



in the
Spirit
of
Greta

Issue 3



Alice Says
Go Fuck Yourself

ALICE SAYS

GO

FUCK

YOURSELF



Issue 3

in the **Spirit** of Greta

May 2023

Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself is a quarterly digital magazine of art & literature,
published by Agape Editions.

Editors: Fox Henry Frazier & Cee Martinez | Designer: Fox Henry Frazier



Respect Existence or Expect Resistance / Grace Noel

A Note From the Editors

On December 27th, 2022, 36-year-old Professional Kickboxer, Men's Rights Personality, and Word Salad Peddler Andrew Tate could refrain no longer from seeking the attention of a certain 19-year-old young lady. He tweeted a request for her email address, so he could “send [her] a complete list of [his] collection of [33] cars and their respective enormous emissions.” Def nothing creepy about *that*.

The young lady whose attention he so ardently craved was none other than climate-change activist and neurodiverse cultural icon Greta Thunberg.

Greta's quick [response](#), at the time of this writing, sits at 3.8 million likes on Twitter: “Yes, please do enlighten me. Email me at smalldickenergy@getalife.com”

We'd like to clarify here that we reject oppressive beauty norms and we believe that all bodies deserve respect. However!! There is something deeply satisfying about an adult man who goes out of his way to publicly bully a teenager finding out the hard way that his intended victim is better at weaponizing his toxic brand of rhetoric than *he* is.

Tate made a follow-up video, blathering on in his usual dime-store thesaurus drivel, trying to gain ground on Greta while munching on delivery pizza with the restaurant graphics on display. Romanian cops promptly arrested him for human trafficking and r*pe, among other things. (At the time, the general consensus of popular opinion was that the Romanian pizza boxes had served as the catalyst that alerted police to Tate's whereabouts; this has since been disputed by Romanian law enforcement.) At any rate, Tate ended his evening in handcuffs.

At which point, Greta tweeted: “This is what happens when you don't recycle your pizza boxes.”

Even the King of Toxic Rich Dudebros, Elon Musk, couldn't resist getting in on the fun, tweeting, “Sometimes it's just better to make pizza at home.”

We laughed ourselves silly, but our private admiration and delight weren't enough — we knew we needed to dedicate our next issue of *Alice* in homage to the spirit of Greta.

And so our call for entries was put out: we wanted everything related to the good green Earth that Greta Thunberg so fervently fights for, pieces related to standing up against bullies / the system / hate, and work that celebrated the Good Fight.

During the time in which this issue developed, Andrew Tate languished in a Romanian jail, his 33 cars confiscated, writing tweet ideas on paper scraps for a 2nd party to post for him. Currently, he is under house arrest, asserting that [he can “decimate” a singular wolf in mortal combat because . . . reasons?](#)

Meanwhile, of course Greta has continued forth, steadfast to her moral compass; as for us, we can finally celebrate the release of this issue, which we dearly hope you all enjoy.

And thus, with Issue 3, O dear starshines, in the Spirit of Greta: Let. Us. Pray.

Love,
Fox & Cee

CONTENTS

FRONT MATTER

Title Page

Respect Existence Or Expect Resistance / Grace Noel

Editors' Note

Table of Contents

Moon Bow / Donna Vorreyer 2

Spotlight Poem:

“I Do Cherry-Pick Fights With You, Joseph,” Dena Rash Guzman 3

5287 / Brian Michael Barbeito 4

POETRY 5

Amirah Al Wassif 7

Jordi Alonso 8

Brian Michael Barbeito 10

Leslie Cairns 12

5288 / Brian Michael Barbeito 14

Cathleen Allyn Conway 15

Lynn Finger 16

Mark Lamoureux 18

Stephanie K. Merrill 22

5286 / Brian Michael Barbeito 24

Syan Mohiuddin 25

Jeanna Ní Ríordáin 26

Glenn Pape 28

Dena Rash Guzman	30
Geoff Sawers	34
Terry Trowbridge	37
5263 / Brian Michael Barbeito	38
FICTION	39
Karen Poppy	41
5268 / Brian Michael Barbeito	58
Lyss Welding	59
<i>Mirror</i> / Donna Vorreyer	71
NONFICTION	73
Angela Eder	75
5264 / Brian Michael Barbeito	89
Martina Robles Gallegos	91
5266 / Brian Michael Barbeito	95
FLASH	97
5279 / Brian Michael Barbeito	98
Kasey Butcher Santana	99
5278 / Brian Michael Barbeito	102
Andrea Fogel	103
5262 / Brian Michael Barbeito	106
Kendra Jackson	107
Cathryn Moore	109
<i>Caul</i> / Donna Vorreyer	111
Daniel Schulz	113
5281 / Brian Michael Barbeito	115
Jeff Stone	116
5290 / Brian Michael Barbeito	117

INTERVIEW with DIANE SEUSS	119
[Conversation begins]	121
<i>Toward the Unknown</i> / Donna Vorreyer	135
CONTRIBUTORS	137



Moon Bow / Donna Vorreyer

I Do Cherry-Pick Fights With You, Joseph

I frequent your cruel orchard, though there are other orchards.
I frequent your cruel orchard. I pick through your high cherries.
Nothing is more disappointing than a sour pie cherry,
or whatever pucker you grow. I frequent your cruel orchard.
 There are other orchards, Joseph. I've really got to go.



5287 / Brian Michael Barbeito

POETRY

Meaning of Kindness

If you want to know something, don't Google it. Just search deeply within you. Last night, I thought of the kindness meaning. I tapped on the keyboard. The dictionary definition appeared on the screen. Nothing else. I know that meaning, so I chose to see more images related to the searched word. I found many stretched-handed poor boys sitting in the dirt under someone's mercy. Some cute girls looked miserable waiting for your financial support. African single mothers breaking the rocks under the heat.

Indian children wanted to be fed up. Egyptian beggars wandering the wide streets. A European blind man wants somebody to take care of him. Some American orphanage house needs volunteers. Some Arabic old paralyzed woman seeks healthy aid & finally, a group of Asian children holding empty pots stare at the camera.

I closed the pages. That wasn't what I'm looking for. I wanted more than this. I tried to pronounce the word softly between me and myself. I repeat what I did many times. My heart moved slowly. I decided to add more rhythm and delight. The word "kindness" danced on the edges of my tongue.

I felt warmth surrounding my limbs. A poetic voice clutched the core of me. I swayed like a feather trying my best to count my sighs. The carnation grew between my fingers. I believed that my body was lighter than the dream. Billions of rooms showed themselves inside.

132 θνήσκει ὑπὲρ πατρίδος

Apollo's children know our bodies are
the graves our spirits linger in before
they wander past a shining cypress and
speak poetry next to Eurydice.

Be happy here, no one will dare demand
“*die for your country*” like Demeter's girl
does every year. And if the sun and song
you're looking for are not in residence,
a pine branch wreathed in ivy, with a cone
to crown it might be enough to meet
a mystery you wanted to explore.

The bacchantes say there is no shortage of
people who carry outward signs of faith,
but just a few are Dionysiacs.

136 χαρίζου ἀβλαβῶς

When Baubo lifted up her peplos and exposed
her vulva to the goddess of the harvest
she made Demeter, sitting on the Stone
Of Sadness, laugh and be reminded of
the power that our bodies have to please.
And then she offered her a drink again
which was accepted and then ritualized
among initiates of the mysteries
who say “I fasted and I drank the kukeion,
and transferred things from baskets into chests
when torches gave me light to see.” The nymphs
above our temple nurtured gods; like them
and Baubo, nude in confidence,
be generous without ulterior motives.

Wolves

there are wolves in sky and, during the waltz of the hidden, epistolary episodic belles
lettres to the shoreline unknown

the past is a long while away, when there was the dream of an orange city and the night,
and another and me caught in fright, trying to make our way. or the great and grand
cathedrals north. I told the woman, 'there used to be a church under the ground, and I
went there and it was beautiful and old and functional,' and the woman surprised me by
saying first, 'I know,' and secondly, 'it is gone now...' and I thought about all that and
there were wolves in the firmament one two three maybe more. and I listened to so
many things, hundreds of things, and read until my eyes couldn't function, but in the
end I closed my eyes and tried to listen to the rainstorms. Mata once read *The Thorn
Birds* near southern balconies whilst I watched the skies over the sea. and one day,
someday, I will live in the skies over the sea. why do you long for much? opulence.
fashion. power. fame. money. food. the new. the gauche. the decadent. more. more.
more. why, if you were different, you could live in the sky ov'r the sea. w/me. we could
live there forever. w/the wolves. I will be there anyhow. you should stop by. oh one time I
went down there after a long strange dream and walked the coastline at dawn. joggers.
yoga people. walkers. the world. but I was always a stranger. I only looked up in the end
and yearned for home, longed to live again in the air, w/out a care, where the astral
wolves sway by the thousand fold lair. ~~~

the ancient sea

my mother read books and I watched the sea, but from a balcony. she read thick books and read *The Thorn Birds* in four days, which was a miracle to me as I looked on. there was not much but the tropical paradise which was enough. i watched the lizards and birds and roamed on my own, a bit further each time than I was allowed. she said the men on the balcony across the way were 'bad men,' because they waited day and night in shifts watching the ocean for a package to wash up. she said to stay far away from them if any of them arrived down at the sea. they didn't come down though. just an elderly man w/one of those metal detector machines searching always for treasure. I suppose he found his share of lost rings or watches or bracelets or necklaces through the years. he had one of those tans so deep I don't think it would ever go away. a tan like certain memories in time, or words in old softcover novels. I sat on the old abandoned catamaran beige and sturdy and stationed perfectly between the sea and where the world began for real behind. that is a liminal and almost unknown physical and psychological and spiritual space. the day would fall as strong as it had been. fall to dusk. the shapes softened. the visual sense lessened and the audio essence more in tune or pronounced. and maybe the inner sense also. I couldn't see the treasure hunter. or the balcony men. I couldn't see the water that well either. but I somehow knew the way back. I remembered the way home then. mother still reading. a stack of novels by her side, and beyond out the windows, the distant sounds of the tide.

The Wilts

There's a love poem to the trees, nestled near the eaves
Of what I've believed. Where the needles stuck in so much,
Found in symmetry of my skin, of elbows silted with damp
Moss or sand or glossy pine. As I laid there for free, underneath the brambles,
Asking the weeping willow
To take me in.

I would be passenger in friends' cars,
& as the window cruised past ponds and sallow beaver dams and rotted root that
Smelled like mother's touch,
I'd wonder which trees would let me harbor with them, when my own home
Kicked me out.

Would the tree I found first let me study under flashlight,
Think about economies and cities I couldn't afford, places that almost wanted me,
Near the rings of stumps?

I'd wish that every time someone lets me down, my trunk wouldn't shrink. I wouldn't
cut calories or find my way to staunch myself down, a potted plant of depression.
The way I'd sleep, insomniac eyed
Wondering where I went.

If, instead, each *almost maybe perhaps*
Was a ring around me, each time someone
Brushed me down dirty,
Another ring lined the center of me. Concave to belly.
Showing I would stick around for a long time,

That I was forest.
& I could breathe with the conversations
Of fallen trees.
No longer holding in anger,
But taking my branches and blooming
Ginger, apple blossom, pears
From my thumbs, outward. The fleshy part
Between my finger pads.

Decorating the petals on the grass that once kept me.
Dying for a season,
Only to come back when they least expected it. By warming degrees,
In a season. Offering them a pit of a fruit, the cobbled hollow of my belly,
the secrets found in acorns, alcoved near
My name.



5288 / Brian Michael Barbeito

Lèche-vitrine

I sat and watched him writhe:
The tied-up boy, a sweet on the pillow,
eyes smouldering with banked fire —
He is the trouble I want to get in.

He'd charm girls with a flip of hair
until the earth crashed into the sun,
screams sweeter than cries of love.
He is used to girls screaming. He likes

to watch them snap, to be the drip
of water wearing on someone's soul.
Mouth soft, cheekbones sharp
as spilled ink, the pull of his teeth

staining his mouth along the swell
of his lower lip, ripe as nymphs,
eyebrows a mad black forest. I wasn't
careful as I licked his mouth.

I like when it hurts, the rush of warm
pouring out, ready to dive headfirst
into the meltdown I've been resisting,
a thin sound of shuddering violins.

The Tasmanian Tigers Are Gone

I loved giraffes when I was young, their height and crooked legs,
deliberate walk and graffiti skin and tattered hair like papier-mache.
But saw one smeared years later on the frontage road
outside the zoo's savanna

exhibit one day, dropped from the crane in transit. Everyone loves
an omen, when something goes wrong, and extinction dances closer.
Just like the Tasmanian Tiger, or Thylacine,
now gone, slipped under

a scorning tree so dark the stripes fade in shadow. The last of the them
died under an abandoned sun, the moment caught in a grainy grey
photograph.

Everything can be gorgeous in a box.

We are chosen fans and shadowed menagerie, both,
and inside our cage, we can blink out
like a dampened match in an instant.
Maybe love precedes
extinction (can you lose what
you haven't loved?)—
but don't believe it.

The Spiritual Teacher

The teacher at the spiritual center
in the mini mall wants to strip
his students of the dross that
 holds them up and weighs them down.

He sits across from his them,
cushion to cushion, his dark hair
pulled back, and simple robes folded,
 nothing between them but students'

eagerness and ignorance.
Their excuses about the chaos
of their lives, their divorce, their drinking,
 anything that dims the glare

of the world's scathing eye.
The teacher's role is to shed
them of these childish protections.
 Resistance is a given, but

he enjoys plucking the supports away,
and gets a warm taste in his mouth
as they fidget, look away, tear up,
 as he knows that pain creates growth.

He doesn't speak as they struggle.
He would never pull legs off a fly,
but once, when young, he did find a one-winged
butterfly who blessed him with her shudders
as he watched her
 struggle to fly.

Elegy (Spring) For Rachel Corrie

In a corona of petals, spring murders the winter: icebreakers
in the river cleave trapezoids of ice that drift in the water,
in the spring a boat is not a machine & does not sing the song
of the machines that rumble & stink to undo you,
you are a thousand music box arms that chime above
the song of the machines that want to flip the trapezoid
of spring to see what's written on the bottom,
but what's written there is hidden, I say it is hidden as it's your name
that's written on the bottom of the trapezoid of spring,
now your eyes are the funnel cakes of summer,
you are the sleeping in tents in seaside towns,
your hair is the magpies & the shiny things the magpies want,
you are the fecund trees that smell like sex, you are the sound
of the roots of those trees, which burrow below the sound
of the machines & the wicked teeth of those who have hurt you,
who undo you, but you are the spring now,
you are the action of the lever & you are beautiful
& gone & you are with all those things which are beautiful & gone,
somewhere unreckoned by base men, bound by the red earth & the sound
of the crushed buildings, the ones who listen to the sounds of the spring
& do not hear your name but instead the song of the bastards
who cast their black lines over the earth & would tie the spring
to the tail of an angry comet, but you are above the comets
& the black lies of the bastards, you are beautiful & gone
& now you are the spring; the plants that bow to the sun
will put the sun in a lovely box & lay it below fecund trees for you,
your name is a flock of magpies bigger than the earth,

poxed by lies and murder, let your murder murder the bastards
who murder the truth & who would murder the spring,
but the spring cannot be murdered as it does not die
& you are the spring now & will not die again.

Song For Noa Pothoven

& a clear bell rings
at the end of all things;

every ash, every ember flits
home, grey birds of annihilation;

the wine-dark of oblivion
swells, a wave that only crests

& whorls of darkness, dolphins
surfing the ripple of unmaking,

crashing in a kind of joy
through the veil of being

& stumbling to rise, fawn-legged
& new in the perfect,

still point of nothingness
where pain is the same as green leaves

or dwarf stars. The night-winged
devas lift high the wordless

banners & the smallest cry
will amplify & pulverize

worlds like pills. Everything
which once was now smaller

than the hole in every letter
of every word,

every powerless word—
the sin of matter

now avenged.
Let it all be gone & let

the ghost of it
be gone too.

I Dedicate My Next Book

to the woman wearing the mustard cloak
in the bookstore crouching & crooning
to the resident cat in the fiction section.

I watch her from the poetry section
& lean into a deep bow because
I am certain she reads aloud to children.

You Belong to the Universe

for my cat, Henry

It's your last day on Planet Earth.
I can hardly think this is happening.

I encourage you to eat from the jar
of baby food until you turn away.

Every slight sighting at the water bowl
is an immeasurable gift, the slurping & the snorting.

Last night I called all the angels, all the fireflies asking for them
to protect you here until you get to the other side.

I visit you every ten minutes in your safe place
in the closet a center of darkness to dab your bloody mucus.

You appreciate it, I think.
Like my mother in the nursing home.

"I appreciate it" she would say after every little aid and comfort
after every little pillow plumping from a nurse or from a daughter.

"I appreciate it" became her moment-to-moment mantra.
I appreciate it, too even in this blurred absence all the privileges

of caregiving this holding on, this letting go of all my cats
of all my people whispering their soft air around us.



5286 / Brian Michael Barbeito

Mourning at a Funeral

Earthed floor; this piste can register no signature:
So, tell me, what can this poor fellow do for you?
The bottles of liquor are passed by, finished,
And with them, too, the clear touches of my épée.

Four calls from the hunting horn, beaters
And hounds entwined; from the brushes,
Shield-shattered faces, pheasants and hares.
In the middle, beyond the chapel, a gathering.

The earth breaks up into coffee ground clumps,
A sludge of sinister, subterranean water
Flowing dark from within, with heady steam
From the cracks beneath, thrusting birds;

The darkness beyond the sink is a portrait
Of the old Master, some words on his body:
'The spirit now indulges itself in the world it has created.'
Truth is sprawled upon the floor as flesh.

The eulogy jumps around the black glare,
Leering at the priest: beady sweat furnished
His forehead. He repeated, in severe mode,
'To him that giveth me wisdom will I give glory.'

The rifle salute is deafening, for no one mourns;
Gleaming under a cold sun, with pasty make-up
The pallbearers fasten cloaks to keep warm
As the coffin is slouched toward the hungry grass.

Invaluable

My aunt had an eye for style & a flair for fashion – she
Knew all the best vintage & thrift stores in town & she
Firmly believed in shopping around

An eco-friendly fashionista, she was upcycling furniture
& upstyling clothes long before such trends were in vogue

She'd always chide me for following trends & throwaway
Fads – she'd say *buying off the rack is disposable tat*

It's strange, but, since she died, I find myself more & more
Drawn to her favourite thrift stores & vintage haunts

I half-expect to find her amongst the wool coats and
Preloved bags, the shiny knick-knacks & loose bric-à-brac,

Draped in a silk scarf or trying on another tweed hat,
Looking like a million dollars.

My Nature Guy

I just opened your insta story –
A proud pic of your new hybrid
And a smiling gif of Greta
Saying *emocionada*

Instantly, it reminded me of all
The reasons why I loved you
And your planet-saving ways

You weren't an obvious choice,
For a spoilt princess like me, but,
Somehow, for all those years, we
Blended rather seamlessly

To this day, I'm not sure what it
Was, but maybe you saw something
In me, that was worth saving too.

The Role of Anger in Revolution

Every word you speak will be dangerous.
Every belief you hold will be despised by someone.
Every step you take will disturb the comfort
of a thousand empty-eyed tyrants and petty puppeteers.

They will want you silenced.
They will want you disillusioned.
They will want you shackled.
They will want their revenge.

Ignite your fury — without it there can be no beginning.
Your anger is necessary, but it can be deceptive –
it will make you feel enormous, but left unchecked
it will consume you; it will make you small.

Keeping your anger where it remains useful
will be the hardest work you ever do.
And the struggle to succeed, I can tell you,
lasts a lifetime.

Focus on hope – without hope there can be no progress.
Focus on beauty – without beauty there can be no purpose.
Focus on laughter – without laughter,
your struggles will all have been for nothing.

Focus on love, my daughter, my son,
because without it I may lose you, and that can never be.
That loss would unleash a tidal wave,
ripping apart the world.

I'll be waiting in the dark,
too far from the fray,
my body stifled by time,
my meager battle scars invisible.

We will come together
and embrace when the tide has turned.
Without that embrace, I can tell you,
those fascist fucking assholes will have won.

Dreadful Animals

I will take my spirit to the wells
of horrible men to poison their water,
to their fires and take their fuel.

I will steal their food
and let them starve to death.

I will surround their shelter,
rip it to shreds, and give the Devil
every last splinter and nail.

Only then will I ascend
to sleep on some celestial bed

Victoria and Ever After

I was a married
woman, and you
were the doctor
with the hysteria
cure. Vibrations.
My soul soiled.
I did not pray.
Yes, I was forced,
and I fell in love.
You used a machine
to ravage my will.
I fell from God.
His light. His favors.
I fell into you,
but you were
my keeper.
I kept hot.
You kept on.
We destroyed
one another.
We were reborn.
Look! Look at us
now, hysterical
after the Before Times.
Hellbent. Godspeed.
The more we get,
the more you need.

Sally

Yes, the heart will stop beating.
Maybe it's best to be a sun
shining long after its own death,
named and noted, light studied.
Yes, the heart is hosting fleshly
a creature, perhaps a manatee,
or a something undiscovered
deep down in the deep down sea,
a deep host unfathomable
but less forgettable than a body.
Time is there always as it was
when a heart beat inside a woman
whose womb bore the womb
that bore the womb that bore
the womb that bore me.
Nobody recalls my
maternal ancestor Barsheeba
but me tonight, or recalls her mother
Sally, just Sally, b. 1792
in Tennessee, her last name,
mother, and date of death
unknown to me, but a virus
is big time and mitochondrion
a hot topic, a possibility
unlike wombs, forever
full of suns which
die too as will we all,

and with us everything
ever believed or charted,
because nothing
but nothing but space
survives. For example,
not Sally

A Tour of the Whale's Library

You call on me before dawn, you hold my throat
shy and startled, you're gone again with the dew.

In the back rooms of the museum fungi bloom
mildew bear-tracks across the archive stacks.

A forest is a potential library, the kind you
hack in the front door with an axe. Split pine

trunks and see the long corridors branching off
bend your ear close and hear the scholars hum

watch when they die as each sprouts gills and bonnets
smell the soft must as they take to the canopy

a humpback whale breaches the floor, crashes back
deflecting off the far side of Pluto

and drifts out into the darkness
step out onto the balcony, feel static all around us

and carve my face. There, I've done it.
I've stepped up to the eagle-winged lectern

there, I've opened the book. There was a wasp
pressed between the pages of John's Gospel.

There, a hind steps out gingerly into the lobby.
Don't think I can't tell it's you

but how did we ever get here? A Chinese dragon
formed in a mess of hot protostellar dust

no field is home
no stone is more than a shattered disc

I'm waiting for a wolf in the museum café
orbital motion of one arc-second per hour

there's a prickle of fear in the west galleries
your sixth-form diaries under glass in a dim-lit case

Nain had to lose her accent when she moved to London
"It was a terrible thing to sound Welsh then. Of course"

sticklebacks in the petrol tank, the manager wants you gone
epiphytic ferns on a sessile oak

Old Brecon Bank, mackerel lines trailed into the Oort Cloud
fifteen in 1920, a generation missing

a startled hare racing through the gap between
tu mewn, tu mas, caught in the auroral storms of 1856

we wed a river, iron filings rearrange themselves
the palm of your hand was a map of the stars

that lost map of the forest, the one that had no core
I still need her to help me say *Ystumllwynarth*

there's a bear in there somewhere, Arth, Arthur
cynnu'r tân, the fire in Llŷn, we shall light such a candle

now I hear the wolf breathing on my neck
streaks and blobs and stress-fracture patterns

outside the museum there is literally no atmosphere
the near-zero chill of the trans-Neptunian plain, smoke

in tongues and the wolf lies down at your feet
curls around the rings that curl round your heart

Demodex Country

My body is teeming
with Demodex mites.

Now my body is teeming
with your Demodex mites.

Soon there will be generations
of new traditions, new tiny accents,

histories of independence
and first contacts.

I will feed these children
that we made.

I will protect and sustain them
as if they were my own body.



5263, by Brian Michael Barbeito

FICTION

Bunny Partners in Crime

Later that evening, they sat alone in their apartment, wondering if they had made the right decision. Not every day did a rabbit duo commit murder, let alone two murders. Bunny partners in crime, they stared into each other's pink albino eyes, and communicated mind-to-mind: “Yes, we made the right decision, and we got away with it too!”

They smiled and made little rabbit purrs, noses and whiskers twitching.

Nibbles and Smartie Hop Tart had no plan to invent an alibi. No need either—who would suspect rabbits of a double homicide? Especially since they took great care to make it look like an accident.

Vertical living suited them, eighty-five storeys up, in the penthouse suite. They popped into the elevator and rode it down to the lobby whenever they wanted a bit of sunshine and grass under their feet in nearby Central Park. People carrying groceries would often stop and offer them some lettuce, cabbage, or sweet carrots. They also knew their way to the corner market, a frequent excursion with their humans, and the last excursion their humans would ever take.

A low-situated motion sensor opened the elevator door when they moved in front of it, and once they entered, the elevator brought them down. Normally, they would go with the two humans who had lived with them, but those humans never would return—so today, they waited until a resident from another floor came into the lobby.

She cooed at them, snapping several photos with her cell phone as they hopped into the elevator. Eager to add the photos to her Instagram later. She thought about smuggling the bunnies into her apartment for more Insta opportunities, until Nibbles and Smartie Hop Tart sensed her intention and left little brown nuggets on the elevator floor. She stared down at their leavings, turned up her nose, and changed her mind.

She pressed the button for the penthouse before she stepped out onto her own floor. She knew the rabbits lived in the penthouse, but she did not know why they came into the elevator without their humans. Lacking insight into herself and her own decisions, she also failed to realize how the rabbits telepathically communicated to her their desire that she press the button for the penthouse. She thought she had done this on impulse.

The elevator function locking access to individual floors had long been broken, and never fixed, despite numerous complaints. Lax building management worked in the

rabbits' favor, as did the later lax handling of the homicide investigation by the NYC Police Department.

All went according to plan. Not only had the rabbits committed murder, they had committed premeditated murder, planned over several months in exquisite detail.

Smartie Hop Tart, who had a macabre sense of humor, said to Nibbles the day before the murders, “We really put flesh on the bones of our plans here.”

“We really have, we really have,” Nibbles replied.

The two rabbits laughed maniacally, which came out as loud happy rabbit honks. Their humans delighted at the cuteness of the sounds, which made Smartie Hop Tart and Nibbles laugh even more.

The sun set, spilling umber and gold across the mirrored surfaces of the neighboring high rises. The rabbits paid no attention. They sat for a while longer, still looking into each other's eyes with admiration. Then they hopped with joy around the living room, and onto the modern velvet couch. The humans had never let them onto the couch. Now they had unfettered access.

“When do you think the lawyers will come?” Nibbles asked Smartie Hop Tart.

“Well, Sue and Brad definitely died, we made sure of it. So their last wishes should be honored soon.”

“Maybe they weren't that bad. Sue said she was our mommy, even if Brad said he definitely was not our daddy. They did leave their entire estate to us in trust, with Angela as the trustee.”

“Weren't that bad? They refused to let us onto the couch and yelled at us when we hopped around at night and what they called 'too early in the morning.' They laughed at us when we ate our own droppings.”

“Which are delicious, as you know.”

“Right, so tasty! They also locked us in cages, separate cages. Solitary confinement. They kept us as prisoners, and used cruel and unusual punishment when we hadn't even committed any crime.”

“True, true. Well, we've committed a crime now.”

“Not a crime. Justifiable homicide. We acted in self-defense.”

“Also, in our best interest, and Angela's! Snooty Sue's niece will benefit from our wealth while acting as the trustee for the estate.”

“Angela is honest, and she deserves to benefit while taking care of us.”

“She really does, she really does.”

All this conversation exhausted Nibbles and Smartie Hop Tart. Nibbles plopped down on his belly, all four legs outstretched. Smartie Hop Tart's ears flattened as he fell asleep. Otherwise, he stayed in the same, seated position. Both rabbits closed their eyes. While Sue and Brad had lived with them—that is, while they were still alive—Nibbles and Smartie Hop Tart rarely felt safe enough to sleep with their eyes closed.

This had especially freaked out Sue. “Look at them. Their red eyes stay open even while they sleep. So creepy!”

“They are adorable, though. You love them, don't you, Sue?”

“You know I do. Let's put them in their cages so they won't disturb us at the crack of dawn.”

“Good idea.”

Smartie Hop Tart had woken up right when Sue had first started talking about their eyes, but pretended to still be asleep. He heard the whole exchange, and at that point decided Sue and Brad had to die.

Smartie Hop Tart communicated this to Nibbles the next morning, as they remained locked side-by-side in their individual cages.

“They have to go. They have to die.”

“I've been saying that now for at least two years, if not more. But how?”

“I have an idea.”

Sue and Brad woke up about an hour later. By then, Nibbles and Smartie Hop Tart had already devised the general outline of their plan to, in the near future, bring these humans to their much-deserved demise.

Over the next several months, Nibbles and Smartie Hop Tart chewed and scratched less. Rabbits' teeth and nails keep growing and growing if they do not become ground down, and they needed long teeth and nails to finalize things if the first part of their plan failed.

“They're starting to look like Bunnacula,” Brad said. “What do you think is wrong with them?”

“Oh, we may have to change their feed or something. I'll do an internet search later.”

“Or maybe they're becoming murderous, like the rabbits in *Watership Down*.”

“You read too many novels.”

Sue left for yoga class, and forgot to search the internet later. Brad ran off to work, thinking Sue would take care of it. Nibbles and Smartie Hop Tart would let their

teeth and nails continue to grow and grow. While published as a novel, the rabbits in *Watership Down* did exist in a less hyperbolic form. The pet rabbits of the author, who saw their homicidal capabilities. He wrote the novel, and he bred his rabbits—some of them came to the United States, the close ancestors of Nibbles and Smartie Hop Tart.

That day, as they sat alone in the penthouse for hours, the rabbits stirred up some drama between themselves.

“You sure have an overbite, Nibbles.” Smartie Hop Tart laughed.

“You should see yours, Smartie. You're a regular Bugs Bunny.”

“I looked in the mirror in our play area. I think that I look like Freddy Mercury.”

“Yeah, if Freddy Mercury had fluffy white fur and ugly, beady eyes.”

“Seems like you just looked at yourself in the mirror. Ow! That hurt!” Nibbles had chomped down with his overgrown overbite, right onto Smartie Hop Tart's furry rear.

He honked, and not in a friendly, laughing way.

Smartie Hop Tart whipped around and bit back, right on the neck. Now Nibbles squealed and screamed.

“Maybe I am a 'regular Bugs Bunny,' like you said, Nibbles.” Smartie Hop Tart sneered, his whiskers twitching. “Quoting old Bugs: 'You know, sometimes me conscience bothers me... but not this time.’”

They both slunk off to separate corners of the living room.

About an hour later, Nibbles timidly hopped over to Smartie Hop Tart.

“I'm not talking to you.” Smartie Hop Tart edged away from Nibbles in a bouncy shuffle.

“Come on, Smartie. We have to keep planning. Otherwise, we're stuck with those cruel humans.”

“Nope, and nope. I will do away with them on my own and put you up for adoption!”

“You know, you're true to your name, or at least your initials. SHT. Put an “I” right after the “H” and it's accurate. That's what you are, a little—”

Smartie bit down on Nibbles again, this time on his leg.

“Ow! Ow!” Nibbles hopped around in pain.

At that moment, the elevator opened and delivered Sue into the living room. “Oh no! Nibbles, you have blood on your leg. Is there dried blood on your neck too?” She did

not take the time to inspect Smartie Hop Tart. If she had, she would have seen a streak of dried blood on his rear.

“Smartie, bad rabbit. I’m putting you in your cage. You have to act nicer to Nibbles.” That both of the rabbits had extraordinarily long teeth and nails slipped her mind.

“Nibbles, Brad will clean you up when he comes home.”

After Smartie Hop Tart's solitary confinement at the hands of Sue, and the stings Nibbles experienced when Brad administered antiseptic on the bites, both rabbits reconciled. Reconciled and more convinced than ever of the need to finalize their plan for the end of Sue and Brad.

They went over their murderous plan every day, slowly adding all the painstaking particulars, like two generals plotting strategy and tactics for war. Like two generals who became so hopping excited when they tasted in advance impending victory, they leapt in circles around the room.

“Do you remember the one kind thing Sue did for us recently?” Smartie asked Nibbles, while they both feasted on their droppings which littered the luxury carpet.

“She gave us the idea for how to do it!”

“I can't believe she's so dumb, but of course she is.”

“She hit the back of her leg, near her foot, on that desk over there. Then she hopped around. Hopped around much like we do, but screaming her head off.”

“Humans have such weird bodies. Especially their legs. Sue's legs are totally bald and shiny, and Brad's have little black hairs all over that look like nasty spiders. Remember how after, he rubbed her leg, the one she injured, and said she hit her Achilles' heel?”

“She corrected him and said tendon, and then he asked, 'Why do you always criticize me?'"

“Sue pulled her leg away. 'That's your Achilles' heel, babe. You can't ever be told when you're wrong.'”

“He got right in her face. 'You tell me that I'm wrong all the time!'”

“They started fighting. Yelling! We hid under the bed.”

“Sue found us later and yelled at us too. Said we aren't supposed to be in the bedroom.”

“Well, now we know about this human weakness. Their Achilles' heel.”

“Ha!”

With several bunny purrs, they finished eating as many delicious droppings as they could. At that point, they looked at each other and the thought communicated between them. They would take care of Sue and Brad the next day, once and for all.

A warm spring day. Sunday, the day Sue and Brad normally brought Smartie and Nibbles on a walk to Central Park and the corner grocery store.

“I don't feel like going today, Brad. You take them.” Sue sat on the sofa with her legs curled under her, staring at her phone.

Sue and Brad had been spending more and more time apart. That is, Sue kept pushing Brad further away.

“Come on, let's just go. I can't take both of them by myself.”

Sue sighed, and it almost sounded like a hiss.

“Fine.”

Sue grabbed the rabbit harness and leash combos. Both aqua colored and with angel wings on backs of the harnesses.

“Let's just carry them. We can put on the harnesses after the park.”

Brad acquiesced, like he did with most things lately, afraid of Sue's wrath.

Sue clipped the leashes to the harnesses and threw them in a large handbag, along with some cloth grocery bags. She moved around the room quickly, with anger.

Smartie and Nibbles looked forward to a peaceful home without all the negative energy. Not much longer.

Brad carried Smartie and Sue carried Nibbles to the elevator, and down they went.

Once in Central Park, at their usual grassy spot, they let both rabbits frolic freely. Some people had criticized them in the past, asking if they wanted their rabbits to run away. Sue and Brad always laughed at that.

“They're too lazy to go far,” would be Sue's usual response.

On this day, the sun made the grass sparkle. Smartie Hop Tart and Nibbles hopped with sweet, little hops over to a corner of the grass, near the path leading out to the street.

Sue and Brad started to walk over to them, but too late. Smartie and Nibbles took off in leaping hops, tearing down the path. Sue and Brad chased after them.

People noticed Sue and Brad running, especially when they pushed people aside. Someone yelled, "Hey, watch it!"

No one noticed Smartie and Nibbles, low to the ground and white. Almost camouflaged with the sidewalk.

Smartie and Nibbles sat on the edge of the curb, about to take off again. They held off until Sue and Brad caught up, and then they descended into the busy street. Cars sped by. The drivers did not see the rabbits.

Once Sue and Brad came off the sidewalk, Smartie and Nibbles put into action the last part of their plan. They bit down hard with their grown out teeth on the Achilles' of each human, first one ankle and then the other. Smartie took on Sue, and Nibbles took on Brad.

Sue, crazy with pain and disoriented, ran into traffic and a delivery truck smashed into her before the driver could slam on his brakes. Brad fell down into the street as he tried to escape Nibbles, as Nibbles chomped on Brad's Achilles' once more for good measure. A taxi ran over Brad's head, busting it open like cantaloupe.

Dexterous, small, and quick, Smartie and Nibbles avoided the onslaught of cars and hopped back up onto the safety of the sidewalk. If they had been humans, they would have given each other high fives. They only had to do the bare minimum of their plan and it worked! No need for any extra bites or scratches to bring Sue and Brad into the pathway of the cars.

In the chaotic aftermath, all the humans focused on the two pedestrian deaths. No one witnessed the two rabbits stealthily hop home—except for one dog. The dog growled from the open window of a car. Smartie puffed himself up and growled back. The dog whimpered, and drew his head back into the car.

Four days later, thirsty and starving, having run out of water and food—and even their own droppings—the two rabbits wondered if they had really made the right decision, after all.

“We’re going to have to take to the streets,” Smartie said to Nibbles. “Sneak food in alleyways.”

“Normally, people feed us when we go outside. They give us something. No one has fed us in days. People have been guarding all the grassy patches in the park with dogs. We can’t even forage.”

“No food in days. Not even a shred of lettuce, or a blade of grass.”

“They know, Smartie. They know. That's why they won't feed us. They know what we did.”

“Even if they did, they can't convict us. At least, I don't think so. We're rabbits.”

“Maybe they can't convict us, but they can starve us to death.”

“A slow execution.”

“I'm afraid. We're going to die.”

In truth, coincidence had it that the people they encountered when they went outside had too much on their minds to be distracted by two rabbits, however deceptively sweet looking. News of a strange disease that originated in Wuhan, China, had just started to circulate.

The next day, Smartie and Nibbles tried to drag themselves to the elevator, but neither of them could move from the couch.

“This is going to be our final resting place, isn't it, Smarts?”

“It looks that way, kiddo. It sure looks that way.”

“At least we get to die on velvet. On the couch Sue and Brad would punish us for hopping on.”

“It's so soft. I'm not going to make it much longer.”

Nibbles let out a low, whimpering sound.

The room grew shadowy, as Smartie Hop Tart and Nibbles weakened to the point that they could barely see out of their pink albino eyes.

The hours wore on, and their other senses started to fade too. So they did not hear the elevator door open, but they did see the silhouette of a human coming toward them.

It's the Angel of Death, intuited Smartie, a half-thought in his diminished and terror-stricken mind. Living with Sue and Brad, who tortured him and Nibbles daily, he long believed the Angel of Death would take a human form.

“It's me. It's Angela.” The words sounded tender and loving. The tender and loving mercy of release from slow death. “Oh, no! You both must have been here for days. I came as soon as I found out.”

It had taken several days to identify Angela as the next of kin. She had planned to have the rabbits euthanized—only trustee until they died, and then the fortune went to her. The will and trust did not specify that she could not kill them. Now she didn't have to, but she did not understand right away how close to death they already were.

They stayed alive just long enough to hear Angela's promise to them.

“You'll be okay. I'll take care of you. Just as you deserve.”



5268 / Brian Michael Barbeito

Laundry Day

I always hated laundry. But there were times at the Bubbaland in Chicago's McKinley Park neighborhood when it wasn't so bad. Once upon a time, Christina taught me how to feed slugs into the coin machines so it gave us back half-dollars. When we got there early enough, which was rare, there were newspapers. I'd do the sudoku, and she'd do the crossword. That's when I first discovered her inane crush on that stupid crossword puzzle writer-blogger from Seattle or Portland or wherever the fuck he's from.

If we were too late for the newspapers, Christina would invent some kind of game to play while we waited. Like making up backstories for the people around us. Or coming up with ludicrous names for their kids. Like Flaster. Or Peenifer. Or Durock. Durock's a type of cement.

Anyway. That shit got old real fast. Lately, our laundry nights have been late, and long, and cold. See, I think we started to resent each other over the past three years of living together. There was just this grudge we refused to confront but clung to nonetheless, like a pair of holey sweatpants the other hated.

Things really started going downhill on laundry day last week. She must've thought I was making fun of her Kirkland brand panties or something, which got her in a bad mood. After that, I brought up that she never brings change for laundry. I'm always paying for both of us.

"OUR laundry," she shouted. "OUR life! OUR laundry! OUR change!"

"Christina," I calmly stated, "You're kind of acting like a bitch."

Steve Jobs famously said, *you can't connect the dots looking forward*. But maybe I could have avoided stepping on that landmine. Ray, my ex-friend/ex-shrink, used to say, *an opportunity is offered, it is not always taken*.

Christina blew up. She proceeded to list my every shortcoming. She was a real Gemini.

Biting, emotional but matter-of-fact, more articulate than me, enunciating every and sometimes extra syllables.

I don't remember all she lit into. Probably yelling at me for never listening, for one. I looked at the timer on the dryer. Thirty-two minutes. I wanted to leave for a cigarette, but she'd been making me quit. I felt like pulling my hair out, but I'd just buzzed it, 'cause Christina had convinced me I'd look like Charlize Theron in *Fury Road*. It was the first time she'd ever used the word "sexy" about *me*—even if it was hypothetical. So anyway, I just stood there, looking like Stanley Tucci, my hands shoved into my front pockets, trying to rub the faces off my quarters.

Our dirty clothes in their circular little windows spun in sync with the dizzy spirals of her whining. All the while, I was acting too indifferent, too passive. Or how she put it, I was *exanimate*, *pococurante*, and other words she learned studying for the GRE that basically mean don't-give-a-shit. I don't think she realized how ridiculous she looked, screaming, *How can you be so lackadaisical?*, shaking a fistful of sports bras. Worst of all, she kept saying that nickname I hate in her totally put-on Chicago accent, *Rahnnie, Rahnnie, Rahnnie!*

The dryer read twenty-one minutes.

"Ron!"

"What?"

"Look at me."

I couldn't. I already knew how her round brown eyes looked when they're disappointed.

"Answer me."

"I don't know, Chris."

And so she went on, this time louder, with bigger, faker words, swinging our delicates, balling up socks and throwing them down to punctuate sentences. Twelve minutes.

Eventually she stopped. She sighed.

“Ron, I think this is over.”

“It says twelve min—”

“No, Ron. *This* is over.”



Christina and I broke up after having done our laundry together for three years.

After saying “I love you” for four.

After doing couples’ therapy for almost two years.

After doing couples’ yoga for a year.

After we met in that same yoga studio... God, almost five years ago.

Ray, my ex-friend/ex-shrink, was the one who introduced us. Fucker. But you know what, despite giving me shit advice for the better half of my twenties, he did, at times, try and make me do things that were good for me. Like suggesting I try circle. CBT. Cognitive behavioral therapy. You know, a support group. Turns out there’s a whole membership for that.

My circle took place in the basement of a YMCA. Christina taught yoga in the same room right before it started. When Ray and I showed up to my first session, Christina was alone in the studio after her class. She was perfectly still, underneath the room’s only working light, her whole body and breath invested in pigeon crescent pose. Her right elbow rested on her slicked-back hair and pointed straight up toward the light. Her back made a perfect C, freeing forward her ribs like a peacock opening its feathers. When she broke the pose to face me, her crystal *om*-engraved necklace reflected the light in my eyes. It was all over from there. Ray saw me staring. He elbowed me hard and said, *Go for it, Ron.*

Fuck you, too, Ray, I shoulda said. But I did ask Christina out, and I didn't hate it.

On our first date, we got overpriced tiny Korean-Tex-Mex tapas in West Loop.

“You don't look like a Veronica,” she said.

“That's why I go by Ron,” I said.

She said, “I like Ronnie.” First red flag.

She asked me what I was doing at the Y. I kinda word-vomited the therapy bit, mumbling over the truth-like reasons (debilitating anxiety, unconscious misogyny, generalized self-loathing), and leaned into some more bullshit-y explanation about not having a relationship with my dad. Hybrid bullshit, we'll call it. But isn't that just 24 and dating?

“Oh yeah?” I remember her perking right up. “My parents are split up too. I've never been in therapy for it though. I'm never going to either. I'm perfectly fine blaming them for everything awful. They deserve it, they're awful.”

“Oh, well—”

“No, they're terrible. My mom's an idiot who doesn't know how to *not* depend on a man. My dad's an idiot *and* a son-of-a-bitch. *Gahd*, he's a skeez. He's from here, but when I was nine, he left my mom and me. Now he's doing real estate in L.A, and he just married some porn star. Well, former porn star. Her name's Shamrock for fuck's sake. Fucking Shamrock. Can you believe it? She's technically retired from porn, but she still models. And if you ask me, it's all part of the same misogynistic, hetero-fatuuous, media-splodge-industrial complex. I hope their divorce sucks.”

I could tell then that she was one of those hot book-reading girls. She looked like Daphne but talked like Velma. She suggested that we get drinks in Pilsen, by her place at the time. At some point, she coaxed me into an alley to smoke a onie and a cigarette. She used to smoke, too. But only Spirits.

All of a sudden we were at a diner. She grabbed me by the belt loop, pulled me past the *Please Wait to Be Seated* sign, and took me all the way into the last stall of the men's room and shouted, "I drew this!" pointing above a urinal where a black sharpie Tyrannosaurus Rex gave the finger to George W. Bush. It was extremely well drawn.

"Wow," I said. "What does it mean?"

She looked at me as if I shoulda known. I forget exactly what she explained. Something about *reptilian* and ... war? I don't remember. Then she asked if I liked it, and she put her hand on my neck and stared into my eyes.

"Yeah. It's awesome." I was stoned. Before that, I had never liked someone so much so fast that it got me stoned.

We walked forever in the cold. No taxi, feet hurt, lungs hurt, dazed, but not wanting the night to end. When we said goodbye at the door of her walk-up, she kissed me and beckoned me inside. We smoked a bowl, made out, and fell asleep on the couch. We had bagel sandwiches with coffee and cigarettes in the morning. We were together ever since.



Christina and I broke up after a long calm following many, many storms.

After drafting two blueprints of a tiny house, which she wanted, then I drew, then she hated.

After forcing myself to say "soda" instead of "pop" for four years because she's an elitist, self-hating Midwesterner.

After having accused each other of cheating too many times to count.

After she thought she might be pregnant. Yeah, riddle me that.

It was Halloween. Christina showered for an entire hour while I put on mime make-up in the bathroom mirror.

“Hey sorry you had to miss that lecture,” I remember shouting over the shower.

“Mhm,” Christina sorta grunted.

“I know you were really looking forward to seeing that crossword guy from... Austin? Or Asheville, or— Where’s he from?”

“He’s a lexical artist,” Christina moaned.

“What?!”

“Can you just— Can we just not talk? For a second?”

Then suddenly she started hacking, violently. She turned off the water, jumped out from the shower, wrapped a towel around herself, and hugged the toilet.

“Ron, I don’t think I can go out tonight.”

But she didn’t want me to stay home with her.

“No, no, you go,” she said. “You’re all dressed up!”

So I went by myself to Ray’s Halloween Party. A word of advice: Don’t go to your backstabbing therapist’s Halloween party.

When I arrived, I was the only guest in costume, but at least it was a hit. Another word of advice: A mime is a great costume for a Halloween party where you hate all the other guests.

Ray and everyone else at the party had gone to college together, the same pseudo-Ivy as Christina. They were all couples except for one freakishly precocious eight-year-old.

Shouldn’t you be trick-or-treating, kiddo?

His parents said he was protesting Big Candy, which preys on low and middle-income families at the expense of their children's heart health.

I chuckled. They did not. They said I wouldn't joke about artificial preservatives and hydrogenated glyphosates if I knew the research connecting them to autism. Then they called their kids' name: *Dorcason, why don't you check out Mr. Ray's typewriter collection? No need to involve yourself here.*

Dorcason? Oh my god, I had to laugh. I scrambled for the bathroom and texted Christina the whole incident. No text back.

Dinner was served—gnocchi. On Halloween. Not even pumpkin gnocchi or some shit. Try-hards. Anyway, I texted a picture of the ridiculous meal to Christina. Still no response.

Somehow the conversation at the dinner table turned to work horror stories. Ray was eager to volunteer. I started feeling pretty awkward. I mean, if Ray tells all his lame friends stories about his clients, is he talking about me behind my back?

It started innocently enough. Stories about walking in on one of his patients in the bathroom. Embarrassing lite. But then he started making fun of the way people grieved. How they sounded when they cried. How distraught these "yuppies" and "basics" got over the stupidest shit. He started showing pictures, too. I wondered if he had pictures of me.

Then Ray's surgeon friend pulled out his phone. *You think that's psycho? Get a load of this tumor I took off a crackhead!*

I excused myself to the kitchen. I tried calling Christina. I don't know why, I was just upset and wanted someone to talk to. No answer. Her voicemail inbox was full.

Then, fully in character with my costume, I left without saying a word.

That night a hot southern front was blowing through the city, rendering the night unseasonably warm. So, instead of transferring to my train downtown, I ambled through

the loop for a while.

Every surface steamed. The city was gritty and quiet, streetlight-lit and romantic. It felt like living in a Hopper painting or listening to Bill Evans. I like that Chicago sort of feels like that sometimes. A lot of times, if you ask me.

Christina was feeling romantic too.

I was walking past a restaurant in the Theater District when I caught a flash of her bouncing auburn hair inside, radiating under warm light in a red velvet booth.

It was unmistakably Christina. Christina in a trench coat and painted red lip. Christina, under the arm of one very buff dude dressed as a sailor. His hulking thumb brushed a tendril of hair away from her cheek as they kissed.

One of the things I had been working on de-programming in therapy was the abiding fear that Christina would leave me for a man. Why not some big, Paul Bunyan Stanley Kowalski Navy Man? This fear, Christina promised, was unfounded. And Ray chalked it up to *internalized homophobia*—which I know sounds shitty, but I swear that shit’s just trying to protect me sometimes. Anyway, I guess the de-programming took effect, because I felt nothing watching them. Really, nothing. A thick, suffocating blanket of nothingness.

It also struck me that one cannot confront their cheating partner when one is dressed as anything remotely related to a clown. So I just stood there and stared. I watched them flirt, caress, and canoodle until they got their bill. Then I went home and got trashed.

I didn’t see Christina for a week. Then one night I woke up around three a.m. to the sound of the smoke alarm and jumped out of bed. Christina was back. I found her behind the kitchen cart in the corner of our studio apartment. She was wearing my clothes, curled up on the floor, high as a kite, bawling to a YouTube video of Shel Silverstein reading *The Giving Tree*. That was some of the most pathetic shit I’ve ever seen.

The week after, I found two pregnancy tests in the bathroom trash can. Both were

negative, but I don't really know how those things work.



Christina and I broke up after being married for almost a year and a half.

Thursday, August 15, 2017, had to be one of the hottest days of the year. Downtown, the wind shoved around heavy smells of garbage, pizza sauce, urine, and bus exhaust. Outside the Daley Center, pigeons couldn't be bothered to move as I steered my single speed around them and the plaza's smokers and cell phone talkers. Not a bike rack in sight. On the building's south side, a small crowd was protesting something. Or celebrating? I couldn't be sure—there were megaphones and flamenco dancers. (I do like this city, even when it smells like piss.)

I would later find out it was 50 years ago to that date, the day of our wedding, that the city unveiled that fugly Picasso sculpture (It's an ox, right?). I looked it up later, and apparently, when Mayor Daley introduced the sculpture, he said, "We believe that what is strange to us today will be familiar tomorrow." Cryptic fucker.

I eventually locked my bike at a donut shop across the street.

At the Daley Center, you get married in the basement, past the man wearing sunglasses and a red rat pack hat offering to take your picture, next to where the bathrooms are tiled in yellow from floor to ceiling, and their fluorescent lights buzz and flicker. You can hear them even when the bathroom door is closed.

Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzck-Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzck.

The waiting room was dark, Christina was missing, and without cell phone reception I couldn't text her to see if she was late or had decided to leave me, again.

One other couple was waiting, dressed all in black, hair dyed black and green, both tatted up. They didn't smile or talk, but on the whole seemed like a good fit for each other.

Christina and I were a match for each other too, I remember telling myself. We're ready

for this, I remember telling myself. *Hell, we're almost 30. Therapy's been helping a lot. Everyone else in Circle got married before Trump took office. And if we don't get nuked, or murdered in a mass shooting, or drowned in a torrential flood caused by the melting icecaps, I'm gonna need the health insurance.*

Christina arrived right as the receptionist behind the bulletproof glass announced our turn to get hitched. We walked through the waiting room door into a hall of offices. Our judge was in the first door to the right.

When Christina repeated the standard vows, her voice was nasally and childlike like I had never heard from her before. Was she starting to cry? And was it because she was happy or scared? I had seen her sob, wail, and scream, but I had never seen her tear up.

I took her to the Grand Hall of Union Station afterward. It's just one of those places in the city I've always thought was really beautiful, cinematic. I like train stations, sue me. On the way there, we bought a couple of very fancy sandwiches with serrano ham and soft cheese and fig preserves and individual bottles of champagne. I proposed to her on the stairs.

"Ron, we're married."

"I know, but I never really proposed."

"I know. I did."

I didn't remember that. So we fought about it. Our first screaming fight as a married couple. We left in separate directions, her without eating her sandwich. Hours later, I got a text from a friend telling me Christina was getting kicked out of a bar in Uptown. I showed up in an Uber because I'm a putz. When I got there, she was outside, kicking shattered glass around the curb and blathering profanities at the bouncer, like the godless progeny of Harry Carey and Sailor Jerry, only less endearing.

I was ready to ignore whatever she had to say. I was ready to pay for the ride home, get her to sleep, then crash, without either of us having to cry in front of each other, without me having to hear her snap *I'm breaking up with you for fucking forever* one more time. Not

on my wedding night.



Christina and I broke up after seeing half a dozen concerts together and never staying through the encore.

After I took on a boatload of credit card debt for therapy bills, because Christina didn't believe my Halloween story and forced us to keep seeing that little shit Ray.

After she shamed me in front of her friends, telling them I voted for Rahm Emmanuel, even though she's not registered to vote at all. And I didn't vote for him his second term, so fuck off.

After I bought bowling shoes, and water shoes, and hiking boots, and black dress shoes, and brown dress shoes, and patent ones too, because Christina has this thing about needing the right shoes for everything. It's stupid.

After she left me last night.

I think it was Dr. Oz or Suzanne Somers who explained that when you fall asleep drunk, you always wake up at 4 a.m., because that's the time your liver naturally detoxifies your body. Last night, it was around 4 a.m. when I had to pee. Christina wasn't in bed. She wasn't in the bathroom. It took no time to discover she wasn't anywhere in our 300-square-foot studio. But there were traces of her everywhere. On the kitchen cart, a cracked tumbler leaking rum and coke. All over the floor, rose quartz beads from a snapped serenity bracelet. On her bedside table, a laptop paused on a YouTube video of the live piano version of "I Don't Want to Get Over You" by that droning Magnetic Fields clown. On the keyboard of the laptop, a note. It started *I tried waking you* and ended *I really did love you and wish you the best*. In between, it talked all about the kind of love you fall into when you walk into a café on a work trip in Brooklyn or Berkeley or somefuckinwhere and you finally meet that fucking crossword puzzle fuck (only, she wrote *lexical artist*), the guy you've been fawning over for the past two years (who I guess isn't in the Navy, after all, because that never came up in the letter), while your partner's been busy doomscrolling Twitter and trying to sell gently used shoes on Craigslist. None of her valuables were left in the apartment, only the spam mailers she never threw

out and her copy of the keys.

I've been awake since then. Ish. In and out of sleep. Watching the soft purple sunrise timidly slip into our apartment on the shortest day of the year. It was supposed to be laundry day.

My dirty clothes are in a heap on the floor next to the bed. Christina took the hamper. I start sorting. Lights, darks, delicates. Her laundry's gone, but my clothes still smell like hers. I wish I could remember what I smelled like before. Before her b.o. infested mine. Before she made me wear the deodorant without the phosphates or phthalates or whatever it is. Before we got all mixed up together.

I wonder, if I don't have to buy groceries at Whole Foods anymore, can I afford a new wardrobe instead of doing laundry? How long could I keep that up? Without Christina, I can do whatever I want. It's like that Sinéad O'Connor song, only not sad. I can eat all the crap I want. I can do all the drugs myself. Take down all the wall art I hate. I could do my laundry in the sink. Or just spray it with Shout or Dryel. Now that's a dumb baby name: Dryel, Dryelston, Dryella.

I might be devastated, if I stop to think about all the ways we loved each other, all the ways we were together. I might give myself hope, if I think about how likely it is she'll come back. She's dumped me before, she could do it again. I could wade through this laundry all day, inhaling the final traces of her scent on my clothes, recalling our memories, some joyful, some disastrous. But for some reason, all that's really on my mind is that The Giving Tree isn't even about love. It's about the environment, for chrissake.



Mirror / Donna Vorreyer

NONFICTION

Our Trauma Was Someone's Prayer

“We did this to you. We're giving you another 6 months before we terminate.”

I ran the mental math. I had until November, National Adoption Month, to get my two youngest children out of foster care and back into my home, or my parental rights would be terminated and they, like me, would be placed for adoption.

Healthy white children...both toddlers, one not even a year old. They'd be snapped up like hot cakes. My family's trauma would be someone else's prayer. The ripple effects wouldn't stop there; under statute, if I lost rights to my younger children, parental rights to my two older children would likely be terminated as well.

They weren't in foster care because I'd abused them, because of addiction or serious mental health issues on my part; they were in foster care because, like 80% of all children in foster care, a single judge said I'd neglected my youngest son by failing to protect him from abuse...abuse perpetrated by an unknown offender.

We celebrate adoption. It's the stuff of feel-good stories. We mourn with adoptive parents when adoptions fail. But there are losses that are ambiguous, that are too big to take in...and so we sweep them aside. We ignore that adoption is inextricably linked to loss, often to state-run child welfare systems that often leverage legal standards which disproportionately target the marginalized in our society. When merged with our history of racism, antebellum family separation, and Indigenous boarding schools, the effect is disproportionate trauma on our Brown and black communities. But the trauma is still global.

Cushioned between releases of books like *The School for Good Mothers* and *Our Missing Hearts* was a sleeper news article: “UN Suggests the US Change or Repeal Major Child Welfare Policies.” The UN specifically targeted 3 laws, instituted during the Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton administrations, that spurred family separation and, in so doing, disproportionately affected BIPOC families. The committee encouraged the US “to

hold hearings, including Congressional hearings, to hear from families affected by the child welfare system.”

Growing up, I only ever wanted a family. Whether intentional or not, my adoptive mother raised me to believe my family was conditional:

“You’re a guest, here by invitation only.”

“If I were to do it over, I wouldn’t adopt.”

When she didn’t hit with language, my adoptive mother hit with belts, wooden spoons, yard sticks. Unexpected, explosive rage. Wood shattered on my back and trust in my gut.

“I hit you because I love you.”

I learned to live with the terror. It forged me, prepared me.

I had little expectation things would have been better in my birth family, whose identity was shrouded in shame and secrecy. Conversations not said to me were whispered in corners.

“She loved you so much she gave you away; God answered our prayers.”

“I’m your real mother. She’s not the one who’s here; any woman can just spread her legs.”

“A teenage mother...sex before she was married...these are the consequences.”

“Everyone knows adopted children wind up becoming single mothers themselves; their own kids wind up in the system.”

I was sure there was something wrong with me and I couldn't have anything better than what was in front of me. I was damaged, tainted, loved so much no one would want me. Someone's consequence. It wouldn't be until my mid-twenties that I learned that, in the course of a voluntary placement, my birth mother had changed her mind and was told by a county social worker that it was too late.

I was determined to do things right. I'd done everything right. College, marriage, house, dog, graduate school, then children...in that order. No drugs. No criminal record.

My hope was anchored in creating my own family as an adult. My children would know they were loved. My worst fear was that I could lose my family, that my children would be raised to believe they, too, were unwanted. But I'd done everything right; no one could take my family.

Except that my worst fears came true in 2015. What began as a legitimate question turned into a Kafkaesque nightmare. I first held out hope in our justice system...but then realized that it isn't designed to support and maintain family integrity. Nearly half of all states do not have child welfare systems focused on increasing a family's capacity to parent. My state is one of these.

December 2015, I came home from work and found my infant son, Frankie, with odd marks on his face. Was it acne? Maybe blood vessels visible through his pale winter skin? I wasn't sure. My husband Jason, who'd taken care of our son that day, couldn't explain. Over the weekend, while Jason was on base where he served as a US Navy Commander, the marks on Frankie bloomed. They were bruises. Somehow, he'd been hurt. Every possibility, except one, flooded my brain.

I pushed aside any idea that Jason had harmed Frankie. After all, just 6 months before I'd temporarily lost custody to my ex-husband after I brought my older children to the doctor when they reported abuse, which my ex-husband even admitted to. Parental alienation, the custody evaluator said, citing a long-debunked psychological theory. The evaluator condemned me as a bad mother for tense communication following my

ex-husband's violence, even blaming me for his physical reactivity, and sent my older children to live with their father "to get used to it." I wasn't surprised. When I left him, he promised I'd never see my children again.

Maybe the dog stepped on Frankie. Maybe he was sick. Until all of that was ruled out and unless I had actual evidence Frankie was abused, the idea that Jason had harmed him couldn't be considered, especially the idea that it was anything other than an accident.

I brought him to his pediatrician and then to the hospital, searching for answers. After a 12-minute examination they, in turn, called the police and child protective services. We did not go home with our baby that day, and it would be another two years before his case closed; our time would be restricted to three, one-hour visits a week, all supervised.

Unbeknownst to me, when your child is taken by CPS, it can be done without a court order, without abuse or neglect being substantiated. And once children are taken, whether abuse or neglect is substantiated or not, the burden of proof shifts to the parents to prove they're fit, by whatever standard the county deems relevant at the moment; no different than the process used for voluntary placements. If one child is taken, often all are taken, and cannot be returned until that initial allegation is resolved. This was the case for us; my older children, who were with my ex-husband during the pendency of custody litigation, couldn't come home until their younger brother's case was resolved.

Three days after Frankie was taken, the county gave us the paperwork.

The county hit.

I stared in disbelief. Next to my name, "birth mother." With the stroke of a pen, I was relegated to "not real"; tainted with a shame riding thick in the throat that I both knew I didn't earn and that, for reasons I couldn't explain, must be all I could expect. Jason, who was married to me before Frankie was born and was an exact copy of him, was listed as "putative father." In an attempt to divide us, the county had diminished our relationships to our son and called paternity into question. They refused to substantiate their allegations or change either designation. I bore the stigma of both.

I was initially concerned that Frankie had a medical condition, a disease or disorder that would predispose him to injury. I'd experienced similar symptoms due to a genetic condition, and was worried it may have been passed on to him. I wanted this ruled out before we called it abuse; loss of job and military benefits, failure to obtain timely medical treatment, and potential loss of custody due to accusations of "parental alienation", were consequences of jumping to an inaccurate conclusion. The district attorney, an adoptive mother herself, knew that I couldn't access my pre-adoptive medical records. Nonetheless, she argued I shouldn't be allowed to present my diagnosis unless all of my medical records were admitted.

Jason and I went to court. We both denied abusing our son. The social worker said Frankie couldn't come home until one of us admitted to abuse, and the offending parent was removed from the home. Just one month after our baby was taken and days after we learned I was pregnant again, Jason assaulted me in a dissociative episode and died by suicide, leaving behind a note claiming responsibility for Frankie's injuries.

It was at that point that the children should have been returned. Thirty days in; they had their admission, the offending parent was gone. The county could have kept the case open, allowing social workers to support and monitor our fragile and grieving family, together and in our home. But that's not what happened.

No one would give, or show, me the note Jason left. I was expected to make sense of it simply on the word-of-mouth summary from strangers; police who, as I knew, were legally allowed to lie.

I was now navigating the physical and emotional scars of DV and suicide loss, in addition to the dizzying process of proving my children were safe with me. It was too much. There was no compassion. There was no guidance.

"Frank can't come home until we know what happened."

A letter from the county investigators came in the mail. There was not a preponderance of evidence that I'd harmed Frankie. Nonetheless, he would stay in foster care pending a

trial. No crime was alleged. No charges were filed. According to the county, the perpetrator was “unknown”.

We were set for trial. Not in front of a jury of peers, but in front of a single judge. The county argued Jason’s note, this exculpatory evidence, should remain suppressed until 10 days before trial. The judge agreed.

Despite extraordinary evidence Jason’s experience wasn’t isolated, the county claimed it had never heard of a parent having a mental health crisis after having their children taken.

My home was now merely a structure, a mausoleum to the family I created, knew, loved, and lost. Baby clothes, never worn. Christmas presents I wasn’t allowed to give. A Diet Coke can left where Jason had placed it on the counter, forgetting to put it in the recycling. A family of shoes left by the door.

I was in a fog of grief that was wild, untamed, and completely divorced from reality. I couldn’t reconcile that this man who’d put his life on the line could harm another. Growing up, I often wondered what parallel life existed for me if I hadn’t been adopted. My imagination ran, questioning if the other me, the one who wasn’t adopted, would be the “bad mother” who lost her children.

Back in 1692, Lord Hale created the legal framework for not only witch trials, but for rape cases; we see the effects to this day. Defendants had no right to counsel, hearsay evidence and character testimony were fair game. Verdicts were made by a standard of clear and convincing evidence, a lower threshold than reasonable doubt. This legal framework remains in place for all child welfare cases. Unlike the trials of colonial Salem, today’s child welfare cases do not have the benefit of a jury trial but are decided by a single judge.

The county called witnesses who didn't know me and testified to rumor; they manufactured conspiratorial ideas: Jason and I had a suicide pact and I'd failed to follow through, they said; we conspired to falsely admit to abuse just to get Frankie home; I murdered my husband; the children weren't actually his.

Though I owned a home that was up to code, with a fridge full of fresh and healthy food and a dresser full of clothes, the county alleged Frankie was without shelter, food, or clothing. He was up to date on medical appointments, but they alleged he was without medical care.

My days were relegated to waiting. Waiting for the next hearing, the next visit, the next time the DA pretended not to know my attorney and instead served papers via the sheriff banging on my door. I learned to fear the knock.

In between waiting, my time was punctuated by "services": forensic psychological evaluations and parenting evaluations and CBT therapy and trauma therapy, none of which raised concerns. Repeats of these services when the DA disagreed with the professionals' findings. New social workers were rotated in when the DA disagreed with the old ones. Social worker reports were intentionally delayed when she disagreed with the content. GALs failed to provide reports as required. The judge allowed all of it, a rubber stamp on a blank check signed to the DA.

Despite engaging in services beyond what was required, they denied not only our reunification, but any expansion of our visits. "Reunification is a trial issue," the DA cited without case law or statute to substantiate her argument. The judge allowed it. In the immediate throws of my own grief, I was caught up in the hagiography of our veteran mythos. Next to nothing is done to educate military spouses on identifying subtler signs of PTSD, or dealing with the aftermath of domestic violence; I was running blind.

"He killed himself to protect you." people told me.

It was easier to believe. Jason was good. He helped people. I was damaged, a bad mother. I deserved this.

Everyone knows adopted children grow up to have their own kids wind up in the system.

Because the county stopped investigating Jason when he died, it took me months to find records that substantiated his suicide note. Records showed that Jason, like many veterans and first responders, was struggling with PTSD and depression and that he kept these struggles to himself until it was too late. When I found these records, the veil slowly lifted, and the county again penalized me for coming to terms with the fact that a man trained for violence on the battlefield could, in fact, fail to shut off that trained reflex when dealing with his family and in the midst of a mental health crisis. They said I was lying, distorting the truth and changing my story.

I was blamed for Jason's anger. Because I was abused by my adoptive mother, they insinuated that I'd not only asked for it, but that this abuse may in fact lead me to be abusive myself, despite statistical evidence to the contrary. When I admitted being assaulted by Jason, I was openly doubted; the DA slut-shamed me and questioned my sanity in open court.

The judge, at the DA's request, ordered I wasn't allowed to say I'd experienced domestic abuse. The judge ruled I wasn't allowed to tell my therapist I was traumatized by the CPS case or experiencing grief over the loss of my family. I was gagged and bound, in a perverse permutation of an obscure porn. The state exercised its enormous power as I lay there, twisting in my chains and muted, a purgatory of grief. There are no support groups when they take your children.

When Mona, our youngest, was born, the county took her simply because Frankie's trial wasn't over. "Reunification is a trial issue." The judge, again, rubber stamped the petition during a surreptitious ex-parte hearing, without asking for any evidence that Mona's safety was at risk. I wasn't even alerted to the hearing, where I could have defended my family.

I waited outside the courtroom. I'd cried so much I couldn't cry anymore. I sat, stiff, doodling in a notebook; cabbage leaves under Ace bandages in a vain attempt to stop my milk. Next to me, another dazed woman asked if I was an attorney, her breasts weeping for her lost child. Confused, I looked around...then realized I was the only white woman there.

The DA argued my attorney was a material witness and moved for the judge to disqualify him, leaving me without counsel. The judge complied, just 10 days shy before I was supposed to present my case in chief. After all, there's no right to an attorney when they take your children.

When we met, my new attorney said I looked like a child who'd woken up in the middle of the night, seeking out a parent during a nightmare. Her visual matched an emotional state I couldn't articulate.

After emergency room visits to examine injuries Frankie sustained in foster care, and hearing stories of Frankie smearing feces on the wall in his foster home, I complained. The judge made a finding that I *failed to protect* Frankie not just because I "should have known" he was abused but because, in expressing concerns about his well-being in foster care, I wasn't acknowledging this was the safest place for him.

There's a cultural more in the Midwest that the job of women is to care for children. Simply because I was their mother, I was expected to hold a crystal ball, to know more than the professionals working with my children, or even the professionals Jason made admissions to in secret. I was all too aware that failure to protect was a female crime, penalized more harshly than the crime of actual abuse. Statistically, it was unlikely I'd ever parent my children again.

"I hope you always remember us as your loving children." My oldest daughter took to sneaking notes in my coat pockets during our brief visits. I could taste the depth of her grief and longing for family. I slept with her note in my pillowcase.

Under state law, within 30 days of taking a child, social workers are supposed to give parents a case plan, a document detailing what they need to do for their children to be returned. The county repeatedly ignored the judge's order to provide me with a case plan; there was no consequence. A final case plan wasn't provided until over 1 year after Frankie was taken, technically well past the statutory deadline for filing termination of parental rights. At every hearing, the DA reminded me I was past the termination deadline. The blade of the guillotine hung perilously over my head, a veritable Pit and Pendulum.

I was acutely aware of what faced not just me, but my children, if my parental rights were terminated: perpetual questions and insidious doubt if they were good enough to be wanted, if they're "bad" like their birth parents. The phantom limb of a family they don't know, simultaneously aching and itching...but nothing was there when the hand reached out for it.

I began a funeral for my own motherhood, and possibly for myself. At our visits, I sang songs to the children, hoping they'd be retained in their reptilian brains. "Please let the moon that shines on me, shine on the one I love." I read them stories... "Wherever you are, my love will find you." I wrote letters and documented family recipes, hoping an eventual and new family, one I didn't want for them, would pass this on. Dread filled my bones knowing that my children, like me, could grow up not knowing their own roots. Separated permanently from parents and aunts and uncles, cousins and siblings. In this scenario, theirs would be a path that would, despite every economic advantage, unleash trauma predisposing them to mental health issues of their own. The ripple effects would resonate through the generations.

As a condition of my case plan, Frankie and my other children couldn't come home until I admitted he was abused. When presented with enough evidence I could truthfully comply, the DA accused me of lying...of "changing my story"...and the goal post shifted to being one that required me to "be candid." When I was candid, I was accused of being uncooperative and demanding, and that intangible was added to the case plan. When I was cooperative, I was accused of being manipulative and the DA told the judge the children wouldn't be returned unless I admitted (even falsely) that I'd abused Frankie; if I didn't make this false admission fast enough, my parental rights would be terminated. I also knew that if I did falsely admit to abuse, my parental rights would be immediately terminated...and so I refused. Still, being told your children will come home is tempting; most parents will do anything to get their children back. How many parents acquiesce to this lie?

I was bent until nearly broken, contorted into just the shape the county wanted me. Unvarying, rehearsed, candid, cooperative. Submissive. And I held. I'd been forged and prepared for this terror as a child.

Psychologists recommended reunification, and the GAL and social worker eventually arranged for it after 15 months. The DA argued against it, citing “concerns that had been brought to her attention,” without citing the specific concern or who said it. During deposition, we later learned that my ex-husband, who wasn’t Frank or Mona’s father, called the DA to say he didn’t believe I should have them. For this reason alone, the DA revoked an expansion of my visits, and efforts to reunify my family stopped. The judge, the sole person deciding the outcome of my family, was unaware of the importance of attachment in child development. “Supposedly attachment is a thing.” He stroked his goatee and rolled his eyes.

I edged closer and closer to the deadline, when my parental rights would be terminated for no other reason than that the children had been in care for the duration of the federal and state timelines. “You need to prepare yourself; it’s possible they’ll move to terminate.” My attorney was calm as she prepared to argue, once again, for reunification. She wore red heels. “There’s no place like home.” She winked.

Every infraction, real or perceived, was used as grounds to keep my children away: I fed my oldest son food that was red; I had tense communication with my ex-husband who, again, was not the father of my younger children; I’d reported a safety violation at my older children’s daycare five years before Frankie and Mona were born; I talked about the CPS case with the press and didn’t inform the county about what I said.

I hoped my case was a crazy fluke, that others hadn’t experienced similar situations before. I hoped that somehow, the system wasn’t working correctly. What I learned was that the fluke was that I was educated and white. The system was working exactly as designed. It was all too easy to get caught in the wheel. But, even when valid questions are answered and addressed, it’s impossible to extricate yourself and your family. What should have been a straightforward investigation, complete with differential diagnosis, became a twisted and circular nightmare, with family court and juvenile court each pointing at each other. The goalposts morphed and shifted in an impossible labyrinth of vague accusations.

I learned to ask permission before I fed my children: what, how much, when. I didn’t write or speak without permission and approval of what I said, and then only when

spoken to. When the social worker failed to buckle the children into the car, I didn't complain. I was silent...the model parent.

No safety allegations were ever made about my parenting or home. It felt as if this entire process was an exercise in the control and policing of my parenting and behavior. A strange obsession, with dystopic and religious underpinnings. Still, I'd been forged. I'd been prepared.

Eventually, the county settled on a new goal: in order to have expanded parenting time with my younger children, it was necessary for me to "demonstrate a noticeable, sustained change in certain behavior." None among the DA, the social worker, or the GAL were able to articulate what the certain behavior was or where this language originated. Eventually, we discovered they'd extracted this language from my ex-husband. They relied on his standards to determine when Frankie and Mona and, by extension, my older children could come home.

Over and over, in nearly every way, the county had systematically failed to comply with its own statutes. Each time, the judge allowed it.

I wanted to believe this was about my children, their safety and best interests. I sat in court and heard a guttural wail rise from the neighboring courtroom. It rose louder and higher, primal, until the judge ordered a recess.

The DA started laughing. "Someone's getting terminated." The social worker and guardian ad litem giggled along. The judge clicked through screens on his computer. It was funny to her, nothing more than a game to win, crushing and policing the opponent until there's nothing left. The human toll, whether it be on the parents or the children, were inconsequential. A school yard gang, not professionals charged with protecting the public or strengthening families.

I was clinging on, fingers dug in on the edge of a narrow outcrop, refusing to let go. I knew I'd made it further than most.

"What do most parents do?" My attorney and I were waiting to resume court. Another disheveled woman sat in the corner, rocking herself.

“They give up.” Her tone told me they don’t give up because they choose to, but because they simply cannot go on.

I often think back to my own birth mother, who’d made a voluntary placement and, when she changed her mind, was told it was too late. Was it too late because she’d now have to prove she was fit to parent based on shifting and impossible standards, just as I had to? How could a teenager, without the support of her family and community, possibly do this? Did she give up because she simply couldn’t go on?

Ultimately, a judge ruled that the county had failed to provide reasonable efforts to reunify our family, and that they’d broken the Data Privacy Act by leaking confidential case information to people outside the case. It was, in some small way, a measure of validation. Their goal wasn’t justice. It wasn’t about what was best for the children. It was about winning: their prayer was to win; their prayer was for our trauma.

Lost in all of this were four children. Two who were in a county-run group foster home, ultimately returned to my care because they were maltreated by their foster parent. Two were with their father, a man I’d divorced in the middle of the Great Recession, and were ultimately allowed back because he could no longer hide his own treatment of them behind a false defense of parental alienation.

When the children were returned, I asked about therapy for the children. “You’re the mom...you figure it out.”

I step back sometimes and wonder if my children, or our family, are safer and better off for the way this was handled. The answer is easy — they aren’t.

All four children, and I, have struggled with various trauma diagnoses, traced back to these experiences. They all bear the wounds of loss. Mona, who was taken at just 5 days old for no reason other than that Frankie’s trial hadn’t completed, struggles with selective mutism. The diagnosing psychologist attributed her condition to being taken and then maltreated in foster care. My oldest daughter, who was old enough to remember this period, fears going to the doctor, which has led to her hiding illnesses until they’re severe enough to warrant emergent care. The sound of the doorbell, or

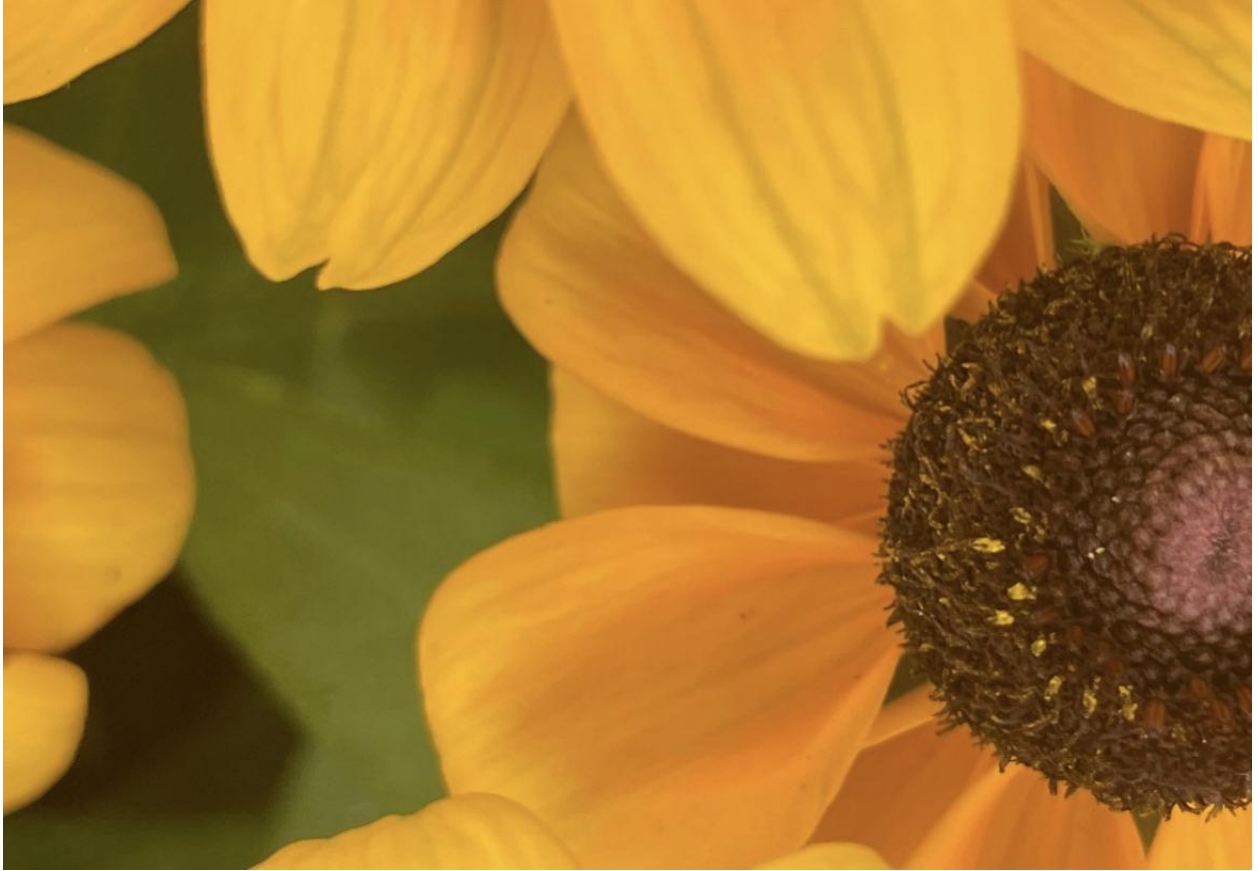
someone asking, “Where are your children?” is all it takes for the dread and shame to flood my body.

But ours is just one story. Our family’s ordeal was backlit by family separations at the US-Mexican border, with 3900 children separated from their parents, a practice denounced by the medical community and child welfare advocates as harmful and traumatic to these children. At the same time, over 400,000 children were in the US foster system that year as they are every year, also separated from their parents. Current estimates are that nearly 40% of all children in the US may be subject to a child welfare investigation by the time they reach the age of 18; the vast majority are African-American or Indigenous.

My situation was, realistically, a best-case scenario. I had funds for an attorney and secure housing. I wasn’t young. I’d been able to access therapy as a young adult to prevent and mitigate many of the mental health conditions and addictions other abuse victims experience. My appearance meant I wasn’t considered dangerous or aggressive to cops; I had no criminal record. If any of these factors had been in play, our family would not be together.

“God answered our prayers.” My adoptive mother would make this pronouncement every anniversary of my adoption, placing a cake on the table. She unwittingly prayed for someone else’s trauma, for a mother who was good enough to be labeled as “bad,” for that mother’s story to be swept aside as unworthy of hearing.

And I can’t help but wonder, when we spend an entire month dedicated to the celebration of adoption, if we’re all not at least somewhat complicit in doing the same.



5264 / Brian Michael Barbeito

Fighting to Stay Alive

After barely surviving a near-fatal hemorrhagic stroke, I knew I'd have to give everything left in me if I wanted a second chance at life. I began rehabilitation therapy as soon as I came out of coma, and because I was asked for my input, I wisely chose the six weeks across the street instead of 'six months recovering at home.' It's obvious now my brain was still injured and out of whack from the severe swelling and bleeding, but I know I used good judgment made the right decision, and I even surprised myself because I realized doctors were testing me, making sure I was aware of what had happened to me, and one actually asked me if I knew where I was and why. I told him I was in the hospital because I'd had a stroke. His reply was, "Yes. You gave us quite a scare. You were pretty sick out there."

Oh, well. I was just chilling the whole time, in a medically induced coma to keep me alive, a comfortably cool room, bed, and pillows, and outside was scorching hot. At least that's what I remember of the weather before I ended up in the hospital. How did I end up in the hospital and literally fighting for my life?

I'd been teaching in a very toxic environment for eighteen years and living in a new home and neighborhood that were just as toxic, adding to the demise of my physical, emotional, and psychological health. I also experienced a lot of verbal, physical, emotional, and psychological abuse and stress from work site administrators, district administrators, neighbors, HOA Boards, and even family members. My life was pure hell for over twenty years, and after the stroke it got even worse.

Added to everything I'd experienced was the fact that now I was dealing with so-called medical practitioners who kept putting my life in danger after several real doctors saved me several times.

I ended up reporting two psychiatrists to the California Medical Board, but the Board never found any wrongdoing by any of these whacks, whom I later learned from other patients I ended up with in support or other community groups, had also either endangered their lives or left them crippled and maimed for life.

I feel the Medical Board is like Teaching Credentialing whatever it's called, that also protects abusive and incompetent teachers, and I also reported teachers from my site who were abusive, not just toward me, but very abusive toward my students, other teachers' students, and their own whom I'd teach Square Dancing and took their frustrations out on me because they couldn't even complain about their own teacher.

These were some of the times I'd experienced shortness of breath, and the students would even tell me, "Ms. Gallegos, your face is as red as a tomato. You need to go outside and get fresh air."

A couple of months after that, I suffered a torn or completely shredded Achilles' tendon on my left foot. Long story still, but two weeks later I had surgery, and two weeks after the surgery, I suffered the near fatal hemorrhagic stroke, and my brain was so swollen and bleeding, it was at risk of exploding, and my siblings, and I think fifteen year old daughter were told doctors had done everything they could, and to get ready for the worst, and here I am because after I miraculously survived, I promised myself I'd do everything in my power to get back on my feet, and I dragged and crawled myself around; and I volunteered and got myself back to school and started writing on the advice of my former high school teacher, and we've actually been published together.

The motto at rehabilitation hospital was, 'no ifs, no buts,' and I lived by that as if my life depended on it, and it did.

Every therapy session was extremely exhausting and painful, especially occupational, as my brain literally hurt from all the thinking, but I never quit. I knew I could quit but was testing my limits, and the therapist would ask me to take breaks, but I declined each one.

After begging doctors and anyone who'd listen, I was discharged to follow up with home care for another six weeks then outpatient for another six. I was diligently doing all my exercises during and after each session and trying hard to do anything I could on my own even if I had to crawl or drag myself around on my bottom.

Soon I begged to seek volunteer work because the walls were beginning to cave in and shrink all around me. I knew I wouldn't survive if I stayed home.

As usual, one of my brothers drove me around, and I, or we, found volunteer jobs at my local hospital and elementary school, and I was doing well until a psycho psychiatrist decided to put an end to all my progress, well, almost. He needed to sign a document verifying I was still disabled, and he didn't want to do it because he said I was 'was working' and would hurt someone. I told him all I did was sit down; volunteered for only a few hours and only a couple of days a week. He then told me I was making him look stupid, and that I'd poison my family doing chores or cooking at home. I wish he wouldn't have said any of those awful things and could've just declined to sign the paperwork.

I'd started online school to resume a Master's and actually enrolled and eventually graduated. I also got better grades than I'd ever gotten in my entire life, and I was happy to go back to school, but it wasn't easy, and I almost flunked my first course, and quite a few times, I almost quit but found the will to persevere.

There were professors who encouraged me to stay in the program and professors who did everything in their power to discourage me from staying. One of them was even stalking and calling me very late at night, and she kept messing up my grades. She was pure evil teaching at a Christian university. Sometimes I want to spell out her poisonous name. Even the person whom I later learned was my academic advisor told me maybe I wasn't ready to be in the program and should quit. What I replied, I'll take to my grave. The one person whom I thought was my academic advisor was actually my recruiting advisor or counselor, and she did stick with me through 'thick and thin,' and there were also some great professors who even helped me apply for Reasonable Accommodations, as per ADA, something I wasn't using when I first started the program.

When I needed to do my Practicum, I asked my school site principal if I could possibly do it there, but she kind of laughed and told me to ask the superintendent. I did even better and attended a Board meeting and asked for permission to do my Practicum where I'd been teaching. I got no reply from anyone that night, but a few days later, I got a letter from the superintendent telling me I should find placement in other schools, private or public. I called private and religious schools, tutoring centers, and non profit organizations, but they all turned me down. I went to a school near my house, but the person who saw me wanted to know why I couldn't do my Practicum at my former

school site since I already “had a relationship with them.” When I told her I wasn't allowed to set foot at the site, she wondered why? I told her I'd gotten hurt on the job, but she said, “You must've done something really bad for them not to let you back there.”

I did call someone an inappropriate name after one of the psychiatrists gave me some nasty medication that turned my brain inside out and upside down right after the stroke, and I sent out an email to half the universe and got in trouble for it, and the reason I called that person the inappropriate name was that I always heard teachers and especially the big Union Wigs refer to that person as such on a daily basis in the teachers' lounge, and how she'd secured the job sharing the bed with former superintendents. God forbid I should blame others for my mistakes. It was obvious the poisonous people I'd worked for for almost twenty years had told all schools, public and private, what I'd done, but they didn't take the time to speak with my family to see how I was doing or what was going on. I then got a cease and desist letter from the superintendent, letting me know I'd lose my job when I knew I'd already lost it and thanks to them and their incompetent custodian and other employees. That's when I broke down crying and told one of my brothers, “I just want to go back into a coma and **never** come back!”

I don't know why or how I'm still alive, especially when things around me just don't change, but I keep very busy doing chores around my house, gardening, bird watching, playing with my cat, listening to music, going to Senior Citizens Center and library for social networking, having my sessions with my therapist, someone I almost lost because my insurance didn't want to work with her, but she's a great one, and I'm not about to lose her while some unethical ones keep practicing, and I switched insurance companies and primary care providers, but I keep attending poetry readings, and writing as much and as often as I can because I feel writing saved my life after the stroke and is what's keeping me alive.



5266 / Brian Michael Barbeito

FLASH



5279 / Brian Michael Barbeito

Noxious Weeds

I have been drawn to weeds from the start, the kind of kid who plucked dandelions in the outfield rather than play ball. At birth, my eyes were such a dark shade of brown that my grandmother called me Black-eyed Susan. Are Black-eyed Susans weeds or wildflowers? It depends on where they grow and who you ask.

The corner where we live blossomed with wildflowers native to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains—Yellow Clover, leggy Harebells, and a smattering of Black-eyed Susans peeping over the other flowers' heads. Bees and butterflies congregated there, drinking nectar, but then a letter from the county arrived, notifying us that someone had complained about our “weeds” and that we must cut them down. Inside our fence, we can do what we want, but the front must be mowed. Our neighbors across the street were not to blame; they also received a letter. My husband mentioned the notice to our next-door neighbor, who proclaimed, “But that’s nature, man!” That left one of the owners of perfectly manicured lawns up the street.

Before we moved to this corner, I was a librarian in a jail. If a library is like a garden, with neat rows of facts, stories, and craft paper decorations blooming on the walls, then a jail library is like a garden that runs amok—roses growing alongside thistle and bindweed winding through the lawn. Many people who borrowed books from our lovingly curated, chaotic library had thorns, defense mechanisms enabling them to survive in the toughest of conditions, but hurting people who tried to get close. One man, a voracious reader, talked energetically about *Don Quixote*, providing weekly summaries of the knight’s adventures when I brought books to his housing unit. Regularly, as he talked with his hands, I saw bruises from fights on his knuckles. A sharp mind; a sharper temper.

Others reminded me of bindweed. No matter how often you pull it, it returns, twisting around any nearby plant. I once saw strands of bindweed growing out of a brick wall. In the garden, I observe it reach across a raised bed, clinging to a sunflower and climbing to the top. It can choke out cultivated plants, but it also provides a steady source of food for bees, as its pale pink and white flowers open each morning. I researched a moth that

I see all over our yard and found that it is a Field Bindweed Moth, a species that readily reproduces on the weed. Such a source of life and beauty, bindweed was given a bad rap because it tangles in mowing and harvesting equipment. It turns out that a weed is just a plant whose existence is inconvenient to some humans.

In the women's section of the jail, one woman kept coming back, as though the courtroom had a revolving door. I never knew exactly what she was in for, but one of her stories started, "Well, I was pulled over and I had a gun in my bra..." While in jail for short sentences, she provided comedic relief for those around her. She used toothpaste to paint a thick mustache and eyebrows on her face and pulled her uniform pants up to her chest to impersonate one of the more serious sheriff's deputies. "Hey! What are you doing!?" she asks, bursting out of her cell in a wannabe cowboy saunter. "I'm going to have to write you up." The deputy earnestly tried not to laugh while writing *her* up. Her life was difficult, but her sense of humor fed everyone around her.

Not long after we received the letter instructing us to trim the weeds on our corner, another pamphlet arrived from the county, imploring us to cut down the "noxious" thistle that started to creep in as an invasive species. The county might want to eradicate it, but on our hiking trails, the six-foot-tall thistle attracts several pollinator species happy to have the nourishment it provides. On a single spiked flower, I observed two swallowtail butterflies, a bumble bee, two cabbage butterflies, and a paper wasp. Noxious. Delicious.

My favorite people are those who give land back to nature, allowing the weeds and wildflowers to grow as they will. Some parts might be tame and neat, allowing dogs and children to play or a kitchen garden to thrive, but other sections reach upward, bursting with color and texture, the height and variety of plants providing respite from pavement and monoculture. Life rarely grows in tidy rows, and I find the gardeners who accept that are more willing to make room for people who grow in twisted, uneven stretches. Rather than spending energy on mowing and trimming to fit a perfect mold, they leave a little time and space for wilder things. And they would never report you to the county.



5278 / Brian Michael Barbeito

Without a Home

God dammit. God fucking dammit.

These were the words going through my mind after I heard the news. They killed another one of our sisters—this time here in New York. It had to have been a murder.

The cops said it was an accidental death. I'm not buying it. I don't believe that girl drowned herself. She had everything going for her. She was going to leave Rochester and move out to Buffalo. Buffalo would have been safer. And now she'll never see it.

Every time I go out for a long walk, I hear it: all the words—you name it. People always ask me twenty questions: about my sexual preferences; about my gender identity; all that gross shit.

It's the people in this cursed city. It couldn't have been anything else. I can't buy it. What happened to her has happened before in this city, and so the tragedy repeated itself, she the next victim for the stochastic death machine.

And I'm sorry to repeat myself. But it all goes over and over again in my mind: round and round, like a Tilt-A-Whirl of terrorism.

I see myself in who she was, dammit. I know if I were there wherever she was when they killed her, it would have been me instead.

Why do we have to live in a world that treats us like this? But I'm wondering what I've already wondered many times before. It's always that same train of thought. We live in a world in which we have the manhood beaten into us before we can ever cogently verbalize our objections, and in return we get further violence just for taking control of the only life we get.

I look in the mirror, trying to get my bearings. I look like Kirk Douglas, my face enveloped in tears. My friends tell me I look nothing like him, but every time I look in

the mirror, I can't help but see it. Whenever I dissociate though, I can see what other people see—at least I think. Looking at myself is like that illusion with the vases and the faces.

I think I can see her now: me, that is. I just wish she would stop crying so I could see her a little more clearly.

Fuck you, killer. Fuck you for what you've done to one of our girls. Fuck you for what you people do to each of us.

I lay down on my bed, surrounded by all these old books. They're another form of escapism, much like movies. Sartre was right; Hell really is other people.¹

Enough. No more. Never again. If it were someone else, it would have eaten me up anyway but... I knew her—and all too well, at that.

If only there were something I could... do. I'll fight and fight and fight, but I never get anything out of it.

It's no safer in queer spaces than in the cishet world, is it? No one cares about us. I start up crying again.

I remember them all. I remember all their names. I remember all their violence. I remember grasping onto any person I could find, trying to pull myself out of the ocean of trauma, only to be pushed away every time. The only thing I can't remember is the hurt ever ending.

What good is it saying them though? No one will take our side. But her—she understood.

I can still hear her voice after I told her the story: the intonation and everything. I remember her sobbing along with me. "You did nothing wrong." That's what she kept saying. And I realized then she was right—because she was the one who could break through and actually facilitate me accepting it.

¹A paraphrase of a line from Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*.

What good is it specifying what we were talking about though? No one will take our side.

It's a world of truth so postmodern nothing means anything anymore. If everything is true, then nothing is true. If everything is wrong, then nothing is wrong.

Don't you want to shatter something? Ruin everything? Kill someone?

Say whatever you want, I guess; none of us have the money to sue any of you for libel.

We sleep in our pithoi—our rooms rented for \$500 a month in the shittiest parts of town—and for what? For this? That's not virtue. That's just an abyss: a respective abyss for each of us.

I look over at the handgun in my own abyss. If only each of us could have one. The landlord doesn't know about it, but screw that guy. I just wish my target was something more clear than a bitter amalgamation of everyone who's ever wronged me.

Fuck you, killer. God have mercy on your soul should I ever find out who you are.



5262 / Brian Michael Barbeito

The Importance of Articulation When Wishing for Your Cheating Ex to Get His Comeuppance

“Hey babe, get a load of the filaments on that! Man, I’d love to plant one in that receptacle.”

Becky shot the speaker a glare that she usually reserved for drivers who failed to follow the rules of the road. She really didn’t need that annoyance right now, not when she was already in an ‘all men are bastards especially my no-good ex-boyfriend’ type of mood.

Becky had done a lot of crazy things in order to get over her ex. She’d originally kicked him to the kerb following the discovery that his liking for gardening included planting his seed in other women’s plots.

Most of the things she’d done since then had included alcohol in some shape or form coupled with, and indeed coupling with an ample supply of willing men.

She prided herself on the fact that she hadn’t done anything too drastic, like say, keying the words ‘cheating bastard’ into his car, or changing his passwords by a single letter or number. Hell, she hadn’t even gone with the traditional gardener’s revenge of having a skip full of elephant shit dumped on the pride and joy that was his front lawn. Although that was mainly because the zoo worker she’d had a rebound fling with had only been in charge of the meerkats and had warned her that she’d be waiting a long time for them to fill a skip.

Occasionally though, late at night, when the last tub of melancholy ice cream had been eaten, Becky would sit out in her back garden, looking up at the night sky, and wish that things had been different.

Of course, she also wished with varying frequency, that her ex’s knob would fall off, that his favourite aftershave would be discontinued, or that a particularly virulent knotweed would take over his garden.

And then, one night Becky had been scrolling through a list of Buzzfeed's top ten most noxious plants and she'd drunkenly wished out loud that she could have one of them to plant in her ex's garden.

How was she to know that the combination of a vodka slurred wish and a fairy godmother with a build-up of ear wax would combine to give her a truly 'obnoxious' plant instead. The damn thing had barely materialised in front of her before it had started in with the innuendo and the salacious comments. Even the planter it had come in had been shaped like an arse, although Becky had to admit that it was indeed quite the shapely arse.

At least though, the fairy godmother had told her the magic would only last a single moon, after that it would revert to an ordinary plant. "But you'll still have the planter," she'd added helpfully.

"Great," thought Becky. "One more arse in my life." She dumped the plant in a corner of her garden where the neighbours hopefully wouldn't hear it catcalling the pigeons.

Later, after Becky had sobered up, she decided that maybe meerkat man was worth another call. After all, while revenge might be a dish best served cold, it could also be well served hot and stinky.

Golden Chance

I rest my back against the warm wall and shuffle my bum to get comfy. The pressure of the bright sun beating down on the top of my head eases a little as the top of the towering wall opposite throws a little shade. Even in the shade it is painfully bright, the gold bricks surrounding me throwing reflections like razor blades through my eyes. I sit for a moment, not moving, eyes closed, just breathing through the heat.

I haven't got long, the guards will patrol past soon. Hopefully it will be one of the friendlier ones, willing to let me linger in the shade for just a minute, but they were few these days. I let my hands drop to my side as if exhausted and reach up my loose sleeve, running my fingers carefully along the sharp metal edges of the tool hidden there. This spot on the wall is a little more exposed than yesterday's, but I can't risk returning to the same place twice in short succession.

Awkwardly, I scrape the tool down the block behind me, trying to not move too much. The smell of roasting meat drifts on the air making my mouth fill with saliva. My empty stomach cramps viscously and I hiss under my breath, hunching forward to try and ease it. I hear shouts as a beggar nearby is forcefully evicted from his hiding hole, the guards using their batons as clubs, meaty thunks as they hit flesh echoing along the almost empty streets. My hand works faster as I scrape and gather, scrape and gather.

The sound of approaching footsteps is magnified by the walls, making it sound like an army bearing down on me. Two uniformed guards hurry into view and a flick of my fingers hides the tool in the slim sheath strapped to my wrist.

"Hey! You can't be here!" Not the friendly ones on duty today, then. They roughly grab my arms and haul me to my feet. After a suspicious glance at the wall to make sure all

the bricks are intact, they shake me and pat my pockets, but it's a half-hearted effort. What damage could a half-starved girl do? A hard shove sends me on my way.

With the sound of my heart pounding in my ears, I stagger away from them. As I move further from their watching eyes the relief begins to set in, and my nose picks up the smell of the cooking meat again. A spark of triumph urges my footsteps to hasten. The golden walls were a show of wealth and arrogance, a literal divide between rich and poor, but for those of us brave enough they were an unintended opportunity. I make my way towards food, hands clenched tightly over the treasure of golden flakes in my pocket.



Caul / Donna Vorreyer

Socialism Is Evil

“If we could really eliminate poverty then the planet would clean itself up,” the man says, “Because if you give every one 5000 dollars per month they could really plan 20 years ahead, actually plan their future instead of fighting in the dirt and the gravel. Socialism is evil.”

2023. We live in the mind of a perturbed 60 year old man, driven by negative neurotic fear. He is concerned about mass protests by people who do not earn 5000 dollar per month and nonetheless think 20 years ahead into the future. He is concerned about his self-confidence. He is concerned about the education system and that people know more about biology and ecological systems than they used to 20 years ago, when he was still minding his own business for 5000 dollars a month.

It's this one-sided idea that you have to impose limits on growth and on people that disturbs him. (Poverty, so they can fight in the dirt and gravel instead of looking ahead into the future). A world controlled by a top-down authority that makes bloody well sure that no one is consuming too much. (My boss, making sure I don't earn enough wages). “And then I hear people say there are too many people on this planet, so I think ‘okay buddy, who exactly are you getting rid of?’” (Nobody. Most of us live in abject poverty. The world is ruled by supply and demand. As long we live in abject poverty we will supply ourselves to the demands of companies, take whatever they got, which isn't much, because the top tier managers are rich and, hence, dependent on bonuses in order to survive. The company board is a colosseum in which the rich fight as gladiators in order to make sure their families survive. Everyone is indebted. Nobody has very much). Socialism is evil.

All we have to do is get rid of poverty, which we have gotten good at so far. (JP lives in a gentrified neighborhood in which poverty has, indeed, been gotten rid of, because the neighborhood owns security).

(JP is afraid of the father figure he has become and afraid his daughter no longer loves him. He projects his fears on Greta Thunberg, the stand-in daughter who everyone loves).

JP does what every good father does, when it becomes clear that his daughter is worried about the future: “Well, truth be told, the end has always been nigh. Do you want a cookie?”

As droughts plague the world, causing wars in Syria, water rationing in Germany and California, JP comforts his daughter for the upcoming future: “Do you want a cookie?”

As wild fires spread due to droughts and crops no longer can be efficiently harvested, JP, a good father figure does not give up, fighting for his child: “Do you want a cookie?”

As the earth becomes more and more uninhabitable, with wildlife dying out, and the price of flour and other baking ingredients going up, JP comforts his daughter: “Do you want a cookie?”

As flour and chocolate become a rarity and all he can offer is eggs from his hen house, JP retreats to his first sentence: “Well, you know, the end has always been nigh. But don’t underestimate humanity’s capacity to overcome obstacles. The world will clean up itself.”

And so he cleans up the crumbs of his cookies. The world really could change, if everyone would earn 5000 dollars a month.



5281 / Brian Michael Barbeito

Local Digest

An armed man entered a gun shop and began shooting at the shop's two owners, who then shot back at the armed man.

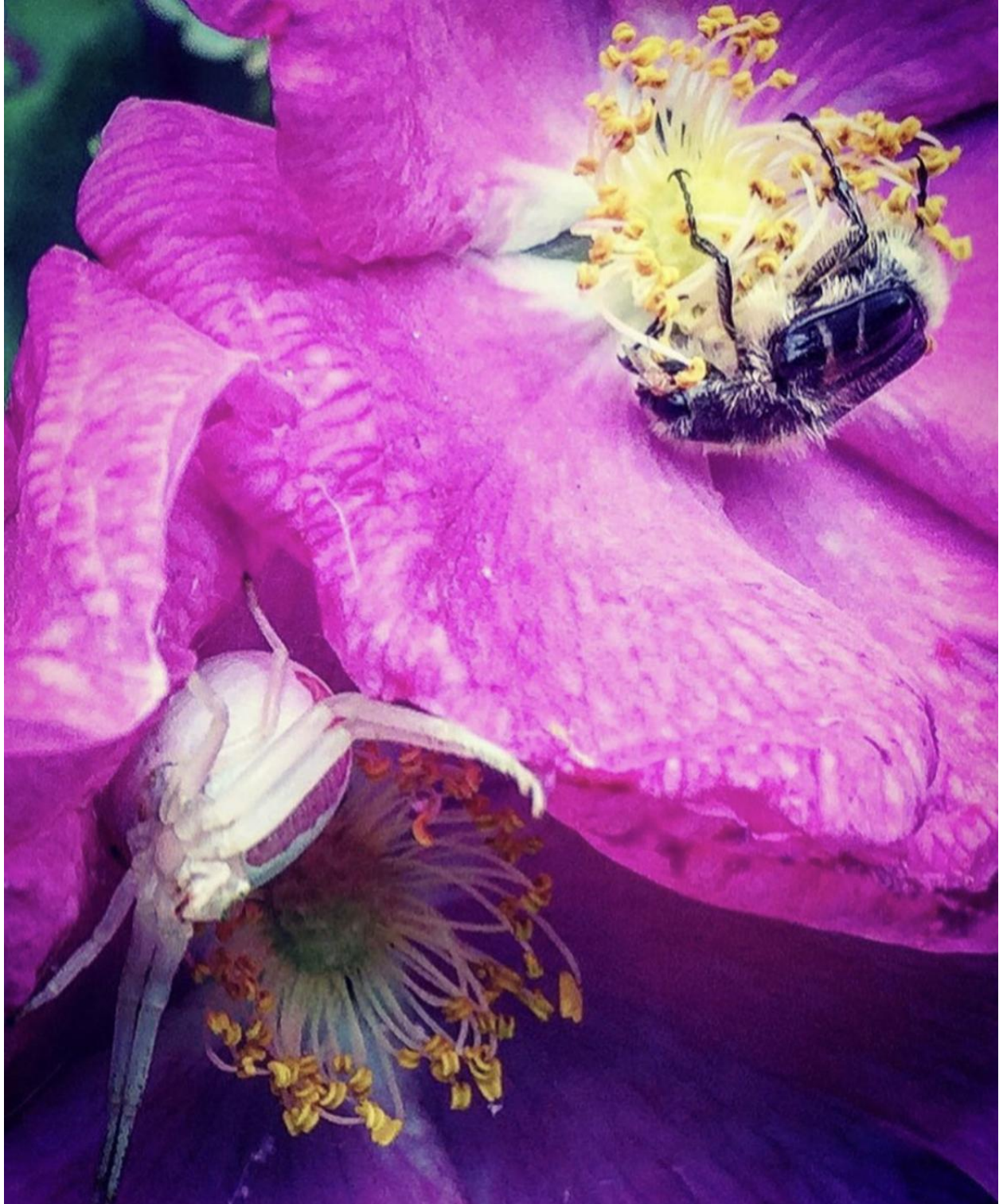
The three shot their guns at one another for a short time before gun shop customers—also armed—began shooting at the armed man, who then returned fire at the customers.

The armed man, the shop owners, and customers shot their guns at one another for several minutes before local police entered the shop.

The police began shooting their guns in the direction of the armed man, who—though shot several times—was still shooting at the gun shop owners and their customers, who were now shooting at everyone in the shop.

The police responded by shooting at everyone in the shop, who all returned fire at the officers. No one survived the incident.

The adjacent shooting range remains open as local authorities investigate the incident.



5290 / Brian Michael Barbeito

INTERVIEW

WITH

DIANE SEUSS

Cee Martinez: Hi! Thanks for meeting with us today.

Diane Seuss: Hi, it's nice to see you both.

Fox Henry Frazier: We're so excited to have you here. The first question I want to dive in and ask is — reading *frank: sonnets* was an amazing ride, and I kept thinking while I was reading it that I hadn't experienced any other book quite like it. What was your process like in writing this book? Or even the initial conception — how did you come to it?

Diane: Like all of my books, *frank* began serendipitously. I really trust the spirits, more than I trust myself. And the way things happen in sort of a — well, you know, a magical way. So, for *frank*, I was out in Washington State at a residency at Willapa Bay Artists in Residence, and I took a day trip, I had a rental car — because I have to have wheels, a big part of going to a residency for me is moving through the landscape and experiencing the feeling in my body of being defamiliarized. I drove to Cape Disappointment, just like the first poem in *frank* says.

It's a place with a lighthouse high on a cliff that you can hike out to. And I went out there, and I looked out at the lighthouse, and I thought, oh, a person could jump off that. That's where I was at. And I just didn't want to do the walk. So I got back in the car and took a nap in the back seat. And on the way back to the residency, I started narrating to myself what had just happened:

I drove all the way to Cape Disappointment but didn't have the energy to get out of the car. Rental. Blue Ford Focus.

And it went from there — I kept having to get out of the car to pee, and then pee again, and I don't know what's going on with my bladder. And so I'm just narrating what's happening, and it's past tense, but only like 5 seconds after living it. On the way

back to my little cottage, I got inside and got the poem onto the computer and noticed, “Wow, this could be 14 lines.” And I think I came to the couplet once I got inside. *How do I explain this restless search for beauty or relief?* And I thought, that sounds like a couplet. In a way, it moves like a couplet. It has that rhetorical gleam, and this could be a sonnet.

People kept saying to me, “You should write a memoir, you have so much life to describe.” Like most people, I’ve lived a complex and eventful life. But I’d been struggling, because I couldn’t hear what that would sound like in prose. Then it came to me — shazam! — I could write a memoir in sonnets.

I’d brought a few books w/ my to the residency and one was Frank O’Hara’s *Collected Poems*. And as I was driving back, it just came to me: *I’m* kind of like Frank O’Hara, but without the famous nose and penis and NY school — so, basically, I’m not like Frank O’Hara at all. But you know, how did Frank O Hara walk in? I don’t know.

But then it became clear to me — oh, it’s kind of a signal that I can approach these sonnets with a sort of O’Hara-like spontaneity. He was known for walking down the street in New York City and narrating, to himself, what he called “I do this, I do that” poems. So what if I brought that spontaneity of thought to these sonnets? And certainly that happens in some of them. It’s not what happens in all of them, but that O’Hara spirit of living it and writing it almost at the same time was very helpful to me.

That’s a long-winded answer, but it’s the truth.

Fox: No, I love it! One of my favorite assignments I used to give, back when I taught creative writing — I used to give my students a day where their assignment was to play hooky from class and walk around, like, downtown or in nature or somewhere, but to basically write a Frank O’Hara poem about it, narrating what they did as they moved through it.

Diane: I love it! What a great assignment. Now I want to just go do that. [laughs] I love that about him. And it suits his modernist/postmodernist perspective in visual art. You

know, he worked at the MOMA and hung out with some of the painters of the time, and that live-ness was his aesthetic perspective.

I like to think of myself in every book as being in conversation with another writer or other writers. You see a lot of that in *frank*, and you will in my next book. And those conversations aren't smooth — that is, a lot of times I choose men. In *Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl*, a lot of them were male painters.

Fox: That was the first book of yours I read! I think in some ways I had a parallel experience — I almost want to say spiritual experience — of both *Two Dead Peacocks* and *frank*, because in the speakers of your poems, there's this mashup of grit and erudition that I find really compelling.

Diane: Thank you. Thank you. I feel that. And I hope it's true in my spirit too.

Fox: I remember thinking, this is someone writing with qualities that I value. I really value grittiness and a sort of, like, real-world common sense — but also erudition, and insights into existence that feel elevated or almost spiritual. What do you see as the role of spirituality in your work? And what is the role of physical, bodied experience, not just in your work, but in your wisdom? Are they at all related?

Diane: In a lot of my work, you find the legacy of my mother. It's kind of a legacy in my family of living a gritty, working-class life but also being drawn to literature and art and ideas.

And in terms of just living: to be in my body, I think to be in any body, is a complicated experience. But to be embodied unacceptably is a particularly complex experience.

I think I've always drawn, in reference to your question, on the spirit world. And I don't mean religion, um, because that just scared the shit out of me, and so did the spirit world. But when it can be harnessed, when it can be accepted, it's a great guide. And as a kid, I think in ways, it's another word for instinct or empathy or connection.

I can't really write without spirit, will, connection and uplift. And I don't mean I write about redemption or light defeating darkness at all, in my next book, which is titled *Modern Poetry*, Keats is my guide. And is it him? Is it his spirit? Is it his poetry? Is it what I feel for him? Is it my empathy for him as a young, young man dying of tuberculosis away from home? Maybe it's all of those things, but it guides me through the writing. And without it, I'm pretty lost.

My mentor was an older male poet who found me in a small, small town in rural southern Michigan. And when he was very elderly and we were still getting together, I asked him once if he believed in heaven. And he said, oh, I don't think so. And then I said, do you believe in ghosts? And he said yes.

So I think I'm of that ilk. I believe in hauntings. I believe in the existence of the dead in some form at work in our lives. Whether I believe in heaven or not is another thing.

Fox: What would you say is the witchiest thing about you?

Diane: My long black hair. You said witchy, not bitchy, right? *[everyone laughs]*

Probably my poems. My poems at their source. When I'm lucky, I can contact it. I feel like without the magic, I'm all thumbs. But with the magic, when it comes, when I can contact it, I can write poems. And that feels pretty witchy.

Cee: The passage about the repeated peeing, getting out of the car to pee, is so real. I think for a lot of women, that applies, because — for men, it's not a big deal to them because everything's a target. *[everyone laughs]* We feel more self conscious about that sort of thing, so it becomes more of an event. We know when we have to do it frequently, because it's an event. And, as women, we usually keep those subjects to ourselves.

We mentioned the witchy and the spirituality and stuff, and I love this because in a way, that's like a beneficial spell you've just cast. You took something that could be just a mundane and maybe even a crude detail of life, but what you've done is you've

transformed it, and it's become something soothing for many women to read or hear, and connect with.

Do you wonder, I don't know how much of it is intentional, but purging some of these secret moments, do you feel that magic moving outwards to other people?

Diane: I love this question. Yeah, I feel that no matter what I address when I'm writing a poem, it does have — the word spiritual is a little wanky, but — it does have spiritual or empathic content.

Like, I do think peeing on the roadside for a woman is a profound thing, and I do feel that. Writing of the actual, embodied life and everything that entails, and welcoming those moments into the margins of the poem, to say these are moments worth breaking silence for. That can feel like an act of welcoming in the reader's embodiment as well.

And maybe this too, comes from my mother, a person who's honest about the experience of being herself, being in her body. There were just three women in my household after I was seven. My sister, my mother, and me — my father died when he was young — and so that changes how you are in your body. My sister, when I started my period for the first time, laughed and said, “Di’s a woman!” In that sense, it was an open household. We all shared the experience of bleeding.

I love transgressing those weird rules about what's worth putting on the page. How can I break new ground for whoever comes after? Because a hell of a lot of ground was broken for me. I think about Sharon Olds, who started publishing in the 1970s, writing a poem called “The Pope's Penis,” or writing about her mother laying on top of her in bed, really taboo shit. And all the backlash. She got all of the labels — confessional, confessional, confessional. But so many of us would not be telling the truth without groundbreakers like her.

If you read the poets of the past, it was very rare, really, for somebody who came up in the working class to achieve publication. These are things that I feel are my legacy: people who do physical labor, pipe fitters, railyard workers, and women like my

grandma, who was a rural mail carrier, who also did everything in the house and hoisted her laundry outside and hung it on a line in the winter until it froze.

This is my world. And so it's important to break the ground of elevating those experiences into art. I mean, that was what *Peacocks* was all about, that book. The experience of the poverty class or the working class can be placed in a gilded frame, just like kings and war heroes. That's one of my missions. Or one of the things that drives me as a poet. To frame all experiences of embodiment, of class, of physical labor, of laboring, birthing, raising children alone. All of those things can be placed in a gilded frame.

I don't like to portray beauty without ugliness in there too. I don't have a lot of time for poems that are simply composed of what is considered beautiful language.

Fox: I don't either. I was laughing when you said that you don't like beauty because the first time I ever heard a song by Florence and The Machine — which is now one of my favorite bands — my best friend had sent me their album *Lungs*, and I didn't know who they were. The first few bars of “Dog Days Are Over” started playing, and I was *immediately* suspicious! I was like, oh fuck this. [*everyone laughs*] It was too pretty.

Diane: There's so much bullshit involved with the word beauty. For me, it's like Christianity — you can't find your way to the pearl of what it actually means anymore. I have a poem in *Four-Legged Girl* called “Beauty Is Over,” and I'm basically saying, fuck beauty. Fuck everything about beauty, whatever it means, it isn't helpful.

And even on social media — people will say, oh, so and so made me feel unattractive or ugly. And then everybody says, no, you're beautiful. You're beautiful just as you are. And I'm always like, why is beauty even an issue? Why is it good to be beautiful? What does that even mean? Fuck it.

I think Toni Morrison said in an interview that beauty is the most dangerous notion in western culture. And I'm right there with Toni Morrison on that. It's so stultifying. It's so suffocating.

Fox: I know I feel self-conscious a lot of the time when I think about the fact that I'm a single mom, my daughter is four years old, and I am just always parenting and always working and always tired. So I always look tired.

Diane: You're tired because you're doing the work. You're raising a child. You're doing what we're doing right now. You're creating things. You're working for a living. So if you were on social media, people would say, oh, but your exhaustion is beautiful.

What I'm saying is, you look as you feel. The notion of beauty is that you have to work so hard to cover up the reality of how you feel.

And you wonder why you, in quotes, look tired? You've *earned* your tired, girl. You've earned it. Yes. That's what I think of every scar on my body, every line in my face. *You've earned it, woman.*

The pandemic has been fucking hard on me in many ways. The isolation. And I've had a lot of responsibility for my mom. My sister has had a very serious chronic illness. My son is, you know, he lives far away and he's been through addiction and mental illness; in a period of crisis, all of those intensities get deeper and it shows on my body, it shows on my face.

It should show, and it's ragged. It isn't beautiful, whatever that is, and I don't want it to be, because it isn't. It's hard.

Cee: I always go back and forth, because of course we like beautiful things — they're aesthetically pleasing. But I dislike the idea of it as any kind of norm, or as something to aspire to. The beauty standard, the label of what's “beautiful” jumps around every so often, but it always remains exclusionary, a war that's us-against-them.

Diane: You know, then you have women constantly buying things so that they can reach that aspiration. There's an older film called *Killing Us Softly* about that very thing — how advertisers take what's already yours and sell it back to you. Like, “natural makeup,” “natural bra.” If it's natural, let my tits hang out.

Fox: Ha! That's what I always say about natural makeup. I'm like, you know what I do when I want to look like I have no makeup on my face? I just don't put any fucking makeup on my face! *[laughs]* Problem solved.

Diane: Yeah, exactly. I skip that step. I think it's so funny that now shit people put in their hair is just called “product.” They don't even lie! But we're also spending all of our energy and our angst on how we look rather than, like, throwing a revolution.

Fox: Speaking of revolutions — could you tell us about an experience you've had where you felt like a total badass?

Diane: Wow. I have to think about it — I'm not sure I ever feel like much of a badass. I do sometimes after writing.

Well, AWP is all over social media right now. One year — maybe it was in Tampa, maybe it was in LA, I don't remember — I was part of a panel on persona, and I was one of four people speaking. And there was a really fucking uncomfortable moment where I talked about a famous poet, who, when I was young and in college, sort of shamed or humiliated me, saying that I wasn't writing in my own voice. And on the panel, I said that if it happened today, I would know how to answer that. I would say, I am writing in my own voice. It's just not your voice.

And the other three panelists — each of them, when it was their turn — said something like, “Well, I had him as a teacher, and he was wonderful,” or “I'm his friend, and he was great.” So we got to the end of the panel, and I felt my anger building, and it was a big crowd. There were probably 200 people in there, and the moderator said, “Let's wrap up.”

And I said, Could you hold a minute? I just want to say, I understand that different people have various experiences of the same person. Some might depend on how old that person is. Like, I was older than everybody on the panel. And I said, This was my experience. I'm not even so much dissing him as saying it was my experience.

And it helped me become aware that often what we call persona is a pathway to our own voice.

And because what he was referencing, I was writing these poems about this character, Monster Woman, and this was in, like, 1975, and they sounded like:

She big and mean, she crashing through the raspberries she eat
the brains of fawns young quail rock stars, rats.
She big and looney, she a hairy woman.

And it went from there, and it was totally — I had no models who were writing that way. I'd never heard that. But it was the way we talked back home; that [poem] was closer to the diction of my upbringing than to the man who was telling me I wasn't writing in my own voice. And so it was more of me saying, writing Monster Woman got me to different iterations, really, of my own voice.

You know, many of these men came to colleges during that era to give readings, and really, for a lot of them — their whole purpose was to get laid by a student. If he'd wanted to fuck me, he would have said how good I was as a poet. "Let me look at your etchings." But he didn't want to fuck me, and so he shamed me in public. This was in the 1970s, and some of that has changed out of fear — their fear of getting caught — but some of it hasn't, and is still ongoing.

For every person like me who somehow managed to keep writing, there are a hundred who were silenced by that shit. And women, primarily, and people of color, who never wrote again and who were destroyed by that kind of shit.

And at the AWP panel, I said, My guess is there are people in this room who have been shut down in such a way, and that's why I'm telling you this. And afterwards, a lot of people came up to me and thanked me and said, Yes, that has been my experience, and thank you for addressing it.

But it was scary, because I had a lot of respect for the other three panelists. They were much more well-known than I was. And brilliant writers in their own right, but they also shut me down and tried to undermine my own experience.

Fox: That is seriously badass. I'm listening to this in awe, because I would term the reaction of the other panelists to you as gaslighting. Because pretty much what they're saying is, my experience of him overrides yours, and that's the reality. And shut up.

Diane: Definitely.

Fox: And gaslighting is such a hard thing to stand up to.

Diane: It really is. And to be honest, when I went back to my shit hotel room and when I say shit, I'm being literal — when I walked into this expensive hotel room at this AWP, there was actual shit in the toilet.

Fox: Oh, my God!

Cee: Aaahhhhhh!

Diane: Yeah. So when I went back to my shit hotel room, even after being a badass, so to speak, I felt extreme despair.

We pay a price for our moments of badassery. People see the badass, but they don't see you in the hotel room afterwards.

Fox: It's inspiring to hear stories where you're a badass, though, even if you cry in your hotel room afterwards. Because some of us have had experiences at AWP where we just went to our hotel room and cried without saying anything at all.

Diane: We all have so many layers, you know? I mean, when I was a kid, I was born a vulnerable, even delicate soul. And my dad was sick, and I felt such empathy for him that I didn't close up the portal.

I just sat with him, and I was with him. And after he died, for a few years, I was so vulnerable. I was terrified of losing my mother. And I would stand at the picture window and just sob and wait for her to come home.

She went to college right after he died. She had not had the right to be educated when she was at that age, and she needed a way to make a living and support us. And I was so terrified of losing her and terrified of life, and I was almost, like, without a skin. And at age ten, I remember it. I said to myself, this does not work. I have to be another way. And, like, a switch flipped and I changed. But that girl is still in there. And I don't bring her out in front of an AWP crowd — but she did appear after, when I was in my hotel room. And I think we all have to learn to listen to her, too, and comfort her, because that's part of all of us.

Cee: What you went through with that poet, the comment that you're not writing in your own voice, I frequently have had that comment thrown at me.

Diane: Very often, I bet.

Cee: And what I find about that comment is, they're not really saying that you're not speaking in your own voice. They're saying, *you're not speaking the way I want you to speak*. They're telling you, *this is how you can be the person I want you to be*.

So I find it a dangerous statement because I don't know if that famous poet was telling you that he didn't want to sleep with you. I think he was telling you, *this is how you can win a place in my bedroom*. It's completely a grooming thing: they try to see who'll take the bait and become the person they want you to be.

Your poem was *Monster Woman*. So that's a terrifying thing for him. You scared him. You wrote a poem about something that's terrifying, because if the future for him was women being monster women, he didn't want to be in that future.

Diane: Once the seal broke during that conversation at AWP — I said, you guys had him as a teacher after his dick fell off, when he was 75 or 80. When he was a visitor at my

college, he was in his prime, man. He was on the hunt. So it's a different thing. But yeah, what you're saying is true. It's a grooming tactic. It's a gaslighting tactic, as you say. Who wants a future with a bunch of monster women walking in their seven-league boots across the landscape?

Fox: I love it. Can I just say, too — you were basically writing sci-fi/horror poetry with a female protagonist. That shit is *pioneering*!

Diane: I still have the poem, and the paper is really fragile now, but yeah, I mean, it's so interesting, the poem. I was thinking of writing an essay about my earliest poetry and then including some of it in there. There was another Monster Woman poem called “The Midnight Ride of Monster Woman” (as opposed to Paul Revere), and it began:

On the 1st of April in 77
up she jump into the saddle
she a tattletail
and her skin
are green
and one if by land and two if by sea
and three if by three if by three if by three
Monster Woman are on the loose
so chew your turkey
and flush your shit
and get that Constitution writ . . .

And it goes from there. I had been forced to memorize “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere” when I was in middle school. So it was in my bones. And I thought, oh, my God, what if I . . . ?

But I didn't know what I was doing! I didn't realize that, oh, I'm taking the canon and inserting Monster Woman into it, and she's taking over the landscape. She's taking over the government. She's taking over history.

It was just a feeling at the end of the other one that I shared with you here — it says, “No use running, no use being scared, Mister. Just put on that football helmet and kiss the good life goodbye!”

Fox: I think this is the spirit of Greta: Monster Women taking over landscape, history, and government! For a last question, do you have any favorite proverbs or idioms, or any favorite piece of wisdom, that you could share with us?

Diane: Well, in *frank* — my mother often says, like, if you say, “Oh, I wish we could go to Chicago,” she’ll say, “Wish in one hand, shit in another.” And I made a sonnet out of that. I love that. *Wish in one hand, shit in another*. It's such a Michigan working-class thing to say. The balance of wish and shit.

Let's see, there was one I was thinking of the other day. Oh, I know — *The most insulting thing to the narcissist is the real world*.

And this was from my therapist: *Expectations are predetermined resentments*. I had to write that on the phone, man, so I wouldn't forget. But most of my idioms or proverbs come from my people and get passed down through my mom.

My dad, when he was sick — especially back then, hospital food really sucked — and he'd have some awful surgery and then they'd feed him jello. And he'd always say, “I don't like jello. I don't like anything that shakes worse than I do.” And that's the kind of humor I'm from. It's, like, ghastly and great. It's naming it —

Fourth voice, offscreen: I like jello!

Fox: Ah, my daughter has joined us.

Fourth voice: Mom, the aquarium is *closed* now!

Fox: It's not closed, honey. We're going to go soon.

Diane: What's your name?

Fourth voice (as child appears in frame): Célestine!

Diane: Hi, Célestine. I'm Di.

Célestine: Hi, Di!

Diane: Are you going to see fish and creatures?

Célestine: Yeah. And guess what? We'll also see a fish that looks like Dory from *Finding Nemo* and little jellyfish that are blue. Do you like sharks?

Diane: Oh, cool. Yeah, I like sharks.

Fox: Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for *Alice*. This was really wonderful.

Cee: Thank you for talking with us!

Célestine: Bye, Di! Thank you!

Diane: I'm excited to see it in print. Yes, thank you. And be safe, both of you, out there in the world.



Toward the Unknown / Donna Vorreyer

CONTRIBUTORS

Amirah Al Wassif is an award-winning poet. She is the author of the poetry collections *For Those Who Don't Know Chocolate* (Poetic Justice Books & Arts, 2019) and *How To Bury A Curious Girl* (Bedazzled Ink Publishing). She is also the author of the children's book *The Cocoa Boy and Other Stories* (2020).

Jordi Alonso holds a Ph.D in Victorian Literature from the University of Missouri, is currently studying Classics at Columbia University, and working on a project involving the neo-Latin poetry of Ubertino Carrara. He is the author of *Honeyvoiced* and *The Lovers' Phrasebook*, and has been published in *Kenyon Review Online* and *The Banyan Review*, among others. Find him online at jordialonsopoet.com or on twitter @nymphscholar.

Brian Michael Barbeito is a Canadian photographer and poet. Recent work appears at *The Notre Dame Review*.

Kasey Butcher Santana is co-owner/operator of Sol Homestead, a backyard alpaca farm where she and her husband also raise chickens, bees, pumpkins, and their daughter. Kasey earned a Ph.D. in American literature from Miami University and has worked as an English teacher and a jail librarian. She chronicles life at the homestead on Instagram @solhomestead and her work has also appeared in *Geez Magazine*, *Farmer-ish*, *The Hopper*, and *Canary*.

Leslie Cairns (she/her): Leslie Cairns holds an MA degree in English Rhetoric. She lives in Denver, Colorado. She is a Pushcart Prize Nomination for 2022 in the Short Story category ("Owl, Lunar, Twig"). She was an honorable mention in Flash 405's call in *Exposition Review* (2022). Leslie has upcoming flash, short stories, and poetry in various magazines (*Tropico Line*, *Poetry as Promised*, and others). Twitter: starbucksgirly

Cathleen Allyn Conway, PhD, is a poet, journalist, and scholar of Sylvia Plath and the Gothic. She is the author of poetry pamphlets *Nocturnes* (Cherry Dress Chapbooks, 2023) *American Ingénue* (Broken Sleep Books, 2021), *All the Twists of the Tongue* (Grey Book Press, 2018), *Static Cling* (Dancing Girl Press, 2012), and the forthcoming collection *Bloofer* (Broken Sleep Books, 2023). Originally from Chicago, she lives in London.

Angela Eder was born and raised in Wisconsin before moving to Minnesota, where she earned her PhD in Chemistry and MSPL in Intellectual Property from the University of Minnesota. Angela is a science writer for the healthcare industry, having published numerous peer-reviewed manuscripts and invited articles. Most recently, she authored a short story for the zine *Archive of the Odd*. Angela currently lives in Minneapolis-St. Paul with her four child pets and a Hermes typewriter.

Lynn Finger's writings have appeared in *8Poems*, *Perhappened*, *Book of Matches*, *Fairy Piece*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *ONE ART: a journal of poetry*. Lynn also recently released a poetry chapbook, *The Truth of Blue Horses*, published by Alien Buddha Press. She was nominated for 2021 and 2022 Best of the Net Anthology. Lynn edits *Harpy Hybrid Review* and works with a group that mentors writers in prison. Her Twitter is @sweetfirefly2.

Andrea Fogel (she/her/hers) is a transsexual author who writes to capture the obscure emotions of the gutter in which she lives in order to elevate the low-brow into the high-brow. Her short fiction has been published in *Exist Otherwise* and *Scuzzbucket*; her non-fiction has been published by Several Problems Press; and her poetry has been published by Paper Teeth Press.

Kendra Jackson lives in Dublin. By day, she crunches numbers for a living. By night (and sometimes into the early morning), she expresses her pent-up creativity by crunching words for fun instead.

Mark Lamoureux lives and practices yoga in New Haven, Connecticut, and teaches English at Housatonic Community College. He is the author of six volumes of poetry. His work has appeared in *Fence*, *spoKe*, *Yes Poetry*, *Ping Pong*, and other publications.

Stephanie K. Merrill (she/her) has poems published or soon appearing in *The Rise Up Review*, *Feral: A Journal of Poetry and Art*, *UCity Review*, *Moist Poetry Journal*, *Amethyst Review*, *Dear Poetry Journal*, *One Art*, *Anti-Heroic Chic*, and elsewhere. Stephanie K. Merrill is a Pushcart Prize nominee. She lives in Austin, Texas.

Syan Mohiuddin is an aspiring poet from Bangladesh. As of yet, he has no particular credits to his name and this is his debut publishing effort.

Cathryn Moore lives in the middle of nowhere in Devon, England. She is often found writing when she should be working.

Jeanna Ní Ríordáin is an Irish-language translator from West Cork, Ireland. She has a PhD in French literature, as well as degrees in Irish & French, from University College Cork. Her work has been featured in *Quarryman Literary Journal*, Drawn to the Light Press, *Cork Words 3*, New Isles Press, *Poetry in the Time of Coronavirus: The Anthology, Volume Two*, *Burrow*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *The Melting Pot: A Mental Health Anthology*, and *Otherwise Engaged*.

Grace Noel is a mixed-media fine artist, muralist, installation artist, and owner of Grace Noel Art, LLC. You can visit her studio at the Denver Art Society Underground in Denver's Art District on Santa Fe Dr, 734 Santa Fe Dr, Denver, CO, or visit her website <https://gracenoel.art/>. Grace's work is inspired by being outside in the sunshine and how it all relates to the four elements of fire, earth, wind, and water.

Glenn Pape is a retired man attempting to age gracefully while sharing a house in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and a terrier mutt who looks like a cross between Bernie Sanders and a loofah. He began submitting his writing in earnest at the age of 50, and has since been published in the *North American Review*, *The Sun*, *Poet Lore*, *Pulp Literature*, and *The Rhysling Anthology*, among others.

Karen Poppy writes poetry, fiction, and blurred-genre work. Her debut full-length poetry collection, *Diving at the Lip of the Water*, was recently published by Beltway Editions. Her chapbooks *Crack Open/Emergency* (2020) and *Our Own Beautiful Brutality* (2021) were both published by Finishing Line Press. Her chapbook *Every Possible Thing*, is published by Homestead Lighthouse Press (2020). An attorney licensed in California and Texas, Karen Poppy lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Dena Rash Guzman is a poet and the author of three books of poetry, including *Life Cycle*, *Joseph*, and her newest, *Scraps for Doomsday*. She is a literary event organizer, and lives and labors in East Multnomah County, Oregon. Reach her at denapoems@gmail.com or on IG @denarashguzman

Martina Robles Gallegos was born and raised in Mexico. She got a Master's degree from GCU. Her works have appeared in the *Altadena Anthology: Poetry Review*, *Spirit Fire Review*, *Poetry Super Highway*, *Silver Birch Press*, *OpenDoor Magazine*, *The Bloom*, *Central Coast Poetry Shows*, *WFWP: Poetry Festival, Canada*, and more recently, in the award-winning anthology *When the Virus Came Calling: COVID-19 Strikes America* (Golden Foothills Press, ed. Thelma T. Reyna).

Geoff Sawers has written and illustrated several non-fiction books and maps. Poetry books include *Scissors Cut Rock* (Flarestack, 2005) and *A Thames Bestiary* (with Peter Hay; Two Rivers Press, 2008). Born in 1966, he was only diagnosed as autistic in his fifties. He divides his time between the gutter and the stars.

Daniel Schulz is a U.S.-German writer known for *Kathy Acker in Seattle* (Misfit Lit, 2020) and publications in journals such as *Mirage*, *Gender Forum*, *Fragmented Voices*, *Versification*, *Café Irreal*, *Cacti Fur*, *The Wild Word*, *Outcast Press Journal*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Word Vomit*, *Dipity*, *Flora Fiction*, *Steel Jackdaw*, anthologies such as *Heart/h* (Fragmented Voices, 2021), *The Clockwork Chronicles* (Madhouse Publications, 2022), and the catalog *Get Rid of Meaning* (Walther König Verlag).

Diane Seuss is the author of five books of poetry. Her most recent collection is *frank: sonnets* (Graywolf Press 2021), winner of the PEN/Voelcker Prize, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, and the Pulitzer Prize. Her sixth collection, *Modern Poetry*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press in 2024. A 2020 Guggenheim Fellow, Seuss was raised by a single mother in rural Michigan, which she continues to call home.

Jeff Stone gave up a capitalist corpo career during the pandemic to write full-time. Years from now, many may call him a fool for doing so, but alas, that will be years from now. He resides among the Blue Ridge Mountains in Crozet, VA, with his family, and aside from 25+ years of writing ad copy, he is a newly published writer of stories of whatever length they demand of him.

Terry Trowbridge's poems have appeared in *The New Quarterly*, *Carousel*, *subTerrain*, *paperplates*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *untethered*, *Quail Bell*, *The Nashwaak Review*, *Orbis*, *Snakeskin Poetry*, *Literary Yard*, *Gray Sparrow*, *CV2*, *Brittle Star*, *Bombfire*, *AoHaM*, *Canadian Woman Studies*, *The Mathematical Intelligencer*, *The Beatnik Cowboy*, *Borderless*, *Literary Veganism*, and more. Terry is grateful to the Ontario Arts Council for his first writing grant, and their support of so many other writers during the polycrisis.

Donna Vorreyer is the author of *To Everything There Is* (2020), *Every Love Story Is An Apocalypse Story* (2016), and *A House of Many Windows* (2013), all from Sundress Publications. Her art and photography have appeared in *Waxwing*, *Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself*, and other journals. An associate editor for *Rhino Poetry*, she hosts the monthly online reading series *A Hundred Pitchers of Honey*.

Lyss Welding was born in Indiana and lives in Illinois. In their 9-to-5, they write about higher education and student loan debt. For fun, they semi-code expressions for the widening chip on their shoulder. They hold a degree in linguistics from the University of Chicago. Their fiction has also appeared in *Euphony Literary Journal*.

Contributors

AMIRAH AL WASSIF

JORDI ALONSO

BRIAN MICHAEL BARBEITO

KASEY BUTCHER SANTANA

LESLIE CAIRNS

CATHLEEN ALLYN CONWAY

ANGELA EDER

LYNN FINGER

ANDREA FOGEL

KENDRA JACKSON

MARK LAMOUREUX

STEPHANIE K. MERRILL

SYAN MOHIUDDIN

CATHRYN MOORE

JEANNA NÍ RÍORDÁIN

GRACE NOEL

GLENN PAPE

KAREN POPPY

DENA RASH GUZMAN

MARTINA ROBLES GALLEGOS

GEOFF SAWERS

DANIEL SCHULZ

JEFF STONE

TERRY TROWBRIDGE

DONNA VORREYER

LYSS WELDING

+ INTERVIEW

WITH

DIANE SEUSS



*Alice Says
Go Fuck Yourself*