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# THE SOCK DRAWER

LITERARY  MAGAZINE



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**F**ounded 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](mailto:TheSockDrawerLitMag@gmail.com)

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# MEET THE TEAM

FOUNDER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



**G**racelyn 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



**K**erstin 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



**I**zzy 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**



**J**ulia 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**



**M**adison 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



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ON THE COVER  
"The Fall Unfinished"  
by Edward Lee



# POETRY

*Denise Alden*  
*Hameedah Aruwa*  
*Ellen Huang*  
*Stephanie Strick*

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## Venti Half-Calf, No Foam, Double Shot Soy Latte

By Denise Alden

This is no longer a safe space for me, this atmosphere  
clouded with hoodies, these foreign languages I hear.  
I would like to speak to the manager.

I come here every month after my manicure  
before my book club, but this . . . cashier  
imposes on my safe space, creates an atmosphere

of ill will and rudeness. How do you ever manage her  
when she's not from here? I mean, her *family's* not from here.  
I would like to speak to the manager.

I would like to be compensated for my time. My calendar  
is demanding; I believe I was here first. I don't mean to domineer  
but I don't feel safe in this space. This atmosphere

used to be so nice, there was such a high caliber  
of people; how I wish they would reappear!  
I *really* would like to speak to the manager.

No, the real one. The *real* one. Not that amateur.  
Look how you've turned my fears into tears.  
This isn't a safe space, this sketchy atmosphere.  
I would like to speak to the manager.



## Boomerang

By Hameedah Aruwa

Let me tell you a thing or two  
about a kind of longing. The kind  
where you long to be more of  
everything  
that it contorts your judgment. Where  
your thoughts are so warped,  
that white becomes less white  
because white can not be white  
enough.

Where sweet becomes bland from  
continuous scrutiny &  
even selected wins  
are secluded in the dark  
because they are not great enough  
to deserve that much light. But  
demeaning efforts blurs the record progress.  
& the thirst for perfection is a blessing  
or a curse. or both.

And in fervently looking to be  
flawless beings we often miss  
the glimmer of light peering,  
through our flaws' garments- the subtle events  
that make each step of our journey  
worthwhile.



# Pride

By Ellen Huang

*Content Warning: Sex, Amatonormativity, Coming Out*

I want to know  
love, I want to know  
what it is, the phasing,  
interlacing heat,  
tying close, organic—  
I want to know the experience,  
this thing that makes you  
so excited, feel real  
present in your body,  
feel so wicked, so known  
feel so loved and overcome—

I mainly want to pass the test.  
Know the conversation.  
Have one more mundane thing  
to do in my ritual routine,  
one more okay comfort.  
Strangely, I just want the closeness  
of the after, the epilogue  
where friends relate so casually,  
that part of eternity.  
I don't think twice of this golden height,  
supernova swan song of virginity itself.  
I just look over at this optional, essential  
commonality, a mystery.  
How juvenile, I want you to be proud of me.

I forget that you were.  
I forget that when the words passed through my lips,  
it held so much power and loveliness  
even more than what could be my first kiss.  
I forget the way the dress feels as it slips  
comfortably onto me, close as my own  
skin, heat of my heart caressed by  
coolness of the colors.  
I forget the way I have let you into the depths  
of my winding, mazing mind, and in this way,  
I am in you and you are in me.

## POETRY

The way the words held that terrifying vulnerability in the room.  
The complementary space that happens when I define I am one thing,  
and silently confirm you are not.  
The way I nervously returned from the stage,  
amidst the event's applause,  
back to my seat

and you  
tapped my shoulder,  
a smile and nod and  
meeting of hands

and you  
reached over to  
speak showers of  
affirmation to me

and you  
immediately  
covered me

how sweetly,  
completely  
you covered me.

whispering to me the very things I  
suppose I will always desire:  
empathy, a hint of bravery  
oh how it felt as you held me  
like you were proud of me.



## Walking into the Christian Bookstore

By Ellen Huang

*Content Warning: Religious Trauma, Homophobia, Heteronormativity, White Supremacy*

I didn't know what I was thinking  
With time to spare, I entered on a whim,  
a mere peasant with colored pins on her knapsack  
treading lightly in the market she knows so well.

It's as if I've come into a bakery, and I can smell the rising yeast  
Loaves of bread surely multiplied to feed us all  
Engraved warmth of words into panels of wood  
Familiar and fresh and ceasing hunger—  
at least in my curiosity.  
*Stay familiar, for this is what we agree on.*

Though I always expected to laugh at the iron I cannot touch  
I come in curiosity, for nostalgia, or hope  
or some sense of reminder of what lasts  
Aesthetic brides with slight flyaway hair  
Speak of patience and romance and charms to remember  
Soft-faced angels with dove wings come  
to nest here beside the promise of soaring like eagles.  
I think of the princesses, and consider their silver.

But then, a maze of pages and covers  
beaming with flowers, only to whisper, upon picking  
*good god, used to be a lesbian, god is good*  
I sift through more pages, hoping for the  
softness of flour, the nourishment of hope  
*confusion, god made woman for man, corruption*  
A book in which they *finally understand women*  
assuming we all want to be wanted the same way.  
It gets worse for the men.



## POETRY

and all around me children are blessings / and quotas  
women are princesses / and accessories  
men are soldiers / and idiots  
and all around me, the feminine angels /are faceless  
and the aesthetic nails in / his hands are white,  
the lightness of it all is washed white.

How do I make sense of it all? That in this market  
I will take your bread / and your fish / and your cup / and your charms  
But you do not see me?

And as I stumble through, I will sing  
of your psalms / and your praises / and your cross

and your kingdom

But you scowl at my colors  
and say I do not know love.

I see the blinded angels / Do you see the blinded demons?  
How is it that we pray to the same God?

And yet, the familiar bakery makes  
wonderful bread that we all break  
and dip into the cup.

And yet, the flowers hiss in my hands.

And yet, the bread.



## the good place

By Ellen Huang

*Content Warning: Religion*

hell, I've been told  
is a cold empty destination  
with the knowledge that you could have  
been loved, the highest of all loves—  
and knowing you blew it by saying no.

heaven, I've been told,  
is the singing of love forever, no tears allowed  
in this castle on a cloud, no cares left  
for art or self or the created earth—  
trading all empathy for majesty.

but perhaps there's more to endings  
than gold streets and right crowds  
than fire and prison cells—  
both merely ways to disappear.  
perhaps the maker of the universe  
truly paints an expanse where there  
echoes music from somewhere beyond.

perhaps I need not  
rush headlong to heaven  
only to escape all thought of hell.

perhaps love is so much more  
than an escape route from the worst.



# Study Notes on Conceptual Physics

By Stephanie Strick

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*TRIGGER WARNING: DISCUSSIONS OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE*

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all machines require an external energy source. that is why they cannot be perpetual, not really. my anger is a machine. anger is the lever that can lift fifty thousand times its force. my anger came second-hand. the lever creaks every time i turn it. the lever begs to stop, but i keep turning it. the rust rattles against my teeth, it speaks in tongues to the copper taste at the rough of my mouth. it wants to be spat out, wriggle free like a baby tooth. the tooth has roots. all trees have roots. they entomb the ground around the tree with a static friction. when i was little, my grandpa and i walked side-by-side to crunch dry leaves underfoot. it is a cherished memory. his electromagnetic smile is encoded on a million vhs tapes and his frown is encoded on his two children. i am his child too, though, he must know. when he turned the lever my tinder-box body cracked underfoot a million miles away, fifty years away. the sound never reached him and that doesn't mean it never happened. one day my parakeet flung all her bird seed to the floor. she doesn't know any better. she doesn't know and i vacuum the floor with two steady hands. i watch the floor become clean. i replace her bird seed. i sing to her. i don't yell that day. it is easy. it is hard. my turn, okay. my turn, okay. i don't yell. i don't yell. i don't yell. i don't yell.



# FICTION

*Rachael Green*

*Suraya Kiawan-Tessa*

*N.K. Woods*

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# Easy Lei

By Rachael Green

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*Content Warning: Attempted Sexual Assault*

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“Hey! Remember me?” He asked. There was a vague familiarity but I’ve never been good with faces. “You used to sell me weed in high school.”

I nodded. I did used to do that.

“Right.” I said. “How’ve you been?” I asked, remembering you’re supposed to ask.

“Oh, you know, living.” He was staring intently, like he was studying my face.

I fidgeted with the book I’d set down on the table when he interrupted my reading. He didn’t ask how I was so I didn’t know what I was supposed to do next. I knew that what I wanted to do was continue reading but I also knew that wasn’t right.

“I’m in town for a few days,” he said after a pause that I believed was too long. “Just visiting friends, making the rounds.” He continued. “I’m staying with a buddy of mine.” I nodded. It was a lot of information that I didn’t ask for and so didn’t know what to do with. “If you’re free, maybe you can stop by tonight. We’ll smoke up and watch cartoons like the old days.” I smiled at the reference to the old days which he took to mean agreement to the plan. “Great,” he said.

“I don’t smoke anymore.” I said.

“I’ll pick us up something to drink then.” He said. He was scribbling an address onto the front matter of my book. I was tapping my foot rapidly under the table because I did not like this but could not remember if it was one of the things I wasn’t supposed to get upset about. Soon, he was gone and I was able to get back to reading.

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn’t until that night, as I was driving to the address that it occurred to me that I didn’t know his name. I debated calling one of my friends from high school to figure out who he was or just taking the gamble that it wouldn’t become an issue. People use names surprisingly rarely for all the emphasis they put on knowing them. I decided to take the gamble. I wasn’t going to stay long anyway. I’d already formed my excuse for taking my leave after the second or third drink. I am house sitting this week and the dog needs a walk at 9 o’clock on the dot or else he shits all over the house. This is true. This dog is an excellent



## THE SOCK DRAWER

excuse, almost worth having to clean up his shit on the off chance I'm ever a few minutes late.

When he opens the door to let me in, I had expected music or, at least voices from a television. There was just silence, though. Inside, his friend sat on the couch, loading weed into the bowl of a pipe. The television was on but it had been muted. I tried not to notice it but muted televisions made me uncomfortable: the mouths moving but no sound coming out, scenes flashing one after the other without a narrative. Cartoons were even worse. The scenes changed so fast and the facial expressions were so fixed, the black dots that were their eyes told me nothing. At least when living people were on the screen, you could pick up context clues about what might have been going on but with cartoons, it was just a chaotic barrage of drawings when there was no narrative to thread them together. I knew I wasn't supposed to notice but I did and they saw that I was staring at the television instead of at them like I was supposed to. "You like this show?" The friend asked. I nodded and looked around at the seating options for one that would allow me to not look directly at the screen. When I used to smoke, I wasn't bothered as much by a muted television. I would make up my own narratives in my head. Sometimes, I would say them out loud and whoever was with me and was equally stoned would laugh and let me carry on. Sometimes, they'd mute a show on purpose so that I would narrate instead. I obliged. A mechanism for soothing my anxiety had become a party favor. I didn't mind.

"Take a seat wherever." The guy I used to sell weed to in high school said, with a sweeping gesture of his arm as if he'd presented a kingdom to me. I chose a recliner and rotated it sideways toward the coffee table and the other occupants of the room. The television was only in my periphery now. This wasn't ideal but I could work with it.

"My name's Matt, by the way, since Ray didn't both to introduce us." The friend said. This was incredibly convenient. Matt and Ray. Matt and Ray. I repeated the names in my head, trying to pin them to their person. "Leilani." I said, remembering in the middle of this process that that was my end of this transaction.

He held out the pipe he'd been packing toward me. I put a hand up. "No, thanks." I said. Then, a few seconds later, I smiled, remembering that I should smile when saying no. "She doesn't smoke anymore." Ray explained to Matt. "I'll get you a beer." He said to me. I nodded. Then, "thanks." Then, a smile. Usually, I'm better at making these interactions seem less spasmodic but the television in my periphery is throwing me off more than I'd care to admit.

When Ray returned with the necks of three beers nestled between his fingers, he said,

“Hey, didn’t you use to have a nickname in high school? What was it?”

I stared at him.

“Oh! That’s right! Easy Lei.” He chuckled.

I nodded. I did used to be called that. I was never a fan of the name.

“How’d you get a nickname like that?” He was grinning at me.

“Well, it started when my parents named me Leilani. Then, one day, a brilliant kid in my health class worked it out that Lei and lay were homophones. So here we are.”

Ray appeared dissatisfied with the answer but I didn’t know what he was expecting. “I heard a different story,” he said.

“What do you do now that you’re out of the weed game?” Matt asked, ignoring the comment from Ray. I believe he was trying to change the subject and I was thankful. I tell him that I’m finishing up nursing school, that I plan to become a traveling nurse when I’m done. He shows interest and asks questions. I explain what a traveling nurse is, that I got the idea I could live on the road, write stories based on the places I went, the people I met. And whenever I got tired of the road, I could settle down wherever I wanted. They need nurses everywhere.

“Do you need another drink?” Ray asked, the first thing he’d said since I began talking. Had I gone on too long? Sometimes, when it’s a topic I like, I tend to talk too much, dominate the conversation and leave no room for anyone else. I studied each of their faces for signs that this is what I had done. Ray’s face showed marks of impatience or maybe irritation. Matt’s face seemed calmer. Though, he had the pipe to his lips and held a lighter in front of his face to light the bowl so it was hard to get a clear read. Since I couldn’t be sure, I said yes to the offer of another drink and, when Ray left, quickly finished off the half-full bottle that I’d been neglecting while talking about nursing.

Matt instinctively tried to pass the pipe to me again before remembering on his own that I didn’t smoke. I was busy trying to think of something to ask to move the conversation away from myself or my interests so that I wouldn’t talk too much, when Ray came back with just the one beer for me. I thanked him and smiled all in one action and was pleased with myself for getting it right this time.

Matt held the pipe out to Ray who took it and smoked. They passed it back and forth between each other while the three of us talked. As a rhythm settled in, it became easier to get my part right. I remembered my follow up questions, my facial expressions. I adequately edited down my responses to key points to avoid running on. I began to swell with pride at

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how well I was doing. Even Ray no longer seemed irritated.

Toward the end of my third beer, I prepared my excuse about the dog. After delivering it, Ray said, “Have a cigarette with me first before you go.” I agreed to this compromise. It was manageable. I followed him out to the backyard. He took two cigarettes out of his pack, stuck one in his mouth and handed the other to me. He lit his and then moved closer to me to light mine. I would have preferred to light my own. The hand-eye coordination was easier when it was both my eyes and my hands rather than my eyes and his hands. Eventually, though, the tip of the cigarette had a satisfactory cherry and he pocketed the lighter.

“Easy Lei,” he said and chuckled to himself.

“Nobody really calls me that anymore,” I said.

“No?” He hadn’t moved away after lighting my cigarette. I didn’t like the closeness, as if an ionosphere orbited him and was brushing up against my own. You could feel it but you couldn’t quite feel it. It made my skin crawl. I stepped back out of his ionosphere.

“You know, I had a bit of a crush on you in school,” he said. I searched for something to say to that. It was hard to find responses when they weren’t questions. He stepped closer, wrapping his sphere back around me. “But you always had this stand-offish vibe. Made me too scared to ask you out.” I nodded. People said that about me a lot. I’ve spent hours in front of mirrors trying to figure out what about my expression or posture looked “stand-offish” and whatever it is, I can’t see it or else I’m not doing it in the mirror and it only happens when other people are around, in which case, I’ll never be able to see it.

He took a long drag off his cigarette and exhaled into my face. I frowned impulsively and he laughed. “You’re just the same as you were in high school,” he said, “Just as hot, too.” He continued. “Only now, I’m not intimidated by it.”

I knew that I’d been quiet too long but he just kept going on and he wasn’t phrasing anything as questions, and he was standing so close that it was hard to think of a suitable response. Suddenly, he backed away. He sat down on a chair near us on the porch. “Take a seat.” He said.

“Where?” I asked. There was only one chair and he was in it.

He smiled and then shot a hand out, squeezing my thigh. “You can sit here with me.” He said and started pulling hard at my thigh to bring me closer to him.

Had I invited this? I don’t remember flirting, but I think sometimes I get my polite facial expressions wrong and they read as suggestive—or else, men just tend to assume politeness is an invitation. Either way, this was a misunderstanding and I was trying to work

out a nice way to say so when Ray's other hand clutched my hip and pulled my whole body down onto his lap. I fell awkwardly onto him and as I tried to pull myself back up, he rearranged me so that I was straddling him.

"I've got to go." I said. "The dog's going to shit on the carpet." I tried to stand up but he had a hand pressed so firmly on top of my thigh that I couldn't get up. His other hand was massaging my breast and his tongue was stuck in my ear. The tongue was the worst of it, soft and wet like a slug inching toward my brain.

"I can't." I said. What had I said? What face did I make? Was there some subtext to the offer of a cigarette that I hadn't picked up on? I pulled myself with all my strength but my body didn't budge. He had me pinned to him.

"Uh, Ray." A voice said from a few feet away. Matt had come out to the back porch. I looked at him, hoping that my face said I didn't want to be there. "Leilani, are you okay?" Matt seemed uncertain what to do. I tried again to wiggle free. "Ray, stop." I said.

"Ray, I don't think she's into it." Matt said. "I think you need to stop."

"For fuck's sake, stop." I said. I bent and twisted and arched, weaving my body through and away from his arms until I could get my elbow angled in front of his face and then I slammed it, hard as I could, into his eye. Ray instinctively clutched at his face with one hand. I used this opportunity to elbow him again in the other eye. He grunted. It wasn't enough to really hurt him but enough for the hand that remained on my thigh to let up just enough that I could pull away. I clattered to the ground from the force of my attempt to break free and then scrambled toward the door behind Matt. Inside, I picked myself up and left without a word.

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as I opened the front door of the house I was watching, I stepped into a pile of dog shit that had been deposited in the entry way. The dog ran up, wagging his tail and jumping up and down in his own mess in frantic delight at my return. He was going to track it all over the house. "Shit." I said and closed the door without going inside. I sat down on the top step of the front porch, lit a cigarette, and pulled out my phone to google, "How to remove dog shit from carpeting."

In the middle of my research, a Facebook message bubble pops up. It's Ray.

"I don't appreciate you acting weird tonight," it says. "You made me out to be the bad guy when I know you knew full well what was going on." I began scraping my shoe against the edge of a lower step to try and get the shit off because the smell of it had begun wafting

## THE SOCK DRAWER

up.

“I would have treated you like a queen,” the message continued. “But instead you always chose assholes who treated you like shit.” I inhaled the last drag of the cigarette. “Sorry, but I don’t think we can be friends anymore.” The message concluded. I stubbed the cigarette out in the dog shit that had transferred from the sole of my shoe onto the porch step and headed inside to start cleaning the carpet.





## Specks of Gold

By Suraya Kiawan-Tessa

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*Content Warning: Racial Microaggressions, Allusions to Verbal Abuse*

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Exasperated, she looked away. The lush greenery and the deep soothing darkness offered by a rainforest's canopy are not images that conjure when she thinks "tropical." She grew up amongst manicured patches of grass and individually assigned palm trees that divided the common walkways from the apartment buildings where everyone lives. Well, everyone she knew. She loved the government-owned herbage and trees; they were not a respite from the concrete and heavy metals that built her neighbourhood. They *were* her natural world. She noticed and ignored the dull heartache as the thought came to her. The neutered palm tree that stood a little too close to their childhood bedroom window was the constant that she looked forward to when she sat at her foldable desk toiling over reading passages, math exercises, science worksheets, mother tongue compositions, and anything else her teachers had assigned for the week. Sometimes, the tree would grow a new spear. This was, of course, exciting. She would share the news with her brother, who out of love and pity, would take his time to join her by the window. Sharp but small, it is easily missed. Then over the weekend, when her mind was allowed to wander a little more freely and further away from her desk, the spear grows. Come Monday afternoon, she would tip-toe to see the appendage much taller but not quite willing to be a frond. She never quite catches the moment these spears finally relent.

She glared back at the poster, not realising that any contempt directed at it will not burn through the paper and sear the hotel's marketing team. The white font stands out bold against the layers of vegetation and the promise of a "singular experience." Their guests will "experience untouched greenery and ultimate luxury" during their stay at a place that bulldozed much of that untouched greenery. "Is honesty so crippling to profit margins?" She wondered, more curious than sardonic. There is nothing untouched about the lands that constrict the straits – there, Concrete is king. Earlier in the century, its rule spread across the entire archipelago, offering simple solutions to people who want to build homes, schools, hospitals, businesses, shelters. Its power is felt strongest in the capitals and cities, but by no means are the lands adjacent to them safe. It is possibly the only monarchy that holds as much power as it is productive. In other words, the "untouched" wilderness that surrounds this decadent, tempting hotel is a lie. "A lucrative one," she muttered as her eyes follow the same advertisement repeating itself along the

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platform. How much longer before it will be seen for what it is? Just another part of the world where people live, thrive, struggle, love, hurt, and do nothing on some days. There's nothing particularly romantic, eye-opening, or *exotic*, about a travel experience where you sit on a refurbished wooden boat with exaggerated motifs and eat a crowd-pleasing rendition of *tempeh goreng*, *chia gio*, and *gado-gado*. In such places, it is not uncommon for dishes with different histories and provenance to follow one another on a lazy yet inundated menu. Most diners are not there to make distinctions between the people that share this continental nook. For them, it is all part of the "singular" experience. Before she could convolute and delve into the complicity of locals, the 1705 train dashed with an urgent force. As with everything in this city, it almost seemed annoyed that she was waiting for it.

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She leaves the station grimacing at the wind. Her face always betrays her reaction to anything, it is the only thing she does not like about it. Since her first seasonal change, she has learnt to despise the wind. It used to be a friend when the sun beat down on her people for living so close to the equator. The school uniforms she started wearing at five years old right up until adulthood were fabric ovens that worsened the heat and humidity. Its breeze would relieve her of the sweat dripping down her nose and running down her cheeks, and sometimes trickling down her back. The first time the wind made her shiver was a horrifying night; standing alone past midnight at a bus stand in her late twenties, she learnt that there were still things that could surprise her. In reality, it should not have – she has been disappointed by family before, so why not a friend? The wind and dry air also made moisturising a health issue. She was proud of her casual skin routine (one acne cream) because the humidity would make the heat worse but it kept her skin supple. Now, she applies different creams, jelly, balms, butter to different body parts every day before leaving the house. Her lips – that never gave her any trouble in a tropical climate – acted out the most. If she forgets to balm it after a few hours, cracks threaten to form. Left untreated for a few more hours, a smart crimson ring outlines her lips and the smallest smile might draw blood. At least the humidity was a reliable foe – never once pretending to be well-intentioned, unlike the wind and some family. It knows its role very well: it is there to exacerbate any given weather conditions. That she could respect.

They spoke about a snow spell between the meetings today, and snow spelt trouble for her. Before it happened, she could almost sense it, that universal sink, her gut telling her that his question was coming, a question just for her. "So do you like snow?" The

contrived amiable tone hits its target. This is how the dance usually begins. To start, she reminds him that she saw snow in high school on a class trip to Japan, that she liked the snow for a few days then she tolerates it and that no, she is not afraid of the cold. When she shared this, most found it interesting that she grew up in a place that only had sunny and rainy days, no spring, no fall, no winter. The initial intrigue faded away because most people had their own lives to love and mind. Not him. For some reason, the novelty of her *particular* foreignness had not worn off him. As the dance continues, she instructs her mouth to maintain a smile as her eyes grip him – the boring curiosity was not romantic, friendly, nor kind. It seemed vague but she could make out undertones of aggression and unhappiness. The only thing glaring was insecurity. His. He says it is *adorable* that it does not snow where her family lives. She thinks it is *adorable* that he makes countless spelling and grammar mistakes in his presentations, despite being “more native” than her in English. There were disapproving looks from the others when he said this, but no voice spoke out. He describes himself as “more native” to assert his supposed birth right over a language and display his outright racism in a socially acceptable way. She believes it is disquieting for someone like him that she feels at home in two languages – she decided a long time ago that neither of them were second. They were both first, which is not unlike two athletes sharing the first-place podium. No one gawks at the empty second-place podium scandalised, so why does this have to be different? It might be that she is not Anglo-Saxon, not from an Anglo-Saxon part of the world, brown, and yet, still very much native to the language. Just like him but with a stronger command. This unsolicited dance usually ends with sentences that sound like apologies, jokes, observations but are none of those things. It punctuates with his meaningless sheepish grin, an attempt to pilfer clemency from her. She holds her grip and lets him wait.

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The same thoughts accompany her on her walks home from the station. Fiercely unwelcomed, work is one of them. She fashions an empty list in her mind and with seasoned accuracy, make notes for the next day. She then flings it as far away as possible so Anxiety knows it needs to leave. When it fades away, her brother appears. She reaches for her phone, and checks on him. A perfect memory means that when she types “M-I-K” the device presents his name and account to her within seconds. The photo count is still the same, no new followers, nothing new, which makes sense. Two hours behind her, he is still at work. If you believe their mother, he was always behind her in the ways their mother deemed important. When the insults drew tears, they were too sensitive, too feeble-minded to comprehend her humour. She would be in disbelief that they would be

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so offended by a joke. Offended? No, that was not it, and not that it matters, but she could not remember ever laughing with their mother, only at her.

When these memories got too difficult, her mind transitions to another thought: dinner. There is everything to love about dinner. It remedies her hunger, replenishes the energy drained from a day of labouring, soothes the noise in her head, and comforts her soul. For her to consider a meal as dinner, it has to be cooked and warm. Otherwise, it is just sustenance. After some reluctant snowfall in November, she has been convincing herself that it was important to use new spices in her cooking. She wants to blend new spices with familiar ones. Yet, there are still no new spices in her kitchen, but her conviction remains strong. She makes a note to start looking this weekend as her mouth waters at the thought of tonight's dinner. She decided while on the train that this was a rough day at work which meant that there was only one thing to eat: *Asam pedas*.

With *asam pedas*, you plan everything. Planning differentiates a good-enough meal from a remedy. In the latter, there are side dishes that tease out the sour and spicy notes of the tamarind and grounded dried chillies, like the dense fattiness of the hard-boiled salted duck egg yolk. Eating with her hands, she crafts a rice cocoon with the yolk, its salty egg white, delicate flakes of mackerel doused with the right amount of the red gravy. It depends on who you ask but some people say *asam pedas* is not complete until you taste the fluff and taste the crunch of a signature fried egg. There is also the *sambal belacan* that acts as the diligent understated harmony to this melody – no one notices its absence until they are scrapping the container it came in. Her *sambal belacan* comes from a wet market north-west of the island – homemade by an aunt who is not a relative and someone she has never met or seen in person. She imagines the old lady sitting at her kitchen table too early in the morning, gently pick up the belacan mixture from her blue plastic bowl with a metal spoon and tucking it into small individual clear containers. No labels on the containers, only the stunning orange-red mixture with yellow specks of chilli seeds and tiny shredded pieces of its skin; a mosaic in its own right. Then one day, she received bad news during a phone call, as one would in a cliché. On one of her routine trips to the market, the lady brought her nursery of *sambal belacan* containers but they told her that they had too many as it is and there was no longer space in their fridge. It seems that she had been making too many. (Rightfully) insulted, the old lady vowed to never return with more. She has not.

Everyone forgets the rice at least once because it is a fixture – reliable and always there until it is not; that was a bitter day she never repeated. In any case, the rice needs to

be steaming, steaming hot. She takes the rice paddle and scoops up as much as possible at one go, then bring it to the surface of a cool glass plate so it can rest. As a child she would put her face up to the rice enjoying the warm steam forming a thin layer of sweat and condensation against her skin, opening pores and nasal cavities, only to regret it later when she overheats. As a child, she imagined rice to smell like the colour white – she used to think clouds had the same nutty, mild, and sweet fragrance. Sometimes she thinks the rice does not smell nice, sometimes it smells weird, but you just accept it with gratitude. The rice is the foundation of your *asam pedas* days; it is the canvas to your masterpiece.

When they were in primary school and finished a long week of intensive standardised exams, their mother would make *asam pedas*. She thinks this was a way to make them feel better after their brains went numb. They would come home drained and lifeless – shredded by the questions on papers that should mean nothing but determined so much of their academic careers, friends, and how they viewed themselves. Their mother knew this and kept it from them, to keep their innocence? She recalls feeling a lot better after these Asam pedas dinners like it was worth all that brain cramming. She also recalls them being messy eaters but only her brother would get scolded for getting splatters of the gravy on his white shirt – the frequent bleaching petrified the blue out of the school's emblem, turning it white and a reluctant gold. Her blue pinafore gave her a great cover, so she was never called the same names their mother called him. Mawar reduces the hob to one. She reaches for her phone, and checks on him, again.



## Sore Spot

By N.K. Woods

It's been a week since we last spoke but when my buzzer sounds I'm sure it's Zoe pressing the bell. No one else would call round at 1am on a Saturday morning.

The intercom doesn't wake me – I haven't been to sleep yet, despite going to bed when the sun was still visible in the summer sky – but I don't spring into action. There's no way I'm opening the door to her, not when I'm dressed in a ratty T-shirt and shorts. The days of letting her see me with my guard down are gone. I'd need armour to face Zoe now, and headphones; after all, she might repeat her *I'm so sorry but something has to give* speech or *I wish things were different but I don't have time for us right now* goodbye.

But why would she bother with a repeat performance? In my head I've composed plenty of furious texts, resentful one-liners, sad emails and pathetic letters, but I haven't made contact with her since she cut me loose. As clean breaks go, it was sterile. She doesn't have anything to complain about. And it's not as if she's the kind of woman who'd get a thrill out of kicking me when I'm down. She was the one with wet eyes after ending our relationship; I was too stunned to well up or even protest. Instead I flew out of the coffee shop without saying a word.

No, the only reason for her to be here is a change of heart. She must have realised that she needs me in her life. The thought pushes any concerns about how I look from my mind. I bolt out of bed, knocking over the golf bag I've been using as a clothes horse. One of the clubs lands on my foot; I curse but don't stop. Hobbling into the hall, I press the button on the wall panel. "Hello! Zoe, you there?"

All I hear is static. But then the front door opens and Daniel tiptoes in. He flips the light switch and jerks back in surprise when he sees me. After faking a heart attack, he drops his holdall and hugs me.

"Hey, sleepyhead. Thought you'd snoozed through the buzzer." Blowing one of my curls from his mouth, he goes on, "Sorry for waking you but I thought I'd lost my keys. Found the bloody things as soon as I rang the bell."

I'm pleased to see him. But I feel foolish; disappointed too. Afraid he'll see the mixed emotions on my face, I bend over to rub the bridge of my foot.

"You okay?" He sounds genuinely concerned and I wonder if that's why he's back



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from his trip twelve hours earlier than planned.

I limp across the hall, explaining as I go about my collision with his golf clubs.

“Let me get cleaned up and I’ll kiss the sore spot better.” He follows me into the bedroom and shakes his head as he picks up the golf bag and the jeans I’d draped over it. “We’ve got to move. This shoebox was fine when you were on your own, but it’s too small for the two of us. It’s time to get a bigger place. Out of town, maybe? We could afford a house if we went out far enough. One with a garden. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Out of town. The phrase echoes in my head as Daniel strokes my hair and talks about how nice it would be to settle into a proper family home. He says I deserve the world and that he can’t bear the thought of me being sad; he admits, lowering his voice, to skipping the drinks that were scheduled for after the end-of-conference dinner because he wanted to wake up with me rather than with another hangover; and, in a whisper, he swears his job in life is to make me happy. Then he squeezes me tight before going to shower.

As soon as I’m alone, part of me resolves to make more of an effort. I thought I’d been doing an okay job of hiding my blue mood, but obviously not. Living with a mope isn’t fair on Daniel. And having him feel the need to miss a shindig in a snazzy hotel because he was worried about me definitely isn’t on; I don’t believe he craved a night of spooning or a clear head – he never says no to a party. But another part of me is too preoccupied with his mention of *out of town* to care much about his personality change.

Out of town. The phrase is like an earworm. I sit cross-legged on the bed and picture the place that’s swallowing up so many of my friends. The image that comes to mind is the commuter town where Zoe went a few years ago to be nearer her aging parents. A dull spot an hour away by train. An hour and three quarters when you factor getting from the door of her semi-d to the lobby of her office block; two and a bit when you allow for the crèche run. Little wonder she slept like the dead whenever she crashed here – a fact we both found funny considering the lumpiness of my sofa, the noise from the traffic below my second-floor windows and her claim to have been given insomnia as a thirty-fifth birthday present.

The hum of the electric shower stops and a minute later Daniel reappears wrapped in a towel. “D’you fancy heading to the farmers’ market in the morning? We could get a box of those coconut muffins you love and eat them in the park.”

I’m too taken aback to answer. He hates the farmers’ market, says it smells of toxic cheese. And he never eats muffins. I’m the one with the sweet tooth. He’s got more



savoury tastes; give him a supply of boiled eggs and Worcestershire sauce and he's a content man.

"We could go see a film afterwards," he continues. "There's a new Ryan Gosling out, isn't there? You like him." His efforts to get me out of my funk make me smile; and the similarity between his tactics and those used by my mother when I suffered my first major heartache make me laugh.

Daniel brightens at my laugh and asks what's so funny. I don't answer but reach out a hand and tug on his towel. He lets it drop but doesn't move. His expression turns doubtful, as if he isn't sure sex is a good idea, not now he's treating me with kid gloves. Cheered by his thoughtfulness, amused too, I uncross my legs and beckon him closer. He doesn't need further coaxing, although he does draw the blackout curtains before joining me in bed.

Ten minutes later he's out for the count. I'm more relaxed than before, but my mind refuses to rest. Freeing myself from his embrace, I open the curtains an inch. I can't see out, but the orange glow from a lamp across the street filters through the blind, which I closed last night instead of the curtains. Unlike Daniel, I don't need total darkness to fall asleep. I actually prefer a little light – proof the world is waiting for when I'm ready to face it. I lay back down and keep my eyes on the warm strip; I watch it till the sun comes up.

When it can reasonably be called morning, I slip out of bed, close the curtains in case Daniel stirs, and silently shut the door as I leave the room. I'm no longer hobbling but, to my surprise, my foot still hurts. I stop to examine it; there's no visible mark but it's tender to touch. Straightening up, I spot Daniel's holdall. It's where he left it in the hall, by the laundry basket that's too big for the bathroom. I lug the bag into the living room, where it'll be less of a trip hazard. I love the flat, part of a refurbished Georgian townhouse in the heart of the city, but Daniel has a point; there isn't enough room for two. I bought it more than a decade ago, when it was marketed by the developer as a haven for the single professional, when the only storage problem I had was where to keep my bike. That was easy enough to sort; I gave it away and signed up for the public bike share scheme. There's a pick-up / drop-off station just around the corner – my own transport hub for getting everywhere from the recruitment agency where I work to the pool where I swim most days. Of course, since Daniel moved in I have access to a car – he rents a space in a multi-storey eyesore near the river – but I hardly ever make use of his standing offer to act as chauffeur. While I'm always on the move, everywhere I need to be I can reach on foot or by bike. My world is crowded, in a good way, but also compact. Unfortunately, crowded and compact don't go so well together when it comes to the flat.

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“Someday your floor’s gonna give way and land downstairs,” Zoe had once joked while transferring boxes of Daniel’s catalogues from the sofa to an armchair.

I wallow briefly in the memory before pushing her from my mind. Think of other things – I tell myself, starting with what it would be like to live in a bigger place. Leaning against the breakfast bar that separates the galley kitchen from the living room, I open my iPad to look up houses for sale. I start with the city centre but apart from a fire damaged cottage near the canal, I can’t find a single house in our price range. Expanding the search to include apartments and flats with a parking space gives more results, but no winners. I consider trawling through what’s on the market in the suburbs but quickly dismiss the idea; there’s no way I’m moving to the no man’s land that’s part of the city without being properly urban. That leaves the commuter belt in the neighbouring counties. Town and country. How bad can it be? Awful is my first reaction but I force myself to keep an open mind. Tons of people make the move each year. There have to be benefits to relocating that I haven’t considered, like easier access to the great outdoors and less chance of being mugged. And it would probably suit Daniel. It would certainly save him time; he’s a sales rep for the whole province and spends half his week visiting clients outside of the city.

I’ve known for a while that I need to make some changes; maybe starting over in a new area is the way to go. A strange feeling bubbles up inside me at the prospect of upending my life. I convince myself its excitement and carefully go through the search results.

It’s shocking to see what we could afford an hour up the road. If I sold my flat, which has doubled in value since I bought it during the crash, and ploughed the profit into a new property, we could trade up to a detached house. The mortgage would be much bigger than the one I have now but it’d be manageable with two incomes.

I skim through the photos of the show house in a new estate. Four bedrooms, three bathrooms, two living rooms. “And a partridge in a pear tree,” I murmur, studying the floor plan while daydreaming about having space to breathe and stretch.

The pictures of the house and its professionally decorated interior stick in my mind even when I click off my iPad and begin transferring clothes from the basket in the hall to the washing machine in the kitchen. By the time the load is sudsy and spinning, I’m imagining doing laundry in a house with a utility room and places to dry clothes out of sight rather than on a rack blocking the TV. By the time the cycle is done, I’ve decided on my next step. I don’t bother unloading the machine but return to the bedroom and open the curtains and the blind.

“Whoa, someone’s really desperate for a coconut muffin,” groans Daniel. He covers his face with a pillow.

“Change of plan.” I grab the pillow and bop him with it. “We’re going on a road trip. I’ll be ready in twenty minutes so you need to get a wiggle on.” Before he can ask any questions I tap my non-existent watch. “Nineteen and three-quarters.... Tick tock!” By 9am we’re strolling through the streets on our way to pick up the car. The city is quiet and the air fresh. This is the best time to be out and about – after the cleaners have been at work but before the shoppers and brunch brigade descend. We stop at a deli and buy a warm chocolate croissant for me and hash browns for Daniel. Sustenance for our mystery tour, as he’s dubbed it; I’m keeping our destination a surprise. We eat as we walk, playfully jostling each other’s elbows while enjoying the luxury of empty pavements on a sunny Saturday.

Once we’re in the car Daniel looks expectantly from me to the satnav.

“Nice try,” I say, clicking in my seatbelt. “Just take the motorway north.”

He tugs a lock of hair and sets off.

Traffic is light and it doesn’t take long to reach the motorway. Every time we pass an exit Daniel glances at me for guidance and I signal for him to keep going. Meanwhile I keep track of our progress on an app on my phone. After fifty minutes, I begin issuing instructions.

“Take the next exit.... Turn left.... Straight through the roundabout.... And the next one.... And the next one.... Right at the T-junction.... Under the railway bridge.”

Between the T-junction and the bridge, doubt creeps into my voice but Daniel doesn’t notice. He may not know exactly where we’re going but I think he’s guessed my game. He seems delighted. So far, he’s pointed out a golf course and a train station with an express service into the city. But the area is more rural than I expected. There are patches of road with no markings and I haven’t seen a streetlight since the last village. With no shops nearby or even a footpath to follow, you’d need a good reason to trudge along these dreary roads, especially as every driver who passes seems oblivious to the speed limit.

Finally, after skirting the edge of a small town, we reach our destination. It’s marked by a billboard advertising the first phase of an exclusive development and a flag promoting the Open House event I read about on the property website.

There’s no denying that the detached houses with their spacious plots are impressive, but I can’t tear my eyes from the land surrounding the estate. There’s nothing

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to see but grass.

Daniel whistles. “Wow! This place is amazing. It’s so peaceful.”

Dead is a better word, but I keep the thought to myself.

I tell him why we’re here and suggest waiting in the car – we’re slightly early for the viewing – but he wants to explore.

There are twelve houses in all, set in a horse-shoe. One is already occupied, judging by the vehicles and toys on the drive; seven, including the show house, are finished; and the rest look to be at the kit-out stage. By the time the woman running the Open House appears, Daniel has settled on No. 8 as the best of the bunch. It’s situated in the widest point of the curve so doesn’t look directly at another building, and is furthest from the road.

A few other couples have arrived and are milling around the site but we’re first in the queue. The estate agent greets us, notes down our details, hands us a brochure and ushers us into No. 7 – the show house.

Up close, I hate it. The plush carpets. The over-abundance of soft furnishings; there are twenty cushions in the main sitting room. The lack of cornices. The chrome kitchen that makes me think of a science lab. The mood music. The windows that open out instead of down. The recessed lights. The fake fire in the second sitting room. The ensuite with no window. The weird proportions; the main bedroom is huge while two of the spares are too narrow to fit anything more than a futon. The samey view. The only thing I like is the main bathroom, but Jack and Jill sinks aren’t enough of a selling point for me to uproot my life.

“Cool, isn’t it?” Daniel beams at me, our initial sweep over. “I mean, all the fussy stuff is brutal but the bones are good. And it’s not like we’d be buying the show house.” Thankfully he doesn’t wait for me to answer but disappears to investigate the attic.

I retreat to the smaller sitting room, the one with the fake fire, and plonk onto an unyielding ottoman. Other potential buyers pass through. They all seem as enthused as Daniel. Everyone has their phone out. Not so long ago I’d have had mine out too, to text Zoe. If she could see me now she’d be gobsmacked. I can’t help myself. I dig my phone out of my bag and scroll through our last exchanges, which are nearly all texts from Zoe apologising for cancelling on me at the last minute.

Her baby was sick. Her mother needed to be brought to a hospital appointment. Her husband couldn’t make the parent-teacher meeting so she had to cover it. Her boss

needed her to fly to London. Her boss's boss needed a report PRONTO. Her father wanted her to drive him to a funeral in the middle of nowhere. Her daughter's soccer coach had messed up the training schedule. Her babysitter was double-booked. Her daughter's teacher had roped her into helping set up the school hall for a bake sale.

My replies were all the same: no worries and a smiley face. Scrolling further back, I realise that before the nightmare coffee date, the last time we managed an actual meet-up was when she crashed at mine after a crisis at work kept her in the office till midnight. There's no record of our older history, of when we shared a flat in college, danced every Friday night, slept in on Saturdays, shared secrets, pooled resources, plotted adventures and travelled the world after graduation – six months with backpacks and limited access to showers and laundrettes, and a pact, made in Vietnam, to forget about shaving till we got home. Those versions of us pre-date mobile phones but I remember them vividly. I prefer the old Zoe; she does too, I think. I've changed less than her, but still. The old me would not be considering relocating to a field with only my boyfriend of eighteen months for company.

I hear her whisper *run*, and smile. I have other friends, newer friends I've met through work and socialising, but none of them is as honest as Zoe.

I don't run, but I do go outside and sit on the low wall in the front garden.

More people arrive but no one leaves. No one emerges from the lived-in house either. It's like the Bermuda Triangle of estates.

When Daniel finally escapes, he takes one look at my face and laughs. "Not a fan?"

It's ridiculous but I feel like crying. "I shouldn't have dragged us out here. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I'm just over the moon that you're open to the idea of upping sticks. And it was useful. Now we've a better idea of what we don't like. I mean, the house is ten out of ten. It has it all, but the location is wrong. Too remote. I want to be able to stroll to the pub." He pulls me to my feet and grins. "We'll do better next time. Home now, though."

As we head for the car, he asks what put me off, the house or the area.

"Both. The house has no soul and I wouldn't last a day so far from-"

Before I can say civilisation, Daniel interrupts. "From your friends. I get it. It'd be hard moving someplace where you have no one. But how's this for a plan? We shift the search to towns south of the city, you know – places close to Zoe." I stop abruptly but he keeps talking. "She'd be as good as a ready-made support network. And a fair few of your

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other friends are out that way too, right? You'd have a ball."

By the time he realises I'm not following, Daniel has the driver's door open. With the sun in his eyes, he squints at me and asks if I'm okay – the same question he asked last night when he came home early, when I thought he'd twigged about how upset I am about Zoe.

"Why did you skip the drinks after the conference?" I demand.

There's a pause before he answers. "I told you. I wanted to spend time with you." He adds sheepishly, "And I'd downed enough on the first night to pickle my liver."

"And what? You screwed up?" With the sun at my back, I can see clearly; there's no mistaking the guilt on his face. His thoughtfulness makes horrible sense now. "With who? A rep with an epic sales technique?"

A glammed-up couple scurries past, carefully averting their eyes before climbing into their SUV and shooting away.

Daniel rushes towards me, almost tripping in his haste. "I didn't cheat on you. I would never do that."

An engine roars to life behind me. I briefly consider asking the latest Open House escapees for a lift to the train station, but decide I'd prefer to risk my life on a road with no path than deal with curiosity or concern. I let the car, a people carrier, pass and then set off.

"But I did screw up," blurts Daniel. I ignore him and keep walking. "Hear me out! Please. Look, I got poached. A rival company got in touch a while ago but I knocked them back. But their Head of Sales was at the conference and we got chatting in the bar. You wouldn't believe the package he's offering. Bigger salary, more holidays, health cover – for you as well as me, pension. The works." I'm on the road now but he's following, talking all the time, the words coming faster and faster. "The only snag is location. I'd be lead rep for the whole of the south. I couldn't do it if I stayed living in the city. I was going to talk to you about it but I got excited, said yes. I'm due to sign the contract on Thursday. I should have war-gamed it with you first, I know, but I was afraid you wouldn't want to move. I'm sorry. Really, I am."

I believe him but inside I'm in bits so I keep walking. I only stop when the pain in my foot flares up. The strap of my flip flop is rubbing against the sore spot, where the beginnings of a bruise has appeared. I gaze at it, shocked by how much it hurts.



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Daniel stops beside me. We stand awkwardly on the verge but don't touch. Neither of us is good at confrontation or its aftermath. While we often bicker, this is the first time either of us has stormed off during an argument. He says he's sorry, again. I say nothing; I don't think I could keep it together if I tried to explain that I'm gutted because my recent wretchedness made so little impression on him that he actually forgot what happened with Zoe. So I keep my eyes fixed on the bruise and imagine it growing bigger and uglier. As the silence drags on, I sense Daniel bowing his head. Then he sighs.

"Those bloody clubs," he mutters to himself, before suggesting I stay put and rest my foot while he goes back for the car.

I nod, desperate for a minute to myself. He sprints so a minute is all I get.

We're both subdued for the first part of the journey home. Mostly I stare out the window. There's no need for me to issue instructions. Daniel knows the lay of the land now.

It isn't long before we hit the motorway. The flow of traffic heading into the city is surprisingly heavy but then I remember there's a big match on this afternoon.

"I'll tell them I've changed my mind," announces Daniel, switching lane to let a minibus by. The driver hoots and a few of the passengers, rugby fans based on their jerseys, wave.

I take a deep breath and say no.

"No?" repeats Daniel, his voice full of hope.

"You should take the job. It sounds brilliant."

"And you'll come?"

I hesitate. The word no is hard enough to say once. I struggle to get it out a second time, but manage it, eventually.

"No?" he repeats.

"You were right about today being useful. I've figured out where I want to be."

He doesn't ask any more questions. I'm grateful for that. The conversation about where our relationship is going can wait. I doubt he's ready to hear that I don't want a family home, or a family life; and he's definitely not ready to hear that long distance might suit us, weekends together and weekdays apart, loved-up time plus all the room we need.

It's the perfect solution. I knew it as soon as he mentioned not being able to make it



## FICTION

work if he stayed in the city, the way I knew the flat was the one for me before I'd seen every room, the way I instinctively knew Daniel would be coming home with me the night I met him at a comedy club.

Despite the traffic, we make good time. When the quays are in sight, Daniel turns away from the river, bypassing the carpark. I tell him there's no need; I lie and say the pain has eased. But he insists on driving me the whole way home. It'll take him ages to negotiate the one-way system to the multi-storey and then trek back but he doesn't complain.

After making my way slowly up the stairs and into the flat, I open the windows and kick off my flip flops. The relief is immense. The bruise is darker now, the flesh swollen. I fetch a bag of peas from the freezer and press it against the sore spot. It stings but I stretch out on the sofa and wait for the pain to fade. Gradually the area goes numb and other things come into focus: buses rumbling past, buskers in the distance, the terrier upstairs – he always barks when left alone for too long. Covering myself up with the rug I use when watching TV, I close my eyes.

An hour later I wake, achy still but less raw. Tossing the now mushy peas onto the windowsill, I wipe my foot dry with the rug and stretch out again. Daniel should be in shortly; he might even be on the stairs. I listen but there's no sound of his footsteps. He might be dragging his heels, though, worried he's about to be dumped. I take out my phone to reassure him. I consider texting him the dove and olive branch emoji, but instead opt for a heart.

Once the message is sent, I start a new one, for Zoe. I keep it short and emoji free and press send before I can change my mind.

*It's alright I understand Xxx*

A silence settles then on the flat, one of those odd lulls you experience occasionally in the city, but it doesn't last long as seconds later my phone beeps.





# NONFICTION

*Dorothee King*

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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.*

## The one with the headhunter

By Dorothée King

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I am in a coaching session. I am at my best. We talk about money mindset. My client visualizes 100.000 a year. We connect the number to feeling thrilled and exited. “I make 100.000 this year!” says my client. Present tense. The money is already there. We can smell it.

I tell my client how I manifested my Swiss 160.000 job. For half a year I chanted, while running: “I love money, money loves me.” I worked on my old belief systems about money. I opened myself up to new possibilities. One day I felt extra cheeky: I doubled my goal. No, not 80.000, 160.000. Yeah. “Money and me. BFF!”

We end the coaching session. We both feel exited. We both are optimistic about all the coming possibilities. I click on the leave button of the zoom meeting. I check my emails. Everett Amsterdam: “Good Day, Mrs. King. We would love to talk to you about this director position in Zurich. Blabla.” I am beyond thrilled. I never got contacted by a headhunter before. The money thing still works! I get all exited. I fantasize about the African dresses I would buy and wear in the office. Just to annoy all the men in suits. I imagine my new income. Let’s double it! Again! I dream about a first-class unlimited travel card for the Swiss railway system. Colin looks at Zurich real estate.

Colin asks: “Wouldn’t that mean even more meetings, more budgets, more management?” “Sure,” I reply. My head is still in first-class, “but I will have 236 employees.”

“Wouldn’t you work even more than you work now?”, “Sure, but I would have three hours on the train every day to do my emails.”

“Wouldn’t we stop seeing you?” “Sure, but I’ll make so much money. We would buy a boat on Zurich lake!”

I decide to think about it for a bit. I have been there before. Flattered by big numbers. This time I want to be smarter.

In the afternoon I go to my favorite bookstore to get a copy of *Find the job that makes you truly happy*. Second page of the book: “Imagine you get a job offer. How are you supposed to know if you should take it? Imagine you already got the job. How does it make you

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feel?” – Okay – “Do you feel excited? Do you feel happiness?” – ...- “Are you thrilled about the new company/employer/boss?” – Hmm, a bit, I guess. – “Do you look forward to your first day at work?” – Oh no, definitely not. – “And the most important question: Do you feel more energy or less?” – I flinch. I already miss my yoga mornings, my coaching sessions, my time to write.

I fantasize about how I would teach deep belly breathing to the men in suits. I imagine how I could bike to work. I envision myself working from home three days a week. I daydream about calling in sick once a month. I keep on reading. “When in doubt, always listen to your heart.” Wise words.





# REVIEWS

*Lisa Goodrum*

*Izzy Peroni*

*Kevan P. Stafford*

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## Riding the Wave : ‘Waves’ by Rashid Johnson, 6 October – 23 December 2020, Hauser and Wirth, London.

By Lisa Goodrum

From March 2020 we have been bombarded by copious amounts of reassurance regarding our productivity during the coronavirus pandemic. We have been absolved of the pressure to produce and encouraged to do only what we can, and as such, artistic responses to this global virus have varied dramatically. Judging by ‘Waves’ at Hauser and Wirth’s London space, the multidisciplinary artist Rashid Johnson was driven to create. This exhibition, which opened in early October, contains a series of sculptural paintings in the form of mosaics and the *Anxious Red Paintings* which update the *Anxious Men* series that Johnson began in 2015, and constitutes the artist’s own response to the worldwide lockdown.

*Anxious Red Paintings August 6th, 13th, 20th and September 3rd* began their creative lives as drawings, and emerged as oil paintings on linen in their final form. In *Anxious Painting, September 3rd* Johnson’s rough brush strokes, in the thick red pigment that he created especially, form a grid-like pattern within which arachnid-esque shapes seem to lurk menacingly. Upon closer examination, the mystery creatures look as if they have eyes that peer nervously out to survey the environment in which they have been placed. These eyes anxiously watch their surroundings, mirroring the state in which people confined to their homes across the world sat and watched the television news and scrolled Twitter while they awaited the next act in what was fast becoming a grim, and at times farcical, play. Tentacles appear to emerge from these shapes and slyly break free from the compartments in which they are supposed to be contained so that they resemble the tentacles of anxiety that have brushed against every aspect of human life this year. Previously we had been able to suppress our consternation by the predictable patterns and structures that underpinned our existence and the distraction that maladaptive coping mechanisms like food, sex and shopping could provide. Now however we are aware of our anxieties and recognise how little control we really have and the treacherous barbs of that realisation have lodged themselves in our very psyches.

The perilous state into which this virus plunged us, and in which, to a certain extent we remain, is represented by the *Anxious Paintings’* unique pigment. We automatically associate the colour red with danger and catastrophe, co-opted as it has been to signify warning and emergency. Johnson’s paint has the garish coagulative quality associated with blood and in its very viscosity lies its menace. The haemic colour’s emblazonment across the white gallery wall is an intimidating and rudimentary

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reminder of the lives this pandemic has claimed and how it has so nonchalantly destroyed our already fragile socio-economic systems. At a scale of approximately 38 x 50 inches, the paintings commandeer the gallery walls and mimic the enormity of this crisis while acting as warning signs to the wider world. Although they are individual artistic expressions, they concurrently alert the viewer to the fact that society is existing within a disaster of epic proportions that we are woefully ill equipped to handle. Johnson's brushwork consigns vivid and lurid lines onto the canvas where they are splayed in a semi-cognitive chaos that engenders an awareness of the painting's interior movement in its audience. This kineticism seems to confirm then, that we are watching a wider cultural situation in flux, while in addition we are observing the artist's mind working to process the upheaval that this event has induced.

Rashid Johnson's *Broken Men* series is a number of ceramic tile mosaics that fuse symbols of the African diaspora experience like shea butter and African black soap with abstract expressionism. In doing so, the images convey the fractured sense of identity that arises from combining Western art traditions and diasporic totems. Indeed, the series as a whole plays with questions of form, identity and heritage. The works in the *Broken Men* series bear a striking resemblance to murals – paintings or other works of art executed directly onto a wall – whose importance stems from their use of art to bring socio-political issues to public attention. In their traditional form murals are placed directly onto a surface and subsume the surrounding area's architectural qualities, yet Johnson's work fails to seamlessly encompass the gallery environment, and instead maintains its distance from it. The works themselves are on concrete before being attached to the gallery wall, and the shards of mirrored tiles contained within the mosaic create the sense of being in a bathroom and peering into a looking glass while determining the persona that one decides to present to the outside world. In *Standing Broken Men, 2020*, the ceramics are reminiscent of the less familiar mosaic tile murals that use small, variously coloured or differently shaped tiles to create a distinct image or pattern. The ceramics here – which Johnson glazed himself – contain particles that are cardinal red, sunflower yellow and duck-egg blue and which sit alongside splashes of paint in similar hues to provide a panoply of shades that illuminate the black tiles that compose the 'wild, agitated' faces in his work.

The fragmentation of the figures in the series *Broken Men and Broken Crowd* and Johnson's use of that descriptor reflect his observations on, and concerns about, the state of modern masculinity. In her 2019 *Guardian* interview with the artist, Nadja Sayez wrote that the 'broken men' seemed like a metaphor for the post #Metoo world, a landscape in



which the reprehensible behaviour of men like Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby and Matt Lauer has been exposed and condemned, thereby rocking the foundations upon which toxic masculinity had so comfortably stood. It is impossible then to look at pieces like *Standing Broken Men*, *Two Standing Broken Men* and *The Broken Five* (the latter with its inescapable echoes of the Central Park Five as portrayed recently in Ava DuVernay's miniseries *When They See Us*) without thinking that they represent the deconstruction, or even dismantling of masculinity, and the characteristics that we have traditionally associated with it. Regarding *The Broken Five* and its potential relationship to the aforementioned case, it is also possible that the work conveys how that miscarriage of justice represented an emasculation for those men who lost their dignity, reputation and ultimately, their liberty.

The current global situation has not only unleashed a vicious assault on our collective physical health, but experts have also warned of the insidious effects on our mental well-being. Within a gallery space existing under the restrictions enforced by this virus and bearing in mind Johnson's own history of exploring anxiety, I suspect that the works may also signify the fragility of male mental health. For this artist, 'broken' is an ambiguous term. His sculptural paintings are comprised of shattered ceramics, smashed mirror tiles and detritus such as oyster shells that represent both broken masculinity and broken mental health, two states that commentators have argued have reached crisis proportions and that others would claim have formed an ouroboros of sorts. Combined with the American Psychological Association's finding that 9 per cent of men in the United States experience daily feelings of depression and anxiety, and that the suicide rate of American men is approximately 4 times higher than that of women, it is difficult not to read Johnson's continuation of the Broken Men series here as a commentary on the precarious psychological state of modern men. Like the *Anxious Red Paintings*, these pieces indicate that worry and trepidation – this time men's – is seeping out of the box-like structures in which we have stored our notions of masculinity for so long.

In Johnson's continuing exploration of anxiety and escapism 'Waves' forms part of a line from his previous shows to this experiment in situating personal experience within a wider cultural narrative. In his continued use of art history, literature, philosophy, materiality and critical history as tools to navigate the terrain between the singular and the collective, Johnson interrogates his experience of the pandemic and the viewer cannot help but feel that this would have been coloured by the plethora of socio-political events and issues that swirled around him. From the US presidential campaign and election; the debate about, and protests against, systemic racism that swept across the United States

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and the globe; alongside the disproportionate effect that the virus has had on Black and minority ethnic people, Rashid Johnson's show encapsulates one man's attempt to understand unprecedented events and the complex emotions they spawned without having a standard visual language to do so. He was compelled then to use his own unique combination of an art movement and diasporic signifiers, and even his own pigment in the *Anxious Red Paintings* to differentiate his sentiments on 2020 from the prodigious critiques that it has already aroused. This show is a personal perspective on a year that has only intensified the main themes with which this artist engages. It highlights the anxiety with which the whole world has been confronted and from which it seems that only art has been able to provide any form of escape or clarification.



# The Gratifying Unpredictability of Short Stories: A Review of Drew Pissarra's *You're Pretty Gay*

By Izzy Peroni

There's an unbelievable relief that comes from not knowing where a story is taking you, and how it's going to end. In a culture where every tale follows age-old formulas for basic narrative success— every YA novel gives its Chosen One their happy ending, every murder mystery implicates the ex-wife, every scary moment in any horror movie is preceded by the same panicked flock of violas— being unable to perfectly predict what the narrator will do or say next is nothing short of a blessing. In Drew Pissarra's short story collection, *You're Pretty Gay*, releasing June 25th, 2021 from Chaffinch Press, there is rarely a predictable moment or trite choice of words; a consistent narrative voice, eternally raunchy and heartfelt, paves its way through each unique moment of this collection. It's filled with moments that have surely been lived many times, but never so succinctly and fantastically written about— moments of difficult grieving, of sexual exploration and regret. Above all, however, there is one preemptive guarantee— every moment is pretty fucking gay.

The abject queerness of it all is what prompted me to review this collection in the first place, besides my personal enjoyment of Pissarra's poetry. I was not, in any shape or form, disappointed— and to my absolute joy, I was at times disturbed, startled, endlessly amused, and devastated. Every labyrinthine twist in narrative is accompanied by the kind of queer experiences that keep you grounded in decades' worth of sharp and unrelenting reality. A stand out story on the subject is 'Arctic Chill,' where our narrator takes us from the moment in 1995 where he blessedly tests negative for HIV, to half a page downward, him eating cookies with Mrs. Claus in the North Pole. It makes perfect sense as you're reading it, then the story concludes, and you feel like you were very briefly out of your mind. It's an incredible relief to lose that control, as Pissarra's narrator pulls you through as many gay experiences as he can conjure up from memory— gay yearning, gay curiosity, gay sex, with as much or as little shame as needed. They're memories from an era before commercialized Pride parades and gay teen movies— an era where everyone in gum ads was heterosexual and National HIV Testing Day was a thing. It should be humbling for young queers to remember where we came from, and that despite a decade or two, we are still, in fact, a 'we.'

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I would recommend *You're Pretty Gay* to those who love ambiguity in prose—poetic-like ambiguity, where you feel comfortably that you've gleaned every possibly meaning from every line as best you can, but you're not completely sure. If you're a reader who can take in mountains of precisely detailed, reality-bending events, then be satisfied when the story ends with "Maybe. Maybe not"—maybe these fantastical things happened exactly as the narrator said, or maybe they didn't—then this is a collection that will excite you. I think, perhaps, above all, I would recommend *You're Pretty Gay* to my fellow young queers, my age or even younger. The 80s and 90s barely feel like decades that could hold any sort of traditionally-defined history, but for the LGBTQ community, change has come rapidly in a short amount of time, and it's easy to lose sight of how far we've come. Young queers deserve stories that aren't straight-washed or sanitized; we deserve everything startling, sexual, abrasive, embarrassing, and raw that comes with coming out, in the 90s and now. *You're Pretty Gay* supplies with ease, and takes absolute pleasure in doing so.



## Review of *No One is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood

By Kavan P. Stafford

*Content Warning: Religious Trauma, Homophobia, Heteronormativity, White Supremacy*

*'Close-ups of nail art, a pebble from outer space, a tarantula's compound eyes, a storm like canned peaches on the surface of Jupiter, Van Gogh's The Potato Eaters, a chihuahua perched on a man's erection, a garage door spray-painted with the words STOP! DON'T EMAIL MY WIFE!'* (p.3).

*No One is Talking About This* (2021) by Patricia Lockwood, author of *Priestdaddy* (2017), has just been shortlisted for the Women's Prize in the UK, and deservedly so. In a literary scene full of young writers trying desperately to depict online life in a way that feels authentic, Lockwood is the only one to have managed. While most writers' attempts at describing the digital experience opt for the use of emails or texts, effectively becoming semi-epistolary novels, it is Lockwood's willingness to fully embrace the surreal mundanity of online life that makes this novel so successful. Readers will recognise themselves in her depictions of her unnamed protagonist blankly scrolling through Twitter and other social media platforms, whether they like it or not.

The book is in two clearly defined parts. For almost the entirety of the first, we are in the protagonist's head as she navigates the world of the internet and social media. She has achieved a strange and transient online notoriety for a viral tweet which asked *'can a dog be twins?'* (p. 13) and has segued this into an international tour of conferences and symposiums where she joins other internet stars such as a man who posts pictures of himself with his testicles subtly on show to discuss the phenomenon of social media.

The protagonist wonders at this type of humour and imagines unsuccessfully trying to explain to her future children why this man showing his testicle was funny or why, for example, in the winter *'everyone gathered together to watch the incest commercial'* (p.73), a real and inadvertently sexual commercial to advertise Folgers coffee. This simultaneous amusement and confusion beautifully describes the online experience. Who knows why anything is funny any more? It just is.

While the first half of the book keeps the reader almost relentlessly in the world of the internet, called *'the portal'* by the protagonist, in the second half the real world rudely intrudes on the narrative as the protagonist's niece is born with Proteus Syndrome and

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given only a few months to live. The rest of the novel deals with protagonist's growing love for this little girl with so little time left and the earnestness of her affection contrasts powerfully with the detached irony of the online life described in the first half of the book.

This contrast is less clearly defined in the form of the novel. The book is written in a series of short paragraphs which are almost, but not quite, short enough to be considered Tweets in themselves. The effect is one less of reading and more of scrolling through social media take after social media take. This works well in the first half of the novel but less so in the second, when the truncated sentences and paragraphs slightly undermine the seriousness of the subject matter.

Another slight issue arises in Lockwood's description of internet phenomena both real – *'in remembrance of those we lost on 9/11 the hotel will provide complimentary coffee and mini muffins Stafford, No One is Talking About This Review, 3 from 8.45-9.15am'* (p. 24) – and imagined – *'chuck e cheese can munch a hole in my you-know what'* (p. 5) – which can sometimes fall slightly flat. However even this is an accurate depiction of the internet experience; 'you had to be there' we mutter as our parents stare at us blankly having listened to our explanation of a funny Tweet.

The danger is, as with all books set in a technologically specific time and place, that Lockwood's book will date rapidly. It's hard to imagine someone reading it in, say, ten years without cringing slightly and the references to Donald Trump, referred to only as 'the dictator' already ring slightly hollow given that he was democratically removed from office only a couple of months before the publication of the novel. That a book will become dated in the future may seem an unfair criticism to level at it now, and perhaps it is, but it seems worth mentioning if only to explain why I think that, despite its quality, it falls short of being a future classic.

When the protagonist's niece finally does die in hospital, *'it was like nothing any of them had ever seen. There was nothing trivial in the room'* (p. 187). The endless trivia of online life has melted away and the protagonist is left with only her very human feeling of loss and grief. The protagonist finds that she still can feel just as powerfully as before and the internet has not entirely 'broken her brain' as people like to say on Twitter. The novel, therefore, has a hopeful ending. We may feel that we are increasingly tied to our electronic devices almost to the point of becoming cyborgs but we remain human underneath.

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*No One is Talking About This* is a beautifully written book which, after an amusing first half, will surprise tears from the eyes of the reader in the second, our journey mirroring that of the protagonist. It would be a worthy winner of this year's Women's Prize.







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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