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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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ON THE COVER  
"Reflections" by  
Esther Chiyanda

# 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



**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 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.

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"My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style."

- Maya Angelou

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



"PROTEA"  
by Elme Strydom

# POETRY

*Judy DeCroce &  
Antoni Ooto  
William Doreski  
Katie Kemple  
Jennifer Lagier  
Leah Mueller  
Drew Pissarra  
Juanita Rey  
Anthony Salandy*

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“The creative act amazes me. Whether it’s poetry, whether it’s music, it’s an amazing process, and it has something to do with bringing forth the old out into the world to create and to bring forth that which will rejuvenate.”

- Joy Harjo (Poet Laureate of  
the United States)



## On Repeat

By Judy DeCroce & Antoni Ooto

in the quiet  
fear folds and opens  
like a well-used paper bag

time slows a loop  
pushing possibilities on repeat

yet we stay in place listening—not listening  
more suspicion—less laughter

till that's gone too

now, comes a feeling, a strong tightness,  
an undeniable visitor  
who says...

“I belong to you.  
We came together  
remaking a world...  
and now...  
I am.”

*(Pandemic 2020)*





"To Be Lost, Willingly"  
by Edward Lee

## Spectral Distance

By William Doreski

Today's high tatter of cloud  
isn't vapor but the ghosts  
of those killed by the police  
or sacrificed to COVID-19  
so our president can re-elect  
himself king of the sand pile.

You doubt me? What if Hamlet,  
lying on his back in the grass,  
looked at this sky and declared  
a cloud very like Ophelia,  
who drowned to flatter his ego?  
You'd believe him, wouldn't you?

Two scones warm from the oven  
and coffee shared outdoors where  
a breeze disables the virus  
that's spreading as fast as a rumor.  
We lean back in metal chairs  
and watch the spectral distance

rumple as high-altitude winds  
attempt to disperse the spirits.  
You still don't believe the dead  
linger in such tangible scraps.  
You think they're just an absence  
we all share when the planets

assume a personal alignment  
and our bodies clench so tightly  
all our vital gases escape.  
Eat your scone. The coffee  
is especially hot today.  
Be careful not to burn yourself.

If you badly scorched your tongue  
you'd have to forego invective.  
Then all those wicked politicians  
would feel the atmosphere relax  
as if the ghosts blamed no one  
for their exile in the blue.



# Family Commitment Form

By Katie Kemple

You separate every child

*Option One: On Campus*

teacher to meet their pre-existing

health

requiring face coverings

hand sanitizing

maximum physical distancing privacy boards,

minimizing congregant movement

we cannot guarantee strict adherence at all times.

On-campus may or may not reduce

the number of students the number of families

*Option Two: Virtual*

Offline rich students collaborate

Students require best grades

The goal and priority is to receive

instruction from highly qualified teacher

*Option three: Homeschooling*

Independent parents with flexibility

4-5 hours per day with each student

individually support learning

*Commit by 11:59pm*

*if you do not*

*your child will be*

*the option.*



## 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.



## Camille Comes Unglued

By Jennifer Lagier

*“It’s a complex issue because one has to think, well there’s a host body and that host body has to have a certain amount of rights because at the end of the day it is that body that that carries this entire other body to term. But there is an additional life there.”-- Florida state Rep. Jose Oliva*

Camille reads the quote, becomes incandescent.  
Despises arrogant misogyny, ignorant belief that  
she’s nothing more than a baby container.  
Vows to support progressive women candidates  
so every female can control her own body.

She wonders how men would react  
if re-designated as insentient hosts,  
each drop of semen conferred with  
person-hood rights that outweighed  
male intentions and interests.

If it impacted them, would obtuse dudes  
oppose governmental interference,  
unqualified legislators in the driver’s seat  
making decisions regarding  
another’s reproductive organs?

Camille listens to a procession  
of smug, self-righteous old guys  
pontificate on the sanctity of the pre-born,  
discovers she is fresh out of fucks to give,  
grows increasingly livid with rage.



## Get Off My Lawn, Kids

By Leah Mueller

Once I  
discovered  
the truth  
about Santa,  
my patience  
for miracles  
began to wane.

I prayed  
every night  
until I was ten,  
but God  
also failed  
to deliver.

Now, in my  
seventh decade,  
I have given  
up hope  
for a Socialist  
takeover,

a vegan  
renaissance,  
a sudden surge  
of brotherhood,  
or heartfelt  
apologies

from ex-friends  
who dashed  
my love  
like eggs  
against a wall.

Forget miracles.

We are  
all better off  
waiting our turn  
in the emotional  
bread line,

hoping there  
will be a few  
tiny scraps  
left over  
when our turn  
finally comes.



## Nevada Suicide Prevention

By Leah Mueller

Friends catch her by the shoulders  
on the edge of a casino balcony,  
drunk and reeling above gaggles of tourists.

Cocktails in hand, the revelers gaze:  
first, with curiosity, then malice.

Vulnerability brings out their sadism.  
They point and laugh. She tries to  
hurl her body into their upturned faces.

Hands steady her momentum, but only for a second.  
She breaks free, bolts downstairs, darts between  
the roulette tables and slot machines, runs

like she can never stop. And she can't stop:  
legs move by themselves, like frantic pistons.

Nothing waits at home for a safe return. No job,  
apartment or money, just the emptiness of flesh,  
and her mind, cluttered as the evening news.

A trip to Vegas for her twenty-third birthday.  
So far, she hasn't won a dime. Friends  
signal the bartender for another round.





## Stage Four

By Leah Mueller

I worry about disease  
each minute,  
since my husband  
was diagnosed with  
colorectal cancer  
last August.

It floats  
into my brain  
first thing  
upon awakening,  
and shuts off  
like a flashlight beam  
when I crawl  
under the covers  
at night.

Sometimes, I start  
to feel happy  
for a moment,  
when I hear a piece  
of music I like,

or admire the branches  
of a majestic tree, as they  
spread their reverent hands  
across the sky.

Then I remember,  
and the light  
extinguishes itself.

Now, everyone  
on the planet  
is a member  
of a vast coronavirus  
death cult.

The internet  
reverberates  
with fatalities,  
but all I can think is  
welcome to my world.



# What I Should Have Told You, Instead

(for Hana)

By Leah Mueller

Let everything go.  
Crows flap upward  
and instantly forget  
their gravitational pull.

Your center releases,  
shedding my weight  
as I stand behind,  
feet mired in earth.

Our film has been  
shown before,  
countless times,

but never like this:  
death, without  
the dignity of burial

or kind words, spoken  
before my ashes  
hit the ground.

Turn and walk away.  
Leave the sack  
for someone else to  
find:

torn, upended,  
no longer hopeful  
of recovery.



## Airborne Orgasms

By Drew Pissarra

Maybe, just maybe, the tantric sex masters know how to do it from six feet apart; their gazes, electric; their breath, beyond rhythmic; their thoughts so specific you'd swear they had touched you down there. I'd be willing to try it with knees on cheap carpet, that outdated, flesh-pinching place where the profane and arcane are known to occur.

Certainly, by which I mean most certainly, I have crafted lewd fuck-fests then placed them inside pop-up boxes then guided those said conversations to syntactically simulate the fiercest of erotic feats – like language-based blow jobs and emoji anal – while jerking myself off to nudies of one headless horseman at whom I woofed thrice 'though he never did deign to reply. I took no offense.

Definitely this is a weird time, this age of aloneness, this imprisoned free world, the horniest week in one unforeseen season in which days stretch past forever and most nights can't last long enough. Hours get swallowed then vomited back into existence, minutes arouse then refreeze in a state of excitement, the second hand of my analogue clock can finger me on the sly but it won't get me hard because life is as hard as it gets, and that's harder than any dick I've ever [insert sex act here]. So yeah. I'm fine. How are you?



## BAD TIME

By Juanita Rey

No,  
I will not take my own life.

It is against my faith,  
even the little of it that remains

And I still have access  
to the parts of me  
that keep my life interested.

There are actions that are  
intent on happening,  
incidents that can't help themselves  
from happening to me.

Besides it can't get  
any worse than this.  
I'm taking the word  
of the last time  
I felt this way.



## THE MICE

By Juanita Rey

There are mice in the ceiling  
and in the walls.  
Every night I hear the scratching,  
the scrambling, the scattering.

Back home, he was El Raton,  
something to frighten  
the thoughts of little girls,  
to be hunted by cats  
or thwacked into oblivion  
by the local he-man.

Here, they are just  
more of God's creatures  
struggling to eke out a living.

I could complain  
to the landlady  
and maybe she would call  
the exterminators  
or maybe she'd  
forget about it.

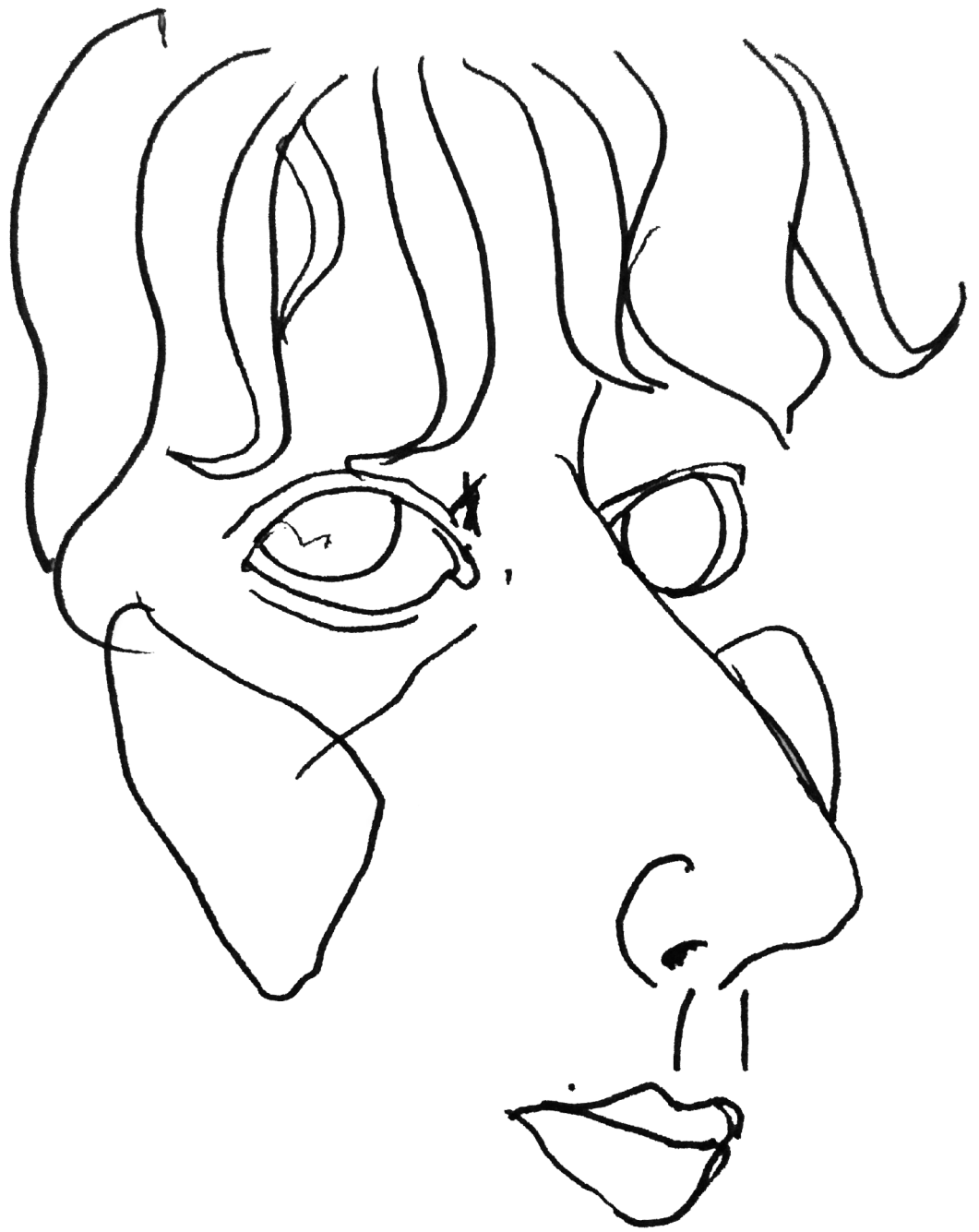
Besides, exterminate  
my newfound willingness  
to live and let live –  
I'd rather not.



## The East of Cities Many

By Anthony Salandy

A broken gate  
Still rests in front  
Of a downtrodden road  
  
That gives direction to passerby's  
Who drive ever faster  
Through a place rough and excluded-  
  
Where doors are locked  
And bags hang tightly clutched  
In the hands of men and women  
  
Who see stratification  
In the dim lit windows  
Of colored faces  
Who know no other life,  
  
But in one home  
Jostled boys who replicated  
Their inequality as upbringing-  
  
And familial burden  
Forced the hands of children  
To compensate for the absentee father's  
  
That came to be synonymous  
With the great tenement east  
Where social dwellings grew musty  
  
And ever cold  
Until they were vacated  
And a man rose to try-  
  
And in part succeed  
Beyond the chains of social segregation  
Only for few to say-  
  
'Oh how far he has risen!'



"Smoking Weed and Drawing My Profile"  
by Megan Ulrich

# FICTION

*Rachel Brelsford*

*Kenny Chua*

*Diane Culp*

*Nicole DiAntonio*

*Kim Hart*

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“Listen to the needs, not what you think we need.”

- LaSaia Wade



## First Kiss

By Rachel Brelsford

Aura sat uncomfortably between Donna and Mr. Kinson, pinching her shoulders up to her ears, her arms folded tightly across her tummy, her knees magnetized to one another. She tried to take up as little space as possible, and above all she tried not to let any part of her body touch either Donna's or Mr. Kinson's. Accidentally colliding with Mr. Kinson was unimaginable for obvious reasons; Aura couldn't think of anything more embarrassing or uncomfortable than bursting Mr. Kinson's very rigid personal bubble. Letting herself lean against Donna was also out of the question but for much more subtle, secretive reasons.

This task Aura had undertaken was quiet the challenge as the rusted, tiny pickup truck bounded down the craterous gravel road. Mr. Kinson was, characteristically, unconcerned with each and every pothole and groove. He couldn't be bothered to alter his intended path or reduce his preferred speed for any of Mother Nature's inconveniences. The truck clanked and Aura swore it even groaned as one tire would sink into a pot hole and another would surmount a rock the size of her head. Mr. Kinson left his left arm on the edge of the window no matter what and his right wrist resting on top of the steering wheel.

Aura knew Donna hated her father, and she understood that; she was pretty sure Mr. Kinson hated Donna, too. But, if Aura were Donna, she would never put her best friend between herself and her repulsing father. And she would also create small talk during the thirty-minute ride from school to the house. However, Donna sat silently, staring out the window and occasionally glancing at Aura. Mr. Kinson didn't have anything to say either. Bluegrass sprang out from the dilapidated speakers—men wailing about their women, land, or moonshine, their voices as twangy as their banjos. Aura had a suppressed admiration for country music, but these redundant ballads were not country music; they're backcountry music. Aura clenched her jaw.

Finally, the trio arrived at the Kinsons' house: a respectable shack at least five miles from any other form of civilization, surrounded by tall, thin, tinted trees. Upon her very first awkward visit to Donna's house at the beginning of the school year Aura had been awed by the resemblance Donna held to the trees surrounding her house. One day Aura had even mentioned the striking similarity to Donna. Donna had smiled her wispy smile.

## FICTION

“I wish I was a tree,” Donna had said. “Those lifeless things would be better parents than mine are.”

“You know trees are alive, right?” Aura asked.

“Whatever. It’s just hard for me to fathom that things around me aren’t just as dead inside as I am.”

Donna’s repertoire of angsty comebacks was unmatched. More than once Aura had pondered at the amount of effort it must take to be as unattached as Donna—or at least as unattached as Donna was most of the time, to the rest of the world. She was different with Aura, a little bit, every now and then. That’s what Aura liked about her.

The girls grabbed their backpacks out of the bed of the truck and trailed behind Mr. Kinson, who hadn’t waited for them, towards the house. Donna’s mother was in her usual spot on the couch in the living room watching the game show network. Donna’s dad and mom didn’t even acknowledge each other as Mr. Kinson walked through the living room and down the hall towards his “office”.

“Hi, Aura. How was school, girls?” At least Mrs. Kinson tried.

“Hello, Mrs. Kinson. School was good. Has anyone won millions yet?” Aura gestured towards the TV.

“Yeah, lots of people who ain’t me.”

“Mom, when will Ma be here to pick us up?”

“She can’t get you two tonight. You’re staying here this weekend.”

“Why?”

“You go to your grandparents’ house too much.”

“No I don’t. You want me to spend less time with my grandparents?”

Mrs. Kinson rolled her eyes. Donna threw her hands up and slapped them against the side of her thin thighs and huffed. She shook her head and looked at Aura who shrugged.

“Why can’t we go over there tomorrow, then?”

“Why can’t you stay here for the weekend?”

“There’s nothing to do here!”

## THE SOCK DRAWER

“What’s there to do there?”

“I’m calling Ma.” Donna stomped to the kitchen and snatched the landline off the wall.

“Aura, where would you rather spend the weekend? There’s nothing to do at her grandparents’ house either, is there?”

“I appreciate you letting me spend the weekend here or there, either way. I’ll go wherever.” Aura sat on the edge of the armchair and focused on the TV screen hoping Mrs. Kinson would do the same. The truth was there wasn’t much more to do at Donna’s grandparents’ house versus at her parents’ house. What Ma and Pop’s place did have going for it over Mr. and Mrs. Kinson’s was a trampoline, dial up internet the girls were actually allowed to use, and significantly less supervision. Plus, Ma and Pop were just nicer people than Mr. and Mrs. Kinson. Aura wasn’t going to say any of that to Mrs. Kinson, though.

“Ma says she’ll pick us up tomorrow morning.” Donna announced when she finally returned. “Come on, Aura. Let’s go downstairs.”

“Downstairs” was just the partially finished basement which housed most of Donna’s childhood toys, a boom box, and two beanbag chairs. Donna complained about her parents and her grandparents while Aura picked out an alternative rock CD to play in the stereo. She settled on Three Days Grace and tried to set the volume to a level which would appease Donna but not bother Mr. Kinson. Regardless, on his half hour patrols Mr. Kinson would tell them to turn off the music unless they put in something Christian or country and Donna would say no, and that would be that until the next patrol in thirty minutes.

The girls got out their homework and started on algebra. Being in all the same classes was very convenient, especially when Aura missed class as she frequently did. But Aura never felt bad for always asking for Donna’s notes because she carried most of the weight when they did their homework together. Aura wouldn’t say she was smarter than Donna, but she would say she tried harder than Donna; she cared more. All Donna cared about were boys and rock bands.

“What’d you get for number fourteen?” Aura asked.

“Fourteen? Jeez. I’m still on nine.”

“Well maybe because you keep checking your phone every five seconds.”

## FICTION

“Whatever. If you tell me what you got for nine, ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen, I’ll start working on fourteen and let you know what I get.”

Aura sighed and handed Donna her notebook.

“Who are you texting, anyway? Someone from school? Your nonexistent, long-distance boyfriend?”

“Daniel is real and he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Oh. He’s just your long-distance friend with benefits?”

“Whatever.” Donna slid her phone open and shut repeatedly until it dinged again.

“So, who are you texting?”

“Tiger.”

“Tiger?” Aura laughed. “Who’s Tiger? Should I be concerned?”

“You should always be concerned about me.” Donna gave Aura one of her unsettling looks that really did make Aura concerned. Donna could make her eyes look black and glassy when she really wanted to and every time it made Aura’s blood go cold for a second. “She’s one of my cousin’s friends I met at Speedy Chef a couple of weeks ago. She’s really cool.”

“How old is she?” All of Donna’s cousins were older, like a lot older. There was no way this Tiger girl was also in eighth grade.

“She’s seventeen. Why does that matter?”

“I was just wondering.”

“She hangs out with my cousin Steven all the time and they were all over at my grandparents’ house the other weekend and we all hung out.”

“Cool.”

“She’s really cool. She doesn’t even really like Steven and his friends. She knows they’re dumb. Most of the time me and her just hung out by ourselves. We spent a lot of time on the trampoline. One night we just laid there and looked up at the stars all night long.”

“Your ma let you spend the night outside on the trampoline?”

“Well, maybe it wasn’t *allnight*.”

“Your cousin and his friends didn’t mind she ditched them?”

## THE SOCK DRAWER

“Who cares?”

Mr. Kinson’s heavy footfalls came down the stairs. Both girls got quiet and stared at their algebra books. Mr. Kinson walked past them, turned down the stereo, looked around, and then stomped back up the stairs.

“What makes this Tiger so cool?”

“I don’t know. She’s just different. She really likes me.”

“*Really?*”

“Yeah.” Donna threw a challenging glance Aura’s way before sliding her phone open to respond to the latest text she’d received. Aura focused on her homework for a moment. She tried solving for X, but when Donna snapped her phone shut again she looked up.

“Do you like her?”

“Well, duh.”

“I mean *really*like her?”

Donna shrugged.

“Girls, come up for dinner.” Mrs. Kinson called from the top of the stairs. Aura stood but Donna sighed and rolled her eyes.

“We’re not hungry.” Donna called back.

“Donna,” Mr. Kinson’s voice rumbled in the distance. Donna slammed her algebra book shut as she stood up.

No one spoke during dinner but sounds of gameshows and commercials from the living room provided sufficient background noise to the subtle sounds of teeth against teeth and forks against plates in the kitchen. Aura and Donna both pushed their mashed potatoes around, thinning them out on the plate, and nibbled on their sloppy joes. In the back of Aura’s mind, she knew she was being rude, but the rest of her mind was too preoccupied to care. She watched Donna take tiny bites of her food and wondered how many texts *Tiger* had sent. Aura was glad cell phones weren’t allowed at the dinner table. She wasn’t quite sure why, but something about this whole Tiger situation really irritated her. But at the same time, something about it almost excited her. It felt like there were bubbles popping in her stomach and shiny suds cluttering her brain.

“Girls, after dinner finish up downstairs and then get ready for bed.” Mr. Kinson

instructed.

“But it’s like seven o’ clock!”

“Well your ma will be here early tomorrow to get you. She’s coming by before she goes to the flea market.”

“Why can’t you take us over there later?”

“Donna, you wanted to go to your grandparents’ house tomorrow, so you’re going. Do as your father says.”

Donna moved slowly as she finished what she wanted of her food and then scraped her plate. The girls helped clear the table and Mrs. Kinson lit a cigarette and began washing the dishes. Mr. Kinson lit a cigarette, slouched to the living room, and slumped into the saggy old sofa. He changed the channel to the news and turned up the volume. Cigarette smoke and sad stories filled the tiny living space.

Donna grabbed Aura’s arm and nodded towards the stairs to the basement. Even after Donna had let go and started walking away, Aura could feel each of her finger tips softly on top of her skin. She shivered and blinked. Aura was used to being hyperaware of everything around her, but never like this. She hurried to follow Donna down the stairs.

“Hey, don’t worry. Going to bed won’t be so bad. I promise.” Aura whispered to Donna when they were back in the basement. She had put air quotations around “going to bed.” What did that mean? What was she doing? Donna just furrowed her brow and shook her head at Aura.

Finally, after dragging her feet and sighing with every motion and rolling her eyes so many times she surely must have felt dizzy, Donna had finished packing her school stuff back up. Aura was sitting on the bottom step waiting for her, having already packed her stuff back up in a very timely manner. She stood up and placed her hand on Donna’s shoulder when Donna eventually came to the stairs. Aura made direct eye contact with Donna and smiled what felt like the most dorky, over-sized smile as she slid her hand over the curve of Donna’s narrow shoulder and down her thin arm. She slipped her hand inside Donna’s and laced her fingers through hers. As she started leading Donna up the steps she giggled, but more so at herself and how foreign she felt in her own skin at this moment. She felt as though she were actually standing at the bottom of the stairs watching her evil, crazy twin lead Donna by the hand up the stairs. *What. The. Heck.*

## THE SOCK DRAWER

Mr. and Mrs. Kinson were both on the couch now watching some soap opera. Luckily, Donna's bedroom was in the opposite direction from the living room, so the girls didn't have to walk by Donna's parents. They heard the girls as they walked down the tight hallway though, and Mr. Kinson called out a "goodnight" to them; neither of them responded. Aura wanted to, but she felt as if she might laugh out loud if she tried. She pushed the floppy, hollow door to Donna's tiny, cluttered room open and dropped Donna's hand. It was barely noticeable, but she was starting to shake, like she had had too much sugar. Aura sat on Donna's black-themed twin bed and put her hands under her thighs to keep them still.

Donna closed her door and leaned against it, looking at Aura. She crossed her arms and began to narrow her eyes, slowly bring her eyelids together into an intense squint. Aura just smiled back at her. She didn't even want to be smiling this dumb, awkward smile, but she couldn't help it. Like every other part of her body she had lost control of the corners of her mouth. She stared back at Donna for as long as she could, but finally had to drop her gaze. Instead, she stared at her lap.

"What are you doing?" Donna finally asked.

"I have no—" Aura's voice was unstable and sounded more like laughter than speech as she began her response, but she was interrupted by the ding of Donna's cell phone receiving a text message.

Donna immediately whipped her phone out of her back pocket and directed all her attention towards it. Without even looking back up, Donna walked to the bed and sat beside Aura. Aura slightly leaned towards Donna to see who the text was from (as if she didn't already know). A clap of thunder shook the house and both girls jumped. Donna dropped her phone.

"Was it supposed to rain tonight?"

"I don't know. I don't watch the weather."

"I guess we haven't looked outside in a couple hours."

It sounded like a waterfall had suddenly appeared above the house as heavy raindrops pelted the roof. Thunder roared again and Aura could feel the vibrations in her bones. The lights flickered, and then were gone. Mr. Kinson groaned in the living room and Mrs. Kinson mumbled a string of four letter words. As the pair fumbled down the hallway and past Donna's room Mr. Kinson told the girls to go to bed. Aura couldn't see it, but she knew Donna rolled her eyes. She felt Donna shift to her knees and crawl to the

edge of her bed up against the wall where the only window in her room was. Aura heard Donna slide the thick curtains apart, but no light came in until lightening streaked across the sky. Donna stretched her legs out and propped her head and shoulders up on her pillow. Aura pulled her feet onto the bed and turned to be facing towards Donna. Neither spoke, but when the next streak of lightening illuminated the room for a heartbeat they were both surprised to find each other looking right into one another's eyes.

"Donna?" Aura whispered, knowing that the walls were very thin and Donna's parents' bedroom was only separated from Donna's room by a tiny bathroom.

"Mmm?"

"Have you ever been kissed?"

"Actually, yes. Have you?"

"Uhm, yeah." Aura knew her second-grade boyfriend probably didn't actually count, but Donna didn't have to know who it was. "Who have you kissed? It can't be your long-distance dream man."

"No."

"So?"

"So?" Lightening brightened the room again and Aura could see way too much haughty pleasure on Donna's face. She just hoped Donna couldn't see the panic she felt was on her face. "It was actually just recently." Donna added.

"Tiger?"

Donna didn't say anything.

"You kissed Tiger? Tiger kissed you?"

Donna laughed. Aura laughed too, but this time it was definitely an anxious, uncomfortable laugh. Her mind was racing.

*I didn't even know she even liked girls. Does she even like girls? She likes everything. She likes anything that gives her attention. Why do I like her? Do I like her? This could be a good thing, though. At least we know she does at least like girls. I think. At least a little. Tiger: what kind of a name is that? I bet Tiger isn't even real. Is this a game? Everything's a game to Donna. She kissed Tiger. Donna's kissed a girl and I haven't? Wait, why do I care?*

Aura took a deep breath as quietly as possible. The thunder clapped again and both girls tensed; the air was stiff between them and the silence left in the wake of their



## THE SOCK DRAWER

laughter and the thunder felt confining. A flash of lightening blinded them both; it filled the room, the air, the silence, and when it was gone again a new, soft, protective darkness settled in.

“What was it like?” Aura whispered. She stretched herself out next to Donna, matching her legs next to Donna’s, her hips alongside Donna’s, and her head sharing a pillow with Donna’s.

“I dunno.” Donna mumbled.

“Was it like this?”

Aura rolled herself in towards Donna. Her hand found its way to the curve of Donna’s cheek and her lips landed perfectly on Donna’s. It was a quick, simple, innocent peck. Aura’s confidence was fleeting and she immediately pulled herself away and laid flat on her back, staring up into the darkness.

*Oh god oh god oh god oh god.* She felt Donna scoot closer to her. Aura closed her eyes. *Yep. That’s right. I suddenly fell asleep. This is all a dream.* Aura was startled by just how close Donna’s voice was to her ear when Donna finally spoke.

“Kind of. But it was more like this.” Donna swung herself over Aura and powerfully pressed her lips onto Aura’s, much more than a simple, innocent peck.

It lasted what felt like an eternity, but it was over too soon. Donna pulled away the next time the thunder interrupted the rain’s rhythmic assault on the window and roof. In the luminescence of the next lightening streak Aura found herself gazing up at Donna, still straddling her, and on Donna’s face was an actual, genuine smile. The happiness in Donna’s eyes filled Aura with renewed confidence and excitement.

“Oh, so like this?” Aura sat up and kissed Donna again, and Donna kissed her back.

Giggles took hold of both girls as they continued to experiment with lip placement and force, where to put their hands, whether or not to utilize their teeth and tongues. Even though the storm continued to drench the world around them, Aura didn’t hear the thunder or see the lightening. She didn’t feel the reverberations from the loud and sudden claps in her bones; all her senses were consumed by Donna’s smell, Donna’s lips, Donna’s fingertips, Donna’s bony hips.

More startling than any clap of thunder, more distracting than any flash of lightening, an obnoxious, electronic, ding came from Donna’s cell phone on the floor. A tiny blue light began blinking on and off in the darkness. Donna sighed but carefully peeled herself away from Aura and slid into the floor, sitting with her back against the bed

## FICTION

as she plucked her phone up and flipped it open. Aura rolled herself to the edge of the bed and began stroking Donna's long, thin hair. She tried not to nosily read the texts over Donna's shoulder, but she did *happento* notice that the sender was Tiger. She watched Donna quickly tap a text back and send it. Aura's heart began to pick up its pace again, anticipating Donna's return to the bed, but Donna did not move. She didn't even snap the phone closed. Instead, she stared at the bright screen, waiting for another text to appear. Of course, it did. Donna giggled and began typing another response.

Aura sighed and rolled over to face the window, away from Donna. Thunder rumbled, but it sounded distant and half-hearted. Lightening attempted to illuminate the world, but it was gone before it reached its full potential for brightness. The rain drops slowed. Darkness and silence filled the room once more. Aura finally felt Donna pull herself back up into the bed. Donna scooted close to Aura so that her body caressed Aura's. She kissed the back of Aura's head. Aura stared straight ahead into thick, concealing darkness; she couldn't see a thing, and she didn't really want to, either.

All of Aura's muscles involuntarily tensed as the newly-settled silence was shattered by another ding from Donna's phone. The heavy, blinding darkness was hollowed out by a repetitive, obnoxious, blue light. Aura heard Donna flip her phone open, and she squinted in the fuzzy brightness that spilled out from the screen. A single tear rolled out of the corner of Aura's eye and down the slope of her nose, but she refused to let anymore drops than that fall. She closed her eyes, determined to fall asleep, and focused on the darkness behind her eyelids.



## Lucky Star

By Kenny Chua

My parents aren't separated. Dad just moved to Taiwan and worked in a factory that produced microchips for iPhones and Mom moved us 10 miles from where we lived to Grandma's cozy 2-bedroom condo in the historical enclave of Escolta at the perimeter of Manila's Chinatown.

Mom worked in the satellite office of a global bank and began dating Allan, an American banker. When he comes over to pick Mom up for dates, he'd say things like *Cynthia, you look great for 50 or why the face? you should smile more* which made me and Grandma visibly uncomfortable.

Dad promised to fly back for the holidays because the year 2000 was a big one. The turn of a new millennium was a historic moment he wanted to share with us. But, like most of his plans, it fell apart. The factory needed him to repair machinery or the year-end bonus was delayed or the flights were *too pricey in December, maybe next summer*. Instead, he sent us money in a ridiculously large red envelope, double his regular monthly support, and a giant screen TV scraped from a neighboring factory.

I was reading one of Mom's fashion magazines in bed while she was putting on her face by the vanity. There must have been more than 50 colorful bottles, tubes and vials on the small crowded table.

*Zip me up*, Mom requested, her hair straightened, her face powdery white.

I used all my strength to navigate the zip all the way to the top of her dress, bunching up her skin in the process. Mom turned around and asked *How do I look?*

I took several seconds to scrutinize her, form a real adult opinion and said *Mom, you look gorgeous*. A word I learned that day.

Mom smiled and kissed me on the head, burying her face in my hair for a few quiet seconds like she's done since I was a baby. *Such a sweet boy*. She hugged me, but I didn't hug back. I never quite know what to do with affection.

Allen came over to pick Mom up for dinner at a swanky hotel. He wore a black three-piece suit with a matching bowtie. He shaved off his blonde wisp of a beard to reveal a chiseled jaw that reminded me of a Hollywood actor. Grandma said he looked like a waiter. She said it in Chinese so he didn't take offense.

## FICTION

He gasped by how good Mom looked and took her hand in his, something Dad never did. Allen's hands were so big and surly that one of his equated to both of Mom's.

As soon as the door shut, Grandma said Mom was ungrateful and Dad was disappointing while peeling roasted chestnuts and consuming an unhealthy amount.

Our dining table was packed with Grandma's New Year offerings to the gods. The fist-sized Mandarin oranges and uncooked rice decorated with red dates and one piso coins were intended to attract good fortune and prosperity while the grey mound of tikoy, glutinous rice cake, would act as the glue, securing luck all year long. When I buried the coins in the rice grains watching the metal slowly disappear as if in quicksand, Grandma slapped my hand and called me an insolent child. She reminded me that this tribute is not only for her and me, but for my kids, grandkids, great grandkids and all the future members of the Lu clan.

We took the crowded elevator up to the roof deck with our neighbors – packs of families traveling in droves that included their cousins, second aunts and relatives from the provinces vacationing in the city – to watch the ridiculous amount of money somebody spent on fireworks. The mob of almost one hundred were jostling for the perfect spot, cursing, shoving and climbing on each other's shoulders. Grandma played her age card so we seized the East-facing rails that overlooked Manila Bay. She leaned on my back using my body as a cane to balance her footing; I was much smaller than her back then, my hair barely crossed the height of her shoulders.

The first golden missile launched into the sky bursting into a fountain of brilliant light. Then, an innumerable amount of torpedoes, grenades and chemical cocktails exploded like an atomic bomb in the atmosphere, spewing colorful bullets ricocheting everywhere like stars, creating constellations that never existed before.

I was overwhelmed by the superabundance of light and shut my eyes with my hand. My mind wandered to thoughts about Mom and Dad. Was Dad out on a date or cooped up in his room watching fireworks through a window? Will Mom be able to dance in those high heels sharp enough to be used as a weapon?

*Don't close your eyes, Fu Xing.* Grandma removed my hand and pulled my eyes open with her fingers. *That's you! Your name means Lucky Star. You'll be up there in the sky one day when you're older! Shiny and revered by many.*

*Dad said William means resolute protector,* I corrected. The night before Dad left, I slept in between him and Mom in our giant king-sized bed, the bacon, lettuce and tomato in our family sandwich.

## THE SOCK DRAWER

*It's your job to protect Mom when I'm gone, okay Will?* He whispered and kissed my forehead. *You'll have to be the man of the house for a while.* He made it my job to stay by Mom's side and protect her resolutely.

Grandma sighed and said that English names were just made up to satisfy the social rules in the country we're living in and I was carelessly named after a British Prince on the cover of OK! Magazine.

Back in the condo, Grandma prepared dinner for Grandpa while I watched Home Alone on the giant screen TV Dad sent over. She set tray of Grandpa's favorite food – sharks fin soup, salt and pepper spareribs, lobster with glass noodles and a tall cold glass of Coke – in front of his altar and told him all about Mom's fancy new job at the bank, how I was adjusting well to my new school and stories of people they knew who've passed away before I was born. *To new beginnings!* she said as she clinked her glass of champagne to his Coke. New beginnings for the new millennium.

As midnight approached, Grandma packed the pockets of my pajamas with shiny antique coins meant to bring wealth in the upcoming year. Then, at midnight, I jumped on my bed vigorously while Grandma danced and clapped gleefully singing *you will grow tall and strong my little Fu Xing.*

I couldn't sleep. Since we moved to Escolta, I didn't seem to require the restorative function of a deep sleep. Through my window, I peered at the girl my age who lived in the building across from us. We waved at each other sometimes. If we had carrier pigeons, we'd be carrier pigeon pals. I imagined her name was Annie and she was wedged between her two parents in bed. Maybe Grandma was right, I am lucky. Unlike Annie, I had my bed all to myself.

It was past 1 a.m. and Mom was still out. She's normally back by 11 p.m. on the dot. I'd wake up to the clickety-clack of her heels on the tile and she'd pop by my room and kiss me goodnight. I was worried that If she got away with going home this late, she'd try to get away with it for the rest of the year 2000.

Mom told me that after most dates, they'd often stroll along Jones Bridge, a fifteen-minute walk from our building, and talk. *Just talk,* she said. Jones Bridge was built after World War I and served as a symbol of autonomy from the United States. Only foreigners viewed it romantically because it overlooks the Pasig River. The European-style street lamps illuminated the walkway. It is a little piece of neoclassical architecture in the mishmash that is Manila. In fact, most Manilenos think that the polluted river smelled like rotten garbage and were afraid of the people living underneath the bridge.

## FICTION

I slipped past the doorman, as I often do, and my 8-year old frame went unnoticed. He was focused on the tiny TV on his desk that played hour-old footage of the fireworks display at Manila Bay. Outside, New Year's festivities in Escolta were still underway. The street kids were playing with fire crackers, lighting them up in the middle of the road and then running for safety. Firecrackers hold enough power to blow off an arm but they reveled in this fear and the smoke and their laughter. I hid behind the illegally parked cars and watched the sparks from a safe distance.

The smog replaced the usual boisterous activity in Escolta – cars edging their way through the noisy traffic and businessmen craftily closing deals. When the crackling of the fireworks stopped, it was replaced by small echo chambers of sound, the snoring man sleeping in an alleyway, the pitter-patter of paws from the stray cats.

The red and gold doors of Seafood Wharf Palace, where Grandma habitually ordered frog legs for dinner and fried pig's brain for dessert, were chained and locked with a heavy duty bolt. Through the barred glass windows, I could see the artificial light coming from the aquarium of fish, crustaceans and shellfish awaiting their turn on the wok. Cooks and cleaners were sleeping on lined-up dining chairs.

At the end of Jones Bridge, I spot the silhouettes of a tall American man and small woman 300 meters away on the other side. I slowed down my strides to give Mom and Allen time to notice my presence before they take me into their arms to join their party. A sort of new beginning I conceived in my head.

The cool breeze from the river glided through the air. I shivered in my thin cotton pajamas. My nose shuddered as I inhaled the toxic fumes of the water waste.

A rail thin man in a torn white t-shirt and crazy hair grabbed my shoulders from behind and asked where I was going. His beard covered not just his face, it went all the way down to his neck. It was then I realized that the toxic fumes came from him.

When I didn't reply, his tone changed from pleading to investigative. His questions were designed to assess his next move.

*Where do you live?*

*Who are you with?*

*Where are your parents?*

The glint of the blade in his pocket was obvious against his matte and grimy figure. I take a step back then catch his expression shift wildly, like a feral animal, as he noticed the sound of money in my pockets. He could have, at that moment, ripped the coins out

## THE SOCK DRAWER

of my pocket and stolen my wealth for the next millennium.

I take a quick look back at Mom and Allen. They were gazing past the river, at the view of moon-lit Manila. His arms were around Mom's shoulders and she wasn't cognizant of my presence at all. Lost in their world of two.

Right after I inhaled, prelude to a scream for help, he scooped me up in one smooth move and covered my mouth with his dusty blade-equipped hand. I suffocate for a moment then bite his fingers ferociously. He flinched in pain. I wriggled out of his grasp. He managed to leave a cut on my arm.

I ran. Rubber against pavement. My toes railed against the thin straps of my slippers. I heard his heavy footsteps trail me as he called out; his tone reverting back to one of pleading. I felt firecrackers going off in my tummy on the precipice of breaking through the stomach lining.

The combination of fear and adrenaline worked as a zephyr pushing me into turbo speed. My knees reached higher, my arms flailed faster. My senses became more acute to my surroundings and the man following me.

I passed through Seafood Wharf Palace where the cooks and waiters came alive preparing for the New Years lunch rush. I noticed the street kids seated calmly on the sidewalk, expended of energy, waiting for the sunrise. I could hear him behind me, his stomps, his breaths growing in clarity.

Right when I saw the spotlight of my building, I slipped. My cheek, arms and knees slammed onto the uneven pavement. Fragments of gravel dug into my skin and scraped my bones. I heard footsteps approaching me.

The doorman picked me up and sighed *Will, Will, Will. What did you do?* Propped up, I saw the tall American man and small woman up close, except they were just two strangers heading to their illegally parked car. They looked nothing like Mom and Allen.

I struggled up the elevator because it felt like needles had been inserted into the cartilage of my knees. I forgot my keys so I rang the doorbell, then knocked on the door, then kicked it in pain to no response. I sat down on the floor of the corridor and examined the aftermath. Under the unforgiving fluorescent light, my pale legs looked like the surface of the moon.

I heard the twisting of the lock and the screech of the door hinges. Grandma simply shook her head and quietly uttered *Ah ya*.

In the shower, she stripped me to my underwear and turned on ice cold water,

## FICTION

which felt like acid on my body. The stinging sensation woke me up. The cut on my arm was still dripping with blood coloring the water a dreamy shade of pink.

Grandma paced outside the room and failed to reach Mom on the phone. She returned with a medical kit. *What happened?* She asked. I couldn't comprehend what had just occurred so I just looked her in the eyes and she miraculously understood.

She applied hydrogen peroxide to disinfect the cuts on my face, arms and legs, then smeared on To Shong Yo Tsui, a sticky brown liquid that worked as a Chinese cure-all, with a cotton pad, which hurt and felt like she was stabbing me with a hot poker.

*An auspicious start to the year*, she laughed and kissed my head. *Go to sleep. When you wake up everything will be A-Okay*, she said enthusiastically as if it really will be. For the next few years, before she passed, Grandma was my resolute protector and I believe that's the reason I'm a lucky star.

I returned to bed and still couldn't fall asleep. My body retained the adrenaline, charging my head with excessive thoughts on how I could protect Mom, finally see Dad, and shoot up to the sky like Grandma wanted me to. I stared outside my window and watched the uneven surface of the moon slowly lose its color, and the sun take its place.

I heard a loud crash and the clickety-clack of Mom's heels. She stopped by my bedroom door and opened it releasing a sharp noise from a loose screw.

*You're already awake*, she said surprised.

I simply smiled at her, my head still resting on a pillow.

*Happy new year*, she sang.

She teetered onto my bed. Her face was redder than my bruised one. She curled into my single mattress, as I rolled onto my side. She embraced me from behind, burying her face in my hair. My heart began to race.

*Happy new year, love*. My heart rate slowed down to a comfortable rhythm. Then, we laid there, her arms tight around my tummy, my eyes closed hard, her legs rested on top of my bruised knee, the pain of which rendered me sleepless on the 1st day of the year 2000.





## Quarantine Love, Part 3

By Diane Culp

Weeks passed and still they sat in the apartment. Things were more relaxed in the city but Stanley would be working at home for the foreseeable future and Janelle's job appeared gone for good, which in a way was okay with her since she didn't feel especially safe going out. She had; however; started to peruse the help wanted ads and kept her eye out for cheap apartments although she had no money for a deposit. She thought maybe she should ask Stanley for the money, but that felt wrong somehow. Neither her parents nor her sister could help her out financially. Maybe she should leave the city and try to start new somewhere else, but that seemed like a bad choice in the middle of what was still a pandemic, yet ever since the man in the window had disappeared Janelle had felt restless; like there was a whole world just waiting for her....well after the pandemic, of course. No way, was she going out in the world right now, not any more than she absolutely had to of course.

One day she had gone to the corner market for some coffee and a man had coughed as he passed her on the street. That was enough for her. She took a shower and changed clothes when she came home. That was a Thursday, Janelle knew because it was a chicken night and she had briefly thought about having something different that night. She had thought she might pick up something at the corner market, maybe some lasagne or some pork barbeque, but then that man had coughed and she hadn't even gotten all the way to the market. She just turned around and went home.

Stanley was mad when she returned without the coffee, but for once she ignored him and went straight to the shower. When she came out, he was gone and there was just a note on the table telling her he was going to his parent's house for dinner....they were having chicken there, and coffee. Janelle sighed reading the note, then suddenly felt liberated. She couldn't remember when she had had time alone in the apartment without Stanley. He was always there. She was always there. It was not healthy, but now she had at least a couple hours to herself.

First, she danced around the room a little, then ordered in some Chinese food, and turned on the tv. She had no idea what was on because Stanley always picked the programs they watched. She scrolled through the channels, at first stopping at one of Stanley's favorite shows, then she asked herself why she was watching his show. She could actually watch something she wanted to watch, something Stanley would never watch.

## FICTION

She finally settled on their local channel that was airing a show about people looking like their pets during quarantine. It was funny as so many people's hair now resembled their pet's fur. The show ended and suddenly there he was on the screen, the man from the window. Janelle couldn't believe her eyes and then her ears as she listened to the ad. It was for an upcoming local tv show called "Finding Love in Quarantine." It was a virtual take off on the popular show, "The Bachelor", only this show was looking for local girls who wanted to compete on a completely virtual show for this man's heart. Janelle couldn't believe her luck. What if she got on the show and won? She could leave Stanley once and for all and finally meet the man in the window. She squinted at the tv once more before the ad ended. She was almost positive it was the same man. She quickly scribbled down the phone number for women to call if they wanted to be on the show, then she began to dial. She got through 6 digits before chickening out and hanging up.

"This is crazy, right?" she thought. But then she thought, "The whole world is crazy right now", and she dialed the number.

She listened to the ringing on the other end and was contemplating hanging up a second time when a voice answered, "Do you want to find love in quarantine? If so dial one."

Janelle pressed one and a second voice came on the phone. "Do you want to find love in quarantine? Are you tired of being alone? Do you want more out of your life?"

"Yes," squealed Janelle, "definitely yes!"

"Well alright then," said the voice on the other end, "I just need to ask you a few questions."

Four simple questions later, the call ended and Janelle rushed to her computer in order to wait for the email that would ask more detailed questions. Janelle found herself staring at the screen wishing time would move a little faster. She was hoping she could finish the questionnaire before Stanley got home.

After what seemed like a small eternity, the email arrived. Janelle opened it up and began to answer the questions. Name, that was easy. What was your longest relationship? That would be with Stanley, so two and a half years, at least if you counted the time they were stuck together since Janelle had "broken" up with him. What are you looking for in a relationship? An escape from her current situation didn't seem like something the show would want to hear so she put down, "True love and a deep meaningful relationship with someone who loves me for who I am." What do you like to do in your spare time?

## THE SOCK DRAWER

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## FICTION

This was like a trick question. I mean since the pandemic began, Janelle had nothing but spare time but also had nothing to do. Staring out a window at a naked man did not seem to qualify as an answer. Janelle tried to remember what she liked to do back before she moved in with Stanley. She used to go to yoga. She hadn't thought about that in a long time. She couldn't really remember why she stopped. She knew Stanley made fun of all the people they used to see going to yoga on their way to work in the morning. She guessed that was why she stopped. She had enjoyed it though and realized how nice it would be to do it again. She typed in yoga as an answer. She also liked cooking when she could make whatever she wanted. Trying new recipes used to be fun. She typed in cooking, and then added in reading because even though she hadn't picked up a book during all the time they were stuck in the apartment, she normally did like to read. Why had she never really cared that Stanley didn't have a single book in his apartment? That should have been a red flag right from the beginning.

The rest of the questions were fairly easy until she got to the one asking her to describe her dream man and her dream date. She had never really thought about either of these things before. She closed her eyes and pictured the naked man who had been in the window across from her. She wasn't sure if he was her "dream man" or if she had just dreamed about him, but she figured she should try to describe him as much as she could to up her odds of being picked.

"My dream man is a city dweller," she wrote. "He has brown hair, a good body, and a sense of adventure."

Would that be enough, she wondered. She couldn't describe his eyes. She thought he was fairly tall, but then realized for all she knew he might have been standing on a stool by the window. In fact, that made some sense. Otherwise, she might not have been able to see all of him in the window. Better not to mention height at all.

She moved on to her dream date. "That's easy," she thought, "at this point going anywhere." At first she rejected that answer because she figured they were looking more for something along the lines of "A romantic dinner followed by a walk on the beach.", but the more she thought about it, the more she liked the first answer. It was true and kind of funny in light of everyone having to stay home for so long.

She quickly read over her answers and hit send just as Stanley came in the door. She shut the laptop and turned to greet him.

"How are your parents?" she asked, but Stanley didn't answer. Instead he walked right past her into the bedroom and closed the door. Clearly, he was still mad about the

## THE SOCK DRAWER

coffee. That meant the morning wouldn't be any better because there was still no coffee in the apartment. Janelle sighed, curled up on the couch and went to sleep.

While she slept, she had a dream she was on the show, only the bachelor wasn't the man in the window, it was Stanley. She awoke with a shudder and realized it was already daylight. She stretched and tried to decide if she should try to go to the corner market again and pick up some coffee before Stanley woke up. Part of her really wanted to because a) she wanted coffee and b) her morning would just go better if there was coffee when Stanley woke up. On the other hand, part of her wanted him to have to go get the coffee. She finally decided to go ahead and get the coffee herself. She got dressed, slipped on a mask, and headed for the market.

There was a short line at the market, but everyone was 6 feet apart. Janelle grabbed the coffee and a package of sweet rolls and got in line. There were three people in front of her. The man at the front of the line paid for his purchase and walked out the door, as he turned to go down the street, Janelle got a look at him through the window. It was him! It was naked guy!

Janelle was stunned for a moment, then sprang into action. She put the coffee and the sweet rolls on the nearest shelf and hurried out the door. She turned in the direction the man had gone, but she didn't see him. Did that mean he lived in the building next to the market or had he turned down the alley. She hurried and looked down the alley, but only the garbage men seemed to be there. Glancing up and down the street in case she had missed him, Janelle felt simultaneously joy and disappointment. If he still lived in the neighborhood, she had a chance to meet him even if she didn't get on the show. She walked back home in a daze without the coffee or the sweet rolls.

When she got back to the apartment, she could hear Stanley in the shower. He was going to be mad there was not coffee, but so what. Soon, he would not be her problem.

Two days later, Janelle got a reply from the show. Her fingers shook as she clicked to open the email. She could barely look once she did open it, but when she forced her eyes downward, all she could see was, "Congratulations! You've been chosen!" She didn't even bother to read any further than that. She let out a little yelp which caused Stanley to sigh loudly and mutter that he was working, could she please be quiet.

Much to her surprise, Janelle heard herself say, "No, no I cannot be quiet. I'm going for a walk."

Leaving Stanley looking stunned, Janelle chuckled to herself and marched out the

## FICTION

door.

It was a lovely day for a walk and Janelle felt joy in her heart for the first time in a long time. Could this really mean she might be rid of Stanley? Then a flicker of doubt set in and she realized she might not be picked by the guy. What then? Where would she go? She certainly couldn't stay with Stanley then, could she? "No" she thought, "that would be impossible."

She tried to quickly put that thought out of her mind, but all day long and into the evening, all she could think of was what would happen to her if she didn't win. She was so deep in thought, that even Stanley seemed to notice.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" he growled when she didn't hear him ask for his nightly foot rub. "You've been off in lala land all evening. Did you notice you didn't even bring the mashed potatoes to the table, I had to get them myself."

She had not noticed.

The next day she got an email from the show telling her they would start filming the show the following week. They would send her the equipment she would need to record herself. Some segments would be live, but most would be recorded. They also told her to do a three minute video introduction of herself.

This sent Janelle into a panic. How could she do any of this with Stanley in the apartment? What would she say to him? What would she say in the video? How was any of this going to work? What a fool she had been to think that it would. She went to bed that night and tossed and turned while trying to think of a solution. Just before dawn, it came to her. She would tell Stanley it was part of a job interview. After all, everything was done online these days. She would suggest that he work in the bedroom so that she would not disturb him or perhaps, even better, he could go to his parent's home. Feeling relieved to have come up with a solution she fell into a deep sleep before Stanley came out to start working a couple of hours later.

Janelle worked up her courage and turned to Stanley as he was pouring a cup of coffee.

"We need to talk," she said.

Stanley turned to her and said, "I don't have time for this."

"Well you need to make time. I have a virtual interview on Monday, and I don't want to disturb you. Maybe you could make plans to work at your parent's house that day."

## THE SOCK DRAWER

Stanley looked at her, then surprised her by saying, "That's not a bad idea. Monday is meatloaf day and I have always liked my mother's meatloaf better than yours. I'll spend the day there, and maybe even the night."

Janelle could barely contain her joy.

"Thank you," she said, then sat down to begin thinking about what she should say for her introduction video.

All morning she tried to come up with something that would make her sound interesting and fun, but she quickly realized she was boring and just how much fun could anyone be stuck inside during a pandemic. Finally around noon, it came to her, and once Stanley went to bed that night, she was ready to record.

As soon as Stanley left for his parents on Monday morning, Janelle went and stood by the window, the one where she used to watch the naked man. She turned on her camera and began, "Hi! My name is Janelle. Even though we are in the middle of a pandemic, I'm always up for a new adventure, even if it's no further than my own window."

Janelle watched it a couple of times, felt satisfied, downloaded it, and clicked send.

Afterwards she was so excited she couldn't get to sleep so she got up and started looking at her phone. Just for fun she decided to check out some online dating sites. It had been a long time since she had done that. Not that she had ever had any luck with them. Oh sure, she went on a date or two here and there, but the guys tended to be creepy and usually not as good looking in person as their photos suggested, but what the heck, tonight she was feeling adventurous and maybe if the show didn't work out, she could find someone on Tinder.

She looked through a few guys, scrolled left a few times and even scrolled right a couple of times. None of the guys seemed to be as good looking as the man in the window, but it never hurt to have a backup plan. She turned off her phone and went to sleep.

The next morning, she was surprised to see that she had gotten a couple of matches. The first guy was well built in this photo. She was sort of excited as she clicked on the message, "I want you to rub my feet until you bring me to orgasm. Then if I'm not too spent, I'll rub your feet too."

"Oh dear, God," thought Janelle. "What was it with men and foot rubs?" She quickly unmatched, then clicked on the next message.

## FICTION

"Suck my toes and I'll suck you."

Janelle deleted her Tinder profile. Two days later, she got a call from the show. They loved her video and would begin shooting at the end of the week. They were shipping video equipment to her house immediately.

Janelle realized she had not really thought things through because she wasn't sure how she would explain the equipment to Stanley. Still she noticed joy in her heart and decided she would just tell him she had gotten a new job that required her use of it. As it turned out; however; she wouldn't need an excuse at all because that night Stanley told her he was going to go visit his parents for the week. They apparently needed some help around the house and it would be easier if he were there. Janelle's heart skipped a beat as she realized she would have the apartment to herself. Even if she didn't "win" the show, at the very least she would soon know the name of the mystery man and learn a little something about him. She hadn't felt this excited in years. It was like being a kid and waiting for Christmas.

The video equipment arrived the next day and after setting it up, Janelle checked her email for information on what would happen next.

"Here's how things will work, " stated the email. Our first episode will show our viewers, and our bachelor, the introduction videos that you and the other contestants sent us. Our bachelor will be watching live so we can all see his reaction to the videos. If he desires, once he has "met" all of you, he will have a chance to ask each one of you a question and get to know you a little better. We will be doing this over a Zoom meeting which we will also be airing live, so please check your Zoom background and remove any offensive items. Janelle looked around the apartment. She found the whole place offensive but realized that was just her and that nothing would stand out that should offend anyone else. Following that our bachelor will send four girls out of the Zoom meeting. If you get sent out of the meeting your time on the show will have come to an end. If you remain in the Zoom, you will be getting further instructions as to the next part of the show. The show will be airing exactly two days from now. Please be sure you are ready to Zoom into Love at the time listed below.

Two days! Janelle could hardly believe it. She ran to the bathroom and started messing with her hair and putting on makeup, trying different styles and colors to determine which one she liked the best. After a couple of hours, she was exhausted and went to bed.



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The next day flew by quickly and before she knew it, it was show time. She had a flicker of guilt run through her when she realized she had not thought of Stanley one time since he had walked out the door to go to his parents. The flicker dimmed quickly though and she hurried to her computer to check for any last minute instructions and to make sure her Zoom was up and ready to go. She opened up her email account and saw an email from the producer marked, "IMPORTANT: LAST MINUTE CHANGE, PLEASE READ AND RESPOND."

Janelle clicked and opened the email. We are sorry to inform you that due to our contestant having Covid 19, he WILL NOT be appearing on the show, but, DON'T WORRY, we have a replacement.

Janelle felt her heart sink. Now she might never meet the guy. Also, she hoped he would be okay. Couldn't they delay filming for a couple of weeks? But no, instead they had found a replacement.

"Oh well," thought Janelle. "I have come this far, no reason not to keep going. Besides, maybe the new guy will be super hot."

Janelle's phone rang and she saw it was the production assistant from the show.

"Are you ready to go?" asked the voice on the other end of the phone.

"I guess, " said Janelle.

"Please keep your tv off during the introduction part. We want you to be totally surprised during the Zoom call. Wait in the Zoom waiting room and we will let you in when our bachelor has finished "meeting" all the contestants."

"Alright, " said Janelle and she hung up the phone.

Janelle felt the butterflies in her stomach as she waited to be let into the Zoom chat. She wanted to run to the bathroom or pace or something, but was afraid she would miss being let into the Zoom.

After what seemed like an hour and a half, Janelle was admitted into the Zoom. She looked at all the other faces there. The women were stunning. How had she gotten picked she wondered. Suddenly the host began speaking.

"Welcome to Love In Quarantine", the show where you can make a love connection even in the middle of a pandemic. Since our first bachelor came down with Covid, we had to do some last minute switching so none of our lovely contestants know anything about our bachelor."

## FICTION

"Ladies," I know you are all excited to meet our quarantine bachelor. He's "met" all of you through your videos, now it's time for you to meet him. Let's let him join our Zoom party."

Janelle realized her heart was thumping wildly as she waited for a face to appear on the screen. Was this her way out from Stanley?

"Oh please, oh please, oh please," she thought.

She stared at the screen and suddenly found herself looking at Stanley.

He was the replacement? Her ears began to buzz as soon as she heard the host announce his name. How could this be? How could he have lied to her about his parents needing work around the house. Oh shit, how was she going to escape now? She had no place to go and there was no way she could stay at his apartment now. Should she leave the Zoom party right now. Should she smile and pretend everything was alright? A million thoughts swirled in her head.

Suddenly, she realized names were being called. If your name was called, you were to wave goodbye and leave the screen. Surely her name had been called. She couldn't focus, she couldn't concentrate. Before she could hit the leave button, the host was saying. "Well that was quick. Ladies, you survived the first round. All of you will now go on a virtual group date. Tell us your thoughts, Stanley."

Janelle watched as Stanley leaned back in his swivel chair and put his naked feet up on the desk in front of him. All the women could see was his big hairy feet. Janelle did not wait to hear anymore. She left the Zoom.



## Love and Admiration

By Nicole DiAntonio

“For the last time, Frida, you fold the dough like this to make Stromboli! How many times do I gotta show ya?” My boss Georgio shoved me to the side as he took over folding the dough.

“It’s Farida,” *for the thousandth time! Is it really that hard?*

“Psh, same thing.” He waved me off.

“Not really,” I said under my breath, but he heard me.

“How’s about this? I start getting your name right, when you start following directions, camel toe!” *How’s about I punch you in the groin, you sexist, racist asshole?*

“I’m sorry. I thought I was doing it right.” *I am doing it right. I’m doing it exactly the way you showed me the past four times you yelled at me for doing it “wrong.”*

“Yeah, you *thought*. How long you been workin’ here, huh?”

“A week.”

“And you can’t even get this right? You didn’t even cover the thing in egg like I said!” *I did cover it! You think I’d forget the egg after you threw one at me the first time?*

“I-I did cover it in egg.”

“Oh really? I barely noticed, which means you probably didn’t use *two* eggs, like I said.” *You never said –! How was I supposed to know that?* He dumped the food into the trash and slammed the pan back on the counter.

“Start over.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to–” Georgio’s phone started to ring. He huffed angrily and mumbled a curse. “Apologize to the customer you just made wait.” *You’re the one who threw the food away instead of helping me fix it.* The door to the backroom slammed, and I could feel people in the restaurant staring at me as my eyes brimmed with tears. I sniffled and quickly wiped my eyes with my wrist, continuing on with remaking the Stromboli. Georgio’s voice could be heard from the backroom, yelling at his ex-wife over the phone, as he often did. A few customers got up and left before ordering anything.

## FICTION

\* \* \*

I hated working at Georgio's Boardwalk Pizza. I wanted to quit so badly, but it was my first time working in the U.S. for the summer, and I didn't know what I was doing. I had originally gotten the idea to do this from a few university friends back in Egypt, who would often talk about their summer exploits in Wildwood. Their stories fascinated and excited me, so I planned on going with one of them before the start of senior year. Unfortunately, my friend flunked a course and had to retake it over the summer. She backed out last minute, but I was still determined to go. I wanted to have a good time, make some money, and maybe even make a few new friends. Most of all, I wanted to come home with my own stories to tell.

It took me a while to get the interview for my tourist visa, so I didn't arrive in Wildwood until late June. By that point, finding a job felt nearly impossible. I had to scour the boardwalk up and down just to find the job at *Georgio's*. It made sense. No one would hire a seasonal employee mid-season unless, like Georgio, all their other employees kept quitting.

I was Georgio's only employee. This meant I had to work a 10-hour shift every day until he could find more help. The prospect of working that long didn't faze me much at first. I needed the hours to pay the rent on my apartment. However, within a week, I was already sick of Georgio.

The worst part of it was that I had no one with which to commiserate. I didn't want to call my mom and cry to her on tough days. She was already fearful about me travelling alone. I knew if I gave her any more reason to worry, she might just come and bring me home herself. Whenever she did call, I had to lie. I had to tell her about all the fun I wasn't really having. I had to tell her about my great boss who didn't exist. I even had to lie to my friends. They didn't think I could make it in the U.S. by myself with how timid I was, but I was determined to prove them wrong. So, both outside and inside of work, I was alone.

\* \* \*

There were two times of day I looked forward to most: break time and closing time. Later that day, I went on my usual 30-minute lunch break. I didn't use it to eat. Instead, I found the closest public restroom, walked into one of the stalls, and cried. All of the pressure that had built up in my head from holding back tears was finally released. I had only done this one other time, and that was when Georgio threw the egg at me. I refused to cry in front of him. If I did, I knew he'd never let me hear the end of it.

My cellphone alarm eventually indicated my break was almost over, and I grew even



"Goin' Thru It" by  
Megan Ulrich

more upset. I didn't want to go back. I just wanted to get on my bike and escape.

"Stop crying," I kept mumbling to myself as I walked out of the stall. I wiped away my tears as they continued to collect in my eyes and slide down my cheeks. Then I splashed some water on my face to make it look as though I had not been crying. I didn't have much time. If I was late getting back, I knew Georgio would really lay into me. So, I started back to the restaurant.

\* \* \*

Georgio's was a dingy Italian place situated between a colorful, overpriced ice cream shop and a franchise arcade in which winning the cranes was an impossible feat. The restaurant had seating outside and umbrellas on each table to keep the seagulls from attacking patrons, but the place never really had many patrons. So, the outside seating was mostly used by people coming from the ice cream shop or other more popular food vendors. Across the boards, blocking the view of the ocean, was a single basketball game. The guy who worked it always sounded like he was hopped up on cocaine. From open to close, he would do the same three chants into the microphone. Sometimes, I would catch myself unconsciously nodding along to the beat.

There was also a game located directly next to the outside seating of the restaurant, and I had to pass it every time I went inside. It was called The Striker and looked like the kind of game some really juiced-up boyfriend would play to impress his girl. You hit the target on the lever with a big mallet and tried to ring a bell 50 ft. high. I wasn't a huge fan of the game, but the woman who worked it was very nice. I didn't know her name, but from several racist and sexist comments made by Georgio, I knew she was Egyptian too and in her mid-forties. She would always smile at me and say hello whenever she saw me, but this time, as I walked past the game, she must have noticed my puffy eyes and called to me in Arabic.

"Hey, miss." She waved me over, and I hesitantly approached her. It was the first time someone in the U.S. had spoken to me in Arabic.

"What's your name? I'm Ghaidaa." I shook her hand, surprised by her insanely tight grip.

"Farida. Nice to meet you."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"Because I know Georgio can be an insufferable shithead." Taken aback by her

## THE SOCK DRAWER

remark, I looked over my shoulder at the restaurant to see that Georgio was preoccupied with a customer and perfectly oblivious. I laughed nervously.

“Um, yeah. A little bit sometimes.”

“You don’t have to lie. You’re not the first employee of his I’ve talked to. And I’ll tell you what I told them: you shouldn’t let him treat you like that. Just get it over with and tell him to fuck off. There are plenty of jobs on the boardwalk.”

“Oh, I don’t want to quit. I-I can’t do that.”

“Why not? He treats you like garbage, and you’re the only employee he has. You’d think that would make him a little more grateful for everything you do.”

“I know, but...”

“Look, I’ve been on this boardwalk for 15 years. I’ve worked for people like him before. He’s not the type of asshole that will realize he’s an asshole. You shouldn’t waste your time with him.”

“I just... it’s my first job here, ya know? And it was really hard to find so late in the summer. Plus, I don’t have much experience. Who else would hire me?” Ghaidaa looked over to the restaurant and then back to me.

“Tell you what,” she picked up the mallet from its holder and balanced it between us with the handle tilted towards me, “I’ll give you however many tries it takes, and if you can ring that bell, I’ll personally tell Georgio to ‘fuck off’ for you. I’ll tell him you quit, and I’ll find you a new job.” My eyes widened.

“You can do that?” Ghaidaa simply smiled at me as she rested her hands on the tip of the mallet handle and leaned toward me.

“I can do anything.” With the way she carried herself, I didn’t doubt it. She ceased leaning on the handle and tilted it my way again. My hand reflexively reached for it without even thinking about the challenge ahead of me. All I wanted in that moment was to be free from the hell that was currently my job.

“Frida! There you are! What are you doing? Your break is over! Can’t you tell time?” Georgio shouted to me from the restaurant’s entrance. He stood there with his arms folded and a scowl on his face. An apology rose to my lips, and I turned to head back to work, but Ghaidaa stopped me.

“Give her a moment, will ya? She wants to try this.”

“She can’t do that.” Georgio shook his head. “She won’t make it past peewee.”

## FICTION

“Ah, you don’t know anything.” Ghaidaa waved him away. “Three tries before you get back to work. Go ahead.” I looked at Georgio a moment for confirmation. He rolled his eyes and waved his hand in a motion that told me to hurry up.

Ghaidaa gave me an encouraging nod as I hesitantly gripped the handle of the mallet. Before picking it up, my mind wandered off towards the future, to the moment after I rang the bell, to the look on Georgio’s face when Ghaidaa told him off, to the new job she’d find me, and to the nicer boss I’d be proud to work for. All I had to do was ring some stupid bell, and I would be home free. *Easy peasy.*

But all my fantasies came crashing back down to earth when I realized that I couldn’t even lift the mallet with one hand. Even with two hands and occasional adjustments with my thigh, I struggled to carry it to the target. By the time I was ready to swing, a small crowd of people stopped on the boardwalk to watch me.

“This oughta be good,” Georgio snorted as he curled his lips into a sneer. “Go ahead, girlie!”

“Yeah, get it, lady!” a random stranger in the crowd shouted. An acidic panic bubbled up in my stomach as I tried to grip the mallet like a baseball bat and realized that I had no idea how to swing something so heavy without hurting myself. I adjusted my grip one last time before awkwardly swinging the mallet over my shoulder. The weight was too heavy. I staggered backward before lurching forward to compensate. I soon realized that the weight of the mallet had shifted in a different direction on the way down. The flat part turned horizontal mid-swing. It was about to graze the target and hit my left foot. I pulled back my foot and loosened my right hand’s grip. The result was a complete miss of the target, a near miss of my foot, and a loud cackle from the crowd behind me, including Georgio.

“Aw boo, you suck!” the same stranger shouted.

My ears became hot, and my panic grew. *What are you doing? You’re proving him right! Stop being so weak!* I was still determined to give it another shot, but at the same time, I was a bit shaken at having nearly injured myself. I lifted the mallet again, staggering backward. *Who are you kidding? You can’t do this.* I stood there for a moment, trying to figure out a safer method of swinging.

“Hurry up, lady! Do it already!”

“Shut up!” Ghaidaa snapped. The man immediately clammed up. Feeling more pressured to get this over with, I swung in the same manner. This time, the hammer



## THE SOCK DRAWER

gently hit the target before spinning off out of control and causing me to lose my grip on the handle. The head of the mallet smashed into the shield on the side of the lever. It bounced off the shield and rolled toward my foot. I took a panicked step back, and the indicator hopped upward, reaching *4 ft. – peewee*. Another burst of laughter erupted from the crowd behind me.

“I told you!” Georgio shouted to Ghaidaa, who just folded her arms and rolled her eyes. At this point, I was so embarrassed and mortified at having just nearly injured myself again, I didn’t even want to take my third attempt. I just wanted to go back to work. Nothing could be worse than this kind of humiliation. I left the mallet where I had dropped it and walked out of the game, closing the metal gate behind me. Ghaidaa called to me, told me I had one last try left, but I waved her off.

\* \* \*

All day I suffered through Georgio’s comments on my poor performance, and all day a kind of resentment built up within me. I had humiliated myself in front of a whole crowd of people and my boss all to try and achieve something that was clearly impossible. I had been such a fool to even believe Ghaidaa when she said she would quit for me if I rang the bell. She might as well have promised to give me a million dollars and the cure for cancer. She knew she could promise me anything because she knew I’d never make it.

As I wheeled my bike away from the restaurant after closing, I noticed that Ghaidaa had not yet closed up. I tried not to meet her gaze, but it was useless. She called me over the moment she saw me pass by.

“You should try again while no one is around!”

“Sorry Ghaidaa, but I really don’t think I can do it.” I exhaled my exhaustion and frustration along with the words.

“Nonsense! I know you can do it with the right motivation and enough practice.” Suddenly, everything came out at once, the anger, the frustration, the resentment over what had happened this afternoon. I threw my bike down and turned to her.

“Bullshit! You lie! You only made that ridiculous promise to me because you knew I’d *never* be able to ring that bell, admit it! I guess I’m the idiot for believing you. And I’m an even bigger idiot for believing I could actually do it! I knew it was too good to be true.”

“Farida, that’s not true. I – “

“No! It is! I humiliated myself today! Do you realize how embarrassing that was? So, if you don’t mind, I’m not gonna take another try. I’m gonna go home. Have a nice night.”

## FICTION

I picked up my bike and began to wheel it toward the ramp that led off of the boardwalk, but as I was leaving, I began to feel terrible. I had just taken out all of my anger on someone who had not deserved it at all, on someone who had only offered me support, and especially on someone who, for the first time, I felt I could commiserate with. I slowed down, stopped, and turned around to apologize. But I turned around just in time to see Ghaidaa swing the mallet clean over her head in a counter-clockwise direction, smack the target dead-center, and shoot the indicator straight up the 50 ft. pipe.

*Ding!*

The sound was loud and clear. I stared in shock for a moment, and by the time I recovered, the indicator was travelling up the pipe again

*Ding!*

I walked my bike up to the metal gate just in time to get an up-close view of how this 40-something year old woman was swinging around a 16-pound mallet and making it look so easy. Ghaidaa was but a few inches taller than my five-foot scrawny build, and it looked as though she too had trouble lifting the unwieldy mallet. But, instead of using brute force to hold it like a baseball bat and swing it over her shoulder, she stood with a wide stance, holding the mallet by the tail with one hand and by the neck with the other. She swung it forward, then backward, like a pendulum, before she gained enough momentum to bring the mallet all the way around over her head, bring her hands down together at the base of the handle, wallop the target, and send the indicator sprinting up the pipe once more.

*Ding!*

After the third ring of the bell, Ghaidaa turned around to find me standing at the gate and watching her with interested eyes. Startled by her sudden attention, I immediately began to apologize for what I had said, but she stopped me. Without a word, she opened the metal gate and tilted the mallet toward me with a smile that communicated the same thing she had said before: *I know you can do it with the right motivation and enough practice.*

I hesitated before picking up the mallet and shakily approaching the target. I widened my stance and positioned my hands the same way I had observed Ghaidaa's. I swung forward, and as the mallet's head reared back from the swing, I noticed that it had become much lighter as a result. I swung it back over my head, and I slid my right hand down as far as I could to keep control of the swing before it hit the target. Although I knew immediately that the hit would not send the indicator to the top, for the first time, I didn't feel worried about getting injured or embarrassing myself. For the first time, I felt

as though I had control.

The indicator bounced up to *16 ft. – Hopeful.*

And hopeful I suddenly became as adrenaline and joy flooded my body. In an instant I understood why so many people played the game even though there were no prizes to win. “Just love and admiration here,” I would often overhear Ghaidaa explain to her customers. It was enough, and I was so proud of myself. I wanted to try again. I looked over my shoulder for permission, and Ghaidaa gave me a nod.

“I don’t close until 2 am. That’s when the drunks like to come by and show off. As long as I don’t have a customer, you can play as much as you want. It’ll draw people in.”

“Your boss won’t get mad?”

“I am the boss.” She laughed. I smiled and thanked her before turning back to focus on my swing. I stayed at The Striker until 2 am, losing track of time and tearing up my arm muscles. By the end of the night, I was exhausted, but I had become addicted to the game and could now consistently reach up to *34 ft. – Iron Man.* I had also developed a serious grudge against the bell, pointing at it, cursing it, and threatening it like a madman every time I got closer to the peak of the pipe.

\* \* \*

The next day, I overslept and was late to work. When I came running into the restaurant, Georgio immediately started to lay into me.

“Well, it looks like Sleeping Beauty has decided to grace me with her presence. To what do I owe the honor?”

“Lay off, Georgio. It’s the first time I’m late. My alarm didn’t go off.”

“Excuse you?” *Did I just say that out loud? Oh shit.*

“I mean, I’m sorry I’m late. I overslept.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought you said.” *What was that? Since when do you give sass?* I thought to myself as I looked over the counter out at The Striker. For some reason, I felt more confident.

From that morning on, I began using half of my break to take a few cracks at The Striker. And, by some miracle of God, I felt more equipped to deal with Georgio’s bullshit afterwards, especially if I could send the indicator just a little bit higher than the day before. I could tell that Georgio didn’t like me playing the game very much, but he could do nothing about it. I started staying with Ghaidaa after work. It messed with my sleep

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schedule and left me exhausted in the mornings, but it did wonders for my swing and confidence. I was too determined to let a little exhaustion get in my way.

\* \* \*

By the third week of this routine, I was hitting *49 ft. – Thor* consistently, cursing under my breath every time a good swing brought me just below the bell. Ghaidaa would always cheer me on, clapping whenever I'd get a good swing and jokingly booing me whenever I'd mess up and get something like *6ft. – Namby Pamby*. Sometimes she would even hand me the money apron if she needed to use the bathroom but needed someone to run the game while she was away. On these occasions, I tried to imitate Ghaidaa's carnival voice and call out to what little people remained on the boards at 1 am. This became my favorite time of the day.

\* \* \*

Four weeks into playing the game though, I was becoming frustrated with my inability to move any higher than 49 ft. My confidence began to diminish as August approached, and I became woefully resigned to the fact that I might be stuck working for Georgio until I went back to Egypt. However, if I did anything by the end of the summer, I would at least ring that godforsaken bell.

“Fa-ri-da! Fa-ri-da! Fa-ri-da!” Ghaidaa chanted my name as I, having just gone on break, approached the game. “You’re going to ring the bell today, yeah?”

“I don’t know. I hope so.” I sighed, staring up at the peak of the pipe and shielding my eyes from the sun.

“The mallet is fresh out of the water, so it should be heavier right now. Plus, the sun makes the pipe oilier. The indicator should shoot right up with one good swing.”

“You make it sound so simple.” I laughed as I took the mallet and lined up my shot.

*45 ft. – Hulk.*

*Again.*

*39 ft. – Wonder Woman.*

*Again.*

The indicator shot straight up this time, and just when I thought it was going to reach 50 ft. and ring the bell, it stopped short and came back down.

*49 ft. – Thor.*

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“Fuck!” I groaned. “I was so close! Is it rigged or something?” Ghaidaa shook her head.

“I have no need to rig it. There’s no prizes. But you are getting better. Your technique is flawless. It’s just the aim that’s off. You need to focus on the target, nothing else.” After a few minutes, Ghaidaa handed me the money apron to watch the game while she used the bathroom. While she was gone, I took a few customers and made a few more unsuccessful attempts. I even called out to the crowds of people walking the boards. Soon enough, I was stopped mid-call by Georgio, who had approached the gate without me noticing.

“Yo, Frida! What’re you workin’ over here now? If you’re not gonna use your break to eat, then you might as well not even take one!”

“What I do on *my* break is none of your business. I still have 20 minutes left.”

“Oh, it’s not, huh?” Georgio nodded to himself angrily.

“Yeah. It’s not.”

“How’s about this, you play that game one more time, and you’re fired. How’s about that for ‘it’s not.’” I glared at him, anger flaring up my nostrils and turning my face and ears red. I turned my back to him and took a defiant attempt, purposefully botching the swing and getting *4 ft. – peewee*. Georgio just shook his head and mumbled “good riddance” under his breath.

As he walked away though, I swung again. This time, I had taken Ghaidaa’s advice. I stared directly at the target, focusing on nothing else, and when I hit it, the indicator shot up the pole, passed *50 ft. – Unbeatable* and...

*Ding!*

I was shocked for a moment, and the sound caused Georgio to turn around and look at me. I began to laugh hysterically, a mixture of relief and triumph. Ghaidaa walked up on the scene just in time to watch what unfolded next.

“How’s about this, Georgio?” I shouted, holding up my middle finger to him, the widest and dopiest grin on my face, “Fuck you! I quit!” Georgio simply growled to himself, shook his head, and stalked back into the restaurant.

“Well done.” Ghaidaa clapped. “I knew you could do it.”

“Did you see me ring it?”

“I heard it.” She nodded. “Guess it’s time for me to uphold my end of the bargain.”

“No need.” I said as I took off the apron and handed it to her. “I already quit.”

“I saw that. What I meant is that I’ll find you another job. I have a lot of people around here who owe me some favors.” I shook my head.

“Thank you. Really, I mean it. But I think I’ll be okay finding a new job myself.”

“You think you can do that?” I simply smiled at her as I handed her back the mallet.

“I can do anything.”



"Risen (the nature of persistence)"  
by Esther Chiyanda

## Becoming Helena

By Kim Hart

Helena felt considerably lighter when the hammer came down and the auctioneer yelled, 'Sold!'. It was as if 30 years had vanished with one word. She was grateful her husband had left her with massive debts. His gambling and borrowing from a loan shark ultimately freed her. Finding out — at his funeral no less — that he owed a quarter of a million dollars to Mr. Stavros had come as quite a shock. Surely knee-capping through her sensible stockings and having her orthotics replaced by a pair of concrete shoes were bound to be part of her future. Unless she could find \$250,000.

A strong cup of tea and the weak morning sun streaming through her kitchen window the morning after the funeral helped Helena conceive a plan. This house was surplus to her needs, and her wants. It had become a prison over the years instead of the sanctuary she'd always hoped a family home would be and getting rid of it would mark the beginning of her freedom. She and Charles — never Charlie — had raised Charlotte — never Charli — here happily, that is if you asked them. Helena had been surplus to *their* needs. She was the proverbial third wheel.

Charlotte, without her father as her safe-harbor and confidant, wasted no time leaving her mother. She was packed and boarding a plane for Europe less than 24 hours after his funeral.

Helena emptied her lukewarm tea into the sink and began the search for local real estate agents. Mr. Stavros would get his money, and Helena would realize a dream. A small motorhome would become her castle. No more lawns to tend or cleaning bathrooms for hours on end. She felt a tingling of excitement at the thought of her new life.

The packing up of a lifetime of memories wasn't so hard. They really weren't her memories. Charlotte had wanted nothing as a keepsake, her memories of her father were enough, she had told her mother coldly. The underlying message that Helena wasn't a part of any fond memory for Charlotte couldn't have been clearer. Charles had been so fastidious and minimalist that there really wasn't any junk to deal with. What Helena couldn't sell, she gladly donated. The sensible shoes and stockings went in the garbage, along with most of her clothes, and those damn hair-rollers. 'New Helena' wore shorts and t-shirts, joggers and hiking boots, and no jewellery, not even a wedding ring. Her little

motorhome was compact and practical. Not a square inch was wasted. It had everything she needed for a life on the road.

Beetling down the highway, at a touch over the speed limit with no destination in mind, Helena was unburdened, liberated. No house, no nagging partner or whining, sullen child. She was free for the first time in her adult life. She popped another corn chip in her mouth, so many Charles-rules being broken with each crunch; no eating in the car, no artificial flavourings, no eating between meals. Good lord, how did she survive for so long under the thumb of such a dictator? Had she perhaps been a victim of Stockholm Syndrome? Her husband's demise just proved to Helena that leading a healthy lifestyle wasn't the be-all and end-all, especially when your end-all was decided by an on-coming bus. Had Charles enjoyed life? Maybe as much as he could have, Helena reasoned. He was definitely a product of his parents. Her mother-in-law ruled their home with an iron fist. Unfortunately, instead of rebelling, Charles had instituted a similar regime in their family life.

Helena turned the radio to a music station. Another Charles no-no, talk-back was the only 'choice' he allowed. She started singing, softly at first, then with all the gusto and passion of Tina Turner. Some songs reminded her of her childhood. If only she could send her teenage-self a letter; the wisdom she'd impart would save that little girl so much loneliness and heartache.

Australia was a vast continent, and she had seen so little of it. Beach vacations sanctioned by Charles were taken annually, at the same stretch of coastline every year. He and Charlotte fished and surfed while Helena cooked and read. She was excited about exploring the interior of Australia and the west coast. She programmed her GPS and put her foot down. She had no time restraints. If she felt like it, maybe she'd send a card to Charlotte now and then, but that would be the extent of their communication. Helena didn't expect her daughter to keep in contact. She thought her detachment would horrify and sadden many mothers, but any maternal instincts had been eroded away over the decades by the constant dripping of disinterest by Charlotte, the spiteful words and the cold shoulders she'd inherited from her father. Sad, yes, but Helena had accepted it and tried to move on. Anxiety and worry, blame and guilt, served no purpose for anyone.

A flock of black cockatoos, screeching to each other, flew across the road in front of Helena, startling her and bringing her attention back to the surroundings. The Australian bush was rugged and beautiful. She was grateful her parents had made the journey from



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"Unnamed Day 2"  
by Megan Ulrich

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Greece before she was born. She felt an affinity with this country like she was always meant to be a part of it. Discovering more was something she had to do. It was a yearning in her soul. Helena wasn't sure Charles and Charlotte had souls. They never talked of desires and dreams. Both of them dismissed her wants as foolishness, never worthy of discussion. She held onto them though; they were just buried deep inside her where their contemptuous attitude couldn't tarnish them further.

The cockatoos soared away.

Helena had a list of free campgrounds between Sydney and Western Australia. Keeping costs down was important, but she also wanted to meet like-minded people. Those fleeing something or someone, those searching for more or wishing for less, perhaps they had advice or encouragement to share. The grey nomad movement was not one she wished to be associated with though. She knew she fit the profile; a retired person travelling independently in their motorhome around Australia, but she felt they only travelled to places to tick them off their bucket lists. Helena wanted to experience places; meet locals, eat local produce, support local businesses if she could. She may even settle down in a town if she fell in love with it and was tired of travelling.

The free campgrounds were basic but wonderful. No tarred roads, reception areas or playgrounds; just trees, outhouses, and silence. Wildlife skirted the edges and occasionally ventured close to the campers. Kangaroos, some with joeys peeking out of their mother's pouches, cautiously hopped between motorhomes searching for food. Possums came out at night, fighting like cats when their territory was threatened. Helena took photos and even started sketching the fauna and flora. With no one to criticize her endeavours, she felt her creativity blossom.

Other campers welcomed Helena and she discovered fairly quickly a scourge sweeping Australia that she never knew existed. Homelessness among older women was growing at an alarming rate, faster than in any other demographic. She supposed she was homeless in a sense, but that was by choice. Many women she met on her journey were forced to live a nomadic lifestyle. With failed marriages and no money of their own, choices were limited or non-existent. The road was often a better option than a refuge, and it was easier to disappear. The resilience of her gender amazed Helena. Not one of the displaced women she met complained about her situation. They were the sisters doing it for themselves, thank you very much. Aretha knew what she was singing about.

"We are tougher than we are led to believe," Helena heard time and again.

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“Our strength is forged by fire,” said one woman who wouldn’t tell Helena her whole story, but the tears in her eyes told Helena enough. How many more women would join this group in the years to come. She hoped the girl’s of today were savvier than her generation. They had left their financial security to the men and were now paying the price. generation. They had left their financial security to the men and were now paying the price.

“We rented houses our whole lives, so when our marriage ended there was nothing to split-up. He had his superannuation and a career. I was left homeless and almost penniless. I had raised our children and taken the odd casual job to supplement his income. We had enough for me to buy Bertha, my motorhome. I try to pick up jobs in small towns, cleaning or fruit picking, but there aren’t many employers willing to take on women on the wrong side of fifty,” the first woman Helena sat down with told her. Jean had been travelling for just over a year now. There wasn’t an ounce of bitterness in her though. Regret perhaps, but she seemed content with her current situation — her and Bertha seeing the countryside together. Helena wrote Jean’s story in her journal and sketched her profile in the firelight.

Dense bush eventually morphed into red dirt, sagebrush, and the white trunks of ghost gums. Along the road termite mounds stood tall and sentinel, always pointing north, like a compass. Helena felt the landscape was mimicking her transformation. The city she’d left was chaotic, forever busy, self-absorbed and shallow. The bush on the outskirts of town had trees and bushes competing for space, hosting wildlife and feral animals alike. But the true outback was the song with the right lyrics for Helena. Here she felt the rhythm of the ancient land humming deep inside her. As each kilometre took her further into the interior, she almost forgot the old Helena; the girl with strict Greek parents, the teenager with dreams unfettered by reality, the wife suppressed by order and the mother numbed by indifference. She felt as if she was finally emerging from her frozen chrysalis. Her wings slowly unfolding and testing their strength for flight in the warmth of the Australian sun.

After thirty hours of driving spread over weeks of leisurely travel, a luxury never afforded her before, Helena stood in the shadow of Uluru. It was once called Ayers Rock, but she was glad it had reverted to the traditional owner's name for the sandstone monolith. The spirituality of the sacred ground filled her with peace and emptied the last of the sadness from her soul. The two could no longer cohabit. The changing color of the rock was mesmerizing, from red to orange to purple depending on the position of the sun. It was the oldest thing Helena had ever seen and she could understand why it

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was so culturally significant to the indigenous community. It made her feel insignificant and important all at the same time. It was a magical place, with stories as old as time, and it gave her more in those few days than she had ever been given in her entire life. Reluctantly after a few days she left, thankful for the gifts it had so freely bestowed on her, but eager to see more of this wide brown land. She also took with her another story of a woman living in a van.

“I cared for my parents in their old age. My six brothers and sisters left it to me since I had no family of my own. When they died, the inheritance split between seven of us, was just enough for me to buy this van,” Lyn said, proudly giving Helena the ‘Grand Tour’. She had lovingly decked it out with colorful bunting. Cushions and rugs hid the stained and torn upholstery. Helena wiped a stray tear from her cheek when Lyn wasn’t looking. A lifetime of caring for others could never be measured in money, but these women deserved so much more.

Most days Helena spent driving in silence. Occasionally she would belt out a tune, but she appreciated the quiet as well and used it to think and reflect. An idea was forming, and she wanted time for it to brew. Every day she wrote and drew in her journal. It was a mix of travel logs, memoirs, and personal reflection. People she met along the way answered questions for her and posed even more. Generosity of spirit was truly in abundance in the bush. It was a lesson everyone should learn. She wished her relationship with Charlotte was stronger so she could share all the wonders she had discovered. Maybe time apart — maybe if Charlotte ever became a mother — things might change between them.

“My kids left home and never looked back,” Barb told her one night. Barb had left an abusive relationship two years ago. “They not only blamed their father for the violence, but they also blamed me for not stopping it. I blamed myself too. I would’ve gladly given my life if I thought it would stop him from hitting them, but I knew it wouldn’t. I tried to take most of the blows, but sometimes the kids got caught in the crossfire. I’m glad they left as soon as they could, but then I became his sole target. After one incident, the last one, I was in hospital for five weeks. The police and a women’s refuge helped me to leave. Now here I am, living the dream!” She smiled, and Helena noticed a few gaps where teeth should have been.

The night sky in the outback was beyond enchanting, and Helena found it to be a healing balm. With no artificial light for hundreds, sometimes thousands of kilometres, Helena could see so much more here than in the city. She understood now why the

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Aboriginal people included the sky and the stars in their Dreamtime stories. It created a powerful narrative; legends passed down from generation to generation, the stories were how morals were taught. The stars were also an important navigational tool; a compass, a calendar, and a clock. Helena marvelled at the knowledge of a people, unfortunately, dismissed by so many. They had so much to share, but no one was listening.

Helena drove for days along the Tanami Track, through towns like Alice Springs, Hall's Creek, and Fitzroy Crossing, enjoying the diversity of each. People from all over the world had made these small towns their home, but it was their indigenous population that intrigued Helena. Their art in particular fascinated her. The dots arranged so intricately into stories that told of their history and their customs were hypnotic. Having nowhere to hang vast canvases in her small motorhome, Helena purchased many postcards of this beautiful craft. She watched as women in Hall's Creek dabbed paint onto canvases and bark, while they explained what each symbol meant. Nothing was random. There was a reason for every dot being placed in a particular order. 'U's' were people, and the symbol that looked like a bullseye was a meeting place or camp.

Helena imagined what a painting of her journey would look like; the women she had talked to around so many campfires, the long lines of travel between meeting places. It would be beautiful. Helena left Hall's Creek with an appreciation for Australia's indigenous people that she wished everyone had. Respecting the first inhabitants was necessary, in her opinion, for a country's growth and success, and an individual's compassion and humanity.

As Helena left the interior and headed for the coast, she had made the decision to head to a place many had told her to visit. Broome was a remote coastal town in north Western Australia famous for its pearl production and its Staircase to the Moon phenomenon. Every full moon a staircase of light appears on the mudflats of Roebuck Bay leading up to the moon. The vivid colors of Broome's landscape in photographs Helena had seen, looked fake; the bright turquoise ocean lapping at rich red rocks surely couldn't be so vibrant?

When Helena arrived at Cable beach, the sun was just setting over the Indian Ocean. She parked the motorhome, took off her shoes and walked down to the water. Her skin now tanned from hours in the strong Australian sun, and her muscles were toned from hiking through gorges and swimming in natural springs. Her black hair was now long

enough to wear in a ponytail and she had bought herself hair ties for the first time since becoming an adult. She finally felt like the authentic version of Helena — Helena 2.0. She had changed inside and out, growing in ways she never thought possible. She finally liked who she was.

The sun stretched out its orange rays almost as if it was trying to hold on to the day. Camels carrying tourists were sauntering languidly along the sand. Photographers lined the beach, trying to capture the beauty of the end of another day. She breathed in the fresh salty air.

“Can I offer you a beer? It’s a tradition here to watch the sunset with a Matso’s.” A man stood behind her holding a bottle of the local brew out to Helena. She looked at the bottle, Matso’s Mango Beer, then at the eyes of the offerer. They were crinkled from his smile. A lifetime spent in the sun had weathered his skin and lightened his hair. His thick eyebrows were raised in a question mark.

“Thank you. I don’t want to ignore a tradition, and mango beer sounds perfect,” Helena responded, with a smile of her own. They clinked bottles in a toast. As the cool ale slid down her throat, she knew she’d found a special place with special people.

“Where ya from,” her drinking partner asked. Helena considered the question.

“Here,” she said, looking out at a view she knew she would never tire of and would always appreciate.

She would write a book; about her travels across Australia, and her journey as a woman, but more importantly she wanted to share the stories of the people she had had the privilege of meeting. She hoped it would highlight the financial inequality older women face and maybe end the embarrassment associated with their destitution. It would hopefully make enough money to start a fund for homeless women.

Broome was the culmination of the extraordinary land she called home; a place for creativity, happiness, new friendships, and perhaps, eventually, even love.



"SERENITY"  
by Elme Strydom



# NONFICTION

*Stela Dujakovic*  
*Maxwell Nagle*

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“Our histories never unfold in isolation. We cannot truly tell what we consider to be our own histories without knowing the other stories. And often we discover that those other stories are actually our own stories.”

- Angela Y. Davis

*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 triumph of silence - or what we can learn from broken friendships

By Stela Dujakovic

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I loved a man once. I never told him that I cared for him deeply. I never will. I put him away after many years of worship, locked into a back compartment, a shoebox with old pictures stacked in the attic from back when people still got their films developed.

It doesn't bother me to think about him today. It doesn't distress me to know that he exists outside of my reach. It's not his fault. I understand that, even if I still vehemently disapprove of the techniques he applies to build an army of female admirers every fall. But I can't exactly blame him for craving what we all desire, though I may occasionally accuse him of hypnotism to gloss over my very own pathological need to be admired.

All this lies in the past now. The geographical relocation was crucial. But also the fact that I stabbed him to death to cleanse myself. In fiction, of course. Only in fiction.

I tried the same with her, too. I tried to write her off in print—a split double, torn portmanteau, the evil sister silenced and imprisoned, an iron mask to protect our secrets.

But she remains headstrong and persistent. A true individualist, of imperial character. Julius, how is it so difficult to escape her?

I google her name every once in a while. Not often. But. You know. And there's nothing there. Two, maybe three ancient entries from back in the day when we were still entwined. No social media. No picture. No address. As if I had conjured her in a lonesome minute. I wonder how many wishes she had fulfilled that were cloaked as friendly turns. And then she disappeared into the lamp, catapulted into a different cave to be found by a different fool.

I shake out this grotesque thread and remember that she had a life without me that I know of and that the person is real, that I couldn't have made her up. But I immediately also recall the many requests that I had granted without hesitation like a devoted servant. I did not only take. That's the truth.

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She continues to resurface. In old books and decorations. In a piece of furniture that I dismantled once with the small electric screwdriver that I borrowed from her. We carried the heavy pieces down the stairs together, one on each end, women at work. She's in some of the worn-out pieces of clothing that I'm still refusing to throw out though they clearly don't spark joy. She's in the oversized clock on my wall that I've been eager to replace with a memory-free, red-rimmed Jones, but haven't—though I keep returning to look at it in the shop. She used to tease me for the fact that I was living in a different time zone for six months each year 'cause I was too lazy to switch the clock to daylight saving time. She's in the small Manhattan map cutting board that was hers and I now cannot recall if she had given it to me or if I had abducted it out of spite. I use it all the time to cut my veggies. Mondays can be tricky, still. We would to meet at Scotti's for 5 o'clock dinners like senior citizens. We had a favorite booth, too.

Years ago, when the wound was still gushing, people asked me—a former roommate I was still in touch with, family, friends—what she'd been up to and if we had finally reunited. And that sliced question was always delivered through a guilty chuckle. The expectation was that things would naturally realign, two poles pulling each other. But the asking died down. Hope, too. And as I continue to replace the objects that trigger moments from the past, I notice that I'm losing her in single pieces.

The other day, I asked my parents if one of them had maybe run into her mom in town recently. They remembered her mom but hadn't seen her around.

When I told her my secret, we were living on different streets. An interim period before she moved in. I remember nervously clutching at the armrests of her antique chair. I was deeply embarrassed. It blew off her socks—as they say.

How? Why? Why? And why have you never told me!? All those years!

I had poor answers to her questions. At the time, I believed it was easier if I kept it inside. After that day though, I eased up a little. She started to joke around in private. So I joked about it, too. And outside, we shared secret giggles and nudges, coded looks like communist spies.

Hers was a secret that she actively kept from a special someone. I was in on it from the beginning and became her co-conspirator. But her lie drove a wedge between us because she didn't trust that I could keep it to myself. And so the union severed, and the nudges turned to spiked jabs, and the jokes became provocations. And after a year of petty aggressions and chronic negligence, silence triumphed.

## THE SOCK DRAWER

One day when we hate each other, you will tell him.

No! Never. Besides, we'll never hate each other.

Maybe not.

There's a framed postcard on my shelf. A torn Llewyn is walking down the street past a coffee house, the disobedient cat in one hand, his cased guitar in the other. I had seen it several times, once at a movie-in-the-park event, glued to bottom-tormenting benches for hours, with poor sound and lighting, swarming mosquitoes in attack mode. I found it hard to bear and thought she must have hated it. And halfway through the movie, I concluded that she would certainly despise the film I was so excited for her to see. It was clearly a disaster, yet I anxiously inquired on our way out how you liked it.

Great. It's a great movie. The soundtrack is awesome.

I echoed that same reaction when you asked me to read a book you'd recommended. The best book of all times, you proclaimed. Not quite, I reported to a mutual friend but communicated the opposite to her.

Great book. Love it. Thanks for the recommendation.

It helps to talk about it—that's the assumption.

I picture a tent-situation off the battlefield, on untouched ground. The opposing parties agree to meet though rage is still boiling fiercely from the fight. But the sons have died in battle, and the daughters were sold off to form alliances that failed, and wives have fallen prey to poison, and the kingdoms lie in ashes, and the people are skin and bones, and there's nothing left to conquer. And that's perhaps when a smart individual came forward and invented the art of diplomacy. And out of the trenches rose the idea that peace can also be negotiated, that it doesn't have to be won with blood. But then there are also times when diplomacy fails. And in one possible outcome, they turn away from each other and only the absence of speech makes agreement possible.

I spill her secret over and over. Mostly out of curiosity. A little bit out of malice—fine. 'Cause she was right, I wanted to. So I take her to the stand and squeeze it out in front of an astounded jury of one. She admitted it herself, wasn't me! Or I lure them to a fake reconciliation scenario and in a climactic moment, I rise from my chair ceremonially and expose her second face. Sometimes I run into them accidentally at the crossing where Immermann and Oststraße meet and still sour, I spew it out spontaneously. And at times, I pack it in fiction, carefully, and publish it for the whole world to read. But that's the

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cunning side in me. Nasty child. Venomous. Counting my losses. Still suffering from the injured-pride-disease. Unsure if I even want it to cease.

And I'm dying to spill it because they keep telling me that she had long betrayed my secret, too. Snickering away, mocking. I hear them. They're drawing caricatures of me with words. Loud laughter.

What a dummy! Can you believe it?

And now the whole floor knows what I had kept hidden for so long. The shame! The shame! How can I go on like this?

But eventually, the drama subsides. And clarity and reason supersede. And as the vision sharpens, I recognize my faults. In the end, I believe that the rift was caused by reciprocal miscommunications and jealousy—classic. And that the fear to be exposed was perceived on both ends equally even if her secret was always heavier. I just thought I was in love with him—that's all there was to it.

I don't talk to her as much anymore. It feels like I have gutted myself many times over. But I never spoke to her directly, in the first place. Only through the characters I invented defiantly from my cozy tower of beds. Imaginary transactions, vengeful disputes. Some are wild and unhinged, others more reconciliatory. I wrote a book in which a manic woman turns into an assassin who kills them off, one at a time. I wrote a short piece in which I admit my own guilt, pack up, and yield the floor arrogantly. Beaten by endless possibilities, I try to explore her point of view in a multi-voice prose poem that has neither beginning nor end. I fabricated so many texts about us in which I recall moments from a joint past both joyful and bitter.

We take friendships for granted. I have. I still do sometimes. But they, too, need to be watered to thrive. And they, too, need to be re-negotiated during phases of significant transformation. And they certainly need to be prioritized in times of need. Sometimes I feel bad for being so difficult, for being too judgmental, for trying to mold her into a person I would have liked to be seen with, a little less passionate, a little more sophisticated, a little less her. But we were stuck with each other for different reasons, and those reasons should have been more meaningful than getting upset about idiosyncrasies. You can love a person for something you'd recognize as a flaw, or you grow to despise them by obsessing about a pea.

## THE SOCK DRAWER

Either way, the outcome is still the same. We walked off in different directions agreeing mutely that we no longer need each other.



## 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.

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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

## NONFICTION

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

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### *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

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### *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*.

## NONFICTION

“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

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

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“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.

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*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

## THE SOCK DRAWER

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

"(Un)Fallen No. 32"  
by Edward Lee



### *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 anniversary 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

## NONFICTION

don't ever get answers. Only harder questions.

-06/07/19

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*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.

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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





"Whispers"  
by Esther Chiyanda

# REVIEWS

*Kerstin Holman*

*Jennifer MacBain-Stephens*

*Izzy Peroni*

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“If after I read a poem the world looks like that poem for 24 hours or so I’m sure it’s a good one - and the same goes for paintings.”

- Elizabeth Bishop

# Uncovering the Uncomfortable: A Review of A.K. Summers' Graphic Memoir *Pregnant Butch: Nine Long Months Spent in Drag*

By Kerstin Holman

“*Pregnant Butch* is part of a long tradition of art whose purpose is to make the unseen visible,” writes author A.K. Summers in the introduction of her memoir. *Pregnant Butch: Nine Long Months Spent in Drag* not only shares an intimately unique perspective into what it is like to experience pregnancy and childbirth as a butch lesbian but Summers’ retelling is done so in the form of a comic.

In today’s politically-correct culture, we are encouraged to see all people as equals going through the same experiences and journeys, no matter how one may identify. However, it would be detrimental and ignorant to pretend that marginalized people face the same obstacles as those in the majority. Told in three parts and based on her real-life pregnancy, Summers (literally) illustrates the fictional struggles characters Teek and her femme partner Vee must face while trying to start a family through a nontraditional pregnancy in early 2000s New York City.

The narrative voice of Teek, the butch lesbian who represents Summers, makes for a bold and brash protagonist. As she attempts to navigate pregnancy and parenthood, Teek struggles to remain connected with her masculine identity and appearance (comparing herself to the fictional character Tintin). *Pregnant Butch* explores themes of fear, loneliness, and identity. Unsurprisingly these topics can be very relatable--despite the story taking place close to twenty years ago--because the fact of the matter is that the societal and personal issues queer individuals and couples face did not end when same-sex marriage was legalized in 2015.

Because Summers refuses to shy away from deep and uncomfortable topics such as the physical, emotional and psychological hardships women endure during pregnancy, this memoir can be seen as an important piece of documentation in queer canon, and for anyone going through major life changes; butch, femme, and anything outside or in between.



## Where Everything is Waiting\* A Review of *They Were Bears* by Sarah Marcus

By Jennifer MacBain-Stephens

In *They Were Bears*, by Sarah Marcus (Sundress Publications, 2017) The bears are evenly ferocious, solitary, and wondrous. We feel a slow dread when they hunt the speaker in one poem only to switch to sympathy upon hearing their elk carcass are stolen by wolves in the next poem. Marcus creates a merge between bear and human.

In this current time when the theme of zoonosis circles the news, we are both scared and fascinated with these mythic beasts. There is a connection, a closeness with them. But don't get too close.

From the poem "But Mostly There Were Bears,"  
"...I dream of following the bears across continents—  
...A skinned bear  
looks like a human corpse.  
I am as much bear as you are.  
If we don't make it down,  
I want you to make sure our  
bones are interred together..."

Marcus could mean—buried with bear bones or human bones. The way people explore and hunt throughout this collection varies through different regions on the earth. There are the mountains and the river valleys, the glacial planes and fields. Like the different landscapes, the characters search for what makes sense in themselves and in their relation to one another. The uncertainty in nature is reflected in the uncertainty in ourselves. Forgetting oneself, re-finding one-self: time is flowy. The bears hunt, people hunt, they look, they flee, like any living thing that is restless.

Marcus circles the body, relationships, abuse, and betrayal and we hike up into the unpredictable mountainous terrain along with her to feel unsteady. We are forced, though, to keep going. The explored psyche is another mountain to trek. The only way out of the wilderness is through.

The poems "Bearing October" and "Damage Ready" appear on opposing pages in

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this collection and this is not a mistake. In the poem, “Bearing October,” the imagery describes horrific hints of malfeasance, abuse. In “Damage Ready,” the speaker is followed by a bear. Both poems create a sick feeling in the reader. How man and bear are similar. How we are hunted our whole lives.

Whereas the bears inflict a more pointed act of violence, the theme of water is ever present in this collection and wreaks havoc, indiscriminately. Marcus writes that “dreams are not free” regarding restoring an old house. But people do not plan well most of the time. From the poem “A Restoration Sequence,” there is a flood and burial. Water leaks into the plaster in the walls. The smell an ever-present reminder of things gone wrong. In the last stanza, the speaker states:

“I want to be the one that slashes out an avalanche chute,  
causes mudslides. carries soil and debris out  
through natural passageways. I want to be your first –  
give me passage.”

If we possessed the power of nature and didn’t always have to plan, to make our next calculated move, to act without consequence...like the water.

“A Restoration Sequence,” like the water, flows effortlessly into the next poem: “Ecosystems: Mangrove,” where there is a blending of different waters and the fluidity lends itself to the speaker’s physical desires. The water is a place holder for our memories. Marcus writes “we are nothing without water.”

In “Ecosystems: Mangrove” (which is, in itself, an obvious metaphor, hinting at a grove of men perhaps.)

“Under cloud cover unbraid my hair and undress me  
where freshwater prairie meets bay saltwater  
hold me under in the backcountry swamp  
under the mangroves in a costal channel with gators and catfish...”

Celebrating human-ness, Marcus explores themes of intimacy and nature, but the water, like the bears, is dangerous. Like the bears, it can overpower us and then we become something else entirely. As Marcus writes in other poems, when something enters us, we are not the same, because that means it has to leave as well.

Marcus uses the water, like the bears, to place us on the earth, in moments, in

## THE SOCK DRAWER

memories, in relationships, in our timelines. The water flows into the very next poem, on the next page. Here she gets right to the point in “The earth has imitated you,”

“How will you find me if the meltwaters  
won’t come for months? The Spring  
thaw moves all things downstream.  
You are the valley. I am the misfit  
stream unable to carve the meander..”

Water is a surreal catalyst for the past and the future. We can only exist in the now but we see water as either stagnant or moving. Exposure kills things but water is a healer. Marcus observes the larger than life bears, their massive claws and backs, but it is the water that returns us to ourselves, our homes.

Marcus’s poems linger long after the last page is read. We see these mountains and sheds she describes, the rivers and hot sun. Perhaps we want to feel safe, when so many outside forces gnaw at us upon leaving home, we cannot escape the news, the threat of something coming, or maybe it’s already here. A bear is a seen foe, unlike so many obstacles in life. But maybe there is comfort leaning into that uncomfortableness, the new method of building resilience: to beasts or the unseen.

\*Where Everything is Waiting is a name of one of the poems in this collection.



## Ancient Heartache Translated into Comfort Through Poetry: A Review of *Arrows* by Dan Beachy-Quick

By Izzy Peroni

The way in which a poet expresses hurt can never truly be limited to the inward; it projects outward into related imagery, ideas, and themes that often encompass the human experience at large. Dan Beachy-Quick's recently published book of poetry, *Arrows*, goes beyond that to bring into his narrator's realm of ego delicate facets of nature, timeless spirituality, and a mournful ancientness, warped and translated through time by tightly packed stanzas and a highly conscious first-person. The density of this book finds its purpose in classical references and thought processes, provoking emotional response before the reader can track down exact meaning. In short, I believe I seek to say: this book does not hand you anything but itself. Like Beachy-Quick's work before this, such as poetry books like *Variations on Dawn and Dusk* and *North True South Bright*, nothing becomes obvious to the reader just by reading, then moving on. Every poem demands attention in a soft voice, one that could be missed, or be considered indecipherable, if the reader is not prepared. As the narrator, and therefore the poet, explains in the first poem, "Primer," under the subtitle, preface, "this book is a learning mist / in which the hand / discovers / the thistle it grips," meaning that you, the reader, will have to reach into the gossamer stanzas and be prepared to wrap your fingers around a definite, pastoral pain. You are, like the title of the opening poem, being primed to understand something damaging and miraculous, but the rest of the work is up to you to wander through "to wonder's / barbed dislocations."

Beachy-Quick's speaker draws out the spiritual from the natural in the most tender ways, pulling the expansiveness of nature into a singular body, keeping it there to ruminate and churn. All that exists in the world lays itself gently into the palms of the speaker and is presented to the reader thoughtfully, as in the poem "Psalm;" "I keep deer in my heart / forgive the ancient fold / I keep the woods there too." In these lines are the core essentials for this collection of poems, pressed together into a prayer. Beachy-Quick translates for us the ancient over and over again, sometimes literally, in his exploration of Phoenician letters in "Abecedarian," or other times in an incredible exploration of philosophy and sense of 'true' self, as "Theseus's Ship" portrays in both content and form. The struggle of self is shown most excellently in poems where the focus shifts from classical abstractions to a self-conscious speaker, aware of their own ability to create ("Some Rules of Grammar") and their ability to suffer, to be abandoned ("Endangered



## THE SOCK DRAWER

Species”).

This collection of poems demands attention, and nurturing consideration. It is a self-described “shard of ancient pottery” that Beachy-Quick has unearthed for us and has asked to treat archaeologically. You will need patience, and the right tools just to dust through the density— but you will find something worthwhile underneath.



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“Leadership is standing with people.  
People say you have to live to fight another day, but sometimes you have to show you are a true leader.”

- Leymah Gbowee

# DISCUSSION

*Gracelyn Willard*

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## See-Through Closet

By Gracelyn Willard

I found the past in my old google drive. I was looking for something else but as is often the case, found the past staring back at me instead. Prom, 2015.

(Two girls in black dresses, wholly in love.)

I have been hiding for a long time. Not intentionally hiding, but hiding all the same. I was bravest at 17 when I proclaimed to the world that I was bi and then I hid all the photos that showed me and my girlfriend at the time. (I broke up with her in part because I saw how uncomfortable everyone was with my relationship.) I didn't want to face relatives that wouldn't understand or judgmental strangers. I posted platonically posed photos so no one could say for sure if I was or wasn't dating someone. I never made gushing posts about how much I loved my partner. In the end, it was easier to hide then shout from the rooftops, to never show that I wasn't straight.

(Other people's fear pushed me back into the see-through closet.)

Even though I had grown up in a neighborhood of gay couples and had liberal, understanding parents; society still pushed me to hide, extended family pushed me to hide. (I was once told "It'll be easier for you if you just like one or the other (genders)") I currently look the 'straightest' I have in the last 4 years (not that you should judge people's sexuality based on appearance but comparing 17,18,19 year old me with me now- I have that 90s movie mom aesthetic down). I am still coming to terms with my own sexuality, it may take me a lifetime to be fully comfortable and confident, but I am happy to be taking one step forward. I love my boyfriend more than anything (even coffee) but being in a hetero presenting relationship is strange because it adds to the mask I've built up. Even though I'm technically out I have the safety of being straight presenting which contrasts with the fact that I can love and be attracted to any gender/non-binary individual.

## DISCUSSION

I wrote a story about two women and dating and heartbreak that was workshopped in a class I took. Another person in the class, who had heard me mention my boyfriend, asked me “what was it like to write from such a different perspective for you?” I responded by outing myself to them, “I’m bi, I’ve dated women it’s not a different perspective.” No one should have to scream their sexuality, we should all be allowed to be as open or closed about it as we want, but we shouldn’t have to put up with the assumptions and the fear that so often comes with the non-heterosexual sexuality.

I have never had a full conversation about my sexuality with my family and after I broke up with her and began dating guys again the questions about who I liked stopped including neutral gender pronouns. “He’s cute.” “Do you like him?” “Which of the guys on (x show) do you think is attractive.” And I did nothing to change that. I accepted the closet again. I accepted my ability and the privilege of people assuming I was straight.





"THULA"  
by Elme Strydom



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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**Tell Us Your Story!** We want to hear from you. We are now accepting poetry, fiction, nonfiction, book reviews and art submissions for upcoming publications.  
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