and lie down to sleep at night, while you hope those neighbors of yours aren't drilling holes in your walls again. You'll catch them next time. **scraaaaaaaaaaaaaatch**. Just another dull moment.

Slice

Nurse: What makes you think you're having a psychotic episode?

Me: I looked up at the ceiling, and the universe was there, and then it shattered into two and floated away.

Nurse: What happened after that?

Me: Whispers all around me. The universe was telling me all its secrets. I knew everything. It was so loud.

Nurse: So, what did you do?

Me: I got a knife.

Nurse: Do you have that knife now?

Me: No.

Nurse: Where is the knife?

Me: It's at my house.

Nurse: What did you do with the knife?

Me: I was going to kill myself, but I stopped myself.

Nurse: How did you stop yourself?

Me: I ran to the mirror to look at my eyes.

Nurse: Why did you do that?

Me: To see if I was still me.

Nurse: ...And?

Me: I was not me.

Nurse: So...what did you do then?

Me: I ran across the park to the hospital.

Scratch

What does it feel like to be in recovery? There is never really a recovery. There's no cure for this thing. But eventually, with the right support, you'll find the right meds and your life will get back on track. Have you ever had a tiny **scratch** on your glasses? You take them off, blow on them, thinking it's an eyelash or a piece of dust, but then realize it's a tiny **scratch**? That's what it feels like. I can fearmonger and say that every day I wait for psychosis to come around the corner, and, on some days, that's true, but most days, I take my meds and live my life, and that is the greatest freedom of all.

I don't have an enormous amount to say about growing or learning. What I have learned is that the veil of sanity is far thinner than most of us think it is. Once you cross to the other side, you are changed irrevocably.

Melanie Cole is a writer and poet from Tacoma, Washington, in the Pacific Northwest. Her writing, ranging from fiction to poetry, and focuses mainly on social issues, including mental illness, police violence, systemic racism, and natural disaster. Melanie is a former disaster responder who began writing as a way to process the stories she collected from her clients. Melanie has been published in Grit City Magazine, the Tacoma News Tribune, and on The Mighty. You can find her at www.melaniemwrites.com or melanieannecole.substack.com.

Being Reborn *by Hillary Keller Connors*

Lent is a time for renewal, in nature and in the inner chambers of the soul. My life was entering a period of transformation. A few centimeters of cancer was detected in time to have all of it removed. Post-surgery, I was bedridden for the entirety of the spring, which made me feel seed-like, buried somewhere safe, awaiting what was next. As I documented my physical healing in a journal, a Lenten prayer came to me. It was the question: *How will I be reborn?* Growth is not always clean. It can be messy and often comes with a portion of death and decay; even pruning so that strength can build upon strength. I knew there would be discoveries which hurt but which will heal, like two sides of the same coin.

While noticing buds on the trees and hearing birdsongs, so much stillness at home, I missed several phone calls from the same number. (Maybe it was intentional.) I finally decided to listen to the voicemails and call back. When the man answered on speakerphone, he immediately asked me to call back in half an hour. I heard the loud swishing and shuffling of papers in the background.

“Sure,” I said, a little miffed that when *I’m* ready to talk somehow he isn’t. What was so important that he had to leave multiple messages asking me to call him back? I waited twenty minutes, and he still took more than six rings to answer. He jumped right in by asking if I had been told what his role was in the annulment process. No one had said anything to me about him, I said. He introduced himself and asked for some clarification on some of my answers to the questions from the diocesan tribunal.

Usually, I needed some time to adjust before engaging in a conversation about my past marriage and the years during and after the divorce. I was unready for this, but accepted these questions as just being another hoop. He asked about my childhood, specifically *why I was resentful of my parents?* What an odd take-away from my 20-page life summary, I thought. I told him about certain life events that changed me. Again, I dredged up a narrative I was used to telling, but that hurt every time in new ways.

After I had answered point blank his questions and I thought we were done, he asked, *What have you done to help yourself?* I was floored by his question. Who was he to ask this? I wanted to say, *my children and I survived*, but where to begin? He asked about divorce recovery groups. Again, I was speechless and became angry. I couldn’t even see the face of this man, but he had some sort of authority in this annulment process (of reliving trauma). Divorce recovery groups? How privileged it would have been to partake in those. I thought back to the upheaval of leaving the house under duress with my kids while my ex slept. How he locked me out of the house with all my things still in it. I thought about my

need to rehabilitate my career after my licensure expired. The night classes, the childcare, the part time jobs.

Finally, I told him what I thought he wanted to hear, so that I “passed” his quizzes, and told him that I participated in therapy and had quit smoking with the help of medication. They were on the micro level he was listening for. Such small things, like tying shoes or brushing teeth; not fleeing home while trying not to scare the children with its urgency. He seemed satisfied, or bored, or disappointed. I couldn’t tell. But it ended before I could tell him what the divorce did for me.

I never told him about my writing. How my poems and prose took me through different perspectives of the loss and trauma in my life. How the act of writing it on paper somehow made me feel more beautiful than sad. How listening to myself was healing. I wanted to tell him about the wonderful, blended family my current husband and I have, even though our marriage wasn’t recognized by the Church. That in him I had found a life partner who was a balm to me in every way.

But I withheld these personal, meaningful jewels of insight. I needed to understand what this man’s motives were for asking these questions. Was he on my side even a little? I actually told him that I felt like I was on trial again, and he didn’t counter that statement. Was he judging me or merely doing his job? I heard him writing everything down, loud scribbling noises in whatever room he was in. (I imagined he was in his home office above the garage.) I hoped he cared. I hoped I had passed his test and that this was the final inquest. But hoping was feeling desperate again, for validation, for being believed, for empathy. He put me in that place I hated; of wanting approval. I was so done with being dependent upon a man who did not have my best interest at heart.

A new feeling began to grow. One that I rarely discovered in myself: anger. The funny thing is, I’d spent most of my life avoiding feelings of anger because I never could act on them. It was a taboo from some time early in my life. I knew that I was expected to be pleasant and engaged while navigating layers upon layers of feelings of those around me. My childhood mind said “anger is ugly” because it made my parents yell horrible things at each other. Those rage-filled words made impacts on the porous walls of my heart. Anger had possessed my mother to continue yelling at me after my father had left, with her wild and weary eyes.

I checked myself to make sure I was not losing my mind; I contemplated this anger. How could I be angry but not hurt others? Maybe that wasn’t the point. When, not how, would I express my anger and to whom? Who would have to listen? The backs of my eyes and throat felt the scrape of salt of tears. *I’m*

done internalizing blame and swallowing my anger. How dare he continue this inquisition? When will my words and decisions be enough?

The anger coalesced into a solid part of my belly, and it was ALL for me; for my useless suffering, for my unjust captivity, for the closets I still had of my remaining fears; the sings of terror from a husband with paranoid delusions. Why did I always try so hard to be good in the midst of all the violence? I truly thought I needed to be blameless, otherwise I'd never be *credible*. Yet my memory would invert itself with strong emotions. I couldn't help it. If I couldn't remember incidents perfectly or chronologically, my opinion of the facts would be disregarded. That rejection would be logical. I had eaten all those mouthfuls of self-doubt. My internal dialogue had been groomed to say: "Put others before yourself or you're a b*#ch, play your role as a peacemaker or you're selfish, pretend there's nothing to worry about or you're the troublemaker."

Now I ask new questions. When is it my turn to burn down the town of the props and beliefs that kept me cornered? And if I do, who will care anymore? Some are already dead or out of reach. Do I cast a net over those who kept me weak and pitiful? Do I gather them all together so they can behold my anger and grief? What will make them care? Perhaps just the threat of violence, the terror given to me. They need to see the losses I've endured because of them.

And then, I don't know what I'll do next, but I'll watch them witness my indecision. I'll let the rock-hard ball of anger decide for me. For the first time, I'll give myself the freedom to act on my anger, without guilt and without noticing if I'm ugly or not.

This is how I am being reborn.

A high school World Language teacher and empty nester, Hilary Keller Connors has written poetry and prose for herself since the third grade. Last spring, during an extended recovery from surgery, she entered the Substack community and began sharing her work with other midlife women writers of the Herstories Project. Her personal essays and poems incorporate her interest in ecology, ethnobotany, multicultural wisdom, neuropsychology, and feminist themes. While Hilary engages in the process of healing trauma through writing, art and nature, she continually looks for solutions for women, like herself, who have suffered abuse from patriarchal and capitalistic ideals and power. She holds her B.A. in anthropology and Spanish and her M.A. in literacy, language and culture from the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor. Hilary lives with her husband in Southeast Michigan.

Belonging: The Wander and the Wonder *by Debbie Hoke*

I hear that I don't belong.

"Here," where my husband, Brian, and I moved ten years ago, the Mikolajczak name rolls off everyone's tongue because everyone knows someone who went to school with, married, or got a loan from a Mikolajczak. "Here," generations walked the same elementary halls. "Here," no one seems able to pronounce my simple four-letter last name—Hoke. The librarian calls me Mrs. Hokey; the teller calls me Mrs. Hock. But, "here" in this rural village, everyone (else) knows everyone (else), and they avoid "ma'am."

For 25 years, Brian, my two children, and I were rooted in a Philadelphia suburban network of corporate cronies, wine-soaked neighborhood book clubs, and carpools. I was happy there until the world ruptured in a crisp blue city sky on a September morning. Thousands of mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons perished. I feel sure they thought they would live much longer. I was forty-three. Success encased me with daily worries about my staffing numbers, the daycare pickup time, and the fear of never finding balance. My future offered compromises of family time, the cost of the next promotion. Maybe I could become a psychologist. I could hang my shingle outside an office off the four-lane highway near home. Help and help instead of manage.

As most people experience at some point, life's dark clouds rolled in and sat atop us. Ours were no more painful, no less important. My parents died, our daughter fell victim to a life-threatening accident (from which she recovered), depression wrapped my husband. What felt like years of lightning bolts and pelting rain threatened to wash us away. Everything was so hard. We slogged on.

Familiarity kept me afloat. "Good mornings" from staff as I navigated the cubicle maze. "Wanna get coffee?" my work gal pal asked mid-morning. Lunch with the usual gang, each struggling with their own clouds. The workday ended with a snarled commute and 45 minutes of NPR's "All Things Considered."

Over time, the work needed to hang a shingle felt insurmountable as the accumulation of loss and struggle left me drained. With time, my grief mellowed. With work, Brian's depression subsided. Our kids tiptoed into independence.

On a drive home from Parents' Weekend at our son's college, I took a deep breath, turned to Brian, and said:

"We should move to a lake."

"Where did that come from?" he asked with only curiosity.

"I need to regroup, restart." I knew he'd jump at the chance. Suburbia was never his thing.

I retired early. Brian worked remotely. We bought a house on a protected cove with a big window view of the water. We left lovely neighbors, nice lawns, Starbucks, and familiarity. The idea of living with the calm that water brings drew us in.

Cayuga Lake, the middle finger of the Finger Lakes, is too far west for the New York City crowd and a little too far east for the Rochester executive elites. It stretches forty miles long, dotted with cottages and buffered by dairy farms and vineyards.

Neither of us held childhood memories of night swims, kayaks, or geese. We knew nothing about the area. A new fantasy evolved. I imagined driving into town in a black Ford F-150 pickup truck wearing broken-in Frye boots. Our two English Setters would ride in the truck bed, heads hanging over the edge, all our tails wagging. The fantasy of our lakeside cottage in the woods disappeared as our minivan sat in the driveway of our air-conditioned, cable-ready home. At least the driveway was gravel and the air restorative. I began to heal.

I found solace in the solitude and soon felt refreshed enough to seek new connections. Most days, I hiked around our cove to stretch my legs and lungs. I sometimes chatted with Mary, one of the four year-rounders out on Marley's Point out walking too. She invited me to join her ladies' group. Perhaps this would fill my social void.

The ten-women club, The Leisure Hour Literary Club, whose members averaged 87 years old, voted on my application at the annual meeting. I was accepted.

As they had for 150 years, a topic was selected, like Women in Politics or Villages in New York. No one mentioned literature or leisure. The monthly meetings rotated among the members' homes. The women, all in black pants and sensible shoes, politely listened to a member's research paper read aloud. The hostess served pie on her grandmother's china. The quiet conversations centered around people I would never meet, as they were either moving to Florida or recovering (hopefully) from an illness. They accepted my letter of resignation.

A much younger neighbor invited me to join the six-person Mikolajczak Library fundraising committee. The Committee Lead hosted gala planning sessions at her impeccably decorated 1800s home. Welcome hugs and "Oh, I love your boots" started most meetings. I listened to more stories of

people I did not know, but I looked forward to meeting these folks. Wine bottles piled up, and the charcuterie trays emptied.

Like a newbie desperate to belong to the cool sorority, I raised my hand for tasks no one else wanted.

“Sure, I can transport the silent auction items,” I’d say, or a “Sure, I can help clean up.”

And they would always respond, "Wow, Thanks. That would be a great help!"

At the wrap-up meeting, the Lead asked for ideas about next year's themes. Enthusiastically, I raised my hand.

"Maybe we could celebrate the author E. B. White, who went to Cornell (situated on our lake) and wrote a famous essay about lakes."

"Hmmm," one said with a polite smile.

"Maybe," another offered and turned back to her conversation.

I shrank. When the meeting ended, the Lead hugged me with a "See ya next year."

As the door closed behind me, I overheard one say to the other, "See ya Thursday at book club."

Undeterred, I signed up for a yoga class in search of like-minded women. I was often the sole student. The instructor, Julie, introduced me to stretches and poses, breaths and meditation. She guided me on virtual walks through rose gardens and midnight stargazing. We developed a cosmic intimacy.

One day, as I was splayed out on the mat on my back in a resting pose, Julie whispered,

"Is it OK if I hold your head?"

I nodded, unwilling to rattle the quiet in my mind with words. From behind me, her strong fingers massaged my exposed neck. Her thumbs circled my temples. She cupped my head. A long-ago sensation returned. I was cradled, protected, cherished.

My calendar was filled with yoga and meditation. I stretched, I stilled, I softened. And then I dreamed.

As I walked into an outdoor café, someone whispered, "He will be there and wants you to come." A handsome young man I believed to be a cousin waited for me at a small table. (This "cousin" looked exactly like a picture I have of my birth father, Hans, as a twenty-something man.) Nonsensical, dream banter ensued, as warm and casual as coffee with an old friend. A waiter asked us to change tables, and as I got up, my "cousin" stayed behind.

I was five when Hans died from kidney disease. My mother rarely mentioned him, as if her survival depended on wiping away the memories. I occasionally wondered if Hans lingered "out there" somewhere, in brief episodes of spiritual curiosity. When I awoke that day, I knew Hans had visited me. I didn't wake with the Hallelujah chorus blaring. I woke up feeling a calm, otherworldly sense of connection. It felt lovely and helpful, answering a question I wasn't actively asking. It was as if a doctor, with certainty and assurances, had told me I would die peacefully in my sleep at age 93. OK then, I know now that I belong in this ethereal web of energy. And I will still matter, though my "matter" will be different.

Not long after, my daughter, pregnant with our first grandchild, invited me to her yoga class. A room full of lithe bodies in coordinated outfits. I did my best to keep up with the class. Finally came the final pose of relaxation. I peeked at her beside me, her eyes closed, belly rising and falling. How beautiful, how tranquil. I swelled with connection. I felt the baby then—a flicker of being, as soft as a distant drum, as bright and fleeting as a falling star.

In stillness, in reverence, I celebrated the wonder of belonging.

A lifelong book lover and book club ringleader, Debbie turned to writing after years in corporate life beautifully gave way to her favorite roles: parent and partner. With space to breathe, her reading habit became a writing habit. Her essays often begin with a line she's underlined in a favorite book (*Charlotte's Web*, always) or a lyric that won't let go (too many to choose). Through them, she explores her world to make better sense of *the* world. These days, she reads and writes overlooking Cayuga Lake in central New York, where she lives with her husband and gathers friends, kids, and now grandkids to marvel at the sunsets. She can be found on Instagram [@debbie_hoke](#) and on Substack as Debbiehoke.substack.com