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THE SOCK DRAWER

LITERARY  MAGAZINE



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Founded in June 2020, The Sock Drawer aims to collect the voices of contemporary artists and writers. In a world as tumultuous as this one people need an outlet for their voice. With a current of feminism and activism running through the veins of the editors, The Sock Drawer seeks to be a place to release the tension of existence.

Letters & Comments: TheSockDrawerLitMag@gmail.com

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ON THE COVER
“Meatsuits, skeletons
and an organ” by
Esther Chiyanda, full
artwork featured on
page 60

MEET THE TEAM

FOUNDER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Gracelyn Willard (she/her) is the founder and editor-in-chief of The Sock Drawer. She is a 2020 graduate of Hood College with a degree in English and a concentration in Creative Writing. She was a 2019 presenter at the Hood College Discovering the Humanities Conference. She had a nonlinear college career due to her battle with multiple chronic illnesses. She loves to read Roxane Gay, Valeria Luiselli, Agatha Christie, Terrance Hayes, and Wisława Szymborska. Her quest for the perfect gluten free madeleine is never ending and at times she wonders if she loves coffee more than her boyfriend. Her last job was as a cheesemonger and she identifies as bisexual. Her passion is writing, reading, editing, and bad reality tv.

NONFICTION EDITOR/
ASSISTANT EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Kerstin Holman is a 2019 Virginia Wesleyan University graduate. In order to get the most bang for her buck, she got her BA in three majors: English Literature, Theatre (with a concentration in dramaturgy) and Women's & Gender Studies. Some writers and voices who inspire her to not only speak but listen are Roxane Gay, Da'Shaun Harrison and noname. As TSD's non-fiction editor and contributor, she hopes to continue polishing her writing craft by bringing awareness to and discussing topics including race, gender, sexuality, and existential crises. She recently became a New Jersian and her interests include bowling, watching "RuPaul's Drag Race," and eating sushi.

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR



Izzy Peroni is the Book Review editor of The Sock Drawer. She is a recent graduate of Hood College, with a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing, and a minor in Studies in Women and Gender. Her main contributions to the magazine, as well as the rest of the world, will include poetry, fiction, and book reviews. The majority of the creative media she consumes is either horror or science-fiction, ranging from 70's slasher flicks to often non-traditional ghost stories, as well as practically anything having to do with aliens. She obsesses over the work of Elizabeth Bishop, and unintentionally imitates her biography. Her hobbies include video games and adoring her cat.

ART & MAGAZINE EDITOR



Julia Gonzales was voted "Most likely to become an Artist" in 6th grade and knew her love for creativity would never waver. Growing up, she competed and placed in several minor art competitions within her community and enjoyed experimenting with various mediums and techniques. She is currently pursuing a degree in Computer Animation at Full Sail University with the intent to one day produce children shows. She is inspired by works from Damien Hirst, Erik Johansson, Frida Kahlo and Leonora Carrington. Some argue that she loves her cat a little too much and her current drink of choice is iced chai tea.

FICTION EDITOR



Madison Diemert is a 2020 graduate of Minnesota State Mankato. She holds a degree in English and a minor in Anthropology. She is currently pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Augsburg University. While Madison is not obsessing over nostalgic cartoons from her childhood or watching every true crime documentary she can get her hands on, you'll find her searching for the perfect cup of cold brew. As The Sock Drawer's fiction editor, Madison hopes to read as many unique stories as possible and hone her craft as a fiction writer herself. Madison resides in Minnesota, where she lives with her boyfriend, two best friends and (approximately) 400 books.

Hello
&
Welcome

The Sock Drawer was created with the intention of creating a community of writers that are often ignored, marginalized, or ‘pushed to the back of the sock drawer’ by society and the publishing industry. We aim to raise up diverse and unique voices that tell stories that are not told often enough. I aim to use my privilege and platform to elevate these voices and bring to light talented individuals through The Sock Drawer. In the wake of ignorance, racism, and violence in the United States and the world it is of key importance that this space cultivates productive, honest, and genuine works. Here at The Sock Drawer, we stand with equality, Black Lives Matter, and many more movements pushing for positive, productive change. It is time to rise past the forced silence and scream. Change will come and we will be here to help facilitate it.

In Hope,

Gracelyn Willard
Founder/Editor-in-Chief

THE SOCK DRAWER

EDITOR INTERVIEWS

Behind-the-scenes with each editor

Gracelyn Willard

Interviewed by Izzy Peroni

1. You're both our Editor-in-Chief, and the Poetry Editor. Both roles come with a heavy task load- how do you find the balance between them?

Hahaha, I don't! When I commit to a project I go all in, I'm not prone to give myself space from a project- in that sense, there is no balance.

2. You have a penchant for both poetry and fiction, and could've taken over either section in the beginning- so what made you choose poetry?

I love both fiction and poetry, but poetry has so much more potential for immense power in a few lines. In fiction you need to have a thread to follow, in poetry you can cut up pieces of an idea and have immense impact and that's what I love. I also founded The Sock Drawer because of a poem I created, it felt a little like fate for me to work the poetry section.

3. Moving towards the specifics of poetry- would you say that your personal style of poetry lines up with the kind of poetry you are looking to publish in The Sock Drawer?

My style of poetry is more experimental than most of what we publish. I like to make very weird, in your face poetry and utilize a variety of mediums for it. There are poems I've made that I wouldn't publish at The Sock Drawer because it doesn't fit with our overarching aesthetic, contemporary does not mean experimental. For The Sock Drawer, I look at the contemporary trends of poetry and how the poem coming in speaks to those trends. I love experimental poetry but it can be hard to get a message across to readers with it if they aren't expecting it.

4. Has reading poetry submissions given you inspiration to write more poetry in your spare time? Or has it, at times, burnt you out?

I know a poem is good if it makes me pick up a pen and start writing, and we've been lucky enough to get several poems that have done that for me. I have been burned out lately, but that may simply be because we're living through an incredibly stressful time and as of this interview I've been unemployed for months and been rejected from jobs over 600 times. So the burn out is kind of a combination at times but mostly more situational than poetic.

5. In your ideal creative future, what sort of poetry do you want to see submitted more to The Sock Drawer? More political poems? Less COVID poems? More experimental styles? Perhaps a shift towards hope and change, and away from the isolating despair of the last year?

I don't like to restrict content, hence why The Sock Drawer doesn't do theme issues. I just know that I want poems that fit our mission statement, we get submissions that clearly go out to many other literary magazines, which is not a bad thing, but so often it doesn't feel like the poet looked at us and our site. I want poems that speak to us and our platform.

6. And what are you looking forward to for the magazine, from your editors, the writing community, etc?

I look forward to finding something new and interesting in our submissions. I always look forward to working with our editors, they're absolutely amazing and I love them all. I look forward to being surprised.

7. And lastly, of course- what have you been reading lately? Any authors or poets you really love? Any you're just looking to rant about?

I haven't been reading much lately (aside from submissions). I haven't found the flavor of book I'm looking for, I might reread Reading Lolita in Tehran by Azar Nafisi. I cannot recommend the book enough! As far as wanting to rant about anything, well that's a can of worms for another day, hahaha. I would like to say, support your local bookstores if you can, keep hope, and don't stop writing your words have meaning and significance.



Kerstin Holman

Interviewed by Gracelyn Willard

1. What draws you to nonfiction?

Although it's hard for me to do it myself, what draws me to works of non-fiction is the rawness and realness that tends to be displayed through a person's writing. I love it when writers pour every bit of themselves into their stories, whether those bits of theirs are shown in a not-so-flattering light. It's fun to get swept away by a fictional story as a means to escape, but I find that it does not feel as satisfying or fulfilling. I want experiences and opinions and politics straight from the source.

2. How would you describe your writing style?

I would say that my writing style is scattered. My motivation is either all or nothing when it comes to writing. The passion I have for a certain topic will come in spurts, so I allow myself to feel whatever emotion I have at the time strongly. Once that passes, I wait for the next one to come. I am not sure if that is a style, exactly, but it's definitely my pattern.

I think like most (if not all) writers, I am incredibly critical of myself, especially when I have written a piece that is particularly vulnerable.

3. What is your favorite part of working on TSD?

It might seem crazy of me to say, but the fact that I am able to wear so many hats is what has me literally addicted to working on TSD. I love that I not only get to review pieces by other writers from around the world, but I also get to do organizational work, social media coordination, make schedules, and write emails. That probably sounds absolutely insane, but being an editor for TSD has shown me that those are things that I not only excel at, but I enjoy doing.

4. What's something you think TSD does well?

This may sound random, but I believe that we are great at correspondence. I am really proud of us for actually taking the time to reply to every single submission we receive. I know for a fact that not all zines do that, and I know that it sends a message of respect and care to those who submit to us because we actually do take the time to look through every submission. And whether or not we accept or reject that submission, you will hear back from us.

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5. Please describe how awesome Gracelyn Willard is and how cool it is to work with her.

If I were to take the time to fully express my admiration for our fearless leader, this interview would be way too long. So I will keep it brief. I am certain that the determination, positivity, and intelligence that our Editor-in-Chief possesses is unmatched by any other. We are immensely fortunate to have her on the team, and I am so excited to continue working with her in 2021 and beyond.

6. What do you wish more submitters did/knew?

I understand how terrifying it is to share your work with other people, let alone giving people from all over the world access to it, but taking that first step is only going to make you a better creator. It's also important to not get deterred if your work is rejected. It may not mean that what you have submitted is not good. It's very possible that your work has not found the right home, yet. Keep creating and keep searching for the right home for your work.



Izzy Peroni

Interviewed by Kerstin Holman

1. When it comes to reviewing books, what are some of the things that books you have enjoyed reading have in common?

I've been especially focused on poetry books for *The Sock Drawer*, and for the most part the poetry books have been published in the past five years, from poets I became familiar with through studying them in my college courses (such as Camonghne Felix and Dan Beachy-Quick). I've enjoyed reading poetry that feels bigger than poetry, whether it's topics that breach beyond the traditional, or experimental styles that I have to spend a lot of time focusing on for the review.

2. What draws you to select a book for review? What do you enjoy about reviewing books?

Sometimes it's just whatever I have on hand, or a book I know I enjoyed reading the first time around and felt the need to revisit, but mostly I do want to explore recently published work. I think it's helpful for any creator to get immediate feedback on their work, and proper recognition for the fruits of their labor that will bring more readers to them. I'm also trying to look for relevant topics and interesting, contemporary styles, as I feel like those are things that our readership will be drawn to as well. Enjoying the book is not as important as being able to empathize with it; I'm sure I'll review plenty of books that I downright dislike for one reason or another, but will still feel better for having read it, as it forced me to feel something.

As for what I enjoy- I think it must be finding that empathy that resonates with me. I enjoy digging for meaning and metaphor, whether intentional or unintentional on the part of the author. I'll admit it's not unlike writing essays or close reading responses to poetry in my creative writing classes, but now it's more about writing a fair, honest review than it is about writing for a grade.

3. Has there been a particular review you've written for TSD so far that you found challenging to tackle?

Most definitely it would be my review for *Three Books*, written by Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles, translated by Kristine Ong Muslim, and illustrated by Erika M. Carreon. The content itself wasn't exactly a challenge, but making sure I was able to do it justice had me rather worried at times. I'm a monolingual white American, and I'm sure this won't be the only time where I'm concerned about the validity of my opinion on books about experiences far from my own. The value and appreciation of art is universal, though, so in any way I can, I'd like to continue to review books on a wide variety of topics with absolute fairness, while not overstepping boundaries.

4. Do you approach reading a book differently when you're planning to review it?

I think I make more specific mental notes when I'm reading through something I'm going to review. About halfway through a book I'll probably have planned out the structure of the review, choosing particular topics to give paragraphs to- maybe the style is interesting, or the narrative voice is something I have (often rhetorical) questions about, or I'm finding I'm able to compare this work to a broader topic. I try not to let all this planning get in the way of enjoying the text, though.

5. Knowing that you have also written poetry and fiction, did your interview with author Darren Demaree (found in Issue 5, November 2020) about his poetry book inform or change the way you approach your own writing?

I think it made me consider what it means to create a cohesive work, mainly a themed book of poetry. Unfinished Murder Ballads is a finely tuned collection of prose poetry, rotating around a topic that was researched and built upon, and to talk with Demaree about his process made me consider how much poetry really is in conversation with all other art forms. It's definitely not easy to focus on a singular idea for so long, especially for someone like me, with very unmedicated and unbridled ADD, but the pursuit of it obviously would pay off in the long run.

6. I have noticed that you have reviewed a few horror books and you even wrote a discussion post relating to horror. What is it that draws you to the genre of horror? Do you have a preference for reading horror in poetry or fiction?

I just like weird shit, honestly. I like monsters and ghosts and figures in the corners of old photographs or unsettling 'found footage' recorded on shoddy cameras from the 90s. Being honest, I'm actually rather afraid of the dark, but if I'm able to subject myself to horror in a controlled environment, I have a blast.

I find horror in novels and short stories scarier than movies, for the most part. The subreddit r/NoSleep has given me worse night terrors than the scariest movies I've seen. It's just something about being able to create the horror in your mind, rather than having it given to you visually. Honestly, I'm not sure how I feel about horror in poetry, because it seems nearly undoable if you're not careful, but who knows. Maybe cosmic horror in verse will be the next big trend.



Julia Gonzales

Interviewed by Madison Diemert

1. What was your inspiration for "learning disability"?/ Do you have a personal connection to a learning disability/disabilities?*

Yes, myself and three of my direct family members have learning disabilities stemming from ADD (an Inattentive form of ADHD). While ADHD itself is a developmental disability, it's often accompanied by and can exacerbate learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, auditory and visual disorders and nonverbal disorders.

I specifically struggle with dyscalculia and auditory processing. This piece in particular is a visual representation of the stigmas surrounding these disabilities and those living with them.

2. What does this piece aim to say about learning disabilities?/ Why do you think this piece is a good fit for The Sock Drawer?

Learning disabilities and ADHD are one of the few conditions I've ever encountered outside of the Spoonie community where people will openly question if you have them, accuse you of faking them or worse, doubt that they exist at all. While it hurts me to say this but I know it must be said, this piece was not created for attention or sympathy but rather to raise awareness and hopefully resonate with anyone else struggling with an invisible disorder.

3. What is your background regarding art?

My earliest memories are creating arts and crafts and writing stories with my mom. I even had arts and craft parties with friends in elementary school. I've experimented with many different mediums over the years including textile, paper, photography, acrylics, pencils, pastels, ink, found objects and food. A favorite project of mine when I was 10 was a condo and grocery store I created for a toy horse of mine made completely out of old National Geographic magazines, complete with soap for the bathroom and a shelf for the slightly-damaged-but-still-sellable products. Over the past few years I've mainly focused on refining my digital art skills in preparation for a future career in computer animation.

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4. How do you know when you're finished with a piece?

All of my art starts out as a visual image in my head that I'll work on until it matches that image or it resembles it close enough that I can walk away feeling somewhat accomplished but still secretly hating that it doesn't look right but it's been a few weeks already and I'm tired of looking at it. Fun fact, my first and last attempt at using oil paints ended in aggressive destruction and attempted arson.

5. What advice would you give your younger self as an artist? What about those submitting to The Sock Drawer?

The first answer to this is honest but aggravating: keep practicing and don't give up. There's so many times where I didn't feel like my art was on the level that I wanted it to be or that it should be and I would take long hiatuses which damaged the creative and technical progress I had made previously. If you're truly inspired to create something never let doubt and fear get in your way.

The second answer is to treat your art and creative gift as a form of self care. Just like cooking or yoga, no one is an expert when they first start out. Create because it feels good and don't be afraid to be silly with it. There's a reason children have a greater imagination than adults.

6. Do you have a favorite artist? If so, what is your favorite piece by them?

Van Gogh's Sunflowers and Klimt's The Kiss will always hold a special place in my heart. Lately I've been inspired by classic abstract expressionists like Barnett Newman and Judith Godwin.



*Referenced artwork featured on page 64

Madison Diemert

Interviewed by Julia Gonzales

1. What books or authors have influenced your writing?

I've been taking in all different kinds of literature since I was young, but I really feel I've been influenced by authors like Shirley Jackson, Margaret Atwood, Benjamin Percy, Ransom Riggs and Stephen King. I love horror and gothic literature, but it's not the only thing I write. I also take inspiration from the likes of Natalie Diaz, Michael Torres, Virginia Woolf, Carmen Maria Machado and so, so many more.

2. Was *The Lake* inspired by something from your life or by a specific idea?

"The Lake" was born from a late-night Google deep-dive. I was reading about the Lake Poets, consisting of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey, which then led me to learning about the Lake District, which is located in England. All this talk of lakes sprung forth this image of a haunting, mysterious lake and after a few drafts, it became what it is today!

3. What kind of stories impress you the most?

I need to feel something when I am reading a story, a poem, an essay, etc. The piece of writing in question can say all it wants to say in the most beautiful and flowery language, but if there is no emotion or sincerity behind it, it means nothing to me. I can tell when an author really wants to connect with their audience and has something important to say.

4. How long have you been writing? How has your writing evolved since then?

I've been writing since I could read. Before computers were a big thing, I would take all the notebooks around the house— even ones my sisters were using for homework— and take out all the filled pages and use the blank pages to create my little stories. Before taking my first Creative Writing course in high school, I just fell into it blindly, with no inhibitions. I gave little thought to style, structure, tone, etc. All I knew was I wanted to get my ideas onto a page and enjoy myself. I'd like to think I had more fun back then, when I wrote just for the sake of expression and enjoyment, but I think I just enjoy it a bit differently now. I find a certain thrill in reading craft books and learning how to better my writing while seeing it improve. I've become more aware of every word and sentence I put down on paper, and how it will affect my writing. There are still times where I write with reckless abandon, though my goals now are to publish and share my writing rather than keep everything in tattered notebooks.

5. What drew you to The Sock Drawer before joining the team?

Over the summer I got really into underground/indie lit mags. I began following so many of them and reading everything I could. I felt like I needed to familiarize myself with the community, especially since I hope to publish much of my work. The Sock Drawer was among those lit mags I started following and I felt a connection to the content being published. Not only that, but the goals of the magazine heavily aligned with my own— as an intersectional feminist and someone who wants to work in publishing, it's a must for me to give a platform to those who are marginalized.

6. In your review of *This is Not Your City* by Caitlin Horrocks, you mention the term "soft worldbuilding" to explain how the author immersed the reader in each world she created. What is your worldbuilding process for developing believable stories and characters? Are you more of a plotter or a pantsier?

I also tend to lean toward soft world-building because it's a bit easier to work around the parameters you give yourself. I also find it much more exciting than hard world-building because anything is possible.

7. How do you prepare your workspace for getting into the writing zone?

Music is the most important thing for me when I write. How well my drafts turn out are almost entirely up to the music I am listening to at the time, as well as where I am (usually my desk) and how comfortable I am. I also can't write during the day— trust me, I've tried. I am such a night person.

8. How long does it take you to write your stories?

This definitely depends on what I'm writing and how long the project is. If it's a short story and I'm feeling heavily inspired, it can take just a few hours. If it's an assignment that I'm not terribly excited to start, it can take me a day or two.

9. What is your favorite genre to write about and why?

Horror is my favorite genre right now. I love finding the macabre in everyday things, such as a hike through the woods or a night drive through some fog. I take inspiration from my own mundane experiences and I think twisting those into something haunting helps me cope with living in a pandemic.

10. Are there any future projects that you're working on?

I'm constantly writing. Currently I'm focusing on my thesis for graduate school, which is a collection of short horror stories. Aside from that, I am also working on several creative nonfiction pieces and a coming-of-age screenplay.





2020 HIGHLIGHTS

Our editor's favorite picks from 2020

Editor's Pick for POETRY

SUBJECT: Are you a patriot?

By Katie Kemple

This email contains
another word
for abracadabra—

last day to save a castle,
to attack
the coronavirus

from New York to Utah—
to deliver
outstanding life.

Are you on our side?
Great!
We're giving you

new ways to get
crushed.
Our goal

shakes

looking for a crucial
service.
I'm excited

to see you savor
the last days
of summer.

Sunday brunch?
I Me Mine!
MLB's return,
fairy tale bridges—

we've got you
covered.

Your
Amazon
has shipped.



*Editor's Pick for POETRY***Inverted Green Heart**

By Aishwarya Javalgekar

She pushes herself through the snow
 in her white and green glory,
 fragile stalks withstanding
 tempestuous winter storms.

She tells stories of why she is white,
 reasons for giving her colour away,
 turning her consolation green into
 a mark of rebirth, positivity.

inverted in·vert | \ in-'vərt \
 reverse, upside down, contrary, gay
green \ 'grēn \
 young, resilient, unhealed, home
heart \ 'hārt \
 core, compassion, nature, love

I tell her the heart is not inverted.
 The flower curves down,
 the heart just follows, she laughs.
I'm getting it tattooed on my arm.

I could wake up tomorrow and forget
 the winter creeping in my soul,
 not hear it crunch under my boots
 or touch it with my woolen hand.

But she will bloom and giggle
 and dance in the frosty wind,
 a snowdrop claiming she has
 an inverted green heart.



Editor's Pick for FICTION

Therapeutic Thursdays

By Paul Lewellan

“What are you drinking?”

Darla Tipper’s voice startled Harry. “A Limited Release Malbec from Biltmore Estate,” he told her. “Mary Lee and I sampled it the last time we were in Asheville. It’s the only American-grown Malbec.” As Marketing Director, Darla had given Dr. Lewis and his wife the Townsend Retirement Village tour ten months ago.

“I’m not much of a wine drinker,” Darla confessed. Her Bachelor’s degree was in business, her Master’s in social work. Her job involved more than marketing.

“We bought a case. Never even opened the box.” He leaned back and gently swirled the liquid in the glass. “Smells like fresh blackberries. Probably great with spicy foods.”

“How is it for breakfast?” Darla came to work early and saw him on his patio. “It’s 6:30 in the morning, Harry.”

“As my friend Pastor Ron used to say, ‘It’s noon somewhere.’” He made eye contact. “A little early for a courtesy call, isn’t it?”

“Some folks in the Village are worried about you.”

“If you email me their names, I’ll pass them on to my daughter. She keeps a list.” Harry sighed. “My name is at the top. I’m a trained therapist; I know when someone is in trouble...”

Darla noted the almost empty bottle. “Save a bottle for Thirsty Thursday.”

Some folks—those more mobile and vocal than the average Townsend Village resident—gathered in the gazebo on Thursday nights to bitch and sample wine. As a psychologist and trained family counselor, Harry understood the therapeutic value. His wife, Mary Lee—recently retired as CFO of International Engineering Solutions—thought the idea sounded “tedious.” Her cancer returned before they could find out.

“We only bought a case. There might not be any wine left by tomorrow night.” Harry thought it best not to mention the 155-bottle dual-zone cooler he’d bought at Costco before moving in, or the 600-bottle chiller in his son’s basement.

“Is that your plan? You’re going to drink yourself to death?” Darla and Harry met a decade ago while serving on the Habitat for Humanity Board. She was more candid with

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him than the average resident.

“I can think of worse ways to go.”

She glanced at her watch. “You’ve counseled dozens of suicidal people...”

“Hundreds.” He corrected.

“And how many did you encourage to do it?”

“Only one.”

“I beg your pardon...?”

“I counseled one of my clients to take her own life.”

“And did she?”

“Yes. The next day.”

Darla tilted her head. “Did you regret that advice?”

“Not for one instant. Ever.” He focused on his empty wine glass. “Our situations aren’t analogous. My client battled a debilitating disease robbing her of all motor control. I’m grieving the loss of my wife of forty years. My client chose to act while she was still capable. I applauded the idea.” He refilled the glass. “If I work at it, I’ll get over *my* grief. She didn’t have that choice.” He picked up the wine. “I’ll keep you posted on my progress.”

When Mary Lee’s cancer returned, they’d been proactive. She took early retirement. Harry closed his practice. They put their house on the market and began searching for a retirement community where life would be easier: no yard work or home maintenance, a weekly cleaning service, snow removal, and a continuum of care in case of long-term illness.

Things happened quickly. Their house sold within hours of being listed, for more than their asking price. They used part of the proceeds for the buy-in at the Village and booked a ten-day Baltic cruise, something on Mary Lee’s bucket list. Four days into the cruise she was hospitalized in Oslo. A week later Harry flew home with her ashes and made arrangements to move into the cottage alone.

On Thursday, Darla knocked on Harry’s door after supper, still dressed in her work clothes. He wore baggy orange cargo shorts, sandals, and a pale blue aloha shirt with glowing orange pineapples.

“You haven’t been out for a week.” Harry didn’t deny it. “We’re going to Thirsty Thursday. Grab a bottle of wine and glasses if you don’t want to drink from Dixie Cups.”

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The idea appalled him. He selected a modest Australian Shiraz and two Waterford Crystal wine glasses and followed her to the gazebo.

After Darla introduced him as the newest resident, she sat down and enjoyed a glass of Harry's wine before excusing herself. After she left, he passed the remains of the Shiraz around and listened. The conversation reminded him of group therapy except no one looked to him to heal anyone. Later, for the first time in weeks, he slept through the night.

When Darla appeared at the door again the next Thursday, he showed her the wine carrier he'd found. Inside he'd placed four glasses, and two Napa Valley wines: a Franciscan Estate Cabernet Sauvignon and a Rutherford Ranch Merlot.

Harry and Darla drank a glass of each and passed the remaining wine to the appreciative folks around the circle. The lively conversation focused on the benefits of comfort animals. Nobody asked him what he thought as a therapist. Harry appreciated that. He didn't notice when Darla left.

The next Thursday Darla texted Harry that he didn't need a chaperone; she was going home. *Your loss* he texted back.

At the gazebo he opened a pair of South African whites: a Groot Constantia Chardonnay and a Cape Point Sauvignon Blanc. Bill Henson President of the Resident Council confessed, "I feel guilty drinking your good stuff."

Dorothy Shrunk added, "I grab anything on sale that has a nice label." Dot started drinking well before her arrival. Her lipstick was erratically applied, and her shoes didn't match.

Edith Prince told him, "None of us knows shit about wine." Edith had been forced by Northeast State University to retire at 70. She still taught Business Writing as an adjunct professor at a local private college.

"I could make recommendations."

After that night Thirsty Thursday sessions began with a ten-minute lesson highlighting the vintages Harry brought followed by best buys that could be found locally. The quality of wine at the weekly confabs improved.

Thursdays Harry never varied from his self-imposed two-glass limit, preferring to remain sober until safely back in his cottage, at which time he would drink himself to sleep.

The first Thursday in August, ten weeks into his residency at Townsend Village, Darla

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stopped by after lunch wearing a simple black dress and heels. Typically, she wore jeans and Keds in the summer, unless she was giving tours.

Harry motioned her into the air conditioning. “I can’t stay,” she said, “but there are some things you should know.”

“Shoot.”

“You are now number Four on the Townsend Village list of Most Eligible Males.”

Harry laughed until he realized she wasn’t joking. “What...?”

“Officially I don’t know this list exists because it, and its female counterpart, are sexist and offensive. But...”

Harry nodded. “There’s probably no good way to stop it.”

“Until recently, I got a kick out of the exercise. ‘Should Bennie Koonz be number one because he’s the best dancer and still owns a controlling interest in the county’s largest Ford dealership, or should he be in the seven- or eight-spot because with his Alzheimer’s he can’t remember a woman from one day to the next?’”

“I see the problem.”

“No, I don’t think you do.” She sighed. “When you moved here, you were number fifteen out of nineteen. Three of the men you beat out where in their late eighties and ready to move to the nursing wing, thus becoming ineligible.”

Harry considered this information. “What was wrong with me?”

“Your wife just died, and you hadn’t had a change to grieve. Plus, you had a PhD and analyzed people for a living.”

“Both are still true. What changed?”

“You’re a hermit the rest of the week, but on Thursday nights you appear human. If the ladies knew you could dance or play euchre, you’d be Number One.”

“I’m not ready to enter the dating pool.”

“I know that. Some women might not.” She motioned to her car idling at the curb. “I’d better go. My ex-husband’s father died. Visitation starts at two o’clock for family, 3:00 for everyone else. I’m going to split the difference and show up at 2:30. The funeral is at 5:00.”

Over the years Darla had shared some details of her ex-husband’s abuse and her ex-father-in-law’s white nationalist leanings. “How long have you been divorced?”

“Three years.”

“Considering the circumstances of your separation, nobody would blame you if you didn’t go.” Darla had been hospitalized. There was a restraining order.

“Frank’s still my son’s father, and Ralph was his grandfather, for better or worse.”

“Of course.”

At the gazebo, Harry opened the evening by telling the group, “Wollersheim is a regional winery in Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin. Mary Lee and I visited three times a year: the summer tasting tour, release day for their Ice Wine, and the vintage Christmas celebration. These wines were dear to my late wife; I’ll let them speak for themselves.” He uncorked four wines: Ruby Nouveau, Ice Wine, Prairie Blush, and Prairie Fumé.

Harry ignored his two-glass rule. He encouraged others to share their favorite places. Finally, Bennie Koonz the former car dealer spoke for the group, “I wish there was a way to thank you for tonight.”

“Well, there is one thing.” People stopped packing up. “I understand there’s a list that identifies eligible bachelors.” The gathering got silent. “If my name is it on, could someone remove it? I’m not ready to be single yet.”

Next Thursday, routine restored, Harry brought two reds from Portugal and spoke briefly on each. Darla made a token appearance. Finally, Edith Prince, the retired professor spoke up. Edith spent an hour each day in the village’s swimming pool. She was athletic, outspoken, and articulate. “Harry,” she said, “you used to be a therapist. Would you be offended if I asked you a question about human behavior?”

He set his glass down. “Ask away.”

“Well, actually, it’s a little personal.”

He leaned in. “Are you going to talk dirty?”

“Well, no....”

“What you say in the gazebo stays in the gazebo.” He motioned to the people in the circle. “Can everyone agree on that? We keep Edith’s remarks confidential?”

“I thought this was a cheap wine and bitch session,” Jeffrey Kaufman said. He’d moved to the village a year ago and still struggled with retirement.

“That’s changed,” Bill Henson responded. “The wine’s gotten better, and the conversation, too.”

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Harry told Edith. “These folks can be trusted. What did you want to know?”

She spoke deliberately. “My ex-husband, when he was still my husband, cheated on me. He got caught. I forgave him. He cheated again. I divorced him. That was twenty years ago. We’ve kept in touch....” Several women groaned. “He’s married and divorced twice since then. Now he’s asked me to join him for a weekend at our favorite Door County Inn.”

Harry kept his expression neutral. He leaned forward to suggest he’d carefully considered what she said. “So, what’s your question?”

“Can a man change?”

“No,” responded a chorus of women.

“Don’t get me started...,” Lucille Snook added. Her face flushed, and she stopped packing her wine glasses. She pulled her husband back into the lawn chair beside her.

Harry motioned for silence. “If you’re uncomfortable with the topic, here’s your chance to leave.” One couple, arguing in hushed tones, fled. “And let’s close the bar.” Some refilled their glasses before putting the bottles away, but no one objected. They huddled up their chairs.

“Let’s address Edith’s concern.” He turned to her. “You’ve already answered the central question, though it’s not the question that you asked.”

She shook her head. “What do you mean?”

“You asked, ‘Can a man change?’ The obvious answer is, ‘yes.’ History is filled with examples of males who have turned their lives around. Comedian Tim Allen comes to mind. But I think the question you’re really asking is, ‘Can my ex-husband change?’ And you’ve already answered that.”

Edith shook her head, as if clearing it. She’d been drinking steadily. “No, I haven’t.”

“Of course, you have. If you believed he’s changed, you wouldn’t ask the question.” Harry paused. “You also shared that he cheated on you, and it cost him his marriage. People can learn from experience, but he’s married and divorced twice since then. He’s repeating past mistakes.”

“If he doesn’t want to change, why would he ask me to...?”

“Maybe he needs to feel desirable again.”

Edith exhaled. “And when that happens...?”

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Harry sat up. “He’ll hunt for his next conquest, confident that he can always come back to you.”

“Or maybe he thinks he won’t get caught this time,” Jeffrey suggested.

“Oh, he can’t be that stupid,” Lucille suggested.

“People convince themselves of stupid things all the time.”

“Like me,” Edith confessed, “thinking this time it won’t hurt as much.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Maybe he’s changed.”

“No. I don’t think so...” Edith touched his arm. “You’re right, Harry. I knew the answer but wouldn’t admit it.”

“Once a snake, always a snake,” Lucille reassured her.

Harry opened up the topic to lively discussion, but he shut it down promptly at 9:00. “It’s getting to be bedtime.” Walking back to his cottage alone, he replayed the conversation in his head. *That felt good.*

Mid-afternoon the next Thursday, Darla appeared at Harry’s door in high heeled sandals, beige tailored slacks, a cream-colored blouse and dress jacket. “Your Marketing Director uniform?”

“I’m the marketing director even in a t-shirt and jeans.”

“But today you own the title.” Harry grinned. “Well done.”

Darla noted his cargo shorts and the red aloha shirt with blue parrots. “You’ve dressed up, too.”

“My Crazy Old White Guy uniform. Easily identified stereotypes save time and unnecessary conversation.”

He offered her iced tea, and Darla followed him into the kitchen. “What will you wear tonight at the gazebo? Your therapist’s uniform?”

“What do you mean?” he asked as he poured the tea. “Am I in trouble?” He motioned to the couch in his living room.

Darla shook her head. “Just the opposite.” She pursed her lips. “Last Monday a group asked the Village bus driver to make a wine run to Costco. They wanted more selections than the grocery store offered.”

She watched his reaction. “Tuesday, Dorothy Shrunk told me on the QT that the

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eligible bachelor and bachelorette lists have been discontinued.” Harry remained quiet. “Then yesterday seven potential residents joined me in the dining room for a free lunch with some Townsend Village Volunteer Ambassadors. When I mentioned Thirsty Thursdays, Edith Prince corrected me. ‘We don’t call it that anymore. It’s Therapeutic Thursdays.’”

“Ouch!”

“No, it’s a good thing. Today Bill Henson, the President of the Resident Council, talked about the virtues of Townsend Village at the Rotary Luncheon. He described living here as being surrounded by a large extended family. He mentioned an informal gathering held every Thursday night where people can share good wine, and I quote, ‘minister to the emotional needs of others.’” Darla raised her eyebrows. “You’ve been nominated for sainthood.”

“I’m not a saint.”

“Obviously.” Darla finished her iced tea but didn’t move. “I met a guy online. A vet. Three tours in Afghanistan. He’s got issues, but there’s chemistry. I was wondering if you’d....”

“Recommend a good couples counselor?”

“I thought maybe you could....”

“That’s a bad idea. I’d rather stay friends.”

“But you’re doing Thursday nights....”

“That’s not counseling. I simply listen and help people talk through their issues.”

Harry gave her names of the best therapists to deal with her abuse issues and her friend’s PTSD. “Trust might be a problem.”

After Darla left, Harry retreated to his wine collection and selected a Molly Dooker Shiraz Blue Eyed Boy from South Australia and a Faust Cabernet from Napa. He changed out of the cargo shorts into slacks but kept the parrot shirt.

After people shared their wines that night, Harry suggested they talk about grief. “The topic has been on my mind.” Others murmured agreement. “At its worse, grief makes you feel like you’re the only person in the world suffering like this,” he told them. “You aren’t. Grief is just the natural response to any loss.”

“It doesn’t feel very natural to me,” someone called out.

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“Natural’ only means that everybody experiences it when something or someone they love is lost. For example, I grieve the death of my wife.” The group became unusually quiet. “Others grieve the loss of good health or employment, the death of a pet, diminished financial status, the sale of your house.”

“Hell,” Bill Henson blurted out, “that’s everyone in the Village. We’ve all stopped working and sold our homes. We all have health problems....”

“Shut up, Bill,” his wife Lucille said. “That’s Harry’s point.”

“But here’s the problem,” he added, “when you’re surrounded by grieving people, you get arrested in the past. Nobody can live that way and be healthy. You need to deal with the grief. You need to do something.”

“Like drink more wine?”

“Not exactly, Jeffrey. Alcohol feels like relief, at least it does for me. It slows the brain, dulls the emotions, but it also leaves feelings unresolved.” He motioned to the group assembled. “In contrast, sharing grief over wine with friends is cathartic. Thursday nights have helped me climb out of the rabbit hole I fell into after my wife’s death.”

“You could be our therapist.”

“I’d prefer to be your sommelier or your friend.”

“Let’s go with friend,” Edith Prince suggested. “Anyone can be the sommelier. Maybe, instead of doing a wine talk, you could do a ten-minute therapy talk, like you did tonight, then allow other people to share.”

“Nobody expects you to solve everything,” Bill added.

“That’s a relief.” Everyone laughed.

After the group broke up, Edith approached him. “How would you feel about walking me home?” He realized this was not a casual question. Her cottage was on the opposite end of the village from his.

“I’d be honored.”

They walked at first in silence, but as they approached Edith’s cottage, she took his arm. “Do you remember the night I asked you if men could change?”

“Of course. You were considering an invitation from your ex- for a weekend getaway. You hoped that he’d changed his cheating ways, but you finally realized that was unlikely.”

“Would it surprise you to know I went with him to Door County?”

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“Not really. I’ve been in this business a long time.”

“You’re well preserved for your age.”

“Thank you.”

Harry made note of her flirting. She was an attractive woman.

“You helped me understand that I’d been hurt by Mark because I’d trusted him. I reasoned that I’d be hurt again only if I trusted him again. So before the trip I made it clear that I was only going for the scenery and the sex. I had no intention of ever letting him back into my life romantically.”

“And how did that work out?”

“The scenery was as beautiful as ever, and the sex was better than the Saturday night fish boil but not as good as when I thought he loved me.” Harry and Edith stopped in front of her cottage. “I realized because of him I distrusted all men.”

“That’s why you went to Door County. So settled for the devil you knew, rather than risk some unknown who might hurt you even more.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“No. Most people think relationships are about intimacy. They’re more about risk.”

“Exactly, Harry. I knew you’d understand.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Let me know when you’re ready to take the plunge. I’ll take you swimming, or buy you coffee, or treat you to a movie. No Door County trips or sleep overs until we know each other better.”

Harry watched her cross the few steps to her cottage and disappear behind the door. “What just happened?” he muttered as he headed home, but he had a pretty good idea he knew.



Editor's Pick for FICTION

The Day is not Far

By Nachi Keta

April 2014. I am waiting in the waiting hall of the blood collection center of a hospital.

I have a faded lemon yellow round-necked T-shirt on me, with a pair of worn-out shorts. It is an air-conditioned hall. With many steel chairs with sieve-like holes in them, and many people sitting on those steel chairs are waiting, like me, for their turn to submit their blood sample.

The walls are painted white. With stripes of sky blue across the walls at four feet from the ground. And at nine feet from the ground, at strategic locations are hung pictures of mountains, rivers, and quotes of hope and health.

Basically, what happens here is: our blood is collected in tiny airtight vials with the help of a syringe, and sent to the main laboratory to be tested for signs of progression of our respective illnesses. Most of the people present here are not suffering from common diseases like common cold or fever or malaria. But those which were attributed to witches and ghosts only four centuries ago.

They are whispering to each other, the people, and it is unlike a usual public place... where you can feel your ears getting ripped off by the undesirable flow of cacophony. Like a bus stand, for example? Only the beep of machines and shuffling of feet. Door opening and closing. And sounds of stamps on paper and sashaying of pen on them.

People appear calm. But this calmness exists only on the outside. Beneath the languid display of bored countenances, there are hearts which are throbbing lopsidedly... under the dual effect of hope and despair, energy and fatigue. Sometimes we think that the train is on the right track, that our medical condition is stable if not getting better. While at others, the train seems to derail.

Our mood depends on those little slips of reports. The numbers written in them with normal range values alongside... And even without knowing who he is, we dislike Sartre and his philosophy, and that he discarded the 'human beings' like us, in his philosophy and common people do not even seem to notice it.

Beside me is an old man. In an Indian flavored white dhoti and kurta, a farmer; with a decaying face made of pouches of withered tanned leather, a pointy white mustache

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under a hairy nose, with shades of gray over brilliant white.

He holds a loose bundle of withering papers in his emaciated hands, in which in the doctor's unreadable hand are scribbled many lines and dates and numerical figures, besides those little vials (four, I count) which will be used as reservoirs of his blood when his turn comes. I myself have two of them, one with violet cap and the other blue, a sticker on both with my name written on them.

Earlier, a plastic container was given to me. And I had peed inside it in the washroom where two other men were doing the same, and in my carelessness, I had misfired my stream.

A few drops landed on my fingers, which I had to wash with disinfectant. But a few lucky ones had fallen on my shorts, too. And when I came out, a lady spotted me and she couldn't restrain a smile from coming on her lips when she saw the dots of moisture on the shorts of a young, well-built man like me.

It is interesting how human beings can spot a moment of joy even in the darkest of times. Perhaps... it is only in the darkest of times that the deepest moments of joy are felt. Contrary to the usual claim that humans cannot adapt to nature, that she is intrinsically a weak animal, we are actually quite adaptive. My lips had contorted into a smile when I saw her tittering. Somehow I felt happy that I had peed on my shorts... at least it had made her smile. She had a beautiful smile.

A traveling bag lies at the feet of the old man. In all likelihood, it is made from his wife's discarded petticoat... faded green with extensive embroidery of colored threads, red and blue and green. It must contain his soap, his towel, some more toiletries, a pair of washed linen and a comb just in case, to set right his pearly mustache.

His clothes, his face, the shape of his cheeks, and his mustache suggest that he is from Haryana, the jolly neighbor of Delhi, and has come for the scheduled medical checkup for some illness yet to be investigated by my prying eyes. In Haryana, you don't find specialized medical centers for specialized diseases like cancer, or human organ transplant.

It is cold in here. The many air conditioners installed at every nook and corner of the hall are continuously screaming stinging wisps of cold air which stand hair even on the most hidden parts of our bodies.

In front of me, a little high up towards the roof, are three panels on the wall... where numbers in red LED are changing at regular intervals. They are for three counters where

three nurses with needles and vials are busy collecting blood from us one by one.

The slip I was given tells me that my number is 235 on counter B. 173 is displayed on the panel. So, approximately sixty people will have given their samples by the time I get to stand up and go to the nurse at counter B and ask her to pinch me with a needle. 'Approximately'... because there are always a few who know the hospital staff and can evade the usual formalities of waiting in the queue. Status quo works most in those places where people come to allay their sufferings.

On my other side is a middle-aged woman wearing a pair of Indian Suit Salwar. Blue and green... with many flowers of faded pink at the seam. She has a black handbag placed near her feet, and a polythene bag in which, as it seems, her medical papers are stuffed.

A sudden pressure compels me to stand up and I walk towards the washroom.

This is my illness. That I pee a lot. Not a lot honestly, because the total content of my urine output is much less than that of normal people. But yes, I have to visit the washroom much more than what people usually do.

The thing is, my kidneys do not function well and hence out of fourteen days of a fortnight, I have to visit the hospital for two of them and check if they have not worsened to emergency levels. When they reach the 'emergency levels', I shall be put on dialysis.

The washroom reeks of a weird smell... ammonia... but even after continued exposure, I have not gotten used to it. I keep a kerchief over my nose.

This time I don't misfire. I wash my hands and come out and sit on my seat and look at the panels where in front of B is displayed 190. A lot of time to pass, I guess.

I don't have many friends... and few people to talk to. Perhaps it is due to the fact that I am ill, and a certain constriction which has developed over time makes me block even those people who try to approach me. Or perhaps it is the inimical nature of my luck, which is not restricted to just my physical health but affects my personal life too. Yes, I am an unlucky fellow.

I check my social networking pages, refresh it and again refresh it to see if something new has happened. I 'like' a few photos which I think will portray the exquisiteness of my taste to the public. And leave a comment or two on a few to show my reaction that I am a thinker. I tweet and retweet, and I also open a blog to read but find it too tiring... and close the browser. Then I open my web messaging account. No one has texted me.

People seldom text me. Because they are busy unlike me and have jobs and colleges

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to attend to. I already understand it. And still I open my web messaging account and read through the statuses of my contacts. I also see their current profile pictures to entertain myself. I do not know if other people behave like this, stalking like this, but always, after a few seconds, I feel disgusted with myself. Having done with all the stalking and intruding, I remove the yellow ball from my bag.

It is a sponge ball with innumerable holes and a black smiley on its surface that stares gleefully back at its possessor, at me. There is a medical reason I have to pump this yellow ball with my left hand. I have to pump this ball continuously to help in the formation of fistula.

A surgery took place a month ago in which my left hand was cut, played with and sewn back again.

I remember that day... And the male pre-operative room where I had to wait for a long time before my turn came, and stare at people and sleep, and watch television.

There was a bed in it and two rows of steel chairs (the ones which have holes in their backs) opposite the bed where people were sitting and waiting. We had removed our regular clothes and were wearing greenish synthetic gowns which open at the back.

My turn was slid down one notch because there was an old man who had to have a procedure similar to mine. Old before young, is the rule which runs the world of hospitals. And he was unlike this one... the one sitting beside me.

He had no mustache and his left hand had a pouch which contained leafy yellow fluid coming out from under his breeches through a pipe. I do not think I even tried to notice the rest of him. Repeatedly, that yellow pouch of his urine would seize me in an unknown bewilderment, a strange rapture.

Besides him, there were three other people with pipes. One's pipe came out of his throat, one's out of his stomach, and there was one who had a pipe coming out of his left ear. They were middle-aged men with firm constitutions and brazen visages. People on the streets couldn't have told them apart from the rest of humanity milling about performing its normal daily routines. No one can guess that I am terminally ill either, just by looking at me.

I was one of the few in the hall without pipes. But I was the youngest one, and they were almost my father's age. My time with pipes shall come. I know.

I was attached to a pipe when I took birth on this earth, and I would be attached to a pipe when I die. But if you ask me, I don't want to die with a pipe stuck to my body. I want

to die in a car crash. I don't want to die of old age either. Dying when you are over sixty is bad manners. You ought to reach eighty before dying if you have passed sixty.

Death is an ever-present reality whereas life is just a dot, a full stop. I don't know what made me say that. When my turn came, I was put on a trolley bed which I had seen a number of times in movies. I tried to use my imagination. I thought it was all a movie, and I was its superstar, and outside the hospital in the movie, people were waiting for me and praying for me to get well.

They carried me to a room where there was a tremendous sun-like bulb shimmering over a narrow bed, also something that I had seen a number of times on Television. There were three doctors, with masks over their faces. I knew only one of them, the one who had taken my OPD, and checked my pulse and advised for the construction of a fistula on my left arm.

I did not know what exactly fistula was. I had read something about it on the internet, but had understood nothing. In my imagination, it was a pipe like structure connecting my blood vessels to the outside world... through which impure blood comes out and purified blood goes in. They were preparing my body for dialysis.

They asked me to shift myself to the bed under the sun. I did. Then they opened my gown and asked me to spread my arms sideways, like wings. They strapped my right arm with a sphygmomanometer, and on the left one, they applied a disinfectant solution.

By now, I had entered a dreamlike stance. I am not a staunch supporter of free-will. I never was. There are things I can do nothing about, and I was doing nothing. I was just trying to observe them doing whatever they wanted to do to me, on me, with me.

They injected something into my left arm, which at once became limp, and then they started performing surgery on it; which, as I now understand, comprises joining an artery to a vein, so that the artery gets thickened over time because of blood pressure; and after some time, when I started howling with pain, they calmly injected some more of anesthetic.

The surgery went on for a long time. Because of anesthetic I became drunk and bold. Once I turned my neck sideways and dared to see the wound on my left hand. I didn't like it. It was all red and squishy. And I felt something of a jolt of inexplicable current when I glimpsed tweezers holding a thread like something going into the red hole in my wrist.

It was one of my veins.

It is more gruesome to see your own meat than the naked meat of others. You are

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always your first love.

After two hours of dauntless operation, they realized that the surgery had gone wrong. According to what I heard of the words coming out of masked mouths and into my dazed self, the connection between the artery and vein had broken because one of them was too thin. They asked me if they could operate again, at a different place in the hand.

The chief surgeon was very fond of calling me 'tiger'. He said: "So tiger, are you all right? Should we proceed further with another place?"

I was drunk and was feeling kind of adventurous, so I agreed. I was enjoying the drunkenness and the weirdness of all the faces dancing above me with their masks. But I didn't know how much it would pain.

They applied a working pair of stitches on the wound - yes, I saw a needle in their hands - and made a cut at another place, this time nearer the palm.

The old wound continued throbbing with pain, while they worked on my recent wound, and continued calling me tiger. Tiger, tiger, tiger, they continued calling me a tiger, and every time I howled, they called me a tiger; the word started ringing in my ears and I started feeling like a tiger, and I started roaring instead of howling... and an image of a packet of biscuit with the face of cartoon tiger on it started floating in front of my eyes.

That was my first ever experience in a proper operation theatre. I know a lot more chances lie ahead of me. The old man has gone, and instead of him sits a young lady with a child in her arms.

She is wearing an Indian Sari. Blue... with flowery patches of yellow all around, and has a red bangle in her right hand. There is also a red vermilion mark on her forehead - characteristic of Indian married women. I make the mistake of looking at her for rather too long, which she notices... and hence, now I have to smile at her with my not so bright teeth. She does not smile back.

The little child in her arms is a girl. This I can make out from the way her long hair is made. She has a white handkerchief wound over her nose that hides almost the whole of her face; I know kidney patients like me have to wear such masks to avoid infection; I myself have suffered from a lot of them. But I can't say just on that basis that the baby is also suffering from a kidney problem. There are many diseases in this world which require one to wear masks.

After about twenty years from the time this tale is written, almost all of us would

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wear masks.

My left palm is continuously pumping the yellow ball. It is now a habit. Sometimes I am not even aware when I pump the ball which has been my constant companion for a month now. This helps in the fistula's development. I look at the panel and note that there are still many people to come before me.

A powerful impulse to ask the mother what her little daughter suffers from arrests me. Perhaps deep inside I wish to feel sorry for her. Such a tiny baby and still suffering so much tsk, tsk.

Or perhaps I just want to satisfy my pathetic vanity... that there are much younger people suffering like me, more than me, and I really need not consume myself with grief. Perhaps I take solace from others' pain. And people tell me to...

They ask me to compare other's suffering with mine when they are in a mood of counseling. They tell me that the world is full of people who are suffering much more than me. When I tell them that once upon a time they had stuck a needle in my penis and put a pipe in it and injected some radioactive chemical, they give me examples of cancer. When I tell them that sometimes my pee burns, they give me examples of cancer. When I tell them that sometimes when I have to wake up in the middle of the night to pee, they tell me that people are dying from cancer.

I make faces to the little girl. I do not know if she is smiling, there is the mask over her face. But she looks at me, her eyes are bright brown, and her pupils move.

My plan is to first get the attention of the kid and then see if the mother notices me. I continue making faces and once in a while spurt out a funny noise. I cannot see the fruits of my efforts, which demotivates me. But I continue with my antics.

Suddenly the little girl laughs, the mask cannot block the sound of her laughter.

So people with dangerous diseases can laugh.

But I bet she does not know about her illness, yet. One day when she grows up she will be told by her parents the reason of her abnormal body, the mask or puffed up arms in the morning. And perhaps that day, her smile will undergo a change.

That day is not far.

Note: In 2014, I was preparing for my dialysis when I wrote this story.



Editor's Pick for NONFICTION

Excerpts from a memoir

By Maxwell Nagle

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Disclaimer: The Sock Drawer cannot verify events that do not appear on public records. Any views expressed are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Sock Drawer or its staff.
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Bathrooms were my haunted houses

I started to fear public bathrooms around the fourth grade. In elementary school, you always had to go to the bathroom with a partner. But I don't remember anyone being with me in this particular instance, which is maybe why I felt extra scared and embarrassed when a class of second graders came by for a bathroom break. Their teacher spotted me as I was walking into the girl's room, grabbed my arm and pulled me swiftly away from the door.

"Excuse me, you don't belong in there."

I looked at her, first shocked that she had put her hands on me, not knowing what to say or do next. Tears started coming out of my eyes as I attempted to say what I think I babbled out frantically.

"N-no, I'm a girl, I'm a girl! I promise! Really!"

I stared back and forth at the teacher and another that had appeared. They were both looking at each other, guilt starting to grow on their faces as they realized from my sincere response and tears, that they had just made a little kid cry, and that it probably wasn't the first time she'd been harassed in a bathroom.

The tears weren't from the fact that I had been wrongly chastised. I was crying because she was right, I didn't belong in there, but I didn't know. I had to exist as someone else, and prove that I was someone else so often growing up, just to do things like use the bathroom.

-Fall 2006

THE SOCK DRAWER

Happy maniversary!

Less than a week before I started my summer internship in New York, the process of going on testosterone finally began churning its wheels. My shrink recommended a place to me saying, “if you want to start all that, they’re the people you need to go to”. I was done playing basketball, and I had one more year of school. It was time.

Whitman-Walker is a Washington, DC community health center that specializes in healthcare for the LGBTQ communities & those living with HIV.

I still jokingly refer to Whitman Walker as ‘the plug’, but they are so much more than that. The longer I stayed with them, the more I thought of them not only as a plug, but a godsend.

At my first appointment I wasn’t expecting to start T that day or in the near future, since I didn’t think I’d be able to get any more appointments before I left for the big apple. I thought I would have to jump through many other hoops of doctors and referral letters to actually receive gender affirming care in the United States. So when Dr. Melby, my endocrinologist, told me “I don’t think this is something you decided overnight,” I quickly nodded my head and smiled—a little surprised he’d agreed to prescribe me testosterone only after fifteen minutes of speaking with me. I told him my situation, that I was going to be gone very soon for the next two months, and the urgency he took upon himself to get the ball rolling let me know that I would be taken care of there.

Before I left, they had to take a sample of blood so they could track my levels, and I had to meet with a nurse who showed me how to prepare the shot and do it properly. It was very nerve-racking, as she lined out the steps and explained all the things I had to be precise about to do it safely. I had to give myself the shot before they let me go with everything, so any kind of discomfort I had with needles vanished pretty quickly. I think it only took me two attempts of holding the syringe above my thigh and moving it downward, close to the skin I had elevated with my other hand only to hesitate, before the needle hit my skin and I pushed it out of the vile. Testosterone is a pretty translucent substance, has a tint of brown and is very thick. It took more effort to push it all in than I thought.

The ‘maniversary’ for trans guys, the day they start testosterone, is a widely-recognized special day for obvious reasons. But I didn’t know how much of a beginning

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that day would hold, even a month in. I didn't know that I would soon see biohazard bins and needles in my closet as common. Or the routine compulsions I would get in the process of getting the shot ready, making sure I didn't inject myself with any air bubbles. I had no idea that eventually, ripping the band-aids off my hairy thighs would hurt more than the shot itself. I had no idea how much I was leaving behind.

-06/07/18

Don't look back

At my college, a student activity board puts together a formal dance each semester, usually held off-campus in downtown Roanoke. The fall semester of my senior year, it was the Winter Ball. The last weekend before finals and a night I touched the sky, in a couple of ways.

I have never been so far from sober as I was that night. So far, that it feels appropriate to describe what happened from the third person.

Suddenly, he wasn't there anymore, and the first thing that went through his head was an emphatic *fuuuuck*—the edible hit. Everything started glitching, like he was in a malfunctioning slow-motion simulation. He couldn't feel his feet on the floor of the bus or see the cars passing by on the highway. Noise came but didn't register. It took him a second to process the sensation of her hand wiping lipstick off his mouth, and her hand on his face, like it'd been there his whole life.

Right before that—she asked him, *do you want to kiss me?*

Right before that—he heard her ask something like *has it hit you yet?* or *did you like watching Brooklyn 99 last night?* or maybe, *are you okay?*

Right before that—he had been taking pictures with his friends, who were chanting *You're gonna kiss a pretty girl tonight! You're gonna get kissed tonight!* while he ate the brownie and drank some wine for good measure.

And soon before that—a friend told him, *I...think she's into you too.*

He just wasn't sure about it before then.

After they kissed and actually got to the ball, he spent the rest of the evening

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wondering if he was dreaming. As she held his hand wherever they went, sat with him while the room was still glitching, rested her head on his shoulder on the bus going back—his focused switched from trying to savor the night, to questioning everything else he felt because up until then, the reality he was experiencing only ever existed in his head, only happened to a man he'd never been. A man who'd caught the attraction of a straight girl.

And back in his room, with her next to him in bed, he asked her *are you going to remember tonight?*

And right before making out some and going to sleep, she said *yes*.

-12/02/18, 12:30 AM

History made

In the middle of finals, snow was in the forecast. I wasn't aware until the day before, hearing from someone that Roanoke was about to get snow, and a lot of it.

I slept in her room again that night. It was the third night in a row I'd ended up there. She was perfectly fine with me being over, and I didn't always have to be the one initiating our hangouts. We usually watched movies, talked (or didn't), and went to sleep whenever we got tired. Ending up there felt almost natural. That was my plan, not forcing anything. We both didn't want anything serious, but sometimes during our conversations I'd wonder what that really meant.

I was used to sleeping in just my boxers, on my double-twin bed, with a box fan on. There was no explanation for how I was sleeping so well—with shorts and a shirt on, in a twin sized bed, with another person, in a dorm with paper-thin walls. And, with socks on. I wasn't allowed on her bed, or her room unless I had socks on. She wasn't a fan of bare feet.

I realized on my way over that I was overdue for a shower. Between sleeping in her bed and taking finals, I was never in my room and showering wasn't on my radar. So I took a detour to my dorm to clean up, threw on some comfy clothes, slid into my adidas sandals with black socks and walked over.

“Let me ask you something,” I said, as she put her laptop away after we finished watching *Bride of Chucky*.

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“What?”

“What do you like about me?”

“Huh, ego much?” she joked. I showed a confidence around her that I didn’t even know I had, and she knew it.

“No,” I laughed back. “Just like, I don’t know. What is it about me?”

“Well,” she began, in a sort of matter-of-fact tone. “You’re funny, you’re not afraid to be yourself and that’s pretty iconic, and you have cute eyes.”

“Cool...” I said, fascinated at her articulation. I’d been complimented on my authenticity before, but never like that.

“What about me?” she continued.

“Well,” I mimicked her. “You have...very cute eyes. You’re quiet, but you notice everything, and you know how to protect your energy. You’re beautiful, authentic...oh, and you make fun of me.” I laughed, remembering when getting teased was devastating and not invigorating, not something that felt like validation.

“Interesting, Maxwell.” she responded, dozing off on my shoulder. I focused inward on my pulse for a long moment, checking again to make sure I was awake, and present, before falling asleep quickly.

At some point during the night I awoke to brightness in the window, in direct view of the bed. Snow was falling. I sat up halfway, seeing the snowflakes breaking through the light emitting from the lamp posts outside. It conjured a blissful kind of silence, and made the chaotic route of each flake look planned and deliberate as it floated to the ground. Then she woke up, noticing I had too.

“It’s snowing.” I whispered excitedly to her. She rolled over, mumbling something back to me half asleep, as I realized—I would have to walk back to my room tomorrow through the snow—in sandals and socks. I smiled, amused with myself as I laid down next to her and went back to sleep.

It was the most snow Roanoke had ever gotten in December.

-12/09/18, very early in the morning

Not even 24 hours later, after turning off the lights and laying down next to me she said,

“Maxwell, can I ask you a question?”

And I went, “Yeah?”

“How do you have sex?”

There was a short pause, and I looked out the window, the moonlight darting through and reaching up to the foot of her bed. I thought to myself, *this is it*.

“Good question.” I answered, slightly laughing. “I mean, I kind of...just like, give. I don’t really want to involve my—own stuff. But to be honest, I don’t...have a lot of experience there. I haven’t—” I paused, feeling the impact of the last few years shake inside a file cabinet of unprocessed stuff in my head. The way that sex had been warped into something scary and complicated, when it was simply not who I was supposed to do it with, something I’d only scratched the surface of with a body still at civil war. It was complicated, because I had a complicated relationship with myself then. A version of myself that was long gone, a version I would now scare. But at that moment, I was the one scared.

“What? What is it?” she turned towards me, sensing my anxiety. I wanted to pull the covers up and completely hide myself. The same voice I heard at Thanksgiving, that told me I couldn’t handle intimacy again, was speaking up. After feeling like my eyes had rolled back into my head, frantically searching for words, anything brave or courageous, she sincerely uttered, “you can talk to me.”

I felt the steady rise and fall of my stomach beneath my hand, every ounce of blood pulsing through my body, starting to ease after the spike in anxiety. The desk fan on her dresser blew cool air onto my face. The firm beat of my heart doing what it had always done. I was alive. I knew I was lying next to her because of something, not despite something. She wasn’t scared, so why should I be?

“Okay,” I started. “Listen, I’m not very experienced, and I’m not just talking about sex. I’ve been on T for six months and...I’m still getting to know myself as I change. It’s more intimate than it’s ever been because...I’m closer to myself than I’ve ever been. I’m figuring out what I’m comfortable sharing. Physically, and everywhere else. And that’s all I really know about sex right now.”

“That’s okay,” she assured, and I was certain that every intimate experience I’d had before was fake in some manner. “So, to clarify,” she continued, looking ahead like I was. “You’d rather give, and not receive.” she motioned with her hand, as if describing a plan with no universal guidelines.

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“Basically, yes.” I answered, more confidently. “And...I’m glad you asked me. It’s not something I can bring up on my own.”

“I’m sure it’s not easy to talk about.” she said softly. I immediately knew that no matter what happened, I’d always have this moment—where someone saw every version of me that created the man I was next to her—and didn’t see me as an asterisk, construction site, or experiment. I started to laugh.

“It’s interesting, all this stuff has become such an afterthought the last few months. I guess it speaks to...how I’m doing now.”

“And how are you doing now?”

“I’m doing well.” I smiled, realizing it was one of the first times I’d meant it. And it wasn’t like when she’d casually ask if I was okay.

“I’m glad.” she responded.

I contemplated telling her how much it meant to me, just to be next to her. And to share that part of me with her. But that might’ve implied something serious, and even though we were in that territory I wouldn’t let myself get trapped there again. I was still relieved though, because what I thought would scare her away from me, the conversation about those topics, didn’t. And right before we began to doze off, she reached over, turned my head towards her, and kissed me.

I knew I was getting to see a side of her no one else did. Every day since the Winter Ball, I thanked the universe. Just for the privilege of knowing her that way. And for the privilege of knowing myself that way.

-12/09/18, late at night.

When it rains, it fucking pours

It’s still spooky to me that right before it happened, I’d concluded that I wasn’t afraid of things getting worse, but better. I was on a downhill, but I did not know how much steeper it was about to get. The universe must’ve told someone to hold their beer.

I was eating lunch in the dining hall with my friends. It was 12:45 on a Wednesday, its peak crowded time. Later that day I was supposed to drive up and stay the night in

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Reston before my pre-op appointment in DC the next morning. I was two weeks and a day away from my top surgery. It was helping me combat other disappointing areas of my life.

As I finished eating and got ready to go to class, my phone rang with a 202 area code. I figured it was Dr. Chao, my surgeon's office calling to confirm the appointment. I stood up and took the call a few steps away from where I was eating, in the back corner of the dining hall. It wasn't about my appointment though, because there wouldn't be one.

"Your insurance is denying coverage for your surgery..." the secretary relayed through my right ear. My heart dropped all the way to my feet.

I have no idea what I said back, and I don't remember hanging up. I sprint walked towards my best friend Maddie, grabbed her and hustled to a secluded area in the lobby where my tears came out of a six-month retirement.

I could not bring myself to say it. I could not say that all my appointments and surgery had gotten cancelled. I could not unhear the indifferent way it was told to me. I could not believe it got snatched away when I was inches away from grabbing it. I told her with as few words as possible. I leaned against the wall and sank to the ground, trying to hide my face while Maddie said everything she could even though there wasn't anything she could do.

There wasn't anything anyone could do. I walked back to my dorm. I was in no shape for class. I texted my friend Clairanne—one of the only other people I'd told when it had been scheduled—and told her to come over after her class got out. I had no idea what to do. My head kept telling me to do something. I had to tune out my head. I opened netflix and pretended I was Billy Hope in *Southpaw*.

The last nine months had been nothing but taking control of my body, letting it heal me, letting my thicker skin grow, shaving when I wanted, recording my voice each month, relishing in energy I'd never had, claiming it as my own, being in complete control of how I was changing, and what it all meant. Being transgender was a condition I had under control.

I thought I had checked all the boxes to take away the last unwanted thing on my body, and that I was controlling it because its days were numbered. But I wasn't, and if I didn't have control of that, I didn't want control of anything.

When Clairanne showed up later, I gave her the keys to my car and told her to keep them for a while.

-03/06/19

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Under construction

I spent the first few days of life with an English degree in my childhood bedroom, searching for patience to call the insurance company while pondering where I'd find another sense of belonging. I celebrated my first maniversary only because it meant the insurance company couldn't use it as a reason to not cover my surgery anymore. It still felt like any other day since graduation—directionless, scary, and transitional. Some feelings were newer than others.

An entire year of loving myself didn't get rid of what I always felt coming back to Reston, a place I hadn't called home in many years. Being there always made me feel like an unfinished puzzle, one I'd been working on but hadn't solved quite yet.

I could lay the previous four years out in my head, clearly and precisely. I could explain how I arrived at every moment, how I got through every peak and trough. I could explain every mistake and try to forgive myself for it.

I'd think back to December, when she was running her fingers through the hair on my arm, something I didn't notice the abundance of until she was occupied with it while I lay beside her. Ready to reveal anything about myself if she wanted to know, like when she asked why Coldplay is my favorite band. She always kept her door locked, even when she was there. As if to keep anything intangible from leaving the confines of the tiny rectangular room, to stay a mystery to everyone else. A room that made her twinkly lights look like the stars on a bright night, and the salt rocks like the moon, even as they changed color. I belonged in her bed. Her head belonged on my shoulder, her hand belonged on my chest. I belonged there.

I tried keeping a more recent vibe alive, just hanging with my friends drinking apple ale in the days leading up to graduation. I felt a kind of protection, that you feel in those rare, real friendships that still makes you feel capable of anything, and I knew I wouldn't find it for a while in Reston. As I kept changing and meeting myself, my friendships grew and got deeper. I was glad I'd found it, but irked that it took almost all four years to get there.

I got the sense that things would get worse before they got better again. I kept going up and down, but nowhere near where I was that December. I didn't know how long construction would last.

I learned much in college. One of the most relevant significant things being—you

don't ever get answers. Only harder questions.

-06/07/19

Finally.

The night before surgery I was teetering between two unpleasant, exhausted feelings. One in which I was constantly anxious because it was that close. And the other, in which I had convinced myself that it wouldn't actually happen because insurance would pull the rug out from under me again. I was almost certain that the next day I'd show up to the hospital, they'd put me under anesthesia, and I'd wake up with the same chest because someone from the insurance company would rush into the OR right before the scalpel punctured my skin and revoke coverage they were supposedly, finally providing. I couldn't afford to believe it was happening and be let down again. I just wanted it to be over. I was sick of calling them, dealing with their bureaucratic shit, and having my health treated like it wasn't important. I was so disconnected from my chest, ready for it to be flat, even ready to feel the pain from being cut into.

My surgery was scheduled for 11:30 in the morning. My mom wanted me to get a good sleep, which I found silly because all I had to do was lay unconscious on a table. I don't know how a person could sleep well on a night before something like that anyway, especially not knowing if it would really happen.

While in the pre-op area the next morning, I sat on a bed, naked under a gown with the IV already in my arm. The anesthesiologist stopped by to explain everything. Dr. Chao stopped by to draw all over my chest with a surgical marker. He explained the risks and benefits once more before saying how long it would take.

Finally, the time came to send the sedatives through my IV. The nurse told me they called it 'happy juice'. I told my family goodbye, and shortly got the sensation that I was stoned as they started to take me into the OR.

That's when it started to get foggy, and as they rolled me through the doors of the OR I was ready to be cut open. I guess the happy juice helped me be ready, I only felt relaxed after feeling nothing but intense anxiety the last two hours. I remember them rolling me

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next to the table, and then getting on. I vaguely remember the oxygen mask being put on, maybe I don't. After that, nothing.

I had a dream, and when it started to wear off, I was really disoriented, until it hit me.

Oh. Oh right! Oh yeah! I was in surgery. Then a few more seconds passed. *Wait—WAIT! It must be over. OH YEAH!* Then I said to the nurse beside me, *I'm gonna have a bra-burning party. I can watch Greys Anatomy again!* Things were dizzy and fuzzy. Things came back in waves. Things were surreal. I remember my legs being squeezed intermittently to keep blood flowing. I kept breathing to make sure I could still breathe fine. I tried to move my arms to make sure I could still move. I didn't look at my chest. It didn't feel different at first, mostly because it was numb. I couldn't believe I had gone through what I had just gone through, that I was finally on the other side of it. *They're gone...?* I kept mumbling to the nurse. *Are they really gone?*

Yes. They're really gone.

I laid there thinking, nah. This didn't actually happen. This was never going to happen. I could never have a flat chest. Well...

Yet there it was. Underneath the ice packs, compression vest, and layers of bandages. Even though I couldn't see it yet, it was there. My chest was finally my chest, and I was still me, more than I'd ever been before.

-08/19/19



Editor's Pick for NONFICTION

Barbès-Rochecouart

By Vamika Sinha

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Disclaimer: The Sock Drawer cannot verify events that do not appear on public records. Any views expressed are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Sock Drawer or its staff.
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This area is full of immigrants. You can notice these things on the train, the porous carriages filtering in a more eclectic mix of people as you approach Barbès. Tall, thin black men in ripped jeans and denim jackets, women in muumuus and babies strapped to their backs, young boys in rip-off designer kicks and snapbacks, huddled over a cheap iPod, a desi man with gel in his hair, talking just a bit too loud on his Nokia cell. My friend Zoe and I chew our bottom lips. This metro station is not pretending for anyone. Here the doors open to the smells of urine and urbanity; a vendor sells strawberries by the narrow staircase.

I am ashamed to say I immediately feel unsafe. My eyes scan the crowd for women. Especially, I am afraid to say, white women. The type who don't look like they belong here. I put my head down, saying nothing, snaking my way through hordes of men, fingers extra tight on my purse, my wallet, my phone case.

As we walk out in search of a café, we pass a store called the Rose d'Orient. It means what it sounds like: the rose of the orient. Zoe and I are drawn to the beautiful window display – bejeweled gowns with unusual draping, sequined lehengas, a grand Ethiopian wedding dress. Both of us are surprised to see such a casually expansive, rich display of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian dress. Of course, we smirk at the name “orient” and chuckle, remembering all our conversations about post-colonialism and Edward Said, watching them trickle into a small part of a small store in an “ethnic” area of northern Paris. We think, we are sure, we are very intelligent. If the word “orient” was an object, it would smell of incense, we joke. Orient is the kind of word that's a kryptonite for alternative Parisians, or the “bobos” as they're labelled here, the bourgeois-bohemians.

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Later, I will go home and type the clunky French name – “Barbès-Rochechouart” – into my search bar and this will come up on an old, forgotten blog by a Frenchman named Anthony:

“Everyone has their own story about Barbès, but there are repeating themes in the stories of outsiders: the disproportionate number of men in public spaces, Friday prayers in the street, drug traders and crack cocaine, the market under the Metro overpass, hijabi girls, and pickpocketing. Told to loved ones and strangers alike, these stories form the public reputation of Barbès and regulate the paths that individuals take to work and the places they frequent and shop. “They’ve never been here,” a co-worker tells me of her friends as we’re walking to my apartment. “And I don’t think they ever will.””

But of course, the orient is more than a word, I realize as we quickly walk towards more open spaces, wider streets. The orient is, in fact, an object. Just like a woman is an object. A piece of humanity made into concept, then galvanized by ignorance, misperception and blindness, into nothing more than a thing. It is an erasure of complexity – within this place, within Barbès, within the Orient, within people like me. It reeks, every single day.

Barbès is commonly described by people like Anthony as the kind of place where disorder becomes danger. There are no neatly lined boulevards but neon signs and corn husks and salons for African braids. It is a tapestry. The French is woven through with Wolof, Arabic, Urdu and more. The butcheries sell halal and there are foreign spices in the local groceries. There are swarms and swarms of swaggering, staggering men, hands stuffed in pockets, whether yours or theirs. There is the colonial and the natural, designer and original, splayed together on the streets like lost, scuffed Adidas sneakers looking for their pairs.

I am suddenly angry – a hot flush of shameful frustration. I am angry that an immigrant area is approached with such disdain. That my default setting is to think of an area as “shady” if it is full of black and brown men. I am angry that almost every immigrant neighborhood I know is a blemish on a city map, a place of poverty and disrepair, a place to avoid. I am angry but I also understand. Of course. Of course. One is scared of the unknown, of what they do not know, what they do not understand. This is a Parisian

orient. This Barbès, this tapestry, this thing. I too am scared. In my H&M dress and bourgeois stability, I too am scared and I write to try and redeem myself. Barbès, in a way, is a bit like Porte de Choisy, the Chinatown of the city. It is a place of outsiders trying to belong, trying to assert themselves in an environment that does not try to understand them. It is a place for people like me, teetering on the edge of a home but never really getting there. It is a place of cardboard constructions, both literal and metaphorical, on the street and within inner consciences. Barbès is ugly. It is poverty, low prices, sweaty pockets and gangs. But Barbès is also hope: it is coins found on the pavement, tinny boombox rap, markets, hot meals, intoxication. Prayer.

In the windows of the Rose d'Orient, the mannequins resemble queens, beckoning me to two different kingdoms, that of my past, watching technicolor Bollywood films in the living room, and the shallow future, the color of my bridal lehenga, jewelry and rituals around a pious fire. Zoe knows I have been feeling homesick and she asks if I want to go inside. I do. I want to go inside because Paris is a place of cravings and here I crave control: control, because some part of me thinks touching these fabrics could let me place a steadying hand on both my trembling past and trembling future, or in other words, just a trembling me. I want to go inside because I feel a greater sense of kinship here, somehow, than when I walk along the Champs-Élysées or the cafés in trendy St Michel.

Inside the store, an old hijabi woman in spectacles giggles in Arabic with her colleagues as she spreads out four-euro kaftans for Zoe to look at. I wonder, as I do with almost any immigrant in the west, how the woman got here and what exactly she is doing in this foreign place. It's the writer's elusive bait: what's the story? My fingers run over the sequins of a child's lehenga on a hanger and I am back to being a little girl, unaware of her own story and how it will unfold, from the foot of Africa to the foot of Montmartre, like a magic time-travelling carpet. As we walk out of the store, I return to my 20-year-old self, feeling less scared and more disoriented, as if I have just emerged from daydreaming on the couch at home. We walk back to the metro station and as I swipe my Navigo pass, I smile faintly at the strawberry vendor before boarding the train.



*Editor's Pick for REVIEWS***Shuggie Bain**

By Lisa Goodrum

Above all else, *Shuggie Bain* – the Booker prize winning novel by Douglas Stuart – is a love story, both to the eponymous hero's mother and the city of Glasgow. Cutting between the 1980s and 1990s, the tentacles of Thatcherism have crept across the city and caused serious harm, decimating the shipyards on the Clyde and casting thousands of men, along with their partners, out of work and into the throes of addiction and struggle. Trapped within her own dependency and always dreaming of a better life is Shuggie's mother, the beautiful and capricious Agnes Bain.

His mother is both the centre and love of Shuggie's life, and between the pair there exists a unique bond. In simple terms, they are both different. Shuggie, for the thoughts and feelings that bar him from being a 'normal boy' and Agnes for her desire to inhabit a world of glamour and sophistication high above the grim tenements and miner's scheme in which she finds herself stranded and engaged in a battle to transcend. Shuggie's love for, and attempts to protect his mother, are heartbreaking, and there are passages in this book where you will want to weep for the parentified child questioning his own place in the world and the difference that is so obvious to others, but for which Shuggie cannot find a cause. He is fundamentally unable to emulate the celebrated Glasgow 'hard man' of popular culture, and instead, it is this very character – steeped in alcohol, violence and emotional repression – that he watches his mother fall prey to time and again. In what is then a critique of the masculinity native to the west of Scotland, Douglas Stuart examines how those who don't fit its criteria are left lonely and ridiculed. Glaswegian machismo has a long and storied tradition, but when put into a wider context of deindustrialisation, social conservatism, Section 28, homophobia, the AIDS crisis and the proselytization of 'family values' it becomes an even more oppressive weapon against those on its periphery. In one of the most heartfelt scenes in the novel, Shuggie laments: 'Why do girls *always* let boys do what they like?' in a question that is also a cry of frustration for why his mother is so helpless in the face of men who only use and discard her, not least his brutal father 'Big Shug'.

Yet among the sadness and deprivation there also exists bravery, love, and above all, humour. Indeed, there are moments when the reader can only laugh out loud: When Shuggie is nearly sucked into a mud crater after an illicit trip to the old mine and decides that only a rendition of Whitney Houston's 'The Greatest Love of All' will sweeten his final

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moments on earth, and when he races to defend his mother against the accusation that she is a 'working girl' by proudly stating: 'She's never worked a day in her life. She's far too good looking'. A picaresque cast of characters like the fabulously named Jinty McClinchy and Dirty Mouse, along with Lamby and Keir Weir populate this novel and orbit around Agnes and her boy. Like the mother and son they also seem to be trying to understand, and survive, their circumstances with the only tools available to them: humour and alcohol. These coping mechanisms have long been identified as key components of the Scottish psyche, but they are arguably ingrained within that belonging to a Glaswegian. The writer Val McDermid has remarked: 'The Scots have gallows humour ... We can't help ourselves. We have to laugh at it. It is how we have survived as a nation: Drink and laughter.'

In *Shuggie Bain*, the former is shown to be a corrosive force that destroys addicts and rips their families apart, prompting relatives to fall away from them one-by-one as the vicissitudes of addiction become too much to bear. Humour and heart however are the traits that build the resilience to which McDermid refers, and that have always been synonymous with Scotland's largest city and its inhabitants, where 'those with least to give always gave the most'. Like his birthplace, Douglas Stuart's protagonist is nothing if not resilient. He survives trauma of an unimaginable kind on a long and tragicomic road to realising that he will never be able to make his 'Mammy better.' He cannot deliver her from the forces of alcohol, poverty and patriarchy against which she so defiantly wages war, but he can find the strength to save himself and preserve the tender uniqueness that makes his story unforgettable.



*Editor's Pick for REVIEWS****Perfume: the Story of Misogyny***

By Bex Dudley

Perfume, published in 1985 by Patrick Suskind, makes no attempts to hide what it is: 'the story of a murderer'. The plot follows Frenchman Grenouille, an utterly insignificant (or even repulsive) man with no personal scent, but with a pitch-perfect sense of smell. Discovering in his youth that the best scents belong to young, virginal girls, he seeks to discover how to immortalise this- particularly in his 'crown jewel' of young Laure. Spoiler alert: it involves an extensive, in-depth knowledge of perfume making, and a whole lot of murder.

Regardless of the intentions or stances of Suskind himself, the novel is quite clearly a tale of misogyny. The entire plot is based around the murdering of young, explicitly virginal girls, so that the protagonist can use their scent for his own gain. It's a dark, heavy book, that perfectly sums up the darkness of the setting, as well as of misogyny.

Seemingly in another universe live the Manic Pixie Dream Girls: the epitome of light and fun, the polar opposite of the themes of *Perfume*. Regardless of whether the name for these characters is familiar to you or not, no doubt you'll recognise the women themselves. Guys want to be with her, girls dream of being her; neither can succeed without destroying her very essence. She's mysterious and captivating, quirky and fun. She's not like other girls. She's going to take your world, turn it upside down, and leave you reeling. Then she's going to gallivant off into the sunset, leaving you with a broken heart, and a whole host of important life lessons.

Think of the women in *Garden State*, *Elizabethtown*, and *(500) Days of Summer* (Loftus, 2015). Take a moment to realise how every single one of these girls is essentially one and the same. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl (hereby referred to as MPDG).

Originally coined by Nathan Rabin (2007), the term has quickly cottoned on. Following this proliferation in use, it's been most succinctly defined as 'a secondary female character whose personality has male fantasy wish elements, which are in some way girlish or impish, and whose function within the plot is to aid in the male protagonists' development, with her own growth and back story largely removed from the plot (Metcalf, 2014). What this mouthful essentially means is a girl- not a woman, at least not in personality- who exists only to further the development of the lead male character, with no substance or story of her own.

Although the previous description focused on the juxtaposition between the light, breezy

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MPDGs, and the dark and heavy *Perfume*. This isn't the whole truth. Although on the surface the two seem at polar opposites, *Perfume* may well be one of the best and clearest examples of the MPDG trope- and it's consequences- in action. It's all too easy to dismiss it as just another film cliché, but in *Perfume* we can see painfully well how it can turn out.

Taking Laure as an example- she being the closest *Perfume* gets to a lead female- we can apply the principles that constitute a MPDG. Firstly, she's a secondary female character, that much is clear: she appears very little throughout the novel, and only ever in relation to Grenouille. She has next to no personality, however, that she exists to fulfill Grenouille's fantasies and wishes of obtaining 'the perfect scent' check that box. She's not only girlish, she literally is a girl, with one of the defining features being her virginity. Through obtaining her scent, Grenouille is able to become popular, setting in motion the final events of the story; and we never get to find out anything about Laure herself, never mind her backstory. The perfect Manic Pixie Dream Girl. Truly perfect, because, in killing Laure, Grenouille ensures that she will never develop anyone else, nor come back to haunt him. He has her, exclusively, and he can move on entirely without her. Murdering her doesn't kill the trope. It crystallises it.

The arc of Laure's story- as well as the arc of every other girl used by Grenouille- perfectly follows the MPDG trajectory. Girl appears. Man uses girl. Optionally, girl leaves. Man develops, as a result of girl. That *Perfume* exaggerates and literalises this process- Grenouille *literally uses* Laure's body to advance, and that her murder is what allows this step in his development- doesn't make it of a different ilk to other portrayals of MPDGs. That is not to say that the way women are treated in *Elizabethtown* or its peers is on the same level as the way women are treated in *Perfume*, not at all. It is not to undermine murder, nor is it to say that the MPDG trope is singlehandedly responsible for femicide. It is to say that we can't pretend they're unlinked.

Perfume is the story of a murderer: not the murdered. Just like *Elizabethtown* is the story of Drew, not Claire; and *Garden State* is the story of Andrew, not Sam. Because the girls don't matter. Because they are only there to be used. Teaching those who watch them that this is the role of women- to be quirky, to be funny, to be sweet; to be obliging, to be used, to be discarded. To be unimportant. *Perfume* is relevant to the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope because it is what comes next. The natural progression of portraying women as unimportant and disposable.

We shouldn't have to turn to exaggerations to see the effects of misogyny: but it's also true that *Perfume* is not an exaggeration. It's the shocking, atrocious reality that comes from men being told they can use women as they please.



Editor's Pick for REVIEWS

Book Review: *Cutting for Stone*, by Abraham Verghese

By Nasreen Rasool

Twins, Shiva and Marion Praise are born mysteriously to a nun who dies during childbirth in an Ethiopian hospital. She carried the secret of how they were conceived with her to her deathbed, and it is up to those who cared about her as a dear friend and colleague, to put together the pieces of the puzzle and give her boys the life she would have wanted.

They are raised by the hospital's matron after the man believed to be their father, Thomas Sone, flees in fear and bewilderment.

Cutting for Stone is a story of brotherhood, of family, growing up, homecoming and love. ShivaMarion, as they are referred to because of the deep connection of their souls that only twins can know, fall in love with the medical field, but in different ways. One is led to the United States by his professional excellence, and there his life is changed in ways he could never have imaged. The other finds his life's calling in alternative healing and remains rooted to his land of birth. In the end, the brothers, torn by circumstance, will find that their lives depend on each other.

Abraham Verghese is to be applauded for this exceptional masterpiece, with characters that are unsuspecting, authentic and brought to life with superb writing. We grow to love them, even with their flaws.

At the heart of the story is that overpowering, invisible thread that runs through humanity, connecting our souls, intertwining our lives, and surpassing death.

An unforgettable, moving read.



Editor's Pick for REVIEWS

To be Invisible is To be Seen; To be Seen is To be Killed: A Review of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

By Kerstin Holman

Since its creation, America has championed itself as the world's freest, richest, and tolerant melting-pot; a place all foreigners dream of living so they can achieve the infamous American Dream which promises money, equality and safety. Rankine all but pulverizes the glamor and glitz of what a dream like one this is: a fantasy. Rankine's book recalls personal experiences with racism, discrimination and racial profiling in her own life, while also discussing how black Americans face these in pop culture (Serena Williams) and politically (Hurricane Katrina). She uses poetry, hybrid prose, art, and photographs to paint a bluntly realistic painting of this country, showing anyone who may feel content with how "advanced" we claim to be that there is still a lot of work to be done.

Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine discusses the hardship both directly and indirectly of the "hypervisibility" that comes with being black in the United States. Rankine recalls an encounter with a therapist she had only ever spoken to over the phone. She arrived at the therapist's house to meet for the first time and was met with shouts and anger from the counselor: "Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?" It was clear that her therapist imagined that her client would be, well, not black. Rankine receives a string of I'm-so-so-so-sorry's after she manages to explain that she has an appointment. But sorry's cannot take back animosity and blatant racism. Words and language—both constructed and validated by those in power (i.e., white people)—are all-too powerful to ignore and many times cannot be forgotten when followed by an embarrassed and reluctant apology.

I knew that revisiting a book like Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* at a time like this would be frustratingly relevant. The movements and protests that simply beg for black lives to be protected and considered human (surprise: they should be and are) as white lives have been for centuries are just as rampant now as they were in 2014 when Rankine's book was published. The murders of black men, women, children, trans and gender-non-conforming people and the refusal to give the victims any sort of justice by apprehending their killers never ceased, but thanks to calls for change through protesting and social media, more people are becoming aware of and thus angry about these murders.

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Citizen acknowledges and comments on the black lives which for generations since their forceful arrival to the country have been wrongfully taken by American citizens, each killing motivated by racism and a disregard for black life. Six years since publication, Rankine's words still sting. Although it may appear that more people are feeling emboldened to make a change, it is hard to say if her novel will feel just as current in the next six.



Editor's Pick for ART



"Reflections" by Esther Chiyanda



“Meatsuits, skeletons and an organ” by Esther Chiyanda

Editor's Pick for ART



“Unnamed Day” by Megan Ulrich



EDITOR HIGHLIGHTS

Favorite works by our editors themselves

Editor Commentary:

“There are pieces of writing that light a fire inside the reader’s soul. “vantablack” is one of those powerful pieces. The way the form complements the nostalgic, melancholy, and introspective musing of the author is haunting and mesmerizing. Each numbered section is a vignette that absorbs you into the words and psyche of the piece. It’s beautiful.”

- Gracelyn Willard, Founder/Editor-In-Chief

vantablack

By Kerstin Holman

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Disclaimer: The Sock Drawer cannot verify events that do not appear on public records. Any views expressed are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Sock Drawer or its staff.
.....

1. in my short existence, i feel as though having a favorite of something has never been in my control. i did not hand-pick a nose that i knew would be enthralled with the smell of black coffee, nor did i choose to have tastebuds that dislike the flavor of the aforementioned drink. i do not think that i noticed when or why, but at one point i found myself gravitating towards feelings, emotions, *things* that i knew were not good for me. i allowed it to do what it does best and absorb me.
2. i do a lot of selective second-guessing in which i question the things that i should be the most certain about. *do i still like watching Brooklyn Nine-Nine?* it’s entire philosophy is to champion cops as the good guys, but then again, it’s not the first nor the last show to do that. *do i actually like painting my nails?* sometimes i feel like it’s more for others than for myself. *do i forgive them?* whether it’s a yes or no, i do not think words can do my feelings any justice. and yet, that is all i have.
3. do you ever wish you were different? that you could eliminate a trait or habit of yours? if you could cast off the unwanted pieces of yourself into the depths of outer space, would you? would you change for yourself or someone else? i can tell myself that it would be for me, but i know a familiar face or two would be flashing in and out of my mind. their stares would have my focus as i bury those flaws i didn’t realize i had until they helped me see them.
4. have you ever known someone who claims they aren’t one to cry but when the waterworks come, it screams rehearsed? i guess i’d cry, too, if i couldn’t come up with a better rebuttal. so i cry. i blot my tissue and i see that some of its whiteness has vanished, my inky mascara bleeding into the soft fibers. i wonder if my crying is more

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real than theirs because transparent tears do not affect the appearance of their tissue. my tissue can represent the relationships that leave visible damage, while theirs can symbolize the scars that remain hidden, vanishing from both sight and mind with the short passage of time.

5. is it possible to assign a feeling a color? do my emotions emit some kind of hue when i express them? i cannot hide the fact that i am attracted to many a color. i wish i could soak each one up and carry them around with me. things would be heavier, though. maybe it would be best to have a singular color represent me. let's have it be the most obvious one then, shall we?
6. even though i do not possess the correct amount of rhythm, i feel like i am constantly dancing on the line of that one word that we both refuse to address. the thin, black tightrope is somehow strong enough to carry the weight of our bodies, stress, resentment, and hesitation. i can see them fumbling with the steps. perhaps they never really knew the choreography to begin with. they've always been the person to encourage freestyle. i can't help but be jealous of their ability to improvise their moves. i can feel the tears in the rope widening, but i allow the music to distract me from our impending crash and burn. our failure doesn't upset me, though. we were amateur acrobats and i've always been afraid of heights.
7. talking doesn't work. i have found that distance is the ideal method. i don't think that the perfect solution is ever going to present itself with fireworks and trumpets. maybe the answer will be a bit more subtle. but the most obvious choice isn't necessarily the easiest one to make. the most difficult answers can become easier to live with over time until, eventually, you just go back to living.
8. having a quarter-life crisis is a side-effect of being a college graduate. i look forward to graduating from one crisis to the next. maybe life as a whole is one big series of crises. mine seem to tangle themselves with one another; blurring lines, making it too fuzzy for me to identify which problem is supposed to be more devastating.
9. i had so many plans to do something else. i envisioned a future that now will never be. i allowed another pollutant to enter my lungs. even though i try my hardest to purify the atmosphere, the smog has crept in now the pieces of myself have mixed with the foreign particles. i will use these contaminations to learn how to develop a better filter.
10. darkness cannot exist without light, i know that to be true. but what i have learned to embrace is that very darkness. it's always been painted as something to fear; that the unknown, the silent, the blurry is to be avoided, or approached with caution. instead, i choose to sprint towards the vantablack expanses, knowing that what awaits me will not always be better, but it will be new.



Editor Commentary:

“Despite every (and I mean every) amazing review that Izzy has written for TSD, this review in particular stands out to me a great deal. Not only does this review critique the long history horror has of reusing the trope of monsters and ghouls terrorizing people who were “simply...in the wrong place at the wrong time,” it also beautifully illustrates how Joey Comeau’s *One Bloody Thing After Another* takes this overused concept, uses it, while also presenting a secondary antagonist: grief. As one matures and experiences loss the way one usually does during their lifetime, we come to fear that loss more than the idea of a monster under the bed or seeing “a ghost holding her own head.” Izzy’s analysis of Comeau’s work not only has me looking forward to the future of horror, but it reminds me that there is nothing more scary, and yet exhilarating, than facing our reality.”

- Kerstin Holman, Nonfiction Editor/Assistant Editor-In-Chief

The Gorey Cross-Section of Horror and Grief: a Review of Joey Comeau’s *One Bloody Thing After Another*

By Izzy Peroni

In the last decade, the horror genre, across all mediums, seems to have shifted its focus from the generic, unfamiliar horrors of ghosts and monsters that harass protagonists for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, to ultra-personal supernatural experiences, where the antagonizing force works as a metaphor for the protagonist’s grief, regret, paranoia, or other mental ailments (see: *The Babadook*, 2014; *The Haunting of Hill House* Netflix series in 2018, based off of the 1959 novel by Shirley Jackson; as well as video games such as *Blair Witch*, 2019, and *The Evil Within 2*, 2017). *One Bloody Thing After Another*, published in 2010, indulges in this concept on various levels, connecting supernatural occurrences to unbelievable personal tragedies. Joey Comeau’s ghosts and monsters are not unknowable creatures from the deep, or phantoms trapped in ancient houses— they are mothers and daughters. Comeau, a co-writer of the archived comic *A Softer World*, as well as author of other novels and short story collections such as *Lockpick Pornography*, *It’s Too Late to Say I’m Sorry*, and *Overqualified*, skips back and forth between the daughters and mothers struggling in the living world to deal with the loss, or unimaginable transformation, of their loved ones. He does so with a refreshing amount of humor and endless empathy for his protagonists, namely Jackie, who has lost her mother to illness but still summons her ghost when she needs to disappear, and Jackie’s best friend (and crush) Ann, whose mother loses sentience and gains a craving for live flesh that her and her sister Margaret must provide.

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The most enticing aspect of the narrative of *One Bloody Thing After Another* is how commonplace the supernatural elements are portrayed. An old man sees a ghost holding her own head in the lobby of his retirement home every day after he takes his dog for a walk, but he treats it as more of an annoyance than a true horror. Ann and Margaret have to feed live animals to their mother and her many teeth, but they do not hesitate to do so, because that's their mother, and you always look after your family. Much of this gorey chaos is played off humorously, and all of it, matter-of-factly. With the lives of many of the characters being upturned by sudden change and loss, bloodied ghouls and creatures are no longer as terrifying and world-shaking as one's own grief. The storylines of these characters become parallel at times, perpendicular at others, and through this complex narrative structure Comeau layers the story in a way that makes it hard to predict what could be coming next. There's even a storyline— or more accurately, the answer to a character's grief— laced through the physical pages themselves, one that I won't spoil for you, because it's worth the anticipation of tracking it through the novel.

This novel from the beginning of the 2010s perfectly encapsulates what would be the tone of horror in the next decade: equal parts tragic and hilarious, stretched across the full range of human emotion and, especially in the case of *One Bloody Thing After Another*, drenched in empathy for a person blindsided by their own way of coping with grief. Jackie's affinity for putting rocks through car windows might not be the most typical way of dealing with loss, but our narrator can't hold that against her.



Final Girls and Intersectional Feminism

By Izzy Peroni

Across subgenres of horror, there is a character consistency that finds its place in movies of all decades: the Final Girl. She is softly gorgeous, but modest, and within the raucous group of young adults she travels with through rural 70s Texas or to a cabin in the middle of an alarming wood, she is the one with the most common sense, and often a romantically troubled mind. She is virginal, but appealing, and the parts of her character arc that don't involve running from whatever is trying to kill her usually involve a lukewarm romance and dealing with her vapid best friend. She pouts, she scolds, she screams, she solves problems, but most importantly, she lives. Her boyfriend, her best friend, her best friend's boyfriend, the blonde one, the black guy, the nerd, the jock, the stoner: they all get picked off one by one by two by three, getting shredded and slashed up and swallowed by gaping, bleeding holes in their beds, leaving our heroine alone to find victory against the violent entity, or at the very least, to escape. All others are merely tragic fodder for her character development.

The character trend is omnipresent in the slasher subgenre of horror, especially movies from the 70s and 80s; Nancy from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Laurie Strode from *Halloween*, and Sally from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* all spring to mind immediately. These young ladies fit the bill almost perfectly, as their traits make up the Final Girl trope that we understand and build upon today; Nancy is paranoid but for good reason, and fights back as much as she is hunted; Laurie is also a fighter against Michael Myers, but before his interruption into her life, she is modest and bookish; Sally spends most of her individual screen time screaming her head off and narrowly avoiding death. Slasher movies emerging in the mid-2000 to the 2010s continue with the Final Girls trend, but often with a harder edge; in the 2013 remake of *Evil Dead*, the iconic Ash Williams is replaced with Final Girl Mia, who resolves the movie dramatically with a shower of blood and a chainsaw. In more recent years, a highly debated final girl is Dani of *Midsommar*, who seems to find a twisted kind of emotional healing while her friends get picked off by a white supremacist cult.

Moving tangentially from white supremacy; notice anything about the female characters I've listed off? You probably don't even have to Google them to guess what I'm referring to.

EDITOR HIGHLIGHTS

Yes: they are all white.

According to tradition, the defining characteristics of the Final Girl can be summed up as smart, chaste, paranoid, and white. A Final Girl is instinctively expected to be a cishet white woman, and even if the rest of the cast is somehow diverse, those other characters will be killed in order to follow the formula. In recent years, diversity in movies has become a significantly broadened discussion, but if a movie still has a cishet white lead, the sacrifices made by and of the other characters nulls the attempt at a diversity. While horror is not a monolithic genre by any means, the majority remains white-centered, even when a powerful woman is at that center.

So what does this say for those who believe that the Final Girls of the modern horror genre are pillars of girl power? It's true that many of these women manage to actively turn the tides of their story through asserting power and cleverness to survive, but why wasn't that writing given to anyone else? Josh from *Midsommar* is a genius, genuinely respectful of the culture he is invited into, and sufficiently cautious; are we to believe that his vital character flaw was being a black man in a movie about a white woman? How do we, as an audience, digest the fact that black women are almost never involved in such a massive genre? And how best can we approach these problems— by remaking classic movies but with a diverse cast that somehow doesn't kill all of its non-white characters; or, taking a page out of Jordan Peele's book, creating fresh new narratives starring black actors, either decentering race, like is *Us*, or directly calling out the sort of faux woke ideologies that put black characters on the chopping block behind white leads, like in *Get Out*?



Editor Commentary:

“Julia’s piece struck a chord with me as soon as I saw it. It was the first piece of art I saw from The Sock Drawer, even before I was a member of the team. The green skin is vibrant and immediately pulls me in, while the muted colors of the background and the cloud hovering above gives the feeling of seriousness. I think this piece shows how much potential someone has, but when their mind is muddled it can be a struggle.”

- Madison Diemert, Fiction Editor



“learning disability” by Julia Gonzales

Editor Commentary:

“Is it a cop-out to pick this one? I don’t think it is. It feels almost too obvious, and I suppose I could have picked butterfly man from the same issue, granted, the magazine is not called The Butterfly Man. We’re The Sock Drawer, and we wouldn’t exist if not for this poem and it’s poet. We wouldn’t exist if not for its ideals: embracing the inevitability of uncontrolled self-expression that comes after being stuffed down and shoved away, by ourselves or our environment. That’s what Grace has given us as a team, and what, I hope, we’ve helped her share with the rest of the world. Also, the final couplet ‘The moment of freedom, / an explosion of pairs’ absolutely whoops ass. It’s just mesmerizing.”

- Izzy Peroni, Book Review Editor

Sock Drawer

By Gracelyn Willard

I stuffed my voice in the sock drawer
thinking the wool and cotton
would mute the cherry soaked
screams.

I let it nestle next to the
beige bra, twisting the underwire
into a lock pick.

It planned its escape as
carefully as I had planned
its imprisonment.

The moment of freedom,
an explosion of pairs.



Editor Commentary:

“The Lake’ provides a fascinating view of a horror scenario from the perspective of a child. It brings me back to lunchroom days full of drama and gossip and every day was an adventure. What’s interesting is the adult’s reactions to what’s happening. I wonder if the real horror isn’t The Lake itself but when no one else can sense the danger you feel. Just like the allure of the mysterious Lake, the story drew me in hard until I felt there was no other choice but to stop everything I was doing and read until the end - and I wasn’t disappointed! The ending is satisfying as it is intriguing and matches the same eerie energy as the beginning.”

- Julia Gonzales, Art and Magazine Editor

The Lake

By Madison Diemert

I was in grade school when I learned about The Lake. It was a secret thing my classmates passed down to one another between white-knuckled fingers, our voices dimming to only whispers, daring to be caught and snuffed out. I learned about The Lake in the dark corners of classrooms, through heads shoved in lockers, nestled between rented library books, and past the swings near the fence on the roadside.

My friends insisted The Lake held all the mysteries of the universe, the water deeper than any other in the world, so deep that your head would explode if you ever made it to the bottom.

Because of all the secrets, one said, our brains can’t hold it all in and it needs to go back to the world.

And your head swells up like this— another raised his arms above his head, gesturing, *like a balloon. And then all the blood and guts and brains splat out. Like my dog’s head when my dad ran him over.* Then he started crying.

Other kids decided that it was where all the old people went to die. Or maybe only the rich and famous. Maybe it was only poets or actors. Maybe it was where our pets went when our parents smashed their heads into the pavement with pickup trucks.

When I got to middle school, I learned that The Lake wasn’t far from school or from home. This made it easy for the bravest of us to visit, even in the dead of winter. My mother warned me not to go absently, after I asked her how to get there. *You might drown,* she said, walking back to her office where she shut and locked the door.

EDITOR HIGHLIGHTS

My friend with the dead dog decided to go one day, and when he came back to school, he was different.

Was it scary? Were there dead bodies in there? we asked, our voices growing too high, too loud even for the fence. In hushed murmurs we continued, *did you see your dog? Do you think anything is actually in there?*

Where we expected excitement or maybe tears, there was only silence. Our friend kept his beady eyes toward the dead leaves on the ground, frost covering their brittle brown ridges. He blew air from his nose like the mythical dragons we imagined to be only a few years ago, the dragons we abandoned on the tire swing when we first heard of The Lake. No matter how many questions we asked or how many times I would nudge his shoulder, looking for any reaction, he did not move. He did not say a word, his little blue lips forming a harsh line across his translucent face. When the bell rang, calling us inside, he began to trudge toward the double doors, teachers hollering at him to pick up his feet. It was like there was nothing inside him anymore.

When we saw the other kids at lunch, the ones who accompanied him, they refused to speak too. The four of them followed the lunch line, grabbing their trays and allowing the mimicked food to be slopped on without so much as a blink. They went through the motions but it was like who they were got sucked out and swallowed, drowned in The Lake.

For weeks they stayed like this, but each day it got worse. We noticed our friend's skin becoming paler and compared it to the freshly fallen snow.

Like a vampire, one of us said.

No, like a ghost. Like someone dead.

Gone was any semblance of our friend as he wasted away right before us; his lips disappearing before his eyes lost their color, his hair falling off his eyebrows and then in chunks from his own head, littering the halls and clumping up on the carpets of classrooms.

When one of us threw a ball at him to see if he would catch it, it hit him in the jaw. It made a resounding thud as his body lurched back, falling to the ground. We paused. He did not get up. We ran to see if he was alright, bending over his shriveled body lying in the snow. His gray eyes stared blankly, no recognition that anything had happened to him. And there, on the right side of his jaw, was the baseball.

It was jammed, wedged into his bone and folding his face into itself. His white skin

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was warped, cracked, breaking apart like brittle bark in the cold. Like the dead leaves crunched up underneath our winter boots. There was no blood. Beneath the fractured pieces of himself his insides had turned black. Like his entire body was rotting from the inside out.

I turned away before falling to my knees and vomiting. I retched so hard my throat tore and blood spattered across the frozen ground, my early breakfast. Before I could get to my feet teachers were rushing toward us.

Are you okay? What happened? Oh— oh my god— someone call 9-1-1!

I was picked off the ground by a large burly science teacher and brought to the nurse's office. I laid there on a cot for an hour before my mom picked me up. She did not ask about what happened, but I explained the incident to her anyway. *Make sure you wash the dishes after you finish your homework*, she said in a flippant response. When the school called later, she did not tell me what they said.

The next day my friend was not at school. No one dared talk about what happened to him. No one mentioned The Lake or what it did to him, what it did to the others who were still there, fading away. Their feet drug beneath them now as they walked, their mouths becoming slack as if their jaws were not strong enough to close around their teeth. Every day, it got worse.

They really do look like they're dead.

One day, in the lunch room, an eyeball fell out.

She was the first of the four others who began truly falling apart. We noticed it worsening when her teeth began wriggling loose from their sockets and pinged down the hall, when her nails ripped from their beds as though they were being pried away by tweezers. No one knew what to make of it, no one knew how the teachers did not notice or why she was still allowed at school. And that day, while she was bent over her instant mashed potatoes, body swaying uncontrollably, her eyeball fell out of her head.

It plopped into her potatoes, sticking so perfectly into the mushy mound that it did not move or roll off the tray. The girl made no notice of her missing organ, nor the slick green strand of pulsing nerves stretching out of her empty socket, still attached to her eyeball. The lunch room was hushed, silence rushing over our heads and sucking out all the noise inside of us.

A girl beside me began to cry, then scream. She stood so abruptly she knocked over her chair and fell to the ground, scuttling away on hands and knees from the

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scene. I could not move as the lunch staff hurried to the girl's side, one of them puking straight into her lap. I watched as they tried to grab her and their hands sunk into her body, fingertips dipping right inside of her. A moan of disgust rippled through one of the women, and she dropped to the floor.

The girl was taken away, awkwardly drug across the floor as her glassy eye followed by, squeaking across the floor and picking up flecks of dust along the way.

My mother got another call from school that night and she did not tell me what was said. But I knew the girl was finally dead. Just like our friend.

Maybe they're zombies, one of us said under a library table.

But zombies eat brains. They never eat anything, said another.

But they can't be really dead, they're still moving.

That was when one of us proposed going to The Lake ourselves, to investigate. She was wide-eyed and serious. The rest of us stared, too amazed to open our mouths. She insisted we go but didn't get close, didn't go into The Lake.

But did they even go into The Lake? What if they just looked at it with their eyes and this happened to them? I said. They all turned their heads to look at me. None of us knew what occurred at The Lake, that much I was sure of.

It's up to us to find out what happened to them, the girl said, it's our duty as their friends. And we'll be safe. We won't even go by it. Okay?

It took a few moments. Each of us were lost in our minds, in whirling thoughts of teeth-cluttered floors and dead eyes, smashed-in faces, exploding heads, and crumbling skin. I was the last to agree, after more convincing. We would go after school that day, miss the bus and tell our parents to come late.

I left with a hole growing in my stomach, expanding as the end of the day grew nearer. Each time I looked at the clock the hole grew into a pit, then a crater, then a bottomless black hole. I began sweating in my t-shirt, the liquid cold and slick against my forehead. I swept it off with the back of my hand, flicking it at the ground. I couldn't keep my legs from shaking, so I tried to focus on the *tick... tock... tick... tock...* of the clock. But the more I listened the louder it became until my head was pounding, pulsating as the bell shrieked directly into my brain. I jerked up and dashed into the hall to my friends.

They wore solemn faces, slowly grabbing their books out of their lockers and stuffing their backpacks full. The panic I felt was still inside me, swimming around like a live goldfish about to be flushed down a toilet bowl. I breathed heavily, almost heaving.

THE SOCK DRAWER

But they ignored my show of worry and drug me out of the building, past the fence and onto the road. It wasn't far from here, they insisted. It wouldn't be long.

They were right, though our twenty-minute walk seemed to last a lifetime as we pushed against the blistering air. Our faces were chafed, raw from the beating we endured from Mother Nature. The wide-eyed girl stopped us at a line of a dark trees, turning to look at us.

We're here, she announced. She spun on her heel and marched past the tree line, trying to appear brave despite her quivering shoulders. We followed, hesitant as we climbed up and down banks of snow. I realized the closer we got to The Lake, the slower we became. I glanced over at one of us, then at another. Our limbs were thickening, freezing over and becoming stiff. Our joints stuck together and protested each movement. Then it came, like an invisible virus being swallowed down with a breath of air. Sudden, out of thin air. A feeling like none I had ever felt, dragging my heart down to the very bottom of myself. I hadn't known grief like this to ever exist inside me. But as The Lake came into view, the oily black waters lurching this way and that despite the cold that should have frozen them, it got worse.

Our leader finally fell to her knees, a raucous sound emitting from her body. Still, she did not stop. She crawled on bare hands toward The Lake, calling out to us. *I can't stop! I have to see it. I have to see what's inside.*

The tears started to well in my eyes, involuntary and shocking. They froze to my cheeks as I trudged through the knee-high snow, sobs racking my body. The tears clouded my vision, but I could still see The Lake, the dead trees bent over it, as if they too were folded in on themselves with pain.

My brain began to filter through all the horrifying events I had faced in my short span of life until my vision was seized by the images... My cat falling from a tree and breaking her spine, my mother purposely slicing her finger off with a knife, my grandfather lying in a casket with one eye open, maggots eating away at a turtle I kept secretively in the backyard, my father's unmoving body bent over the steering wheel, his body lying in a casket, his casket being lowered next to my grandfather's, his grave being covered with dirt and grass and weeds and—

I opened my mouth to cry, to release the pain rising up inside my body. But before I could make a sound, my vision suddenly cleared again. My friend was bent over The Lake, peering into it. She gripped the banks with her swollen, purple-black hands and leaned down. Her nose was almost touching the inky water when I shouted, *STOP!*

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It was too late. Her head dipped into the water and the rest of her went with it. I halted. Only one of us was left standing beside me. He looked at me, cheeks frozen and eyes wide with fear. Out of the corner of my eye, the two others were standing over the water, heads bent at a ninety-degree perfect angle. Their necks were so severely bent it seemed as if they would slide right off their shoulders and splash into The Lake.

Something inside me told me not to look at them, that if I did, I would not be able to stop again. I reached for my friend, arm stretched out as far as it could go.

Don't... just as my fingers brushed his pea coat, he turned to watch the last of us fall slack into the murderous waters. There was no sound when their bodies smacked the sleek black waters. His mouth dropped, a silent scream as his head shook violently. Spit and tears splattered around him as he charged for The Lake. I shouted after him, but he did not stop. I kept my eyes focused on a spot close to The Lake, where I could still see him without giving the body of water what it wanted. Without hesitation, he submerged himself. I crumpled to the ground, sobbing.

Without thinking, I began to crawl. I did not look up to see where I was going, only that I knew I needed to get there. The thin gloves covering my hands were soaked through and my new jeans were sopping. I kept going, despite the imminent frostbite settling into me, making a home.

I did not look up until I had made it far across the tree line. I stood up to look back at where The Lake stood, where I could see the shadows of my friends slowly rising and clawing at the frozen grounds to get out of the water. I watched their dripping bodies sling forward through the snow, slowly but surely making their way back to civilization.

I understood then. As my chest began to loosen and the tears dried themselves, I knew. I had saved myself. I survived The Lake. But the others did not. I did not know then how strong I was, as I turned my back on my friends who were condemned to slow and torturous deaths.

I wrestled my way through the snow back to the main road and walked the whole way home, leaving my gloves behind on the sidewalk. I never looked back. When they were at school that next day, I pretended not to see them. I ate lunch alone and took up residence at a different library table. It was easier than begging them to remember me, to come back.

Even now, I struggle with the thoughts of never knowing how I did it, why it had to be me. As I watched my friends collapse in on themselves from whatever transpired at The Lake, I wondered if perhaps, death would have been preferable.



The Complexities of Eleven Different Women Shine Through Their Struggles as Shown by Caitlin Horrocks

By Madison Diemert

This Is Not Your City by Caitlin Horrocks features eleven short stories about eleven different women. No matter the problems the women face— or rather, no matter how magical or mundane— Horrocks takes us through wild and unusual journeys. The collection focuses on themes such as motherhood, grief, dealing with regrets, and the effects of a shattering illness while balancing between reality and fantasy. Horrocks dances on this invisible line throughout her collection, weaving in and out of reality so naturally, you don't even notice.

The women Horrocks introduces us to are all troubled and exiled in some way. In "Zolaria" it's the guilty conscious of the woman who bullied her childhood friend after she became sick. In "Steal Small" it's Lyssa who struggles with her morals as her partner, Leo, sells dogs for medical experiments. In "In the Gulf of Aden, Past the Cape of Guardafui" it's the mother held captive by not only pirates who hijacked her cruise, but also her son's severe disability. Whatever it is that plagues these women, Horrocks creates an unbreakable bond between the reader and character. Despite Lyssa allowing Leo to torture dogs, I still sympathize with her— I even sympathize with the woman in "Zolaria". It is something I have never seen before in a short story collection. Even though many of these women bring about these problems onto themselves, their struggles and emotional distress are genuine. They feel that their troubles are real and their solutions— though not always the best— are the only way they will ever be happy again.

Take the woman in "Embodied". She slowly becomes unhinged while recognizing people from her past 127 lives, people who she might have loved, even people who might have killed her. This causes her to do something abhorrent and normally unforgivable, but she gives a sound argument for why she must do it: "...I remember being held under the water by my mother, put down like an animal. I don't know who she was or why she did it. But I always knew that if she came back, if I recognized her, I wouldn't be able to forgive her." Doing the thing, as horrible as it is, is the only way to right the wrong in her world. We believe in her. In "Zero Conditional" Eril treats her students unjustly, but because we can understand why she is not simply a bad person. She is a woman struggling with self-esteem, with working a job she hates, with a life she never wanted

to live at twenty-one. Knowing why Horrocks' women make bad decisions creates an understanding, one that is hard to overlook.

The world-building in each story is entirely its own. Horrocks somehow finds a way to change absolutely everything about each story, while still connecting each one by its characters. I would call what Horrocks does "soft worldbuilding"; there are no hard and fast rules for her worlds. There may be some explanation for some strange happening here or there, but in Horrocks' stories, the world just is the way it is. Things happen because they are normal. This is how Horrocks is able to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. The characters do not question what is happening, as it is entirely their reality and they are stuck finding solutions to their unhappiness. This makes everything much more believable, rather than if Horrocks decided to go a different route and try to explain why, for example, the woman in "Embodied" remembers all her past lives. Instead, we hear her account of living those past lives and take it as truth. If Horrocks spent all her time setting up rules for her stories, not only would this be a larger book, it would be far less fascinating. There is an amount of unknown that creates a sense of wonder and thrill for the reader. Horrocks captures that perfectly in her world-building.

There is another interesting thing going on in Horrocks' writing. Because of her soft world-building, there are moments where the reader doesn't entirely know if what's happening is real. This can be disorientating for some readers. Taking "Zolaria" for example, there are periods in which the girls truly believe their myths of which they created. The lines between reality and fantasy blur. Even after the narrator has grown up and had a family of her own, she still speaks to the ogre she and her friend made up, saying to him, "Mr. Veen, I once ruled a kingdom and left traps for you in the woods. Don't you want your revenge?" I will say, "Mr. Veen, you are an ogre and a thief and the patron saint of Julys, of summer Sundays, of miracles." I will say, "Mr. Veen, do not take my children." This may no doubt leave the reader wondering if Zolaria was a real place and if Ogan Veen was a real, monstrous ogre. There is no clear answer here as Horrocks does not give us one, and like her world-building, this can be an exciting thing. Readers who enjoy reading between the lines and ambiguous endings that allow for you to make up the rest of the story will no doubt enjoy *This Is Not Your City*.





At The Sock Drawer we aim to raise the voices of those who have felt that their voices have been placed in the back of the sock drawer. We welcome all art and all artists, while giving special notice to those who are often marginalized by society.

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