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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  
“Deserted Beaches”  
by Catherine Brennan

# 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



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

## FICTION EDITOR



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

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"My mother told me to be a lady. And for her, that meant be your own person, be independent."

- **Ruth Bader Ginsberg**, second female justice appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court



"Meatsuits, skeletons  
and an organ"  
by Esther Chiyanda



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

# POETRY

*Juliana Chang*

*Darren Demaree*

*TAK Erzinger*

*Steve Golds*

*Emily Kate Hastings*

*James Croal Jackson*

*Maitreyi Parakh*

*Jacob Smith*

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“I have learned over the years that when one’s mind is made up, this diminishes fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear.”

- **Rosa Parks**, American civil rights activist



## English as a second language

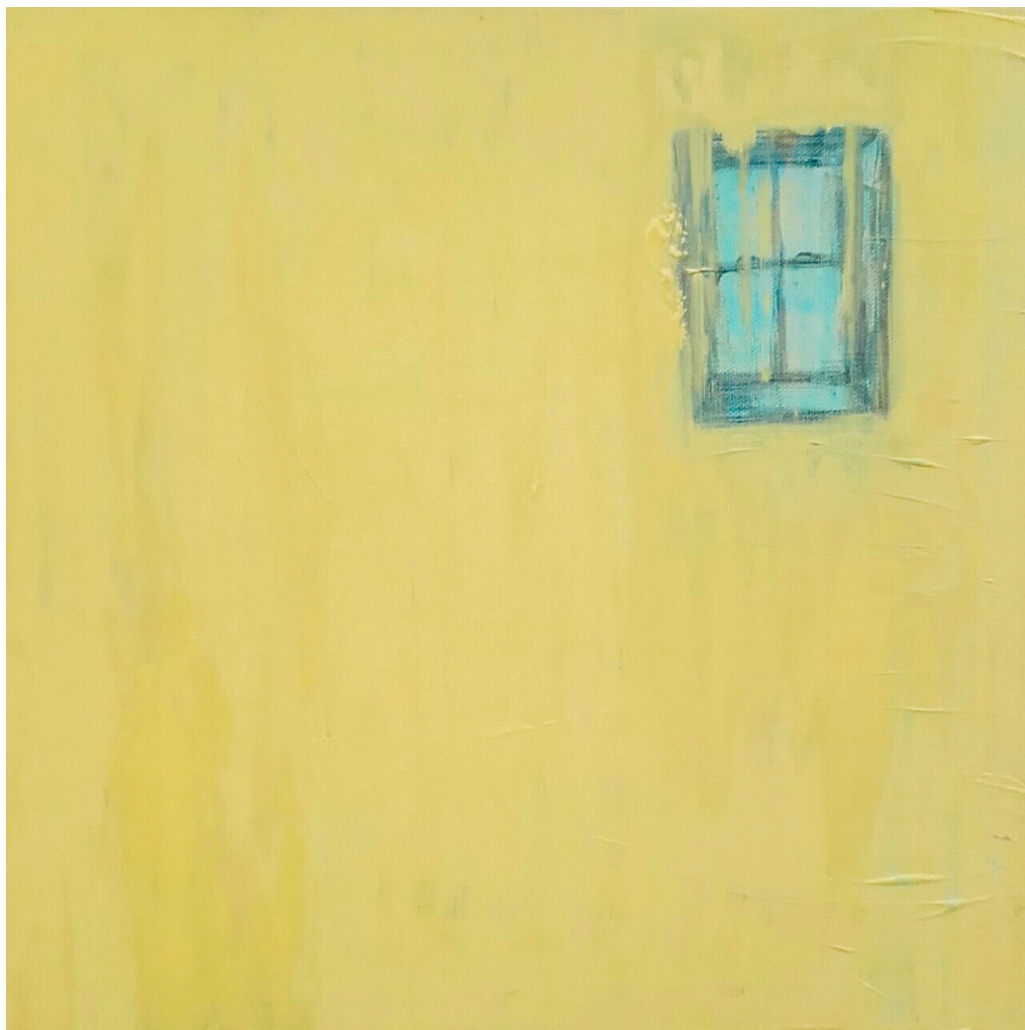
By Juliana Chang

I couldn't read in second grade.  
To be fair, I didn't think anyone else could  
either,  
just thought I was the cleverest kid in class  
for snagging the only books with pictures  
during silent reading time.

A year later,  
I cried when my front tooth fell out,  
because I had spent 4 months in speech  
therapy  
practicing my th-  
and now my little tongue guardrail was gone  
and I was back to fanking Ms. Denton  
for working wif me during recess.

I don't know why I wanted it so bad back  
then,  
language.  
I don't know what I thought it would do for  
me.  
All I know is that summer  
I memorized every Nickelback chorus on the  
radio.  
I sacrificed a dozen library books  
to the underside of couches.  
I ate every idiom I was given,  
stood on my tiptoes at the bathroom mirror  
and chewed and chewed:  
held the English steady on my tongue  
with kid gloves  
followed the sound of her  
to the moon and back.





"Looking Out"  
by Catherine Brennan

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"[Pieces were] painted early in initial lockdown when the morale was low. Materials were low. Canvases were low. Contact was nil. There are just these 8 in the Isolation Series. The colours reflect the colour of the houses outside the window of my small painting room, hence also the choice of medium and subject matter."

- Catherine Brennan

## Type A personalities in time of coronavirus

By Juliana Chang

It is new information for virtually no one  
that I like to be in control:  
the color coded calendars,  
how I bite my nails at poorly planned events,  
that time I made a 12 child party  
restart “Happy Birthday” because they didn’t enunciate  
(it wasn’t my birthday).

What I am trying to say is:  
I am the author of my own best disasters.  
I have always been a good orator  
and an exceptionally awful party guest.  
The other day, R gently told me  
I need to stop reorganizing his closet  
everytime he goes to bed.

So many things are wrong today,  
so I’m doing my best to not add to the list  
insisting there’s one way for things to be right.  
Instead, I’ll let the dishes sit out. Breathe,  
and not just to reassert body dominance  
by manipulating my heart rate.

I’ll watch a movie without reading  
the Wikipedia summary first.  
Find Gwen on Facebook  
apologize for throwing a temper tantrum  
on her 5th birthday.



## Feet Feeling

By Juliana Chang

in the stress, I manage to scratch  
the soles of my left foot raw,  
weeping skin the size  
of a flattened chicken nugget  
stinging beneath my toes.  
to be fair, it is not entirely my fault  
with the eczema, and the itching,  
and the entire world  
going to shit  
but my baby is horrified anyway,  
audibly yelps the first time I uncover my  
dirty red  
appendage, which I am pretty sure  
is infected (I watched a stray pube  
sneak past that flap of dead skin there),  
and ask that he take a look.

and of course, it is disgusting, and of course  
my baby, wincing, but also eyes rolling  
into the back of his shaggy unshorn  
head, takes a pair of tweezers,  
begins the slow work  
of cleaning, deposits dust chunk  
and loose scab onto nearby napkin,  
murmurs softly while I yelp and complain  
the entire time.

twenty minutes later, my foot is disinfected  
and dressed to the nines in white coats of our  
best lotion,  
and I am pouting and resentful,  
having lost the dermatoid volcanic wasteland  
I had spent all day creating.

these days, the world feels blunt, and jagged,  
and I find myself looking for the soft things  
left to say. so from wounded foot, cracked  
wide heart,  
I say this—on the nights my mouth gapes  
like open wound, I know you will remember  
the ointment and the bandage,  
but also the gummies.  
also the fuzzy sock,  
the head rub.  
if you wake in the night  
and find me whispering, I promise  
I am just naming all the ways you have  
learned  
to hold my hurt,  
all these quiet places you have built  
for me to regrow.





# EMILY AS I PREPARE THE MEAL-KIT CRISPY RANCH PORK CHOPS

By Darren Demaree

I don't want to lay down  
in the dying grass  
& tell you I am fed

enough to overwhelm  
the small ghost  
that remains

of our life before  
we needed Panko  
breeding on everything,

but I am comfortable  
here, crying, asking  
for the rain to come

& mean something  
more than it can  
mean for a family

that never leaves  
their own property. We are  
thirsty. That is true.



## EMILY AS I PREPARE THE MEAL-KIT SWEET 'N' TANGY MEATBALLS

By Darren Demaree

This is how our skin  
begins to layer underneath  
the skin. This is why

we are thick for each other.  
We haven't eaten a meal  
apart in four months

& nobody chooses to eat  
partially above the thaw  
of so much upheaval.

Regardless, most of our time  
is spent joking about sex  
we can't have without

convincing our children  
to camp out in a heat so  
unpleasant that they cry

without a bowl of ice cream.  
Dammit, I really miss  
Emily as dessert.



## EMILY AS I PREPARE THE MEAL-KIT PARTY THYME STEAK

By Darren Demaree

I could not have predicted  
a meal-kit pun would make us  
laugh. Please send real humor

& better steak. I am drowning  
in cloves of garlic  
& our son's knock-knock book.

Emily has resorted to prat falls  
& marshmallow sandwiches.  
Everything is so damn sticky.



## Foreign

By TAK Erzinger

They've sampled my tradition in a spoonful,  
too curious to refuse.

I'm a buffet laid out, my language colourful,  
a sea teeming with strange delights,

that laps at their ear holes  
the edge of their understanding.

It could be smooth sailing, I've heard,  
but I feel a storm in the air

caught between hot and cold, clouded  
partitions create boundaries

between concrete and abstract  
why must there be one or the other?

I've always been good at balancing  
the two from my head to my heart.

They say they care but I can't read  
their lips. I beg at their table

like wasps or flies trying to snatch back  
pieces they've appropriated, I end up starved.





# Absconding

By TAK Erzinger

Lies cling to your lips  
generations of bees under  
your tongue. How did you choose  
to leave? When did you realise  
that you wouldn't return?  
I did the dance, I followed  
the others  
    measured  
    convincing.

Honey, in Spanish is  
*miel*  
    but it's sweet  
    in every culture  
it was their stickiness - the children's,  
you couldn't endure, leaving you bitter.

When a queen leaves  
the hive she abandons  
responsibility  
lack of direction and hunger left in her wake  
but the flowers continue to return  
and with no one left to lead  
we got lost in the swarm.



***TW: Sexual Violence, Femicide Against Indigenous Women***

**Cindy Gladue**

By Emily Kate Hastings

Perhaps you did not intend to kill me.  
But the paperwork checks out, and it did not  
matter.

I was a hole in the ground  
You filled me with your appetite, your size,  
with objects, and with your body.

There is something in you. In you, and  
many who came before, a cultivated thing  
that has grown out of a dark seed.

You want power, but you do not know what  
men can do.

I had a dream that we were grown, and he  
handed me a cup to nourish me, he used his  
fingers. And his eyes were admirers, and  
there was a movement, both ways, back and  
forth, an energy that we made.

Suddenly—I am coming to. There is a  
movement, skin is raw, or—something  
sharp.

*Am I really here?*

## THE SOCK DRAWER

They will know once they dissect. Open me,  
look. Hold up and show to the jury.  
Stand above me, penetration.

What are the sounds that a woman makes?

a poem in memory of Cindy Gladue

Cindy Gladue was a mother of three daughters.

When Cindy was 36 years old, she spent two nights with a man in an Edmonton hotel. The morning after their second night together, Cindy was dead. Medical examiners found an 11 cm cut in Cindy's vagina, which caused her to bleed to death.

The man testified that the pair engaged in "Consensual rough sex" during which he inserted his fist into her vagina, an action he described as "more extreme and forceful." The man says that he woke up to find Cindy dead in the bathtub the following morning.

Her death was ruled an accident.

During the trial, preserved vaginal tissues were displayed as an exhibit. Cindy was continually stereotyped; lawyers referred to her as a "native" and "prostitute" more than 26 times before the jury.

\* \* \*

"We recall her strength and dignity now, because the trial in relation to her death failed to do so."- The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.



## After the Procession

By Steve Golds

A casket's mahogany  
too dull,  
Lilac's scent  
too sick &  
the priest's voice  
too droning  
in that church  
too small  
for what you were.





## Stafford

By James Croal Jackson

in the wetlands black-  
eyed orange daisies  
live for light needing

no human hand to rustle  
nearby leaves nor tinted  
hair draping black dress

of lilies within weeds  
and leaves you plucked  
a direction: north

and walked bulldozed  
path to void of trees  
where the wind stocked

moral inventory to forgive  
you inside its shelter  
measuring the days with

yardsticks staring up  
to sky from hard earth  
needles on a marionette



## Denuded

By James Croal Jackson

Naked at the lake between salamander  
bodies, I kiss  
your face, handfuls of sunflower on my  
nipples.

With mountains behind me (to my surprise)  
I have become a bouquet. Verdant hills

a family- a cheetah must hide in this  
wilderness.  
I feel emerald eyes ogling me from  
somewhere

in space time- even in this reunion,  
I want to be as naked as a cloudless sky,

as the eroded stone I stand on.



## cruel, but still a little bit kind

By Maitreyi Parakh

there are secrets flooding/ through one ear/ spilling out so you press/ it shut and cage the beast./  
*who am i? who am i, who am i, who-* a gun fires but we ignore it and put the pie/ back in the  
oven/ and you forget the song/ your mother sang when/ violets bloomed in the place/ of eyes and  
you remember when you committed a small crime./ a petty crime./ when you stole/ my  
innocence but left/ a fleck of it/ on the rim of your glasses./ when the blood on your lips/ stained  
the fallen petals./ *who are you? who are you, who are you, who-* a scar on your collarbone/ a  
knife in your back./ on the coffee table, a stack of rejection letters/ love letters to someone/ you  
have seen at the/ morgue, their face painted with the glass/ that shattered when you slammed/ the  
door on your way home./ after all, colorful dreams are the hardest to get rid of.

and you remember the anxiety in your/ ribcage threatening to overgrow into thorns/ the morphine  
dripping/ into your veins./ there are guitars strumming in our ears/ too loud and too fast./ but we  
listen anyway because the pavement is rough against our bare feet/ and the glass on the table is  
sweating in the heat./ see, compromise isn't as delicate as it sounds./ the hum of the car engine/  
tall buildings, scorching asphalt/ the blare of traffic./ you can't wake up/ this is not a dream./  
reading out to an empty auditorium./ secrets aren't meant to be kept so long.



## ode to my indian-ness

By Maitreyi Parakh

you silk lehenga bright red tikki mehndi crawling up your arms girl. you were yourself but you were a billion other people. you with years of culture but none at all, you slurred accent in a dozen languages, you hater of pretentious white men and stealing white women, anger is all you feel anymore.

putting your foot down and having your name pronounced correctly, something you learnt in elementary school when the substitute called you a cheap white name and you shrugged is that you can never stop them all but if you stop enough of them the rest will take care of itself.

just trying to go pray. just trying to go shopping. just trying to eat your lunch but then someone asks you to put it away because it doesn't smell right so you laugh. laugh and the sound wraps itself around his neck. laugh and he is silenced eyes bulging out lips turning blue like your grandmothers of the past were silenced.

you don't really care about the traditions and the gods but you want to be yourself, you want to feel the ganges river running through your blood and watch everyone see the beauty of kerala and maharashtra and punjab and assam like you do.

if the racists and the bigots would stay quiet you would wear your sari and stand tall as if you don't carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, ignoring their looks saying that you weren't enough, weren't right because you were yourself and that was enough.





## Jurisdiction

By Jacob Smith

I gather my friends for jury duty to see how they'll respond when  
I slip them the evidence of you saying  
*I've never felt this way for anyone before.*  
The prosecution weighs in with  
*He's obviously into you or*  
*You just need to make the first move,*  
but I'm too aware of how I held back the most incriminating detail:  
    The unspoken truth in the burn between my shoulder blades,  
    your chest pressed there,  
    my name on your lips like a prayer.  
So I step up as defense attorney and close the conversation with  
*Well, he says he only likes girls* because  
I don't want to stack a case against you  
or spearhead a rumor but sometimes --  
sometimes I just need to hear them say I'm not crazy --  
that there's a desire clawing at you, whispering of me.  
    And maybe I'm intensely sixteen for following  
    the blind hope that a friendship like ours could really be  
    the start of a smalltown gay love story because --  
    the world was built for two, wasn't it? And aren't we two?  
But I get in my head and I wonder if when you look at me you see how  
I don't curve in the right places for you to feel the way you do and so I  
fear I'm a walking cliché, a hopeless romantic, because I'm in love  
with someone who won't let himself love me.  
That fear keeps me pinned in this limbo gray of  
a relationship between two boys who call themselves friends but act  
something like lovers. And since you won't say anything and I won't either I  
watch the hammer of your chest rise and fall like the gavel deeming you *not*  
*guilty* of being in love with me as you sleep in my bed, next to me,  
through a midafternoon nap.



## Gathering Dust

By Jacob Smith

In middle school I found that if I stood on the post at the foot of my bed and stretched myself out as high as my toes could lift me, I was able to reach the upside of my ceiling fan blades. Years of dust hid there, painting the midnight blades a January gray. I drug my finger through the gathered dust, carved out smiley faces and stars. Wrote a boy's name. Hidden away above my bed. Hidden away above

Where my mom tucked me in every night. Comforter wrapped in whispers of a goodnight prayer, sheets laced with questions of the girls at school. *Is there anyone new?* I looked to the ceiling fan. *No.*

Where I ran around the bed with my friends. Pillows hurled across the room in friendly fire, prodding of who I may have a crush on slung like gunshots. I'd just flash a smile, say *I'll never tell* as I looked to the blades, his name a constant circling to nowhere.

Where I laid next to *him*. Laptop propped on pillows, movie streaming but holding no attention. Me curled into him. Him, peeling his joggers from his waist, daring me to make the next move. Oh how I wanted to. Instead I flopped a pillow over his face, tossed him a *you wish*. Because we'd been there before. Too many times before. And Hope only has so many lives.

During the summer after my eighth grade year, he moved somewhere far away and I moved across town. On one of the final days in that old bedroom, I stood on the post at the foot of my bed, stretched myself out, retraced each letter of his name to let the midnight bold shine through. My room was deconstructed, bed packed away into a moving truck. I stood in the doorway, looked around at the emptiness, saw the ghosts of memories that lived on there. I looked up to the ceiling fan, bricks shifting behind my chest finally breaking. Tears carving rivers down my cheeks. And I wondered how long it would take for his name to be reclaimed by the dust. Nothing more than January gray.



# FICTION

*Michael Anthony*

*Nachi Keta*

*Paul Lewellan*

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“No person is your friend who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow.”

- **Alice Walker**, American novelist, poet, and social activist

## Drawn From Life

By Michael Anthony

Though the sun hadn't yet crested the hills to the east, the air in Colemans Hollow was already thick. The meandering river was but a trickle where, in rainy season, it churned and boiled. No kayaking or rafting this weekend. With their leaves curling inward, even the trees seemed defeated, limp. The entire valley was a tinderbox, only one spark away from a blaze that would leave a swath of destruction in its wake. The foliage wasn't the only thing about to ignite that Sunday.

Wiping sleep from her eyes, Maddie sat up on the edge of her bed. A few months shy of her fifteenth birthday, Maddie wanted to skip Mass and just walk the trails along the riverbank. There she would sit and sketch trees, red tail hawks circling overhead, and clouds scudding by. That's where Maddie found her god; not in some stuffy small building that reeked of incense, mothballs, and saccharine lilac perfume. Because she was a loner who would rather flee into the woods than talk to anyone, townsfolk eyed Maddie with suspicion.

A quick glance at the clock said she had about twenty-five minutes to wash and dress before her Aunt Elaine would knock on the bedroom door and announce, "Time for church." Maddie slipped into the clothes she wore only one day a week.

The ride was much the same as every other Sunday. Maddie in the back behind Aunt Elaine; her cousin Scott sitting opposite her and directly behind Uncle Jeff who always drove. A missal rested on Maddie's lap, its gilt edged pages frayed and worn. Aunt Elaine said it once belonged to her sister Rosemary, Maddie's mother. To distract from the predictable services and Father Burkhart's sleep inducing sermons, Maddie would leaf through the various saints' days, imagining their lives and their martyred deaths.

It being summer and with city folks vacationing at their second homes or rented cabins, the church parking lot was a bit fuller than usual. Instead of a smattering of elderly couples on walkers and canes, there were families in shorts, golf shirts, and boating shoes. Whispering among themselves, locals bemoaned those disrespectful out-of-towners. Maddie didn't take sides. She just wanted Mass to end so she could get home; change; and, stroll the trails with her sketchpad.

At precisely seven-fifty-nine, the organist, Mrs. Doris Pettengill started playing. It might have been "Now Thank We All Our God," or "Here I Am, Lord." To Maddie they

## THE SOCK DRAWER

all pretty much sounded the same. While reading about St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, she heard a murmur ripple through the congregation.

She looked towards the sanctuary. The rotund Fr. Burkhart was not standing by the altar, but a different priest. Maddie returned to her missal. Though she stood when everyone else did and knelt when Aunt Elaine nudged her, for the most part, Maddie remained isolated, studying those obscure passages.

The congregation was unusually quiet as the visiting priest approached the lectern to read the gospel and offer his homily. Introducing himself as Fr. Tom, he apologized for the absence of Fr. Burkhart, whom he said had taken ill unexpectedly. “Nothing serious. But, he will need time to recuperate. I suspect it may affect Father Burkhart’s retirement plans. The bishop has asked me to fill in as your interim pastor until a final assignment is made. I look forward to getting to know each of you.”

A wave of nausea washed over Maddie. Her legs felt weak. Attributing her sudden discomfort to the unrelenting heat and humidity, she returned to her missal, tuning out the words coming from the pulpit. With her eyes closed, she tried to imagine herself along the river.

In minutes, Maddie heard people in the pews ahead of her beginning to stand and shuffle into the main aisle to receive communion. When Uncle Jeff and Aunt Elaine stood, so did she. With her eyes downcast, Maddie studied the terrazzo floor, trying to form images from the embedded chips of marble and granite. Angels, dogs, faces. Sensing Uncle Jeff had moved to the right, Maddie raised her eyes to face the priest and receive the host from his extended hand.

The blood drained from her cheeks. Everything dimmed.

Maddie awoke on a folding chair in the community room adjacent to the church vestibule. Aunt Elaine was pressing a wet paper towel to her forehead. Uncle Jeff held a cup of water. Scott stared at her, saying nothing. An usher offered Elaine a plastic bucket in case Maddie vomited. She didn’t.

“You okay, honey?” Aunt Elaine asked.

Her face flushed and warm, Maddie nodded.

Back home, Aunt Elaine guided the girl to her bedroom. While helping Maddie out of those Sunday clothes, she asked, “Heat get you before?”

“I guess,” Maddie said.



## FICTION

“Well, you just stay here. Uncle Jeff is getting the fan and I’ll bring you some sweetened ice tea. You just rest.”

So much for today’s river walk.

By mid-afternoon, Maddie felt strong enough to venture downstairs and out onto the covered porch. Even Scott, who though two years her junior and not really interested in her, or any girl for that matter, was considerate, asking if she needed anything. The balance of the day and week were uneventful. Not once did she experience the fainting that had sent her crashing to the floor of St. Anne’s.

With another scorching week gone, Maddie again sat up in her bed, awaiting Aunt Elaine’s admonition to hurry up for church. She didn’t move. When her aunt came in already dressed and asking why Maddie wasn’t as well, Maddie said she felt weak. Elaine placed her palm on the girl’s forehead. “No fever.” Though skeptical, Elaine knew that, unlike Scott, Maddie wasn’t one to feign illness. She agreed to let her stay home that Sunday.

Aunt Elaine was not similarly persuaded when the scene was repeated the following Sunday. She demanded Maddie dress and accompany the family to Mass. Maddie did as told.

The girl broke into a sweat as her Uncle Jeff turned into the church parking lot. “I think we’ve had enough of this,” her aunt said. Maddie started dry heaving the moment she stepped from the car.

“You go in with Scott,” Uncle Jeff said. “I’ll take Maddie home and stay with her. Pick you up around nine-fifteen.” Despite Aunt Elaine’s stern glare, she relented.

On the way home, Jeff Chisholm checked the rearview mirror several times. Color was returning to Maddie’s cheeks as the wind rushing through the open window lifted her auburn hair. After parking in the driveway, Jeff opened the car door for Maddie. But, instead of leading her inside, he walked her to the bench he had built beneath that massive oak tree on the side of the house. “Come. Sit,” he smiled while patting the bench. They rested quietly for several minutes. Then, while looking through a break in the trees at the hills across The Delaware, he said, “Would you like to tell me why you get sick when it’s time for church?”

Staring at her feet, Maddie didn’t respond.

“Is Scottie bothering you?”

Maddie shook her head.

“Did Aunt Elaine or I do anything to make you feel this way?”

Another shake.

“Well, Maddie, I’d really like to help. I’ll take you to a doctor if you want. Just between us. Nobody else has to know.” He shared his concern that she didn’t seem herself over these past few weeks. He said it was natural that as she matured, things that hadn’t bothered her before might now. “Your mom? Your dad?” he asked.

Her uncle never treated her any differently than he did his son, not babying her or expecting more. That was what Maddie liked most about living here. Uncle Jeff spoke to her as an equal. Younger, but equal.

“Just let me know if you want to talk. Otherwise, why don’t you head inside and change? I’ll go pick up Elaine and Scott.”

Maddie started towards the house, then spun back, her blotchy face a river of tears. She opened up to her uncle. Her words escaped in bursts between deep sobs and shudders.

“Sorry I’m late,” Jeff said as he pulled up to the church steps where Elaine and Scott stood. When Elaine slid into the car the concern showing on Jeff’s face instantly erased the anger that had been building as she waited for nearly a half hour after the other parishioners left.

“Where’s Maddie?”

“She’s home, okay.” Jeff nodded towards Scott in the back, suggesting it wasn’t the right time to talk.

“Can we go? I’m starving,” Scott groused.

That evening, with the sun slipping behind the pines and the sky tinting violet, Elaine and Jeff remained on that bench beneath the oak where they had been since finishing dinner. Maddie hadn’t eaten and Scott was at his friend’s house down Parker Ferry Road. Elaine’s hands trembled as she asked Jeff what they should do. He rubbed the back of his neck and sighed, “I think we have only one option.”

“But, what if she’s exaggerating?”

“What if she’s not?” he replied.

Jeff Chisholm called into work the following morning, saying he was taking a personal day. Elaine did the same. They told Maddie and Scott they had to run an errand but would be back before lunch. Though only a few miles, the ride across town seemed

## FICTION

interminable. Jeff held the door open for Elaine who followed him into the imposing building. Walking down the corridor, she again asked if they should be there. Jeff's answer didn't change.

As the clock outside the community bank on Front Street chimed eleven, the Chisholms headed home. They stopped at the German bakery to pick up some éclairs for Maddie and Scott. "Let's just do exactly as she said," Jeff cautioned when they arrived at the house.

At three that afternoon, the Chisholms were again walking the same hallway they had earlier that day. This time, Maddie accompanied them, a folder clutched tightly in her hand.

"Hello, my name is Lorraine Mihalik. You must be Maddie."

And so it began. Some twenty minutes after the low key introduction, the Chisholms stepped from the small office, leaving Maddie alone with Lorraine. They sat on a sofa in a lounge down the hall, saying little.

An hour later, Lorraine Mihalik approached, asking the Chisholms to follow her. Expecting to rejoin Maddie, they were instead led to another office, this even smaller than the one in which they had left the girl. "Please, take a seat."

Her tone sounded ominous.

"First, I want to thank you for bringing Maddie in today. Not many people would be so quick to act. Based on my conversation with Maddie, I believe this warrants further examination. However, I should caution you that the road ahead could be difficult and the result less than satisfactory. That said, I want you to know I'll be with you the entire way. You have my word."

The Chisholms were dismayed yet, encouraged. As always, their primary concern was Maddie's wellbeing. When Elaine asked about next steps, Mihalik said she was going to bring in an associate who specialized in such cases. Based on her evaluation, they would decide the best course of action, if any.

The ride home was silent and somber. Maddie stared out the window watching tree after tree slip by, each a momentary blur of green. As instructed, neither Elaine nor Jeff spoke to Maddie about her meeting or those that followed.

The Chisholms returned to Mihalik's office three weeks later. This time without Maddie. Lorraine Mihalik introduced her associate, who shared her findings with the couple. By the end of her remarks, the Chisholms sat shocked by what they heard. Elaine

sobbed. Barely holding back tears, Jeff asked, “What are her chances?”

“It’ll be tough,” Mihalik said.

She detailed the process; how long it would likely take; and, reiterated the probability of success. Before they left, Mihalik and her associate each hugged the Chisholms, vowing they would do everything in their power for Maddie. While walking them to the exit, Mihalik said, “I don’t want to get your hopes up. But, I have a good feeling about this. I really do.”

Events unfolded almost exactly as Lorraine Mihalik had predicted. In a town as small as Colemans Hollow, word spread faster than summer brush fires along the riverbank. The Chisholm’s phone started ringing non-stop until Jeff took it off the hook. He and Elaine put their cell phones on do not disturb. They gathered Maddie and Scott in the living room and explained what little they could.

Within days letters showed up in their mailbox. Most offering support; some expressing outrage; and, a few even threatening violence. Those were handed over to Mihalik. The Chisholms no longer attended Mass. While it pained Elaine to miss services, she thought it best, especially for Maddie.

Not expecting anyone, Jeff answered the door cautiously.

“Hi. How are you all holding up?” Lorraine Mihalik asked. “Especially Maddie?”

“As well as can be expected,” Elaine replied, her voice quivering. She hesitated, then murmured, “How could we have missed it?”

“Don’t blame yourselves. If it wasn’t for Maddie’s drawings, we wouldn’t have gotten this far.”

As Mihalik and Elaine talked, Jeff Chisholm sank into the sofa reflecting on what they had been told Maddie shared over the course of the sessions.

When she was about six, a soft-spoken man began visiting her mother Rosemary. He would frequently spend the night when Maddie’s father was on a cross-country long haul run. Apparently, this went on for months. Sometimes, her mother would leave Maddie alone with the man while she ran out for cigarettes and beer. There was a vicious fight the day Maddie’s father found a pair of men’s boxers that weren’t his under the bed. The police were called. Her father left that night and never returned. Rosemary brought Maddie to Elaine’s for a few days, telling the girl she had some things to sort out. Those days turned into weeks, then months. Maddie had difficulty sleeping, often waking, and crying for her mother. Only Elaine could calm the girl.

## FICTION

Jeff also recalled an incoherent, late night call from Rosemary saying she had met someone and thought it best Maddie stay with the Chisholms permanently. The next time Elaine saw her sister, she was on a steel table in the morgue at the hospital in Stroudsburg. Drugs, drinking, and driving make for a deadly combination, especially on those foggy Pocono back roads.

Told the deep emotional scars of Maddie's traumatic childhood might never heal, the Chisholm's support for their niece was, as it had always been, unshakeable. Elaine peered across the table and said, "We'll do whatever it takes for her."

Lorraine Mihalik smiled, saying that in all her years as a detective investigating these types of cases, she never had one with such detailed contemporaneous evidence as the drawings Maddie had made of the man who had stolen her innocence. "The Byzantine cross tattoo she saw on his wrist that Sunday in St. Anne's was the same one she had seen and drawn as a child. That, along with church records showing he resided only blocks from the apartment where Maddie and her mother lived at the time, made our case solid. Now, we just have to hope he gets the max, so he doesn't destroy another childhood."

Fourteen months later, the morning sun glinted off a haze that lay atop the surface of the river where Scott and Jeff fished from a rowboat. Elaine watched Maddie perch atop a boulder on the shoreline to capture the tranquil scene with her pastel chalks.

Though her recent drawings were more vibrant than earlier ones, it would take years of therapy before Maddie was able to replace the darkness she had documented as a child with the light that now brightened her life.

Fr. Tomas Nicolescu was found dead of a broken neck at the state penitentiary in Marienville. His death was ruled an accident.





## THE SOCK DRAWER



"Isolation(covid)"  
by Esther Chiyanda

# The day is not far

By Nachi Keta

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## FICTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## THE SOCK DRAWER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## FICTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was one of my veins.

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

always your first love.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## FICTION

wear masks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So people with dangerous diseases can laugh.

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

That day is not far.

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





"Womanxlife"  
by Esther Chiyanda

# Therapeutic Thursdays

By Paul Lewellan

“What are you drinking?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

him than the average resident.

“I can think of worse ways to go.”

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

“Hundreds.” He corrected.

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

“Only one.”

“I beg your pardon...?”

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

“And did she?”

“Yes. The next day.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I could make recommendations."

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

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

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

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

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

“Shoot.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I see the problem.”

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

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

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

“Both are still true. What changed?”

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

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

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

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



“Three years.”

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

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

“Of course.”

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

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

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

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

He set his glass down. “Ask away.”

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

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

“Well, no....”

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

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

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



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

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

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

“Can a man change?”

“No,” responded a chorus of women.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe he needs to feel desirable again.”

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

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

"Or maybe he thinks he won't get caught this time," Jeffrey suggested.

"Oh, he can't be that stupid," Lucille suggested.

"People convince themselves of stupid things all the time."

"Like me," Edith confessed, "thinking this time it won't hurt as much."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Maybe he's changed."

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

"Once a snake, always a snake," Lucille reassured her.

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

Midafternoon the next Thursday, Darla appeared at Harry's door in high heeled sandals, beige tailored slacks, a cream-colored blouse and dress jacket. "Your Marketing Director uniform?"

"I'm the marketing director even in a t-shirt and jeans."

"But today you own the title." Harry grinned. "Well done."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ouch!”

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

“I’m not a saint.”

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

“Recommend a good couples counselor?”

“I thought maybe you could....”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Like drink more wine?”

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

“You could be our therapist.”

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

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

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

“That’s a relief.” Everyone laughed.

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

“I’d be honored.”

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

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

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

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

“You’re well preserved for your age.”

“Thank you.”

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

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

“And how did that work out?”

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

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

“Is it that obvious?”

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

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

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



# NONFICTION

*Stephanie Elena Bowman*  
*Vamika Sinha*

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“For people who have been ostracized, who have been all the way at the bottom, there’s only one way that we can go - and that’s up.”

- Mj Rodriguez, actor,  
singer and activist

*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.*

# Les Tipaniers

By Stephanie Elena Bowman

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When I've counted myself to sleep, my dreams are bookended by a rush of familiar images, primal in the way only childhood visions can be. I remember seeing the Birth of Venus in an art book at my grandmother's house; in the dream, my mother emerges from the shell, coconut-clad, donning a grass skirt and a crown of broad banana leaves. When I walk on the lawn, always barefoot in the waxy evenings, I can feel the breeze across my shoulders. I can smell her manoi oil on my fingers.

My very first crush was Jacques, my grandmother's best friend and the manager of the restaurant with the thatch pandanus roof and the terrace that stretched out over the sand. Jacques was tall and bald and brought my frosted sundae-glasses of diced bananas, ananas (pineapple), and url (breadfruit) with shredded coconut. My brother and sister preferred strips of raw fish for lunch, which we ate at a rough-hewn round table, like a great wheel under an umbrella of palm fronds. When I was five, I decided I would marry him, and we would eat coconut under the thatch. v

Before my lifetime, to live in Tahiti as a popaa—a European woman—in the 1980s was to invite hostility from the locals. Mo'orea is a speck not one hundred kilometers in circumference, and the barebones economy inspired much ill-will towards newcomers, even those who had paid for land. Fleeing domestic abuse in Italy, my grandmother came with her two daughters to build Les Tipaniers, a hotel named for the plumeria flowers whose rich scent and poisonous sap were found in abundance on the shore. The bungalows she designed and built herself, along with an office, a bar, and a restaurant. My visits to the island were after, long after, Nonna had received death threats, been surrounded in her hut by natives overstretched by competitive tourism and angered by the presence of yet another European. Afterwards, her total employed many Tahitians, and they slowly grew protective of her, although it was difficult to retain employees whose warm blood and free culture emphasized fishing over building. My mother Alessandra and aunt Elizabetta sowed the grass seeds along the sand bank and watered it daily; my mother washed dishes and tended bar by age fourteen. She developed a hatred for the hinano beer which was consumed with fervor even after it had started frothing out in the



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sweat and under the heavy tattoos of half-naked men.

Mine was a Tahiti enchanted. It was well after the resentment had died down towards Club Med and its exploitations; it was after my mother had ventured to the U.S. for journalism school; after the death threats and gang violence. My Tahiti was untouched.

I walked each morning along the long gravel driveway under the palm trees and pink hibiscus, the heaviness of the humid guava breeze and the shift of the pareu knotted around my neck, hung like a paper napkin around my tight chest and child's belly. Apart from the cloth, I was naked always if I could help it. I woke early to the small crane collecting bananas and coconuts from the trees along the gravel. I'd help Hinano (the restaurant manager, not the beer) set the tables in the restaurant, whose woven eastern wall could be rolled up and tied to let in the pale sunrise over the Pacific. I arranged bright flowers in the short blue vases and snuck pain au chocolat wrapped in wax paper. When there was no chocolate, I ate the long crusted loaves of baguette, delivered darling into a special square mailbox at the end of the drive. The French influence is unmistakable, and any analysis of these memories requires postcolonial recalibration.

I remember playing with the snails in the brush on the sunrise side of our bungalow, gathering and naming them before they wandered away with their cold, wet noses. I remember the street vendors, the mamas who have me small candy, the Asian merchants who had consumed Tahitian retail, especially the coveted black pearls nurtured and harvested by native divers. Genevieve, the hotel manager, sat with me once on our stoop with a large hinged clam, drawing her fingers along the iridescent patterns in its hull. We listened as the wind moved the chimes of sea urchin spines above us, and she explained the process of pearl farming. A carefully placed grain of sand had irritated the creature, whose reaction was to produce a hard noni, laminating the sand for its own protection as the pearl grew larger and larger and choked its life.

I did not understand then the history of Europeans in the islands, how Mo'orea had long harbored enmity towards popaa, the various diasporas and languages both representing vast financial potential and fostering cultural resentment. The white explorers made light of assumed Maohi ignorance, trading buttons and bangles for the fruit which would make them rich, but they were also known to exploit each other. The now-infamous mutiny on the *HMS Bounty* was prompted by Captain Bligh's orders to ration water for the crew so he would water the uru trees instead; still, the Tahitians were not entirely innocent, sending out their young women in hopes of landing the favor of a sailor and, perhaps, the prized enfants demis. These days the French live mostly

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in Papeete, but their influence remains even on the outer islands. The Chinese are the masters of the marketplace, and to go shopping is to go *à la Chine*—to the Chinese.

It is too simple and unjust to say that Hawaii has long submitted to its tourism. In Tahiti, this struggle continued into the '70s and '80s, rebellious against its classification as un territoire d'outre-mer, an overseas territory. And its waters are appropriately hostile: formed on the spiny backs of great atolls, the sea life begins exactly at the shoreline, inches from the sand and laid naked at every low tide. In Hawaii and Fiji, the sand continues, welcoming, straight into the water. In Mo'orea, the children wear jelly sandals to keep away the poisonous rock fish which kill through pain, the razor cone shells and sea snakes.

The air hangs dense in Mo'orea in the summer months, never more than twenty minutes from the next storm. On the blinding sand, the young people play volleyball or pétanque, listening to American music. Alessandra and Elizabetta learned English there, memorizing Eagles tunes that fuzzed through a worn transistor radio. The outdoor markets smell of sticky ananas and the cooperatif boasts the freshest catches, less the traps that Nonna's fisherman draw up from our small pier. The village fishermen, sweating under floppy cotton hats in the wet heat, set up shop even with only a single fish to sell. The mamas, all-seeing matriarchs, braid cheap jewelry and dye tapa cloth; brightly-colored and -tassled pareu blankets, soft and salt-smelling, hang on clotheslines or are folded into piles on the pandanus mats. Everyone sits on the ground, and the babies are wrapped on their mothers' backs with pareu and hemp cord, all bulges and cloth. When I wander through the mats at my grandmother's heels, there are choruses of *la ora na* with fingers outstretched to comb my blond hair or pull back my eyelids. When my brother is born, the mamas group around to coo at the towheaded baby with indigo eyes.

I think my dream is birthed in the 'ôte'a 'àmui, the tribal dance to the sound of pahu sharkskin drums. For hours we prepare our braided flower crowns, stitching through the stamen and into the hips of hibiscus flowers to secure them to the banana leaves. Mine slips over my forehead and lets fall the honey smell of flowers.

Unlike the hypnotizing hula dancers of Hawaii, Tahitian dancers move quickly, forcing their hips like a tarantella through the long straw skirts. There is a large flame set against the ocean, out of which a lithe woman emerged to celebrate with the fire-dancers. It's part celebration, part ritual: the monomythic Venus-birth of the human pearl.

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A young man with strong arms sees my mother sitting at the edge of the sand, anoints her with les bises, and lifts her by the hands to join in the frenzy of lightening feet and fire. She is transformed. Her hips move expertly, like a rattle, and she laughs with her partner. I realize years later that he loved her.

She married a boy from Hawaii, a calm man with a conch voice who spoke to her in Italian and never forced her in French. She was married in a dress of Tahitian lace which buttoned to the elbow, hand-stitched by the mamas; she wore a flowered crown.



## Barbès-Rochechouart

By Vamika Sinha

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am suddenly angry – a hot flush of shameful frustration. I am angry that an immigrant area is approached with such disdain. That my default setting is to think of an area as “shady” if it is full of black and brown men. I am angry that almost every immigrant neighborhood I know is a blemish on a city map, a place of poverty and disrepair, a place to avoid. I am angry but I also understand. Of course. Of course. One is scared of the unknown, of what they do not know, what they do not understand. This is a Parisian orient. This Barbès, this tapestry, this thing. I too am scared. In my H&M dress and bourgeois stability, I too am scared and I write to try and redeem myself. Barbès, in a way, is a bit like Porte de Choisy, the Chinatown of the city. It is a place of outsiders trying to belong, trying to assert themselves in an environment that does not try to understand them. It is a place for people like me, teetering on the edge of a home but never really getting there. It is a place of cardboard constructions, both literal and metaphorical, on

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the street and within inner consciences. Barbès is ugly. It is poverty, low prices, sweaty pockets and gangs. But Barbès is also hope: it is coins found on the pavement, tinny boombox rap, markets, hot meals, intoxication. Prayer.

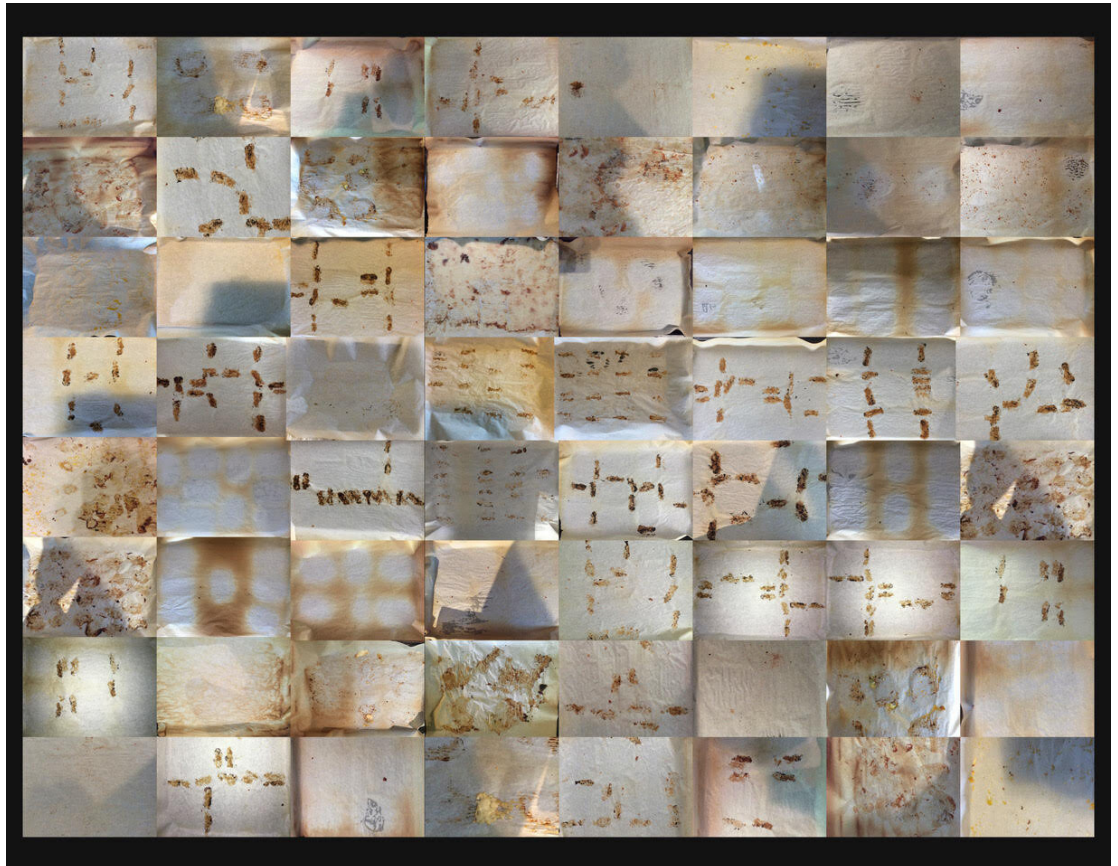
In the windows of the Rose d'Orient, the mannequins resemble queens, beckoning me to two different kingdoms, that of my past, watching technicolor Bollywood films in the living room, and the shallow future, the color of my bridal lehenga, jewelry and rituals around a pious fire. Zoe knows I have been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

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





"Parchment  
Paper Baking"  
by Matthew Gwathmey



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"With five kids at home, age ranges 5 to 14, my partner Lily and I have had to be pretty creative with how we fill the time to keep the kids occupied. And we have a lot of material to offer a glimpse into a 'family life' during these times."

- Angela Y. Davis



# REVIEWS

*Bex Dudley*

*Izzy Peroni*

*Nasreen Rasool*

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“We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis. [...] And if solutions within the system are so impossible to find, then maybe we should change the system itself?”

- **Greta Thunberg**, climate change activist

## *Perfume: the Story of Misogyny*

By Bex Dudley

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Reading (and Translating) Between the Lines: a Review of *Three Books*, written by Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles, translated by Kristine Ong Muslim, and illustrated by Erika M. Carreon

By Izzy Peroni

Translation is perhaps the most effective form of recontextualization. While exact wording in similar languages can be translated directly, phrases and ideas must be reworked to account for intent, and understanding must be supplemented by various sources in order to glean the meaning of the original author. For *Three Books*, a collection of poetry books written originally in Filipino by Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles, Kristine Ong Muslim translates each poem into English with incredible tact and care for the intent of the poet. The introduction and translator note reveal the deep attention given to each and every line of these books as they were put into English; *Three Books* is, after all, a collection of “erasure” poetry (popularly known as “black-out” poetry), meaning that the translation of each word or phrase by Muslim is just as impactful, and should be treated as delicately, as the choice by Arguelles to take them from their original text and create a new being from them. The poetry itself is startlingly succinct in form, but abrasive in its power and voice. Arguelles packs paragraphs into porous lines, quite literally, as he leaves us to consider how the context blacked out finds its true meaning within the brief moments that were left in. Couple all of this with monochromatic illustrations by Erika M. Carreon, who provides visuals to ideas that forcefully resist our sight, and *Three Books* creates an experience as ingeniously recontextualized as its creation.

The first book in this collection, *Antares*, is my personal favorite, as the intricacies of translation is on full display. Arguelles took descriptions of sexual content in movies from IMDB, erased and translated into Filipino, and now Muslim has translated those erasure poems back into English, refitting the words into their original language, with the added intent of the Filipino translation. The depth of these short stanzas is breath-taking at points, as the jagged line between original text and recontextualized poetry parallels the line between the real and fake of erotic movie content. The poem “Antichrist (Lars von Trier, 2009)” asserts that visual ambiguity;

(vacuity)

(or simulation)

## THE SOCK DRAWER

Behold rather  
the staging

Behold rather  
the sketch

The poet calls attention to the false, unrealistic aspects of sex scenes in movies, asking the reader to gaze upon the staging; at the same time, we are noticing the staging of each poem, taking in all that is performed for us. The poem “Dogtooth (Yorgos Lanthonis, 2009)” cross-hatches revelation and surreptitiousness in a similar manner, remarking on the way that nudity and sexuality is used as much for the latter as the former; “The rift between within and without / The shroud revealed by undressing.” Muslim does an incredible job of reframing each poem into its new identity, leaving traces of the primary text so that the reader still recognizes the IMDB type of language, but applying Arguelles’ intent accurately.

The other two books in this translated collection, *Chi* and *Mal*, are both accompanied by the illustrations of Erika M. Carreon and are erasures of the memoir of Filipino Sen. Chiz Escudero, *Say ni Chiz*, and Rio Alma’s poetry collection *Kung Bakit Kailangan ang Himala*, respectively. As an American reviewer, the cultural context of these works goes beyond what I am capable of researching, but, as seems to be the intention of Arguelles and Muslim’s methods, the translation gives accessibility to the context regardless. *Chi* opens with the idea of dependence, of everything in this world relying on everything else, much like erasure poetry relies on the individual words its collecting, or translation relies on the original language text; “If you look at it, everything depends on something: how many steps before reaching the staircase, what time the cockroach shows up, from which hole rats emerge or which hole needs to again be plugged. / There is an enormity of whatnot, an obvious burden and anguish.” The illustrations by Carreon in this book put face and form to what rejects outline in Arguelles’ poetry, depicting human forms that are often obscured or corrupted. *Mal* provides infinitely less words to work with, as Arguelles chose to take so few words from the source to begin with. The reformation of the original poems creates an intense obscurity; “A form embedded in concrete / materialized / and molted its skin”. All of the texts Arguelles has worked with have molted their skins with provocation from the poet, and Muslim and Carreon translate and add on to the rebirthed creatures compellingly.

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

By Nasreen Rasool

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

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

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

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

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

An unforgettable, moving read.





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“One thing I know that’s true about horror fans of any color is they like to be scared. And the easiest place to be scared is in a new thing.”

- **Tananarive Due**, American educator  
and author of *My Soul to Keep*

# DISCUSSION

*Izzy Peroni*

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## Final Girls and Intersectional Feminism

By Izzy Peroni

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

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

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

Yes: they are all white.

## THE SOCK DRAWER

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

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





"Cocooning"  
by Catherine Brennan



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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