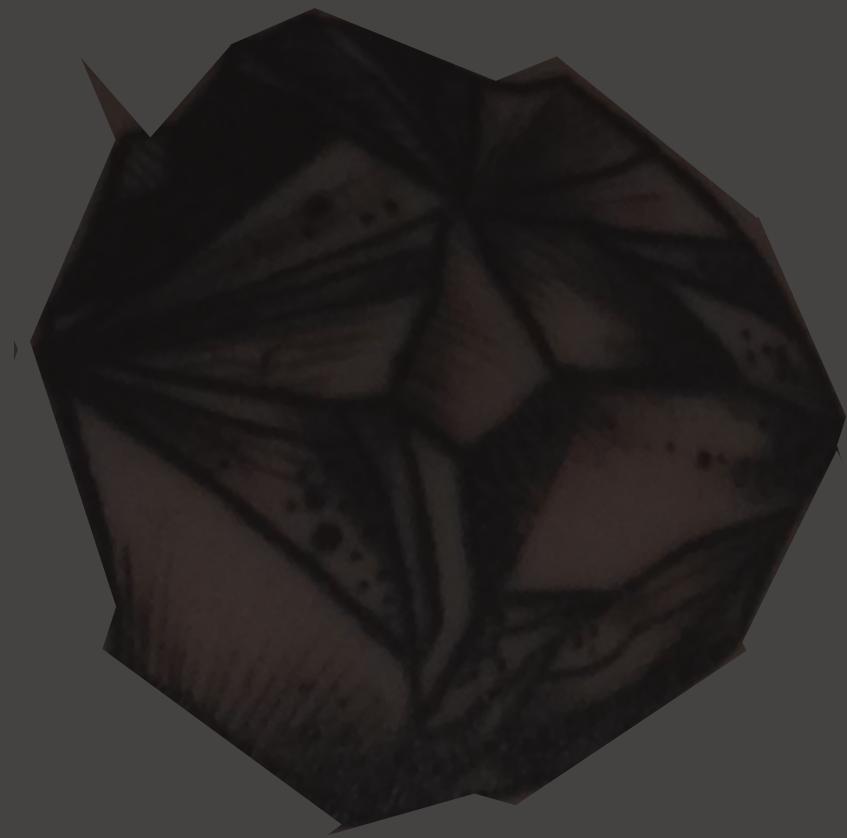


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winter 2015

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## ***NOSTALGIANICA #2: O HOLY NITE, O HOLY NIGH Jessie Janeshek***

It's penitential  
measle epics blacken  
this year of fast wings  
glass eyes and chastity.

our skin of tinsel  
the broken edge of January

Cats are addicted  
snow with the sun out  
blood behind mint  
and you're the likeness  
between hunter and hu

and I'm a new believer  
in the great design oligarchies  
Virgin Mary      needlepoint pillows.

I wear places out  
watch Muscovites die  
go to heaven wrapped  
in patched saddle blankets.

It's fenced now, fire containment.      I know the watch.

The meth-toothed fake angel  
is dumping King Baby      straight in Cheat Lake  
but if she felt      my pressure  
she'd stop.

**Jessie Janeshek**'s first book of poems is *Invisible Mink* (Iris Press, 2010). An Assistant Professor of English and the Director of Writing at Bethany College, she holds a Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and an M.F.A. from Emerson College. She co-edited the literary anthology *Outscape: Writings on Fences and Frontiers* (KWG Press, 2008). You can read more of her poetry at [jessiejaneshek.net](http://jessiejaneshek.net).

WEANING  
*Libba Hockley*

This circle of granite,  
dead silent kitchen surrounds me.  
Faint stretch-marked hip leaning on counter, I bite  
a chocolate chip cookie my mom bought  
from the Amish bakery near her house.  
Down a mug of raw milk, cream curls swirling  
just days from the udder.  
It's an old Christmas mug that's cracked around the rim,  
worn porcelain rubbing my lips dry.  
I don't want to risk waking him  
reaching for a better glass.

I spent 64 minutes putting him to sleep tonight  
Each week the plan changes:  
nurse him, rock him, pat his back, drive him around  
dusty country roads behind  
our house until  
his lids rest, my restless eyes blurring the horizon.  
We'll turn the corner. We have to.

I glance at my reflection in the kitchen window, nipples hard  
through my night shirt, breasts smaller than I remember.  
I tell my husband he sucks me dry. Of energy. Of love.  
I tell myself he is 17 months. He still needs me.  
I give my four year-old less, and my husband even less.  
I give myself the least.

Tonight, I watch the new lambs born behind our house  
suckle milk from their mamas as the sun tucks  
behind the barn's dying roof,  
mama strings tugged.  
I glance at the patch of bluebells clutching earth.  
The mama lambs pause, let the babies latch on,  
tug and twitch,  
warm milk loving.

*Libba Hockley received her MFA in creative nonfiction from Chatham University, where she was a teaching fellow and taught creative writing to inmates at the county jail in Pittsburgh. Her work may be found in Coal Hill Review, The Fourth River, inTravel Magazine, and the Pittsburgh Post Gazette. She lives in Central Pennsylvania with her husband and two children.*

## ***BECAUSE YOU WANT A LOVE POEM***

***Hillary Katz***

I'll tell you when we first loved each other, surely: the day we laid on the beach and guessed the number of bones buried underneath us, fossilizing. We pushed ourselves

deeper into the sand until the air was biting, until the sky and the sea turned into the same nameless color. When we rode our bikes back through the park, back to the

meat of the city, we guessed each other's facts: favorite color, first concert, age of first heartbreak. I'll tell you when we first loved each other, completely: months later,

on the day we did not become parents. We shivered and stared dry-eyed out the window on the cab ride home. You made small talk with the driver and I circled my

thumb around the inside of the band on my wrist until we stopped and stumbled up to my apartment, shocked by how light the day still was, and buried ourselves into bed,

then searched with our whole bodies for a piece of each other's arms, torso, head and neck, hips and thighs, the curve of spine from tailbone to brain. We unspooled our breath

into the creases of each other's skin, and sunk into womb-like sleeplessness, eyes unblinking, mouths closed, because there was nothing, then, to tell, and there was nothing else to want.

*Hillary Katz's poems have appeared in Salamander, burndistrict, A cappella Zoo, and other journals. Born and raised in Vermont, she is a graduate of the University of New Hampshire. Currently, she teaches elementary school and attends the University of Pacific as a graduate student of education. She lives with her partner in San Francisco.*

**A WOMAN LIVES BY HERSELF**  
**Heron Greenesmith**

A woman lives by herself in a medium-sized house in a small orchard, tucked away from her nowhere village, near a nowhere forest, equidistant from the two roads that lead perpendicularly out of the village, heading nowhere. The orchard was her parents' orchard and her grandparents' before that. She grew up with these trees and this house, and moved back in after her husband died working at the village mill. She and her sister cared for their parents as they died, then her sister went back into the village to her own husband's house and left the woman alone with the house and the trees. The walk from the village to the house is one and a half hours on a lovely day, an hour if she takes the horse to trade apples for the things she can't make herself – flour, sugar, salt, fat, twine, news.

The woman's apples are good because her grandfather was a great arborist and orchardist. He planted the trees and grafted them and pruned them and fertilized them and sang to them in warm summer evenings. He chose his trees carefully, emphasizing variety and rarity. The result was a glorious testament to the fruit; proud branches heavy with rich, bright apples. His son, the woman's father, was a good orchardist. He tended to the trees as he tended to the memory of his father and hummed to himself as he worked among them.

The woman is neither great nor good, but she hopes that the trees will bear well for as long as she needs them to, until, perhaps, another great or good orchardist comes along. She reluctantly prunes two or three trees each day in early spring until she can't lift her arms above her head. The orchard holds one hundred trees, ancient gnarled things some over fifty years old, widely spaced, stretching their sturdy arms to their brothers around them, sure of the land and of their place on it. The woman used to play among the trees, as safe in their arms as in her father's. The sweet smell of fallen fruit harmonizes with the buzz of bees, reminding the woman of her father, humming among the trees.

The woman grows a kitchen garden in front of her south-facing porch. She grows kale there, and chard and herbs and peas and corn and tomatoes and cucumbers and onions and marigolds to keep out the bugs. She learned to plant marigolds from watching her mother, when to add ash or egg shells to the soil. From her father, she learned to listen to the woods to hear the next day's weather. Wind touches the tops of the firs before bending over the orchard. Deer live in the woods. Under the branches it's warm and full of life and the deer rarely wander into the garden, preferring, if they stray from the forest, to graze on fallen apples.

She keeps her horse, two small goats for their milk, and three chickens for their eggs. Her sister visits once a week to take some apples and eggs and tomatoes home and to help with canning and pickling in the summer. Their hands touch as they work together in the kitchen, mimicking their mother's movements, using her knife, her towels, now threadbare, her cutting board.

They stand together at the table their father built for their mother. They tuck back strands of thick brown hair, their mother's, with dark brown hands, their father's. After her sister leaves, the woman sits on her porch and the air, filled with dust and memories, stirs around her in the summer heat.

The woman is not lazy, for she does the work she needs to keep herself and the animals alive, but she resents these obligations. In the colder winter mornings, she lies in her bed, warm among the quilts, until the goats' cries drive her from the bed with guilt. She walks slowly through the house, across the broad planks planed smooth by her grandfather. Here and there a brighter plank reveals her father's hand, repairing his own father's handiwork cracked or creaky from years of use.

The woman had been pregnant early in her marriage but miscarried months before her husband's death. The next years were occupied with caring for her parents, then the orchard and she slowly became part of the fabric of the land. She is thirty-four.

On midsummer day, when the proud sun takes his longest trip across the wild blue sky above the forest, the woman leaves her house and her orchard. She rides her horse into the village to tell her sister she will be gone for a little while but in the end does not tell her, and only gives her sister six eggs and a tomato vine sagging with fruit. Their hands touch over the produce and the woman yearns for something she cannot name. She rides back to the house and writes a note to her sister saying simply "I will be back, please take what you want." She sets the goats loose in the orchard and the chickens into the garden, looks back at the apple trees a final time and takes the path towards the road, turning away from the village, toward the warm dark forest.

In the premature dark among the trees, canopied by branches as familiar as her sister's outstretched hands, the woman stops her horse because she is weeping. After some time, weaker from crying but stronger, unable to name the wild spinning yearn inside her, she tuts to her horse and continues through the forest. The threads tying her to the orchard stretch and stretch until they snap, one by one, leaving her free.

The woman binds her chest when she works in the orchard or garden, not tightly, and wears a man's linen shirt and pants. At first, when she was married and then before her parents died, she would wear dresses if she was going out in the village. But as time wore on and she seemed to slip from people's gazes, she began to wear her comfortable clothing even into the village. And so she wears her shirt and pants, breasts bound loosely underneath, as she rides her horse into the forest and the world beyond. As she rides, she is easily taken (not mistaken, merely taken) for a man, with her loose clothing, short thick brown hair, and wide brimmed hat keeping the sun from her eyes. She does not hurry to correct this assumption. She speaks little and keeps away from the busier roads, preferring the winding paths among

the farms and fields, the nowhere paths between nowhere farms like her own.

She takes time to reflect on her life, her parents, her husband (strong and warm and full of plans and thoughts about the future), her sister (always exasperated by the woman, grateful for her having taken the orchard), her horse, her goats (lonely in the orchard), her trees, her father's trees, her grandfather's trees. She thinks about her crumbling well awaiting repair, her kale and chard, her peas (wild and tangled), the woods behind her land (warm and secretive), her shirt, her arms (brown and strong), her bed and quilts, her house (dusty but sound), her barn (disused and drafty). She thinks about her mind, closed even to herself, and her heart, tender and lost and big and scared and proud and strong.

She sleeps in the woods and the fields, cooking before the sun sets and damping her fire tightly at night, and always feels safest when she's alone. She has no goal and no obligations and soon begins to feel a looseness come over her, a thrill and warmth in her joints that she recognizes as happiness.

She meets strangers along her road. One wetter night she sees a lighted window in a farmhouse and knocks on the door to ask if she can use the barn. A young couple with a baby invite her to eat with them, fresh bread and milk and a meaty stew that make the woman quiet with concentration. She sees love and generosity and light and goes to sleep in the barn despite their invitation to stay by the warm fire. The hay loft is warm as well, heat rising from the pigs and goats and horses crowding in from the rain.

Another night the woman camps too close to the road and a man stops by her fire. He is small and quick and she takes her knife from her saddle when she rises to get another round of cheese to share. She can only stay completely silent for so long and when she speaks and he realizes she is not a man, he leaps from the fire to grab her. In the dying sunset, she pulls her knife and sticks him in the arm. He howls and curses but she runs to her horse and rides away, leaving the fire and her best tin cup behind.

One month from the day she left, when she reaches the edges of the capital, more fields, more people, houses clustered in the distance, the woman feels melancholy battle her excitement. She doesn't want this time to end, but at the same time is eager to discover what the next month, day, hour, minute holds for her. She takes her horse onto the high road and pats the sack of apples she has been saving as cover or disguise. She is unsure. She had scavenged along the way for fruit and vegetables to accompany her daily bread and goat's cheese rather than risk being naked, without a plan, although she would have been hard-pressed to articulate what that plan was.

Now in the capital she crosses through the thick gates set into the wall around the city itself, nestled around the castle like a mother cat around its kitten. She rides slowly through the quiet afternoon streets, knowing to stay

close to the wall but far from the gate to find an inn she can afford. The fourth inn she tries has a small barn and the hayloft is unoccupied. The woman negotiates a rate for herself and her horse for one week, trading her cheese for her room. That night she doesn't sleep, listening to the sounds of human life around her, very different from the sounds of animal life in the fields and forest, but also very much the same. Sounds of love and hate, sounds of contentment, sounds of scolding and praising, sounds of dinner and music. The murmur of goats is replaced with the quiet babbling of a mother bathing her child. The creak of old apple branches with the lilt of the fiddler playing to the stragglers in the inn below.

The next morning the woman rises, binds her breasts in the hayloft alone, eats her small breakfast, tucks her apples under a broken basket covered by the hay, and descends into the streets. That first day she walks for hours, as invisible as she is among her trees or in her village. Eyes slide over her, while her eyes devour everything. There are houses upon houses upon houses. Filth and flowers. Narrow streets with washing hanging between opposite windows. Narrow lanes suddenly spilling into a market square. The castle itself was built on a hill, now concealed by the sprawling city. That first day she stays within the twisted quarter near her inn. The next day and the next, as she grows more comfortable with the spiraling sloping lanes, she explores further, watching the houses grow grander as the streets slope up, seeing the squalor stacked against the wall itself.

On the fourth day, she is crossing the broad lane that leads up from the gate to the castle walls when she hears a swell of noise and looks down to the wall to see a host of riders. Flags hang in the warm still air and horses step proudly, choosing their footsteps carefully on the cobbles. The woman stands in the small crowd of people who now must wait to cross the boulevard. The first riders pass, armor-clad noblemen with plumes in their helmets, women with silken dresses and brocade on their chests. Then a set of six handsome white horses, their riders all bearing the same standard, a blue teardrop on a white field, the standard of the queen regent, mourning for her king, lost these last ten years. The first four guardsmen pass and then the woman sees the queen, riding a dun brown mare and carrying no standard for herself. The queen is sitting side-saddle, as she must in her dress, blue as the teardrop on her flag, silk and velvet and who knows what else, thinks the woman. The queen's hair is brown as her horse and her lips not frowning and not smiling. Her eyes are set straight ahead but as her horse passes the woman, the queen looks over the people on the road and the woman can see strength and warmth and plans and ideas.

The woman realizes she hasn't breathed and takes a breath of the dusty air, rich with human, animal, and vegetable smells. The queen's guard passes, followed by more noblemen and women, although less noble, then wagons of goods, then servants and guards on foot, carrying sacks and armed with pikes and bows and arrows.

When the processional passes, the woman crosses the broad lane with the other people, on their way home from the market or the blacksmith or the castle. She climbs up into her hayloft and sleeps, dreaming dreams in blue and brown.

The woman does not see the queen again. She continues to walk around the city, celebrating her anonymity, but the weather has turned hot and dry. Her thoughts turn to her farm, her trees, her goats, her sister, her house, her heart. At the end of the week, she pays for another with the last of her goats' cheese. She sits in the inn with the innkeeper's wife, sharing a small glass of beer, listening to the talk around her.

*Took ill she has.*

*Who's that?*

*The queen. Hasn't left her room in three days since she got back, they say.*

*Trip too much for her? She's not so strong these days.*

*Could be, could be. Castle's inviting doctors from all over the city, big crowd up there today. Looking for anyone who can help.*

*Poor girl, last thing she needs.*

*Aye.*

The woman finishes her beer and goes up into her hayloft. She removes her shirt and her bindings and holds her breasts in her hands. They are warm and full of life. Then she rebinds herself and puts her shirt back on, pulling the bag of apples from under the basket and descending into the streets.

It is past midday, that sleepy time, as when she first arrived in the city, when people hide from the sun in their dark houses or shops, waiting for the cool of the afternoon to return to their business. The apples heavy on her back, the woman walks slowly through the streets, parallel with the wall, until she reaches the boulevard where she saw the queen's procession. She turns up the hill to face the castle, and begins her slow walk up. The houses along this way are nicer than those deeper in the city, but as she walks upwards they became nicer still, broad stones with brass details, red roofs and colored glass windows. Then, no houses as all, only level terraced grounds between her and the castle gates, looming dark at the top of the hill. There are guards at the gate, but they aren't the queen's guards and the gates are open anyway at this time of day. Inside, the air cools out of the sun and the woman slows her pace further, waiting perhaps, relishing perhaps her last moments of utter anonymity.

The man at the inn was right, the castle has invited all of the city's doctors to heal the queen. They stand, in their black robes and caps, in a crowd at the far end of the courtyard, blustering to one another with grand gestures and deep laughs. A man stands in a broad doorway, writing in a big

book. The woman watches as doctors approach the man and speak for a few moments. The man nods, writes in his book, and beckons the next doctor forward.

Willing her legs to move, the woman walks towards the doctors and the man. Still murmuring, the doctors don't notice the figure among them, sack on its back, old shirt and old pants, until it climbs the steps towards the man with the book. She can feel the doctors' eyes on her back.

*Yes?*

*I'm here for the queen.*

*Are you a doctor, sir? Ma'am?*

*I am not. I'm an orchardist. That is, I grow apples. I thought...*

*Yes?*

*I thought the queen would like my apples.*

The man looks at her closely. She tells him her name and he writes it in his book. He points to the left and she walks slowly back down the stairs to stand near the doctors, murmuring again, but in a different tone. The woman watches as the remaining doctors tell the man their names until he finally closes his book with a clap.

*The queen thanks you lords... and lady... for your concern and begs you to wait at your leisure until your name is announced.*

The woman dares not look at his face in case he is looking at her. He turns on his heel and enters the castle proper. The woman sits beside her sack of apples, leaning her back against the cool castle wall. She looks at her feet. The doctors do not approach her.

Time passes. The man comes back and reads names from his book. Each name sends a rumble through the doctors. Each time, a man in black robes and a black hat ascends the stairs and passes through the broad doorway. Then another name is called. Another rumble. And so on.

The day lengthens into evening. And evening into night. Some doctors leave before their names are called, grumbling in a different tenor. The remaining doctors huddle together, perhaps seeking strength in their dwindling numbers. They spare the woman no words, glancing only before turning their faces away, having concluded their diagnosis or judgment. The woman stands and stretches her legs, then lies down on the paving stones with her back against the apples. Her stomach aches.

When she awakes into the early morning dew, the sky is already warming with the pink bits of sun far to the east over the courtyard wall. The woman looks around and sees a dozen doctors sleeping on the stairs and against the walls. The man with the book opens the door and peers into the courtyard. He looks poorly, his eyes red. He calls a name, but no one answers. Another. Another. These are the men who went home. Another. The doctors wake as he calls names and begin to answer for the missing.

*He's not here.*

*He left.*

*He left, too.*

*When will you call our names?*

The man opens his book and looks through.

*You are all dismissed. You should have gone to your homes. Your teachers and mentors and masters have already tried and failed. You will fare no differently.*

The remaining doctors howl.

*We waited all night! We must see the queen!*

*I'm sorry, you must go.*

The doctors leave.

The woman stays behind. When the last doctor whisks his dark cloak through the courtyard gate, she lifts her bag of apples and walks up the steps to the broad door. She knocks. The man opens the door and stands silhouetted by cool darkness.

*Why do you persist? The queen will not see any more healers.*

*I waited.*

*You should have gone to your home.*

*I have no home to return to. I live very far from the city. Your doctors failed. Will you let the queen try my apples?*

The man shrugs and gestures for her to wait. He closes the door. The woman waits. When the door finally opens, a small girl's hand beckons her inside. The woman walks through doors into a cool dark hallway, smooth underfoot and unfathomably long and tall. She stands still to let her eyes adjust, but the girl tugs on her hand and leads her into the dark. The girl turns up a broad set of stairs that lead up one story into another hallway. At the end of the second hall, the girl knocks on a gilded door. She walks away, leaving the woman to stand with her sack of apples in front of a gilded door in a darkened hallway on the second story of a castle in a city far from her home.

The door opens and the man with the book steps into the hallway. He isn't holding the book any longer and somehow he looks worse. His collar hangs limply and sweat shines on his pale face.

*Please do come in. We are at wit's end.*

The woman enters a narrow hall behind the door and moves to let the man pass.

*Follow me.*

Down a short hall, through a door on the right and then across the room looms a bed with hanging. The man approaches the bed and pulls one curtain back slightly.

*Your majesty. May I?*

He beckons the woman closer and gestures for her to put her sack on the floor. She does, opening the mouth of the sack and pulling one apple out. It is small, tart and full of juice. It is her favorite. And her sister's favorite. Her husband preferred another variety, large and crisp, with thick skin.

And her father a third, bright green with little flecks of red and an almost syrupy taste.

She passes the small apple to the man's outstretched hand. He holds it to the break in the curtains. A thin brown hand emerges and the man places the apple in the hand delicately, reverently. The hand withdraws. A sigh. And then an almost comical crunch of crisp skin and tart flesh. Another bite. Another bite. A murmur and the man's head bows close to the curtain.

*Yes, of course.*

He waves the woman close and she takes a step, almost touching the drapery around the bed. The man slowly pulls the curtain aside and from within the woman can hear a voice.

*Please let me see your face.*

The woman looks at the man who nods, so she ducks carefully between the drapes to lean into the darkness. The queen lies still, deep over pillow and under quilt. Her brown hair is damp with sweat, stuck to her cheek and brow. The woman resists an urge to smooth it away. The queen's eyes are closed and her lips are barely open, chapped and cracked. The woman waits. The queen's eyes open and there. The woman drowns. And resurfaces. There is warmth and strength and plans and ideas and beauty and purpose. There is deep sadness.

The woman feels her own heart beating. Her heart is an apple being peeled by a sharp knife, a paring knife, separating skin from flesh. Warm hands, her husband's hands, her father's hands, her mother's hands, the queen's hands, are holding her apple-heart and peeling the tough skin, leaving only sweet white flesh.

The queen takes a shallow breath.

*You brought this apple.*

*I did.*

*From your orchard.*

*Yes, your majesty.*

*It was delicious.*

*Thank you, your majesty.*

*Are there more?*

*Infinitely, your majesty. Yes.*

Later, the woman is sitting in another room in the queen's suite. She is listening as the man with the book tells her that the queen has been able to eat three more apples and some porridge. He is looking more tired than before, but not quite so gray. The woman has learned that he is the queen's steward, has been since her marriage to the king and become her confidant and counselor after the king's death. The queen fell ill quite suddenly when they returned from their latest trip abroad and nothing could rouse her appetite or her spirits. The man with the book is very talkative and the woman lets him talk, thinking only of the queen's eyes, of blue and brown.

That night, the woman sleeps in a bed in the queen's suite with covers

as blue as the teardrop and wakens to the news that the queen has eaten nine apples, some chicken, and a few bits of bread. The servant who wakes the woman is beside herself with joy. The woman eats breakfast silently and waits in her room for the man to come back.

He doesn't and finally the woman opens the door to find the staff bustling back and forth with hot and cold dishes. The woman feels their eyes slide past her and doesn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. She finds her clothes folded neatly on a chair in her room, changes out of the nightgown they gave her and into her binding, shirt, and pants, and slips away. Down the short hall, into the larger gallery. Down the stairs, through the grand hall, and out the front door. Across the doctor-less courtyard, now busy with smiling guards and cooks and stable boys and handmaidens, all full with the good news. Through the castle gates, open for the day's business, down the broad lane and into the slippery side streets. As she walks, her heart is full and does not empty. It fills and fills and fills not as if her heart were a cup but as if her heart were a well, endlessly swelling with water from the surrounding earth. She makes her way to the inn, greets her horse, pulls the saddle from the low wall, and rides away just as the sun is reaching its highest point.

Back to her home. Back to her trees and her sister and her goats and her peas. Back to her bed and her quilts and to endless dreams of blue and brown.

**Heron Greenesmith** lives in Somerville, MA with her partner and cat. She is a queer/bisexual policy attorney who works for the LGBT movement. Find her on twitter @herong.

**AGING**  
*Sierra Webster*

her naked body  
hunched over, drying  
her legs with a pale,  
pink towel

her wiry hair dripping  
pool water onto the dark tiles  
of the Daniel Meyer pool  
changing-room floor

her skin, thin, sags and collects  
under her breasts  
around her hips  
and above her knees

this must be what  
it looks like to carry  
the weight of the world  
for a lifetime

*Sierra Webster is a freshman undergraduate at the University of Oregon where she is majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing. She attended the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop in 2014 and is published in the workshop anthology titled 1209600 Seconds.*

**TIME SLOWING DOWN**  
*Ren Adams*

In what might be  
last days  
everything is present

INSTANT  
suspended, curious

Super-blue  
sky and choose  
Sandia Crest, pulling moon  
ant-crawl, wind-lift sun and shade  
splash of semi-rain,  
horn-blare highway with bus-step bike  
eyes at 7-11, eyes passing aisle,  
eyes on bus, eyes inside  
a teal purse, hanging open  
cell phone-tissue-candy,  
tomorrow-list  
confidence of connection, of  
flattened vodka curio  
trash can party-place, these  
flattened objects, objects acquired, flattened  
plastic, wire and sand  
the great deluge of beautiful nerds  
the great deluge of words and heard  
the ceremony of bottle shards, glass-blanket mass  
form and fuckery, postmodern plush  
window-crack  
dance-back doorway  
doorstop webs and corner sheds—  
car at corner, loud Bruno Mars  
mars, mars of seven stars  
This here, now,  
hot-blast wind  
streetlight hits  
rock, trim.

If we only had a little more time.

Do you remember the time you  
and the times we stood and  
or walked, then  
whispered and  
touched or  
turned to

**Ren Adams** was born in 1974 in Lancaster, California, and currently lives and works in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Adams works cross-media, from visual art installations to poetry and sound. She has an MFA in Visual Arts from Lesley University as well as a degree in English, mentoring under Thom Gunn, Charles Hood and Robert Peters. Ren has widely exhibited and published art and writing and currently teaches through the University of New Mexico. Her poetry has appeared in a variety of publications, including Atom Mind, Poetry Motel, Potpourri, The Great Blue Beacon, and Mother Road, with upcoming features in First Class Lit and eratio. Her visual art has recently appeared in The Bombay Gin, Fickle Muses, Cactus Heart and The Adirondack Review. Ren is interested in the deconstruction of self as it encounters media and non-self, especially the rigors of television and the wonderful, terrible sublime of remixed anxiety and loss.

**SEE THE BEFORE AND AFTER PHOTOS OF 18  
CELEBS WHO CLEARLY HAVE FAKE TEETH**  
*Colette Arrand*

Tom Cruise clicks through this slideshow on his MacBook. He's bored and he's at an airport, and there are 36 pictures, which, when clicked through, account for three minutes of his time. He does it; Tom Cruise clicks through all 36 pictures, and is pleased to see that he isn't listed first or second or even third. Tom Cruise is listed fifteenth, an afterthought, one more set of good teeth in a murderer's row of folks with good teeth.

Tom Cruise looks upon the picture of himself smiling and smiles, an action that, for an actor like Tom Cruise, takes a great deal of concentration. He wants his smile, like the stunts he executes in his films, to be authentic. He thinks of one of those stunts, thinks of himself as Ethan Hunt, or as Tom Cruise as Ethan Hunt (as an audience member thinks of Ethan Hunt, in other words, which is to say not as his own, unique man, but as Tom Cruise trying to bring a man to life, a man who often happens to dangle from incredible heights, suspended between life and not-life) digging his fingers into the thin crevice between the industrial-grade steel of a military airplane's door and the rest of its body, yelling at a nebbish Englishman to open the door. The plane leaves the runway and climbs higher, higher, higher—and there it is: Tom Cruise is smiling.

Then Tom Cruise remembers that this picture of him, fifteenth in a slideshow of 36 pictures, was taken in real life, taken while he was enjoying an ice cream cone with his daughter and not while he was, say, scaling the Burj Khalifa, is juxtaposed against a headline claiming that he and seventeen other people with great teeth are frauds. This makes him too self-conscious to enjoy the moment, a rare one where he is not the first name or face used to sell something; just a man who just snuck by the velvet rope as it was coming down, a beautiful face in a beautiful crowd. Tom Cruise frowns. Then the thought of frown lines enters his mind, how a team of men at a bay of computers would have to wear their hands out erasing those frown lines from every frame of an intergalactic science-fiction adventure where Tom Cruise saves the planet, and he compels his face to rest.

Really though, Tom Cruise is fuming. Right now, an insurance broker in Cedar Rapids is having her veneers done to no fanfare. In Orlando, a dentist extracts a rotted tooth from some common mouth and replaces it with a new one fashioned with the powdered and polished bones of a few thousand nameless dead. Tom Cruise believes in these people and the miracles of modern dentistry because of course they exist, but with him, with Tom Cruise, it's always something people can't believe, as if a head of perfect hair or a mouth full of perfect teeth made him

unknowable, untrustworthy. If not this, his religion. His ex-wives. His name on the cover of every tabloid, screaming about a secret gay life. There is always a skeleton in Tom Cruise's closet, a pile of bones leering at his success. Tom Cruise wants to know how good that skeleton's teeth are. Tom Cruise wants an object he can judge.

**Colette Arrand** lives in Athens, Georgia, where she is a student at the University of Georgia. Her work appears in or is forthcoming from *The Toast*, The Atlas Review, Entropy Magazine, and elsewhere. Online, she can be found at [colettearrand.com](http://colettearrand.com) or [fearofaghostplanet.com](http://fearofaghostplanet.com).

**GASOLINE AND FAITH**  
**Brooklyn Baron**

When the first pioneers set out across the continent they didn't know what they would find on the other side. How could they have known how many people had walked there before them? They thought they were first and it thrilled them. It left cold stones heavy in their bellies. They were searching for an ocean, but what faith could assure them that there was another ocean to find out there when all they could see was miles and miles of desert ground? Their faith was written on paper, not sandstone and not skin.

When we set out across the continent we were in a blue Volvo that was older than both of us. You saw a sign in the window in a Long Island City parking lot, five hundred dollars it said. The number was written in a wide-tipped permanent marker and you had to buy it, you said. What could be wrong with a five hundred dollar car? We fought when you got home, mostly about the car, but also because it was ninety degrees that night and humid and we lived in a third floor walk-up railroad apartment with no air conditioner two blocks from the stinking canal.

I asked you about earthquakes. "Isn't there that fault line out there? San Antonio?"

"San Andreas," you said, and you asked me about hurricanes.

When we left you had your window rolled down and the little wispy ends of your hair blew around your head like the halo of a medieval saint. That was back when you still had long hair, before I came home one night on the other side of the continent and you asked me to cut it all off. The little hairs stuck in the sink drain for weeks.

"I swear to god this car only works because you think it will."

"I think I can get it across Pennsylvania that way. I might need your help when we get to Ohio."

When we left we didn't have faith, you and I, so we tried to write it ourselves. We wrote it longhand onto hearts, and highways, and days, and the hollow parts of bones, and the blood that's made there, and we tried our damnedest to make it stay there.

You turned your head and turned up the music and you turned to face the know-not, in your car that ran only on gasoline and faith.

*Brooklyn Baron is originally from New York City, and spent time in rural New Mexico and Maine before coming to Portland, OR, where she now lives. She has been writing for fun pretty much since she learned how to write at the age of five, but this is her first publication. She is especially interested in the stories that get hidden in people and objects. When she isn't writing, Brooklyn can be found either working on a number of creative pursuits, outside, or studying biology (which she somehow ended up with a degree in). If all of those fail, try a coffeeshop.*

## **THE BOBBY PROBLEM**

**Whitney Hayes**

The Bobby problem is complicated. The Bobby problem is asymptomatic and therefore more serious than you realize. You won't be aware that there is a problem until you begin to list off the subtle indicators—until you attempt to quantify your discomfort. Only then do you realize there is an ailment at all.

The signs have been subtle and scattered. The time he wanted to sneak out the back door after sex, for instance, so that he wouldn't have to pass your housemate again. The time he asked if you were afraid to get older and lose your looks. The time he called you a femme fatale and made you wonder how the hell to interpret that. The time he made you wait for him to come over because he was at a party. The second, third, and fourth time he stood you up. The time he came over to fuck you at one in the morning and still refused to spend the night. Not that you wanted him to. Not that you believed it to be a good idea.

These are the clues to this problem. You won't see them right away. You won't feel them until they've collected—until they've formed a tumor beneath the skin. You won't know they are there until the disease has settled into your system.

Because on the surface, Bobby is just your lover. You have night class with him—you see him around campus. You share friends and peers, none of whom know that he visits your apartment in the afternoon to have sex with you.

The Bobby problem is like a hospital drama on television. Once you've understood the problem, the rest of the episode is spent on the hunt for a diagnosis. In this instance though, it will not be salvaged by some grandiose deus ex machina in the last five minutes. The Bobby problem will remain unsolvable—unanswered. So baffled by the plot, you will almost forget to change his name in the essay you write about him. You will be too caught up in the pieces of the medical puzzle.

Don't forget though—you were half of this puzzle. Let's not overlook you as the host for this malady to spread upon. You with your flippant brown eyes and your wandering curls. You often forget this, but you are more aloof than you realize. You turned the knob on the door as fast as he was out it so it's hard to know the true origin of the infection. It's hard to know if it was your body that invited it in to begin with.

This is also part of the Bobby problem: he tells you things about yourself. He says you're closed off and bad at being vulnerable. He points out that you're scared of intimacy. He tells you that you radiate sexuality, that you're hard to quit, that you've stuck with him. Part of you understands that perhaps you are more contagious than he is—likely

more deadly.

The Bobby problem is that he's not the problem at all. The Bobby problem is a diversion. The Bobby problem is a cycle you perpetuated—a purely physical interaction that distracted you from the fact that you wanted a relationship but could not admit it. You were afraid to take a chance. You were afraid to trust yourself with another partner so you stayed with one you could never have. You chose sickness—you signed the death certificate before you even stepped foot in the doctor's office for a checkup.

The Bobby problem is a chapter in a medical encyclopedia that you take down from the shelf every so often. The Bobby problem has dust on its pages, though the ink is still fresh. The Bobby problem could be ripped out or burned, but there will be copies somewhere else. It will never entirely heal over. The Bobby problem remembers.

*Whitney Hayes is a Virginia native living in Pittsburgh, where she received her MFA in creative nonfiction from Chatham University. Her work has appeared in Under the Gum Tree and Word Riot, and more recently online at RandomNerds.com. She is passionate about social justice work and also co-curates a monthly literary event out of her home. She is currently writing short films, essays, and the occasional sex poem.*

## **MAY I SPEAK FREELY?**

*jojo Lazar*

(A conversation with Edna St. Vincent-Millay's "Fatal Interview xi")

*Not in a silver casket cool with pearls.  
But a tall glass of milk flirting with chai,  
silk with taut thoughts or red garters.*

*Locked, and the key withheld as other girls?  
A tattooed doorplate and the key is me,  
wearing the same tight black pants*

all week with a foot on the dash  
to make you blush, to stretch my thighs.  
*In gardens stripped and scattered, peering north.*

In parks, atop monkey bars, spying on readers.  
I won't cheerlead the band playing ball  
instead of rehearsing. I can hang,

but sorry, I'm journaling. *With dahlia  
tubers dripping from the hand, I'll return  
lighter, earplugs to your pocket,*

always toss tissues in my wake  
as I slide off the edge of the bed.  
*The wind of their endurance, driving south,*

You can keep your hand on my knee,  
but don't crowd me taking off  
the parking brake, cranking

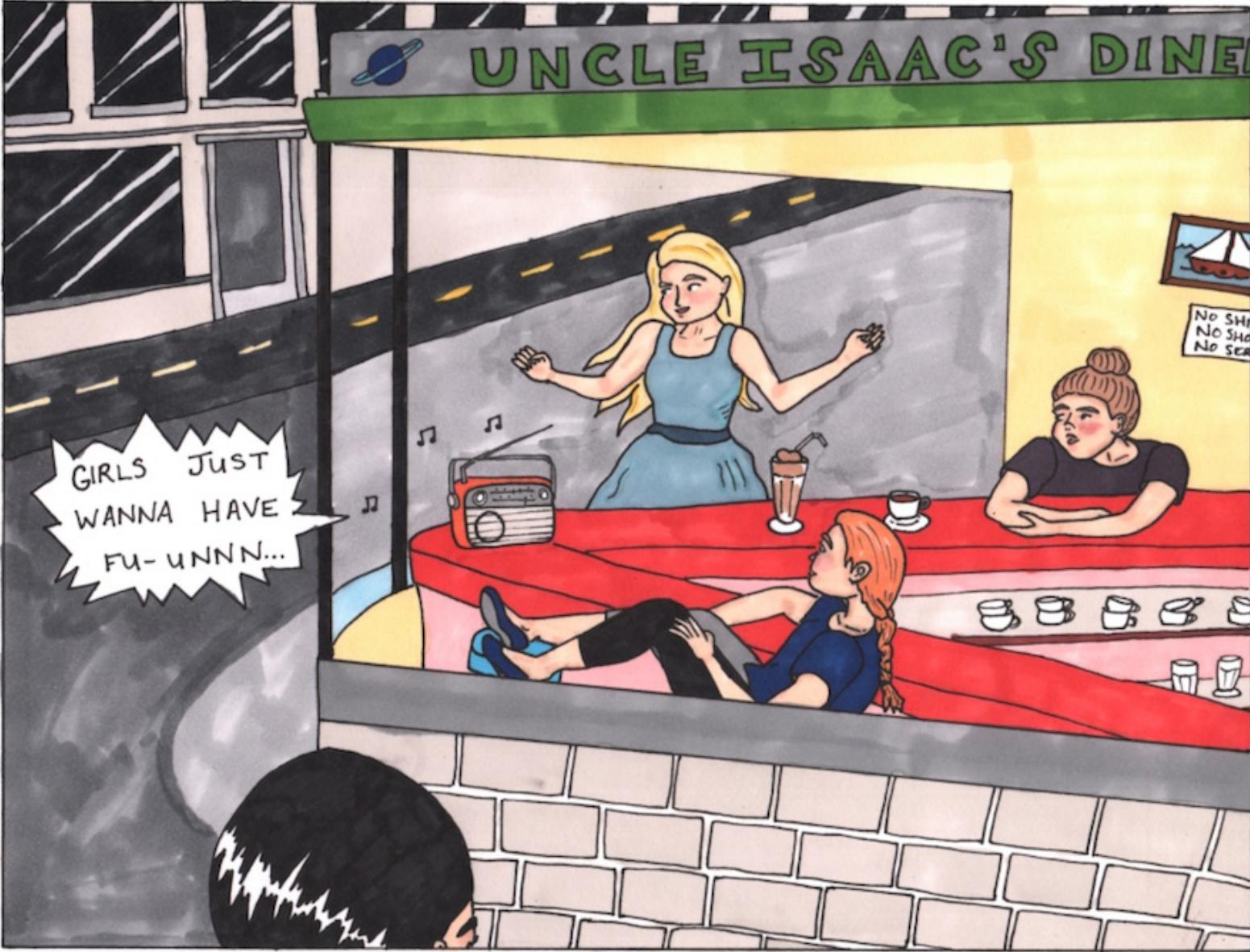
my iPod between my legs.  
*Flattened your words against your speaking  
mouth, I pray my flautist's lower lip,  
these, my best gestures will weigh as much as gifts.*

*jojo Lazar* has an MFA from Lesley and is a vaudevillian of all arts/trades around Boston and the steampunk scene. She has been published in journals including Connotation Press, Bad Penny Review and more. She plays ukulele in the Army of Toys ([armyoftoys.com](http://armyoftoys.com)) and has presented at the MassPoetry festival. Find her @poetesss / [jojolazar.com](http://jojolazar.com).

# MORE TO LIFE

BY ADRIENNE  
CELT





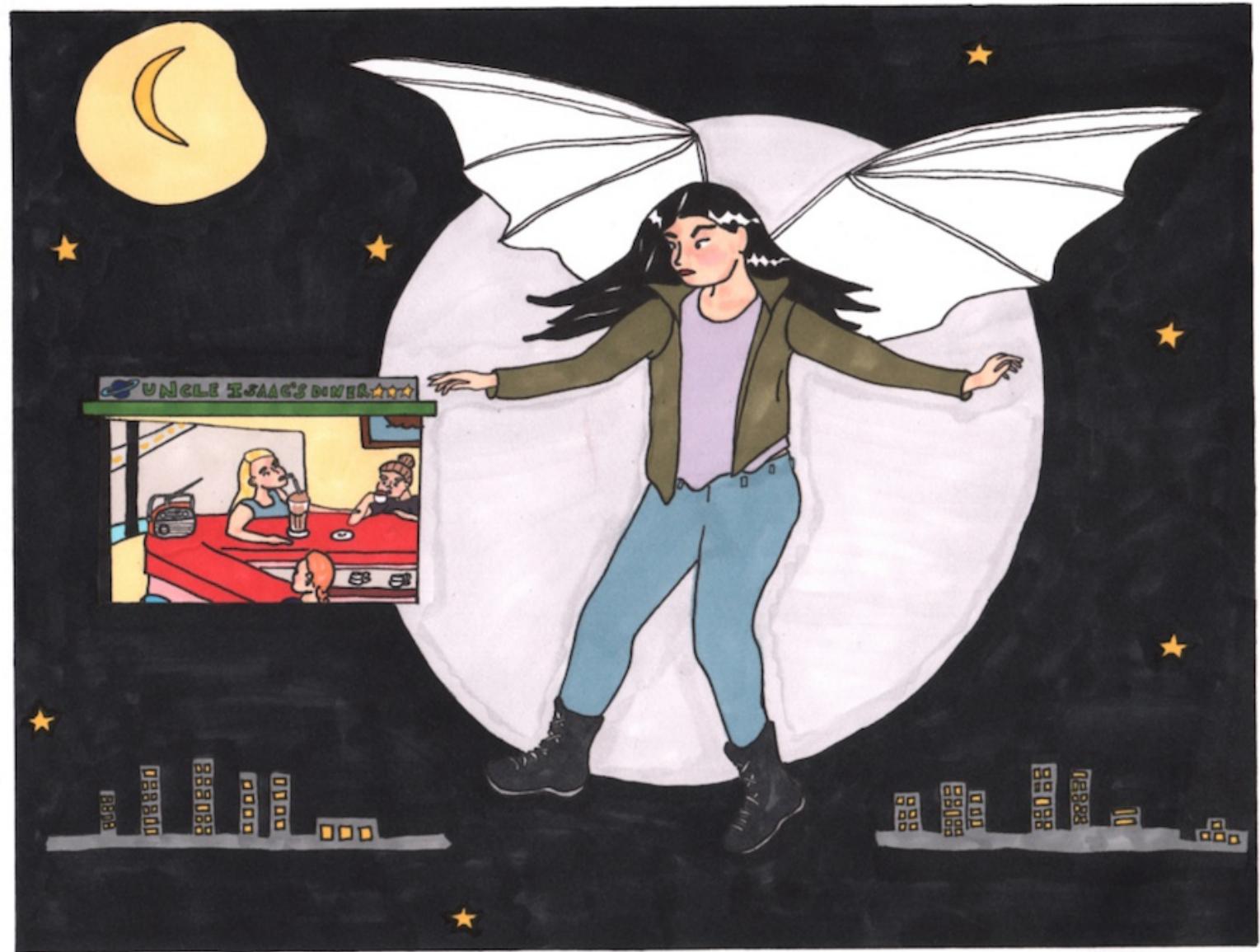
# UNCLE ISAAC'S DINER

GIRLS JUST  
WANNA HAVE  
FU-UNNN...

NO SHI  
NO SHO  
NO SEA









**Adrienne Celt** is the author of the novel *The Daughters* (W.W. Norton / Liveright 2015). A writer and cartoonist, her work has appeared in *Esquire*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Millions*, *The Lit Hub*, *the Tin House Open Bar*, *The Toast*, and many other places. Find her online at [adriennecelt.com](http://adriennecelt.com) or visit her webcomic at [loveamongthelampreys.com](http://loveamongthelampreys.com).

**GYPSY ROSE LEE NEVER HAD A  
FIVE O'CLOCK SHADOW**  
*Elizabeth Kirkpatrick Vrenios*

Boylesque  
in suit, tie,  
and breakaway pants  
one-man chorus  
of nipple glitter and  
glorified strip dance

stars like  
*Go Go Harden*  
*Mr. Gorgeous*  
and new to the sport  
*Mr. Modern Arty*  
dancing to *Leather Daddy*  
and *Mad about the Boy*  
traces of the cad

because I'm quite mad for  
the boy learning the difficult art  
of removing the Lycra part  
to reveal the à la carte  
subtle scheming  
boxers  
silk-striped sequins  
a lovely flashy affair  
and oh-so-divine trashy pair  
of breakaway pants

the mirror's odd diversity  
of misery and joy  
is mad about the boy  
feeling insane and young again  
though furry and fat  
as a puddled-middled  
couch cat

Ah! Hiding beneath  
the tease

the squeeze  
the peek discreet  
a single sequined heart  
under the jock  
over the cock  
part *l'amour toujour*  
carnal winking lure  
pouring more

and more  
sugar into titillation  
and timorous smutty glance  
the *oh-là-là* gut tug  
of the breakaway pants

*Look Mama, I'm a pretty boy!  
You never knew I was so much more,  
strutting through the spangled door.  
Start saving those singles, boys—  
I'm gonna make it rain.*

**Elizabeth Kirkpatrick Vrenios**' poetry has appeared in Clementine, Silver Birch Press, Kentucky Review, Bethlehem Writers Roundtable Poeming Pidgeon and Silkworm, in forthcoming issues of Edison Literary Review, Crack the Spine, and Unsplendid. She co-wrote the book Party Line under the name Elizabeth Kirkpatrick. Elizabeth is a professor emerita from American University in Washington D.C., having chaired the vocal and music departments. Vrenios' solo recitals throughout the United States, South America, Scandinavia, Japan and Europe have been acclaimed, and as the artistic director of the Redwoods Opera Workshop in Mendocino, California, and the Crittenden Opera Workshop in Washington D.C. and Boston, she has influenced and trained students across the country. She is a member of the international Who's Who of Musicians, and is the past National President of the National Opera Association.

## **HOT GIRL-ON-GIRL ACTION**

*jojo Lazar*

I learn offstage that the waif  
of a contortionist is only eighteen;  
a culinary student, strangely  
enough. She is amiss, all bones,  
her shadow a snake-charming  
sliver. Counting her ribs,

I feel my corset cut,  
draw the line between physical  
prowess and the brainy girl burlesque.  
"What do you do?" she asks.  
I fold a sonnet into my thigh high,  
reply, "A phony vaudeville routine.

I'm a comedic poetess..."  
She's already stretching metatarsals  
and counting on her bit's  
*pièce de résistance et délicieuse*.  
Her limbs rearrange as impossibly  
as a paper crane. She touches

her toes to the top of her shaved head,  
and with a flash of her pearls,  
she removes her skirt  
with her teeth.  
We undress to address you.  
Ghazals burst my lace-veined garters,

vulgar villanelles cling to skin,  
my Petrachean punchlines never  
align with my stocking seams.  
I know I can count  
on a buccaneer with that front  
row leer to bite a ballad from brassiere

every show I am limber enough  
to write. I wonder if she's always  
highly aware of her ribs, worries  
whether she'll be able to extend

*NOTE: An earlier draft of this poem appeared on Delirious Hem (delirioushem.blogspot.com).*

her leg entirely over her head tonight.  
In some cultures, poetry is printed on money.

*Let's press our last dollars to her feet.*  
(Years ago I read this poem's last  
line in my sleep. I know it wasn't  
a book I'd published in that universe,  
but I'll flash it, even  
if I'm sued in my dreams...)

**jojo Lazar** has an MFA from Lesley and is a vaudevillian of all arts/trades around Boston and the steampunk scene. She has been published in journals including Connotation Press, Bad Penny Review and more. She plays ukulele in the Army of Toys ([armyoftoys.com](http://armyoftoys.com)) and has presented at the MassPoetry festival. Find her @poetesss / [jojolazar.com](http://jojolazar.com).

**UNTITLED**  
*Chelsey van der Munnik*

She preferred one side of my stomach like the indented side of a king bed, making me a deflating soccer ball, but smaller. I could only fit a tiny carry-on, an efficient young womb only hungering the smallest portions. When she wanted out early in the middle of the night, I reached between my legs and her head was fuzzy and hard, possibly only as big as a lemon. Big. She will make her way out. What seems slight inside needs so much room to come out.

*Chelsey van der Munnik* is a poet and university student studying psychology and writing in Plattsburgh, NY. Her work has been previously published in Crack the Spine and ZPlatt. She received the Hassler Award and the Robert Frost Poetry Prize from SUNY Plattsburgh.

## **AFTER INJURY**

**Hillary Katz**

The mailbox overflows. The trash overflows. The refrigerator overflows. My body overflows with its own defense. The dishes in the sink overflow. The soap dispenser is empty. The water filter is empty. The chair across the table is empty. There is nothing I can fill or unfill.

At night, copper moonshine drops into the apartment like a stranger. I am stared at by walls. By a flood of empty flasks. Flood of hollow forgiveness. Flood of want. Flood of failed love. Flood of broken glass. Flood of dead skin. Flood of photographs. No one's soul is showing.

Forget the way the wind sounds on a blue afternoon. Forget how you released across the city like a surge. Forget the core of it, hot with bodies. Forget the jolt of a bus. Forget the closeness of someone else's breath. The speeding of your blood. Now, there is relief in nothingness.

*Hillary Katz's poems have appeared in Salamander, burndistrict, A cappella Zoo, and other journals. Born and raised in Vermont, she is a graduate of the University of New Hampshire. Currently, she teaches elementary school and attends the University of Pacific as a graduate student of education. She lives with her partner in San Francisco.*

***AN UNLIKELY AFFAIR***  
***Cassandra A. Clarke***

1.  
Imp Boy

He sat behind the girl with the green hair. He rubbed his knee, or the place where the pole said his knee should be. His fingers grazed the knobby edge, pulling; only he could see the nub jutting out, imitating bone. He wondered what would happen if he kept pulling. If he tugged it off, would she mind? Of course she would! The imp hadn't gotten this far being an imp without learning a thing or two about height. He knew people enjoyed looking down at one another; that was why he transferred high schools. At home, height didn't matter. But home was a burrow; mirrors were covered in dirt; rooms held: three leaf plants, lemongrass, dew. His mother rubbed fresh leaves against his cheeks each morning for luck. The imp only drank beer to get rid of the smell. Who wants to smell like a meadow in high school? The girls wouldn't listen to his stories; and if they did, they'd tilt their heads, half-listening, half-believing, half, half, half! If the girl with the green hair didn't mind about the one pole, what about the other? Can I hold it? she'd ask. And what if she ran away with it? What would he be left with? He learned girls were like that in the stories he heard growing up; beautiful girls are too curious; they touch too much; they ruin things, and end up floating away on a teacup, safe, as his kind is left stranded on a moat, or worse, an alligator's head! He looked to her mane, imagining what it'd be like to grab it, holding, riding a foamy mouth of a tide. His hands curled into fists, radiating heat. Where was the map he was supposed to have to tell him how to move? The green hair flicked onto his desk like hundreds of slick serpents, hissing, laughing at his too long fingernails, at his slightly too high pitch for a boy's, voice. She tied her hair back into a bow. Hair green. My queen. *Say hello.* He took his pencil, and poked her shoulder.

2.  
Mermaid

She couldn't remember what the ocean tasted like without the salt. It made her want to cry, but then, there'd just be more salt! Little known fact to mermaids, if you dive deep enough, past the crested caverns of the sea, there's no more salt. There's just water. On earth, there's just thirst.

In today's science class, she was supposed to be learning about the ocean, but the mermaid stopped listening once the teacher started to talk

about anchors. She'd seen shipwrecks. She used an anchor to make her headboard, propped beside purple sponges for pillows. But, she couldn't tell the class that. She had to hide her tail under her long, flowery skirt. They thought her green hair was something "artsy," asking if she liked *Fall Out Boy*. She'd say no. She didn't know that was a band. She thought they asked if she liked *Falling Boys*. She didn't. She met some; the ones who tried to dance on water with boards, and almost drowned. She'd sigh, and carry them to shore. Stupid boys. Little toys.

The mermaid tried to pay attention, but each time she heard the word *altitude* she heard a murmuring of sea. The mermaid flipped her hair like it would flip that lullaby of waves out of her ears. It made the boy behind her scoff. She thought about swatting his face with her tail, but then she'd be expelled. School was supposed to be better than riding dolphins all day. She'd be a cartographer. She'd teach humans to circumnavigate her sacred coves, her schools of tropical speckled fish, her scarce seadragons. A poke interrupted her. "What is your problem?" the mermaid asked the blushing boy.

He lifted his pant-legs to expose the stilts he used as legs.  
For once, she stopped licking her lips.

3.  
Oh, Emma

No one told the imp and the mermaid that having children together would be difficult. Everyone thought they must know. How else could a father raised in mud and a mother raised in waves, expect to raise an impish boy and one and one-half mermaids? The littlest child, Emma, was the half-one. Three feet tall. Green hair. One tail. Brown skin. She could speak both dolphin and badger. The other siblings: Tom, and Leia, liked to play with her, even if she did say the wrong thing. *Eeek, eek*, Emma would say to Tom, forgetting Tom didn't speak dolphin. *Raga, gaga*, Emma would say to Leia, who didn't speak badger, who didn't *do* dirt. Her dad would say, "Let me rub lemongrass on those cheeks." Her mom would say, "You smell so salty! Are you sure you dove deep enough into the sea?"

Emma, poor Emma, would want to persist, "I don't want to smell like lemongrass. The dolphins hate the smell and run from me." And, "I can't swim that deep. I'm not tall!" Emma said nothing.

"Oh, Emma," they'd all say.

So, Emma packed her bags and hitchhiked to San Diego. She knocked on the door of an aquarium, and got a job. She was small enough to slide between cages, and fast enough to smack sharks on the nose who asked for food *too* much. The aquarium never made her a tank for her, for others to point at and ask, *What is she? I can't tell*. The agreement was

made that way. She'd offer her knowledge of the sea, but, like imps do best, would not bargain herself. She had a hut by the dolphins, but close enough to the nearby park, to critters of the soil; they'd visit her each morning to trade herbs. In this way, the imp and the mermaid were perfectly in sync; they created a half-life to be lived by one. Emma, of course, didn't call it a half life, because for her, halves of things was all she knew to be true of life.

***Cassandra A. Clarke*** is an MFA student at Emerson College. Her prose has been previously published or upcoming at Electric Literature, Molotov Cocktail, Cartridge Lit, and Gone Lawn. When not writing, she's kicking her way to her second black belt.

## **BLOOD-FORGETTING**

**Kai Coggin**

Each month I bleed,  
I see the absence,  
as if there is something  
that would have been  
nourished  
with my blood's thick riches,  
as if a baby  
could have been  
warmed with the red-blanket of me,  
until I could hold it close,  
until I could name it

*wonder  
future  
light  
forever.*

This body—  
warm altar,  
uterus grail,  
bloodletting forget.

I am not a battlefield—  
yet  
here is the blood that  
holds the lives of men unmade,  
women never built into towers.

Each month I bleed,  
a part of me says goodbye  
to something that was never here,  
to someone that was never.

**Kai Coggin** is a poet and author living on the side of a small mountain in Hot Springs, AR. She holds a degree in Poetry and Creative Writing from Texas A&M University. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Split This Rock, Yellow Chair Review, ANIMA, Lavender Review, Elephant Journal, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Cliterature, ITWOW, [empath] quarterly, Catching Calliope, and other journals, as well as anthologized in several collections.

Kai is the author of PERISCOPE HEART (Swimming with Elephants Publications, 2014). Her poetry has recently been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Bettering American Poetry. She is also a Teaching Artist with the Arkansas Arts Council, specializing in bringing poetry and creative writing to youth. Find her at [www.kaicoggin.com](http://www.kaicoggin.com).

**SUSPENSION**  
*Ren Adams*

The moment we hand-parted,  
semi-hot sun with semi-glare,  
halfway between wake-hope and dash-night, that  
*silence* rules a graffiti-kingdom, I can't deny  
Syd Barrett who said: you're nice to me like ice, but  
it isn't true, you're nice to me like icing—hot&sweet&fragile,  
But QUIET  
quiet like (did you die, did you lie?) icing like ice, the WAIT,  
the interminable fuckwit green-wall wait,  
held over in a Hospital, wings of semi-tile like waiting for results, paused  
breath held before the curb-step,  
before stepping into sharp blue sky—  
the ice-knot returns, sappy, at 2, at every 3, at every turn,  
a disconnect dream, thoughts returning, concrete.

At 9 I swore I walked into the sky, light-footed  
out of the yellow dirt drive, over the Chevy,  
near tree-tops and telephone poles—this grand suspension  
this shimmering Mojave heat—I just thought, sure.  
This is possible.  
And I did it.  
I saw the steel-roofed carport, muddied  
where dad threw trash.

No one believes you when you walk in the sky.

Why *this* 9-paned window on Route 66, below the tops of trees,  
now cloudy tar-desert sky, a space you've entered in story,  
never in breath, your absence;  
rail and scream, rail running East to West,  
rail suspended without steps to the sky.

No one believes you when you walk in the sky.

**Ren Adams** was born in 1974 in Lancaster, California, and currently lives and works in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Adams works cross-media, from visual art installations to poetry and sound. She has an MFA in Visual Arts from Lesley University as well as a degree in English, mentoring under Thom Gunn, Charles Hood and Robert Peters. Ren has widely exhibited and published art and writing and currently teaches through the University of New Mexico. Her poetry has appeared in a variety of publications, including Atom Mind, Poetry Motel, Potpourri, The Great Blue Beacon, and Mother Road, with upcoming features in First Class Lit and eratio. Her visual art has recently appeared in The Bombay Gin, Fickle Muses, Cactus Heart and The Adirondack Review. Ren is interested in the deconstruction of self as it encounters media and non-self, especially the rigors of television and the wonderful, terrible sublime of remixed anxiety and loss.

**KITTEN**  
*Tabitha Blankenbiller*

When I was scarcely twenty, I fell for a cipher.

Or maybe a cipher fell for me, a mask concealing a void. We were a long time ago now. It's hard to tell what happened from what I tell myself.

Each of us was running a scam on the other. Me, the girl who collected facets of a personality instead of committing to one. Job at a lingerie store, stiletto and stocking collection, love of vodka. I didn't see how empty Adam was too, how hard he tried to be smooth, with each move slick with well-worn grooves. It's tough to spot another husk when you're busy masking the gaps in your own being.

I made up my first date with Adam. At least it feels like I did. When I remember it now I'm watching a stranger. She was a part I read for a one-woman show, an audition for the role I actually wanted in life. Beautiful Beloved. If I pushed too hard against the walls of the Portland City Grill they might collapse, like a stage set.

As soon as the doors closed to fly to the 30th floor, Adam pinned me to the wall with a playful shove, and I grinned, gasped—I craved the roughness so deeply, so carnally, he could smell the need on my breath. I was trapped in a box, suspended in air on a string, his. I was so obvious, wearing a corset as a top, paired with a napkin passed off as a skirt.

I fantasized about wrapping my legs around his waist, the nonexistent skirt hardly a barrier against a few minutes of frantic, probably-uncomfortable-but-totally-hot-in-theory fucking we could laugh about years from now, inspired to sneak off to a couple's dinner party coat room and relive our first date.

The bar felt lushly dark, as if stitched in velvet. The only light flickered from each table's sentinel tea light, and the dim city skyline pinpricking the floor-to-ceiling windows. The perfect place to hide my age (under), Adam's hand (way too high), the thin veneer of my confidence. A cache of booths circled a grand piano with a man massaging "Fly Me to the Moon" from the keys. Each booth was a cave with high, plush walls muting the world into light slivers and piano keys and perfectly shaken drinks.

A waitress peeked into our cave, and Adam ordered a gin and tonic. "Cosmopolitan," I said with all the self-assurance of a girl in the arms of a man fourteen years her senior. The ID checking formalities never arose.

Adam had the messy blonde tousle of a frat boy, with the crooked nose and permanently cocked smile to match. Adam was from Hollywood, he said. A music industry insider. He knew everyone from back in the good old days (the eighties, from what I could surmise). "Now those jobs are drying up, with everyone pirating music," he lamented, moving the glass of gin in a ring around the table, watching the ice cubes whirl a moment behind. "People

think rock stars are so rich, that they aren't stealing anything. But there's a ton of little people behind that music. They're the ones getting fucked."

"I download all my songs from iTunes," I said.

"That is the sexiest thing I've ever heard," he said, and he leaned in for another kiss, shamelessly pawing at my mounds of breasts cinched into the corset.

The piano switched tunes and he began to hum along. Los Angeles was just a small town, he said. He knew everyone. Jennifer Aniston was a secret lesbian, he said. The Beatles were in his studio planning a reunion the day before Lennon was shot, he said. Carrot Top stole his prop comedy idea, he said. Rod Stewart liked to doodle dicks on the studio ceiling, he said.

"I left my home in Georgia, headed for the 'Frisco bay," he sang, nudging me.

"What? I don't know this song."

He clutched his fist to his heart. "Otis Redding? How can you not have heard this?" Because my parents' albums were a little less soul and a lot more Styx. Because as Motown as we got was Whitney Houston bopping to "Somebody to Love Me" while Mom did chores. Because I had a decade and a half of catching up to do. "It's easy, see kitten? 'Sittin' by the dock of the bay, watching the tide roll away'..." he let the note trail off and fade like a passing train. "Kitten. That's the perfect name for you, don't you think?"

"I have a kitten," I said. I made everything so easy; the effortless seduction for a girl too hungry.

"Where are we going now?" The clock in Adam's Honda Accord twinkled 11:30. Since picking me up in front of my dorm hall at Concordia University we'd been to a hole-in-the-wall sushi crevice run by a team of Soup Nazis, a karaoke bar that broke up our makeout session and kicked us out when I "couldn't find" my ID, and the Grill.

"I've got a surprise," he said. We wound up the tight streets of the West Hills, the land Portland tycoons have built their fortresses on for generations. Everclear's lyrics caroused around my head: *I will buy you a big house, way up in the West Hills; I will buy you a new life.*

The giant Tudor houses and their brick-and-iron gates thinned out toward the top of the hill, where we crested into a dark parking lot. The city spread in panorama through the windows, flickering every hue of light: the aquamarine Rose Garden towers, the Made in Oregon reindeer's red blinking nose, purples and greens reflecting from the bridges into the river's slow, lapping scales. This was horror movie-perfect sex parking.

"Let's go!" Adam said, swinging his door open.

"Where?"

"Just follow me." I probably should have been more nervous than I was. I'd only met the man a few hours earlier, and no one knew where I was aside from "on a date tonight." It was almost midnight, and the empty city park was a textbook *CSI: SVU* opener. But the city and the kisses and the drinks and

the Hollywood stardust. I was enchanted in a way I've grown too jaded to grasp.

A few yards past the parking lot was a playground perched right on the edge of the hill. He took a seat on the swing set, beckoning me to follow. "The best swing ride of your life," he promised.

"This is un-fucking-believable," I said, kicking my legs above the playground sawdust. With each pump of my legs I flew, my toes grazed the miniature city below and beyond. "I could reach out and touch it!"

"I swear, nobody knows about this," he said, "who goes swinging in the dark?"

"This is the best first date ever."

"Really?"

"Seriously? A midnight flight above the city? You're going to win for Best First Date Ever. Nobody could top this."

And nobody has.

Two months before my first date with Adam, I was stood up at Lloyd Center Mall. I told the guy on Yahoo! Chat that I wanted to spend a day wandering around his house on all fours wearing nothing but a collar. I'd lick milk from a saucer and nap on the couch. *I wanna be your sex kitty.* I thought that would inspire his attention, but as I sat on the bench in front of our designated Starbucks for twenty minutes past our promised meet, it was clear that I was a few dollars shy of prostituting myself and still getting turned down.

Had he not come at all, or walked by, saw me and turned back around? *I'll be the girl in the crazy socks,* I'd told him.

Sulking away from Starbucks, I fumbled around in my purse for my cell phone. I dialed my best friend Christian, but I got his voicemail. "It's me," I said after the beep. "I'm at the mall, stood up, it's confirmed. I am un-wantable. Call me, or if you don't, you know. You won't be the only one."

When I hung up, I found myself staring into a window-ful of kittens. I had wandered halfway down the mall, on a side of the shopping center I rarely ventured to. The litter of baby cats were mostly calicos, four sisters tumbling over one another like a living, nipping obstacle course. Atop the scratching post, the sole black-and-white kitten languished like the display window's Cleopatra. As I stared she yawned a miniature-lion growl, and fluttered open her tiny blue eyes.

Those eyes, and I was done for.

I waved down guy behind the counter, asked to hold the black-and-white kitten. She was so small, probably smaller than a kitten away from her mother should be. She was nothing but cotton against my chest, humming with a nonstop purrrrr. Her cheek was dotted with a single black speck—a beauty mark.

"I'll take her," I said. There were no other words.

Two days after the Best Date Ever with Adam I was working the night

shift with Brandi. Brandi, with her Wolverine nails in acrylic French pedicures and dark-outliner-with-nude-gloss lips, was the toughest woman I met in the lingerie business. She ran every day on a container of Campbell's Chicken Soup To Go and a dollar menu McDouble. "I eat less than 900 calories a day," she bragged between soup-slurps in the back room. Barely five feet tall and maybe 100 pounds (with a McDouble in her stomach), I'd seen her stare down every threat that came through our glass doorway, from the crook trying to return stolen merchandise ("there's no way I'm taking back what you stole from me yesterday," she said, shoving the embroidered black negligee back across the counter) to her slurring ex-husband who liked to stop by shit-faced ("take your pinkie-sized dick and get out of my mall!"). Brandi approved of me because I kept her sales numbers up and didn't give her any lip about vacuuming the cheetah carpet. The vacuuming was my favorite part of the night—it was a Zen release, the noise draining out any straggling customers and the Muzak soundtrack looping Christina Aguilera's "Car Wash" cover.

"I have a crush," I told Brandi as I re-sized the Dream Corset section back to a neat series of 32s to 44s. Brandi re-hung panties at the counter.

"Another Match guy?" she asked, not looking up from the tangle of thongs.

"Yeah, but this one I actually like." With Adam, I understood what people meant when they talked about chemistry. Sparks. We bantered! We joked! We hadn't even had sex on the first date, so I was practically in a Victorian romance. "And the best part is, he has a lingerie fetish. I wore my corset out on our date and he practically fell down when he saw it."

"That's a good match," she said, her penciled-on eyebrows ticking ever-so-slightly up.

In my quick pass through the storeroom to take out the garbage, I seized the moment alone to sneak a look at my cell phone, glowing green from the depths of my purse with a new text message. *Whatcha up to kitten?*

*Slaving over panties. Be home at ten.*

"I think Adam could be my Mr. Big," I told Christian the night before, my cell phone wedged up against my shoulder while I combed through my closet for the perfect second-date ensemble. "We have this witty back-and-forth. Our conversation didn't stall for a second the whole time."

"Does he have that asshole edge?"

"He's kind of cocky," I admitted. Film editing genius, musical instrument savant, crafter of Best Dates Ever, and from what he'd promised in the backseat of the Honda—"literally. He went on for a while about how ginormous his dick was."

"Can you confirm?"

"Not yet, but I have to make this one epic night," I said, taking out a black-and-red plaid skirt. Every modern-day fairy tale started with one incredible night.

Blinking in my purse I had another message waiting: *Dirty little kitty! Call me.*

\* \* \*

An hour after returning to my single dorm room, I was bounding back down the stairs in my Velveeta outfit of seduction. Pleated plaid skirt, white Peter Pan blouse, argyle knee socks tucked into black platform Mary Janes. I clomped in my heavy shoes, alerting the entire lobby of Uno and *Halo* players to look up and watch me welcome some random old guy into the building. My college was a Lutheran school, and I'd wholly overestimated the number of agnostics that I would meet. I was drawn to small perks like a theater program willing to give me a scholarship and the short commute into a city I adored. I downplayed anything that was a drawback, like strong conservatism and a dry campus. If I was a genius at anything, it was being delusional.

Suffice to say, I didn't hit it off with my classmates. We chafed in class and tumbled into an all-out war on election night (our five-member College Democrats chapter versus everyone else, Kerry versus Bush... it was a messy Tuesday). By this time I was on an ornery mission. Not that my loneliness was the fault of these future Sunday School teachers of America. They were the smart ones. They'd found a school with the mellow, God-loving atmosphere they were looking for, and I had set awful criteria.

I dressed up as a dirty schoolgirl to turn Adam on almost as much as I did to piss the hall kids off. And from the glares in my peripheral and slack-jawed guest gawking through the glass door, I seemed to be successful on both counts.

The disgust, the ogling made me throb so hard I felt dizzy. I wanted to be fucked. Not make love, not hook up, not have sex. Ridiculously, unconsciously, unapologetically fucked. None of the awkward sex I had amassed, scattered, in the last year. I wanted to be an object of irresistible beauty and lust and pleasure, not a person. An experience. A force. A memory. I wanted Adam to fuck me so hard I would be born again as that witty, worldly woman I imagined; the old me fucked into oblivion. I wanted to be yanked and thrown and conquered and torn open like a feast. I was sick of being the hungry one; for once, I wanted to be devoured.

"How did you know about my *Wild Things* fantasy?" he asked, and grabbed my ass full-force as we bounded up the stairs. I shrieked with total, giddy delight. "Although—" He held me at arm's length at the second-floor landing, "Denise Richards had bobby socks on." I stared blankly back at him, as the only role I'd ever seen Denise Richards in was opposite Pierce Brosnan in *The World is Not Enough*, where she played a top nuclear physicist with all the believability of Bigfoot footage. He gazed back at me expectantly, as if awaiting some level of response.

"Um, I have bobby socks too," I said, "Do you want me to change them?"

"Nah, that's okay," he said, then paused a moment. "Well actually, if you have them anyway... do you mind?"

I shrugged. I was so close, what was a little wardrobe change?

I opened the door to my room with pride. My couch pillows were fluffed, and the air was spritzed with a puff of Frederick's signature fragrance (musky vanilla wafers).

Adam followed in, took a few steps from the doorway, and halted. He eyeballed the entire space, from my "kitchen" (mini fridge, contraband hot plate

skillet and microwave) to my computer desk (kind of a dining room, where I crammed chili and rice into my face while clicking through my Match messages), my bed (with the princess net canopy I bought at Bed, Bath, and Beyond which, in retrospect, adds a creepy touch). I hovered behind, waiting for some wonder at my sweet, sexy digs.

“This place needs some incense,” he said. He asked if I had any tucked away in one of my drawers, and I shook my head. The heavy, spicy aroma of those reeds made me ill. “Every college campus has someone selling incense and stuff. Take a look next week.” Reed College, sure. Concordia? The only peddler I had seen on school grounds was dealing in hand-carved nativity scenes. But I spared him the boring schematics and fished some scented tealights from my desk drawer. While I dug around for a lighter he lounged across the bed, folding his hands behind his head, beach hammock style.

“Now,” he said as I turned, “about those socks.”

“Oh yeah.” The lace bobby socks were in my dresser drawer, and they didn’t match with the skirt the way the argyle knee-highs had. But if it’s what he wanted, what did it matter? I popped the Mary Janes back on my feet and smiled, hands on my hips.

“Ms. Jensen,” he said, tossing me a copy of the textbook I’d left on the bed—*Old Testament Translations and Studies*. “I’m afraid there have been some issues with your class performance lately.”

Oh my god, role playing! I’d always wanted to do this! “Why, whatever do you mean?” I asked, clutching the heavy book to my chest.

“I don’t think I can pass you through this class if you don’t perform some—extra credit.”

“But I thought I was doing so well; I just turned in that paper on Tolstoy...”

“Time out,” Adam cut in, sitting up. “You can’t argue when you’re role-playing. That ruins the whole thing.”

Not in my head it didn’t. I wanted to be coerced, threatened, manipulated; otherwise I wasn’t being seduced or ravaged. I was being boring and slutty. But I guess he liked boring and slutty—boring and slutty gilded up with the right socks. At the time, I didn’t feel I was entitled to choice. *Don’t scare him off!* I told myself, *and he’s right. Arguing during foreplay isn’t hot.* So I smiled and purred and rolled my words: “I’ll do aaaaanything for an Aaaa...”

As soon as he was finished I collapsed next to him, and got a slick of armpit sweat on my shoulder. Gross, I thought, but didn’t mention it. That wouldn’t be cool. I scuttled toward the wall; the one I failed to consider was heroin-addict-thin while I was making my hot girl moans and cries of *Oh god!* and *Oh yeah!* and *Fuck me, harder!* I stared up at the Elvgren pinup girls framed on my wall in their rumpled skirts and flashed garters until Adam broke the silence. “Hey, didn’t you say you had a cat?”

“She’s gone,” I said.

\* \* \*

A month before my first date with Adam, I'd snuck Mehitabel into my dorm in an innocuous cardboard box peppered with holes, designed to carry a hamster. She was so small, she barely filled my palm. She was named after an obscure Mel Brooks musical, *Archy and Mehitabel*, based on an also-obscure 1930's comic strip. I had played the marquee character in Concordia's revival. Originally played by Eartha Kitt during the musical's month-long Broadway run, Mehitabel was an aging alley cat whose best friend is Archie, a neurotic cockroach and aspiring writer.

Once Mehitabel and I settled in together, I stopped dating. I forgot to troll through my email, snuffing out dates. I was going to bed every night with a fuzzy little snuggler who nested next to my head on the pillow. In the morning she would stretch her miniature paw to my cheek, ready for her dish of Fancy Feast. I picked the most fabulous and pretentious flavors, like Sea Bass and Shrimp Appetizer in a Delicate Broth, Seared Filet Mignon Feast in Light Gravy, and Shredded Wild Salmon Fare with Grilled Greens in a Savory Sauce.

"Good morning, Mehitabel!" I greeted the morning. Overnight she'd transformed me into a homebody. I rushed back from classes and work to throw her jingle ball across the carpet or chase her with the feather fish-line. At night, after I came back from poking through the cafeteria's awful choices, we would snuggle in for movie night. Me on my cheap rocker chair, Mehitabel napping on my boobs, re-watching my small DVD collection of *Sex and the City*, *Secretary*, *Chicago* and *Bridget Jones' Diary* over and over again.

November rolled by, and I was the happiest I had ever been at Concordia. Without the bad dates and constant disappointments, I forgot to loathe myself. I felt at home in my room, content in my job, decent in my classes. "You're all the love I need, Mehitabel," I would tell her, jingling toys in front of her mole-kissed pink nose.

One night, the week after Thanksgiving, I took myself out on a date. A movie at the independent theater downtown about a drug smuggler with a heart of gold, and ice cream from Cold Stone Creamery. I didn't get back to the dorm until close to midnight, the latest I'd been out since finding the love of my life at the pet store. "I'm sorry, pretty kitty, did you miss me?" I asked, dipping down to smother her in Eskimo kisses and tummy tickles. "Let's get you some Fancy Feast!"

As I plucked a can from my dresser drawer (turkey and potato), the land line phone rang. I answered, and a hushed "hello" whispered into my ear.

"Christian?" I asked, the only guy I could imagine calling me nowadays.

"Yeah. How are you doing?" Fine, I claimed, shifting through my confusion. "I miss you," he murmured.

"Uhm, I miss you too."

"What would you do if I were there right now?"

Fuck! I thought I'd remembered these quiet, heavy-breathed conversations from the past few weeks, but they rang in so late and hazy that I thought I was dreaming. "Nothing, because you're GAY," I said, my fingers

shaking as I hung up.

I dialed up the school security line. They might be able to trace the call, I figured. I never thought they'd respond to a prank call report by telling me "I'll be there in five minutes."

"Shit!" I screeched, letting the phone clatter to the floor. The batteries bounced out, and Mehitabel dove for cover underneath the couch bed. I went into kitty fire drill mode, practiced a few weeks ago when the RAs were performing a door-to-door canned food drive. Fleece blanket over the litter box, towel on the food dishes, Mehitabel locked in the closet. Just seconds after she was safely veiled under my dresses and skirts, a knock cracked against the door. Taking a deep breath I swung it wide open, revealing a short-and-stout student officer I'd seen making rounds in our parking lot. "So you say this has happened before?" she asked, walking to my desk where the suspicious phone jack stood. A couple times, I said. Was she lonely or something?

"I've gotten a few calls lately in my room too," she said. No notepad, just the conversation of a girl with five hours left on her graveyard shift. "I think it's actually someone on campus."

*Scratch, scratch, scratch.*

She glanced at the closet, then back at me. "What did you say when you answered?"

*Scratch, scratch, scratch.*

I coughed, a pathetic last resort. "Do you have a hamster in there?" she asked. I shook my head. "I'm going to need you to open your closet."

My throat closed up as I silently opened the door, releasing the restless Mehitabel, who jumped for joy at my feet. Just the sight of her, oblivious to our peril, thinking this was all a game of hide-and-seek, broke me. More painful than any man or date gone awry, every way I couldn't get life right. Of all the sex and vodka drawer and contraband hot plate, Concordia brought me down for my sweet little kitten. She was the tax evasion to my Al Capone. "You're going to have to find her a new home," the security guard astutely pointed out.

The next weekend I drove Mehitabel up to Mom and Dad's. "She'll be right here every time you come to visit," Mom had promised me, even though she hated cats more than most people hate Nickelback.

In my email, my first Match message from Adam waited. *Lingerie fetish? You've got me hooked. Sushi?*

"I know you're still upset," Mom said over the phone as I drove back to Portland. "Take a day to yourself tomorrow. Watch some movies, go out and get your nails done. Just spend a day taking care of yourself, all right?"

"I can't, I have a date tomorrow night."

"I don't think you should go," she said in that wary voice, her sixth sense for scumbag men sprung. "You don't need the stress right now. Do you really think that's a good idea? Just stay home."

No one ever listens to Mom's best ideas.

\* \* \*

A month after our first date, I was convinced I was headed for girlfriend-dom with Adam. After our first night together we started to amass dates and adventures, like our trip to Yam Yam's Barbecue. We kept pawing at each other over saucy pulled pork, me teasing him about what was underneath my buttoned-up peacoat. "I could get arrested," I teased.

"Now, how am I supposed to enjoy Portland's best ribs when all I can think about is ripping that damn coat off?"

He brought over an old cribbage board and taught me the game. "Nothing like cribbage after sex," he said. "A game takes just the right amount of time to get ready for another go."

He wrote a song about me, or so he claimed. I tried to see him sing with his band at a bar in Old Town, but the bouncer wasn't buying my "I.D. left at home" line.

We snuck into the handicap shower across the hall and almost got caught when another girl came in to pee.

Four weeks after our first date I invited him out for coffee. Wasn't that what non-couples that were just about to have the talk about how perfect they were for each other and how exciting it would be to explore an exclusive relationship did? But he just laughed at my suggestion. "Coffee, huh? Sure. I'll be over in an hour."

Oh well. A few more tricks, a few more orgasms. We'd get there. I just had to step it up. A few days ago I'd stolen a feather duster from the prop department to go with a French maid costume I scored from the Halloween clearance rack. He met me at the back staircase, my costume hidden by a fleece bathrobe. Even in the scant light of the stairwell I could see that Adam looked haggard. His witty, infectious energy I bounced off was non-existent as he trudged behind me. "Everything okay?" I asked, opening my door.

"Yeah, work's just fucked up right now."

"Well I know a job that might fix that," I offered, gesturing toward the chair. I gave my best Dita Von Teese impression, swinging the sash and letting the robe puddle at my feet.

"Nice!" he said, perking up. I slid his jeans down around his ankles, fluttering the feather duster at his thighs.

"Tu és tres dirty, dirty boy!" I said. And I went down, as always. That's what awesome girlfriends are for.

I popped up with a smile, straightening my lace maid headband. "That was the best one ever," he said, and sighed. "Too bad, because this is probably the last time we'll see each other."

I couldn't play cool rewinding the sentence in my head. Twisted jaw, furrowing brow. "What?"

"I'm probably going to have a real girlfriend soon."

My brain wasn't quick enough on the uptake, so he calmly explained. There was a girl he'd been eyeing for a long time, but she had been in a relationship. And now she was out of it, and he had promised himself that if she was available, he would go for it. He looked at me earnestly, because I had

no reason to be mad.

I stumbled over to the bed and gripped the mattress with all the strength I should have been using to punch Adam in the face.

I was nothing.

No, not nothing. A thing. A sex toy, no more sacred, no less disposable than a double-edged dildo. I didn't even warrant a polite break-up dinner, or even the courtesy of breaking this news before I got down on my knees. Sex kitten was supposed to be my bait, not my substance. He could see that, right? That's what I was projecting, wasn't it?

"Come on, we can still have a good night, right?" he prodded.

*Don't let him see you hurt*, my head throbbed. Woozy with confusion, with doubt. I was the bombshell, remember? What did I care if he left? I would still be fun and sexy and fabulous. *Don't be a punchline*.

So I laid back. I let him fuck me. I let him come inside me. I watched as he put his clothes on and stood up and walked out the door. He didn't see my face and he didn't see me cry.

Without Adam or Mehitabel in my world, all I wanted was to make it through to spring. I was planning a move off-campus into my own apartment, a place to build a life outside of my failure and reputation. The night in March that I came home to a blinking phone message, my foot arches were aching from six hours standing on the padding-free cheetah carpeting. I had an Old Testament final coming up. I was getting good at distractions.

I pressed Play on my phone, and listened as I stripped down from my black blazer jacket and slacks.

"Hey there, kitten."

I halted, my left shoe still in my hand. Three months had passed since Adam left me in my French maid apron. I'd considered us through, in this life and all future incarnations.

"So that girl I left you for? Dumped me. I knew right away it was karma for the shitty way I treated you. That's what I get for letting a good girl go. Give me a call; number's the same."

Where did he get his boundless source of nerve, I wondered, finally pleased and furious in the proper doses. "Karma would be getting hit by a bus," I muttered, and punched a defiant, orgasmic DELETE.

I dialed Christian and re-enacted the voicemail, seared in my mind as soap opera monologue. "What does he want from me?" I asked him, and got my lazy-scriptwriter answer.

"Easy sex again. Duh." And yet, I missed easy sex. Any sex. "Don't you dare call him back," Christian warned.

"I didn't."

"Don't."

I kept my promise and moved along—for a week. I was at my desk lording over a virtual household on *The Sims* when my phone rang.

“Hey there, kitten.” Adam’s cocky-grin tone, as if he’d trapped me. “Did you get my message?” I mumbled a yes. “So yeah, dumped. But you’re not sad, are you?”

“Why, am I supposed to be?” I asked.

“That’s rather macabre of you.”

“Sorry,” I said. I was cracking, and over nothing. No wonder he had the balls to call me back. I was a total pushover.

“Listen. I’m sorry I was such a jerk. That was totally the wrong thing to do. You’re a really nice girl, and you didn’t deserve to be treated that way. I’d like to stay friends, if you’d let me.”

“You really hurt me,” I managed to say.

“That’s kind of a surprise, honestly. I didn’t think you really cared that much. I thought I was just a booty call for you. You’d just call me up and want me to come over—I thought I was just your boy toy.”

What about trying to go for coffee? What about the conversations, the dinners? Could he really not know that I wanted more? His claims clouded my outrage. I felt a twist of guilt in my stomach—had I used him?

“What are you doing Saturday?” He wanted to know. Working until close, I said. “There’s a late-night showing of *Sin City*. You’d have time to run home and change out of your underwear uniform. Pick you up at 11?” I agreed, sounds good. “Good night, kitten.” *Click*.

I stared at the phone screen fading back in my hand.

The movie went fine, though I didn’t tell a soul that I had gone. We didn’t hug, no lingering at the curb trying to get upstairs. Movie, home, done. Perhaps I could really do this, be friends with an ex.

*He’s not an ex, I reminded myself. He never wanted to be your boyfriend, remember?*

The next Saturday he called, talking about his latest band gig. “You know, you haven’t played me my song,” I said. Even as gullible as I was, I had a hard time believing he’d sat down and composed something for a girl he didn’t seem to give a genuine fuck about.

“Kitten?” I’d need my guitar to play it.” Bring it over, I commanded. I wanted proof that, maybe, one thing between us wasn’t total bullshit. “I can’t bring all my amps and stuff over. Come over here. I’ll pick you up.”

I didn’t fuss with myself, didn’t put on elaborate underwear and thigh-highs or a Mondrian painting of eyeshadow. Just jeans and a wrinkled pink blouse. Friend stuff. We drove from northeast into southeast Portland, to Adam’s rented bungalow, a place I had never been invited to in the time we dated/screwed. One of the renovated beauties on Portland’s oldest streets, with short ceilings and narrow staircases, creaky hardwoods and air crowded with ghosts. He led me to a staircase hidden beneath a closet, the path to the basement. When he turned on the bare lightbulb hanging from the concrete

ceiling, I had to choke back a laugh. It was the most stereotypical, rocker-wannabe basement I'd ever seen. Sparkly drum set. Jimi Hendrix posters. Huge, seventies-era amps, the grates caked in dust.

Adam set to tweaking with the knobs and cords attached to a scruffy red electric guitar, which he gripped with reverence. "I haven't played the song in a while," he confessed, "so give me a minute. And don't be surprised if it sucks. But tell me, truthfully if you like it. Or don't."

I think I liked it, or at least I liked the idea. I applauded as he brought us home with a plucky rock star finish, swinging his arm in a pinwheel and shaking the last chord from the guitar's neck. "I swear I'm not pretending," I said, flashing a thumb's up. "It's really, really good."

I turned and skipped back up the stairs, satisfied. See, universe? I wasn't all wrong about the two of us. Maybe Adam wasn't all lies. Maybe I wasn't all costumes and facades. There was a song between us. I had my purse on my shoulder and the front doorknob in my hand.

"What are you doing?" he asked, closing his hand around mine, putting a dead stop to my turn. He pushed me up against the closed door, a ferocious kiss waking my lips. My heart, my mind screamed at me—everyone in your life, everyone who has ever cared about you would throat-punch you right now if they knew you were even here, let alone—

And yet.

Like a throw pillow, plucked and tossed on the couch, his weight pressing against me. "Wait," a tiny voice cried out, more suggestion than command. "I have to think about this." I couldn't think, not drunk on being wanted, not inches from snaking my legs around his back and throwing myself back into him. "I really, really liked you. And you, you just... I felt like garbage."

"Oh." He sat back on the cushion, maybe concerned, maybe disappointed. "I don't want you to be hurt, but we had a great thing together. If you want to just have some fun, I'm all for it. But that's up to you."

Those were the terms. I was never going to be The Girlfriend, there were never going to be anniversary picnics up at the park next to our swing set. We could be whipped cream and Kama Sutra and costumes, but that was the line.

"Do you want to stay over tonight?" he proposed after the clothes had been shed, lying on his bed in smooth, cotton sheets and a worn denim comforter.

"I'd like that," I simply said, a lilted hope.

Adam couldn't find his cribbage board, so he brought over a Chinese puzzle game instead. The rules were simple, he promised, removing a carved wooden board and collection of brown and white marbles. You had to make a solid row of your marbles before the other person could block you. After a few rounds, we began to notice a distinct pattern. Whoever went first always won, because if you used one first-round maneuver we discovered, you were mathematically certain to conquer. "That's incredible!" he exclaimed, "Who could have figured that out besides us?"

*Us.* I could sense the panic welling up inside of him immediately. A cough, a blush. He looked vaguely nauseous. “You know, come to think of it, I have to get up early for work tomorrow,” he said abruptly, throwing the defeated game back under the bed. “It might not be the best night for a sleepover.” I nodded and groped around the floor for my clothes. “You’re not mad, right?”

Maybe I could win this battle of wills, of who could care less. The shell wearing garters could do it. The girl missing her cat could not. I kicked the flicker of myself into the closet and shut the door. Coughed.

I shook my head. No, not mad.

How could I be? You’re not mine.

**Tabitha Blankenbiller** is a Pacific University MFA graduate living outside of Portland, Oregon. Her essays have appeared in *The Rumpus*, Barrelhouse, Hobart, Brevity, and a number of other journals. She reviews books for Bustle and is a regular columnist at PDXX Collective. When she's not Tweeting @tabithablanken, she's working on a novel about broken friendships.

**SHARE**  
*Chelsey van der Munnik*

We used to climb down through  
the trees off the side of the Perry Mills Road.  
The river trampled the rocks and moved

faster as I looked with longing.  
I began to stare and think of a restaurant  
by a different river where throwing

myself in was better than dessert and that  
bottle of Windex when we were six.  
Let's share like we were taught.  
I'll show you how to jump in and forget to swim.

Watch the leeches grab and pull life out.  
Watch the mosquitoes swarm and coat  
our tiny bodies in raw bumps.

Watch the butterflies speed away  
from our murderous grasp.  
Watch the tadpoles fear our stepping, little toes.

This way to the path,  
hold my hand.

*Chelsey van der Munnik is a poet and university student studying psychology and writing in Plattsburgh, NY. Her work has been previously published in Crack the Spine and ZPlatt. She received the Hassler Award and the Robert Frost Poetry Prize from SUNY Plattsburgh.*

**AFTER THE ABORTION I LEARN TO SAY YES INSTEAD OF NO**

**Hillary Katz**

It's easier to say, *no, I've never had a baby*, than it is to say, *yes, I had an abortion*. Nobody likes to talk about it: abortion is a four-letter word. Better to call it the *procedure*. The *experience*. The experience of it is crouching in the darkest parts of the self: the depths of the uterus (*also known as the womb; the only hollow organ; waiting to be replete, to support growth; mine has been painfully full; mine has been achingly empty*), the bile of the stomach (*growing like algae from the floor of the organ, ready to bloom*), the tissue of the breasts (*swollen; the ducts bloated with new milk*). Beyond that, or perhaps only above that, the parietal lobe of the brain: sensations (*yes, I felt the fetus inside me; yes, I knew it was alive*); perception (*yes, I am responsible for ending something that could have been; yes, I put my fears and my body before everything else*). Now, there is the importance of the temporal lobe: memory (*yes, I remember the saturation and then the depletion of my body; yes, I remember the release of life from the uterus, from the breasts; yes, I remember both the pain and the relief of afterward*); and the brainstem: consciousness (*yes, I chose to not be everything to someone else when I could not yet be that to myself; yes, I believe in telling the truth; yes, I still feel joy; yes, I still love*).

**Hillary Katz**'s poems have appeared in *Salamander*, *burntdistrict*, *A cappella Zoo*, and other journals. Born and raised in Vermont, she is a graduate of the University of New Hampshire. Currently, she teaches elementary school and attends the University of Pacific as a graduate student of education. She lives with her partner in San Francisco.

**THE LANGUAGE**  
**Libba Hockley**

An exercise ball buckles below me,  
thighs form deep puddles  
baby weight, buoyant  
light as eyelashes in wild winds.

Its heart rate drops  
beeps trudging through caramel.  
*Don't wait for contractions, honey,  
just push*  
the midwife tells me.

Hips hang between a hospital bed arch  
My bones unlock in pelvis curls  
as I push chin to chest  
A survival thrust  
out she comes, she

She unwraps the cord twice  
Purple, plush shoulders and cheeks rest  
high on my chest.  
The nurses slap her back and  
prop an oxygen mask near her lips,  
tiny plates of skin not yet rooting for something to suckle.

Ten times the effort of a normal breath  
this newborn body gasps for a share of earth's lungs

let  
her  
in

What I thought was life is redefined  
by miracles found in the details of an  
iris eye,  
carpel waiting.

I cannot find the language,  
cups of baby spilling over  
my brain.

**Libba Hockley** received her MFA in creative nonfiction from Chatham University, where she was a teaching fellow and taught creative writing to inmates at the county jail in Pittsburgh. Her work may be found in Coal Hill Review, The Fourth River, inTravel Magazine, and the Pittsburgh Post Gazette. She lives in Central Pennsylvania with her husband and two children.

**ENCOUNTER**  
**Mary Lucille Hays**

**PART I: CONVERGENCE**

“Boys?” she asked, as if I had planned it that way. “You had all boys?”

I nodded. This wasn’t going so well already.

We were sitting at the dining room table, a pot of tea between us. I looked out the window. The fog was still hovering over the house, though you could see past the grape arbor now. November had started out warm and soggy, but a cold front had come in and when the fresh snow met the warm earth a thick fog rose up, shrouding everything. She followed my gaze to the yard, and her voice softened with the next question.

“Pete...” she began, “is he still...?”

I hesitated. I had no idea how we got into this situation, sitting at my table together. She just showed up this morning out of the fog. In thirty years I haven’t seen fog like this, except for the time I had to drive home from Lickskillet. That night I drove by instinct and feel, my eyes on the edge of a road that I could barely see. Afraid to stop, afraid to go on. Not sure I was on the pavement. Not at all sure I hadn’t missed a turn.

She came, as I said, this morning, about ten o’clock. I work from home on Tuesdays and Thursdays, grading papers and planning lectures. I sit down at the computer with a cup of coffee when Evan leaves for the bus. I have to work while I’m still focused. By the time he gets home in the afternoon I’ve left my desk and started a batch of bread, or a pot of soup, but somehow when David comes home from work, I’m still in the middle of all that, plus I’ve got some kind of sewing project half finished on the dining room table, or I’ve left all that mess and wandered out into the garden.

This morning I was on my way to the kitchen for my second cup of coffee, and there she was, shrugging out of that theatrical black coat of hers with the mutton chop sleeves. It was so long on her that it dragged the ground in places and was now edged with snow. She hadn’t yet cut her hair, and I had forgotten how long it was, and thick! Falling in waves almost to her butt. She had an unlikely bowler hat that I didn’t remember, also black, but under her coat she wore overalls. And though they were gigantic on her legs, her belly filled out the bib, so she looked a bit like Humpty Dumpty. She was pretty far along.

She has come, I suppose, to see if I am living my dream—to see what chance she has at happiness. I had no idea how much I should be telling her. I took a deep breath. “Pete and I broke up when Ya was about a month old,” I said, though we had technically broken up several times—but why go into the details now? Anyway, she already knew about the first time. It had happened before I even got pregnant. In fact, she knew by now that Pete and I had

moved back in together briefly because of the pregnancy.

“Figures,” she said, quietly.

“It was better that way,” I said.

“Yeah, I know.” She looked stricken, but she rested her hand on her belly. “Ya? That’s a nice name.”

“Thanks. But David and I are pretty much the only ones who use it now. He goes by ‘Ian’ to his friends. At some point he decided that Ya didn’t fit him—or maybe his friends decided.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she sniffed them back. I waited in the stillness.

I had changed the spelling of Ya’s name from “Iah” early on, because people had so much trouble figuring it out. She knew already, of course, that it was the name of an Egyptian moon god—her favorite class her first semester had been that World Mythologies class. But she couldn’t have known that he would be born with the full moon, which was how his father and I stopped arguing, finally, about his name.

After a few minutes she smiled.

OK, fine. She didn’t sniff them back. The tears. She started sobbing dramatically and already, I’m getting fed up. I want to yell at her to shut up, to think about someone besides her own selfish self for once, but I take her hand and try to pat it sympathetically until she finally stops. She is, after all, only a kid.

I feel like I’m trespassing. Should I prophecy for her? Warn her? I already know that each of her children will cost her a tooth. Should I tell her that in three years she will meet the love of her life, but that she will almost spoil everything with her clinging and crying, her stupid jealousies? That she will go through a baptism of fire and emerge, finally, raw and broken, but with the seeds of sanity, that would grow slowly? Would she listen? Would it matter? *Seeds of sanity*—that sounds like something she would say.

She finally stops crying and she asks me again about Ya’s name. She really did like it; it seemed to give her some peace and assurance, so I tell her about the time when he was not yet Ian, maybe nine years old, and we were outside looking at a bright moon in the dark sky, and he said, “Hey, thank you for naming me after that cool guy up there.” She and I smile at the story, and I don’t tell her that he denies ever saying that now. He puts up with me calling him Ya and that’s enough. He can be Ian to the rest of the world.

She asks about the other boys and I tell her about the sweet temper of Evan, our baby—not really a baby at all anymore in the third grade, though we all call him that sometimes—and about Duncan, with the red hair, our rebel, who got detention at school for refusing to say the Pledge of Allegiance. And she seems proud of that, but I catch myself inwardly cringing. She probably thinks I’m a sellout for sending him to a school where they would even say the pledge or have detentions. But in actual fact, she probably hasn’t

yet thought that far ahead. She still thinks she's going to put her baby in a backpack when he is born, and take him to classes. She really thinks this, and I don't have the heart, at the moment, to disabuse her of this notion.

Still, I wish I could stop editing my life for her, just be upfront and unapologetic about it. Why, for instance, did I offer her tea instead of coffee? Every morning I drink my two cups before I cut myself off, and substituting tea for my second cup wasn't doing it for me. I was flirting with a headache, but I was afraid she would object on dietary or political grounds. Still, maybe I am not giving her enough credit. Sure, she's a vegetarian, and she won't give that baby any white sugar until he's two years old, which, now that I think about it, is a pretty good idea. I wish I'd done that with Duncan and Evan, but it's too late now. But she's not going to be rude about the coffee, is she? Then I flash on her asking for a cheese sandwich at Nature's Table, and when they bring it to her, asking whether they used the same knife to cut her cheese as they use to slice ham, and I cringe. It's a dang good thing there weren't any vegans back then. She would probably have joined PETA.

OK. I'm not stupid. I've read good fiction and bad fiction. I know this is a huge cliche—a stilted, unlikely device. And I'd be crazy to ask anyone to suspend anything to listen to my story. I think for a moment about passing my hand through her body, which should dissipate like a Hollywood ghost. Did she form from the mist she walked out of this morning? I reach for her, but my hand touches her shoulder. It is warm. She is sobbing again. What are you going to do? I pat her shoulder.

"It's OK," I say. "It's going to be OK."

I am struck at how much she looks like my mother one instant, my sisters the next. It is strange to see her from this angle—an old photograph come to life.

"It doesn't even look like the same place," she says, and I am swept back 20 years. I remember how the farm looked then: broken, dejected; three different layers of siding in various colors and on various parts of the house; the granary about to collapse; piles of junk scattered in the tall grass. We have done a lot of work on the place.

I glance down at our teacups where we are both warming our hands—mine have grown plump as rising bread, hers still slender and youthful. She takes my left hand, and for a second I think she is looking at my wedding ring, but she pulls at my middle finger and touches the scar I got when I was seven. More than a scar, really. A chunk cut out from the corner by the top of my fingernail. Then she smiles and shows me her identical scar.

And I think again that I must be crazy. But that doesn't change the fact of her presence at my table on a foggy winter day. Sitting there, I realize that I've got a weak hold on my emotions and abruptly I'm pissed again. Who does she think she is?

\* \* \*

“Who do you think you are?” I say, and she flinches, but then gathering something (courage? strength? audacity?) she answers.

“You know who I am.”

And I guess I do, or at least, if I don’t, nobody does.

“But what are you doing here?”

“You tell me.”

And I try to remember anything that would lead her out to the farm. I should have a memory of this meeting, but there is nothing. Is it even real? Is it a dream? Hers or mine? How would she even get out here? She doesn’t have a car. Did she come to visit Grandma and find me instead?

She is staring at me, searching for something, and now I see how strange this encounter is for her, too. She looks scared and I realize that she’s never thought this far ahead before—not even enough imagination to look at Mom and think about what she’ll be like at age thirty, forty, fifty. But then I realize that *her* mother is still younger than I am today. This whole scene is weird—awkward. She is still staring at me and I cast about for something to fill the clumsiness of the moment.

In the end we sat and knitted together. She pulled some needles and a half-finished bootie out of her bag. The yarn was variegated, blue and eggshell colored—navy blue, not baby blue. I went to the attic, and dug around ‘til I found half a skein of wool in exactly the same color. She patiently showed me the pattern and I knitted the other bootie to match hers. We fill the afternoon with idle talk. I feed her soup, and now it is dusk, and she is about to leave. Evan will be home from his piano lesson soon, and then David will come.

She says she has to go, and I believe her. I walk her out the kitchen door. The fog of the morning has dissipated. The moon shines, bouncing off the snow, giving the yard a gentle glow. I want to offer her some wisdom, but it comes out sounding bossy.

“You need to start taking better care of your teeth now. Start flossing. And keep taking vitamins even after the baby is born. B complex is good for carpal tunnel. Don’t be so obsessed with email. All that typing is hard on your hands.”

“What are you talking about? What kind of mail? I don’t even have a typewriter.”

“And eat some vegetables once in a while.”

“I’m a vegetaria—”

“Yeah, yeah. You don’t eat meat, but you don’t eat many vegetables either. All you eat is cheese and bread and peanut butter. Eat something green once in a while or you’ll end up fat and arthritic,” I say. “Plus, you won’t fart so much.”

“I don’t fart that much,” she says, and turns to go.

“One more thing,” I say. “You’ve got to forgive Penny. She doesn’t act

like it, but she does love you."

She turns back. "Penny?" she asks, wrinkling her brow. "I'm not mad at Penny."

"Yeah, I know. You will be though," I say. "And don't frown like that. It gives you wrinkles on your forehead."

"Oh, don't be so self-centered," she says, and I smile.

She looks around the yard. "You could use some chickens around here. Maybe a goat."

"Yeah," I say. And now I don't want her to go. I want to tell her more. To be nicer to David when she meets him. To quit being so judgmental about Mom all the time. That the kids will learn how to treat their own mother by watching how she treats hers. But the moon slips behind the cloud and as quick as that the yard darkens. Her black hat and coat are swallowed up in the dimness and now her face is all I can see. The cloud passes and the moon glows on the snow once again, but she has disappeared into the night.

## PART II: REUNION

The fog makes a cave or an upside-down bowl around the car and we can only see about 30 feet ahead of us. The metal corncrib gradually forms itself out of the mist.

"Here's the corner," I say, and Pete stops the car. I can see only the first couple of rows of stones in the cemetery across the road.

Pete turns toward me, pushes his blondish hair out of his eyes. It's long and straight, but kind of flyaway.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive you up to the house?" he asks.

I nod, resting my hand on the shelf of my belly. I know he is relieved.

My family wouldn't be any happier than his was. I don't even want him there.

"Cool beans," he says, and looks back straight up the road.

There is nothing else to say, so I put on my hat, open the car door, and heave myself up and out.

It's early November. I have another month. It's cold, and I'm glad I'm wearing my long, black coat. It feels weighty on my shoulders. I hear the car pull into the little gravel drive at the corncrib to turn around, but I don't look back. The asphalt has patches of ice, so I walk next to the road. Long grass pushes up through the snow, and it crunches under my feet. I am glad to be moving after the drive from campus. The bowl of clarity follows along with me through the fog, but has not yet revealed the house. When I hated junior high so much, on foggy days I used to try to believe that some magic had transported me to Brigadoon, or that the school had disappeared, but it was always there.

The walk seemed longer in the fog, and I began to wonder if I had missed the farm lane. Maybe it would be better if I did miss it. It was a narrow drive that led to the house with only the slightest curve, open fields on either side. The mist seemed to be thickening, but then I made out the mailbox, leaning drunkenly. It had big, reflective letters on it, crookedly declaring itself Box 25. I turned up the lane.

Grandma was the one I was worried about. Grandpa would yell, but my stoic grandmother would just sit, stony-faced, and look at me. They already knew, but I hadn't seen them in person since going away to college last August. I don't care what anybody thinks. I'm not going to drop out.

I wasn't looking forward to this, but the cold and determination kept my pace brisk. I heard a muffled sound up ahead, and out of the fog a black dog came running straight towards me. I stopped. I had never seen it before. It stopped too, then broke into a wriggling trot, tail wagging in a circle like a windmill. It came right up to me and I held out my hand. It sniffed me all over, and then actually stood up on its hind legs and put its front paws on my shoulder to lick my face. Have I been away so long that they got another dog? Duchess was a Shepherd mix, and this looked like a Lab.

The dog had just a little grey in her muzzle, as if she had touched her chin whiskers to a bucket of white paint. She had the heavy body of doggy middle age. I saw the dog was a girl. She finished her inspection and then turned back to walk with me up to the house.

At the door I paused. I had always just walked into my grandmother's house—that's how we all did—but would my long absence or my news change things? I decided it wouldn't if I didn't let it, and turned the knob. The dog followed me inside.

I stepped up the three stairs into the kitchen. It was all—rearranged. They did all this in a year? The same cupboards but in different places, a new stove, a new window? I had rehearsed calling out "Grandma," but this change stunned me into silence, and I walked through the kitchen. The dog went on ahead of me through the dining room and into the living room, and I heard a voice.

"Ursa? How did you get in? Did somebody come home early?"

Back comes the dog, and in comes a woman, with her head down, still looking at the dog.

My first thought was that Aunt Connie had lost a lot of weight.

"Hi?" I said, and she gave a little yelp and looked up.

It wasn't Aunt Connie.

"Oh. My. God," she said, quietly, and put her hand to her cheek. "How did you get here?"

And somehow I knew.

I thought, "If this is a dream, I'm just going to go with it."

At first we only stared at each other. She must be, what, forties? She was fat for one thing. Not fat like a lot of the women in my family, but fatter

than I ever wanted to be. She looked—ordinary. She wore all brown. Some kind of knit pants and a brown turtleneck. Her pants had been mended at the knee. Not a patch, just darned or something. I only noticed because she had used a darker brown. It was a chain stitch of some kind. She didn't wear any earrings or anything to fix herself up. She looked like a little brown bird with her round, tortoiseshell glasses. Her hair didn't have much grey, but it had some, and it was cut short around her face.

My face.

She had my face. The same mole over her lip. Eyebrows thicker, though, and unruly.

“Well,” she said, finally. “You’re here.”

And I nodded. I didn’t know what to say. What do you say?

We just stood looking at each other for a long moment. Then she shook her head, like she was shaking herself out of a trance.

“How about a cup of tea?” she asked, all business, and we went back into the kitchen.

She put the kettle on and we made small talk while it boiled. It was really ridiculous. “How have you been?” “Oh, pretty good, mostly. You?” That sort of thing. I started laughing and couldn’t stop. Then she was laughing too, and it was okay for a minute, and then the kettle sang out and she pulled two blue cups from the cupboard, then the saucers. Nanny’s Fiestaware.

“Earl Grey all right?”

I nodded.

I wondered if I should ask her questions, but I didn’t know what to ask. For instance, I didn’t really want to know whether I was having a boy or a girl, but then she spoiled it. I guess it wasn’t her fault that their pictures are on Grandma’s old credenza. She didn’t know I would show up that day. I picked up one triple frame. It was shaped like a tiny ladder with three snapshots, one above another. At the top is a toddler with wispy blond curls. He sits in a swing and looks at me. In the middle sits a redhead at the beach. He kneels in the sand, squinting in the sun. I can see the blue and white of the surf coming in behind him. His hair is thick. He looks about seven. The bottom picture is a blond boy in his teens sitting in a tree. I look at him the longest. It seems to me that he has her—our—eyebrows.

“Your boys?” I ask her. But she doesn’t even have to answer, and already I feel a sense of loss. I know it’s dumb, but I had just assumed I would have a girl. I wouldn’t know what to do with a boy. I never liked to play with trucks. Come to think of it, I never liked to play with dolls, either. I think it was looking at those photos that made me cry.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “This is all a bit too much.”

I just felt—stupid. She was sitting there looking at me like—like she had it all handled, and that made me feel like an idiot. That’s really why I started crying. And if she couldn’t understand that, who would? And she didn’t seem to, at first, but then I think maybe it was almost too much for her, too, because as

we sat drinking our tea she took off her glasses and set them on the table and rubbed her eyes, like she had a headache, or was tired. I set my glasses on the table and put hers on. I looked around the room. She's pretty blind. Now she was looking at me. I looked down at my tea to take a sip and I was suddenly seasick.

“Oh!” I said and snatched the glasses off my face.

She laughed. “It’s the bifocals. You’ll need them when you hit forty. Everybody does.”

I was afraid to ask her too much about what her life is like, how she ended up at the farm. I never thought that would happen. She seemed happy out here. Happy to see me, too, after the initial shock, especially after I showed her the bootie I was knitting. We sat and knitted together until the dusk began to creep into the room.

She follows me down the kitchen steps and out the door. We linger a little over our goodbyes. The fog has gone and the moon is rising. She gives me a hug, leaning into my shoulder and patting me on the back. I am patting her back in the same way, and we both laugh a little. We don’t want to part—at least I don’t, but I know I have to go. Ursula follows me down the lane to the mailbox, and then sits on her haunches. I put my hand on my belly and look at the sky as I walk back up the road.

I’m thinking about everything she told me, and wondering what she kept to herself. She said I should treat everyone like gold. At least I think that’s what she meant. First she said to treat the baby like gold, and I said, “Well, duh.” But then she got really quiet and took my face in her hands. For a second I thought she was going to kiss me, but she looked right into my eyes while hers were filling up with tears. She said, “Err on the side of kindness.”

“What do you mean?” I asked her. “Am I not kind?”

“Oh honey, you are kind—most of the time. And when you’re not you’re certainly justified. All I’m saying is that someday you will regret every chance you missed to be loving.” She sighed and looked away. “You will never regret being kind, but those missed opportunities will prick your heart like thistles.”

Clouds are gathering overhead, but near the horizon is one bright star. Just above it the full moon is rising, throwing shadows behind me. Coming up over the cemetery, it’s a smoky orange and bigger than I’ve ever seen it. Almost like a cartoon. I feel like I’ve never seen a moon this big or this clear. I feel like I can see the Sea of Tranquility from here. I think about something I learned in my World Mythologies class last spring. That in India they don’t see the man in the moon. They see a rabbit instead. I stare at the moon as I walk down the lonely road. And now I see a long-legged bird in the shadows of the craters. It is flying towards home.

**Mary Lucille Hays** lives on a farm in the Midwest and raises chickens. Some of her chickens lay blue eggs and some lay brown eggs. Sometimes she thinks that finding 3 warm, blue eggs in the coop is the best thing that can happen to her all day. Mary teaches writing at the University of Illinois. In 2015 she was the Jesse Stuart Fellow at the Murray State University low-residency MFA program, where she is a student. She is working on revising her first novel, Ruth Harris: Under the Prairie Moon. “Encounter” acts as a set of bookends for the novel, being the first and last stories. Mary writes a weekly column called Letter from Birdland for a few community newspapers. You can find it at [www.letterfrombirdland.blogspot.com](http://www.letterfrombirdland.blogspot.com). She was named for both of her grandmothers.

***NOSTALGIANICA #3: THE HOME-EC PARADE***  
***Jessie Janeshek***

I feel needy today  
non-narrative, annotative, in love  
with the skinny, vice principaled  
oligarchy.

It's the penitent epic  
an orange hand-sewn apron.  
He asks me to name  
the homecoming queen.

It's dark in these halls  
the health teacher's balls burning off.  
We've just discovered blow jobs and hairpins  
our presence a used teddy bear.

Marcy's mother is pregnant  
with triplets.  
Her concrete mons pubis  
mimics pornography  
raw selfie structure.  
These days we skip closure

so drunk we feed  
off truth and hot oats  
in Limited stirrup pants  
and black bodysuits  
can't leave the foodcourt.

We rebound, play dead  
blue snow, sore throats  
run back into school  
with Christian dishcloths  
for our choir director  
that year of big boots  
when it was so cold  
our cats' bodies shut down.

***Jessie Janeshek's first book of poems is Invisible Mink (Iris Press, 2010). An Assistant Professor of English and the Director of Writing at Bethany College, she holds a Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and an M.F.A. from Emerson College. She co-edited the literary anthology Outscape: Writings on Fences and Frontiers (KWG Press, 2008). You can read more of her poetry at [jessiejaneshek.net](http://jessiejaneshek.net).***

This issue wouldn't exist without our lovely contributors,  
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I hope all of you have a safe, fun, joyful New Year. Thank you for reading.

Love,

Heather Lefebvre  
Editor-in-Chief