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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  
“A Modern Dance” by  
Jordan Jones

# MEET THE TEAM

FOUNDER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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

NONFICTION EDITOR/  
ASSISTANT EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR



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

ART & MAGAZINE EDITOR



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

FICTION EDITOR



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

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"The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity. The fears are paper tigers. You can do anything you decide to do. You can act to change and control your life; and the procedure, the process is its own reward."

- **Amelia Earhart**, First female to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean

Hello  
&  
Welcome

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

In Hope,

Gracelyn Willard  
Founder/Editor-in-Chief

THE SOCK DRAWER



“Contrasted Hands” by Scott Hart

# POETRY

*Gabriel Bogart*  
*Arsimmer McCoy*  
*Tara Tulshyan*

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“Those are the same stars, and that is the same moon, that look down upon your brothers and sisters, and which they see as they look up to them, though they are ever so far away from us, and each other.”

- **Sojourner Truth**, American abolitionist and women’s rights activist



# A Machine Built For Breaking

By Gabriel Bogart

...there is only a finite space...

one small shift in matter construction  
or the wrong fork in the road  
of Evolution; taken

and we would never have survived  
the edge of  
the Ocean.

an afternoon stroll  
that took millions of years  
and countless pitfalls, near-misses  
Extinctions  
and bones cleaved

to walk on four legs  
let alone two or breathe  
in a body that houses  
one of the most delicate organs  
in the known universe:  
the Heart;  
a machine built for breaking.  
but there is only a finite space  
before it is filled with scar tissue

maybe death is just when we take  
a failing machine in for repairs  
and hopefully an upgrade



## my mother's hands

By Gabriel Bogart

my mother's hands turned to ash over a year ago,  
 along with the rest of her body,  
 but right now, I'm thinking of her hands.  
 I miss those hands; breaking apart the bleu cheese,  
 because it feels gross to my hands.  
 she teases me, with chuckling fingers

covered in the streaks and smears of bleu cheese.  
 even as an adult, she allows me  
 to be the kid still, in that moment.  
 I miss those hands; unfailingly tolerant  
 of the slimy outer leaves of  
 the green onions we must salvage for the salad.  
 again, the texture drives me into my skin.

she's peeled these onions so many times  
 to save me the sensation, she reminds me of that,  
 which I bristle at, as any child passing 40  
 assuredly reacts to their parent...really,  
 it is her deep understanding of my  
 frayed edges and synesthetic aversions. that's love...

I miss those hands; feigning  
 to peg an extra point in the cribbage board,  
 as if I wouldn't notice.

those hands, that understood,  
 how to stroke my head, when I was a boy,  
 in the very specific way I demanded  
 subduing me with the onset of sleep  
 and the welcoming, lush universe of dreams.



## The Ghost Dance

By Arsimmer McCoy

“Gonna lay down my burden, down by the riverside. Gonna lay down my burden, down by the riverside. I ain't gonna study war no more. Study war no more. Ain't gonna study war no more.”- Negro Spiritual

Gather your grit.  
Remember your training.  
Stand steady on the balls of your feet,  
then wait.  
This is the moment.  
We have rivaled with these interlopers for centuries.  
It comes to an end now.  
We've agreed to meet at the water's edge.  
Bring The women in to perform the ritual.  
Rub bergamot on the daughter's temples.  
Ground Geraniums into our son's hands.  
Rub the legs and arms down with lemongrass.  
Place lavender flowers and eucalyptus into the hair.  
Push nickels into the navels of the children.

After the death of our sweet King  
the elders say we lost our audacity,  
and replaced it with reasoning.  
Say we were wandering aimlessly.  
Forgetting our training.

They took our babies and hung them from trees for trophies.  
Drugged us and left our girls  
Sputtering to ghosts on the streets.  
Split open our veins and let them leak.  
Just to see how we bleed.

And they saw magic,  
Stardust and unknown planets;  
Enchantment.  
Since then, they have been seeking to end us.  
Our survival means their demise.  
Now is the time.

Remember your training.

When your mother took you out to look at the stars and told you to follow the gourd.  
When the pipes froze in the walls,  
your uncle wrapped you in sheepskin,  
rubbed your dried skin with petroleum,  
and told you how he survived the dust bowl;  
The black smoke.  
Like his grand pap survived the ship bowels,  
rollin round in puke and shit.  
Threw our Kuba overskirts overboard;  
The goats blood from the rite of passage  
Hadn't even dried yet on our flesh.  
We join hands at the ocean  
to call on them.

When yemoja troubled the waters  
she heaved and pushed.  
Murky Tsunamis drew back and rolled.  
There was an eclipse of that same black smoke.  
Iridescent ravens flew from her,  
spread their wings,  
and kicked up red dust.



## POETRY

When the current comes,  
it will take us first.  
We the children of Yemoja,  
fish children.  
When you put your hands  
on us,  
to drown us,  
we bob right back up to the surface,  
with hoarse laughter.  
We been breathing underwater.  
We been wading through rivers.  
And this land was all river once before  
and it will be  
a river again.

Our ancestors sit on the bottom  
of the ocean floor waiting.  
When the tide washes up  
Its them whispering,  
Remember your training.

When you separate a people,  
destroy their culture,  
take their language,  
and never atone for it,  
and they still find a way to come together,  
it is dangerous.

So I say remember Stono,  
remember the German Coast,  
Chikaka and the Seminoles.  
Remember Turner,  
Amistad,  
and the Gold coast warriors.  
Soldiers who never forgot who they were.  
Slaughtered their captures  
and sang to the sun,  
with nooses on their necks,  
at the public execution in New York.

It began in the water.  
It will end in the sea.

Fish children,  
Remember your training.  
Remember your training.  
Now take to the water  
and let peace be still.



## +1997+Santa Claus Goes Straight to the Ghetto+

By Arsimmer McCoy

Where were you when the bank truck flipped?  
When 2nd Christmas came to the ghettos.  
When all of my Miami showed a united front  
under a cool sun at 7am in the morning.  
It must have sounded like an explosion.  
There was dread first. A sound like that  
Couldn't be good.

People in this city always rushing,  
even in standstill traffic.

People popped their heads from their cars.

Children threw out their notepads,  
to fill up their book bags.

Everyone looked to the sky,  
to see a pinata shaped Brinks truck,  
bust open like a sardine can.

Slim dingy green colored slips  
avalanche over I95.

3.7million dollar dreams flooded  
Overtown skies.

Pennies from heaven showered down.  
The people stuffed their shirts and strollers.

Pulled the floating marvels into their cars.  
Wads of cash spilling out of jackets,  
folks utilizing whatever containers they could find.  
Nobody died.

Though im sure individual pockets of scuffles over  
New appliances, rent, bills, debts, and food,  
was the fuel to some heated arguments.

But why argue when a \$300,000 sack is bouncing down the interstate.

The papers called it a mob.

Looked to me like a dance.

The jook of the forgotten.

A step,

step,

step,

step in your answered prayers.

1997 would be the year of the unexplainable.  
The year we all made amends with God and our  
mothers.

It would be the year black people in the city  
believed in miracles again.



## Dirty Red, Black, High Yellow, & Brown Lil' Baby

By Arsimmer McCoy

A gaggle of shiny oiled  
 thighs parade onto  
 the field.  
 Dirty red, Black,  
 High yellow, & Brown Lil' Baby.  
 Flipped over Fruit cup juice slides off the sides of  
 their hands.  
 The tall park lights shine  
 bright overhead,  
 casting down on the Richmond Heights Giants,  
 as they kneel down in prayer.  
 To God.  
 To Football.  
 To Mama.  
 To Uncle Pat.  
 To Money.  
 To The park.  
 To God.  
 To God.  
 To God.  
 Dirty red, Black, High Yellow, & Brown Lil' baby,  
 gossip underneath a gumbo-limbo tree.  
 Bass cuts in.  
 Crowd screams.  
 Chest hits crash into the space  
 above everyone's heads.  
 The fog of grilled meat.  
 The laughter surrounding cigar smoke and old men.  
 Dirty Red, Black, High yellow, & Brown Lil' baby  
 swing their hips.  
 On the sidelines.  
 To ghost town Dj's on the breakdown.  
 Folks can hear the victory across town.  
 The atmosphere is so  
 Electric.  
 Curse words and failed bets

Just turn into shrugged shoulders  
 and knee slaps.  
 Besides, It's way to many mama's  
 talking to girlfriends about their men.  
 Way too many cocoa coated babies running around  
 to engage in conflict.  
 The grounds are littered with  
 plastic cups and chip bags.  
 Dirty Red, Black, High yellow, & Brown Lil' baby, kick  
 the trash.

They walk home together In the night.  
 Not scared.  
 For what?  
 These are their streets.  
 They walk home together.  
 In the night.  
 Careful not to step on cracks  
 In the concrete.  
 A false move can break your mama's  
 back.  
 or gentrify your community.  
 These are and will always be their streets.  
 Dirty Red, Black, High Yellow, & Brown Lil' Baby.



## Dynamic Pieces

By Arsimmer McCoy

He fell in love with clay  
At a young age.  
Molding the wet raw  
material in his hands  
made a gateway  
to a destiny,  
that Initially he couldn't see.  
By highschool he was creating.  
Dynamic pieces.  
A bust of his mother.  
A clay rendering of his father's hands,  
constructed in honor of his favorite artist,  
Augusta Savage.  
With scholarships to the schools of his choice,  
the art world starts to take notice.  
In an instant,  
he'd be smoking a joint  
in New York City  
with all the cool kids.  
Who ran away from home,  
To be Baldwin.  
To be Hayden.  
To be able to die and have your existence carry some  
weight in it.  
Them White girls gushed,  
when he spoke of  
Back home in his city.  
That one time he got jumped in Brown Subs.  
The first girl he gave a clay pot to  
Lived in Little Haiti.  
She liked it and in exchange,  
gave him her virginity,  
at the Swap Shop;  
at the Drive -In.  
Them white men gushed,  
when they watched him

describe his process with his hands,  
the color of bronze.  
Smile so big with teeth,  
the color of white.  
Started to hear what real money  
Sounded like.  
The higher up  
he seemed to go,  
he noticed less and less  
Darker complexioned patrons  
showing up to the shows.  
His family hasn't seen him since he  
left home.  
He calls every now then.  
Deposits a few bands,  
then goes back to  
Brunches at his girlfriend's  
summer House in the Hamptons.  
She tells him she loves him,  
even if her parents believe  
A nice jewish girl and black  
boy from the block just won't  
pan out.  
He likes it here.  
Here's comfortable.  
There's no sirens and everyone's so inviting.  
Just keep the work coming.  
Keep telling them about the life  
You left for the life you chose.  
Keep convincing yourself  
that somebody's son,  
who looks just like you,  
couldn't benefit from you bringing that wealth  
back home. That clay pot is still sitting in that girls window.



## A Kopitiam near Johor Causeway Bridge

By Tara Tulshyan

condensed milk froths against uncle's teh tarik / when he tips over the tea / where he steeps his memories of Malaysia / he churns the tea leaves for three days / grounds the bark infuses it into milk / he cannot see the bottom of the pot when he stirs his hands / pours it into his mouth where his lips are melted onto his chin / he's reminded of his papa / whose fingers are stained with ceylon that breathes with him when he sells teh / his body syrups in the heat / sleepy with sunlight / papa pulls the milk and tea together / he takes his time / the milk has to curdle into the bitterness / the tea bubbles have to blister / then it is sweet enough / papa walks the streets of Johor before the yolk of sunlight swirls into the hawker / the pots burnished onto his shoulders / forehead bowing to the sun as the road to Singapore unfolds before him







“Without You” by Karla Madrigal

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“I painted this while I was going through an intense break up. My first lesbian relationship. We spent a few months apart and ended up together once again. But this time we included self help books, therapist, and psychiatrist.”

- Karla Madrigal

# FICTION

*Anna Bankston*

*Megha Nayar*

*Carly Tagen-Dye*

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“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.”

- **Toni Morrison**, American novelist, essayist, book editor and college professor

## *Amethyst Adolescence*

By Anna Bankston

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*TRIGGER WARNING: CONTAINS PHYSICAL ABUSE*

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I was born a shade of deep violet, my umbilical cord wrapped so tightly around my neck I was kept from announcing my arrival to the world. After they delivered me, my parents told me the room erupted in quiet chaos as the nurses worked furiously to make me cry. Years of medical training ensured that my pitiful screams rang out at an unbearable octave in no time at all. My cheeks took on a rosy blush as my skin faded to a pale, dull color.

“Everyone in that room cared about you so much,” my mother later cooed, running her fingers through my thin dark hair. “They were going to do everything possible to bring you and your bright eyes into this world.”

And so they did. On October 14th, 2002, the doctors delivered me, Aria Valentine Porter, a plump, plum girl. From that moment on, my favorite color was purple.

My parents couldn't have been more thrilled to have a daughter, considering they already had their fill of boys with my twin brothers, Eden and Maverick. They were in the fourth grade when I was born, and to put it simply, they wanted absolutely nothing to do with me. Not that I had any problem with it. From the moment I was carried into my house, secured tightly in my carrier, my parents didn't stop showering me with attention. My dad would read to me for hours in my nursery, which he had filled to the brim with stuffed singing lambs and giant white bows. On my fourth birthday, my mom clapped as I walked into my newly painted purple bedroom. I'm not sure what made them think asking a child to pick a paint swatch was a good idea because now the walls are a harsh, heavy lilac color that could pass as a dark grape-flavored cave. Nonetheless, I was overjoyed. I stuck glow-in-the-dark stars on the walls and laid my dress-up clothes on the floor. Big, white cursive letters reading A-R-I-A hung over the head of my bed.

As I grew older, my parents quickly turned from doting mentors to helicopter lunatics. I found myself spending more and more time in my room, the only place where I seemed to be able to catch my breath. When I was there, I could pretend that all that existed in the world were coloring books and sparkly nail polish. What else did a six-year-old need? Well, other than a good friend, that is. Up until then, my childhood had been a somewhat lonely one. My relationship with my brothers grew increasingly estranged

## FICTION

as they never truly recovered from the attention deficit that began with my birth. It took a while for my parents to realize a young girl my age needed to spend time with other children, not just with her family, loving as they were. That was when they introduced me to Elena.

Elena was just a year older than me and lived on the corner of our street. I noticed she was always moving playing hopscotch, shooting baskets, jumping rope. Her blond pigtails were constantly bouncing up and down. On our first playdate, I couldn't match her energy level.

"So, what do you want to do?" she inquired, dragging out her voice. I racked my mind for ideas, but all I seemed to be able to focus on was the loud chomping of her bubble gum. I twisted the bracelet on my wrist anxiously, looking down at my twinkle-toed shoes. In raising me in social isolation, my parents had doomed me to awkwardness. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well," Elena started, "we could ride my bike, or swing on the swing set, or see if my mommy can take us to the park." I shook my head, feeling my breath straining at the thought of keeping up with my new hyperactive friend. "Or we could go swimming at my grandma's pool, or play in my tree house in my backyard—"

"Wait, you have a tree house?" I inquired, my attention perking back up. "Like *Jack and Annie and the Magic Tree House*?" The series had been one of my most recent obsessions.

"Uh, sure, just like that!" Elena grabbed my arm and dragged me through her yard until there was a tall maple tree looming over both of us. There were six wooden planks nailed crookedly to the trunk, leading haphazardly up to the lower limbs. Other than those planks, I noticed the tree was completely bare.

"Elena, this isn't a tree house."

She laughed, shaking her head. "Just pretend it's a tree house! Now come on!" Elena took off toward the planks, and I watched in amazement as she pulled herself up within a matter of seconds. I swallowed, my nerves making my stomach do somersaults. Noticing my hesitation, Elena coaxed, "Come on, Aria, it'll be fun! We can play Magic Tree House if you want!"

With a long, unsteady breath, I nodded my head once and reached toward the planks. I hoisted myself up, my small pale arms straining with effort. "I can do it," I whispered to myself. "I'm doing it." And I was, at least until the planks ran out. My hand

reached for the next holding spot only to grasp air. I went tumbling, my arms and legs clumsily banging along the trunk on the way down. Laying still in my crumpled form, I let out a strangled cry.

“Are you okay?” Elena called down to me, puzzled at the girl with unsteady hands.

When I went home that night, my mom knelt with me in the bathroom as she cleaned my scrapes. The wet washcloth stung to the point of being unbearable, and she continued despite my pleas for her to stop. “Darling, it’s okay,” she said in a soothing tone. “It’s going to have to hurt before it can get better.” While I didn’t see how that could possibly be true, I bit my tongue and tried to ignore the metallic taste in my mouth.

As my mom tucked me in, I noticed a blue mark peeking out from one of my band-aids. “What’s that?” I asked, pointing at the mysterious blemish. I’d never seen anything like it.

“That’s a bruise, honey.”

“What’s a bruise?” The word felt funny on my lips.

My mom smiled softly, crawling underneath my violet covers. I instinctively nuzzled into her side. “A bruise is how your body shows you were hurting and how you can tell when you’re getting better.” I nodded along, acting like I understood what she said when all I could really think about was that my skin was turning purple.

Throughout the week it took for my bruises to heal, I found that I was utterly fascinated by them. I would poke and prod, looking at them in the mirror, under a magnifying glass, in the bathtub. No one had ever told me our skin could change color before. I was surprisingly content with the little purple blobs. However, my reaction changed from mesmerized to disgusted when I woke up one morning to see that they’d transformed into a seasick shade of green.

“Mommy!” I exclaimed, running downstairs into our kitchen. She had a baby pink apron tied around her waist as she worked on flipping golden brown pancakes. My brothers, anxiously awaiting their breakfasts, did not appear to be amused with my interruption. “My arm is green!”

“Remember what I told you, sweetie?” she said, bending down to my height. “That’s how your body tells you that you’re getting better.”

“I liked it better purple,” I pouted, crossing my arms. “That’s my favorite color!”

“Well, Aria, people aren’t supposed to be purple.”

## FICTION

During recess that day, I replayed her voice over and over again in my head. I sat alone on the swings, dragging my toes along slowly in the dusty pebbles. I ran my fingers over my shins where one of the discolored spots had lost all of its darkness. In a sudden impulse, I pressed down on the bruise, using what strength I could muster. I watched as my pale skin turned even whiter at the pressure. No matter how hard I pressed, the purple didn't seem to come back.

Until the next morning. As I pulled on my ruffled jean skirt, I noticed that my shin was blue once again. For some reason, I felt a smile spread across my face. Who said I couldn't be purple if I wanted to?

Years went by with the same dull routine. I spent an obscene amount of time with my parents, seldom spoke to my brothers, and struggled to keep up with my best friend's chaotic energy. I desperately needed a change. Eventually, my prayers were answered.

When I turned fifteen, I had my first boyfriend. A boyfriend wouldn't have been my choice in a lifestyle adjustment, but Elena couldn't help but play matchmaker. "He likes you!" she squealed, grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking me in excitement. "Connor Steelman is like, the fourth hottest junior boy! And he likes you! How are you not freaking out?"

"Because I don't believe you!" I pushed back. "What would Connor Steelman want to do with a girl like me?" I was making a valid point. My hands began fidgeting with the bracelets that now covered a third of my left arm. I found myself completely and utterly undesirable. My hair was stick straight and bland, my outfits were laughable due to the unfortunate fact that my mom still did all of my shopping for me, and my box frame was less than appealing.

"Well, believe me or not, he told me he wants to take you to the drive-in tonight!" Elena said in a sing-songy voice.

Up until Connor pulled into her driveway, I really didn't think Elena was telling the truth. But there he was in all his glory: pierced ear, curly brown hair, killer smile. I hopped in the passenger seat, praying neither of my parents was outside to catch me in my lies. Despite the guilt in the pit of my stomach, I figured it was my turn for some normal teenage rebellion.

"So," I shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat of his beat-up Mustang. The opening credits were starting to roll on the big projector screen, and the opening track played softly through the car's stereo. "Have you seen this movie before?"

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“What movie?” Connor asked, taking a puff of his cigarette before letting it dangle out of the open window.

“*Casablanca*,” I said between stifled coughs, choking on the smoke that drifted over.

“Never heard of it.”

I frowned. “But you asked me to come to this movie with you?”

Putting out his cigarette and rolling up the window, Connor turned towards me. I could barely see his face, its outline dimly lit by the motion picture playing above. “You’re a pretty girl, you know that?” he huffed. I thought maybe he was leaning closer to me, but I couldn’t be sure. I was too busy, still choking on the cigarette smoke.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I blushed, my hand instantly reaching for my bracelets. I flinched when Connor grabbed my hand instead, running his finger slowly over the top of my knuckles.

“The innocent girl act? It looks good on you.” Now I was sure he was leaning in. I could feel his breath hot on my face as I bit the inside of my cheek. I opened my mouth to respond, but before I could, he pulled me forward and smashed his lips into mine. My mind started whirling with more thoughts than I could comprehend. *This is my first kiss! And it’s with Connor Steelman! I can’t believe this is happening! Wow, no one said it was going to be this wet. Or this sloppy. Is that his tongue? Why is he squeezing my hand so tight? The movie is starting now, shouldn’t we watch it?* I strained to hear the dialogue on the stereo, but all I could make out was the sound of Connor’s labored breathing in my ear.

The minutes ticked on as his mouth moved to my neck and his hand slipped underneath my shirt. The buckle dug painfully into my thigh, and I winced. *So, this is being a normal, rebellious teen.* Needless to stay, we didn’t watch *Casablanca*.

I swear my dad’s shouts the next morning could have been heard all throughout our neighborhood. “Aria Valentine Porter, what the hell is on your neck?”

“What are you talking about?”

My dad rose out of his chair and dragged me to the bathroom mirror, pointing at the string of magenta circles leading from my ear to my collarbone. My eyes widened in horror, and I winced as he called for my mother. What a disappointment their little girl had become.

“Three weeks,” I groaned on the bus ride to school. “I don’t think anyone has ever been grounded for that long.”

## FICTION

“Well, to be fair,” Elena said, dragging down the top of my turtleneck to examine the damage. “You did lie to them. And wow, Connor really did a number on you.”

“How was I supposed to know there were going to be bruises!” I exclaimed.

Elena threw her head back, overwrought with laughter. “They’re called hickeys, stupid.”

“Well, they’re still bruises, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, but the type of bruise you want to have! Those are bruises of love!” She dragged out the last word at varying octaves, poking me in the ribs. This was an interesting concept to me. I never thought bruises could be a good thing, other than their peculiar beauty. Maybe my mom hadn’t been honest with me. If I wanted to, I could be the girl with the purple skin.

Being grounded didn’t stop me from finding ways to see Connor. From sneaking out at night, to skipping classes, to using Elena as a cover, I found myself going back to him time and time again. As more and more months rolled by, I kept losing myself in him. He gave me my first cigarette, helped me get clothes that were “more mature,” gave me more love bruises in less visible places. I was completely enamored with him. As my relationship with Connor grew stronger, my relationship with my parents went up in flames. With my brothers out of the house and in college, they had nothing else to do but sit and watch me spiral. Their perfect little girl, their angel, was turning into a monster right before their eyes. I didn’t know how to convince them that wearing winged eyeliner and being in love with an eighteen-year-old didn’t mean I suddenly worshipped the devil. So, I didn’t bother trying.

“You’ve been different lately,” Elena remarked one afternoon. We were sitting precariously in the tree limbs in her backyard, taking long drags off cigarettes.

I swung my legs back and forth. My shoelaces bounced against my boots in a rhythmic *click-click-click* beat. “What do you mean ‘different?’”

“I don’t know,” she said, shrugging her shoulders and turning to lean her back against the trunk. “You’re quiet. More reserved. It’s hard to tell how you’re doing.”

“I’ve always been quiet and reserved.”

Elena sighed, meeting my eyes. She looked worried. “Not like this, Aria.”

“I’m fine,” I grumbled. “My mom’s just been extra pissy lately.”

“You’ve never been a good liar.” She pushed herself out of the tree and landed with



## THE SOCK DRAWER

a thud on the ground. “I’ll be here when you’re actually ready to talk about it, okay?”

My room looked very different now, other than the deep purple walls. The white A-R-I-A letters were nowhere to be seen, and black and white posters were plastered alongside my bed. Open eyeshadow palettes and earring studs were scattered across my desk. My sparkly nail polish had long since been shoved in the top of the closet. The only item from my childhood to escape the identity overhaul was a full-length mirror that hung on the back of my door. It had a floral border with twisting green vines and pink wax flowers.

I stood in front of it now in just my navy lace bra and short black panties. Just moments ago, I had kissed Connor goodbye for the night. He squeezed my hand before crawling out of the window, an unnecessary precaution considering my parents ultimately gave up on enforcing any rules. As I heard the sound of his Mustang start from down the street, I shuddered. My reflection shuddered back at me. The girl in the mirror looked thin. She was fragile. Black bruises looked incredibly dark on her pale skin. They littered her arms, her legs, her torso. Try as I might, I couldn’t believe that girl was actually me.

The first time Connor hurt me it was a joke. A dare. He made a bet that I wouldn’t be able to take a cigarette burn for longer than five seconds. Before I knew it, cigarette burns from a stupid dare became bruises on my neck, courtesy of Connor’s hands. I wasn’t alarmed in the beginning. He had always been aggressive. But he hadn’t always been mad. The night he hit me I didn’t want to forgive him. Everything in me told me that I shouldn’t. But he was all I had. My parents had never felt farther away, Elena was busy actually making something of herself, and even my disappointed brothers were out of reach.

It became part of our routine. Things would be going well for a while, he’d be happy. Then he’d get low on money, wouldn’t be able to pay his dealer, and therefore found himself on the edge and upset. My body became his outlet. But he always told me he loved me. I knew he did. He was just stressed. I needed to understand. I needed to learn. He was helping me learn.

I sat on my bed and traced a bruise on my shin. With a wince, I pressed it lightly with the tip of my pointer finger. For a moment, I felt like the little girl on the swings at recess again. Back when all I wanted was to be my favorite color. Now my skin wasn’t purple. It was black and brown and damaged. It was all I had.

There was nothing to prepare me for my mom swinging open my bedroom door.

## FICTION

“Christ, mom!” I pathetically attempted to cover my arms and legs. “It’s two in the morning!”

“Exactly, which is why I want to know why I heard voices,” her voice stopped abruptly as her gaze fell upon my figure. For a moment, we just looked at each other. A lost daughter and a hopeless mother. She finally let out a strangled cry, her hands covering her mouth. “My baby,” she choked out through quiet sobs. “What has he done to you?”

“It’s nothing,” I shot back, wrapping my comforter around me tightly.

“Nothing? Can you look me in the eye and tell me that’s fucking nothing?” This caught me off guard. I’d never heard my mom swear before. She slowly walked closer to my bed, reaching out towards my arms. “Look at you. You’re hurting. He’s hurt you—”

“He loves me!” I shouted, shoving her embrace away.

“Love? Is that what he’s calling it?” she sobbed. “What does he call those burns and bruises, Aria?” She sat down next to me, and I felt my body tense up as her arm brushed my shoulder. “I know things have been different for a while now,” my mom whispered, tears silently dripping down her cheeks. “We haven’t been able to reach you, and I know you’ve always struggled to really reach us. But darling . . . this is not love.”

I turned to face her, feeling anger swelling inside me. “Well then what is? Because I sure haven’t felt it from Eden or Maverick! They would prefer I’d never been born at all. And Elena, my only friend? That pairing was forcibly orchestrated by you and dad! You two are the worst of all. I’ve always been your puppet on strings, ‘Aria do this,’ ‘Aria do that,’ and when I’m not your perfect little doll, you just hate me! How is that love?”

The quiet of my room and the sound of dogs barking beyond the open window surrounded us for a moment. Finally, my mom said, “When you were born, there was a moment we weren’t sure if you were going to make it. There is nothing more terrifying than knowing your child is hurting. At that moment, my heart was in so much pain I wasn’t sure I’d be able to live with myself if you weren’t living with me.” I became conscious of tears streaming down my own cheeks now, steady trails dripping down my neck and disappearing in my comforter. “When they handed you to me for the first time, I knew that I had never loved anything or anyone that much in the entire world. Aria, I still love you more than you can ever possibly know.”

I was sobbing now, my body heaving uncontrollably. My mother’s arms wrapped around me. It was a comfort I didn’t realize I’d been missing so much. “I can admit that

## THE SOCK DRAWER

your father and I weren't perfect parents," she continued. "But you should believe me when I say we did our best. We didn't know how to have a daughter. We still don't. But what we do know is our baby hasn't been okay. My child is hurting, and it's like I'm back in the delivery room all over again."

I buried into my mom's hair, the strands sticking awkwardly to the wet parts of my face. It had been so long since I really held someone. Since I had someone really hold me. I felt like the little girl crying in the bathroom as her mom cleaned out her scrapes. *Darling, it's okay. It's going to have to hurt before it can get better.*





“Sudden” by Karla Madrigal

“I painted this during the summer of 2020. This day in particular I picked up my acrylic paint for the first time in a long while. I had a particular love for watercolor and it was the medium I had used to fill up this sketch book. I love this piece so much and I haven’t stopped obsessing over acrylic ever since.”

- Karla Madrigal

## *Coming of Age*

By Megha Nayar

I will never forget the day I had my first period, so memorable was the date – 09/09/99. I was twelve and prepared but reality did not match expectations. I had anticipated a runny flow, like a tap bursting open. Having witnessed my girlfriends make emergency exits from class with one fist tightly wrapped around a secret thingamajig, I was counting on the arrival of womanhood to be bright-red and conspicuous. Instead, it came as a thick brown discharge that looked like the consequence of an over-confident fart.

That first period was a slow-motion event. It was icky and annoying but largely tame.

When my mother taught me how to affix a sanitary napkin to the inside of my panty, I saved her instructions in my head with bullet points. A class topper, I even revised them twice. Place the upper end of the napkin about one inch north of where the vaginal opening sits. Check that the entire napkin is firmly glued to the panty. Change every four to six hours. Take two baths a day, keep your crotch clean. And, listen – don't toss your undies into the laundry pile anymore. We can't expect a man-servant to handle a big girl's panties. Wash them yourself at bath time. Here, take this detergent soap and scrubbing brush.

Big girl.

I listened and nodded, suddenly feeling shy. I knew, in theory, that periods are a perfectly legit part of female evolution, yet for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to look the domestic help in the eye that evening. I avoided him for several evenings thereafter.

In school, curious things were happening. My classmates were starting to soar like birds, their heads expanding with strange new ideas. My best friend Aisha, who'd matured six months before me, was falling hopelessly in love with a senior. She nicknamed him "Red Bag" because he carried, well, a red-coloured bag. I did not know his name. She didn't either. But he had a face like an angel's and she was convinced she would spend the rest of her life with him. Every day, during recess, she would drag me to the third-floor corridor from where the both of us got a direct view of Red Bag having a snack in the canteen. We could only see the top of his head though, and the food going into his mouth. "Look at him eat a sandwich again! That must be his favourite snack," she would muse. "Look, he hasn't oiled his hair today! Must be planning to go out in the evening."

## FICTION

Those were pre-internet days. The earliest mobile phones were still five years away. We lived in a small, conservative town – one where the most rebellious thing twelve-year-old girls could do was talk to boys in public. I was not the type to flirt – neither with dudes nor with danger. I had been conditioned since birth into goodgirlness. My bestie, though, was sassier.

“Oye!” she whispered to me one morning during the Social Science class. “I managed to find out Red Bag’s name.”

“What?!” I felt a tiny shiver climb up my spine.

“I followed him to the parking lot yesterday after school,” she explained. “His bike wasn’t very far from mine. I pretended that mine had a punctured tyre and made a show of dragging it out of the mud. He noticed and came over to help.”

“Wow!” The girl was crafty. “And then? Just like that you asked him his name?”

So, after he helped her with her bike, she turned around to thank him – calling him someone else’s name on purpose. He corrected her. I’m not A, I’m B.

Clever. I was mind-blown. I also felt a slight nudge of terror, even though it wasn’t I who’d strayed.

Yes, this was straying. Girls from respectable families were not supposed to seek romance. School was for education. Love could happen later, when your parents picked a man for you, or when you picked a man you were sure your parents would approve of.

Right? Right.

But Aisha was intoxicated. The guy with the red bag was her drug. She wouldn’t stop drooling over him. Her scores dipped. All day in class, she day-dreamed. She wrote his name in the back of her English notebook. She played FLAMES with their names written together, and the result was M for Marriage. She was thrilled. She tore out that paper, folded it into a little origami flower and slipped it under her shirt. “I want to hold him close to my heart,” she said. I grinned.

Inwardly, I wondered if she was becoming the wrong kind of company.

My mother had told me in detail about the kind of girls to stay away from. Girls who wore eyeliner to school, or black bras. Girls who looked for excuses to slap boys on their arms.

## THE SOCK DRAWER

Girls who did not study seriously for class tests. Girls with low calibre and high hemlines.

Aisha was fast beginning to resemble them.

The following month, on a crisp December morning, we embarked on our annual school trip. The bestie had done a mad dance the previous week when she'd found out that Grades 8 to 10 would be going together. Not like they could do anything scandalous like hold hands on the bus, because teachers are known to metamorphose into hawks on school picnics. But still, *he* would be around. She could watch him all day. Maybe they'd get to talk again? Fourteen hours of possibilities lay ahead. She was deliriously happy.

The picnic venue was a forest with a hundred-year old banyan tree. There was ample space and opportunity for everyone to frolic around. The sporty ones grabbed their badminton racquets, the lazy ones sprawled out in the shade with playing cards and packed snacks. I wanted to soak in the greenery and take a quiet walk around the woods. But when I turned to call Aisha, I realized she was no longer with me. She, along with the rest of the hormonal ones, had vanished in search of a secret hideout. She wouldn't be back all day.

In the evening, when everyone began piling back into the bus, I reserved a seat for her. I was, of course, livid at how she'd ditched me without a word, but my goodgirlness always got in the way of confrontation. I did not know how to throw a fit. When she finally hopped on board, dishevelled and grinning, I saw the look in her eyes and knew her love story had made progress.

"What did you do?" I asked after the bus took off.

"Let's just say I got to know someone better," she winked.

Good Lord! What had the girl done?

"Nothing serious, babe. Just some fun. A little kissing. Harmless stuff."

I wanted to know more but she refused to elaborate. I had too much pride to badger her. She plugged in a cassette and began listening on her Walkman. I turned to the window, upset at her treatment of me, but more importantly, very worried for her.

Why hadn't she spared a thought for the consequences of meandering? Assuming she'd been canoodling with Red Bag, what if someone from the school had seen them? What if her parents were informed? Or worse ... what if she fell pregnant?

## FICTION

I'd read in a woman's magazine that "oral sex is a legitimate alternative to regular sex". I knew, from studying biology, that anything oral concerns the mouth. Like oral exams, for example, where one has to speak out the answers. Naturally, oral sex had to mean kissing then. What else could it be?

The thought travelled from my mind into my bones, making me shudder. My mother always said that mingling too much with boys was dangerous. It could cause pregnancy and tarnish a girl's life for good. I did not exactly know how babies came about but had an inkling that kissing – also known as oral sex, as earlier deduced – had something to do with it. And if oral sex was an alternative to regular sex, it had to have the same outcomes, obviously.

Oh god, why was this girl tempting fate?

I said nothing to her but made some quick calculations. Her last period had ended a week ago – I knew this because she'd made numerous trips to the washroom and had done her I'm-walking-ahead-of-you-please-check-my-skirt routine a few times. I also knew, as her closest friend, that her cycles were usually 29 days. I calculated – her next period would be due on the 15th of next month.

So, if she got her period, it would mean she wasn't pregnant. Right? Isn't that what the magazines said?

Those three weeks after the school picnic were the longest three weeks of my life. I was wracked by anxiety. None of the usual distractions worked, not even my favourite activities like reading story-books and studying for class tests. I was tormented by the prospect of my best friend dropping out of the school race. At night, I tossed and turned for hours. At one point, I even had a nightmare where I saw her arrive in school with a massive protruding belly, instantly becoming the target of endless mockery. The teachers were shell-shocked and made *tch tch tch* noises. The Principal announced her expulsion from school at the morning assembly. To make matters worse, he called me in for interrogation as well. "You are Aisha's best friend, aren't you?" he asked me severely, his infamous cane just inches away from where I sat. "Are you also like her? Do you have a boyfriend too? We're going to summon both of your parents. Girls these days have no shame!"

When the nightmare broke, I was trembling. I realized I'd peed a little in my pyjamas.

On her part, Aisha was blissfully unaware of my distress. She continued her shenanigans



## THE SOCK DRAWER

– meeting up with Red Bag in the canteen, chatting him up in the parking lot, even exchanging home phone numbers – and I grew convinced that all hell was waiting to break loose upon all of us. I wondered if I should tell my mother about her meanderings, but then I was afraid my mother might turn up at school to set her straight, and the last thing I wanted was drama, so I held my tongue in check.

On the 14th of that month, Aisha did not come to school.

I contemplated the possibilities – maybe she'd woken up late, maybe her alarm didn't ring, maybe her bike got punctured en route. Such exigencies alone could explain her sudden disappearance. I must have looked at the door at least a million times, willing her to turn up. But she was determinedly absent.

Ditto on the 15th – her seat remained empty. All through the morning prayers, I wished desperately that she would appear at the door, dressed in the red-and-grey school uniform, bearing a perfectly flat belly. But there was no sign of her.

Both days, I was powerless to concentrate on studies. In and out they went – the Mathematics teacher, the History teacher, the English teacher, the Arts teacher – but to my mind they were as absent as Aisha. Nothing they said registered. Not a word.

At 12:30 PM, when the last bell rang, I darted out of the classroom like a human arrow. My bag had already been packed, my shoelaces tied. I'd been sitting in lunge position, right next to the door, so that I could escape getting stuck in the crowded corridors. Off I ran, like a cat chasing a mouse, and reached home so quick my mother wondered if the school had let us off early.

After gobbling up my lunch, I told my mother I was going to Aisha's place to help her out with schoolwork. "She has been absent these past two days", I explained. "So, I need to help her with the missed portions."

Before my mother could ask any questions, I grabbed my backpack and rushed out of the house. I hopped onto my bicycle – my faithful pink Ladybird – and cycled like a maniac all the way to my best friend's home, not stopping once to catch my breath.

At their porch, I rang the doorbell and waited. My heart was drumming in my ears. Auntie seemed to be taking an eternity to reach the door. In the meantime, my brain conjured up the worst possible outcomes. What if Aisha's parents had found out the truth and given her a tongue-lashing? She would be grounded. They would take her for surgery. A doctor

## FICTION

would extract the baby from her stomach. Would the baby be fully formed? Likely not. Babies can't possibly grow much in a month or two. What would happen to Aisha? She would be hidden from the world until her belly settled back into shape; that was certain. Would she be permitted to resume school? Impossible. Her parents would lock her up indoors and get her home-schooled. She wouldn't be allowed to step out unescorted. Her plans to study in America would be axed. Worse, she would never get to see Red Bag again. Like a pair of separated swans, they would writhe in agony and eventually die. As the only person who knew of their boundless love for each other, I would be morally obliged to share their saga with the world. I would pen their love story with depth and longing. It would make everyone cry, maybe even win me a prize. The BBC would interview me. The critics would call my book "poignant" and "moving". But the awards and accolades would do nothing to heal my heart, broken from having lost my best friend forever. I would live the rest of my life cautioning every girl in the world to never indulge in oral sex until after getting married.

At this point the door opened, jolting me out of my thoughts.

Aisha's mother took a moment to register my presence, perhaps because of how disoriented I must have looked, and how profusely sweating. "Hi Aunty," I panted, my heart now throbbing at hundred-decibel levels, "I ... sorry for showing up like this. I just came to meet Aisha. Is she ... okay? I ... she missed two days of school, so I came to help her with lessons. Hope she is fine?"

Aunty smiled sweetly at me. "How nice of you, kiddo! Aisha is fine, she is just having a very heavy period. You know how it is, right? She was groaning so much, I told her she could stay home. She'll be back in school tomorrow. Now, why don't you come in? Aisha is watching *Princess Diaries* on cable. Go on, join her – I'll bring you girls pizza and milkshakes in a bit."

And just like that, the thudding in my heart subsided. The nightmares dispersed, I joined my best friend on the couch, and all was well in my world.

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### **Epilogue:**

I did learn, eventually, that kissing and oral sex aren't synonyms. I also learnt, over long years of un-learning, to not issue character certificates to other women.



## *The Itch*

By Carly Tagen-Dye

Rafi opens the door to his apartment and finds her, makeup smeared, in a dress he's never seen before. It's royal plum, with sequins lining the seams and enough fluff around the waist to make it stick out a good three inches. He can't completely see her shoes, but gets a glimpse of silver. The nail polish on her toes is chipped, was once possibly chartreuse. Under the porch light, Rafi sees that his sister has been crying.

"You're ruining your makeup," he says. Shira utters a sound somewhere between a choke and a chuckle. Dried eyeliner runs down her face in long black tire marks. Rafi notes that she's wearing one of his old winter jackets; the dark green one that was too big for even him. She looks like an overstuffed olive.

"It's freezing out here," Shira sniffs. "Is now a good time?"

It would be rude to say otherwise. Rafi straightens his stance and steps aside. He's in his pajamas; a state school sweatshirt, striped pants. He has the beginnings of beard stubble dotting his cheeks and chin, and likely doesn't smell too fresh. Shira either doesn't notice or care.

"You are my best person," she says. Her dress hits him as she walks inside. Before following, Rafi scans the street to see if anyone else is around; a cab, perhaps, or a friend who drove her. He's on the first floor of the complex and has a view. The street light have been on for hours.

No one remains. Rafi shuts the door and lets the click linger in the foyer.

\*

From the kitchen, he hears faint television sounds. Rafi places the lid back onto a jar of Skippy as Claude Rains' demented laugh bounces off the walls. The stove clock reads 8:18. Shira sits in the living room with her back against the couch. Her shoes are tossed beside her, jacket thrown onto the coffee table. Rafi holds out the plate he's prepared: rice cakes slathered in peanut butter, red flakes of cinnamon on top. The crunch as Shira bites seems deafening.

"Your dress is nice," Rafi says, joining her on the floor. "Where'd you get it?" "Downtown thrift shop," Shira licks her ring finger. "Major steal. There was a tear in the back, but I sewed it."

## FICTION

“You can’t even tell.”

Rafi’s place is modest; three and a half rooms, though it feels much smaller. The furniture came from various yard sales and curbside advertisements. His dishes and linens are all taken from his childhood home.

Shira crunches as *The Invisible Man* continues to play.

“Does Mom—” Rafi starts.

“No,” Shira says. “And don’t call her. Please. She’s not expecting me home for another few hours. Maybe not until tomorrow morning.”

“Geez. Does she think you’re getting laid tonight or something?”

“I don’t know what she thinks, ever,” Shira scowls. “I think she was just excited that I was getting out of the house. We had a deal, though. And I followed through on my part.” “So you went?”

“I passed by the school. Technically, I was there.” Shira pauses. “And then I walked in the opposite direction and caught the bus and came to you instead.”

Rafi nods. In this moment, the aftershocks of a high school dance still lingering on her face, Shira looks so much like their mother. They have the same chestnut hair, the same small frame. Shira normally hides behind a pair of thick glasses, but tonight, she has her contacts in. They bring out an identical, penetrating set of dark eyes. Rafi doesn’t say anything. He looks more like his father, anyway.

“You can crash here if you want,” Rafi says. “I can sleep on the couch.” “You should have your own bed.”

“What if we both slept out here? Someone can take the couch. I have a blow up mattress somewhere.” He didn’t, but Shira fell asleep quickly. He could make sure she had the better arrangement without her knowing.

“Alright.” She focuses back on the black and white. Rafi turns the volume up.

\*

He zones out and begins to slip away, back into the thought void.

Rafi’s father was the one who told him that he and Rafi’s mother were getting a divorce. Saul took him to see *Fletch*, which had just come out in theaters, at the South Hills Village Cinema. It was the first weekend that felt like summer. Rafi didn’t understand the movie.

## THE SOCK DRAWER

Saul broke the news on the car ride home, Rafi still dazed by sunlight after ninety minutes in the dark. His father shared the announcement like a second thought, like another item to tick off a to-do list.

“And that’s that,” Saul had said. His breath still smelled of Red Vines. Rafi was eleven. Shira, back at home, was four.

Rafi was still too young to understand what it meant when two people fell out of love. He was on the cusp of grasping that his parents were real humans outside of him, who could break as easily as they could mend, but wasn’t quite there yet. There were no affairs, no scandals. It was a dissolution. Perhaps that was worse.

Saul stayed close at first. He had a condo near the main house, where Rafi and Shira lived with their mother, Nadine. They spent one weekend a month with him, accompanied by Blockbuster and takeout, until Saul’s favorite aunt in D.C. got sick. Saul traveled to be with her and his family there until she died, and, upon realizing that there wasn’t much left for him in Pennsylvania, he stayed. He still called when he could, claiming the country’s capital city had a great job market for his work in public relations. Saul wanted both kids to come visit after Shira graduated in June.

Rafi often wondered what Shira, so young then, had thought of it all. He’d found his own ways to cope. At fifteen, he bought a keytar at a garage sale and dabbled in a brief musical career in his bedroom when Tears for Fears and “Raspberry Beret” dominated the radio, simply as something to do. At twenty, he worked through a mediocre communications program at the University of Pittsburgh, and came home on the weekends for laundry and the occasional Shabbat dinner. Now, at twenty-five, with a degree and an apartment and a job writing press releases for a startup tech company, Rafi was simply *being*. He occasionally went on morning runs. He sometimes forgot to shave. He was a person in a place. Shira didn’t seem to *be* anything, or she hadn’t directly mentioned it to him. She could eat cream cheese frosting for every meal, and liked scouring the newspaper for appealing odd jobs, like chinchilla sitting or painting mailboxes, to get out of the house. She floated through school and kept a straight face through it; a little intense, a little dissatisfied. Restlessness in its prime.

Shira described this amalgamation of feeling to him once as “The Itch.”

“You can get rid of it for a little while, but it always comes back,” she said. Rafi wasn’t sure what “it” was; perhaps everything, perhaps nothing. Sometimes, he thought that Shira should have been an only child. She had far more substance for the both of them.

## FICTION

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The movie plays on. Rafi gets up halfway through to use the bathroom, and when he comes back, finds Shira with a wine cooler. They're stored at the back of the fridge, usually clumped between yogurt and wilting lettuce. He watches for a moment as she tries to force the thing down, before giving up after a few sips. Claude Rains slowly disappears from being as the screen dissolves to black. The alcohol remains untouched.

Shira gets up to stretch her legs. There is a soft swish of fabric as she moves through the room, runs her fingers along the couch. She stops in front of the bookshelf. Aside from old paperbacks, it holds a stereo and a CD collection.

"You've got to update these," Shira motions toward the disc titles. Sinatra, the Four Seasons. "You are living in the past, buddy."

"You're nosy."

"And you are...alone," Shira cocks an eyebrow. She doesn't say it cruelly. "Are we forgetting why you're here in the first place?" Rafi says.

"It's just a winter formal," Shira says. She examines an album cover, flips it over. "If it was prom or something, I'd get her being so uptight. Not that I think I'll be going to that either."

"You're very resistant these days."

"Not that different from most. If Mom would be so kind as to let me relish in that, we wouldn't have a problem." Shira tends to rant when she's worked up, words tumbling from her mouth in a soupy stream. Rafi tends to sweat.

"Did you even have a date?" He asks from the floor.

"Some guy from my physics class," Shira says. "His name is Toby Forrester. He's had braces for seven years. Set for U Chicago next fall."

"Prestigious. Windy." Rafi is thankful when she begins to spin away from the stereo. His sister can shatter confidence with a single stare. "Was he nice, at least?"

"Sure. But it doesn't matter. I'm not interested, in him or that general scene." The sentences sound like an effort. Shira is now pacing. Her feet make the floorboards creak. "Are *you* interested in anything?"

The question takes Rafi by surprise.

"I'm alright. It's not great for anyone, you know? Figuring things out." He tries to

look Shira in the eye.

“If you’re the right kind of person, it shouldn’t be.” She says.

“So we’re not those kinds of people.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I guess so,” Rafi says. “If you think about that stuff for too long, you’ll give yourself a migraine.”

“Maybe,” Shira perches on the arm of the couch. Small bits of glitter fall onto the carpet. “But if you don’t, you’ll never move forward from where you are. That’s what they say in Mom’s self-help books.”

“You read those things?” Rafi walks over.

“I peruse.” Shira angles him so he’s in front of her, then points a finger at the spot between his eyes. “You have to know your opposition.”

\*

Rafi thinks again. He wonders what their mother is doing. It is Saturday, and Nadine is a lover of zen. She liked things both concrete and moldable, which were afforded to her by books about self-love and a house to herself. She liked to stay in, to feel at home amongst her things, to find joy in a subtle way.

She had grown up in the area, in another uneventful suburb of Pittsburgh not unlike Bethel Park. Now, Nadine’s days were filled with substitute teaching gigs, where she specialized in calculus and statistics. She was quick-minded. It was a weapon she utilized, and one, Rafi thought, that allowed her to parent alone.

On the weekends when he was wanted, Rafi would often come back to the main house and find it silent. Shira would be shut away in her room, Nadine at the kitchen table with her lesson plans, a hard grip on her pens and a brisket in the oven. Something soft was usually on the radio. Whatever sullenness hung in the air dissolved once dinner actually began.

They didn’t do Sabbath every week. Saul grew up celebrating it only once a month, and both he and Nadine considered themselves more Secular. But Nadine appreciated tradition. She blessed her children, each named for late relatives. She pressed a kiss to Rafi and Shira’s temples by candlelight, though the girl stiffened, occasionally, when it was her turn. Growing pains, Rafi assumed. He knew they fought, as all mothers and daughters did.

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“Your sister is very insecure,” Nadine would confide in him afterward. “It’s not a good look for her.”

“She’s seventeen,” Rafi would say. Her hands were cold when she cupped his chin.

“You, my sweet boy, will have to keep it together for the both of you.” Rafi wasn’t sure if the sentiment was touching or melodramatic, but it made him feel a bit dizzy either way. He wasn’t certain of a lot of things, and he didn’t like to be reminded.

“She’s a psychopath,” Shira would comment on Sundays. She was tasked with overflow miscellaneous errands. Rafi would accompany Shira to pick up the drycleaning or take yard waste to the dump. “A real psychopath. Did you know that she told me that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to fix my overbite?”

“Do you even want one?”

“An overbite? No.”

“A significant other.”

“No, but that’s not the point!” Rafi didn’t know the act of stuffing leaves into bags could become dangerous, but Shira swung her elbows sharply. He became aware of how precious his eyeballs were.

These afternoons led to more quiet evenings, save for Nadine and Shira talking around each other; profs in passive aggressiveness. Rafi often returned back to campus or his apartment ready to embrace solitude again. He looked forward to the mundanity of exams, of work, of routine, until he didn’t.

\*

They’re still hungry, so Rafi heats up leftovers from the nearby Thai place. The noodles stick to the tupperware and make a splat sound when he finally manages them into a bowl. Shira sits on the counter and picks through the fruit bowl. The plastic spins in circles. “You know, I’m fine,” Rafi says, unprovoked.

The phone rings, startling them both. Shira looks to him with panicked eyes. She points a banana in his direction.

“Don’t,” she hisses.

“We don’t know who it is.”

“Yes, we do.”

“Maybe you should talk, then.”



“You’re deranged.”

“I’m answering.”

Receiver to his ear, Rafi hears Nadine before he has a chance to open his mouth. “Raphael,” his mother’s voice is shaky. “Is she with you?”

“Hi.” He puts on his best customer service voice, mouths *telemarketer* to Shira, just to prove her wrong.

“I just need to know, because if she is...” Her voice trails off. “I got a call from Toby’s mother. She says your sister never showed up to her dance. I just need to know that she’s alright, and that my heart attack was unnecessary.”

Rafi pauses and glances at Shira, who is now rolling an orange around on her palm.

“Is she?” Nadine’s voice trembles. “Raphael, if something happened to her—”

“We’re all good,” he says, a bit too quickly. “Don’t worry. I’ve got it handled. Anything else I can help you with?”

“What’s this shtick? Is that a yes?” his mother says. Rafi replies in the affirmative, hears a sigh on her end.

“You’re the one that keeps me sane,” Nadine says. “The only one.”

He wishes he could convince himself to believe her.

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

Shira is sulking when Rafi hangs up. He’s not a great actor.

“She says she loves you.” He places the phone back on the wall. “In her own way.”

The microwave dings. Neither of them notice that it’s been doing so for the last minute and a half. Rafi pulls out the Pad Thai. He pictures Nadine, curled up on the couch, soaps on and a bowl of mixed nuts in front of her. Her voice echoes louder in an empty house. She can hear herself more clearly.

When Rafi glances up from the food, Shira is sniffing.

“No tears,” he pleads. “What’s wrong?”

“I probably seem so miserable to her,” Shira grimaces. He sees remnants of lipstick on her right canine. “I’ve been thinking about that a lot. This is the first time I’m saying it out loud. I don’t want to seem that way, but it’s hard sometimes.”

“I guess it’d be weird if you weren’t kind of hating your life right now,” Rafi says. “It’s

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that age.”

“Yeah? And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“How does feeling stuck in your twenties feel?”

Rafi moves past her to collect silverware. It’s cold in his hands, and as he steps back, he catches a glimpse, in Shira’s eyes, of an uncertain year ahead. He sees her leaving home, sees her first steps in a still undecided city, and knows it’ll all actually happen for her. He thinks about her ranting, her defensiveness, and how it makes her seem much more inhibited than she actually is. Rafi hears all of her discomforts, somehow, in an exhale of relief. He sees them leave her for the evening.

He doesn’t have an answer. Rafi sticks two forks into the noodles, and they eat.

\*

The television images blur into one. A new film plays. Neither sibling is paying attention anymore.

Rafi’s limbs feel stiff. He sinks onto the couch, his sister’s toe hitting his thigh just as he makes contact with the cushions. Shira keeps kicking until he looks up.

“What are you doing?” He asks, irritated. Shira moves toward the bookshelf.

“I think I deserve one dance tonight,” she says. She flips through his CD collection, flicking his taste aside, before holding a case up. “One good disc!”

Shira slips the CD in the player and skips a few songs. There’s a moment of silence, then a steady drumbeat, then a shrieking saxophone. David Bowie laments about young Americans and their funny lives, and Shira mouths along. She messes up the words, the lyrics looking sloppy. She jumps, bounces around on grounded feet. Rafi stays stuck until she flits over to him and prods until he gets up.

“Shira,” Rafi stands still, hands at his side. He marvels at how quickly the hard things can disappear for some people. There is a bitter taste on his own tongue now.

Outside, a car passes by. Rafi glimpses the moon through the plastic shades. It hangs high and big and bright.

“Move, you oaf!” His sister bumps him with her hip. Her hair flies around her face, the dress creating a hazy ring as she spins in circles.

For five minutes, and then many more after, Shira becomes something personified.

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In the dim light of the lamp, she is a muted fire, the sequins becoming stars in her singular orbit.

Seconds pass until Rafi begins to dance too. It's clumsy and awkward. He stops after a few beats and lets his sister continue on her own.





“A Loose Fit” by Jordan Jones

“My art style is a mix of street art, abstract, and contemporary acrylic. The pieces I create reflect on observations, internal feelings, and point of views surrounding my environment. I like giving the viewer total imagination to create their own meaning behind each piece.”

- Karla Madrigal

# NONFICTION

*Anna Bankston*

*Umme Hoque*

*Mary Zelinka*

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“Healing begins where the wound was made.”

- **Alice walker**, American  
novelist, short story  
writer, poet and  
social 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.*

## *Every Thorn Has Its Rose*

By Anna Bankston

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My grandpa died. People sent flowers to our house.

Perky pink tulips and wild white lilies. Obnoxious. They mock me. Their life, their youthfulness, it explodes all over the kitchen and coats my mourning mother and me in a phony film of faux peace. Her heart could not be farther from feelings of felicity, as yet another petal wilts, withering away, likely to never fully recover. How are we supposed to return to any sense of normalcy with these bright bouquets sitting on our kitchen table? I understand the gifting of flowers for a Mother's Day morning or Valentine's Day date. But here, as the centerpiece of our dining room, they are a constant reminder of our loss.

In ancient times, the association between flowers and funerals started because surrounding the casket with floral arrangements masked a decaying body's stench. What a stomach-churning fact, to know their purpose was mainly meant to distract from the presence of the dead. Possibly this is why people still send flowers today: they hope to distract from the looming reality of the departed's absence.

The contrast at funerals is sharp, the front of the room painted in black and white—the budding of the young pictured right next to the passing of the old. Great-grandchildren run around the church pews, oblivious to the open casket raised high above their view. The grey attendees try to avoid thinking about which side of the spectrum they are closest to. I am increasingly irritated with these bursting bouquet deliveries. However, I try to understand what the givers want these arrangements to represent. Specific “sympathy flowers” carry unique messages intended to aid the mourning recipient. Chrysanthemums symbolize grief itself, while a choice of orchids or red roses are said to have the clear message of “I love you.” Different colors carry different meanings, such as the message of youth, purity, and innocence detonated by white flowers. In other instances, the choice of a vibrant color might be an attempt to bring some brightness back into the lives of those who have lost a family member or friend. I appreciate the sentiment of these gifts, I really do. But a flower is not going to fill the void someone so loved has left.

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While I admittedly resent the demonstration of gifting floral arrangements to surviving family members, I whole-heartedly support giving them to the dead. A single sunflower or a plethora of peonies laying at the foot of a gravestone bring life back into space so cluttered by the ghosts of those forgotten. Flowers under their name show people think of them, who did and still do care for them, and who will always remember what a gift their presence once was. An outlet for life should be given to those who no longer have any other earthly means of expressing it.

In 2018 my family spent two weeks in Germany with my grandparents. We spent a lot of the time in the country meeting extended family for the first time, visiting historical landmarks, and embracing a culture so different from what my sisters and I knew. One day, we paid a visit to a small shaded cemetery just off a secluded dirt road. My Oma led us to the graves of her departed father, mother, and brother. We watched as she wandered over to a watering well, which the builders had positioned in the center of the cemetery. Picking up a can by the base of a fountain, she filled it with water and brought it back to her family's resting places. She doused all the blue bellflowers and German chamomiles in enough liquid to last them until their next visit before replacing the holy water in the dish at the tombstone bases.

While my Oma sat and prayed over their graves, my sisters and I walked through each cemetery row. Every tombstone in this yard was more extravagant than any I had ever seen in America. There, one walks the empty grounds devoid of life, passing moss covered plaques spaced evenly through the yard, a faded name the only indication that this person once lived. Some tombstones may be accompanied by a vase of synthetic roses or daisies, firmly secured to the ground. Without any need for water, there's no telling when the site last had a visit.

In Germany, things were much different. Beyond the large engraved slabs of granite, each section had a flowerbed about four feet by three feet in front of it. Caretakers and visitors had neatly organized them, with framed photos, half-burned candles, sparkling rosaries, and many, many flowers in bloom. The garden spoke life from the very mouths of the dead. Each grave and garden was well-kept; it was apparent they were visited frequently to be kept in such pristine condition. The reds, the yellows, the blues and magentas, they all spoke to the lasting memory of these individuals. When one generation passed, the next would assume the responsibility of caring for the graves.

These flowers said something more than I am sorry for your loss.

They said, It is in your name that we keep on living.

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I want to place a rose on my grandpa's casket. I want to set aside time to make the occasional two-hour drive to tend to his tombstone and think of his life. I want my visits to be representative of his sixteen grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. I want him to know, that is, if heaven is real, and if he is watching over me now, I will do my very best to make sure the flowers at his grave never die.





## *The National & depressed white people*

By Umme Hoque

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### **Music you listen to when you're sad**

*You had your soul with you; I was in no mood*

And thus opens "I Am Easy to Find" - the 8th album from indie rock The National. With roots in the mid-West and a sound out of Brooklyn, the band crosses regional and rhythmic divides. They make songs that empathize with listeners about the experience of being human - the shared experience of living in this ridiculous and intense construct and trying to figure it out. The songs can be slow or fast, but always a bit melancholy, a bit pensive and a bit overcast.

It is, quite frankly, music that's best listened to when you're sad.

Growing up a Muslim brown woman in small town Texas, sadness and confusion was real; music was key, and I could only find solace by combining the two. It was melody and music I turned to when times were tough, and I was shaped by it. I had lockers and binders covered in quotes and photos of bands that I heard all the time and thus believed spoke to my soul. Indie rock gospel like Goo Goo Dolls, Live, Incubus, Soundgarden, Arcade Fire. When I was broken or confused about who I was, it was a nasally or angry rock song I'd turn to; I had a constant playlist in the background of my life.

And the songs themselves became part of my living memory. The National was always part of that. Once, "Abel" made me realize I was having a mental breakdown. Listening to "Green Gloves" I discovered some love just isn't possible. I shouted the lyrics of "Bloodbuzz Ohio" at strangers when I was taken off guard. And, even when I was traveling overseas, I made a point to see "Mistaken for Strangers," their documentary, and cried because the experience was relatable; was real; was mine and ours.

For this new album, The National released a partner video. This piece, a 20ish minute narrative, provides the listener a visual experience to amplify their emotional journey. When asked why they made this video, the band referenced a conversation they had

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in the development process with the filmmaker, who said: “*I don’t know what we’re making—it might be Lemonade for depressed white people.*”

And maybe they did. I’m sure many depressed white people are watching the video on repeat - but so am I. Growing up in the ‘90’s and 2000’s, in rural America, your actual identity as a listener didn't matter. Because music was an extension of this depressed white person experience, wrapped up in the tones of (mostly) white men singing lyrically about breakups, heartache, isolation, loss and endless want. And thus that became my background, my obsession and my self - and I know I'm not alone.

After all, escaping into my room, putting on these albums and identifying with the words and souls - those moments happened. So, maybe my musical tastes and some sense of my identity is simply what they described - a depressed white person, yet made even more depressed and complicated because I’m not actually white.

I finally got to see The National live a few years ago, my first time seeing the band live in spite of my decades of fandom. Entering the arena, I’m surrounded by tens of thousands of depressed but confident white people, swaying their bodies, spilling drinks over themselves, crying into each others’ hair while chain-smoking cheap cigarettes. They are taking great joy in this moment, belting lyrics they think resonates so greatly with them because of the uniqueness of their experience.

I can count the brown or black faces. There are a handful of us; we are accent marks in this white sea. I purchase a bottle of water. An Asian man bumps into me at the bar, and I nod at him and smile. He smiles back, tapping my water bottle with his to cheers to it, and we both sing along to the lyric *I am secretly in love with / Everyone I grew up with.*

He walks off. We’ll never speak. We don’t need to. I understand he partially experiences life as a depressed white person, too.





“A Modern Dance” by Jordan Jones

## *My Brother: Adventurer & Aviator*

By Mary Zelinka

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Earlier this year my brother's ashes were buried in Alabama at the feet of my mother's parents. He designed the marker himself: a rectangular black stone with an etched biplane over the words "Adventurer and Aviator." Then his name and dates of his birth and death.

When Charles died, we had been estranged for many years. I still don't understand why.

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My parents were so desperate to have a boy that when I turned out to be their second daughter, Mother wanted to name me Nicholas after my father.

A doctor told them that having intercourse at a specific time during Mother's ovulation cycle would increase their chances of having a boy. Mother charted her temperature and Charles was born in 1953, five years after me. Two weeks later, my older sister Gracie and I sat with Mother and watched "Little Ricky" get born on *I Love Lucy* – a television first. Charles was much cuter, I thought.

Everyone assumed Charles would grow up to be an airline pilot like Father. He was even named after a WWI pilot. When he was a boy, he flew radio-controlled airplanes with Father and glued countless plastic models together. Father took him up in small planes and Charles couldn't wait for his legs to get long enough to reach the pedals so Father could teach him to fly.

---

As kids, Charles and I often sold one another our belongings when we needed some quick money. We swapped things back and forth – I might buy a polished stone from him for a quarter and then sell it back to him the next week for thirty cents.

The son of a friend of my aunt's had sent me a black fossil when I was in third grade. Since I lived in Miami, I probably sent him seashells in return. The fossil was of some

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kind of plant embedded in a black stone, shiny like obsidian. About the size of a lump of coal.

One day I sold it to Charles. I immediately regretted it, but he had really wanted it and wouldn't sell it back. That put an end to our buying and selling because from then on, I made the black fossil a condition to every transaction.

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Early one morning when I was in high school, Mother told Charles to be careful when he and his friend Alex played outside in the evenings. She read in the paper that someone had gone around our neighborhood tying all the car antennas in knots and she worried they would be accused. Damage was estimated at over \$6,000. I looked at my brother and he widened his eyes at me ever so slightly. He followed me into my room and whispered, "Don't tell." I swore I wouldn't, but asked why they did it, it seemed kind of a stupid thing to do. He shrugged.

---

After my freshman year in college, my parents took Charles and me to Europe. Gracie had gone a few years before with a friend, but even if she hadn't, she wouldn't have come. She had as little to do with any of us as possible. Father had ordered a VW station wagon from the factory in Wolfsburg and we drove it through the Soviet-occupied portion of Germany into West Berlin.

Charles and I were in the habit of taking long walks after dinner wherever we stayed, mostly so I could smoke a few cigarettes, which our parents prohibited. One evening during our walk in Berlin, we came upon the wall separating the West and East. There must have been a rise in the road because I remember being on eye level with the soldier guarding the wall from a platform on the Eastern side. We were less than ten feet apart – only the rusted barbed wire coiled on top of the brick separated us.

The soldier, who looked to be my age, and I asked one another if we spoke German? Russian? English? French? Spanish? Pig Latin? We were all laughing together, Charles, me, and the soldier. Then, I don't know why, I reached out and wrapped my hand around the twisted wire between the barbs. The soldier's face went dark and he yelled something in Russian or German, who knows, and leveled his rifle at us. The wire snapped off and Charles and I took off running, not stopping until we were around a corner several blocks away. Breathlessly we examined our treasure, a piece of rusted barbed wire about a foot

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long, something we would have ignored if we saw it lying beside the road. We broke it in two – half for Charles and half for me.

---

Charles was sent to live with my husband, Rick, and me the summer of 1970 when we were living in Grand Junction, Colorado. We had been married not quite long enough to have a one-year-old son.

Charles had fallen in with the wrong crowd or something. My parents weren't too clear. Only that someone had thrown a cement button, the type Miami placed in parkways to keep you from driving over the grass, through their kitchen window. Shortly afterwards, their VW was set on fire. Charles said some guys had accused him of taking their drugs, but he didn't even know those guys.

During the days, Charles hung around with me and Bobby, going to the grocery store and laundromat with us. He helped Rick dig a drainage ditch. He bought me an antique silver salt and pepper set, just an inch high, because Mother had one. When I sliced the tip of my finger off cutting onions one afternoon, he gathered up Bobby and took me to the hospital.

At night he drove off in our VW Bug and came home long after we had gone to bed.

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Charles was still living at home waiting for his life to start when our parents disowned me after my second failed marriage. This husband had been violent, and I was left broken and lost. I gave custody of Bobby to Rick because I didn't believe I could take care of him anymore. I was bumming around the country in a van looking for some place that felt like it could become home, and on impulse decided to drive to Miami. I hoped that if my parents saw me, they might love me again. They didn't and I only stayed a couple of days.

The night before I left, Charles, now twenty-five, came to my room and handed me the black fossil. I hadn't seen it since we were children. "I'm sorry," he said. "You can have this back."

---

Many years after the fact and Charles was healthy again, I learned that he had had Crohn's disease and spent six weeks at Mayo Clinic after he graduated from college. He almost

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died. My mother rented an apartment close by the clinic. She called me regularly during that time, but never mentioned my brother's illness. When I found out, I asked why she hadn't told me. "Well, there wasn't anything you could have done," she said. I told her I could have called. I could have sent cards. I could have wrung my hands. I could have prayed.

---

Now in his thirties, Charles wasn't working. His room looked much the same as it always had. Two single beds made an "L" in the corner. The wall-to-wall bookcase housed aviation and Miami history and nature books, plastic model planes, seashells, fossils, an alligator tooth, a conch shell with the top cut off so you could blow it like a horn, a turtle shell, birds' nests, a piston from a biplane engine, a piece of barbed wire from the Berlin Wall, a cigar box filled with arrowheads, a jar of marbles, and stacks of Mad Magazines dating back to the early 1960s.

Many years later, Charles told me in an email, "Sometimes I like to look at things from my past to remember that it wasn't just a dream."

---

Whenever I went to Miami at Christmas, Charles left the house early in the morning, returning late in the afternoon to change his clothes and eat a supper that Mother fixed him before leaving again. If I spoke to him, he'd say, "I'm in a hurry now, we'll talk later."

Once I asked Mother where he went. She said she had never asked. "Maybe Fairchild Gardens, I buy a pass for him there every year. It's been so hard for your brother, not getting on with the airlines."

I thought about the survivors I worked with at the Center Against Rape and Domestic Violence. How in the midst of their fear and trauma and loss, they carved out whole new lives. I thought about my son, who was being raised by his father and stepmother.

I did feel bad for Charles and wanted to say something sympathetic on his behalf, but the best I could come up with was, "Not many of us get the kind of lives we think we have coming."

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All my brother ever wanted was to be an airline pilot. When he went off to college, my parents bought him a small plane so he could keep accumulating flight hours. He acquired the college degree and all the licenses and ratings that were necessary qualifications. He even had fifteen minutes of jet time, which was enough to put him with the more desirable candidates. But by the mid-1970s, pilots who had flown jets in Vietnam were coming home and their qualifications far outweighed civilian pilots.

For a while Charles flew a seaplane for a small charter airline, and then a private plane for a businessman. He taught lessons. Everything was temporary and short-lived.

Finally, in 1988, he was hired as third officer with Eastern Airlines, where our father had flown. I have a picture I took of him that Christmas. He has the rakish look of an aviator from a by-gone era – his uniform jacket unbuttoned, tie loosened, his hat at a jaunty angle. He's holding an aluminum Halliburton flight bag, the type pilots of our father's generation favored. The look on his face is the definition of joy.

The next year, a man named Lorenzo bought Eastern and started dismantling the airlines by selling off the flight routes. The employees went on strike. In the picture Mother sent of Charles in the picket line, he was in his uniform, his hat tilted back. He was wearing a sandwich board with Lorenzo's name in a circle and a red line slashed through it. He looked defeated. His career as an airline pilot was over and he knew it.

My brother never held a job for more than a few months after that.

---

One Sunday afternoon during a visit to Miami, I saw Charles sitting in the back yard next to his old fishing boat, overturned in the wide-bladed grass. This boat had taken him to all the tiny islands off the coast which aren't on any of the maps. He'd bring home chunks of coral and beautiful pink conchs, like those you see in photographs of children holding shells up to their ears to hear the ocean.

I sat down with him. This was the first time we had been alone together since all those years ago when he spent the summer with Rick and me. He poked at the rusty bolts with his pocketknife and we talked about the Australian pines – those tall, gangling trees with long needles and miniature pinecones – that had been cut down in the last vacant lot in our neighborhood and how they were being cut down everywhere. That if a movie was made about us, the soundtrack would be the wind blowing through their pine needles.



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“Actually, they’re not even native to South Florida. They were brought here from somewhere else,” Charles said. “A lot of plants and trees in Miami were. Like the Melaleuca trees in front of the house.”

I did not know that and for a moment even the grass we were sitting on seemed suspect.

Then Father walked by and said, “That’s the wrong tool to use for removing bolts.”

Without looking up, Charles said, “I’m just fooling around.”

Father’s face went red with anger. “When you want to know how to do it right, then come into the garage and I’ll tell you!”

Charles shrugged his shoulders as Father stomped off. We sat there for a while longer, but he didn’t meet my eyes again.

---

Years after that afternoon, I sent Charles a letter. I was nearly fifty then and it occurred to me that when Mother died, I might never have any contact with him again. My family didn’t have relationships the way other families seemed to. Other than criticizing us, Father only talked to Mother. Mother was like the hub of a wheel and Gracie, Charles and I were her spokes. We each had a relationship with her, but not with one another. I had established a connection, fragile though it was, with Gracie, and I wanted at least that with Charles.

In this letter I wrote about when we were kids and how I had enjoyed his company even though he was so much younger. The time when I was a senior in high school, and we snuck off to go flying with this guy I met who had a small plane. The time I helped him get expelled from Cotillion Club, something Mother had made each of us attend so we could learn to dance the Lindy and other dances nobody had done since before we were born. He was expelled after I drove our jeep over the club’s manicured lawn when I picked him up one night. That had made him so happy.

I told him I loved him.

Six weeks later I received a Halloween card from him. On the back, he had written that he was the kind of person who didn’t tell someone to have a nice day, he did something to make sure they did. Like empty their trash. He said I had no right to

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complain about anybody after I had given away my son.

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When Mother's lungs collapsed in 2002 and she was on life support for what turned out to be almost a year and a half before she finally died, Gracie took charge of the family's finances. She discovered Mother had been supporting Charles.

We learned that our parents had mortgaged their house to cover Charles's legal fees. He had been arrested for a scheme to fly drugs into Miami. Father said Charles would never be able to fly again because once you were convicted on a drug-related offence, the FAA revoked your license.

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After visiting Mother at the nursing facility one afternoon, Charles drove me back to the hotel. He talked so fast it was hard to follow him. Something about an ex-girlfriend named Chantilly or Chenille who kept getting in his face, so he snatched the cigarette out of her hand and crumpled it into her drink.

He brought up the letter I had sent him years before and his response. "Sometimes I think I'm too much like Father," he said. "I misinterpret what somebody does and then write them off. Even after I learn I'm wrong."

The night before I fly home to Oregon, the hotel sent up a couple of CDs Charles left of music he made from the 45-rpm records I passed on to him when I went away to college almost forty years ago.

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Before Mother was in the hospital, I called her every week. If Father or Charles answered, they responded to my "Hi, it's me Mary" with "I'll get Mother." Now that she was unable to speak because of the respirator snaking down her throat, Charles and I talked.

One night I asked, "Do you know the name of that plant, maybe it's a shrub, that has little clumps of blossoms like snowballs, only they're kind of pointy? I think it's red, or maybe orange? And if you pluck one of the blossoms and pull the stamen out backwards, you can suck the nectar?"

Charles thought a moment and said, "Ixora." My brother knew things like that.

## THE SOCK DRAWER

Another night he asked if I had a gun. I said no. “You live alone. You need a gun. I keep a few at home and of course in my car. I’ll send you one.” I told him I didn’t want a gun and besides, it was illegal to send firearms through the mail. “Only if they know about it,” he responded.

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When Mother died, Charles and I walked around the neighborhood together looking for a likely palm frond for him to shinny up to thwack down a frond. Mother loved palm trees and I wanted to place a frond in her casket. Charles looked like a suspicious character, this tall, rangy barefoot man in frayed jeans and ratty old tee-shirt swinging a machete.

Charles had rolled his eyes when I told him why I wanted the frond, but didn’t hesitate to come with me. When we got home, he fetched a silver dollar from his room and asked me to put it in Mother’s casket as well. “In case she has to pay a toll,” he explained.

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Charles drove me to the airport a few days after Mother’s funeral. He talked the whole way – fast, so it would have been impossible for me to interject anything, which may have been his intent. He sat with Mother every single day she was on life support and he seemed at loose ends now. He kept saying, “She’s in a better place,” because he thought I was crying over Mother.

But I was crying over Gracie. On the way to Father’s house from the hotel that morning, she had blown up at me, which had been a pattern all our lives. I knew that our tenuous relationship was finally severed.

When we pulled up at my airlines, the porter ran out to the car and Charles slipped him a five-dollar bill as though he was doing something illegal instead of carrying my suitcase to the ticket counter.

Charles hugged me goodbye and told me he loved me. It would be the last time I ever saw him. Or Father. Or Gracie. Or our childhood home. I didn’t know that then. If I had, I wonder if I would have been so relieved to step through those automatic doors into the canned airport air and become another anonymous traveler impatient to fly away from this crazy place.

## NONFICTION

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After Mother died, and Gracie was no longer speaking to me, Charles and I rarely communicated. I called Father every week and as the months passed, he became more and more belligerent. One of us kids always had to be the hated child – growing up, we had involuntarily taken turns in this role. It seemed reasonable to me, in a twisted sort of way, that I should play this part full time now. Gracie managed his finances and Charles took care of grocery shopping and whatever else Father needed. I was far away in Oregon. But during my call one week, Father attacked my son and grandson and I had enough. I told him I couldn't talk to him anymore. I wished him well and hung up the phone with him for the last time. I emailed Charles what had happened so he could expect to hear Father's condemnation of me.

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I learned of my Father's passing a couple of weeks after he died. Charles sent me a little china doll, no bigger than my thumb, that was Mother's. I emailed Charles thanking him and asked how Father was.

"I thought you knew," Charles emailed back. "He died on my birthday. I was told not to tell you or Dad's sister. I feel bad about it but there was nothing I could say as it was not my place."

Charles was no match for my father or sister. And he would not have wanted to be the one to tell me about Father's Will which stated that I and my descendants "shall not be treated as descendants of mine." There was the money part too. I suppose it was easier for Gracie and Charles to say they were obligated to uphold Father's wishes than tell me outright that they were done with me.

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Years later, I was awakened one night by a woman calling me from Mississippi. She identified herself as Deb and said she was a friend of my brother's. She asked me to promise I wouldn't tell Gracie she called.

Charles had died of pneumonia the week before. He was sixty-six. When Gracie and Deb opened Charles's safe deposit box, they found a note saying he didn't want me to be contacted. That didn't seem right to Deb, but Gracie insisted they honor Charles's wishes.

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After Gracie flew home, Deb googled me. She found a few personal essays of mine that had been published in small journals and were now on the internet. After reading them, she decided I was a good person. “It wasn’t fair that no one was going to contact you, so I had to do my part,” she said. She also said she had been drinking wine most of the afternoon and evening.

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I called my son the next morning. Bob listened in his quiet patient way as I told him about Deb reading my work, finding my number in Charles’s phone and going against his wishes to call me.

“Charles kept your phone number,” Bob said gently. “It’s been eleven years since your father died and Gracie and Charles cut you out. He must have changed his phone a few times. At the very least, he would have seen your name when he scrolled through his contacts. He didn’t want to let you go.”

I wanted to believe that.

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Deb and I talked several times and cried together.

“Why did he move to Mississippi?” I asked her one night.

“He liked the ruralness of it,” she said. “The country roads, the small towns.”

He moved there six months after Father died. I just can’t picture him living in Mississippi, or anywhere for that matter, that wasn’t Miami. He loved Miami – that is the one thing about him I’m sure of. In one of our last conversations he talked about how Biscayne Bay was getting healthier, that the sea horses were coming back and they were so fragile.

I had made a list of questions after my first conversation with Deb, but wound up not asking them. The answers didn’t really matter. Mostly, I listened to Deb. She had just lost Charles and I lost him long ago.

Deb called after Charles’s ashes were buried in Alabama. If he was in a cemetery in Mississippi, he had told Deb, after a while no one would remember who he was. But if he was with our grandparents, even though the last name was different, he could be traced.

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He wouldn't be forgotten. I didn't ask why he didn't want to be next to our parents in Miami. If Deb had known, she would have said.

She texted me a picture of the marker he designed. The inscription "Adventurer and Aviator" came as a surprise. Then I decided that maybe thinking of himself as an adventurer and aviator gave him a sense of peace during his last days clerking in a liquor store in a small Mississippi town.

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I remember my brother when he was a boy. Before he got trapped inside the life that had snuck up on him.

On this particular afternoon Charles and his friend Alex run around our front yard corralling the conchs they caught in the ocean for Mother to make chowder. Each conch inches his slimy foot through the grass towards the ocean, a good two miles away. Their clumsy homes, towering above them, rock from side to side.

It starts to rain; fat drops fall in slow motion through air thick with humidity. Charles's bare feet slide in the wet grass and for a moment he teeters, almost falling. He stretches his arms out like wings and catches himself, graceful as a dancer. His beautiful boy's face shines with laughter and promise.

A sudden gust of wind whooshes through the Australian pines and leaves behind a faded whispery sound, melancholy and secret.



THE SOCK DRAWER



“Recycled” by Karla Madrigal

“My love for heart faces is witnessed through out a few of my paintings. I painted this one in particular for my girlfriend when we started to speak again. It’s her favorite.”

- Karla Madrigal

# REVIEWS

*Lisa Goodrum*

*Kevan P. Stafford*

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“You only have what you give. It’s by spending yourself that you became rich.”

- **Isabel Allende**, Chilean  
writer and activist



## Book Review: 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World

By Lisa Goodrum

Elif Shafak's Booker Prize-shortlisted novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* derives its title from scientific research claiming that brain activity can occur for this long after death. In a trademark fusion of history, politics and mysticism, the author assigns one of the compelling Leila Tequila's memories to each of these minutes and pulls her heroine, and her reader, down a memory lane signposted by joy, sorrow and the volatility of fate.

Beginning with the story of her birth and rather unorthodox upbringing, Leila remembers the seminal moments of what can glibly be described as a tragic and unfair life. And yet the textured richness of her recollections proves that this is a reductive assessment. Leila's memories encapsulate Shafak's signature spiritualism, her interest in the fusion of Eastern and Western storytelling traditions and her allusions to Turkey's Ottoman and Byzantine past. These myriad influences mirror the complexity that underpins Leila's life, and under Shafak's guidance they form a tapestry where the sorrow, friendship and omniscience of fate that colour the narrative run through it like the brightest threads.

Leila's path leads her off on joyous and miserable tangents that she previously had no intention of pursuing and when reviewing the sequence of events that culminate in her death the reader could argue that these detours were determined by men. Leila's trajectory is irrevocably altered by her chillingly manipulative uncle, but it is after the death of her little brother that the patriarchal strictures her father avows become stiflingly theocratic and wind themselves even more tightly around her. Holding his social, political and moral authority in a death grip, Leila's mother and Auntie Binnaz fall in line with her father's wishes so that the young woman's flight to Istanbul symbolises a rejection of their subservience and the future that he has ordained for her.

If Leila is the novel's premier character then Istanbul is its second, and the city provides a cradle in which Shafak can tend and queer the notion of family. To invoke Armistead Maupin, Istanbul is where Leila creates her own 'logical family' of friends. Her companions are a kaleidoscopic whirl of different nationalities, religions and life experiences who have escaped lives of oppression and inauthenticity in the hope that the waters of the Bosphorus will wash away their pasts. From Sabotage, Leila's childhood

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the waters of the Bosphorus will wash away their pasts. From Sabotage, Leila's childhood friend who lacks the courage to articulate his true feelings for her, to Humeyra, an Iraqi woman who shames her family when she escapes an arranged marriage and Nalan, a transsexual woman whose physical presence belies a touching sensitivity and unstinting loyalty. Leila and her colourful troupe of friends exist squarely at the city's margins and Istanbul is a bonfire of the vanities where their social position also forces them to exist within the flames. Yet, if friends really are the family that you create for yourself then Leila's friends' devotion to her, and the lengths that they go to for her, confirm that this is how they view their alliance. Their fidelity evokes *Tales of the City*, where existing outside of social norms compelled Maupin's characters to form the familial bonds that we are all too quick to apply to more heteronormative units.

Reading the book late last year I also thought of Max Porter's new novella, *The Death of Francis Bacon*, where he captures the painter's final thoughts in seven distinct episodes. Bacon was an art world fixture – owing to his friendships with the likes of Lucian Freud – and a renowned bon vivant, but like Leila he made his home on the outskirts of conventional society. He was an Irish-born gay man who was in his late fifties before homosexuality was decriminalised, who presided over the bohemian kingdom of Soho and whose work only received significant acclaim after his death. Unlike Bacon however, Leila's recollections are those of a bona-fide nobody. She is a minority on every level: a poor female sex worker in a pitiless city and patriarchal country that wants to dispose of her in the 'Cemetery of the Companionless', rendering her as anonymous in death as she has been in life. It is only the love and faithfulness of her friends that ensures Leila avoids this fate. In a farcical pilgrimage that dominates the novel's climax, they are able to reunite her with the sea that is her natural realm.

Leila's return to the water is precipitated by her friends, and the succour and stability that friendship can provide is central to this novel. Against the backdrop of an evolving city and changing world it is Leila's friendships that remain the constant in her life. The connection between this band of outsiders is unyielding and Leila is the glue that binds them together, even after her death when they unite to share her flat. Over the 10 minutes 38 seconds that Leila's brain shuts down, Shafak poses the perpetual question of what signifies a great life. Leila's memories may lack the grandiosity of Bacon's but they answer her creator's query. They prove that her life choices and the injustices she endured do not define her, nor do they accurately communicate her merit. Leila's worth is not determined by her occupation or social status, instead it is quantified by the love she gave to, and received from, her chosen family and because of that, her life is great in every sense of the word.



## Review of *Havana Year Zero* by Karla Suarez, trans. Christina MacSweeney

By Kavan P. Stafford

While Karla Suarez's *Havana Year Zero*, translated and published this year in a sumptuous edition from independent Scottish publisher Charco Press, appeared in its original Spanish in 2011, it's impossible to escape the parallels with our current situation; both that of COVID-19 lock-downs and the crisis in Texas. It's 1993 and the collapse of the Soviet bloc has led to economic crisis in Cuba, a rock bottom which protagonist Julia describes as 'year zero'. It is, she says, *'like waking up each morning on the same day [...] Hours without electricity. Food shortages [...] the streets empty at night, bicycles replacing cars, shuttered shops'*. A glance at any newspaper or trip to any town centre will make this all feel rather familiar.

But if the setting has a coincidental sense of familiarity, it is the only thing that does. Suarez keeps the reader continually off-balance. Nothing is ever quite what it seems right down to the names of characters. "Julia" herself has chosen an alias based on French mathematician Gaston Julia, she names her mentor and ex-lover "Euclid", her boyfriend "Angel", her author friend "Leonardo" and so on. Identities are slippery and the relationship of the three men to each other, to Julia herself, and to the mysterious and absent "Margarita" are in constant flux with almost every chapter bringing a revelation which changes the way the reader sees these relationships.

The plot concerns the obsession of the four principal players with the mysterious case of Antonio Meucci. Meucci was an Italian inventor who, in mid-nineteenth century Havana and New York, made strides towards the invention of the telephone (a fact recognised by the US House of Representatives in 2002) but was ultimately beaten to the patent by Alexander Graham Bell. Throughout the novel they search for a document with original drawings and diagrams by Meucci which would vindicate their belief that he was the true inventor of the telephone, a document that is believed to have once belonged to Margarita.

Each character wants the document for different reasons. For Euclid it is his ticket to academic fame, for Angel the document is an excuse to get back in contact with his ex-wife Margarita and for Leonardo it is the final piece he needs to complete his novel about Meucci. For Julia, though, it is something else. As she feels her country and herself slipping away in the misery of economic collapse, the idea of the document is 'like a

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glimmer of light in the darkness' giving her something to strive towards. It gives the world around her a solidity that the Cuba's situation had robbed it of and is a proxy for getting the world to notice the country at its time of crisis. *'Don't you get it?'* she says, *'I knew a story that would interest the whole scientific community, people from other countries and that made me solid, in some way important'*.

It's not much of a spoiler to say that the quest for the Meucci document drives the plot but is ultimately unimportant. Instead, *Havana Year Zero* is at its heart a story about human relationships, about the importance of reaching out to each other when there is nothing else left. Companionship is the overriding theme of the work and this is helped along with Julia's informal and friendly first person narration that makes the reader feel part of her inner circle.

Julia's unique way of seeing the world as a mathematics problem, in which people and events are variables to be given order, is entertaining and her relationships with the men in her life have enough ups and downs to keep the reader going. Suarez's prose, and Christina MacSweeney's translation, is conversational, beautifully written and manages wonderfully to evoke Havana as a city in crisis without the situation seeming hopeless. There is the sense that things have been better and that there are better days to come. After all, year zero must surely be a beginning rather than an end.





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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