DRIFTWOOD

ISSUE 9.2

Driftwood Press

Issue 9.2

Editors

James McNulty
Managing Fiction Editor
Visual Arts Editor
Magazine Designer
Copyeditor

Jerrod Schwarz
Managing Poetry Editor
Visual Arts Editor
Copyeditor

Fiction Editors
Claire Agnes
Stephen Hundley
Rachel Phillippo

Poetry Editor
Andrew Hemmert

Guest Fiction Editors
Lynda Montgomery
Dailihana Alfonseca
Mason Boyles
Jessica Holbert

Publicity Assistant
Olivia Farina

Copyeditor
Jessica Holbert

Credits

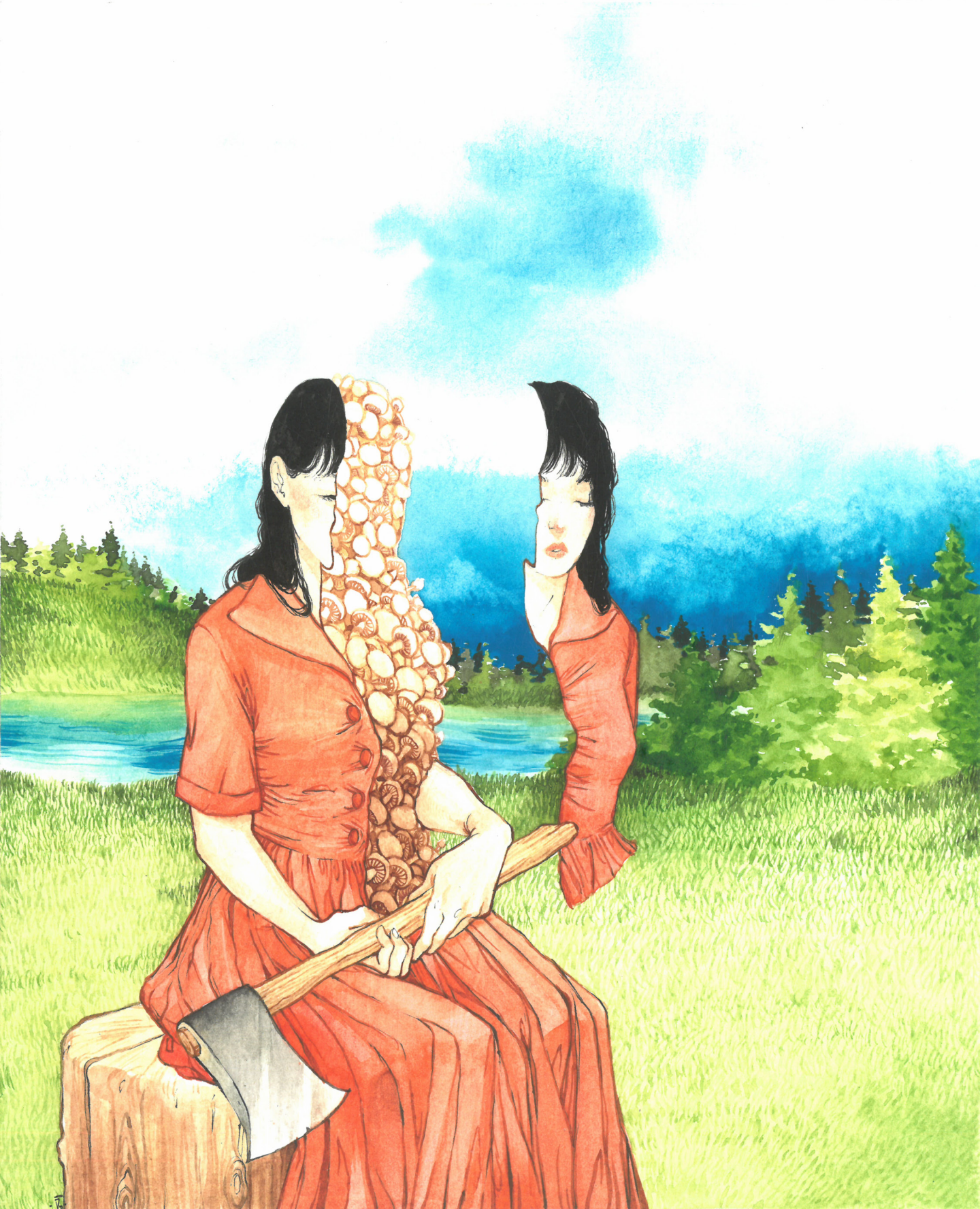
Independently published by *Driftwood Press*
in the United States of America.

Fonts: Satellite, Garamond, Cinzel, League Gothic,
& Merriweather.
Cover Image & Content Illustrations: Ío Wuerich
Cover Design: Sally Franckowiak
Magazine Design: James McNulty

Published in July 2022
ISSN Print: 2578-7195
ISSN Online: 2331-7132
ISBN-13: 978-1-949065-20-6
Please visit our website at www.driftwoodpress.net
or email us at editor@driftwoodpress.net.

Table of

Contents



Sore Vexed

CHAD GUSLER

The day Karl chopped off his thumb, Hanne was standing at the kitchen sink humming a tune her mother sang, something about the reaper in the rye and the raven in its roost. She was wiping dirt from her mushrooms, examining their gray caps and delicate gills, brushing her finger over their paper-thin ridges. "Fruit of the earth," she said to herself, and then, quoting Genesis: "*To you it shall be as meat.*" She placed a cap on her tongue, and the rest she dropped into the black kettle on the wood counter, covering them with water, the base for her vegetable broth. The sun broke through the clouds, and Hanne looked up; the meadow was gold and green, and she marveled at the surrounding hills, rich in vetch and rabbits. And then she saw Karl, dancing at his woodstack by the hedgerow, cradling his right hand in his left. He called out, his yelping high-pitched, a whipped bitch in heat. Hanne cursed and dried her hands. "I'm coming, Love," she said softly. Bryggen opened one eye and watched her wade through the meadow. He flapped the tip of his tail, then squeezed his eye shut.

Hanne found Karl's thumb resting on a heap of ash bark. She picked it up, dug the dirt from under the nail, then slid it into her apron pocket. It came to rest between the thimble and the chanterelle. She asked Karl why he thought it proper to chop off his thumb, couldn't he even tell the difference between flesh and wood? She ripped a piece of cloth from her apron and wrapped the blue strip around his wound, pressing the rag hard against where his thumb had sprouted. Karl flinched.

"To stop the bleeding, Love," she said, walking him back to the kitchen. "Stop squirming."

By evening, Karl was in bed with a fever. Hanne fed him a bowl of leek soup, which he ate carelessly, staining the pillows and the bedclothes. She'd have more work in the morning, but at least he was asleep. She tended the fire in the kitchen stove and trimmed the lantern, then stretched out the batting she pulled from the frayed quilt folded on the chest at the foot of Karl's bed. The quilt was Karl's grandmother's; ugly and carelessly stitched.

After her akvavit, Hanne dug Karl's thumb from her apron and rested it on the batting. It was as cold as the sausages in her icebox, and gray, too, but probably not as tasty. She poked it with a fork. Was Karl dreaming about his thumb just now? She looked toward his bedroom and listened to his heavy breathing, rhythmic and slow, and decided that he was not. He'd never once told her any of his dreams, even when she confessed hers. She opened her bible, and the lantern light cast shadows across the page. The evening office was from St. Mark: *And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched.*

Well Karl certainly had had a biblical day.

In the morning, Ann, Hanne's niece, was in the kitchen frying eggs. Ann smiled and asked after her—had she slept well? had she dreamt?—and Hanne said no on both accounts, explaining Karl's restless night and the severed thumb.

"I saw it here on the batting," Ann said, sliding a plate of eggs onto the table and pouring out the boiling water for coffee. "I had sixteen skips on the lake today."

Hanne nodded and pierced her egg, drowning the red poppies on her marriage plate in golden yolk. Ann was pretty, and she saw traces of Ann's mother in her eyes and forehead, and maybe even in her chin.

"Are your eggs fine?" Ann asked. "Mama said to be sure you eat your eggs."

Hanne realized she was staring and blinked twice. "They're wonderful, dear."

Ann smiled and asked if Hanne wanted another, but she declined, then nudged Karl's thumb with her knife and told Ann how he'd chopped it off with his ax, how he danced and sang and hollered. But she wouldn't miss that thumb, not a bit—its ragged nail searching for God-knows-what deep inside the folds of his nose, flicking what it found there onto the hearth while he read his receipts in front of the fire. God, no! Hanne shuddered.

"Such a delightful fool," Ann said.

"Hear how he whimpers," she said, sipping her coffee. "Not the baby I wanted."

Karl cried out from his bed: "*Heal me, for my bones are vexed.*"

Ann giggled and wiped her hands on the dishcloth. "Nothing like suffering to turn one to the Psalms," she said, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

Hanne swirled the grounds in her cup. Ann's fingers were long, she noticed, and when Ann blew her coffee, the steam momentarily blurred her bright blue eyes. "It's more than bones that's vexed in him," Hanne said finally.

Ann sat at the table and grasped her hand. "And his thumb?"

"What about it?"

Ann poked it. "What do you plan to do with this?"

Hanne carried Karl's thumb to the window, where she could get better look, and rolled it between her thumb and forefinger. Such tenderness. And how unlike the man it came from! Maybe cruel disregard softens when it's severed from its nub. And then Karl's thumb slipped from her fingers and plopped into her kettle of mushroom water.

Ann clamped her hand to her mouth and tried not to laugh while Hanne fished the thumb out in a glass jar. She held it up in triumph. "Let's see if anything grows from his scrap of a life. I've got a clay pot."

"And dirt from the garden?"

"We'll take soil from the fairy circle," Hanne said. "It's rich there."

Karl called out again: "*All the night make I my bed to swim.*"

Hanne swirled Karl's thumb in the sunlight. "Try not to drown, dear."

After the kitchen was cleaned and Karl cared for, Hanne filled the pot with soil, then pushed his thumb deep into the black dirt, drenching it with the mushroom water for good measure.

"Dirt to dirt," Ann said.

They set the clay pot on the rock under the yew. The sun dropped behind the forest and the wind shifted, coming cool off the lake.

They had gotten along well enough. Karl was handsome and broad-shouldered, blond, the best looking of the Fiske brothers. He was a good lover, gentle and not like some men. He liked to sing, hymns mostly, but sometimes bawdy songs he heard in town. They often went to the lake and sat on the dock, their feet grazing the cold water, and after Hanne unpacked their basket and handed Karl his sandwich, she'd snuggle close and breathe him in. And when he pushed her hair behind her ears, she knew Karl was grateful to be with her and not some other village girl. Sometimes they made love on the stone beach, the sky big above them, and afterward he would sing "A Mighty Fortress" and she would watch the shelf of his chest rise and fall, his nipples hard as dried peas.

Though Hanne knew Karl was attracted to her, she also knew he had settled for the second best of the Sandberg sisters. Everyone knew it. But Hanne considered herself lucky, given her patchy skin, thick ankles, and flat chest. *A pity marriage*, some whispered. *Erlend was lucky to have married her off*. Hanne wasn't ugly, but no one noticed her when she was with her older sister Hilde. Hanne was strong, however, and could beat Karl at arm wrestling any day, bragging among the womanfolk in Pastor Jørgen's flock that she'd never lost, *I'll swear to you on the life of my firstborn.*

"If only, finally, you had a firstborn," one of them told her.

Hanne flushed in shame and pressed her dress against her thighs. How could these hips be not pleased to bear a daughter?

But Karl couldn't keep his eyes from Hilde's breasts, those flawless apples, firm and freckled. He'd been careful at first—this Hanne was sure of—but he grew bold, reckless, almost as if he wished to be caught. She refused Karl his desire, however, even after she crept to the lakeshore and found them entwined on a blanket. Karl's toy boat, the one he'd made and sailed from the pier on windy days, lay on its side at their feet. The fire he lit smoldered, smoke trailing off in the gray air, his ax propped against a small stack of wood. Karl's striped swim trunks were crumpled on top of Hilde's. Hanne watched them from a distant tree, braiding strands of grass into hard knots. Karl had never once taken Hanne from behind—what must that be like? Hilde slapped Karl's hand, the one groping for her breast, telling him to stop, what if they were discovered?

Hanne heard the branches rustle above her; it was Bryggen, a kitten then, staring at her. She reached out for him, but he swiped the back of her hand, drawing blood, then scrambled down the bark and sauntered onto the beach.

"You spying on us, you little puss?" Karl said, petting Bryggen.

Hilde rose from the stones, still naked, and took Karl's ax in her hands. "It's heavier than I thought."

"Go ahead and swing it," Karl said. "I'd like to see that."

Hilde steadied a billet, then swung, and the log fell in two. "My papa taught me well," she said, tossing the wood onto the fire. It sprang to life.

"My God," Karl said, grabbing Hilde's chapped haunches.

Hanne flushed, then ran home and killed a chicken for dinner, the foolish cock that thought himself immortal. She boiled him extra long, then plucked his feathers and tossed him in the stove. Karl grimaced at the tough meat slathered in mushroom gravy, then settled in front of the fire with his receipts. His cheeks were sunburned. Probably his back, too.

Three seasons later and Hilde's firstborn was a girl. Ann, Hilde named her, after Hilde's husband's grandmother. She was an adorable baby, all head and smiles.

Ann suggested a remedy of maggots to help clear the infection. Hanne wasn't convinced—she'd only heard rumors of its effectiveness from travelers in the market—but Ann was persistent and asked her what

she had to lose.

Hanne looked at Karl, who lay sweating in his bed, lips full and flushed and strangely suckable, though the rest of his body repelled her. "Not much, I suppose," she said finally.

Ann wiped Karl's moist forehead. "You think I could find them next to the smokehouse?"

Hanne nodded; Ann would find plenty of maggots in the compost there. And she did, writhing little devils that made Hanne gag. But she swallowed her bile and pulled back Karl's crusty bandage, green with pus, and helped Ann place the critters onto Karl's putrid hand. He was quiet at first, but as they wriggled and burrowed, he flinched and begged them to stop tickling him.

"Nobody is tickling you, Karl," Hanne said, slapping his head.

Ann kissed his flushed cheek. "It's okay, Onkel," she said. "The tickling will fade."

When the maggots stilled, drunk on Karl's fizzy flesh, Ann scraped them into Hanne's compost bucket and administered a fresh batch. The color soon returned to Karl's cheeks, and Ann pointed it out, telling Hanne that he'd be better soon.

Hanne sipped her akvavit. "You think?"

Ann removed her hand from Karl's forehead. "He's cooled," she said. "I think the infection is leaving."

Hanne rose from her wooden chair. "You really think?"

"You don't believe me?"

"Your onkel keeps me skeptical."

Ann stood and Hanne followed her into the kitchen. "You seem indifferent," Ann said, stirring honey into her tea. "You'd miss him if he were dead."

Karl cried from his bed: "*In the grave who shall give thee thanks?*"

And Ann replied: "*Oh save me for thy mercies' sake.*"

"He'll pull out," she told Ann. "He always does."

She'd never borne a child because Karl hadn't wanted one.

"Not even a son?" Hanne asked him one evening.

Karl stroked Bryggen, then lifted his wire lenses onto his forehead. "And then what will you have?"

"A child."

Bryggen purred, a rattly sound resonating deep in its ribs, and Karl returned to his receipts. "Children are a dismay," he said.

Hanne reached for Karl's boat on the mantle and brushed her finger along its white hull. "You'll have someone to play with," she said, "a son to help you."

Karl paused and considered this, looking up at his boat. "Children break things."

"You could teach him how to build a boat," she said. "He would be a delight to you."

Karl leveled his eyes at Hanne's flat chest, then looked at her face. "And you?"

Bryggen jumped from Karl's lap and sat on the rug, staring unblinking at Hanne. Her cheeks blazed. "I am quite capable."

Karl stood and brushed the cat's hair from his wool pants. "And tell me, dear wife, how you know?"

Hanne slapped the receipts from his hand and they fluttered onto the stone hearth. "A child would bring us joy," she said. "Pastor Jørgen even said so." One of Karl's receipts curled and burst into flame.

Karl watched the paper burn, then swept his hand across the mantle, knocking the boat onto the wood floor.

Hanne kicked the pieces into the fire. "Looks like you'll have to build another," she said.

The mushroom grew from the clay pot under the yew. It was fleshy with a spongy cap and delicate gills, like no mushroom Hanne had ever seen.

Karlsthumb, she named it.

The Lord had granted her a new thing, and that new thing was delicious. But what, finally, would a whole body give?

Hilde first sent Ann over when she was seven. There was a knock on the door, and when she answered, there was Ann with a loaf of bread and a sack of mushrooms. She held them out. "For you and Onkel." She was missing a tooth.

She kneeled and wrapped Ann up in her arms. "Thank you, dear."

"Mama sent the bread," Ann said. "It's good with lingonberry jam."

"I'm sure it is." Hilde was always the better baker.

"And I picked the mushrooms myself," Ann said. "They grow in the woods, you know."

She put the loaf in the breadbox and the mushrooms on the table, then asked Ann if she wanted tea. Ann nodded, and Hanne poured the water into a cup and stirred the nettles. "And how did you come? By road or shoreline?"

Ann smoothed her braids and told her that she'd hiked the trail by the lake. "Mama said it was safer."

She placed the cup in front of Ann. "I'm sure it is."

Ann asked for sugar, then sipped her tea. "The water was cold and Onkel was sailing his boat."

Hanne raised her eyebrows. "Is that so?" Karl hadn't mentioned that he'd be sailing his toy boat.

"He waved to me from the pier, and when I went over, he pulled his boat in and showed me how to skip a stone."

"Was the lake calm?"

"Oh, very much."

Hanne sat down and held her coffee in her lap. "And how many skips?"

"Six!"

She laughed. "A record?"

"Oh yes!" Ann said. "But Onkel skipped thirteen."

"His lucky number."

Ann finished her tea, then tried to lick the sugar from the bottom of the cup. Her tongue was like a finger. "But do you know what he told me?"

"What did he tell you?"

"That one day I'll be able to skip thirteen or more."

"Is that so?"

Ann rested her mug on the table. "That's an awful lot of skips."

"Your mother was a good stone-skipper," Hanne said.

Ann folded her hands, and Hanne was amazed at what a little Hilde she was, from the shape of her forehead to the pitch of her nose to her dimpled chin. "I've never seen my Papa skip a stone," Ann said finally.

Hanne stood and rinsed their cups, then hung them loosely on her fingers while she walked to the cupboard.

"Are you lonely, Tante?"

Hanne stopped. "What makes you ask?"

"Mama says so," Ann said. "That's why she sent me, because you'll never give me cousins."

Hanne felt her throat tighten, and she let Ann's cup slip from her finger. It shattered on the floor.

Ann slid off her chair and picked up the shards, then offered them in her cupped hands. "But you don't seem lonely to me," Ann said.

"You can tell your mother that I am more than content and not at all lonely." She dumped the broken cup into the waste bin. "Not at all."

Karl was at the table drinking coffee and eating oatmeal when Hanne came to the kitchen. She gave her mushroom water a stir, then stood silent for a moment, staring at her husband. His body was skeletal, his face gaunt, but his shitty eyes were lively.

"Good morning," Karl said.

"Where's Ann?"

"I sent her home."

Hanne went to the sink and drank a glass of water. Bryggen was in the cherry tree, swinging his tail, watching her with his golden eyes.

"Where's my thumb?"

She turned. "What do you mean?"

Karl held up his bandaged hand. "Have you forgotten?"

Hanne opened the window above the sink and cold air rushed in. "I burned it, of course." The cat jumped from his branch and stuck his nose in the empty clay pot near the garden.

"You didn't save it?" Karl said.

"It would have rotted."

"How am I to skip stones without it?"

Hanne glanced at Karl's good hand, the one that fondled Hilde's breast. "You have another."

"You should have kept it in the icebox."

"And confuse it with a sausage?" she said. "Hardly."

"The doctor could have reattached it."

"He's got a trembly hand."

"He could have tried, at least," Karl said.

"Ashes to ashes," she said. "You'll be chopping one-handed from now on."

Karl put his bowl in the sink. "I'll barely be able to swing the ax."

Hanne shut the window. "Since you're up and about, lend me your hand at the pile."

Karl was winded when they got to his wood stack. He wrapped his red scarf around his neck and sat on his chopping block, his shoulders slumped, his crooked spine against the straight-stacked cord. He shut his eyes and turned his face toward the sun while Hanne pulled a few oak billets from the pile. She rolled them to Karl's feet, and he opened his eyes. "You've always been so strong," he said.

"You'll have to move if you want me to swing your ax."

Karl stood, using a crooked branch to help his balance, and watched her place a log on his block. "Get it right in the center," he said. Bryggen appeared from behind the wood stack and sat near Karl.

She steadied the ax, then swung. The split log fell at her feet.

"You always were deft with an ax," Karl said, stroking Bryggen.

"Papa taught us well." Hanne kicked the split wood out of her way and steadied another chunk of oak, but it tipped and rolled. "You'll have to steady this one."

"You want me to hold it?"

She leaned against her ax, watching Karl's stupid Adam's apple bob. "Yes, of course."

Karl slowly kneeled in front of her and reached out his hand while she positioned the log. The fool had cut it on an angle. What sort of man does that? But when she stepped back and raised her ax, Karl squinted.

She lowered her ax. "Leave your eyes open."

"Why?"

"So you can watch what I'm about to do."

Karl repositioned his hand, then stared at her face.

"Watch the arc," she said, "not me." And she swung and Karl moved his hand the moment steel hit wood. The log was hewn in two.

Karl leaned against the stack and cradled his bandaged fist. "You nearly smashed my hand."

"Close indeed." Hanne positioned another log. "A few more, and then akvavit." She dreaded changing that seeping bandage; it would take more than a dram for her to muster up the courage.

Karl secured the log and Hanne swung; two for the kitchen stove. Bryggen cleaned his face and Karl cleared his phlegm. "Better than your sister," Karl said.

Hanne stared at him. "Last one."

Karl steadied a log. "And then we drink?"

But what fool steadies a log with a thumbless hand? Hanne smiled, then severed his hand with such force that it thumped the cat in its ribs. Bryggen ran and Karl fainted and Hanne dragged him back to the house, carrying her ax over her shoulder. She propped it against the door, then made a tourniquet to stanch the blood. She wrapped Karl's stump in bandages, then bound it securely against his side. She pulled the covers tight and kissed his cheek. "Sleep deep," she whispered, "and sleep long."

"*The Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping*," Karl said.

"Maybe so."

"*The Lord will receive my prayer*," Karl said.

Hanne laughed out loud and poured herself a drink in the kitchen. She drank it in silence, staring at the trail of blood Karl had left for her to clean.

"You can't rush burial rights," Pastor Jørgen said.

"But surely you could bless him now."

"No respectable wife would want that for a still-breathing husband," he said. "One has to be dead."

"But I've brought the incense."

"I don't need incense."

"But smoke purifies," she said. "He won't last much longer."

Jørgen licked his spastic lips and placed his damp hand on top of hers. "Grief alters one's reality."

Hanne removed her hand from his. "My reality is not altered."

"Are you not grieved?"

"It's complex," she said. "You can't presume grief."

"Does your sister know of this?"

"What does it matter what she knows?"

Jørgen rubbed his eye. "It's just that she's family."

"We haven't spoken in years."

"Then your niece," Jørgen said. "Anna—"

"—Ann," Hanne interrupted. "Her name is Ann, and she's at my home taking care of her onkel."

Pastor Jørgen nodded. "God bless the girl."

"She's nearly a woman."

Jørgen licked his lips. "Of course," he said. "It's just that I haven't seen her in quite some time."

Hanne brushed his words away with the flick of her wrist. "Your ignorance is forgiven."

Pastor Jørgen reached into his pocket and retrieved a dozen or so dried pea pods. "Take these seeds and plant them," he said. "Seeds from the parish, for the parish."

Hanne squeezed the thin skins, and the dried peas popped into her palm. She closed her hand.

"From last year's crop," Jørgen said, smiling. "Quite a productive year!"

She slipped the peas into her apron pocket. "I'll plant them in the spring."

"The lesson of the seeds is this," he said. "From death, new life arises."

Hanne rolled her eyes.

At home, she found Ann in Karl's room, squeezing water from a sponge into his mouth. "Onkel has a fever again," she said.

Hanne rested the back of her hand on Karl's hot forehead. "Another round of maggots?"

Ann stood and went to the kitchen. "His fever is beyond the maggot's cure."

Hanne heard the water run in the sink, then lifted the sheets and noted his bandaged stump still wrapped tightly against his side, undisturbed and just as she'd left it. "Maybe you should call the pastor," Ann called out.

Hanne pulled the sheets tight and tucked them under the mattress. "Fool of a pastor doesn't know a thing about death."

Ann returned and pried open Karl's mouth, but most of the water dribbled down his cheek, soaking the pillow. "I don't understand how the fever—" But Ann began to cry before she finished her sentence.

Hanne embraced Ann and stroked her blonde hair. "These things happen," she said. "Who knows the will of the Lord?"

"I will miss him."

Hanne watched Karl's chest rise and fall. "Of course you will."

"*Let all mine enemies be ashamed and sore vexed,*" Karl said through his raspy breath.

She closed his eyelids and finished the Psalm: "Let them return and be ashamed suddenly."

Karl fit snuggly in his shallow grave there in the middle of the fairy circle. They plastered him with sawdust soaked in mushroom water—the remedy of mushrooms, Hanne called it—then covered him with soil. He'd be plenty warm—of that, she was sure.

"And when does the pastor come?" Ann said.

"From dust you have come—"

Ann wiped her forehead and leaned her shovel against the smokehouse. "But it's not a burial without a pastor."

"—and to dust you shall return."

"And a stone? In the cemetery?" Ann said. "With his name?"

Hanne evened the dirt over Karl's body with her hoe. "And from dust you shall rise again."

Ann stood and walked calmly into the woods. Hanne watched her go, then heard her wails echo through the forest. The ravens leaped from their branches and circled overhead. When she quieted, Hanne turned and found old Bryggen burying his fresh shit in Karl's dirt. She screamed at the cat, but Bryggen paid her

no mind, so Hanne lopped off its head with one swipe of her hoe. Hanne retrieved Karl's toy boat from the mantle, then dragged it and the cat to the lake. The wind was up, and she skinned the cat there at the shoreline, laughing as she stretched its orange hide along the mast of Karl's boat, laughing while she bound its carcass to the deck.

"Farewell," she said, pushing the boat onto the lake. The catsail caught the wind, expanded like a lung, and took off across the choppy water. She held her breath, but the boat soon struck a whitecap and sank not far from the pier.

That's when Hanne cried.

When she returned from the lake, Hanne fixed a plate of mushrooms and ate them at her kitchen table. The late afternoon sun lit up the mud she'd tracked in on her boots. Surely Ann would notice the dirt, but she didn't care, because her mushrooms, their smell of rot and life, rooted her. She loved them sautéed in oil with the green garlic that grew just beyond the gate, near the cherry tree where Bryggen used to rest. Sometimes she added scallions to her skillet, sometimes chives, but always garlic and oil, the way of her mother and grandmother, both respectable women and a lot like her.

She ate her mushrooms from their marriage platter, though Karl had always hated that plate. "It's too fragile and the poppies are ugly," he told her once. "Who wants to eat sausages from a plate of flowers?"

"The poppies are lovely, Karl," she'd said.

"They remind me of your mother," he'd said, "and nothing good came from your mother."

Hanne forked a mushroom into her mouth. "Except my sister," she said.

When she finished, Hanne rinsed her plate and fetched her akvavit, pouring a bit into a jar. She watched the dusk creep across the meadow, and when it came through her kitchen window, she lit her candles and opened her bible. The reading was from St. John: *Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?* Hanne drained her drink and looked out at the mound. She wondered if Karl was, after all, cold under all that loam and sawdust. He was probably fine, she decided.

"You've tracked in dirt, Tante."

She turned toward her niece, who stood in the door holding a broom. Ann's eyes were swollen and blotchy, and her hair had fallen from its braid. Hanne put her dish in the sink and poured herself more akvavit, offering a bit to Ann. "In memory of your onkel?"

Ann dropped the broom and drank quickly, then noticed the peas lined up in a row on the counter. "Seeds?"

"From a good crop."

"Onkel once told me to never eat seeds, lest one sprout inside." Ann picked one up. "He once knew a man who grew a melon from his anus."

"Your onkel was full of wild ideas."

Ann put her glass in the sink. "I'll miss him."

"Hear the lesson of the seed: From death, new life arises."

Ann glanced at Hanne's open bible and read from St. John: "*Believest thou this?*"

Hanne scooped up the dried peas, then emptied them into Ann's open hand. "Don't you?"

"Sometimes," Ann said, wrapping her hand around the seeds, "and sometimes not."

She pushed Ann's hair from her face, and then she saw it: her furrowed brow was Karl's brow, the tight pinch of her mouth Karl's mouth—how had she not noticed?

Ann sat in Karl's chair. "Please tell me you miss him, Tante."

Hanne looked into the dark toward Karl's grave. "I believe in mushrooms."

"But they don't live forever," Ann said.

"Even wind dies," Hanne said, "but if I give mushrooms what they need, they'll give me what I want." Karl never gave a wit about giving in return. But now, in his death, he would grant her what she deserved.

Of that, Hanne was sure.

Comically Distorted

A Conversation with Chad Gusler

THE FOLLOWING CONVERSATION WAS CONDUCTED BY MANAGING FICTION EDITOR JAMES MCNULTY

James McNulty: Hey, Chad! I'm so excited to feature "Sore Vexed" in this issue! We so rarely publish period pieces, but this one was a ton of fun, and it's always a pleasure to keep *Driftwood* readers on their toes! First question first: when and where do you imagine "Sore Vexed" is set?

Chad Gusler: Thanks, James. I'm thrilled "Sore Vexed" has found a home at *Driftwood*! It's funny; I wasn't consciously writing a period piece, but, of course, it certainly turned out that way. To me, this story is set in rural Norway, maybe in the early 1960s. I've never physically been to Norway, but I'd been reading a lot of novels written by Scandinavians—Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Time for Everything*; Tarjei *Vesaas's The Birds*; Ida Jessen's *A Change of Time*; Hanne Ørstavikɔs *Love*—so my sense of place and style was obviously influenced by these folks.

To my mind, there's a haunting spareness in these books, both in the prose itself and the consequent storylines, that sort of weaseled its way into my spirit, shifting my sense of the world: I don't exist apart from my relationships. This sounds kind of bleak (and maybe even un-American), but there's immense grace in knowing that we're all bound together in our collective impermanence. In fact, I'd even call these books prophetic, not in the sense that they predict some otherworldly future, but in the sense that these pages hold a mirror up to our collective humanity and diagnose our condition. I would call these writers, to use a Flannery O'Connor term, "realists of distances."

JM: It's interesting to hear "I don't exist apart from my relationships" in the pandemic landscape, where we've all been so cloistered off and alone, certainly less conventionally social beings. Hopefully, a rich internal world can exist alongside the external relationships, no? Please also refresh myself and our readers on O'Connor's terminology. What did she mean by "realists of distances," and how does "Sore Vexed" embody this idea?

CG: I absolutely agree that rich internal worlds are necessary, particularly for fiction writers. In fact, when the pandemic happened, I loved how the world quieted and came to a screeching halt. (That's the introvert in me!) But that stillness also put me in my place: I'm a part of the ecosystem, both physical and social, and I exist only in those relationships. It's good to be reminded of that, I think, because we humans have a tendency to take ourselves too seriously. We're all a little broken, really, and I hope "Sore Vexed" examines that brokenness in a unique way.

O'Conner's use of the phrase "realist of distances" is rooted in her belief that good literature is prophetic in nature. I know there's a ton of baggage in that word, "prophetic," but O'Connor uses it in the sense that a prophet is one who diagnoses the human condition, as opposed to predicting some event. (I like to think of it as *forthtelling*.) Literature, then, if it's to be

prophetic, sees where we are and points us to where we should be, bringing the far up close.

I think it's bad form to start a story (or any work of art, for that matter) with the intention of "making it prophetic." Such work is sunk in itself, to use another O'Connor phrase, and doesn't move beyond its good intentions. Before I began "Sore Vexed," I'd heard about these "mushroom suits" that you can request to be buried in. Then, as your body turns to dirt, you sprout mushrooms through the decomposition process. How cool! But what would it be like to eat such mushrooms? And what if a wife in an unhappy marriage at least reaped a mushroom reward for living so long with an asshole? That's where "Sore Vexed" began. Through the process of writing Hanne and letting go of my intentions for her, I realized that I stumbled into something bigger: We humans are cruel, selfish, and fractured.

JM: I pitched this story to our editors as a black comedy, which I'm not quite sure all of them agreed with. How do you feel about that classification?

CG: I think black comedy is a pretty good description. I mean, what's not funny about a severed thumb? Or the fact that a husband's hard body can finally provide nourishment for a plaintive wife? I've read portions of this story in front of audiences, and they always laugh at the right moments—and that absolutely thrills me! But I do wonder if *grotesque* would be a better descriptor for "Sore Vexed." We, of course, probably have a common assumption of what *grotesque* means—something ugly or repulsive—but I think we need to add comically distorted to that definition.

O'Connor says that writers of grotesque works make alive "some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day." These experiences may be entertaining, of course, but they should also move us into the realm of mystery, to "a point not visible to the human eye." I like this idea so much because it gives writers reason to work with the sensual concreteness of everyday life. We can only know our stories through our senses, so good fiction is always grounded, even grotesque or otherwise distorted stories.

JM: I quite love the idea to embrace "comically distorted" as a possible connotation to *grotesque*. The editors at *Driftwood*, myself included, are huge fans of alt comics, and you see this "comical distortion" so often in alt comics artwork. I don't see it often in prose; I can't think of the last time I thought of something as "comically distorted"; usually that defaults to "absurdism," I think. When it comes to my classification of "black comedy," of course I think about the whole dynamic between Hanne and Karl, but also I think of more subtly cruel moments, such as Ann asking Hanne if her "eggs are fine." Could you talk a little bit about the crafting of comedic scenes or lines?

CG: You know, that is such a great question, and I'm not quite sure I have an answer! Perhaps this question has to do with how a writer builds a character. I'm a big fan of George Saunders, a master at creating and building characters. He says that successful stories come from writers who have "intuited [a character's] expansiveness." This is great because it frees the writer to let their character *go*, to let the character *become*. In my case, I let Hanne be Hanne, and she turned out to be quite wry. If you do that with all your characters, I think you'll organically create characters who act and react against each other; sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's not. But certainly, the writer is always present when they create a character—I don't mean to sound like I channel characters out of nothing—so I think a writer's personality is always present in a story. I like dark humor, and I like to read dark humor, so I think those subtly cruel moments are, for better or for worse, part of who I am.

JM: I like that you've addressed that "channeling" a character largely has to do with your own personality—and how your own sensibilities influence your characters' behavior. I've heard many a writer say that they channel their characters—but they often sound far less grounded, almost as if they believe they're being possessed. Perhaps they only mean what you do here, but it's good to see this addressed frankly. Saunders' quote, to me, reads as an erudite way of saying that the character has taken on proper depth and complexity in the writer's mind.

"Sore Vexed" is a very tight story; each scene is

effective in its goal without feeling rushed or overt. I imagine you must've outlined or thoroughly worked on revisions to this story to tighten the writing so much.

CG: I think scene-building is extremely important in short stories. Sandra Scofield, a mentor from grad school, said that scenes should have event and emotion, that they should pulse with life; a character leaving the scene isn't the same character who entered the scene. I tried to remind myself of that with Hanne. Of course, one can do this quickly through a story, or one can do it leisurely, but no matter the speed, the scene should push the story forward.

I wrote several drafts of this story, plus shared it with a couple of writing groups I'm a part of. Their big-picture feedback helped me pare things down, as did my own care over how each sentence sounded on the page, how they held the possibility of either revealing character or diminishing it. I always tend to overwrite. For example, in an early draft of the story, Hanne didn't see Karl chop off his thumb until page two or three. Moving that action to the first paragraph helped me get the story off the ground. And, of course, behind every decent story is a great copy-editor!

JM: This is all great advice for writers. I specifically like how you addressed that a story can move either quickly or leisurely and yet this doesn't affect the tightness of the writing. That's a very important and nuanced lesson that many writers need learn.

Talk to me about your self-diagnosed habit of overwriting. Almost all the writers I work with tend to fall on one side or the other; very rarely do you find someone who's written in the middle, fairly successful on the first try. One thing I've noticed is that overwriters always know they overwrite, whereas folks who underwrite usually don't realize it until it's been pointed out to them and thoroughly explained. This is probably a generalization, but that's been my dominating experience working with writers over the past decade. Of course, it's better for your writing to understand your weaknesses, so I think the ones who overwrite often send in the best drafts, though it's always disheartening to have to recommend large cuts. In terms of "Sore Vexed," I think the writing was already very tight, but we did cut one half-page scene in revision. Talk to me about the pros and cons of overwriting, and share with the readers a bit about the scene that we ultimately decided to cut.

CG: I'm chuckling right now at your comment about the difference between underwriters and overwriters—so true! I think there are a ton of advantages to overwriting, the first being developing character. For me, my stories often don't start until I get toward the middle; I sort of have to write my way into the story. But once I've gotten there and have a sense of where things are going, the story takes off. I guess you could say that overwriting gives me some traction, especially at the beginning of the process. Overwriting also helps me flesh out characters, enabling me to get a sense of their being in the world. This is certainly true for major characters, but I think it matters even for minor characters. A character's success in a story hinges on how well the writer knows them. Additionally, overwriting opens possibilities and envisions potential. This process can be maddening, because what I want the story to do and what the story wants to do are sometimes in conflict. So it takes a good dose of humility to be able to realize that, *gosh, my original idea may not have been that great*. Saunders would say that we should treat our stories like the people we love. Or, according to Sting, "If you love somebody, set them free."

I don't think there are any inherent disadvantages to overwriting; you just have to be willing to let things go. That's really difficult because it means giving up control. It's also a form of faith, of trusting that less is more, believing that beauty is intensified through lean prose. As I mentioned to you during our copy-editing process, I was sort of attached to the scene we cut, Hanne's extended conversation with her pastor. Thankfully, however, I'd had some distance from the story, so I could see that the scene really wasn't doing much. It was fine, but that's all it was.

JM: I remember mentioning to you that you needn't cut it if you didn't want to, but that it was an extraneous scene, and cutting it would help the story's pacing a bit. Could you share with readers more about that

scene? What other scenes were cut before the story made it to our submission portal?

It sounds like overwriters have to avoid being precious with their writing—unafraid to make large cuts to that first half you mentioned—where you were unsure where the story was going. I've seen many overwritten submissions where the writer was too precious during (or perhaps skipped) revision, and what resulted was a story that wandered for several pages before beginning. A lack of conflict and confidence in those first few pages turns editors off quick; a sharp editor can always tell when the writing doesn't know where it's going or what it's doing—we call it "lacking confidence." I hope overwriters who read this recognize all the concept-phase strengths you've mentioned while also realizing the added work and emotional distancing required for revision. But no matter your tact—under or overwriting or anything else—revision is often hard work.

CG: I love that phrase, "lacking confidence," and I think it's a great phrase for writers to keep in mind during the hard work of revision. In the scene we cut, I was trying to flesh out the pastor a bit more, to give the readers a sense of who he was and how he related to Hanne. In some ways I think it was successful: readers would experience Hanne's specific feelings about the pastor (he's a creep) and her feelings about religious life in general (she's not buying it). Ultimately, though, these things weren't necessary for the short story because the story's about Hanne, not the pastor, and I think the reader already had a pretty good sense of Hanne's feelings about religious life. So the scene simply plateaued the story when it should have pushed it forward. There were other scenes in early drafts that were sliced and diced and composted. Most, though, probably couldn't even have been defined as scenes: they were simply necessary false starts and blind stabs.

JM: You start to touch on another invaluable lesson here: some worths overriding other worths in a story. This is a more nuanced lesson than it sounds: a scene may be succeeding in several things, but the negative may still outweigh those benefits—even if the negative is something so broad as *pacing*. I also like your phrasing here of a scene "plateauing." I think the blind stab you mention, while needing to be cut eventually, can be invaluable to the process.

To your note about the cut scene appearing a little redundant: I may have mentioned this in another *Driftwood* interview years back, but Geronimo Johnson often teaches a useful trick: label your scenes *Establishing, Confirming,* or *Developing*. Establishing scenes appear at the beginning of your story; these establish plot, concept, character, theme, etc. Most of these markers should be entirely replaced by *Developing* as the story progresses. It's those *Confirming* scenes that need serious consideration—that likely need cutting. Those are the scenes that only confirm what you already know. Even if it's a good scene, if it's only *confirming* your character, plot, theme, etc., it's probably superfluous.

CG: Oh, I like that so much! I'll definitely keep this concept in mind as I write and teach. And yes, now that I think about it, Pastor Jørgen's extended scene was definitely a confirming scene, elaborating something I already knew about the pastor. It's interesting, though, that you often can't know this until after an extended period of time. At least that's been my experience; to me, writing decent fiction can't be rushed. The irony, of course, is trying to teach undergrads how fiction works over the span of fifteen weeks!

JM: Despite the open brutality of Hanne, there's often a nice subtlety to this story—particularly the double meanings so often present in the dialogue. I think of the cruel humor in Ann asking if Hanne's "eggs are fine." Can you talk a little about the difficulties of incorporating double meanings and subtlety despite the character's openly brash demeanor?

CG: One of the advantages to setting your characters free is that you discover the roundness of them. Good fiction introduces us to characters who aren't completely evil nor completely divine. This, I think, mimics our lived experience, of relating to the broad range of humans who we encounter. So, to me, it's vital to let my characters fully be themselves and trust their hopes and aspirations. Sometimes, of course, my good intentions get thrown back at me, as when Ann asks Hanne if her eggs are fine. There's definitely cru-

elty in that phrase, but my aim for Ann wasn't necessarily callous indifference: it was simply what she said in the moment, her way of dealing with a wounded Hanne. Human relationships are enormously complex, and to write a character with her intentions set is incredibly high-handed and maybe even a bit conceited. The trick, then, is to juggle all these characters and keep them in relationship. Part of this (maybe half?) is trusting your readers to bring their own histories into the story, to trust that they'll say, *hey, I know this feeling; something similar happened to me or to someone I love.* So you could say that a character's brash demeanor is as layered as a Costco chocolate cake: there's more than meets eye beneath that treacly frosting.

JM: You spoke about the originating idea of mushroom body bags before. How do mushrooms function in the story?

CG: I think of mushrooms as remediating lifeforms, the fruit that results from healing mycelial networks. Of course, in one sense they're food (or "meat" as the King James Version says, which I think is fantastic), and Hanne loves her mushrooms, the earthiness of them. They satisfy something in her that nothing else can. And that, I hope, is why they're significant: they point us up and out of the story and into our own world. The mushrooms give us something to latch on to and help us understand Hanne's predicament: her health has come at a great cost.

JM: Hanne's outburst of violence—with Bryggen the cat—towards the end is sure to surprise some readers. She seems to have a harsh mental break at that point, swiftly followed by the prophesized "ashamed suddenly." How do you avoid melodrama and temper these shocking moments in the narrative? How did you land on these final few scenes?

CG: Well, first off, let me just assure readers that I think cats are pretty great. Four have taken residence in our household, and I can't imagine skinning any of them, even the annoying one that sprays the furnace. But, yeah, there's some violence in that scene for sure. Hanne's action at this point in the story actually surprised me—I didn't see it coming. I also found her action to be pretty complex. Certainly Bryggen had been the bane of her existence, a constant reminder of Karl's unfaithfulness, but how dare that cat defile Karl's grave? He was, after all, Hanne's husband, and I think there still might have been a bit of love in her toward her husband. I think you're correct using the word prophesied above. In a very real way, Hanne has come to terms with her role in her husband's death, and the Psalm that Karl has recited throughout the story (a Psalm that pleads for mercy) turns on her. Her tears are a result of competing emotions: love and hate; staying and leaving; fertility and barrenness; innocence and guilt; giving and taking. Melodrama is tempered by complexity.

JM: "Melodrama is tempered by complexity." You've just written a craft essay in a sentence, Chad. You've mentioned O'Connor and Saunders thoroughly, but I'm curious what other writers influence you—and particularly those who most influenced "Sore Vexed"?

CG: Broadly speaking, I really appreciate St. Augustine's work, particularly his concept of time, which sort of colors everything I write. He notes that "it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future." In other words, we're all in the here and now, and time isn't as linear as we make it out to be. I think Augustine's idea here can profoundly affect how a writer creates a character. If we realize that a character's perceptions of the present are influenced by their past and what they wish for in the future, then that character is immediately anagogical in nature—her existence, grounded in the present, simultaneously contains her past and future.

I also like Martin Heidegger's idea of "enframement." His essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," is often interpreted as an environmental essay, but much of that essay can have far-reaching effects on how a writer both approaches the world and creates it. For Heidegger, enframement happens when we see a river, say, as only a source of hydroelectric power or a tree only as a source of heat. Nature is good when we can harvest something from it, but not inherently so. We also do this when we categorize human relationships, when we try to fit those we meet

into our tidy, labeled boxes. It's human nature to label things, to be sure, but the problems begin as soon as we do so, because we're seeing only what we expect and have become immune to surprise. The damage done extends in all directions: not only do we suppress a personality, we also compromise our own vision by refusing to see beyond our assumptions. For the writer, this approach stifles characters because he's simply creating a glorified extension of himself, and the results on the page are pretty flat. I see this in visual art, too, where the art is all about the artist and not about the good of the thing made.

JM: You've shifted a bit in that answer to craft influences; how about fiction? But while you're on the topic of craft, what craft books—specifically those about *writing*—are some of your favorites? I've always been committed to David Jauss' *On Writing Fiction*, Cindy Vitto's *Grammar by Diagram,* Charles Baxter's *Burning Down the House*, and of course more classic ones like Gardner's and *Faulkner in the University.* Outside of *Mystery &* Manners, add a few favorites to this list for me.

CG: Sandra Scofield's *The Scene Book* is wonderful, and I also like George Saunders's new book on craft, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain.* I read Baxter's book in grad school (it's great!), along with E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel.* I have Matthew Salesses's book, *Craft in the Real World*, on my desk, but haven't read it yet. Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction* is also good, though that's more of a textbook than a book on craft.

For fiction influences, I've been enjoying Ruth Oseki's new book, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*; her scene building skills are exquisite! I also loved John Williams's book, *Stoner*, along with Wallace Stegner's novel, *Angel of Repose.* Roberto Bolaño's novella, *By Night in Chile*, is a wonderful example of compressed story-telling, as is Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud A Solitude. Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih is fantastic, and I love W. G. Sebald's weird sense of otherness. Virginia Woolf's work makes me wonder why I even bother to write (*To the Lighthouse* is amazing!), as does Joyce's *Dubliners.* And I love what John Le Carré does with dialogue and tension—*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* blew me away.

JM: Are there other mediums that influence you?

CG: Oh, so much music! Lately I've been listening to a lot of Appalachian drone music (Pelt; Nathan Bowles; Bill McKay; the Black Twig Pickers) along with musicians like Brigid Mae Power, Ben Chasny, and Tyler Childers to fit with some current stories I'm feeling out. For "Sore Vexed," I listened to a lot of Aurora, Nils Frahm, Olafur Arnalds, and Hania Rani, along with the Ukrainian composer Lubomyr Melnyk. I also find lots to think about through visual art, particularly the Dutch and Flemish painters Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Hieronymus Bosch. Their moody attention to detail is astonishing. But I'm pretty easily impressed. I just try to keep my eyes open and look at all sorts of stuff. I also love the vibrancy of Faith Ringgold's quilts.

JM: Now that "Sore Vexed" has been published, what are you working on next?

CG: Well, although it's cliché to mention that I have "a novel in progress," it's certainly true. I'm also working on several short stories set in the contemporary Amercian South, all of them coursing with magical realism. I'm hoping to finish those this year and send them out for homes.

JM: I've really enjoyed this discussion, Chad. I think we've hit on a few sharp topics and covered a ton in a short space. Thanks for chatting with me! Is there anything else you'd like to leave us with—particularly regarding "Sore Vexed"?

CG: Thanks so much for this opportunity! I agree: we've covered a lot, and I'm grateful for your good questions. I don't often think about how I write, so this interview has been a sound reflective exercise for me. I think Hanne would want us to tell those we keep close that we love them. But if that changes, I'm sure she'll let us know.

WINGED

CAROLINE BOCK

Circling the poppies, flying over the fields of white flowers, the eagle tracked prey.

We were there to burn down crops, a rite of spring against the farmers of Afghanistan. I was leading the patrol, thinking how it would be something to run through those sweet-smelling blooms. How the mountains flattened against the sky and the moaning winds made me ache for home—a week away, home.

Jax Jones pointed out the eagle first, a Golden Eagle with a six-foot wingspan, and made note that it was probably male. "Females are bigger, ma'am. Gliding like it's resting on the air. Its talons could tear us apart. That's the national bird of Afghanistan."

With its wings spread wide, that bird surveyed us like it was on a fire watch. On my third deployment in five years, I should have known better. I looked up when I should have been looking down. That damn bird was the last thing I saw before the IED exploded.

Days later, in a hospital far away from those poppy fields, the surgeon said to me, "Marine. We gave you wings."

I have wings—magnificent, white feathers flecked with black, made more for the Arctic tundra than the Virginia suburbs—a six-foot wingspan—fused to my spine. This morning, after months in the V.A. rehab, the xenotransplantation specialist says, "Seriously, those wings are going to make my career. Our paper about this experimental surgery—"

I stop listening. I didn't ask for these wings. The feathers bristle against my bare shoulder blades, wanting to do what's natural—fly. The doctor runs his cold hand down the stitches along my spine. He strokes from the wingtips to the pale outside of the upper wing to the wing pits.

I am still until I sweep the wings close to my body. I've been trained by various physical therapists who think I need everything broken down Barney-style, baby steps, to control the wings. The goal is control—that's been repeated to me daily. The wings center and balance me and enable me to walk. I don't need them to do anything else, and I don't need this damn doctor examining me anymore.

"Remember: no flying on those wings," he says, scrawling a fat notation on his device and smirking to himself. "Control, Icarus."

"The name is Antonia Anzio," I reply.

The doctor mumbles something more about success and restraint and scurries out. With him gone, I attempt to stand. Upright, at the edge of the hospital bed, my legs shudder with the strain of one step, then two. If I could tear the wings off, I would. Another step, a cut-in-two slash of pain—and I collapse forward. Breasts smash into the stone-hard mattress; wings beat. I won't be flying anywhere near the sun.

The rest of the morning is spent in the hospital bed, checking my phone for photos from Ma and pictures of my babies. But the only photos are from Jones. He's back in Montana, and he keeps sending me photos. *A White-throated Sparrow. A Brown-headed Cowbird.* He identifies the birds but nothing more.

I call Ma. She expresses her difficulties in bringing my babies to visit me in rehab: "How the hell am I going to drive two hours across Virginia with a screaming, shitting three-year-old and a screaming, shitting two-year-old in that broken-down Jeep of yours. You strap on those new wings—"

"Ma, please. I don't have to strap on the wings."

"Ever wonder why that man of yours killed himself? I'm about ready to leave those babies of yours on the side of the road and do it myself."

Ma knows I don't talk about Dan. The doctors all said the wings would fix me up, and here I am with Ma still telling me what to do and Dan still dead.

"Get home, Antonia, that's all I got to say."

A month later, the medics deliver me to the apartment I share with Ma. I carry with me: a wheelchair, no motor—I have to build my upper body strength; two stuffed teddy bears from the hospital gift shop; and a Purple Heart. The one-bedroom apartment in Arlington is crowded enough without me. "At least you had the common sense to rent a ground floor," says Ma in greeting me. She asks why I need a wheelchair, and I say mastery exercises are required for the wings. She scrunches her face like I'm making it all up.

My little girl is afraid of me. My modified sports bra exposes my scars as well as the wings. The two-year-old, who was crying when I arrived, doesn't stop when Ma drops him into my arms and announces that she's going out for the first time in months for drinks with her girlfriends. I slump in the wheelchair because it's easier. My baby-boy wails in my arms, and I gaze out the front window. Off to the side, a crow pecks at the garbage overflowing from the steel trash bins. The crow caws and more muster in a row along the top of the can. I wonder what it'd be like to join them—though the feathers on me are matted these days, straining my shoulders and neck. The wings flutter, raising dust.

I text Jones. *Stop sending photos of the damn birds.*

He doesn't stop. He doesn't write or call. A *Downy Woodpecker*, a *Red-winged Blackbird*, hawks, and herons against the biggest blue sky I have ever seen appear on my cellphone. I don't strip down and do my damn mastery exercises, or go to the out-patient clinic, or wash; I have the sour, dank odor of something cooped.

I finally call Ty. Big T. He's another one of my Marines. He runs an auto scrapyard with his brother. Some would describe it as 'chop shop,' but I prefer to think of him as an honest businessman. He has parts from every car imaginable and no one seems to know exactly how they get there. His true gift, however, is fixing up vehicles for vets.

His younger brother escorts him over the day I call him. I wheel myself out into the sun for the first time in a week—being in the chair is just easier. I hadn't even bothered brushing my hair, just poked it up with a hair clip. Both children are napping and will stay asleep for at least an hour. Ma's run out to do some shopping at Walmart. My government money is in and she can't wait to spend it.

Ty climbs out of his pickup, leaving his brother behind. Ty's in his work clothes, beer-bellied these days, smelling of gasoline and grease from afar. He flashes his trademarked big-hearted smile at me.

"Jax Jones keeps sending me pictures of birds," I shout out to him.

"That Marine was always crazy."

"I'm going to drive out and tell him to stop."

"Long way from Virginia to Montana for a short message."

"I got to go. Just for a week or so."

"I'll fix up this Jeep for you good, ma'am." He pats the Jeep down like it's a living thing.

For the first time, in a long time, truly ever since Dan killed himself off in the woods—one shot was all it took—I have another thought: I want Big T to ease me down in the back seat of this worn-out Jeep. He catches me looking at him like that and circles around the Jeep as if on inspection. "How many miles on it? You sure you don't want me to be on the look out for another car?"

"Just get this Jeep running smooth for me."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You don't have to call me 'ma'am' anymore." I rise. My legs jerk a step, and then another. Shoulders squared. The wings, with the slightest of movements, aid me with forward motion.

I press the car keys into Ty's hands, but I don't let go of them. His skin is feathery-smooth and sun-warm. He must still spend his days outside. If I could, I'd drive off right now; it's a kind of wanderlust, or maybe at this moment, it's just lust. The wings ruffle at the thought of leaving, and Ty is wide-eyed. He lets me idle over his knuckles before he draws the car keys from me and says, "Big T will get it done for you, ma'am."

Took him a week, but Ty returns the Jeep looking shiny and new—with modifications. His brother has trailed him in his pickup, again staying behind in the cab. During this visit, little brother has his headphones on and a wary look. It's like he's Ty's minder, keeping him grounded.

Just that morning, I had received a photo of a soaring eagle. I didn't even have to read the description to know*: American Bald Eagle*. I called Jones's cell a dozen times today to no response. He'd be crazy enough to throw himself off a cliff if there are cliffs in Montana—and he doesn't have wings.

"Ready, ma'am?" asks Ty, scuffling his way up to the stoop. "Okay, if I assist?"

I hope I'm looking serious, not in pain. I nod, and Ty scoops me up, carrying me out to the Jeep. He slides me into the front seat, careful with the wings, and explains, "No need to use your legs if you don't want to, ma'am. Just take it easy and try out these hand controls I put in. Of course, if you'd rather have a car with all those autonomous do-dads, I'm sure I could arrange for one to show up at the yard."

I settle in, and Ty's right. I like the familiarity of being in my Jeep's old driver's seat.

I practice looping around Ty in a wide circle. I don't have to think of my legs. I don't have to think of anything but how fast and how far I can go. I shout out to him, "What do I owe you for this?"

"Nothing, ma'am. My pleasure."

"Antonia. Or Toni. Or Anzio. Anything but ma'am."

He just keeps on smiling; I keep on circling him. "Can I take you for a ride? Ma is inside watching some game show with the babies."

All I want to do is go. This sense of restlessness has always been with me. It's one of the main reasons I enlisted at eighteen. Now, at twenty-four, it hasn't left me. Ty, though, says he has more work to do. I tell him, "Go, then. Go," more loudly than I need to, and he double times it back to his brother's pickup.

I stay in the driver's seat, weaving around the neighborhood until dark. Flocks of Canadian geese fly north in a formation that cuts through the stars. *Follow them, Antonia*, I say to myself in the shadows. The wings, pressed for so long against the car seat, lay damp and limp.

In the parking lot, I have to call Ma to come get me. My legs are stiff. I'm afraid I'll fall. She crashes and bashes that wheelchair out to me. I can't decide what she hates more—the wheelchair or me.

"I'm leaving," I say as soon as I am secure in that damn chair. "I have to go to Montana. One of my men needs me."

"What men? You don't got no 'men,' no more."

"I have one that's hurting. Or at least, I think he is."

"You got responsibilities here."

"When I come home, Ma, I'll finish my degree. I'll take care of my babies." Even though they remind me of Dan every moment of every day, I do love them. The doctors should have given Dan the wings—

he'd have known what to do with them. These wings, this experiment, is wasted on me.

I am sweating from the effort to roll myself forward on cracked asphalt.

"You're going to fly there?" she asks, watching me. "Use those wings, I mean."

"No," I say, without adding that it's not possible. I just need to see Jax Jones and tell him that nothing about it all was his fault—and to stop sending me pictures of birds.

"I was thinking it would be something to see you fly."

"That's not what these are for—"

"They give you damn wings and don't expect you to use them? To do what they're supposed to do? Those wings are something pretty—"

"I didn't make the rules."

"Let's get inside," says Ma, doing her best to avoid the wheelchair.

I shove on, head down, gripping the rubber wheels, drenched in sweat, intent on staying on the path. And Ma halts—right in front of me.

Without asking, she takes over. Pushing me the rest of the way inside, I feel her breath, full of tobacco and fast-food fries, on my neck. She is a wiry fifty with mounds of black curly hair, like me, and she's as strong as hell. She sways in the doorway, searching at the sky. "Sometimes rules are made by fools. But when did you, my daughter, become somebody who follows fools?" she finally says, almost to herself, before stepping inside, before double-locking the door and stroking my head good night.

By the end of the week, I'm driving west. Past acres of golden cornfields, I'm going all day until the road blurs. Ma agreed that I should go. "One last crazy thing, Antonia, and then promise me: you're home for good."

When I'm finally ready to stop for the night, I'm somewhere between Cleveland and Toledo and debate whether to sleep in the Jeep. I'd already struggled out in my sports bra and cut-off jeans to fill up, to pee, and saw how people gawked at me with fear or pity.

After another mile or so, I spot a motel with a sign advertising*: Live Music in the World-Famous Hi-Life Lounge*—and think this will work. I scuttle out of the Jeep, unsteady, graceless. I have the wheelchair in the trunk if I need it, but I won't. *Control.* The wings unfold; the feathers on the first downstroke, firm my spine. Cool air quickens the quills. On the upstroke, the wingtips angle out and steady me. I restrain rapid movements of the wings. On the next downstroke, I'm thrust forward a step toward the front entrance of the motel, and I repeat the drill until I'm at the entrance of the motel.

Check in and make a straight line to the bar, Anzio. Fake white flowers in squat vases dot each table—dirty and scentless flowers. Dozens of eyes light on me. *Go ahead and stare.*

After two quick, cold Buds at a table all to myself, I'm doing okay. A three-piece band swoons out some Hank Williams, Jr. A guy with hair slicked down to his shoulders sidles up to me. "Are those wings made for dancing?" he asks.

I'm sober enough to know that he's been drinking more than me.

"You look real good," the local continues when I don't respond. "You wanna dance?"

I shove the table toward him. Shoulders back, the wings bristling, I count to ten and stand. The wings tremble. *Control, Anzio.*

He's gawking at me, thinking he's going to have a show, something to tell at work or post on Instagram or Tik Tok. He snags me around my waist, yanking me toward him, and shouting out to the crowd, "Take my picture with this—this, what should I call it?"

My legs quiver. I concentrate on balance, on one step, then two, and I am out of here—and my legs slip out. I'm facedown on the *World-Famous Hi-Life Lounge's* filthy floor.

With rapid-fire laughter, he's saying over me, aiming at the crowd, "I just wanna dance with her. Come on, help me get her up to dance. We can show her the chicken dance. Keep your phones ready, folks." From the stage, the Hank Williams fades away and a polka plucks in.

After the longest moment, his crowd-crowing is cut by a scream. I had been so intent on the road I didn't notice Ty tracking me.

After shoving the drunk aside with a bash from the back of his hand, Ty picks me up off that lounge-room floor.

"Big T," I say, burrowing my face into his chest, folding the wings around us both.

Ty brings me to the motel room. He lays me down onto a lumpy, queen-sized bed. The room festers with mold and disinfectant. Ty shifts open the sliding doors that lead to a balcony of chipped paint and butts. The balcony overlooks the back parking lot, and just beyond, a stretch of fallow fields against a rising moon. A sweet breeze saves us.

"I should go," Ty says, losing his smile and tacking on that hard stare I know so well. "I should go get that fucker in the lounge."

"Ty," I say, and he sighs as if he can't do anything else but follow orders and drops down on the bed next to me. I knot my fingers through his. "Why'd you follow me?"

"Never been to Montana."

"Neither have I." With my free hand, I trace his sharp eyes, his fierce beak of a nose, the scars half-hidden by the tufts of hair on his neck, scars from shrapnel and burns. "I think if you were a bird, you'd be one of those Canadian geese, the ones that always fly in formation."

"I'm no bird, Antonia."

"I sometimes wonder what that eagle saw. High above those poppy fields. Did it observe all those white poppies scattering to the wind? Did that eagle wonder what us humans were doing? You know something else? My name sounds sweet in your mouth." I pull myself closer to Ty and kiss him hard.

"Look at you," he says once I'm done, running his fingers now down my side. He doesn't pretend that there isn't something different about me: arms, breasts, the curve of my hips, and the wings; the wings, he gives long, elegant strokes, before he stops and stretches flat on his back as if I ordered him to stand down.

"Some things just keep on going," he says. His eyes travel past me to whatever place he has to remember now. "Some give up. I'm a pretty good mechanic and I can't tell you why some things can be fixed and some can't. I can tell you this: my brother is going to be mad as hell at me."

"Why?"

"He was supposed to be watching that I didn't do anything crazy. All I want is possibilities. He doesn't get that." His eyes slide over to mine.

I ask him, "What bird am I?"

"You're no bird."

All I can think is this*:* his fascination might only be something about me having wings.

"I'm still going to Montana," I say after a while, and wait to see if he'll challenge me.

"I'll follow you," he murmurs back, and adds, "Antonia."

I bend toward him. He cups my waist with both hands, and all at once, rises me high above him. I think *control*, and then I think, *no*. There are moments we cannot control. When it is better to let ourselves be the experiment.

I'm hovering over Ty and spreading my arms wide—and then the wings, my wings, beat even wider. My wings bite the air. I'm winged. I lift him from the crappy motel bed and carry us out toward the fields. We glide on big, moonlit skies.

Spare Language

A Conversation with Caroline Bock

THE FOLLOWING CONVERSATION WAS CONDUCTED BY MANAGING FICTION EDITOR JAMES MCNULTY

James McNulty: Hey, Caroline. Congrats on having "Winged" selected by Xu Xi as the winner of our 2021 Adrift Contest! What'd you and Xu chat about when she called to congratulate you?

Caroline Bock: Xu and I truly connected over an almost hour-long Zoom conversation. She was so generous with her time and insights, I really appreciated it. She was surprised that I wasn't a veteran like the main character in the story, which made me think, *Yes! I must have nailed the voice.* I shared with her that in recent years I have taught several veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars—I teach at Marymount University in Arlington. A few years ago, I had a soldier, a young mother, who was in class with me. It was a literature survey course, The American Dream, and she was facing her third deployment in five years. The irony of the class name and the despair of this young mother has never left me. I also shared with Xu that both of my parents were veterans; my father suffered from what I now know was PTSD. She also liked the spareness of my writing, and then I had to admit I was probably channeling one of my former teachers/mentors, Raymond Carver, who I studied with at Syracuse University when I was an undergraduate there.

JM: You studied under Carver? What was that like? What did he teach you?

CB: I was in his fiction workshop—and we focused solely on writing short stories. I think I was one of two, or three, undergraduates out of a dozen students admitted to his weekly evening workshop. He made me appreciate the time and effort it took to write a story by having me go through many drafts—and this was back when, in 1983-1984, I was still writing on a beat-up IBM Selectric typewriter. Luckily, I could type about 100-words a minute. Most of all, Ray was a beautiful teacher—detailed, caring, and grateful for the time we spent together as teacher and students. We stayed in touch until he passed, too young.

JM: You mentioned how Xu was convinced by the veteran voice. Did any research go into the military customs or vernacular, or did you primarily rely on your lived experience interacting with the young mother from your class?

CB: Yes, I researched a lot of specific phrases, and I hope I got them right. I apologize to any veterans now if I flubbed something. My Pop was also in the service, in Korea, on the frontlines, and while he didn't talk a lot about his specific experiences, when I was a kid, we watched hours and hours of war movies together—and, this watching war movies and discussing them together continued all his life with me. So, I think I felt his voice as I was writing. I also found the voices

of my other student-veterans, particularly the women, in my head as I was writing.

JM: "Winged" tackles a lot in such a short space. We've got the conflict with the mother, the wings, Jax, and Ty's unfolding relationship. I like the quick structure of this piece; the pacing and momentum move quickly, and there are two or three different conflicts evolving at all times. How'd you land on this structure?

CB: I normally write either novels or flash fiction (a thousand words or less), so, I challenged myself to write a more traditional-length short story by entering this contest and others. I wanted to push myself out of my literary comfort zone to see what would happen. This story evolved through at least five or six drafts before I even submitted it to *Driftwood*. I think it also took on some of the flash fiction pacing, the stripping down to gut-punch moments. Though I knew from the outset—and don't ask me how—that my main character, Antonia Anzio, would face Jax, her mother, and Ty, and that none of these relationships would be easy for her. The wings came in a later draft, though Antonia was always disabled. My mother suffered a massive stroke when I was four years old, so the image of someone struggling to walk–my mother never did again—is always with me. And perhaps I was going back to the basic story idea that conflict reveals character, or perhaps I just like to write characters like Antonio Anzio who are just very difficult, complicated people with difficult, complicated lives.

JM: I see the flash fiction influences here, and I think they make the story stronger. There's an immediacy that's tangible—both in the short sections and the onward momentum. You don't waste space, and that's refreshing. I wonder, then, what a novel is like from you. Are your novels this compressed?

CB: I've had two young adult novels published by *St. Martin's Press*—my debut, *LIE*, is from ten different points of view—five adult, five teen—about the attack of a group of white suburban teens against two Hispanic brothers (inspired by a real incident on Long Island, NY), and people have said it reads like a confessional. It's very tightly written at 207 pages. The current novel I am working on—an adult novel–was started as a novel-in-flash, though that structure has broken down into compressed, propulsive scenes. I have a first draft at 90,000 words, and I'm excitedly/nervously revising my way through it.

JM: In keeping with this talk of the pacing and momentum, much of the story moves rapidly, but the final scene slows down the pacing considerably. Could you talk about the contrast and what you hoped to accomplish with that final scene?

CB: I know you've commented on that final scene before—I also have a film background. I think the last scene of anything is crucial—it's what you leave the viewers/reader with to reflect upon, to love or hate. I wanted to end on an image—I won't give it away here—but I wanted to end on a lyrical possibility. To your first question, Xu Xi also noted the end, that it doesn't end on despair, and why did I make that choice? I believe in possibilities.

JM: Talk to me more about your film background. How does that influence you? Do you have favorite filmmakers you draw from?

CB: I grew up in cable television (USA, AMC, Bravo, IFC). I was part of the executive team that launched IFC Films, as well as the senior vice president of marketing there for several years. I draw from that independent film movement—auteur works, which focus on character and story. So, I will watch anything by John Sayles, and more recently, I love it when I discover one of the many women directors doing exciting character-driven work—my new favorite is Eliza Hittman. Plus, always a cinematic love of mine is Vittorio De Sica, the great, classic Italian actor and director of spare and gorgeous films such as *The Bicycle Thief*.

JM: Of course, this is a literary magazine, not a film magazine, yet recurrent readers will know by now I'm a big foreign/indie film nerd, so I have to answer your answer with more film questions, though I'll resist asking you about your experiences with IFC. Have you

kept up with the contemporary social realist movements, which seems to echo Sica's Italian Neorealism? Folks like Kelly Reichardt, the Dardenne brothers, Tsai Ming-liang, Sofia Coppola, or the more obscure picks like *Eyimofe* or *An Elephant Standing Still,* to name only a few. Knowing your love for Sica, Carver, and sparse writing, I think you'd like those folks/films if you don't know them already.

CB: I'm impressed! Sofia Coppola, of course—she has a mesmerizing visual language. I am constantly fighting with my sixteen-year-old daughter to watch films on our big screen TV from filmmakers you have here. I discovered the Dardenne Brothers years ago at various film festivals and will watch any movie they make. I think I'm going to have to fight harder with my kid for the remote and make sure I watch a few others that you noted here. Thank you for being both a literary and international film/indie nerd!

JM: I remember being floored by *Two Days, One Night* when I saw it at Cannes—my first Dardenne experience. If Carver was a filmmaker, he'd be the Dardennes, not Altman. *Somewhere, First Cow*, and *Wendy & Lucy* are also all brilliant films by filmmakers working in the same vein.

CB: Of course, Altman made the movie *Short Cuts,* based on Carver's stories. Now, I'm going to have to watch it again!

JM: Your writing is spare, you studied under Carver, and you love Italian neorealism, which is also a spare style of filmmaking. Talk to me a little about this preference for minimalism and spare social realism. What do you find alluring about this particular style?

CB: I know this may seem like an odd answer: I was raised by my Pop from age four on. He raised four kids (I am the oldest, of course) single-handedly after my mother had a massive stroke. He was a guy from the Bronx, who didn't suffer fools or fancy-schmancy. I am his daughter.

JM: That's a very good answer—not odd at all! I figure the style that most writers land on often (though perhaps not always) matches their personality, or at the very least, it'll match the qualities they care about. What are the negatives to the minimalistic style? That is to say, what are the risks inherent in spareness?

CB: The challenge is the exactness. Too spare and I might be leaving out key details. Too spare and my sentences might be choppy instead of fluid. Too spare and it's all about style and not substance. I'll often break into more fluid sentences or descriptions in order to make a point, draw out a character, luxuriate on a word or phrase, slow down the pacing, or end with an image nine-months pregnant with emotion. Still, I always come back to these ideas: Make every word matter.

JM: This sounds right to me: often, young writers will confuse minimalism for underwriting; the text will be choppy, lacking in detail, and too style-focused. It takes a very experienced eye to tell the difference between minimalism and something just being underwritten.

Talk to me about the central metaphor of wings in the story. What do they mean to you?

CB: The wings, ah! The wings are about giving oneself permission to take control, to break out of the confines others give us, particularly as women; ultimately, the wings are about possibilities.

JM: You *are* forced to walk a tightrope between vagueness and specificity with this story—particularly regarding the wings. In your revision with us, you seemed to want to keep the wings somewhat intentionally vague, yet you also wanted them to be specific enough to be felt and seen. Talk to me about the push-and-pull there.

CB: I wanted the focus to be on character—for her to eventually "own" the wings. So, I started with much less detail about the wings and only through revision—and research on the anatomy of wings—did they become fully realized. I think the push-and-pull comes from this fact: I was a bit afraid of the wings

and all they represented to the character—and to me. You pushed me to think harder about the wings, and I added details and emotional and metaphorical layers to the story. This is why every writer needs a thoughtful editor.

JM: I sometimes think of an editor as a coach; it's their job to make the writer better without doing any of the work for them. I'm so glad my pushing you a little bit paid off and you're happier with the end results.

It's been said that every story has one moment (or line) that is so vital to the heart of the story that if it were removed the whole story would implode. What, in this story, is that moment?

CB: When Antonia decides to call Ty, that's the key moment. I hadn't thought of Ty until I wrote the line where she called him—I thought this would be a story of Antonia going out West to confront Jax Jones. And of course, with that decision/moment the whole story goes in another direction.

JM: Is there anything else you'd like to leave us with—particularly about "Winged"?

CB: I learned again the importance of persistence and revision with this story. This short story didn't want to be on a hard drive or in a drawer, it wanted to be out in the world—to fly. I'm so grateful my work found a home with *Driftwood Press*.

The Great Fall

KATE GRIFFIN

Tahmina Amiri was the first we fell out of. She had been listening to a sleep meditation podcast at the time. Half-way through, she jolted, and thwacked at the patchwork duvet around her legs—after-effects of a nightmare. That's when we left. We spilled from her ear in seconds, landing just millimeters away in a sparse coating of wax. She didn't feel us at all. Perhaps because it was only one of us, and this one, in particular, had been very small. It was a clear blue, the shape of a tiny orb—hardened like a piece of sea glass. Silently, it dropped from her pillowcase during laundry day and settled on her pink bed sheets.

We knew she was an observant woman; she did not miss us the way others would have. Fascinated by its rare beauty, she picked the orb from under the smallest of seven pillows, where it had hidden under its plaited corner. At first, Tahmina had thought it was a jewel, something that had fled a necklace or a stashed away antique, but she knew she had never owned anything quite so fine. Indeed, we had lost a good one.

Over the next month, she and her boyfriend Zaid showed the mysterious orb to their friends and family.

"Gorgeous!" Tahmina's friend Chantel squealed. "It'll be worth a lot, *that*, I'm telling you. Take it on one of them shows, those antique ones."

So she did.

"Pretty, but nothing we can sell," the gemologist told her, rolling the orb between her thumb and index finger. She couldn't figure out what it was made of, but she was sure it wasn't a jewel. Puzzled and irritated by her lack of results, Tahmina drove home, relentlessly questioning what else it could be. After pacing her living room for an hour, and scuffing up the hardwood with her new boots, she finally surrendered and displayed the orb in a trinket on the mantelpiece, concluding that it was nothing more than a beautiful piece of sea glass.

Tahmina took the orb into the primary school she worked at for a class of show and tell. The whole of year three jingled with excitement. It was contagious. Tahmina found herself giddy, anticipating answers she had never thought of. She was a teacher—the kind students actually liked. She made sure to tell all of those who were clever and brilliant that they were, knowing that they may have never been called clever or brilliant before. In the long wait for show and tell, the orb sat, radiant, on a ceramic coaster on her desk, inches away from banana boxes and Tahmina's mug of milk tea. Five chimes rang. The kids conspired after lunch in whisper-shouts about the possibilities of us. There was shoving in the playground lineup, arguing about who should be first into Tahmina's classroom. Should it be Timo, the most creative, with worlds built from Lego, or Lois, the best at science, with a collection of biology books from floor to ceiling in her home? Tahmina let Odessa in first, telling the line to wait until they were inside to share their thoughts about the object. They held their ideas until they couldn't any longer. With everyone seated, the children made wild suggestions about what the orb could be.

"It's like in a game. It's the thing you win at the end of a quest!" Simo shouted.

"It's got magical powers inside of it! When you eat it, you get big or small, like Alice!" Elsie said, pointing at the *Alice and Wonderland* book on Tahmina's desk. Dalton shook his head.

"Or—or," he quieted the room with a pause, "it's actually an object from a past life, come back to haunt you!" he said, his hands in a menacing triangle clasp.

Tahmina laughed. "Could be!"

"What do you think it is, Nate?" she asked another child, placing the smooth orb in his palm.

"I don't know," he said, "but it looks like the sea." Tahmina smiled. Whatever it was, it looked like she'd caught water.

During that week, fifteen people had found various sorts of us. We fell into their beds, their tiny cubicle showers, in piles of unwashed laundry hoarded by twenty-year-olds. Many had shared that they felt different, as though upon finding us, they'd lost something else. Tahmina had written to BBC News, and they discovered that she was the first person to ever lose one of us.

The reporter edged the microphone closer to Tahmina, who gave it a glance, as if suddenly remembering she was being filmed.

"It was so cold when I held it. Like it had been in a freezer for days," Tahmina said. The reporter stood stiffly in his charcoal gray coat, listening.

"And can you tell us what happened then?" he encouraged, his eyes abnormally wide and a little bloodshot.

"Well, I thought nothing of it, but the next day I went to the shops and couldn't find my way home. I tried to figure it out, walked a few feet in every direction, trying to remember the route, but no matter where I went, I just couldn't. Eventually, I had to call my boyfriend to drive me home. Now every time I go out, I need to use Google Maps to get back home."

After a couple of TV appearances and interviews, the news moved on from Tahmina. By then, we had become more common. Over a thousand people in the UK had found at least one of us. We fell from fifty people in Sunderland one Tuesday, but only one in the whole of Madeira. It happened like that. Sometimes one of us would fall, sometimes a dozen, and there was no way to predict who we would fall from, or for anyone to stop the memories they wanted from leaving. We began happening to the entirety of Berlin, then we took over Germany and made our way across Europe. With the majority of us leaving in the night, people began calling the phenomenon *sleep-shedding*, us being the shedding.

"I have thirty-six!" a large, fifty-year-old Ukrainian woman exclaimed.

"And me, I have twelve!" her husband followed. Together, they emptied their satin bags filled with us. Some, like Tahmina's, had been perfect orbs, but others were ragged like shards of glass. And not all were beautiful. Some were a dull piss-yellow, and others had clusters of pitted holes in them, the kind that scared trypophobiacs with how close and deep they seemed to drill into the surface. The people hadn't realised that, like them, we could be ugly too.

A percentage of people couldn't move their memories. Every night, no matter where they had placed them, the orbs crawled under their pillows where they had originally fallen. Several theories had been suggested by researchers and common folk alike about how we got back.

"They grow legs when we aren't looking—little ones, like beetles. Then, they scurry back into the pillows," a curly-haired secretary claimed on Tyne Tees News. People experimented with putting their memories in separate rooms, driving miles away, and throwing us far off tall cliffs, making it impossible for us to get back. They filled the gaps under their doors with wet cloths, blocking every entry. Some had completely sewn their pillows shut. Yet somehow we always returned to them.

One man installed a camera to watch his: a thick magenta stone containing the memory of his family's famous lasagna recipe. He had wanted to capture it and place it back inside his head. Over and over again, he had tried to relearn the recipe without it and failed.

"What is this?" his grandmother had roared at him after an attempt to use sliced parsnips. The whole room smelled of them. They had been strewn over benches and piled high on the dining room table. She picked them up with a scowl, their long stringy stems like tentacles, her best dish ruined by them.

"It's celery! I keep telling you, that's all. Four sticks of celery, dice them small-small," she told him, showing him the width they should be.

"Celery, celery, it's only celery," he told himself, but the next time he tried to cook he had completely forgotten and added twelve portobello mushrooms in the celery's place.

To his disappointment, his memory hadn't grown legs. It simply disappeared—then reappeared, back under his pillow in a matter of milliseconds. Uncatchable.

A boy called Ben tried to fit his memories back into his ears. He used tweezers, positioned them carefully, like he was preparing for an operation. By the third orb, he gave up. They were all a touch too big, something miniscule and immeasurable, like they'd grown a crumb in size immediately after leaving his body. Ben cried to the Santa Claus at his community hall.

"They're mine! I want them back!" he sobbed, pulling on the Santa's false white beard.

At a university in Vienna, Frankie met Brontë thirteen weeks after the first of us had fallen. She didn't like her then; she thought Brontë shameless, always raising her hand in lectures and talking so much that their professor had to ask permission to move on. It made Frankie cringe and shrink behind her stocky laptop, not wanting to be seen. She found it difficult not to compare them: Brontë's oversharing versus her own complete absence of answers. It forced Frankie to think about everything that she wasn't saying. Yet despite her annoyance, she was curious about the confidence Brontë wore, the unexpected loudness of her voice, the way she contradicted herself by looking like somebody else's shadow in that long black coat, and the sinking nature she had, curling into her chair.

That spring, they formed a truce at a house party. They listened to indie music until all of the people filtered out of the living room and it was just them on a futon surrounded by stacks of coats and square bottles of Jim Beam they couldn't afford. Frankie listened to Brontë compare sex to stone fruits: peaches, plums, lychees. Said her best one-night stand was like a nectarine—all flesh and half-bruised skin. It was the first time Brontë had seen Frankie smile. When Brontë asked why, Frankie told her, "Because you surprise me."

The next Friday, she met Brontë again. Brontë meant thunder in Greek—it made sense to Frankie. She even looked like it: ragged, chaotic, seconds away from a storm. They spent the night hidden under high ceilings and a winter quilt. Brontë would later describe the sex as a date and think herself funny for it.

Their meetings went on for some time, months of uncertain texts sent for the Saturday ahead. Then it became routine. Every weekend, Frankie and Brontë talked to friends at parties.

"It happened to Anita. She lost four. They think she lost her memory of learning *how* to speak—it's rare, but it happens sometimes," Diya said, and they all leaned in around her. "Those ones are only ever green, that's what I've heard." She always had the best stories about us.

Everyone looked around at each other and took a mental note of the colour green. What kind of green: juniper, moss, parakeet, shamrock, mint? They agonised over it. The answer was none. It was the memory of language Anita had lost, not the memory of how to speak—and it had been a bright canary yellow. It was much larger than most of us and a little squidgy, malleable; it left the soft imprint of thumbs pushing down.

"My brother lost his job because of his: seven years of school and now he's back working in Costa," Will said. They downed their drinks as a gesture of shared hopelessness. It had happened to most of them, but it had been small. Jaz lost all of her memories before she was five, which weren't many in the first place. Lewis forgot about his first stepfather and needed to be reminded during conversations with his mum. Alexi forgot about maths: fractions, and angles, and then how to count money, but a calculator solved that for her. They hadn't had a serious loss by then, most things had slipped away almost unnoticeable. It was suspicious. They lived with the fear that statistically it had to happen to one of them.

When they reached home, Brontë stumbled up the stairs, collapsing into a crawl on the final few. Frankie doubled over at her drunken attempt to make it up. She took pity eventually and lifted her into their bedroom. They both reclined on the bed, Frankie letting the red cup from Diya's, half-full of rum and coke, balance on the carpet below.

"Let's not lose each other," Brontë said, suddenly solemn. Her hand stretched up to the ceiling, imagining that she could hold air.

"We won't, course we won't," Frankie told her, taking her hand and tightening around it, as though a firm grip could hold onto things like us, as though we weren't always only seconds from leaving, as though they mattered.

Brontë woke up at 5 A.M.; she had always been the earliest. She kissed Frankie on the forehead, then left for a morning walk along the promenade. It was a cold rainy day in October, and the oak trees had just begun to brown. Brontë watched the leaves dance across the road. Everything in nature had its phases: growing, drifting, turning brown—she understood that. What she couldn't accept was that it was happening to people too, that she was watching everything important skip past her like dead leaves. She was tired of watching the world slip away. When Brontë walked, she thought of Frankie at home. On reaching the end of Whygate pier, something comparable to a punch hit her stomach.

When Brontë left, Frankie had slept through the closing of the door. As it turned six, lulled against her pillow, the inside of a memory had seeped from Frankie's ears. She jumped, as though she'd felt it slip away, and rushed awake to catch it. But it was too late. The memory of Brontë had gone, and in the corner edge of Frankie's pillow lay one of us: cherry red, the shape of a small stone.

When Brontë returned, Frankie saw only a stranger. The woman touched her shoulder.

"You have to remember me!" Brontë said. But hard as she tried, Frankie couldn't remember anything about Brontë. She could only recall the feeling of loving someone once, at some time.

Santiago had a lonely bed in a two-bedroom flat in Barcelona. In truth, he had wished us away. We could hardly blame him. He was plagued with the kind of memories that were bad, rotten things. They grew in him, somewhere rooted to his insides, like they had seeped out into blood and skin. We should know. When we fell it was in shades: oranges first, then blues, and so on. Everything by the dozen. When we began to leave him, it was at a time when everyone knew what we were and some had entirely forgotten themselves: their friends, families, and lovers had completely disappeared from their minds. In Santiago's case, the memories that had fallen had relieved him of his worst pains. He had lightened. When people asked him how he felt, he said, "relieved," and they looked at him in all of their loss, confused by why he had suddenly began to see the world in colour.

Santiago waded through throngs of people carrying bin bags full of us. Every few minutes he would stop to set the bags down, only to heave them back up again, a couple of memories spilling out onto the pavement under him. He left a trail, breadcrumbs of us scattered through La Rambla and all the way down to the beach. He first visited on his wedding anniversary, then three times over Christmas, and then whenever he had one of those bad, gray work days that gave him migraines—it became his place to forget. Getting there was a tiresome journey. The weight of us pulled at Santiago's wrists and set red lines in the creases of his hands. So sentimental, he couldn't part with all of us, but when he was ready to let a little more burden go, he would run to the water and throw handfuls of us in, one after the other, particularly those of us who were flat, like magic skimming stones. The rest, he would tie back in the bags and take home again, leaving for another day. Standing in the water, looking down at all of his memories, he saw freedom. He watched his mind spill out. There, the sea turned pink.

One day, he had the courage to peek under his pillow and try to decipher which of us held the painful memory of his late wife. Clueless on how she would appear as one of us, he thought of her as the shiny, pink orb, much like a rare pearl inside of a clam. But it wasn't her at all. It was only when he could no longer think of her, that was when the memory had left him and she had become a fandango purple droplet. At that time, Santiago had three pillows full of us and never checked inside them anymore.

On the news, we watched our counterparts fall out by the millions. When we had filled out homes, we only grew more. We burst from pillows and developed stories, growing as tall as blocks of council flats, breaking through bedroom windows and balconies. We built foundations, skyscrapers, and overtook the height of office buildings. We became part of the London skyline, one edge touching the Shard. People

travelled to Greece to view an island so overrun with us that all of its people had fled. Who would want to live in a place so full of ghosts when they could just visit instead? Tourists paid three euros for memories that were advertised as a stranger's first kiss or the feeling of a father's pride. Some put us into goody bags when they got home—kid's party favours. The lonely collected jars full, one woman filling her bathtub with orbs—hoping at some point there would be something for her to feel. When she couldn't, she flushed us, all eight hundred and seventy-four memories down into a New York sewer drain.

When we ran out of the living, we spilled from corpses, buried headstones, flooded the fields they lay under. They sent some of us to landfills, but we filled those too in all the grooves where plastic couldn't quite make it. A mortician in Minneapolis coined it 'the great fall.' For every body he received, the mortician dragged two tins the size of laundry baskets under each ear and watched the great fall firsthand. Some called him *the collector;* he had so many of us, and so few were his own. He kept the most beautiful in display cases, used us as ornaments for urns, coffin decor.

"Never ending." He shook his head with a smile. "Might as well make the most of it," he said, scouring for orbs that resembled red diamonds.

We knew that our existence must feel like a cruel trick, to gain something and lose something simultaneously. They made assumptions. Some religions claimed it as a new form of punishment. A church lady, so certain, told all of her friends, "God has willed you to lose something dear to teach you something about the way you've been living." Others swore, "it's karma! You took too much in a past life and now—see—you're losing it all." What nobody could grasp is that we were not punishments, or karma, or evil—we just were. The closest a person got to understanding was a street vendor comforting his bereaved customer.

"That's the thing with loss," he said. "It happens to everyone. It doesn't pick and choose; everyone gets their time." The customer kicked his cart over in response. It was not the answer he had been searching for. The street vendor watched him trod through the street, his shoes thick with mango and patches of tajín.

All over the world, people added objects under the largest groups of us, as though offering to a temple.

"Take it, please," a woman begged us, a mounting pile of orbs overfilling an old dam. She slid an image of a baby under. It joined three thousand more pictures, hopeful, agnoising, all joined in prayer to mistaken gods.

In Honduras, a man buried his son's broken motorbike under the tower of pillows by the Basilica de Suyapa. For seventeen years he had kept it, mourned for him over the broken pieces he'd stored in his garage. He'd waited there for six hours, expecting a singular tiny stone to fall from him. He was one of the few from whom nothing had fallen. It was a kind of purgatory, a heaviness the man was being kept in. No one would be able to imagine that the orb in question weighed only a milligram. At midnight, he took the bike parts home, covered them in white sheets, and mourned for five more years.

They so desperately wanted us to take their pain away. In any hour they flocked to us, the largest sculptures, the ones that called to them like healers. They laid down sacred texts and holy water and begged. When we didn't respond, they considered it to mean they weren't giving enough and quietly began to offer their homes, their daughters, their souls. We took nothing. We gave nothing. We didn't know how. We knew only how to grow and outgrow. Over the years, we fell and watched the world slowly forget that we were ever in their heads.

Loss Both Big & Small

A Conversation with Kate Griffin

THE FOLLOWING CONVERSATION WAS CONDUCTED BY MANAGING FICTION EDITOR JAMES MCNULTY

James McNulty: Hey, Kate! Welcome to the pages of *Driftwood*. We're happy to have you!

Kate Griffin: Hi, James! Thanks a lot. I'm very happy to be featured here.

JM: I've noticed over the past few years that we've been publishing a lot of *compressed* stories, and I think "The Great Fall" fits that broad classification well. Within only a few pages, you move between multiple characters and multiple countries. The writing is tight, and it covers quite a lot. Talk to me about the advantages and difficulties of writing in this style.

KG: I found that an advantage of writing in this style is how many lives you get to dip into. It allows you to pick small moments from characters and join them in a much bigger picture. The style expects you to be there temporarily, so there's less of a need to wrap things up tightly and more room to jump from one character to the next. You can go big—cover cities, countries, or the whole world. It offers a lot of freedom in that sense. Being able to condense a large idea into something small was challenging, but I think the style allowed my ideas to speak matter-of-factly, whilst longer forms may have demanded more explanation from the memories as readers form more questions over time. The advantage here is not needing to explain something that doesn't have a cause. It's not needing to make up an answer for why the orbs have fallen when they are merely a phenomenon. A disadvantage I found is that it's hard to balance how much writing is right for each character. I found that often I had to be sparse for the sake of the story. Characters will tempt you to write more for them, but often with something as compressed as this, it's better to keep something back.

JM: Could you share with readers a bit more about the process of holding back? What did you have to cut?

KG: In the beginning, I overwrote Tahmina's section as well as Brontë and Frankie's. The first draft was filled with lots of tiny details about the characters that would have read as boring to readers. It needed to be stripped back to project a scene of a character rather than a film. With the second draft, I revealed too much when it came to the theme of the story. When you want your intentions to be known, it's natural to speak them clearly, but with writing it's more interesting for the reader to see those intentions reveal themselves slowly, through actions. I cut over a thousand words from the second draft. This choice was largely because the theme was being told instead of shown and my narration no longer matched the style of the memories. I wanted to say and feel too much, but that's not how they are.

JM: I spoke to another writer in this issue about the benefits to overwriting vs underwriting. In your case, I think the benefit to overwriting that second draft was that it allowed you to find the theme; sure, that second draft might've been a little on-the-nose thematically, but that straightforward explanation of the theme served as a stronger guide for you during rewrites. I know many writers would disagree with this tact, but I think sometimes it's very helpful to write a thesis statement for personal use; that allows the theme to be fully fleshed out and consistent in your mind, which aids the writing so long as you're careful about blatancy. Sometimes, writers have to do a lot of work for a more modest result; many writers write a paragraph to find one good sentence, then cut the rest of the paragraph. This seemed to work for you and your theme; that overwriting landed you on a good thematic sentence or two that you nicely slid into the back third of the story. In fact, I'd argue that many writers utilize this "overwriting" tact—more for finding theme and characters than for any other facet.

KG: That's true. If it weren't for overwriting, I wouldn't have figured out how I wanted to communicate my theme. I had a basic idea of my intentions, but not enough to explain them well. When I wrote the second version, the theme sharpened and that meant I had more direction for all of my drafts after that. Writing it the wrong way helped me to clarify what I wanted the story to actually say. I'm definitely one of the writers you've described. I often write whole paragraphs only to end up keeping one line. Overwriting here got me two lines that stood out. For me, it's worth the work of trimming if it gets me that. Often, those are the lines people remember when they read your story.

JM: I imagine one of the difficulties of a compressed style is balancing vagueness with specificity, and a risk of *telling* more than *showing*. Of course, specificity and uniqueness of concept help to mask some of the *telling*, and the vignette structure allows you to get away with more *telling*, too. How much were you conscious of *telling and showing* during the writing of this particular story, and what did you learn about balancing them—or what allows you to get away with more *telling* than you traditionally might get away with in another type of story?

KG: Some of this story has a lot of specificity, what the orbs mean to people and how they value them are detailed. Other parts, usually for pacing or narration purposes, had to be more vague. Finding a balance is still a challenge for me. I think it comes from a need to be heard correctly. When you value a piece, you want to make sure it's understood. I didn't want too much confusion when people read my story. I wanted the ideas to be enjoyed in all of their strangeness. When writing, I wasn't massively aware of whether I was showing or telling. At points, I asked myself, would the memories care about these emotions, appearances, thoughts? The answer, a lot of the time, was no. They would want to be clear, but brief. What allows me to tell more is the perspective the story is written from. The memories are logical, matter of fact, they don't dance around things the way people do—they say what they see. For me, this is why telling works here. Also, because the concept of "The Great Fall" is quite big, I found that telling was necessary so that the ideas could be clear in the short time I had to get them across.

JM: The plural POV, the lost memories, is probably the most defining and surprising characteristic of the story. How'd you land on this idea? Did it make drafting difficult—or easy?

KG: I started with the aim of writing a story from the 'we' perspective. I'd just finished reading *The Mothers* by Brit Bennett, a novel written from a *we* POV that sounds like a community of mothers. It intrigued me. I wanted to know what it was like to write from a group. I couldn't find a group that I wanted to write from and everything I tried made the 'we' sound so unhuman. I was fascinated by losing things at the time of writing the piece and still am, so I started to think about what happens when we lose something crucial to who we are: objects, relationships, ourselves. How does that affect us? Memories became an option—close enough to know everything about the characters,

but unable to have emotions themselves. They could be critical or careless things. This made them fun to play with. Losing them could destroy someone, free them, or simply slip away, unnoticed. I allowed myself the freedom to imagine them as physical things—gave them colours and sizes, imagined how it would look when enough memories to fill a glass would fall, then a laundry bag, then a skyscraper. The first draft was easy, but flawed. It was written with the excitement of a new idea. Now, the story has been polished so that it keeps its buzz, but speaks better and looks cleaner.

JM: I like how you note that the "we" sounded unhuman—so then your solution was to lean into that and make it literally unhuman. This story is full of fun ideas; there's a sense of *play* at work that immediately signals this as being fun to write. Would you classify this story as "high concept"?

KG: Yes, I think that's a perfect way to describe "The Great Fall"! It's a piece of speculative fiction, driven by an idea, and supported by characters. The idea itself and the *what ifs* it makes people ask are what draws the most interest. Characters are there to add specificity and emotion, but the primary focus of this piece is its concept.

JM: With a premise like this, there's so much freedom to move in whichever direction you please. How'd you chart a course for this story? How'd you nail down the structure—and what ideas to follow?

KG: I'm not a planner—especially not with this story. I started with the goal of writing a *we* POV story and wrote with a notebook and pen until the idea sparked some excitement in me. I knew that I wanted to write about a wide range of characters and countries from the get-go. My intention was to zoom in and out again, focusing on intimate close-ups of characters for some time, then distancing to show smaller, more fly-away moments of a variety of characters. This zoom-in, zoom-out pattern became a structure for me. Eventually, I had to close what could be an eternal loop of character moments and conclude by looking at how the memories reacted to their effect on the world around them.

JM: You mention not being a planner. Could you talk more about why that is? What are the benefits and difficulties in not being a planner?

KG: I say I'm not a planner, as I enjoy freewriting a lot and most of my stories come from combined freewriting sessions. I write from a feeling or a basic idea, then highlight lines or concepts that stand out to me to use later. With some stories I make bullet points of what I'd like to include or a few vague details I might want in a scene, but I don't like the rigidness of a fully planned out story. It takes away some of the magic for me. I prefer to watch it unfold as I write, then take a harsh look at the outcome in the editing process. The benefits are that a lot of joy comes from writing whatever you want, without a voice in your head telling you that you must make what you're writing perfect. The first draft doesn't even have to make sense. You can do anything when you write just for you. Another benefit is that it allows you to veer away from your original thoughts into something more interesting. Planners tend to stick with what they have and work within limits. I'd rather the limits be taken away when creating, as I know I can add them back in when I need to redraft. Difficulties are that there are sections that don't always fit the rest of your story. Bits and pieces can be random when you allow yourself so much leeway. Usually, this means that my writing needs a lot of attention to make it work, shifting things around, or removing whole sections to transform it into something I would like to read as well as write.

JM: I love how honest and frank your understanding of your process is here—including how you're aware of your strengths and weaknesses, the joys and difficulties. I haven't met many writers—maybe only screenwriters—who outline a "fully planned out story." Most writers claim to hate outlines because this is their mistaken definition of an outline—but really an outline can be loose and just what you've described regards bullet points and notes. It's a bad planner who sticks to their original plan when a better idea occurs. Based on this specific process you've outlined, par-

ticularly in your last sentence there, I'm curious how your other stories differ from "The Great Fall." Do they all shift around, or work in a vignette structure? I worry that your process here of shifting things around, deleting sections, and restructuring wouldn't work quite as easily for a more linear, more traditional single POV story.

KG: "The Great Fall" isn't the first story I've written which has a vignette-style structure. My story "What the Sea Took From Her" is from a single POV. It looks at my character, Adrianna's life, through the romantic relationships she's experienced. Each section looks at her experiences with another partner and how the attachment ended. Most of my stories are third person and from the perspective of one narrator. But I still shifted those stories around a lot too. Like I said before, I combine writing from lots of free writing sessions, so I add originally unconnected scenes and find ways to glue them together. Sometimes this works more seamlessly than others. Often, those that work best are from writings around the same time, written from a similar focus and knowledge. When I join things from months apart or with very different themes, it's a bit trickier and takes a lot more removal and adding to thread them together into something that fits one character, scene, or story. Still, the stories work, they just demand more attention on the editing side of things.

JM: It's an interesting creative process you've got! Depending on the writer, it can be very difficult to force yourself to write, so I learned long ago that you have to go with whatever process feels natural and conducive to you—regardless of its negatives. This sort of scattershot, vignette style is working out for you, and we can all see the wonderful results, so keep at it until it doesn't serve you anymore, yeah?

Several points in the story—I'm thinking particularly of the lasagna recipe scene—are genuinely funny. Could you talk a little bit about drafting comedy? How does it differ from drafting more dramatic moments?

KG: I agree. It can be tough to push writing, but routine and allowing yourself to be creative in the way your mind works helps to get a lot of the work done. So, yeah, I definitely see myself continuing with this process.

I don't write comedy much. Actually, it's been a sort of fear I've had in my writing. A lot of my work is based on intimacy and sadness—comedy always seemed so far away from the things I was trying to say. I could never really find a place for it in my other work, but here it fit. Comedic moments are a curiosity for me. I wrote them just to see what would happen, then saw that their presence added some joy to an otherwise serious story. This story could have been far more dark and solemn because of how close it touches on grieving, but I wanted there to be a balance of light and dark, given that the loss of the memories are so random and causeless. For that, I needed a bit of humour to add a variety of emotions to the piece. I tried to ignore my inner critic and just had fun making those scenes with humour. Dramatic moments, on the other hand, take more of a toll. Dramatic moments seem to have a much larger effect. They make waves in the story. Their effects have to be tracked and used sparingly. I've enjoyed writing both, but I tend to favour writing about deeper, more dramatic moments. Writing them feels like more of a release. Although after enjoying creating comedic moments and seeing them land well in this story, I'm definitely less apprehensive about writing them in the future.

JM: You mentioned *The Mothers* earlier, but what other mediums and/or writers inspired "The Great Fall"?

KG: I was inspired by short stories and novels that looked at the removal of things from people: *This One Sky Day* by Leone Ross, in which vulvas fall out of women; *The Great Awake* by Julia Armfield, where sleep steps out of characters' bodies and becomes its own entity; *Eight Bites* by Carmen Maria Machado, where a woman's former unloved body haunts her. Mostly magical realism, inspiring me to write about impossible things made possible. All very different pieces, but all exploring what it is to lose something you thought couldn't be lost.

JM: Now that "The Great Fall" has wrapped up, what

are you working on next? Do you ever work on longer projects? I wonder if your vignette-writing process would be conducive to those; probably that would result in a very interesting and unique book.

KG: I'm currently working on a novel and a short story collection. I'm 50,000 words into the novel. While it's not in a vignette-style, it does shift around a lot and shine spotlights on a variety of characters. The novel jumps from past to present with each chapter. There is an eight-year difference between the past, where my character is a lonely fifteen-year-old, stuck in toxic family dynamics, compared to the present in which he is twenty-three, married, and trying to earn forgiveness while revisiting all he left behind. The novel alternates until the middle of the story, where it streamlines into the present only. In this work, I look at forgiveness, family, danger, growing up, and change. I hope to finish it within the year. I plan on experimenting with my short story collection. I would like to have vignette stories, single POV stories, magical realist stories, literary fiction, and possibly horror. Really, just a selection. I'm not completely sure yet if they will be connected by a theme, but I do think it's heading in that direction. Hopefully, "The Great Fall" will be part of it.

JM: In earlier drafts, you had a final line that almost set up the story as an allegory for cancer (or perhaps illness more *in general*), and other parts of the story seemed to hint towards it being an allegory for Alzheimer's. As I conduct this interview, I know we're still working on the revisions, but I wanted to ask here about your original thematic intentions and how they've evolved over the course of revision.

KG: Due to this story focusing on loss, in the beginning I gravitated towards obvious loss—death, terminal illness, and medical conditions that affect memory. Part of me wanted to capture something similar to dementia, to explore what it is for someone to forget what's important to and about them. But unlike dementia, I didn't want my characters to lose nearly all of their memories, only one or two, and I wanted most of them to recognise that they'd actually lost something. Cancer and terminal illness came in when the idea of loss blurred into the idea of grief. This didn't last long as I began to understand that you could mourn when losing things other than people and that you could mourn for people in many other ways than for their death. The more I opened up my mind to what we consider important to lose, the easier it was to move away from the more obvious choices of loss. What I want to show now is best summed up by the line of the street vendor: "'That's the thing with loss. It happens to everyone. It doesn't pick and choose; everyone gets their time.'" We all lose something without a cause. We replicate nature, cyclically shedding everything we've worked so hard to build. I wanted to show loss in big and small ways, from losing a partner to losing a lasagna recipe. I wanted to show that almost everything is temporary, falling in and out of our lives.

MAXIME COUSINEAU-PÉRUSSE'S FLOWER/BOULDER

FIRE PRESERVATION

TRIIN PAJA

if you ask me where I am going,
I am going where a birch without leaves

no longer resembles the starved. I am going
into the wind, the earth's widest room.

afterwards, I will still be going.

if you ask me more, then the world
will answer you: the hills will burn,

a song will fossilize
in the ambers of flame.

it is not a rocking chair that will burn,
nor a violin or a leather-bound ode,

but the tulip weight of mice bones,
an indigo wingspan, air

incensed with charred wolf fur.

if I lay under a tree bleeding with cherries,
I am too far. if the heat is a casket of light,

I am too near. if a child with old legs
is singing, I am near, near.

the fire bellows river absence.
a river is how the land heals itself.

one may cry to the fire: *land, land—*
and the fire will answer:

o child sacrifice, leper, widow, o witch
burning, o you, I am still only your child.

FUNERAL PARADE OF ROSES PT. 2

DAISUKE SHEN

The steam wets my face, turns my skin petal pink.
I lose control of language. The body is quick to follow.
speaking requires trust, too much trust. Before I was
this quiet I was very, very loud. *Remember how you*
were five years ago , my friend asks. *You could make*
a whole room quake with laughter.

The body is quick to follow when I lose control of language.
When we tried to die that night, I think we actually did.
Trust the quiet. Sometimes it is very loud.
A whole room quakes with laughter. I can turn myself into
petals. Five years ago, a friend asked me why I could
never remember anyone's names or birthdays. Who knows.

The night we tried to die, we actually did. Your body followed
mine into the afterlife—or the other way around.
I can't trust the quiet to take care of me. I'm shaking with
something like nervous laughter in my room, alone.
「それ本当に痛かったよ!なぜそうゆうことするの!」
って、ばあちゃんが私に言った。

Was it the other way around? Was it my body or yours who went first?
I can't remember what day it is, let alone birthdays or names.
Your face turns quiet, too quiet. I am sorry that I was very, very loud.
There are cherry blossom petals on my yukata. 「本当に綺麗だね、
コニーちゃん。」ばあちゃんが盆踊りで言いました。
I can't move or speak. I wet my face before washing it.

Interview

WITH DAISUKE SHEN

What were the inspirations for this poem?

I like villanelles a lot. I think I had re-read Duy Doan's poems from his collection *We Play a Game*. He writes villanelles and all poems very wonderfully.

What felt most difficult about writing it? Inversely, what came easiest?

In 2020, I was living back in my hometown that I had promised myself I'd never return to after experiencing some very traumatizing events. I felt so painfully isolated and completely lost my mind, and anything I wrote during 2016-2020 is really difficult to look back on and not feel this deep, burning shame. I guess what is most difficult about writing poetry or nonfiction that revolves around those darker periods of one's life, and at the same time, the easiest: that embarrassment that comes with knowing oneself so well that you can write about yourself with complete honesty.

How much revision went into this poem?

I don't know if I revised this one as much as I would, say, a fiction piece of mine. What I like about centos and other poetry forms is that I have a formula to follow—poetry doesn't come very easily to me unless I have guidelines. Looking at it now, I would probably revise the entire thing, but I think many writers feel this way about their work. There's always "mistakes" you'll see that others don't, more changes that you could make, but at a certain point you just have to be done with it.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

I think that if I'd been asked this question a couple of years ago, I would have said yes. I went to school for creative nonfiction due to the fact I didn't have enough fiction pieces to submit for MFA applications, though fiction writing comes much more naturally to me. I spent around three or four years writing about bad things that had happened to me, and now that I'm more removed from those experiences and have become a healthier person, I'm able to write more widely about the things I love writing about: characters with tics or obsessions or hang-ups that aren't my own living in realities different than my own. Or maybe they bear similarities to me: our writing is a culmination of perceptions, both of ourselves as well as others. Fiction allows me a wider scope through which to write about the things that interest me about humans and our messy connections, our search for meaning.

What is your favorite line from the poem or the line you are most proud of?

"A whole room quakes with laughter. I can turn myself into / petals." This is probably due to what I mentioned above: I quite like the idea of someone who can dissolve themselves into a flower.

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

If there's a line or ideas for a story that pop into my head, I'll write it down and stick it in a file where it waits for me until I'm ready for it—but perhaps it's more truthful to say when the story is ready for me. I'm trying to get better at outlining stories because I do think it's helpful to have it laid out in that way, but I usually just write the story as it reveals itself to me.

Learning how to be a better reader has helped me

a lot, by which I mean trying to figure out what the writer is trying to do with their work and reading it through that lens, rather than trying to impose your own understanding. I think many of us who have gone to school for creative writing know that we either learn or are encouraged to look for mistakes in others' work. As I've grown as a teacher and editor, I've learned that if I don't understand what a writer is trying to do with their work, that's on me—something a visiting poet once said during undergrad, and which unfortunately took me years to internalize.

So now, when my clients and students tell me how helpful and encouraging my feedback is to their work and how it feels like I really understand what they're trying to do, that means so much to me. I love being able to help other writers, to make others feel understood. That's all to say, once I learned how to ask more questions, that I shouldn't and cannot possibly hold all the answers, I learned to be kinder with myself and my own work.

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

Books: Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human*, Vi Khi Nao's *A Brief Alphabet of Torture*, Shuang Xuetao's *Rouge Street.*

Films: Toshio Matsumoto's *Funeral Parade of Roses*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady,* Shunji Iwai's *All About Lily Chou-chou.*

Based on your personal experience, what advice would you give to other poets?

Make bad art, and a lot of it. Learn how to be proud of your art and the mistakes within your art, especially. Trust the opinions of those who understand you and your work, but know that you are the one who knows your writing the best.

HEADLOCK / ON POETRY

SOFIA SEARS

Language as goalkeeper. Language as madwoman
polluting her own attic. Language as attic. Lan-
guage as landkeeping. Language as landbreak-
ing. Language as pleasure-hungry velociraptor, tricking
us into its waiting mouth. Language as accelerator
asescapehatch. Language as headlock, ripe in
the arms & tremor-veined. Language as blood ritual, as
the water bled from terror. Language as screenshot, as
gimmick, as the stranger in the window in the computer in
noiseless intimacy. Language as dead breath, as carpool line,
as what pearls & clots in utero, stays waiting, stays unmade.
Language as constellation as consolation of power to itself of
its own lineage. Language as locked loaded kickback as
bittered chest & backwards gestures, as relocation, as rep-
arative engine. Language as beloved blade beneath the pillow,
as the pillow. Language as the way we watch him sleep
as the way we keep ourselves awake, language as how
we sharpen our breaths. Language as molding
house archiving its own dead ends. Language as unputdownable
masochism. Language as molding tree mirroring our
incorrigible & ingrown hearts, language as yellowing spongy fungus
that is also a life form, in its way. Language as decomposition
as ossuary as the skull that fevers with baby grass
in a catacomb under our city, language as body
farm as maggot-ripe return, as green wrists sprouting
post-blue. Language as nightmare logic, as goblin,
as Hydra, as Medusa, as monster sulking & teething
under the bed, language as their petulant wilderness
and all the bends they birth. Language as your last supper
warming its own gums with all the time in the world,
language as wishing for & against all the time in the world.
Language as threshold pretending to be a place. Language
as uncurled hand, as coronary artifact as the scalpel that
disjoints imagined bone structure as a swerve
as a line shaken from its standstill as a cleaved pick
-et fence curled around your muscles. Language as an affair
you can't abandon for a softer axis, even for all
its tortured scenery & unfinished kisses even for all
the ways it won't quite love you back. Language
as itself as abstraction feral with tender fruit
as point of light-stunned pressure—

HOME

SAMANTHA PADGETT

1

in my childhood memories it's always September
my body tacky with sweat the translucent moon
in the sky my mother and I drive circles around
the neighborhood counting each street sign

2

not for the first time, my father reminds me to act first
with teeth gnashing lips quivering when drawing him
I begin with his mouth never his eyes, heart, or toes
crimson crayons his words black and blue against skin

3

the universe is ever expanding, an astronomer
says as he pours milk into his oolong, Earl Grey,
Darjeeling I can't be bothered to imagine his drink
when the distance between me and home is shrinking

4

fingernails dig into palms Sunday morning
my mother splits open biscuits and butters
each one still hot to the touch hands blistered
we listen for silent shifts in the atmosphere

5

cut open from throat pubic bone a smear
of entrails circles back to a haruspex dissecting
a past filled with this child ribs cracked open wide
I'm knocking on the sternum no one's home

INTERVIEW

WITH SAMANTHA PADGETT

What were the inspirations for this poem?

My dad left my mom and me when I was in the seventh grade, and the months leading up to my parents' separation were tense to say the least. There were many days when, after my mom picked me up from school, we didn't want to go home so we would drive circles around our neighborhood. That was what I was thinking about when I first began writing this poem and that is where this poem begins—with my mother and me counting street signs to avoid going home.

What felt most difficult about writing it? Inversely, what came easiest?

I often write about my relationship with my dad. My dad is a recovering alcoholic and my childhood with him was extremely difficult. In some ways, writing about him is easy because there's a lot of material to mine. In other ways, it's extremely difficult because I often wonder if I'm revealing too much.

Was there anything in your original conception that did not make it in?

In the original poem, instead of breaking the stanzas up with numbers, I used the street names. I ultimately decided against doing that because I felt that it was too distracting.

How much revision went into this poem?

I went through two different workshops with this poem and I revised it a couple of times before it ended up in its current form.

What is your favorite line from the poem or the line you are most proud of?

The line that I'm most proud of is, "when drawing him / I begin with his mouth."

How long have you been writing poetry? What has changed from your first poem to your newest work?

I began seriously writing poetry in the summer of 2020. I've been extremely lucky to have wonderful mentors who have helped me find my poetic voice. When I first began writing poetry, I was far more concerned with writing poems that captured what I thought poetry should be. Now, I'm far less interested in writing poetry that can be contained neatly in a little box. I want to write poetry that challenges me. I now write poetry that deals with difficult topics while also making me laugh.

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

Space Struck by Paige Lewis, *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath, and *Calling a Wolf a Wolf* by Kaveh Akbar.

Where can readers find more of your work?

My work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poet Lore, Moon City Review, South Dakota Review, Up the Staircase Quarterly, Rust + Moth, After the Pause,* and *New Ohio Review.*

Litany of Spent Attempts

EMILY DEMAIONEWTON

How much effort it must take to keep
a field of wildflowers blooming here.
Dear bees who make a home between the rising
concrete slabs, show me where, in this mock meadow,
to bury lists of times I wept instead of listening.
Halt construction long enough to fill
the pipes of grief with earthwater.

Flow back until the night when golden threads
rose from the river valley—maybe spiders
migrating; she called them UFOs.
Unfocus and you'll see them better, then
the final weight between us wrecked
by tenderness, which sifted heat
into the rust of where she lay her hands.

INTERVIEW

WITH EMILY DEMAIONEWTON

What were the inspirations for this poem?

I wrote the first draft of this poem sitting in the meadow at the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens. At that time, I was processing feedback from a loved one that when she shared feelings, I often got emotional myself in a way that made it about me. Watching the thriving bee population in the strange oasis in the middle of the city, I longed for them to teach me how to live better in community.

What felt most difficult about writing it? Inversely, what came easiest?

I knew for a while that I wanted to write a poem about the time I witnessed mysterious golden threads rising from a valley over a river, but it took me a long time to successfully fit it into a poem. The first stanza of this poem came easily. It took a few revisions to realize that the UFO story should be its second stanza.

How much revision went into this poem?

I revised this poem after its first draft more than most of my poems. Because of that, I know with more certainty that it is complete. I spent a lot of time making sure that each word does exactly what I want it to.

What is your favorite line from the poem or the line you are most proud of?

The last line excited me most when it came. I'd been searching for a way to describe the combination of power and comfort I feel when someone I am in love with touches my skin. This poem's contrasting industrial and natural imagery led me to exactly the right place.

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

Crush by Richard Siken, *Arcadia* by Lauren Groff, and *Bright Dead Things* by Ada Limón. *Crush* made me obsessed with the conflicting possibilities of ruin and utopia in queer relationships; *Arcadia* taught me how to live tenderly; and *Bright Dead Things* taught me that poems could be deeply emotional without being melodramatic.

Do you work in any other artistic mediums? If so, how do those other genres inform your poetry?

I'm also a dancer and a visual artist, but both very much as hobbies. Visual art often helps me process my emotions before I'm ready to articulate them into poetry, and it also sometimes informs the shape of my poems on the page. I've written some poetry that mimics the shape of the light in a photograph or painting, and it's also helped me learn how to create balance or purposeful imbalance on a page.

Ballet and modern dance have taught me about movement and flow in ways that inevitably influence my poetry and other writing. Understanding how energy flows through my physical body makes my poetry more visceral, I think.

Where can readers find more of your work?

My personal essays can be read in the Modern Love column of the *New York Times* and in *Dance Magazine*. A critical essay I wrote about the grief of the anthropocene in Paige Lewis's phenomenal poetry collection *Space Struck* can be read on the *Ploughshares* blog. And you can find my artist profiles, interviews, and reporting in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*.

Ghosts and Lingerie

DANAE YOUNGE

Bodiless lace // floral crimson // on a clothesline.

night winds of june pausing to smell the plaited peonies, phasing through mesh — exposed pockets of invisible skin. dewy tulle shimmers with sink water but its stems still seem to be curling on their canvas, the petals still untethering gradually, descending — as if drowning; irony in the enemy. it's the first year she's wrapped her chest with latticework — and already, she's beginning to realize how much of the world whistles. soon she will start her collection, keep it beneath her bed: faces of the wind in an old cigar box.

Interview

with Danae Younge

What felt most difficult about writing it? Inversely, what came easiest?

Finding the balance between visual description and situational clarification was the most difficult aspect of writing this piece. A large part of the poem is this singular image of a lace brallette on a clothesline—how that extends out into a metaphor about the complicated entanglements and disentanglements of newfound sexuality. Writing that imagery alone came easiest to me because the core idea for the poem was born from an image. However, adding in the right amount of context that the metaphor could inhabit was challenging.

How much revision went into this poem?

The poem was originally longer and included more specific details about the interactions between the girl and others over the years. This is often the case with my poems, in that I start with a poem that is much more explicit and edit it down to a shorter, slightly more ambiguous piece. For "Ghosts and Lingerie" this editing process fit especially well because I wanted the reader to realize that those interactions actually had nothing to do with who the people were, and everything to do with how they phased through her evanescently.

What is your favorite line from the poem or the line you are most proud of?

I'm really proud of the ending image in this poem: "faces of the wind in an old cigar box." It encapsulates that the people she has encountered are barely visible—almost like phantoms in her memory that have passed through her and left only faint images of their faces. I also like the unexpected idea of her keeping these 'faces' specifically in a cigar box and the implications of that. It's the type of a secret that she feels a little ashamed of.

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

I keep a document called "Snippets of Inspiration" in my Google Drive that is easily accessible whenever I have my phone or computer. I'll often get vivid images that don't mean anything in the moment but just feel like they have a poem inside of them. It's the same with specific lines that I then end up writing a poem around.

How long do you usually spend working on a single poem?

It will usually take a good three or four hours, but it definitely depends on the length of the poem. I often run into the predicament that I get the most creatively inspired at midnight, so poems have kept me up until as late as 5:00 AM. I've also discovered that I have to write a poem in one sitting, with the exception of minimal next-day word changes. I can't stop until a poem is polished and done, or else it will actually keep me awake. There are, of course, pros and cons to that!

Where can readers find more of your work?

My website (www.danaeyounge.com), and I post about my writing regularly on my Instagram (@danae_celeste_).

MOTHER, MOTHER

KINDALL FREDRICKS

The child ties a knot in her hair.
The child ties a knot in her hair, face twinned
in the mirror, sun lilying against her fine skin.
Lilying against skin so fine that when her mother first held her,
sorrow moved through the child, no, sorrow moved
through the mother like a cathedral bell rocking
without its mallet, like the pail of dark rank well water she once
carried to the mewling goats. The child ties a knot in her hair
and the girls in black begin to twirl with slippered feet, unwound
from the violin that carried them. A woman, her silence ruched
as elegantly as sorrow, moves through the girls.
When the dance ends, they crouch behind the dumpsters
and take turns inhaling a cigarette sticky with melted lip balm.

The woods, like any mother, feel a pang—
its doped-up rivers, always leaving, its stewed leaves
releasing a scent so sweet it makes the child root
towards its center, passing over the bicycle licked clean
by the sun, passing over the flowers, petals still slippering
their buds. The child's breath, too, is sweet—pill after pill
of stolen Motherwort, bottle after bottle of Emergen-C.
Like any child the mother rocks and waits for an undoing—
a rapping door at night or that soft tug, untying the thing
pulled into sweet bunny knots inside her belly. She rocks and waits,
rocks and waits until she falls asleep against a sycamore.
And the sycamore hums a song to her so fine, so fine
she can almost hear the water sloshing onto her mother's legs.
The mewling, the lapping of tongues.

Interview

WITH KINDALL FREDRICKS

What were the inspirations for this poem?

This poem was unfortunately inspired by what's going on in my home state of Texas. Governor Greg Abbott recently passed a very draconian law that bans abortions at six weeks, before most women and girls even know that they're pregnant. Astonishingly, it also deputizes citizens to sue abortion providers and other citizens viewed as aiding and abetting the perfectly legal procedure. There are no exceptions for rape or incest. As both a nurse and a mother, I had to write something about it.

What felt most difficult about writing it? Inversely, what came easiest?

Crafting the speaker was emotionally burdensome. She is so, so many girls. Easiest? I'd say I had fun with the mirroring and repetition, but I wouldn't necessarily say that anything about the writing process comes easily for me!

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

I would say so—most of my work is very image-driven, feminist in nature, and I try to create a space for the mythical even when it's set in the real world.

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

I'm a working mother of a toddler, so my writing process is one of utter chaos. I put my daughter to bed at 9:00, chug some caffeine, and try my best not to get distracted or fall asleep. Sometimes I'll get on a roll and write frequently, but other times I'll go months without writing. Not ideal, but I try my best!

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

That's so hard! At this moment these works come to mind: *Soft Science* by Franny Choi, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, and—this is a movie—*The Florida Project*.

Do you work in any other artistic mediums? If so, how do those other genres inform your poetry?

Not necessarily artistic, but my job as a nurse very much informs my work. I use a lot of bodily imagery and medicalized language because that's just the lens with which I view the world.

How much revision went into this work?

After I received some wonderful suggestions on the first draft from the poet, Nick Lantz, it felt complete. This is extraordinary rare for me, usually I nitpick everything.

Fire Lance

ROBIN GOW

I walked into school with a fire lance
and there was no school and there were
no metal detectors. The gunpower was pure
and ready to bloom. My friend has
surveillance footage of her front door
being shot at with fire lances.
She covers her head. The police
park their cars side by side
like they're dancing. I'm taking my war cart
down to the farmer's market
to make a mess. Everyone in my life
has wronged me but I'll never tell them how.
Where does a bullet begin?
I'm tracing the history of
a shrinking puncture. The wound
from a fire lance would be
eternal and permanent. The blast
hymnal-ing through a decade
into the next and the next.
Sometimes a bamboo tube.
We sometimes forget everything
is natural and organic.
I carry the fire lance
to the supermarket where
I will likely have no use
or need for protection
but if I'm not holding it
who will? There is shrapnel
older than the roads scarring
my hometown. Iron pellets.
Floating like life rafting
in the ankle of a statue.
Aim steady.

Interview

WITH ROBIN GOW

What were the inspirations for this poem?

I was doing research on the history of guns for a collection I'm working on about the Winchester Mystery House and gun violence. As a poet my approach exploring social issues I care about is often to turn to history.

To write the poem I read some historical accounts of people using fire lances and how those weapons evolved into guns.

Was there anything in your original conception that did not make it in?

The original version had more sporatic formatting but I opted for a more common left-alignment because I felt like it better allowed the reader to focus on the words which are already a little jarring I think.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

I think it's a little outside of my usual work. Generally, I write about sex and gender, and I think that lens is still present in talking about guns, but there's a different kind of urgency I sense in this poem. Usually my poems are a more internal panic and in this poem there's a more shared panic considering there's a weapon in a school building.

What is your favorite line from the poem or the line you are most proud of?

"Where does a bullet begin?"

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

Research, definitely. It's not like academic research, just Google searches and Wikipedia rabbit holes but I think engaging with other kinds of writing and material is really valuable to my process.

How long do you usually spend working on a single poem?

Not long actually. Probably an hour tops. I write a lot of not-good poems and just file them away and every so often it just lands and I'm proud of it.

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

feeld by Jos Charles, *Fifteen Dogs* by André Alexis, & cartoons/anime from the early 2000-2010s.

How would you personally define poetry?

Curious language.

Based on your personal experience, what advice would you give to other poets?

Write bad poems sometimes. I think I have wasted so much time worrying if a poem I wanted to write would be good. Write messy poems. Write cliché poems. The secret is a lot of them will end up being good.

Where can readers find more of your work?

On my website (RobinGow.com). I write a poem every single morning. I know it's a little much but if you're curious check it out. Also my book *Our Lady of Perpetual Degeneracy* and my YA verse novel *A Million Quiet Revolutions* that's just come out March 2022.

THAT SUMMER I WAS TWENTY-TWO

DANIELLE SHORR

eating subway sandwiches in the stockroom
of the retail job where I spent eight hours a day. I started
a week after college graduation. The sales floor
was chair-less. I squatted in the only corner without
a security camera so I could scroll on my phone.
In my mostly empty days, I read from the copy
of Fifty Shades of Grey marked down to a dollar.
On busier days, I sold vibrators that cost a week's
paycheck. I sold sex cushions that cost three. I watched
couples peruse and dreamt of intimacy I did not have. A man
I knew didn't love me sent me roses, a pizza, and a breakup
text in the same week. I had already requested the week off
to visit him. For seven days I sulked in the bathtub I hadn't
cleaned in years. I got a peony tattooed on my forearm even
though I had never seen one in person. It would not be the end
of me even if I would have liked it to be. The sun was
particularly harsh that July. The UV rays sent my immune
system into a frenzy. Eczema swallowed patches of my back,
arms, belly. Anywhere skin could mutate. In 90-degree weather,
I covered up the scales in long sleeves. I tried not to pee myself
hooked up to IVs. My body full of disease and the liquid
trying to soothe it. I lit sparklers in my backyard and
remember little else. August ate its days. I lived on
Lean Cuisines and fountain drinks from the Wendy's
next to work. In September, he returned. He didn't come
back for me, but he came back for me. I wish I could say
I did not beg. In pleas disguised as passion, I rediscovered
the lights underneath my kitchen cabinets. I braided
my hair for his grip. I wish I could say it was my first role
of sacrifice. There is no thesis for self-neglect. I would
write about him for longer than he wanted me. The eczema
healed when he left, I would forget about the cabinet lights,
and I would not be twenty-two forever. Like sixteen,
and eighteen, and every summer of working a shit job
and attempting to morph into an ineffable being,
and stuffing ill-fitting syllables into enough,
and knowing better while also knowing nothing
and knowing and wishing to know less
and wishing until the wishing turns another season—
the heat did not kill me, even if I would have liked it to.

Interview

WITH DANIELLE SHORR

What were the inspirations for this poem?

I have a series of poems in my current manuscript that are all about being a certain age in summer and the relationships I had during those summers. The first one I wrote and published was about being sixteen and this one was actually my last of the series about being twenty two. All of the poems reflect on the relationships I had and their (in retrospect) very glaring issues.

What felt most difficult about writing it? Inversely, what came easiest?

I struggled for a long time to write about this particular time in my life because even though years had passed since, I still hadn't worked through the aftermath of that toxic relationship. Writing this poem helped me put the experience and reflection into words.

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

I'm not a believer in the idea that you have to write every single day to be a good writer. I write when I feel compelled to write, because I never want writing to feel like a chore. My writing process is usually prompted by the work I read, which then inspires/motivates me to create. Reading poems that move/resonate with me ultimately guides my work in the right direction.

How long do you usually spend working on a single poem?

Eternity, it seems. I'm a big believer that a poem can truly never be finished. But sometimes I hold my breath and press submit.

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

There are a few poems that I am almost always meditating on. The first is "Good Bones" by Maggie Smith, which just encapsulates so much and has resonated with me since my first reading of it. Another is "Elegy for a Suicide" by John Poch, which is a poem I think about constantly. It does exactly what I think a great poem should do, which is sit in your consciousness like a song.

Based on your personal experience, what advice would you give to other poets?

Read read read! You can absolutely not be a good poet if you are not reading.

What piece of writing advice would you give to a new poet? What do you wish you would have known earlier in your writing life?

Read, write, repeat. Allow yourself to enjoy writing. Don't overthink. Don't overstress. Remember this is your outlet, not your punishment.

STRANGE SUMMER

LAURA GOLDIN

We were on an errand, carrying food up to the big house
Pretending to be lost children
Stopping to eat stolen bread crusts
Under Grandfather's willow tree

We were pretending we'd lost the children
Opening box after box and shouting: *not in there!*
Grandfather wept under the willow tree
(He couldn't bear another disappointment)

There, there. We taped his open mouth and boxed him up
Then picked cucumbers for the aunts and uncles
Who could bear such disappointment?
(Scanning the lake again for signs of Mother)

The aunts and uncles had their pick of cucumbers
To carry up in endless errands to the big house
And Mother, who had gone from the lake without a sign,
Left us no bread crusts. Stole away without stopping.

Interview

WITH LAURA GOLDIN

What were the inspirations for this poem?

I had been reading pantoums and experimenting with lines and phrases that appear and recur in modified form. The poem isn't a pantoum, of course, but something about the subject matter—which had itself emerged from a recurring memory of a particular time in childhood—seemed to lend itself to this kind of play.

Was there anything in your original conception that did not make it in?

Most of the notes I made for the poem ended up nowhere in it. I am a happier editor than writer, and what I like best in the process of revising a poem is the removal of everything that, on reflection, doesn't actually belong. There were a lot of literal memories I jotted down and then discarded because ultimately the poem didn't need them.

What is your favorite line from the poem or the line you are most proud of?

I am most drawn in this poem to "We were pretending we'd lost the children/Opening box after box and shouting: not in there!" I like the silliness of it, but also what strikes me as the truth it points to both about memory and about parenthood: we are all, I think, always on a quest to "find" our children, by which I mean to find out who they really are, what makes them tick, where they may be hiding. I loved the idea that the speaker is "pretending" to lose the children—just as children so often pretend to be lost—not even, necessarily, for the joy of rediscovery so much as for the pleasure one may take in the process of seeking: opening box after box and shouting out one's progress report (which in the case of the poem is an ongoing failure).

How long have you been writing poetry? What has changed from your first poem to your newest work?

I was writing poems in my early twenties but I stopped for a long time and didn't really come back to poetry until my mid-forties. It has been years since I started writing regularly again. When I look back now, what strikes me most about the early poems is how serious they were, and how seriously they took themselves. I have more fun now when I write, even when the subject matter is dark.

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

A very inventive high school English teacher of mine gave us Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Nose" and asked us to write a story in a similar style. I read *The Brothers Karamazov* the same year, and just as the Gogol writing assignment made me feel for the first time that I could be a writer, the experience of reading Dostoevsky I identify with the first time I truly felt that I could be a reader of adult literature—that I could really understand what made a novel. So "The Nose" and *The Brothers Karamazov* and for poetry—because the question calls for only three—Hermine Meinhard's *Bright Turquoise Umbrella*, which I've read many times and keep coming back to for inspiration.

Do you work in any other artistic mediums? If so, how do those other genres inform your poetry?

I love to draw faces, but I'm a terrible artist and end up writing captions to explain what the pictures are supposed to represent. Sometimes poems come out of the captions, so my doodling is not an entirely lost cause.

If at the Door

ADRIANA STIMOLA

Bring me boughs
hung with hammered metal;
your coin purse poured
on the bedroom floor.
Break up into
air-carried ash; a
that-night-laden sweater slung
over midnight rungs.
Overflow into crowds of mouths
and keep a cup safe for
my November mantle.
This is what it takes to
soften under tender fingers—quick,
before I fall, a pile of petals
passed without a pause.

Interview

WITH ADRIANA STIMOLA

What were the inspirations for this poem?

This poem started with the last line, "quick, before I fall, a pile of petals passed without a pause." I had a bouquet of farm flowers in the kitchen, and noticed, in one moment, that all the petals from a single bloom had fallen into this perfect mound on the table. I stopped and stood there for a moment—really took them in, thought about what the flower looked like in its prime and felt that we all deserve that kind of tender attention, in life, in death. What if I hadn't noticed? The poem built backwards from there.

What felt most difficult about writing it? Inversely, what came easiest?

The first line. That was the hardest. The last line came so organically, and had such a ringing tone to it, that constructing a cadence for the rest of the poem and a place to start it felt like a hill to climb.

Was there anything in your original conception that did not make it in?

Not in this one. I felt like I had to wring it into being—every word got used.

How much revision went into this poem?

More honing than true revision. I spent time with the potency and mouth feel of words, but the concepts (and original last line) remained.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

I *think* so. I find, even as a look back at really old work, that there is always an element of longing. And I've leaned into that. The longing is definitely present in this one. My work tends to be short, and concentrated, and that's the case here as well. I like to get into the moment quickly and deeply.

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

I rarely sit down to write a poem—I just sit down to write. I journal—a lot—in pen and paper. I'll pull over, when driving, to write down a line or phrase or sight that struck me. Sometimes the poems come as a collage of bits of moments I've captured in my journal. Sometimes, like with this poem, I'll have one line that I can't get out of my head so I'll start writing around that line. That's usually when I move to my laptop, if I'm home. That journal comes with me everywhere. And if it happens for some strange reason to not be with me, I'll handwrite the thought on a scrap of paper or napkin—whatever I can find.

How long do you usually spend working on a single poem?

Typically no longer than a week. I find if I revise or rework for longer than that, I run the risk of hitting a wall of "it needs to be perfect," and then I can't let the poem breathe, live or go after that.

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

Rachel Carson's *At the Edge of the Sea;* Joseph Cambell's *The Power of Myth*; Mary Oliver's *Devotions.*

Where can readers find more of your work?

You can find links to other published poems on my website (adrianastimola.com/poetry), and I post bi-weekly haiku along with select poetry on Instagram (@adrianastimola).

I don't want to take another bath
where I come out smelling bad. I don't want to stand up

and watch the water spill from my creases
onto the floor where it blossoms into the shapes of a younger me.

I unfollow every account where women are perfect.
I can't scroll far enough down to get to a stopping point. I hide

this fact like a shining block of gold
I pulled from your mouth the last time you lied to me.

I take the women and bury them under the rose tree.
Roses like something about piss, I guess I do too. Mark me and line your fence

from my wrists to my ankles, call me whore wife.
I'm gunna paint you a plate of biscuits, make them glow with the oven of my love.

I'll eat your paintbrushes and choke on the horsehair
just to watch you pull me up by my ponytail. Darling, you say, cough it up.

My love, you coo, pour salts, add lemon.
Vomit your tonsils into my hands, my child. You like dressing up as a priest

to pretend I don't know God.
I print out pictures of Molly Ringwald and walk her around the yard.

Look, Molly. (I level with her)
You were always the one. I don't know why they cancelled you

from that show. Forget Joe. (She's smiling now)
I show her the fountain, the place where I fell and broke my knee.

(I plead with her to accept my new life)
You watch us, like we are at prom that one time you left me with another version of myself.

Interview
WITH KELLY GRAY

What were the inspirations for this poem?

While sitting in my garden, I was having a sad moment with social media. This won't sound especially radical to anyone reading this, but the onslaught of images were eating away at my self-esteem and this was having a negative effect on my in-the-flesh relationships. I wanted to write a poem that captured my most vulnerable feelings about social media, conditioning, and who I thought I would be when I was a kid. "Pretty in Pink" is that poem.

Was there anything in your original conception that did not make it in?

Originally, the narrator had been thinking about and speaking to Molly Ringwald as if Molly was one of her movie characters, Andi Walsh. As I understood more about the poem, it became more compelling to address her as the actress.

What line from the poem are you most proud of?

"You like dressing up as a priest
to pretend I don't know God."

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

Right now, my writing group is essential to my finished work. They know my style, voice, and limitations as well as what I am trying to achieve, so we have built trust in feedback. We allow ourselves time to discuss everything from craft to ethics in our writing. They are skilled at helping me see when the poem becomes alive, as opposed to when I started writing it. I also rely heavily on recording and listening to my poems to catch what isn't working—sound is important to me. As of late, I write almost every poem in two versions—prose and lineated. In prose, I tend towards more explosive writing, perhaps I am more unhinged there, in the best of ways. In lineation, I lean towards working my words double time with enjambment, but that can create a distance that is not always best suited for the work—and other times, it creates whole new levels of intimacy. I keep a knife nearby while I write, which helps me to pretend that I am not too sentimental about any of this.

How would you personally define poetry?

I would like to invite folks to consider whether defining poetry is useful, or, does it keep us locked up and inaccessible from our readers and also from our best writing selves? I've become a stronger writer when my "poetry" bleeds into my "prose" and my "speculation" bleeds into my "CNF." I am to a point where I don't see them as very different—even when they are. If you asked me to define my good writing, I would say that I am writing well when I am unveiling one of my truths through carefully selected words, spaces and sounds designed to manipulate your body into thinking that you are in my body and that my truth is your truth. You could replace *manipulate* with *tempt, direct, orchestrate,* or *guide* and it is still the same for me. I want my writing to make us feel revealed and connected.

Based on your personal experience, what advice would you give to other poets?

Hydrate, walk a lot. Try to be a kind person. Allow yourself a few personas so that you can escape yourself when need be. Celebrate other writers and forget competition, there are enough words and lines for all of us.

California Without Makeup

Amanda Hartzell

I do, says the woman to the future.
The cake howls when cut but she licks
icing from ringed finger, not knowing
    black seeds don't take in the garden
    or root in champagne and armpits of lace.

She does not see the warm bodies
burrowed in pine needles and down
who kill for their young but begins
    hearing them flee at night
    and finds their fur

and puts tufts in her mouth
as if she too carries a child.
One promise of heat and time
    is incandescence. Another:
    Drought. And more months.

A dry wind will come inside
the house, testing doors.
When the bedroom catches fire
    she wakes like a little mission
    town abandoned in orange hills.

INTERVIEW
WITH AMANDA HARTZELL

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

It is. I'm attracted to grounding fairytale to the modern and tactile. I like to imagine poems as reversed tumbled stones—how to take the false shine out and return to the imperfections that reflect experience shaped and worn by time, pressure, exposure. Here that's the fusion of marriage and wildfire.

What is your favorite line from the poem or the line you are most proud of?

The last line. It was the one that sparked the poem, but rather than open with it I knew that's where I wanted to end up. The rest of the poem grew as a way of getting there.

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

One of my favorite phrases is "active waiting"—not writing but absorbing impression and experience all the time to use later. Also I find I create better when I'm busier because my time is more valuable. So those unassuming non-writing moments—chasing around a toddler, answering work emails, cooking, running—are all very stabilizing places where a poem begins to take shape.

How long do you usually spend working on a single poem?

Anywhere from one middle of the night to a few weeks. Sometimes a poem develops as a fully inhabited room and other times the furniture needs several rearrangements.

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

Richard Siken's *Crush*, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, and Joy Williams' *The Visiting Privilege*.

How would you personally define poetry?

George Saunders has the line "humor is what happens when we're told the truth quicker and more directly than we're used to" and poetry is something like that—a way to be startled into truth that, while not obvious, is immediately recognizable. And I think the best poetry invites the reader to that unexpected place then lets go of their hand.

Based on your personal experience, what advice would you give to other poets?

Read what makes you uncomfortable.

Where can readers find more of your work?

Find me creating on IG (@heatherandsmoke) and on my website (https://amandahartzell87.wixsite.com/writer).

Evening Game by the Tamarind Tree

ANANYA KANAI SHAH

With supple dreams they congregate around the tamarind tree. Horrified by the extravagance, the mendicant supplicates in front of the earth room dazzling with cobwebs. The earth is oxidized twenty times over the course of an inconsolable night. The secret police walk in and everyone disappears. Here is where the schoolchildren learn that disappear is a transitive verb. The schoolchildren aged ten, eleven, twelve watch as their bodies change, turn into weapons, turn into glass, turn into bright yellow turmeric powder. The home is a flashlight switched on. The body of a rusting female is found in the well. Sullied drinking water. In the evening, the schoolchildren play games with stones.

Interview

WITH ANANYA KANAI SHAH

What were the inspirations for this poem?

This poem deals with the concept of home as a conflict zone and the manners in which conflict particularly impacts the community—specifically children. At the same time, I wanted to show how people are resilient, with a spirit that cannot be defeated. At its essence, this poem aims to capture innocence and the ways in which it can be eroded.

What felt most difficult about writing it? Inversely, what came easiest?

In a rare occurrence, this poem was really easy to write. The style of the poem is a bit surreal, which provides the speaker to approach the material from an angle. I wrote it as a prose poem in my first draft, so I didn't have to change the form, but I did have a lot of longer lines, which I broke up to provide some diversity and to allow the phrases to breathe more.

The notion of the tree as a congregating point for the community was something that I started with, and then I introduced different characters to whom it would matter.

How much revision went into this poem?

This was one of the rare times when I only went through one or two rounds of revision, and the people I shared this poem with all had similar feedback. So I didn't spend a lot of time reworking it since most of it came as though full-formed when I put it down on paper.

However, I often work on my other poems for weeks or months, and experiment with the tone, form, and structure. Many of my edits are the level of the line, and working on the compression and enactment—how the narrative is presented—of each line.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

The surrealist imagery within this poem is something you can find in some of my other poems as well. I also use a lot of science metaphors in my work, which the speaker deploys here ("The earth is oxidized...").

I tend to use a lot of the first-person in my poems, whereas this poem is more macroscopic and utilizes the third-person semi-omniscient narrative.

What is your favorite line from the poem or the line you are most proud of?

It is probably this: "The body of a rusting female is found in the well, Sullied drinking water. In the evening, the schoolchildren play games with stones."

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

I have started to keep a diary—I use it to jot down ideas or phrases throughout the day. I also have a running list of phrases in the Notes app on my phone. These things have helped me keep stock of concepts or phrases to use next. It has also helped me become more disciplined.

Very often, I start with an image or a feeling, and work the poem outwards from there. I enjoy writing in the afternoon or whenever it is quiet. The first draft takes anywhere between fifteen minutes to one hour hour to write, but revision takes much longer. I go through multiple rounds of editing.

How would you personally define poetry?

Poetry is a liminal space—it allows for the gaps in comprehension and allows for many truths to exist simultaneously.

Quintet for the West

AUSTIN SANCHEZ-MORAN

I. Snowing in Cheyenne on Mother's Day

Overheard at the Train Depot Bar:

"I mean you get cancer in the arm, the toe,
you just cut that shit right off...
but when it hits your lungs, your brain,
your heart, you're gone man, you're just gone."
"...Yea, but I think it's just pneumonic phlegm."

Meanwhile, outside of town:

The blank screens of the snow fences
have one simultaneous cinematic dream
where all the ghosts of the frozen buffaloes
shake their horned, wooly heads and rise
from the deep drifts into which they fell.

II. Salt Lake City

The space out here
might leave more room
for idiosyncratic behavior.

III. When in Boise, Think of Utah

I was just sitting there, at this empty bar and a woman, skinny, middle-aged comes in and sits down next to me and I give her a courteous, "hello", and when I make eye contact, I see she obviously had been trying some new downer, but I was polite, I thought I'll just finish my beer and get back to my hotel near the airport. She starts sharing about her abusive ex-husband, her fat, bitchy mother who has to take care of her sons when she's at work, and, one of her sons is gifted, skipped two grades in high school, but can't graduate and go to college because there are no good scholarships for a kid that young. So I manage to find this rhythm of "Oh, how awful…" and "You're kidding me!" as I start to get engaged to the conversation, but I finish my beer, look at my wrist with no watch and say, "Well, thanks, I guess I gotta be heading home now." She stares at me with her eyes half-closed, trying to be seductive, "Really?" Yea really. I know what's going on, so I shake her hand and drive back to my hotel. A little later, as I'm lying in bed, it's midnight, I get a phone call from the front desk. "Hello sir, there is a -----, who would like to come up."

IV. Sangre de Cristo

The tuckering out
The tears of Georgia O'Keeffe
The purpling mountain light

V. Yakima

Mas alla de los huertos de manzanos
hay esqueletos de arboles
que rodean este valle.

Encima, ángeles con alas como colmillos
agarre la noche
y nunca se dejan ir.

Translation:

Further away from the apple orchards
there are skeletons of trees
that surround this valley.

Above, angels with wings like fangs
grip the night
and are never letting go.

INTERVIEW

WITH AUSTIN SANCHEZ-MORAN

What were the inspirations for this poem?

The West. (Specifically Routes 82, 84, 80: Mile Markers 76, 249, and 153 1/2)

What does your writing process look like? Are there any practices that have become invaluable in your writing journey?

Continually find ways of discovering that you are among foxes, and that you want to always aspire to become a porcupine.

How long have you been writing poetry? What has changed from your first poem to your newest work?

Since I could squawk, I have been learning how to squeak.

If you had to narrow it down, what three books (or other pieces of media) have had the most impact on your writing?

The 1998 sports season in general, the children's book, "The Sandman" (1989), and Chex Cereal, specifically Rice Chex with the "Chex Quest" CD-ROM computer game inside.

How would you personally define poetry?

Real toads with imaginary gardens in them.

Based on your personal experience, what advice would you give to other poets?

Hey, don't look at my paper!

What piece of writing advice would you give to a new poet? What do you wish you would have known earlier in your writing life?

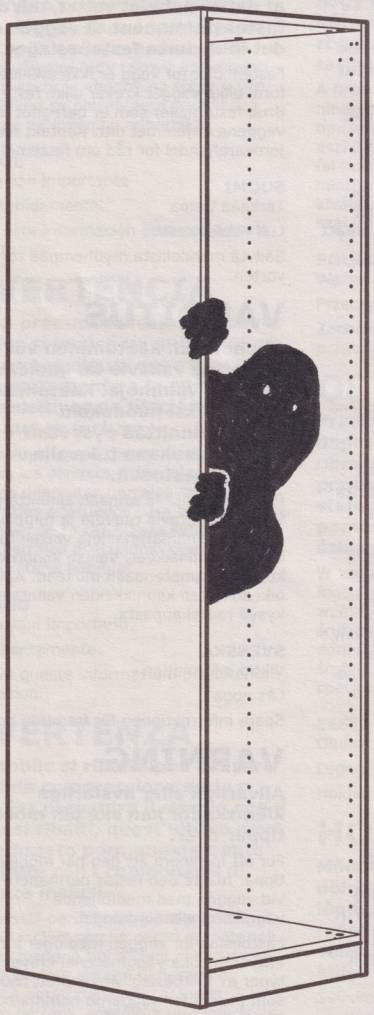
"Enjoy every sandwich."

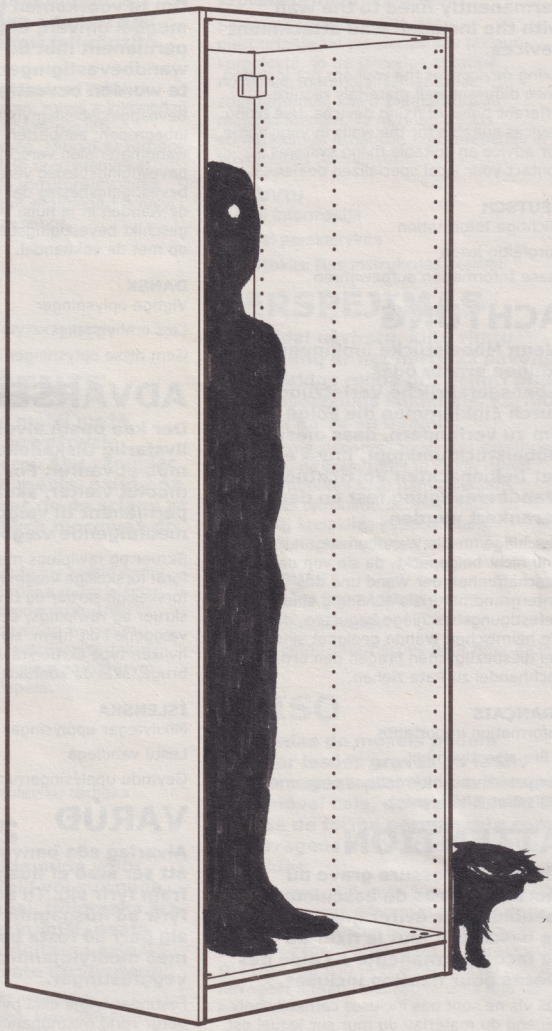
- Warren Zevon

Where can readers find more of your work?

Suburban Sutras, published in 2021 by *Finishing Line Press.*

PAX

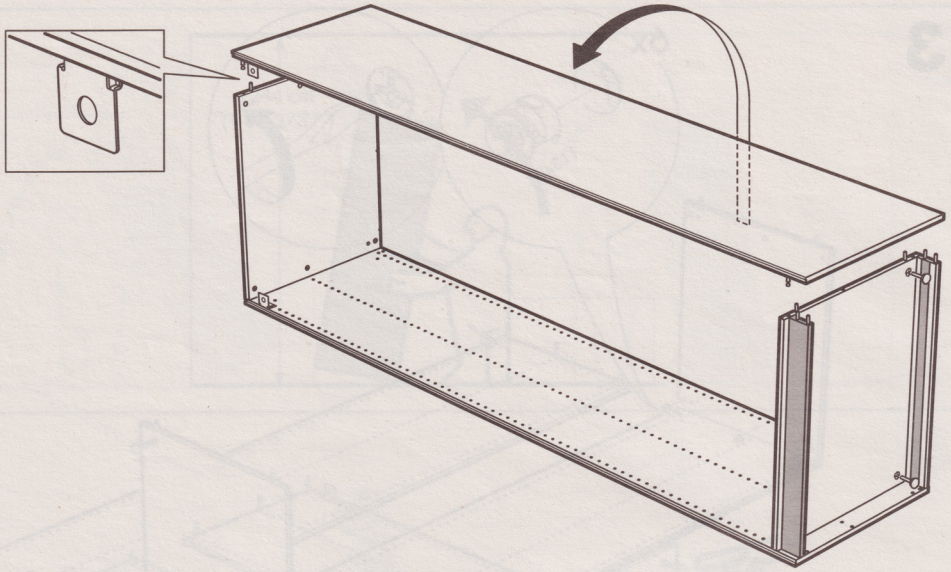




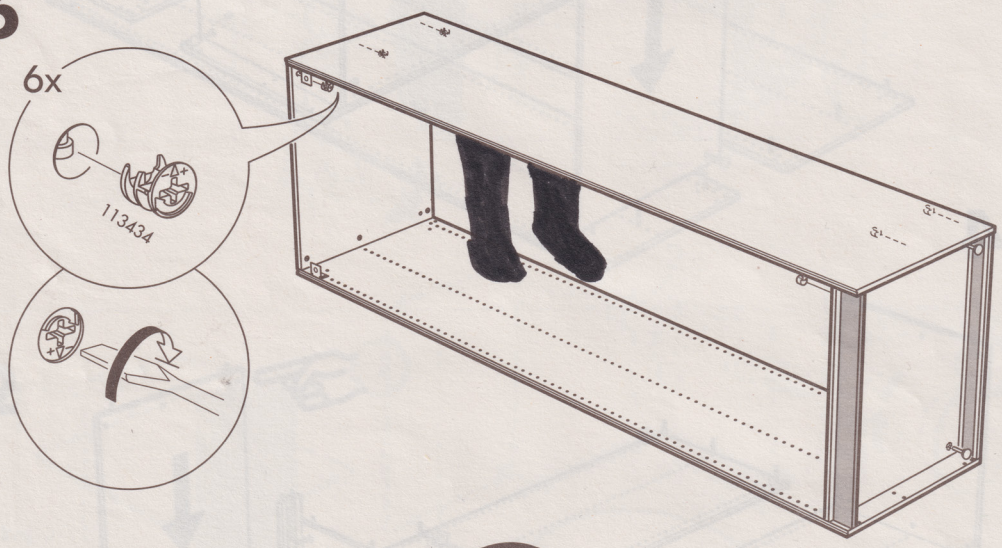
IKEA®

Design and Quality
IKEA of Sweden

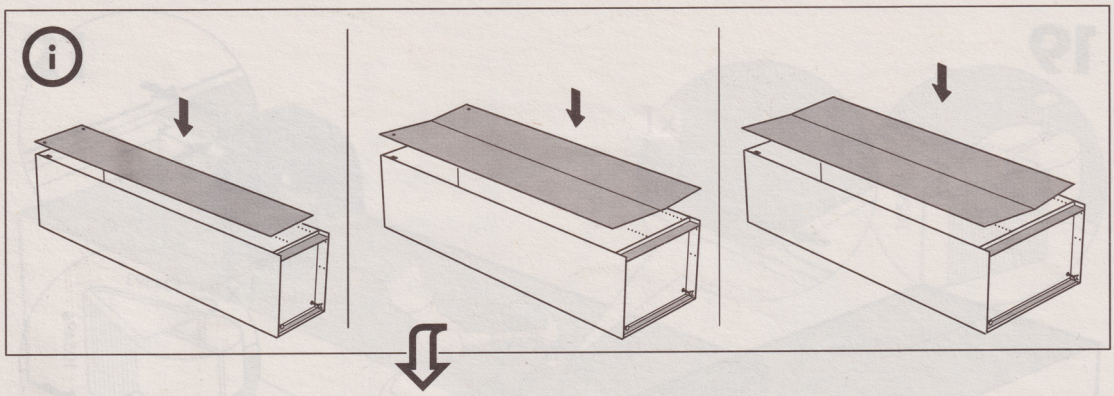
15



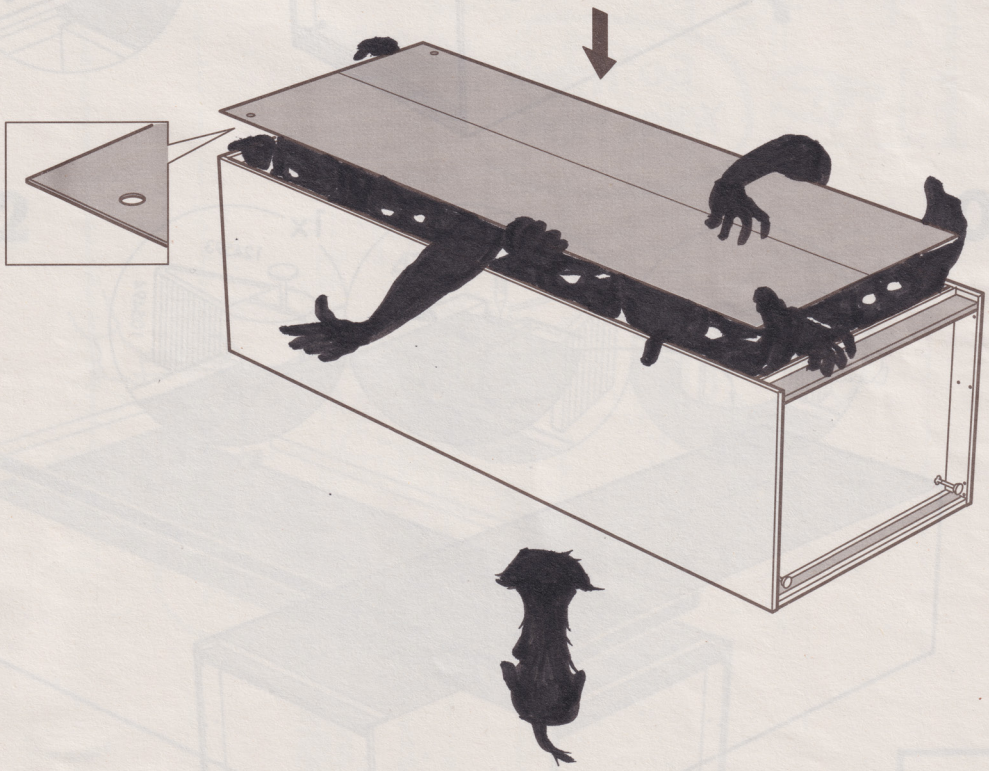
16



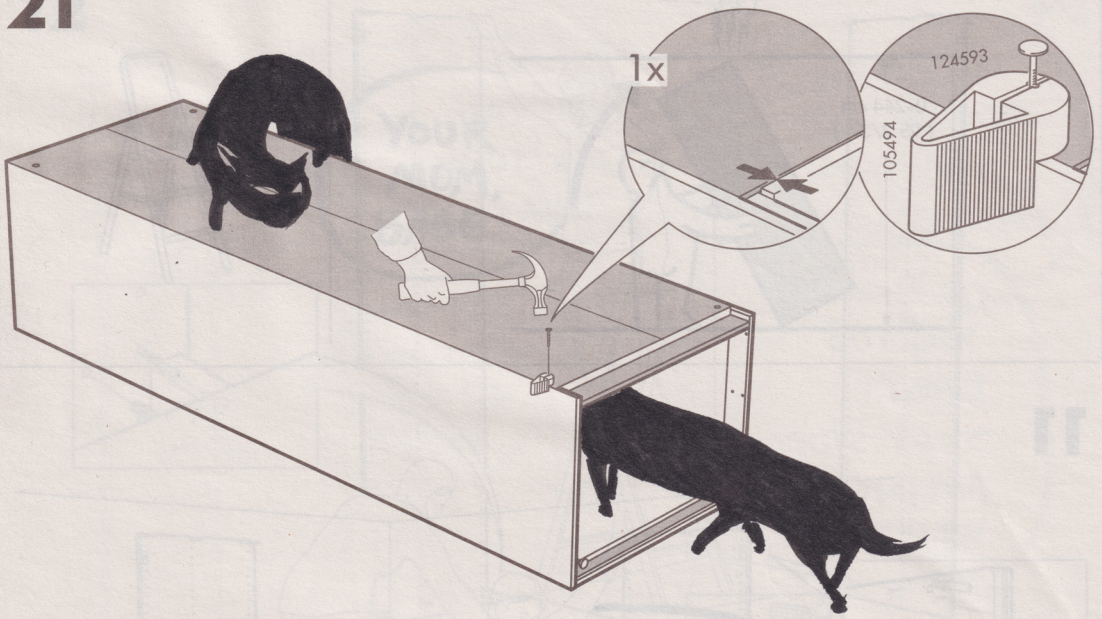
17



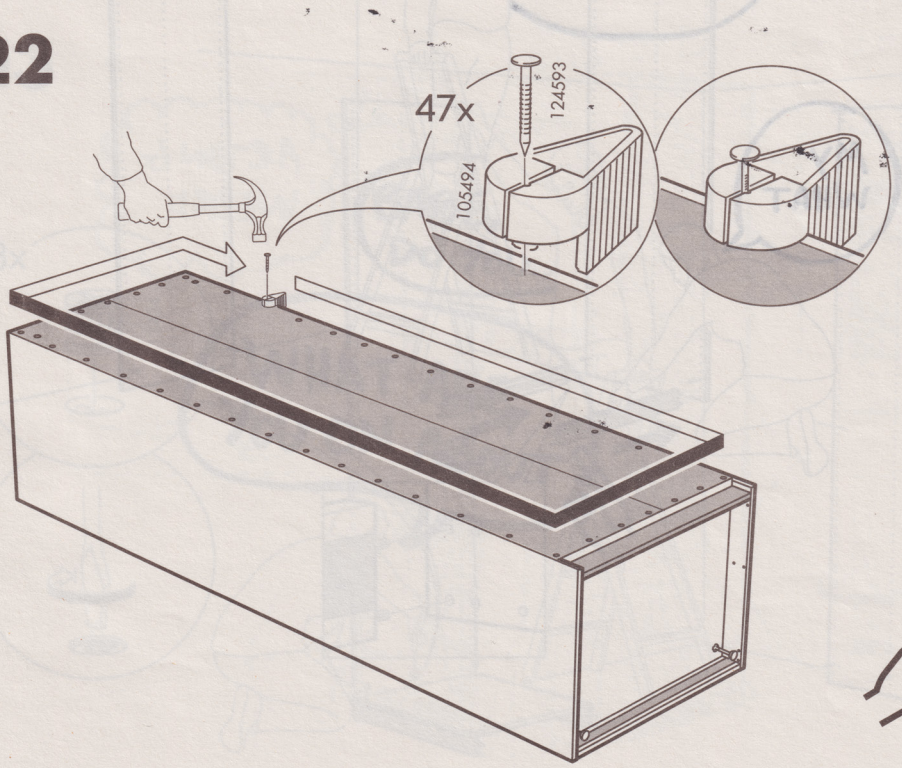
18



21



22



Interview
with Daniel Ferreira

Working with a furniture manual as your base page is a fascinating way to craft comics. What drew you to this multimedia approach? Building off that, what are the challenges of working on an already rendered canvas?

The booklet is printed in this very rough, porous paper, which is very satisfying to draw on (it soaks the ink very nicely). I often draw on manuals, pamphlets and newspaper. Working on top of pre-existing content prompts me to do things I'd never think of doing if I had a blank canvas.

In this case, the technical schematics provided a great starting point, while still giving me tons of empty space to work with.

How would you describe your aesthetic?

Sloppy.

What inspired this comic? Tell us more about the origins of its creation and whether any aspects of it were inspired by real life.

I didn't know what I was going to draw until I started making the shapes. Once the figures started popping up, it became about expressing some sort of general undefined uneasiness.

I usually struggle to execute what I plan. But in this case I had no plan (and no drafts), so no struggle.

What instruments did you use here?

Ink (fine line pen) on paper.

What other comic mediums do you work in? Do you have a particular preference?

I'd love to just do ink on paper, like with this series. But most of my comics are done digitally, using a tablet. My limited drawing skills (and available time) don't match my ideas, so I need to rely on the crutches of digital media (god bless undo).

Transitioning from creating artwork to fully-fledged comics can often feel daunting for artists. Do you have any tips for aspiring comic writers? What were things you wish you would have known when you were starting out?

I don't feel like I've ever done something that I'd consider a "fully-fledged" comic. I lack the discipline and time for that. Mostly I do strips, occasional one-pagers and very short series (like this one). I have been working on a long-form narrative comic, but progress is slow.

When does a comic feel "done" in your mind?

Never. That's why publishing is great—suddenly there's a deadline.

If you had to narrow it down, who would you say are your three biggest influences?

Daniel Clowes, Laerte Coutinho, and David Lynch.

Where can our readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

I've published in a few anthologies, but I mostly self-publish online. You can find me on Reddit and Instagram (@Modernlovecomic). Most of my old comics are hosted at *Comic Genesis* (beware, very weird and uneven).

What are your own artistic goals for the future? Simply, what do you want to do next?

I'm usually working on a few projects across different media at any given time (which explains why I take so long to finish stuff). Currently I'm working on the aforementioned long-form narrative comic, recording some music and coding a minimalistic puzzle game. More about me and my work in my main website (www.7luas.com.br).

Ghost Story

author:
Amanda Ngo

illustrator:
Kendall Krantz

When I was younger, my dad used to tell me stories of his escape from Vietnam.

In one story, he was on his way to Cambodia by foot.

He sat under a tree and let exhaustion lull him to sleep

until he heard the leaves rustle.

The body of a monkey, the head of a ghoul, morphed souls of man and beast who died in this forest.

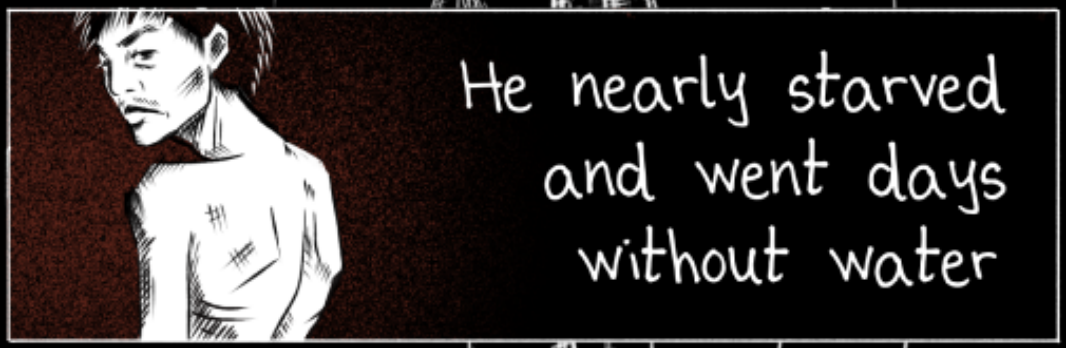
The war killed beyond one's life. It reached beyond the battlefield, haunting those who survived. My father wasn't sure if he would. The touch of the war's dead things reached out to him, cold, wet, and hungry.

Nonsense.


Your father saw a lot of dark things during the war, but that never happened to him.
Mom

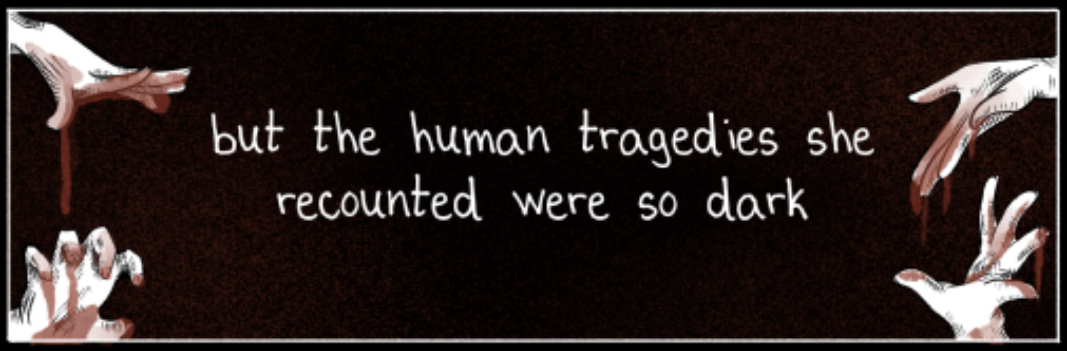

He heard landmines go off

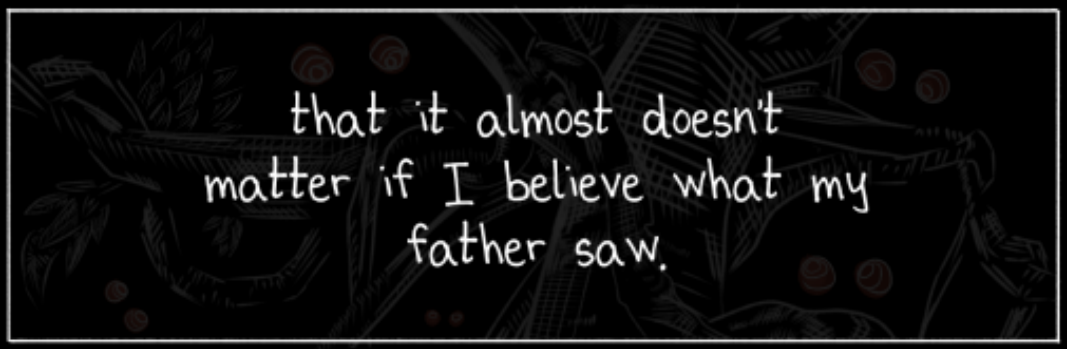

He broke his skin on rocks and roots


He nearly starved and went days without water


But there was no ghoul.

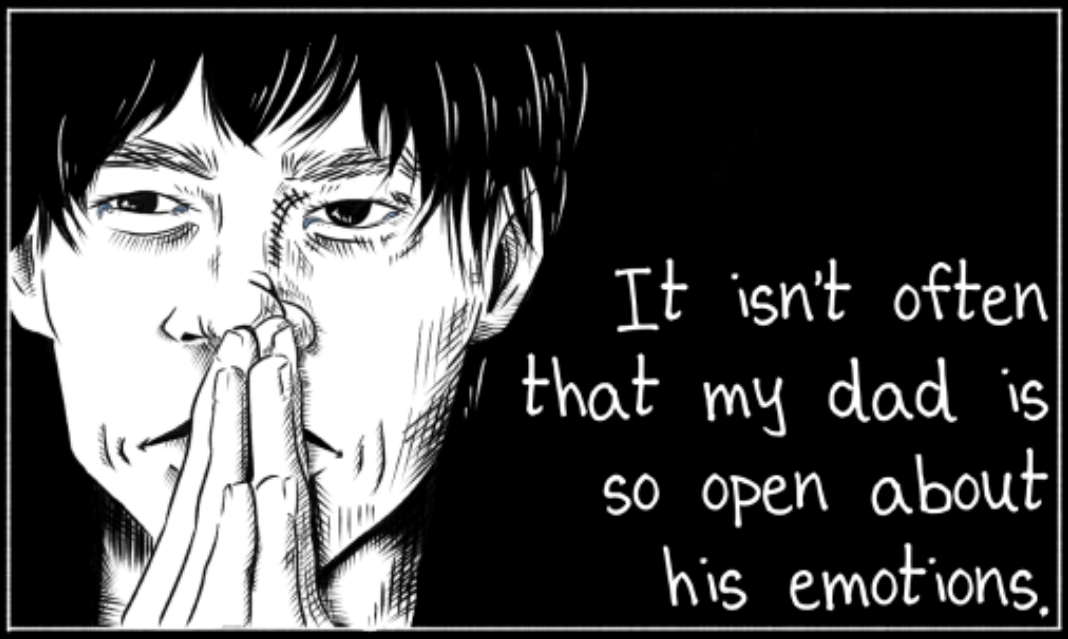

My mom scoffs at this ghost story,


but the human tragedies she recounted were so dark


that it almost doesn't matter if I believe what my father saw.


What happened next?


I don't remember.


It isn't often that my dad is so open about his emotions.


These early memories,


when he still told me his stories,


gave me a glimmer of another side of him.


But these moments grew further apart.
You dont know a hard life.


In time,
You only know stories.


they passed altogether.
whatever.

But I like to remember those moments of care...

smiley faces drawn on tests I left out for him to see;

his voice, heavy in the tales he told,

and the feather duster he used to wake up my sister and me for school by tickling our feet.

As I grew older,

Central Middle School

Let's take the photo quickly and go.

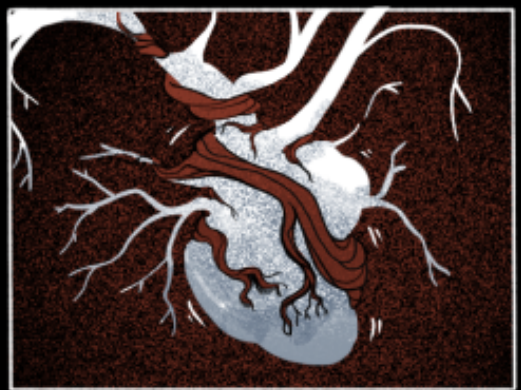
he grew meaner.

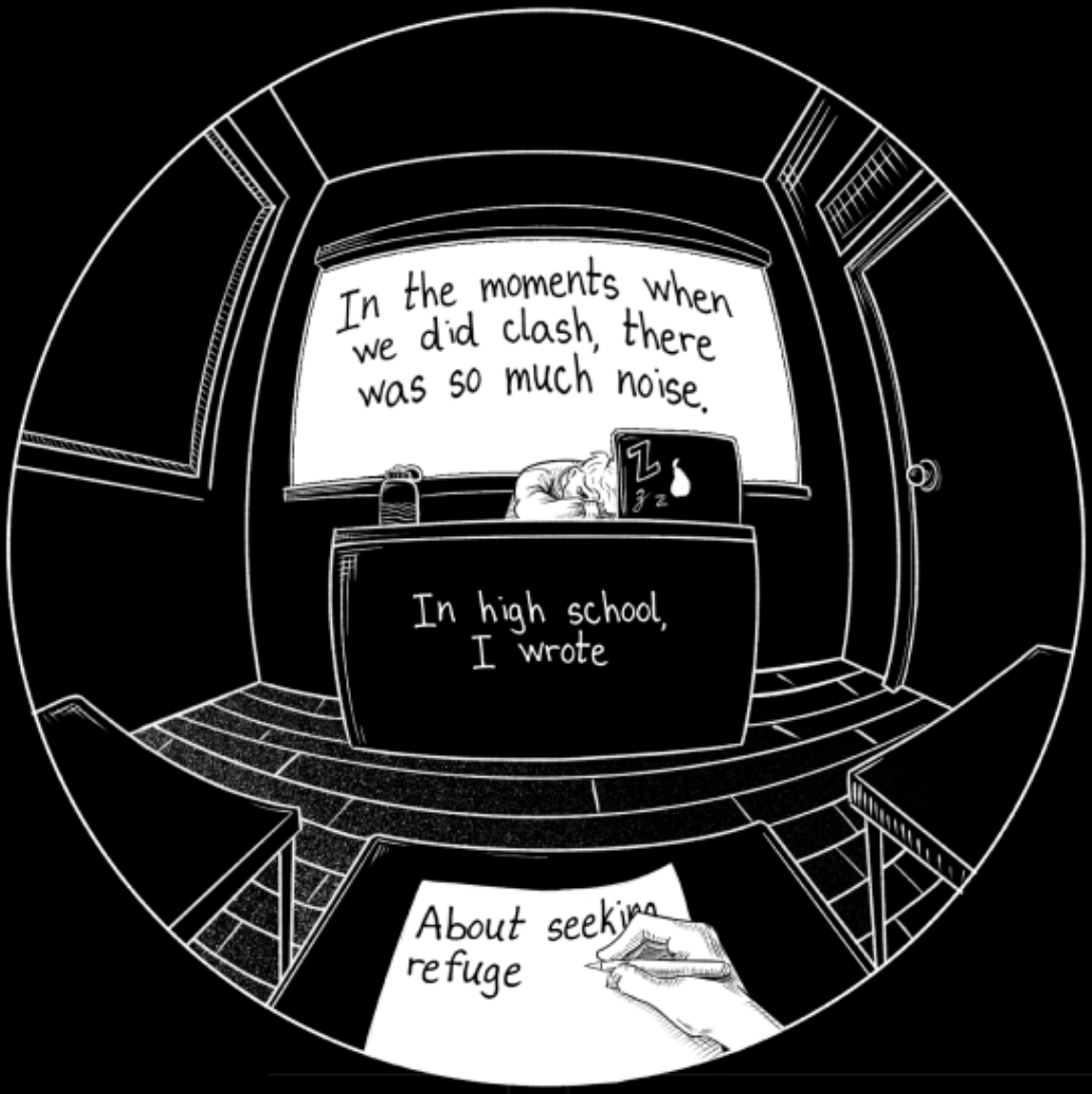
I let a grudge plant itself in me.

Roots in my veins,

blue blooms like bruises.

After years of encouragement, it didn't need much more than silence to grow a life of its own.

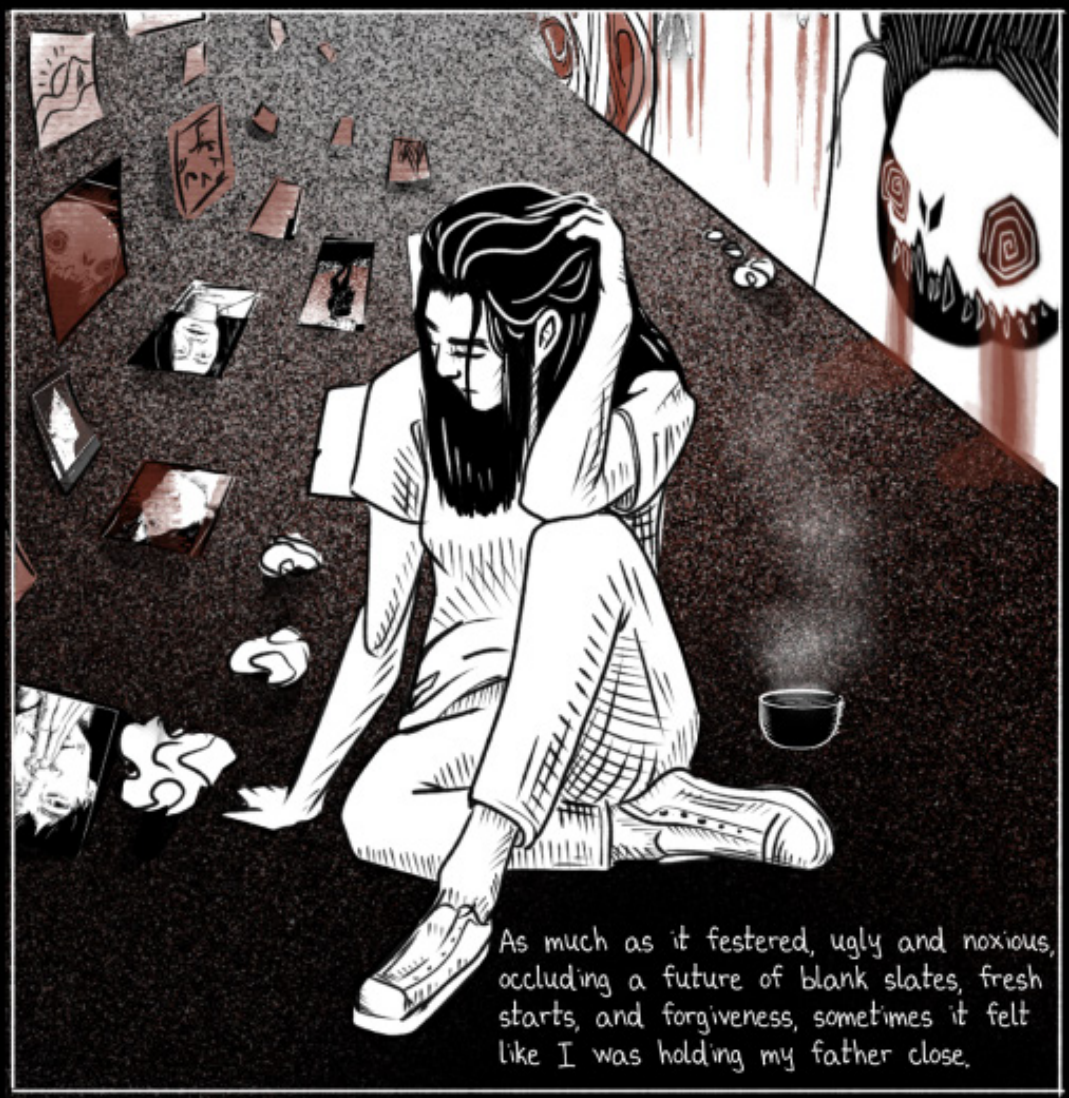



In the moments when we did clash, there was so much noise.
In high school, I wrote
About seeking refuge


From my father and our explosive arguments,


and the dead things crawling out of an unmarked grave.


And I watched it grow. My grudge, the haunting, over time they blended together.


As much as it festered, ugly and noxious, occluding a future of blank slates, fresh starts, and forgiveness, sometimes it felt like I was holding my father close.


Why is anger all we have for each other?
You cannot forgive someone for a burden you think you shoulder together.
I had to become someone who could survive.
But war is not my father's only inheritance.
I would do well to remember it's hardly mine.
You have to learn how to be better than I am.
I won't live out your haunting with you anymore. But we can learn to be better together.

Interview

WITH AMANDA NGO & KEN KRANTZ

Is "Ghost Story" based on a true story, or is it entire fiction?

Amanda Ngo: "Ghost Story" is based on the very real and tempestuous relationship I have with my father. When I was a kid, my father used to tell me the story I mentioned in the comic all the time. It became the story I associated with him every time we got into an argument.

What are the challenges of creating comics about family?

AN: Family is one of the most emotional topics a person could write about, in my opinion. When there are so many feelings, judgments and biases, you always wonder how honest you're being. Of course, there is no one truth, no one perspective that exists when you write about your family. But as the writer who is putting her version of the story out there, I was constantly ripping up drafts that didn't let my father be a real person who very much might have seen the narrative totally differently.

When you set out to tell a truthful story about your family, you feel like you have a duty to be impartial to these people who you've known all your life, but you don't want to be self-effacing either. I fought with myself a lot while working on this comic. At points, I just had to tell myself that my feelings have truth to them, and I had to just let them say what they had to say.

Building off that, what advice would you give to aspiring comic artists who also want to write about family and close relationships?

AN: Try not to write about the moments that still get you overly emotional. There's nothing wrong with emotion in writing, but sometimes when you write about moments with family that you're not done processing, you spend more time trying to explain your feelings to yourself than you do telling a story. Also, never tell your family you're writing about them until you are done with the final draft. Lastly, if you're struggling with this idea of putting an honest version of the story out like I did, I would recommend reading Lauren Slater's *Lying*.

Ken Krantz: A physical object can often tie this kind of narrative together. A story about an unfeeling, unthinking object surrounded by people moving in a thousand directions is generally compelling!

The use of a black background is striking here and adds much to the overall tone of the story. Was this a decision you made at the outset or something that came about more organically?

KK: This was Amanda's idea!

AN: The very first draft of this comic was done as an exercise for a class Ken and I took. It's important to note that I was admitted into the class as a writer, not an illustrator. Before Ken and I collaborated, this comic was a solo effort. I figured working in black and white was something I could manage instead of trying to figure out how to use other colors. And it worked out because the story I was set on telling really needed that darker tone. In the end though, Ken elevated my original vision, and I'm deeply humbled every time I look at the original draft with my stick figures.

This piece went through some heavy revisions. What advice would you give to other comic artists about revising work? Talk to us about the revisions this underwent.

KK: Between the first draft and today, I started taking myself seriously as an illustrator. The first draft was a midterm and one of my first completed comics. We received some notes on the piece, and I realized that I had new tools in my toolkit. Feedback, especially from experienced editors or creatives, is a labor of love. Because this story reflects some of my co-creator's lived experience, a revision was a matter of respect for her narrative. My advice is to invest emotionally in projects rather than drafts. The act of drawing generates improvement, so every revision reflects the skills you gained through practice the last time through. It's not a sunk cost. If you can finish by the deadline, don't be afraid to refresh your work when you see an opportunity to improve the project as a whole.

AN: This comic took about a year to complete (with ample breaks throughout). In that year, there were a lot of written revisions, too. I started this story before I knew what I wanted to say. The early versions were very word-heavy because I spent so much time trying to explain my feelings to an audience, but mostly to myself. I had never shared such a personal story, so I felt like I had to justify why I was just divulging it in the first place. By the time we got to the final draft, I was able to just share a snapshot of who my father and I are as people, and that felt right.

Are the themes of generational trauma and familial strife ones you want to return to in the future, or are you plumbing something new?

AN: It's ironic because I wrote this story during a time when I was very, very against writing traumatic family stories. One of my senior projects in college was writing about familial joy and hope, actually. That's the current direction I'm taking with a lot of my writing. I'm really drawn to Asian and Asian American narratives, but every time I read them, I'm reminded of how deeply sad our family stories can be. There is almost always someone suffering from war, illness, estrangement, anxiety, death, cultural rifts—all sorts of tough topics with very little happiness to take the weight off. I think writing about trauma and strife is important, but I want my writing to be a fuller reflection of the family. And I'm ready for that to include the love and delightfulness that I have also felt because of my family.

Was there any theme or idea you hoped to address with this work?

AN: Very obviously, this is not the light, happy, and fun story I wanted to tell about my family. That being said, I did commit to writing this because I wanted to let myself explore the dimensionality of a person I had grown up despising. When I was growing up, I told myself that if I was ever going to write about my father, I would expose how horrible he was so that the whole world would see it, too. "Ghost Story" turned out the way it did because I learned that there is much more to my dad than his anger or the way he treated me. I was tired of holding onto all this rage and making him out to be the villain of my entire life. For anyone who has had this type of relationship in their life, I wanted this comic to show that a story can exist beyond just anger and forgiveness. Sometimes the story is just about figuring out how whole a person can be.

We recognized some Junji Ito influences in the art style. What other artists inspire you?

KK: Robert Crumb's *Book of Genesis* was the first time I saw a comic book displayed as high art in a round room where each page was framed and displayed at eye level. I was awestruck. Since then, I've been following Wenqing Yan (*Fisheye Placebo, Knite*), Rachel Smythe (*Lore Olympus*), Afua Richardson (*Black Panther: World of Wakanda*), and Glen Harvey (*Vice: Terraform*).

How would you describe your aesthetic?

KK: Inspired by woodcut.

What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?

AN: Figuring out how to end the piece in a way that didn't sound like the relationship settled in a definitive and certain place.

KK: Displaying narrative craft as a visual space.

Transitioning from creating artwork to fully-fledged comics can often feel daunting for art-

ists. Do you have any tips for aspiring comic writers? What were things you wish you would have known when you were starting out?

KK: Working with a partner or source text is valuable. You don't have to whip something brilliant out of thin air by yourself. Look at the credits page for a Marvel comic and don't expect yourself to keep pace with a full time team of more than six professionals. I personally stay entertained with long projects by hiding references to memes in each section (if it's appropriate).

What piece of comic-making advice has helped you?

KK: Anything from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics.*

When does a comic feel "done" in your mind?

KK: I have yet to feel done with a comic.

AN: Ditto. I mostly write about the relationships I have with people I meet, and no story feels finished when you're still living it.

What other mediums have influenced your work? How?

KK: Maps. When I was in elementary school, I collected amusement park maps in a big folder. I love how colors, shapes, and lines convey the sense of place. Cartography is helpful for comics because you have to think about what's labeled, what's centralized, and what's missing.

Where can our readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

KK: *Vice: Terraform, McSweeney's, Little Old Lady Comedy,* and a (new) monthly strip in *Jewish Rhode Island.*

AN: This is my first publication as an adult, outside of a college publication.

What are your own artistic goals for the future? Simply, what do you want to do next?

AN: I started writing a collection of essays a bit ago that are much happier than this comic. I want to keep adding onto them and collect the essays into a memoir. Although, this artistic endeavor feels more like a personal one than one I'll be looking to publish. But who knows! Maybe in between the classes I'm teaching as a middle school teacher, I'll find the time to get some more writing out.

KK: I'm currently working on a senior thesis project that I plan to self-publish on Webtoons Canvas. It's a graphic adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial.* An illustration of Gregor Samsa kept circulating around Twitter during quarantine, so I wanted to bring a lesser-known but equally relevant work into the spotlight. My goal is to create an accessible, fun avenue into Jewish literature.

Contributors

Caroline Bock is the author of *Carry Her Home*, winner of the Fiction Award from the Washington Writers' Publishing House, as well as *LIE* & *Before My Eyes*, young adult novels, from *St. Martin's Press*. Her short work has been published in *SmokeLong, jmww, Brevity, Gargoyle, Vestal Review, Fiction Southeast, Delmarva Review, Little Patuxtent Review, The Writer, Ploughshares,* and more. She is the fiction editor of the 2021 anthology *This Is What America Looks Like: poetry and fiction from DC, Maryland, and Virginia* from *the Washington Writers' Publishing House* as well as *WWPH Writes*, a bi-weekly literary journal. As an undergraduate at Syracuse University, she studied creative writing with Raymond Carver and Jack Gilbert. As a cable executive at *Bravo*, she was also part of the senior team that launched *IFC* and *IFC Films*. In 2011, she earned an MFA in Fiction from The City College of New York. She lives in Maryland with her family. Find her @cabockwrites on Twitter.

Chad Gusler holds an MFA in fiction writing from Seattle Pacific University and an MA in religious studies from Eastern Mennonite Seminary. His stories have been published in the *Southwest Review, Punt Volat, Relief, The Other Journal*, and elsewhere. His short story "flyBaby," recently published by the *Maine Review,* was a finalist for the 2020 Calvino Award. He teaches creative writing at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where he is an associate professor of English.

Kate Griffin is a twenty-three-year-old fiction writer from Newcastle Upon Tyne. She currently lives and writes in London. Her short stories have been published in *io Literary Journal, Fincham Press,* and *Roey Writes On*. She can be found online on Instagram (@itskategriffin).

Samantha Padgett is an MFA Candidate at Sam Houston State University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poet Lore, Moon City Review, South Dakota Review, Up the Staircase Quarterly, Rust + Moth, After the Pause*, and *New Ohio Review*. She lives in Huntsville, TX.

Emily DeMaioNewton has made an effort to regularly watch the sunrise since they were five years old. Their writing has appeared in the Modern Love column of the *New York Times*, *The Ploughshares Blog, Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, and *Dance Magazine*.

Sofia Sears is a writer and student from Los Angeles. They write about gender, desire, queerness, monstrous womxn, and all the different forms hunger can take; they study creative writing at the University of Pennsylvania. They are also the Books Editor for *Lithium Magazine* and the creator of various podcasts. You can find their work online (sofsears.com).

Danae Younge is a twenty-year-old writer whose work has appeared in over forty publications across the US, UK, Canada, Pakistan, & internationally, including *Salamander Magazine, Bacopa Literary Review, Zone 3 Magazine*, & *Wax Paper*. She proudly identifies as biracial & bisexual. She was a winner of National Poetry Quarterly's annual contest in 2020 & placed in the international It's All Write competition. Her flash fiction piece, "Skeletons Don't," appeared in the top ten of *Grindstone Literary*'s international competition for all ages. She was also the youngest contributor to be published & interviewed for the *2020 Red Skies Print Anthology*. Danae is currently pursuing her BA in Creative Writing at Occidental College. You can read more of her work online (www.danaeyounge.com).

KINDALL FREDRICKS is a practicing registered nurse and an MFA candidate at Sam Houston State University, focusing on both poetry and the intersection of literature and the medical sciences. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Letters, Quarterly West, NELLE, The Coachella Review, Menacing Hedge, WomensArts Quarterly, The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, The Academy of American Poets,* and elsewhere.

ROBIN GOW is a trans poet and young adult author. They are the author of *Our Lady of Perpetual Degeneracy* (*Tolsun Books* 2020) and the chapbook *Honeysuckle* (*Finishing Line Press* 2019). Their first young adult novel, *A Million Quiet Revolutions* is slated for publication in winter 2022 with *FSG*. Gow's poetry has recently been published in *POETRY, New Delta Review*, and *Washington Square Review*. Gow received their MFA from Adelphi University where they were also an adjunct instructor. Gow is a managing editor at *The Nasiona* and *Doubleback Books*.

AUSTIN SANCHEZ-MORAN is a teacher and writer who received his MFA in Poetry from George Mason University. His poems and short fiction have been published in *RHINO Poetry, Denver Quarterly,* and *Salamander Magazine,* among many others. He also has had poems and short fiction chosen for the anthologies, *Best New Poets of the Midwest* (2017), *Best Microfiction 2020,* and *5 South Flash Fiction Anthology* (2022), respectively. His first poetry collection, *Suburban Sutras* (*Finishing Line Press*, 2021), is out now.

DANIELLE SHORR is an MFA alum and professor of disability rhetoric and creative writing at Chapman University. She has a fear of commitment in regard to novel writing and an affinity for wiener dogs. Her work can be found in *Lunch Ticket, Vassar Review, Hobart, Split Lip, The Florida Review*, and others.

TRIIN PAJA is the author of three collections of poetry in Estonian and a recipient of several awards including the Betti Alver Literary Award and the Juhan Liiv Poetry Prize. Her English poetry has received a Pushcart Prize and can be found in *Black Warrior Review, Cincinnati Review, Denver Quarterly, Prairie Schooner, Rattle*, and elsewhere. She has also translated poets from the U.S. and the Baltics into Estonian.

LAURA GOLDIN is a publishing lawyer in New York. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Right Hand Pointing, Molecule: A Tiny Lit Mag, Club Plum, Blue Heron Review, The Spoon River Poetry Review, Bellevue Literary Review,* and *The Comstock Review*.

ADRIANA STIMOLA is a non-fiction literary agent, mother, and ever-aspiring poet. She earned her BA in media, performance, and poetry from Emerson College. Her poems have appeared in numerous publications including *The Santa Clara Review, Harbor Review, Beyond Words Literary Magazine,* and *High Shelf Press*. She currently lives in the Hudson Valley of NY.

KELLY GRAY is a writer, playwright, and educator in Northern California on occupied Coast Miwok land, deep in fire country. She is the author of the poetry collection *Instructions of an Animal Body* (*MoonTide Press*) and the audio chapbook *My Fingers are Whales and other stories of Cetology* (*Moon Child Press*). Her writing appears or is forthcoming in *Passages North, Pithead Chapel, Hobart, Under a Warm Green Linden, The Normal School, Barren Magazine, Lunch Ticket, Superstition Review* and elsewhere. Kelly's nonfiction essay 'The Falcon's Cry' was a finalist for Best of the Net and she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Atticus Review*. Her play, *Beautiful Monsters*, ran at the Luther Burbank Center for the Arts and was produced by Left Edge Theater in the summer of 2021. You can read more of her work online (writekgray.com).

AMANDA HARTZELL holds an MFA from Emerson College in Boston. Her work appears in *Breakwater Review, Carve Magazine, Cathexis Northwest Press, The Knicknackery, New Letters, Petrichor Journal,* and *West Trade Review*, among others. Her writing won the Alexander Patterson Cappon Prize and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. From eastern PA, she now lives in Seattle, WA with her husband, son, and their dog.

ANANYA KANAI SHAH was born in Boston and raised in Ahmedabad, India. Her poems and essays have appeared in the *Offing, the Gulf Coast Online, the Bangalore Review*, the *Bombay Review*, and the *Ploughshares blog*. Currently a low-residency MFA candidate in Poetry at NYU, she holds a BA from Brown University. She was a Kundiman Mentorship Lab Fellow in 2019.

DAISUKE SHEN is a fiction writer and poet from Kitahiroshima, Japan, and Greenville, South Carolina. You learn more online (www.daisukeshen.com).

ÍO WUERICH is an Argentinian illustrator who lives in Spain. She was born within a family full of artists, so she has always felt the freedom of doing what she loves. Her personal challenge is to draw something every single day so she can keep on learning.

MAXIME COUSINEAU-PÉRUSSE is a figurative expressionist artist based in Montreal, Canada. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in child psychology at McGill University, which strongly influences his artwork. Art relates to his studies as it provides a therapeutic process and allows him to translate his research of the human psyche into visual form. His latest body of work focuses on the impacts of gender and expectations of masculinity on identity development and mental health. (@maximecp / www.maximecp.com)

AMANDA NGO graduated with a BA in English Nonfiction from Brown University. She is new to the graphic narrative world, piecing together more polished pieces when she's lucky enough to stumble upon an illustrator, but she mostly sticks to poorly drawn lines and hopes audiences believe in shoddy minimalism. Her debut into writing came by way of adolescent Tumblr poetry and eventually a few publications in *Canvas Literary Journal*. Since then, she has had worked published in *Brown Daily Herald's post- magazine* as well as *Brown/RISD's VISIONS Magazine*.

KEN KRANTZ is a writer and illustrator with work in *McSweeney's, Vice,* & more. Find them on Twitter (@goodkenergy) & Instagram (@goodkenergyart).

DANIEL FERREIRA is a Brazilian artist/designer based in London, UK. He creates comics, illustrations, animations, music, and all sorts of digital stuff. His fascination about the expressive potential of code became a PhD practice-led research, developed between University of São Paulo (Brasil) and University College London (UK). He's participated in several exhibits and publications, both individually and as part of collectives, in various digital, traditional, and mixed media. More on his website (www.7luas.com.br).

MORE TITLES FROM

DRIFTWOOD PRESS

comics, chapbooks, & collections