

CHEAT  
RIVER  
REVIEW

15



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## Letter from the Editors

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*Cheat River Review* eagerly presents our fifteenth issue, one that hopes to highlight Black writers, Indigenous writers, writers of color, and LGBTQ+ writers. As we opened submissions on Valentine's Day, we especially encouraged pieces that focused on love in all its forms. The editorial team at *Cheat River* earnestly thanks all submitters, contributors, and readers; we aspire to continue our goal of fostering an inclusive and historically minded space within our corner of the literary community.

We were (and will forever be) humbled to be in conversations with so many exceptional artists. It is a privilege--as readers and writers ourselves—to be trusted with their work.

(as always) with love,

*CRR* Editorial Team

**Cary Grant** *Tiffany Babb*

---

I adore Cary Grant. Or maybe  
I simply love the way he walks  
through a room or maybe I want  
to pilfer the way he speaks  
or maybe I am jealous  
that he could always land  
the Woman or that he could  
flirt with men and  
get away with it. Or maybe  
I also wish that I could  
do away with my past  
and re-piece  
myself into someone  
the world would adore, idolize,  
mimic, desire.

**Dream Life** *Subhaga Crystal Bacon*

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Just before the alarm went off  
I woke from a dream  
of kissing a woman secretly  
goodbye, moving our bodies  
out of the sightline of a window.  
The woman, my real-life partner,  
become once again unknown  
and pursued. Roused in the early dark,  
I was confused about the journey I was to take,  
wherever it was I was meant to go.  
Me, who used to run in short cycles  
of longing and pursuit—wishing to be loved  
beyond all else, unable to do the same—  
rising here from a dream of what I already have.

Shooting: An Ode to My Daughter, Yet to Be Born Trisha Cowen

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December 14, 2012

Stars shoot and so do guns—  
my daughter tells me this, a fact, as she climbs  
down the school bus steps.  
I'm speechless and cold because  
her face looks older  
and I think she can see through me.  
I rub my gloved hands together and visions  
of the shooting stars from last night's  
Geminid meteor shower alter into gunshots  
at Sandy Hook Elementary School.  
She looks up and waits for me to say something,  
but I don't and we walk inside.

Later, the streets are empty and all doors  
are locked. The streets separating our houses are apocalyptic.  
The plows have left the snow,  
but no one notices, not even the dog  
who hasn't even begged for a walk.  
Instead, we are connected by our talking televisions  
droning still on CNN,  
which we watch religiously like we did on 9/11,  
questioning who, what, where, when, and why  
so that we don't have to imagine  
what it would have felt like to be  
the teacher who shielded her children  
from the gunman  
with her body.  
Or the boy with superpowers  
who told his teacher not to worry because he knew karate.

Tonight, my daughter is tightly tucked beneath bed sheets  
decorated in dinosaurs, owls, and penguins with elf hats,  
*for 'tis the season to be merry and bright.*  
I try to read to her from *The Polar Express*  
but I keep skipping words and she whines and tells me  
I'm doing it wrong.  
I ring a bell and ask *can you hear it? Do you believe?*

Her brown eyes look like the underbellies  
of mushrooms,  
wide and questioning.  
She shakes her head *yes*, but she plays with the seam  
of her pajamas.  
She won't look at the bell.

I think about the parents from Sandy Hook  
who have hidden presents  
for the children still lying in the school, waiting to be identified.  
They would have hidden the gifts in closets, attics, basements,  
littering their hallways with trinkets  
for ghosts.

I kiss my daughter's forehead and walk out of her room,  
hesitating a moment before I crack the door,  
like I do every night so she can sleep.  
*Mom*, she calls out, turning in bed.  
*You can close the door. I'm too old to believe  
in monsters*

I force a smile, but I feel the pressure in my throat growing.  
Last night, we'd stayed up together and watched  
the Geminid meteor shower  
and made a thousand wishes as the stars sped past.  
We'd wished for health and happiness, for world peace,  
for plush puppies and ruby red slippers.  
*O Holy Night! The stars are brightly shining.*  
We sang together and hummed when we lost track  
of the words.

Whenever my daughter had caught sight  
of a shooting star,  
she'd pointed and giggled and danced  
and asked me what I wished for.  
What was on my list for Santa?

I'd studied her  
as she spun in the middle of the field  
and looked up into the Milky Way,  
imagining all the places she'd go.

And, tonight, I kneel outside her bedroom,  
with the door safely shut  
trying to remember what  
it had looked like  
through her eyes  
when all was still and bright and innocent,  
and when shooting was only an act of the stars.



**Hands** *Jonathan Ayala*

---

We stand outside the wine shop and you reach down to grab my hand, but instead of weaving my fingers with yours, I keep them in my pockets.

I don't hold hands with other men in public. Certainly not when children are nearby. Nor, generally, in front of old people, though that depends on the neighborhood and time of day. I also don't hold hands when it's so hot that I'd have to share palm sweat, nor when it's too cold and I'd rather keep my gloved hands in my coat pockets.

My problem with hand-holding is people are likely to notice that I bite my nails and cuticles, at times bad enough to make them raw and bloody. I'd have to explain that I'm afraid of my own hands — of the diseases they might communicate, the way they're too small for some men, too big for others. And I don't tell many people this, but there was a period when I was a teenager when I had a small wart on my left palm line, the one that indicates long life. I spent two years with my hands in my pockets, or else clenched into a fist.

We've been dating for two months now. My neighbors have seen you enough times that they hold the building door open for you. You're funny. You have a sweet tooth, you kiss me pretty good, and I'm thinking this is the moment when I've got to decide whether you're going to become something in my life, or else someone I think about when I jerk off at night.

You've forgotten my hand and instead we're on the corner of 14th, trying to get a cab to Petworth for a party two men are throwing to celebrate the new house they've purchased. You scan the street for an empty taxi.

"It's early. What if we walk?" I suggest.

You agree. We start up 14th Street and I slide my hand into yours and we continue that way for a dozen blocks.

But if I'm being totally honest, it still feels shameful. As if someone will see us and instantly know everything about my lengthened fricatives and lowered trap vowels. They'll know where I go on weekends, that I quote María Félix movies, that occasionally I don't feel like a man, and that occasionally I like that. All of this from hand-holding. And sure, we should learn how to be proud, take a stand, all of that—

But sometimes I don't want to be political. Sometimes, all I want is to leave a party early and sit beside you on an empty southbound red line train, and lay my head against your shoulder, tracing the lines on your palms with my fingers, and hear you ask, "Home?" and mean mine, and know you're coming with me. My apartment is tucked away in a small corner of this city and I need your help to get there. Because if I'm not paying attention when I walk up Lanier, or if it's late and I'm particularly tired and thinking of all the things I want to say to you, sometimes I can miss it completely.

**Sunday** *KP Vogell*

---

We only fuck on Sundays. That's because you'd be embarrassed if people found out we're fucking. On Sundays you stop in, say hi to the neighbors, smoke pot with them, then come next door to "pick up some things." They assume you're going through old papers. I mean no one would ever suspect that you're fucking me. Most people think I'm a dyke. Men think I'm disgusting, a dyke, a waste of space, (a vagina not available for their use), I know it. To their faces you agree, people ask about your tenant, you joke and laugh it off and say it's none of your business what I do in my personal life as long as I'm paying the rent. Also, they've all met your girlfriend. Petite, big-eyed, speaks perfect French, they congratulate you, they're fucking jealous as fuck, they are imagining her tight pink pussy, but me, I don't have one. I'm made of rough cloth and dried hair gel. For that, your girlfriend never suspects a thing either. You have good taste; you like beautiful things. I'm as ugly as fuck and no one can figure out why I bother, why I insist on existing.

So, what happens on Sundays? You come in. We say hi. I leave you alone, I never approach you, both of us know I can't approach you. If I ever did, you'd never touch me again. I have to pretend I don't care that you're here; I even act like I'm annoyed. I go to my room. What if one day I didn't go to my room, what if I stayed in the living room surfing the web? But no, I always go to my room. I go in and lie face down on the bed, fully clothed. And what would I do if one day you didn't come in (after a minute)? I don't know, kill myself maybe. Every Sunday, sometimes for two minutes, sometimes for as many as forty-five, I lie there, wondering if this is the day you don't come in—the last day of my life. The time I spend waiting, face down on the bed, is so excruciatingly raw, so intense, it's almost as good as the sex itself, or maybe it's better. By the time you do come in—just the door clicking open, that's it, no words—I'm completely wet. Which is good because there is no foreplay and there never will be.

You strip off my pants and slide in. You don't use a condom. I never have sex with anyone, and I had my tubes tied years ago anyways. I always hated the idea of becoming a vessel for some man's baby. You fuck me, always extremely slowly, and you cry out, very quietly, so as not to alert the neighbors. In these little cries, in the fluctuations and differences, I can hear everything—the fight with your girlfriend; the fights you still have with your father even though you're a grown man; your worries about losing your hair, twisting your ankle surfing, or whether the business is gonna take off; that ex-girlfriend you still see when you travel to Brazil; your discomfort with the homoerotic experiences you've had. In fact, you fuck me because I look almost exactly like a boy, but I'm still a woman and so you don't have to be gay.

I hear all these things in your little cries and most of all—the fear of not being good enough. I on the other hand, make no noise at all. I didn't the first time, out of fear, and I don't ever dare change a thing, in case that's the thing that breaks the spell, that makes it never happen again. I think if I made noise, I would exist too much and my existence is disgusting so you'd probably get up in the middle of things and put your pants on and walk out.

So, I'm silent, but inside I'm weeping uncontrollably, and shuddering, and crying out to God. Thunderstorms rage, earthquakes crack open gaping canyons in the earth of me. Giant monsters ravage cities. So that's why I live, I live, I go on living for Sundays.

But you, you who are beautiful and blessed, who are rich and successful, who are beloved by your parents, family, friends, by your classy girlfriend, by the neighbors, you bright boy, why do you only live for Sundays, too?

**Super Excited Jack Bentz**

---

The microwaved potato is like a piece of a truck tire in your mouth. Margarine, sour cream, and bacon bits fail to improve it, but you and your brothers keep trying, while your grandmother, sitting at the end of the dining room table, asks if anyone would care for more Swiss steak. The three of you keep chewing with the silent intensity that teenaged boys bring to food of almost any kind.

Since the family ranch is an hour away, you and your brothers stay with your grandmother in town during the school week. A widow for almost twenty years, she has floated the Amazon, ridden a camel, seen Paris in the rain and fed a temple monkey from her hand. But when needed, she moved back to the middle of nowhere, put her luggage away and turned on daytime television. Your father had warned you about his mother's cooking. He was right.

The white casserole dish is passed, and you all take more thin slices of beef covered in brown gravy. The overcooked broccoli remains ignored at the center of the table. No one will want more of that.

"How was school today?" asks your grandmother.

"It was fine," says your older brother June, "only ninety-four days left." He reaches for more sour cream. It's June's senior year and with football over, he can now concentrate on the spring rodeo season.

"Yeah, pretty okay. I got my math test back, and I passed," Norris says. Norris has never not passed a test. Not any test.

"Good. We start practice tonight for the play. Mike's in it, so he's giving me a ride," you say, careful to keep your voice as dead as possible.

Your grandmother, in her late seventies, has recently given up wearing wigs. She looks perfectly fine with her white halo of hair that tops off a round face. Her sharp eyes, behind oversized glasses, find yours and she asks:

"Which Mike is picking you up?"

"Mike McBride," you answer.

"He's such a handsome boy, don't you think?" she asks no one in particular.

You and your brothers are silent. And then June says, "Sure, if you say so. We're guys, so how would we know?"

"Yes, you are young men, but you aren't blind," she says.

"Is there dessert, Grandma?" Norris asks, pushing the rest of his potato aside. He's a tall boy, wearing a white baseball shirt with blue sleeves. At fourteen, his face is like a kitchen drawer of features not yet completely assembled.

"Yes dear, there are brownies in the kitchen. Can you bring them in for us, please?"

“Glad to help.” Norris jumps up and flails his long body in the direction of the kitchen.

“Damn it, Norris, can’t you manage not to step on me?” June says.

“Nope, guess not,” Norris says, continuing a conversation that started at birth.

At the sound of a car horn, Norris calls from the kitchen, “Tommy, your ride’s here. Cool car.”

“Invite Mike in for a brownie,” your grandmother says.

“I’ll take one for him; don’t want to be late on the first night of play practice.” You take two brownies, grab your coat, and run for the door. You shout, “See you after practice, don’t wait up.”

“Remember you have homework to do, young man,” June yells after you. “We don’t want you running the streets all hours.”

Mike is driving his mother’s light blue Cadillac. He blinks the headlights as you come out the front door. You hold both brownies between your teeth as you heave the car door open and then slide in. You hand one brownie to Mike and pull the door shut.

“From my grandmother. And Duncan Hines, of course.”

“Classic,” Mike says through the brownie.

Your grandmother is right; Mike McBride is a good-looking guy. No, come on, you have to admit it. He’s handsome. You use the word ‘beautiful’ to yourself, even though you’ve been told men are not beautiful. Mike is, without a doubt, the most handsome/beautiful guy in the whole school, maybe the world, for all you know.

The McBrides have the car dealership in town and more ready money than most of your families. Mike was adopted by them and is darker than his parents. He tells people that he is Cherokee Indian but is probably a Mexican mix. He has thick black hair, wavy in a feathered way that is fashionable but natural on him. It’s long enough to brush his broad shoulders that are filling out his fleece lined denim jacket. His eyes are the same shade of green as the big glass grapes that sit on your grandmother’s coffee table and he smells powerfully of Brut 33.

You breathe it in and talk yourself down — you are in Mike McBride’s car and he is three feet away. You have thought of nothing else all day, but you must stay cool. You are just two guys driving to school. No. Big. Deal.

Mike noses the car out into the small town’s main street in the direction of the high school. Taste of Honey’s “Boogie Oogie Oogie” comes on the radio and you turn it up. Mike nods his head to the music and spreads his legs apart and stretches his arm across the top of the seat. You can tell he’s acting cool; you lean back and do the same. Your arms touch and Mike squeezes your bicep. You freeze, but flex at the same time.

“Tommy Miller. How are you?” Mike asks.

“I’m okay,” you say. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime, Tommy Miller,” he says.

Your mind is blank, it's as though there is literally nothing behind your eyes, you notice that you've stopped breathing.

"Man, I sure hope that fag Mr. Jordan doesn't try to get into my pants this time," Mike says.

"Uh, yeah. He better not try it with me, that's for sure," You say, even though Mr. Jordan has never, not even once, been anything but friendly and polite to you. But he is the school librarian and wears an earring, so people say he is gay.

You wonder for a moment what trying to get into someone's pants might look like. This makes you glance at Mike's pants and you then stare out the window, trying to get your mind to change the subject.

Just driving along like this, passing the NAPA auto parts store and LaChappel funeral parlor, listening to music with a friend, you are getting an erection. You shift in your seat and you remove your arm from his and say:

"Let's drag the gut after play practice."

"Can't. My mom will check the odometer. I'm still in trouble from last time my buddies and I drove up and down main street until two in the morning."

Your erection is not going away, so you try to think of something gross. Your mind rolls through images of a dead bloated cow, followed by moldy cheese, and then finally, your Uncle Bob's breath seems to do the trick, just as you pull into the high school parking lot.

Most years, the spring play is a musical. This gives the choir and band kids the entire year to prepare. But, since last year's production of *Godspell* proved that the current crop of students are not singers, Mr. Jordan has decided to attempt a play.

"And not just any play, but a classic; Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*," Mr. Jordan says, as scripts are handed out to the cast of students gathered on two of the several folding tables in the cafeteria. Heavy dark maroon curtains are pulled shut on the stage at the far end of the large room. The whole place smells of bleach with something to hide.

Is Mr. Jordan gay? you ask yourself. He just seems like Mr. Jordan to you. True, no other man in town wears an earring or clogs. And he does have a funny sort of voice. Does that mean he's attracted to men? What would the tone of his voice have to do with anything? Mr. Jordan has pushed up the sleeves of his black v necked sweater; a chain with a gold cross nestles in his dark chest hair. Does he look gay?

Darla Simmons, your best friend, slides into the table next to you and says, "Tommy. Mike. Good evening to you both." Darla has come from work and she's wearing a white rabbit fur vest over her Dairy Queen uniform. The vest was a gift from you on her last birthday and she's not been seen without it since. Her hair is short and spiked and she's wearing a lot of Bowie inspired eye makeup.

Darla mimes taking off a hat, putting it down, and then picks it up and places the invisible hat on your head. She then adjusts imaginary eyeglasses and begins smoking an invisible cigarette.

“Darla, what are you doing?” you ask.

“Rehearsing. Careful, don’t damage my hat. Mike, want a cigarette?”

Mike laughs and holds out his hand. She mimes hitting the back of a cigarette packet on the table, extracts a cigarette and hands it across the table to Mike and says,

“I read the script in the library, this play has no props, we have to fake it.”

Mr. Jordan, slips his glasses up to the top of his bald head and says,

“Welcome everyone to our first read through. We have a wonderful cast and I’m super excited to begin rehearsal. You all have your scripts, so let’s dive in, shall we? Now, it’s a little confusing, but, as you know, I will play The Stage Manager, but Mrs. Hotchkiss will *be* our stage manager. Mrs. Hotchkiss, may I ask you to read the stage directions?”

“Super excited!” Mike whispers to you and stretches his legs out under the table and rubs them up against yours. You have to think about Uncle Bob’s breath again.

Darla looks at you and whispers, “Stop making fun of Mr. Jordan.”

Darla is right, you should stop. You pull your legs back, and look down at the script as Ellie Hotchkiss, the typing teacher, continues with the stage directions,

“When the auditorium is in complete darkness he speaks:”

Mr. Jordan clears his throat and reads, “This play is called *Our Town*. It was written by Thornton Wilder ...”

It takes two hours to read *Our Town*, and you think the play is incredible, even though your role of Dr. Gibbs is not that interesting. Darla is playing several roles including the Lady in the Balcony and Mrs. Soemes. Mike is playing a character called Simon Stimson who is sort of an outsider who drinks.

“I guess we know what Mr. Jordan thinks of the three of us. An old doctor, a sketchy drunk, and the town gossip,” Darla says, as you move to leave with the chattering cast members after the quiet ending of the play.

Mike remains seated and he looks dazed. “What a sad ending. Everyone sitting there in a graveyard. It’s sad but really good, don’t you think?” he says, his eyes soft, all sarcasm and joking gone.

“Yeah,” you say, looking away from him, and pulling on your coat. “It’s not bad, I guess.”

“Especially the part when dead Emily goes back to just a regular day and it’s too much for her. And she realizes that she missed so much by not paying attention. I bet we do that all the time,” Mike says, still sitting as students are folding up the tables and rolling them to a corner.

“Come on, let’s put this table away,” Darla says.

Mr. Jordan comes over and says, “I’m glad the three of you are in the play this spring. We are so darn lucky to have such talented actors like you— a brilliant Doc Gibbs, a perfect Simon, and Darla, who can play so many parts in the same play!”

“We’re looking forward to doing this play; it’s really good,” Darla says. You and Mike glance at Mr. Jordan and nod and mutter agreement. Even though you see and talk to Mr. Jordan in the library, you pull away here in public. You can’t afford to be seen talking with a gay teacher.

“Mike, let’s go. I have a lot of homework to finish,” you say and walk towards the door.

“Right,” says Mike, “Catch you later, Darla.”

“Good night, Mr. Jordan; and thanks again for putting us in the play.” She follows you out to the parking lot.

The night has gotten colder, and as you stand by Mike’s car, clouds of your breath fill the space between the three of you.

“Want to get something to eat?” Darla asks.

Mike glances at you and then you say, “No; thanks anyway, I have to start that paper for English tonight.”

“I better drop Tommy off and get home myself,” Mike adds and walks to his side of the car.

“I thought we could... I mean, I have a bunch of homework too,” Darla says. “So yeah, good luck with your homework. And Mike, drive safe, the roads out our way are gonna be slick tonight.”

Darla gets into her beaten up white El Camino, its bed filled with an old chicken cage and a bale of straw with its corners blown off. At some point, her father had wired on a set of deer antlers as a hood ornament and Darla strung a set of beads between the two sides.

Her car coughs awake, and Darla gives a couple of squeaky honks on the horn and she is gone. The blue Cadillac is the last remaining car in the lot. The sky is blank with snow clouds lowering themselves towards the county. You think you can just see the first sifting of snow as it falls past the nearby streetlamp.

“I better get you home, it’s beginning to snow,” Mike says, getting into the car and starting it.

You turn your face up to the sky, catching the first few flakes of snow in your mouth. You inhale deeply and imagine you can smell the snow as it melts on your hot tongue.

You turn and get in the car and slam the door shut.

“Cold out there,” you say, not feeling cold in the least, instead you unbutton your jacket. You turn on the radio, Elton John is halfway through “Your Song.”

“Elton. Cool,” Mike says. You have loved everything Elton John has ever recorded. Mr. Jordan has lent you three of Elton’s records and you played them constantly until June threatened to break them over your head.



“Yeah, not bad,” you say and settle back into the seat. The car is warming up, but Mike doesn’t seem in any hurry to pull out of the parking lot. Elton John continues to sing about if they’re green or if they’re blue.

“Your eyes are blue,” Mike says.

“Uh, yup. And yours are green,” you say without thinking. “At least I think they are. I don’t really know.”

Elton’s voice continues to hope that you don’t mind.

“We all have blue eyes; I guess it runs in the family,” you babble, “Green eyes are more unusual, generally. Don’t you think?”

“Let me see your eyes,” Mike says and reaches up, turning on the dome light, and leans over to you, puts his hand on your chin and turns you towards the light.

At first you squint in the light, and then open your eyes obligingly. He is so close that you smell the Big Red cinnamon gum on his breath. His eyes examine yours and he says,

“What shade of blue would you say they are? Blue like the sky or darker blue like a lake? Or blue like a work shirt, or blue like a flax flower?”

You laugh but don’t pull away from him. “What’s a flax flower?” you ask.

“You know, the pale blue one that grows along the road. Flax. Don’t you know the local plants? We obviously have different fathers.”

“You’re adopted, so maybe not,” you say.

He laughs and drops his hand.

“True enough, we don’t know.”

“Let me see your eyes,” you say, while the dome light is still on.

“Right,” he says and tilts his head up and looks into the light.

You were correct, they are a clear beautiful shade of green, his black eyelashes are long and dark, and you look into his eyes. And your hands reach up and touch either side of his face, and then gently glide up towards his ears. You sharply tug both of his ears.

“Hey!” he says and pulls back from you with a friendly shove at your chest. He turns off the dome light and reaches for you.

The front seat of the Cadillac is big enough for him to move from behind the wheel to your side of the car. You grab his arms and he tries to get you into a headlock. You laugh and say, “Back off buddy, you don’t want to get hurt.”

He says, “And who’s gonna hurt me?” He pulls you into a tight hug, pinning your arms. You struggle but not too much really. It’s not at all cold in the car anymore.

“You surrender?” Mike asks, his face close to yours, John Denver’s voice singing “Calypso” arcs out of the speakers.

“I surrender,” you say. And you kiss him.

It starts out as a small brush of his lips, but he pulls you closer and kisses you back, hard. Then, at the same time, as though blown apart, you both jerk back to your sides of the car. John Denver is still singing, the car motor is still quietly murmuring, and you can hear the soft whir of the heat fan.

You both reach for the radio at the same time, your hands banging together, and you turn it off.

“God, yodeling. Unbearable,” you say.

Mike turns the heat down and lowers his window by a couple of inches.

Cold air seeps into the car, and you say, “That feels good.”

You keep your face looking dead ahead, but steal glances as Mike’s dark profile against his window. You feel out of breath, and you can hear your heart beating in your head, and you have no idea what is next.

Mike puts the car into gear and the Cadillac floats out of the parking lot towards your house. A couple of cars cruise by filled with your classmates heading downtown. One car you recognize belongs to a neighbor and that might be your brother June in a smoke-filled interior. But the car is gone before you can be sure.

The short silent drive to your grandmother’s house is over. Mike pulls up and puts the car into park. The snow is managing to just barely cover the open ground.

“Well, see you tomorrow,” you say and bend forward, groping for your script, which has slid under the seat, Mike places his hand on your back and gently moves it up to the nape of your neck and then it’s gone.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow,” he says, and you get out of his car.

**Undersong** *B. Tyler Lee*

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Shoving aside a pile of flannels and babydoll dresses, I placed the crate on the floor of my closet, Tea for the Tillerman facing out. The pocket-sized redbear on the cover (Is he the tillerman? I never learned.) would continue sipping his chamomile for years as my clothes multiplied around him. I left “Hard Headed Woman” and Cat Stevens’s baritone flat and silent, buried in the vinyl.

\*

Around the time I turned six, my mother began keeping a sea in a pickle jar in the pantry—on the top shelf, behind fat cans of diced tomatoes. The first time I asked her what it was, she said, “It’s an ocean. Just a small one. In case I need it.”

“What’s the name of the ocean?”

“It’s the Ocean of Enirehtac.”

“In-ear-eh-tack?”

“Yes. Enirehtac.”

I didn’t think to ask where the sea got its name. It seemed as futile as asking why the places in books she read me were called Narnia and Esgaroth: they just were.

Sometimes she’d bring the jar down and unscrew the lid, inhaling slowly. With her hand wrapped around it, I could only see the bottom, sand and chunks of purplish rock swaying in the brine. She’d smile for a long moment, then return it to the shelf. This wasn’t unusual for her—she often stood in the pantry with herbs and spices held to her nostrils, making decisions. “Thyme,” she’d murmur, eyes closed, as if breathing in its secrets. “I think we’ll have—” she’d pause for a second, searching for the answer. Her eyes flew open. “Pasta primavera! I’ll make pasta primavera tonight.”

If we needed to go to the Safeway for ingredients—and most weekdays, we did—we’d stop by Catherine’s first. Catherine lived in a one-bedroom condo with exotic features like arched entryways and wrought-iron leaves on the balcony railing. My little brother, Mark, and I would flop on Catherine’s black futon, pop open a can of Planter’s cheese balls, and watch Magnum, P.I. reruns on channel 21. “He’s so handsome,” I said once, repeating after Heather Loeffler’s mom, even attempting her mom’s daydreamy sigh at the end.

“Well,” said Catherine. “He certainly has a fine mustache.”

Where our household décor centered on my mother’s many “projects” (a half-finished still life in the dining room, the easel and scene still set, gardenias long dead; a macramé owl who would never earn his wings or the lower two-thirds of his body), the contents of Catherine’s condo were precise. One iron skillet, a green card table with two ladderback chairs, two of each utensil. She kept only what she needed, which meant her few wild elaborations—the 75-gallon saltwater aquarium, her eight guitars, the dozen milk crates full of vinyl albums lining the living room walls—also ranked as absolute necessities.

I learned at some point that Catherine herself was a result of another of my mother's projects: she'd taken classical guitar from Catherine at the community college, an instrument she'd abandoned thereafter. But Catherine remained.

When we weren't sprawled in front of her 13-inch Sony TV, Mark gazed at the starry blennies and scissortail dartfish while I pulled records from the bins and made requests. Catherine had a rule: If I asked for a song I'd heard before and knew I liked, she played me one I'd never heard first. So, when I wanted to listen to Tina Turner, whose husky alto rode the airwaves because of *Beyond Thunderdome*, she paired her with Nina Simone. Because *An American Tail* had introduced me to Linda Rondstadt, I also encountered EmmyLou Harris. Long before my hipster college friends tried to recruit me into the cult of Nick Drake, I'd been a child convert by way of Van Morrison.

Though I complained that Catherine didn't listen to the *Top Gun* soundtrack on cassettes like everyone else in our small town (or from rainbow-mirrored CDs, like Heather Loeffler's mom did), I secretly appreciated the heft of the records, the album covers large enough to contain all the lyrics. Positioning them on the turntable, finding the exact spot to drop the needle—these trained me for the accuracy music required. And so, after I'd turned eight and summer stretched before me, when Catherine asked if I was ready to learn to play, I was.

I sat on the edge of her waterbed (another extravagance), oversized guitar in hand, and learned E chords while my mother floated in and out with items from the kitchen under her nose:

“Mind if I make something with this garlic powder?”

“You know I don't, Maureen.”

Or, “Why do you always buy such shitty coffee?”

“It's cheap, and I can't taste the difference.”

“The R.J. Reynolds company has ruined your taste buds.”

“My Camels are the one thing I can taste.”

After the lessons, while my mother and Catherine drank more Folgers, Mark and I would line our bodies up to the edges of the mirrored sliding doors on the closet, watching in wonder as our reflections rode invisible horses and did grotesque leaps, our half-selves as gravity-defiant as we wished our wholes could be.

Somehow, though, despite the fact that the worst thing that ever happened at Catherine's was my mother's occasional cursing, I knew I wasn't supposed to tell anyone about the time we spent there. We went through the arched doorway into a Narnia filled with John Prine and clownfish, and perhaps no one outside the wardrobe would believe us.

As I grew older, I fell in love with other magics: slumber parties and black raspberry lip gloss and origamied notes passed in Earth Science. I discovered boys didn't like it when I played acoustic circles around them at parties and learned, instead, to giggle and feign awe that they could pluck out the two-string melody line of “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” I swerved past my

parents and Mark in the hallways wearing homemade black chokers and knockoff Doc Martens and thought I knew a little something about grit and smoke.

One Saturday, my mother tapped on my bedroom door and asked if I wanted to visit Catherine. It'd been almost a year since I'd last gone over there, and even then, just a quick pop-in. I sat cross-legged on the floor, reading the liner notes of Pearl Jam's Ten yet again, and, without looking up, I said, "Thanks, Mom, but I'm good. I hope you guys have fun, though!"

"Elisabeth." Her tone made me turn to face her. "I...I think you should come with me. If not today, very soon."

The aquarium sat scummed over, fishless. Just murky water and purple rocks at the bottom. The air smelled cleaner, but in a counterfeit way, as if someone had worked to tame the perfumes of Catherine's apartment, to confine the stale smoke to the carpet fibers and the whiskey-laced coffee scent to the sheet music.

She looked so thin. And not cool thin, like Michelle Pfeiffer, who'd toppled Heather Loeffler's mom as the bellwether of feminine taste and beauty. A leathery thin that made me both afraid to give her the hug she requested and also ashamed of the repulsion I felt when she squeezed my hand after my awkward side embrace.

We positioned her on the futon and talked idly around her skeleton, probably about why I refused to join the high school band. My mom put on Billie Holliday, and we all closed our eyes and listened, inhaling jazz and exhaling metastases. It was the last time I saw Catherine.

A few weeks later, I rounded the corner into the kitchen but stopped short when I heard my parents' voices. My dad was employing a tone he often used with my mom—gentle, hoping to help, baffled by why she didn't want to accept the help.

"I'm just saying that I can leave work early and pick up dinner and the kids. I'll take care of everything."

"I know, it's just..."

"I get that you think you need to take care of all of us, but we can manage for one afternoon, I promise. There's no need for them to leave school early and miss classes. Plus, wouldn't they be uncomfortable? They barely knew her."

"Okay, I..."

"Take time to mourn your friend, Sweetie. I'll hold down the fort for you."

Two days later, my mother came in with a bin of vinyl albums.

"I tried to get you a guitar, but her sister drove in from San Diego just so that she had room to take them all. But I got you these."

She'd clearly tried to gather my favorites from childhood—Bridge Over Troubled Water and Rumors nestled next to John Prine and I Put a Spell on You—but had forgotten a few. Songs in the Key of Life was nowhere to be found.

I wish I could say I slid the records from their sleeves and played them one by one that night, but the crate sat there, untouched. It wouldn't be until my junior year of college that I'd rediscover the Fruit Tree box set after my roommate's boyfriend tried to impress us with a shit rendition of "One of These Things First." And when he broke up with her for a girl who bought his shit rendition—bought that a trust fund baby from Winnetka could have been a signpost, sailor, cook—she joined me in swaying to "Pink Moon" before my closet mirror, our lit cigarettes and pizza buffet cups filled with 7Up and vodka raised to Catherine and Nick Drake, to the ghosts who gifted us the kinds of rhythms that shot through us like charms, like piranha teeth. We periodically tossed up a cheer of "Fuck Tom!" for the ex-boyfriend.

A few weeks after Catherine's funeral, I stayed home with a cold. I woke at noon, hungry, my head full of twine, and rambled down to the kitchen. I opened the pantry and found my mother huddled on the floor with the pickle jar, a can of Folgers, and a pack of Camels open in front of her. She looked up, eyes red and woolly. The part of me that fancied myself a punk-grunge goddess felt disgusted by her sentimentality. The part of me that fell from her gave a sad smile and closed the door, leaving her to smell her grief in peace.

My parents divorced a couple of years later, and, few years after that, in 2001, my mother met Lucille, with whom she would open a natural foods co-op and spend the last 19 years of her life. They shuffled around their disorganized spaces contentedly together, never finishing one project before they began the next.

Mom died last year. Lucille fell ill, too, but she had a decade's advantage in age and health and pulled through. My husband, demonstrating the sort of linguistic flourish that has always made him the superior lyricist between us, told our daughters their grandmother died "of a virus that took her breath away."

When he said this, it conjured me back to the first time I'd heard that phrase in real life, outside the context of "Lady in Red" or the Berlin song.

It was 1989. My father had a work event, and my mother was shuttling us to my uncle's for an overnight, but first we had to stop by Catherine's. My mom had phoned ahead, so when we knocked, Catherine called out from the bedroom, "It's unlocked!"

I went into the living room to search while my mom headed down the hallway. She wore her perennial party dress, a Kelly green button down with a belted waist that accentuated the thick bottom and heavy thighs she was forever trying to diet away. She often joked she was

“smuggling pillows,” a self-jab I’d add to my own repertoire in my 20s when it became clear I couldn’t outwit my pear-shaped genes.

I was embarrassed by her in that moment. How dare she attend an event with her gratuitous body and her dress a decade out of date? How dare she be nothing like Heather Loeffler’s tanned, toned mom with her shoulder-padded ensembles in chic black and magenta?

I could hear Catherine in the bedroom. “What did he leave here, again?”

“It’s his Care Bear. He can’t sleep without it.”

“The yellow thing?”

I was preparing to correct her, to say, “Uh, his name is Funshine Bear” as only a fourth-grader can, when she caught sight of my mother. She’d never been to an event with her, of course, would never have seen the offending dress. I prepared for Catherine to reproach her, but instead, she said:

“Oh, Maureen. You look so beautiful. You take my breath away.”

Her eyes went wide when she looked behind my mother and realized I’d come in, too, leaving Mark alone in the car.

“Cath—”

“You’ll take everyone at the party’s breath away, I mean. Now, let’s find that bear.”

After they cremated my mom—the safest way to handle her, they said—I brought my half of her home in a sustainable tote from the funeral home. Lucille came over and helped me situate her on a dozen different surfaces until we settled on an outsized bookshelf in the basement, which my husband and I converted into a studio.

Stepping back, satisfied with the placement, Lucille said, “Oh! Would you like Catherine’s jar, too?”

I did a double take. “She still has the jar?”

“Of course she does. Did. Have you ever met your mother?” And she laughed.

And so Catherine’s sea came to rest next to my mother’s ashes. A foggy, 35-year-old pickle jar next to the stainless steel urn I’d chosen, my own taste suddenly wrong.

I asked Lucille if this arrangement seemed too cheesy, too maudlin, and she said, “No, your mom would have loved it. But do me a favor, will you, and put a little of me in a spice jar next to Maureen when I go, too? Or maybe next to Mark’s half of her. Either way.” And I said I would.

My girls came down a few days later and pointed at the pickle jar, the briny lumps of rock almost invisible, and said, “Ew. What’s that?”

“That’s your grandmas’ ocean,” I told them. And because they are children, more disgusted by milky green water ill-contained beneath a rusted lid than they are concerned with the quiet magic of dead women, they never thought to ask where I put the apostrophe.



Ada, Multiplied *Keshaun Chow*

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I was standing outside the school gates, surrounded by the sharp scent of eucalypts, that I first realized. My five-year-old daughter was starting elementary school. Gathered around us was a small gaggle of children, their hats askew and their feet shuffling. And us, their parents — who, after 112 days of enforced lockdown — were attempting to model appropriate human-to-human interaction.

“What’s your daughter’s name?” a bubbly, bob-haired woman asked me.

“Ada,” I replied. We had chosen what we’d believed to be an old-fashioned name, in honor of her long-dead great grandmother. Through some twist of naming trend cycles, our daughter’s name had become unexpectedly commonplace.

“Oh, what a coincidence!” the woman replied. “Our daughter’s name is Ada too!” She pointed at her Ada, a willowy slip of a child standing quietly off to one side. The woman, who I later learned was named Maggie<sup>1</sup>, laughed, showing a row of even white teeth. “They even look the same!”

It was true. Her Ada had the same dark brown hair, the same dark brown eyes, the same olive complexion as our daughter. Standing next to each other, they could almost pass for sisters.

You see, I am one half of a stereotypical couple. I met my now-fiancé at university. It was me that made the first move — inviting him to my birthday party, snogging him, and bringing him back to my place all in the space of 24 hours. Later, after an accelerated courtship that involved us moving in together after only four months, he would say “he didn’t see me coming.” Of course that was the case; we all have our idea of what a future partner might look like. For him, a *banana* probably wasn’t it.

For me, however, it was the norm. I have a long history of dating white boys. In fact, I have a history of only dating white boys. I’ve never dated anything but.

I could spout all sorts of nonsense about cross-cultural relations, about the wokeness of modern relationships, or of not seeing color. But the truth is, I do see color. I see color more than my white, cis-het male fiancé does. I don’t have a choice.

When I was four, a skinhead spat on my dress and told me to “go home.” When I was fifteen, a friend told me I was “lucky” I got to date a white boy. My parents’ friends would say biracial children were attractive because “they got the best of both sides”. What were meant as harmless throwaway comments only served to make me feel like a lesser, uglier, specimen.

These, as well as innumerable other micro-aggressions, add up over a lifetime. They become so pervasive that in the end they seem like they don’t exist. If you squint, you can almost convince

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect privacy

yourself you're imagining it. You're too sensitive. You're being a snowflake. Everyone gets offended these days. Don't make a problem where there ain't one, man.

I doubt my fiancé realized what he'd signed up for, all those years ago. When I pounced on him in that smoke-filled divey bar, I doubt he expected he'd be here, fifteen years later, living in a two-bedroom house with two cats and two biracial kids. I doubt he anticipated the ten-year battle of wills over whether we should wear shoes in the house (Chinese culture dictates that shoes should be left at the door; he felt like a slob if he went barefoot). He once told me a random woman approached he and Ada at the swimming pool and knew he had an Asian wife, even though I wasn't present. He related this anecdote with an air of confusion.

"How," he asked me, "did she know Ada was half-Asian?"

To which I replied, "she could tell by her eyes. The epicanthal folds."

"The what?" He'd never even heard that term.

I pointed at my inner eyelids. "These bits."

"Oh." He'd always called them my "treasure chests". I thought it was cute, so I'd never corrected him.

He doesn't see color. He doesn't have to.

None of this might be concerning if it weren't so common. Being a stereotypical couple means that in our suburb, in our city, in our country, around the world, there are probably tens of thousands other couples like us. Jokes about mail order brides aside, the Asian female-white male coupling is one of the most popular interracial pairings worldwide. It is so common that entire groups of Asian males lament the loss of 'their' women to white men. Actual dating agencies have sprung up which pair Asian men with Black women. Do I feel bad that such agencies need to exist? Yes. Do I still find myself most attracted to white men? Also yes.

I've often asked myself why this is, and the truth is equally painful and embarrassing. My preference for white men is not a rejection of Asian men. It is a rejection of myself. Growing up, I hated being Chinese in a white-dominated world. I wanted to be an actor, an Olympic swimmer, an author, a vet; all professions with very little diversity. Although representation is getting better with time, these professions remain disproportionately white. It's difficult to express how tiring it is to always have to push that little bit harder than everyone else in order to be successful.

I always wanted children, and like all parents regardless of species, I didn't want my offspring to suffer. In my twisted logic, having half-white kids would spare them 50% of the struggles I faced growing up. The effect of my ethnicity could theoretically be diluted down the generations until it ceased to be an issue at all, and therefore my descendants could enjoy a life free of race-related struggles. Now, as an adult, I realize this is pretty nonsensical. All humans have the capacity to suffer, whatever their skin color. But as a child, this dangerous messaging became so deeply ingrained in my psyche that I'm sure it shaped the very synapses governing my attraction to the opposite sex.

My unspoken assumptions backfired somewhat. I thought I'd spare my biracial children race-related suffering (and simultaneously gift them a fortunate combination of genes that would render them attractive). But having biracial kids opens up a whole realm of equally worrisome issues. Personal tales abound from biracial people who never felt they fit in. Or worse, who are teased for being 'hapa' or 'half-breeds'.

Then there's the concern they'll be fetishized as much as I was as a full-blooded Asian woman. Eurasians are lauded as being "exotic" and "beautiful" (remember the comments of my parents' friends?). I worry that my kids will become symbolic tokens, just like I was.

Once, a white male friend said that with all the interracial couples nowadays, humans would one day "become a gray race". I realized how deep-seated that worry was when I watched my daughter Ada standing next to her doppelganger namesake. It's one of the complexities of being a marginalized human. On the one hand, you want to be like everybody else. At the same time, you can't stand being boxed up with everybody else, because then you become a faceless representation of your entire culture and stop existing as a real, individual person. It's like the time I found out my ex-boyfriend had replaced me with another short, Asian woman. All of a sudden, I was no longer flesh and blood. I became a caricature, a carbon-copy, a romanticized version of an Oriental ideal.

Exactly how damaging is it to have children born out of self-hatred? I once read a devastatingly long, bitter essay written by a half-Asian adult man, who raged not only at himself but at his mother for her perceived "rejection" of his own kind. After all, he reasoned, how could she love him, a half-Asian, when she obviously hated Asians so much she refused to marry one? Apart from the obvious paradox that if she *had* married an Asian, he wouldn't even exist, he had a point. How can I, an Asian woman who only ever dated white men, instill in my children the type of self-acceptance that I desperately wish I possessed myself?

How can I, in a society that constantly, subtly glorifies white men and fetishizes Asian women, teach my children to truly see beyond color? Not in a blessedly ignorant way, like my partner. But in a way that acknowledges their heritage without forcing them into a pre-conceived category. Already the language of my parents is fading. The traditions, the recipes, the superstitions... In less than one generation, it will be all gone.

I don't have the answers to these questions. Is it enough of a start that I'm asking?

When my son was born, I was relieved. Not just because he was a nine-pound baby with a 97<sup>th</sup> percentile head birthed out of my barely-dilated cervix in just over an hour (the anesthesiologist arrived too late to deliver pain relief). I was relieved because through the bloodied, matted mess of bodily secretions I saw his hair was blond. I'd never expected to have a blond baby, and — having absorbed Mendelian genetics as gospel all throughout high school — it still perplexes me to this day. It hurts me to say I was relieved he looked like my partner. My blue-eyed partner, who never asked for his privilege, but has it anyway. My partner, who never saw color because he never had to.

I can only hope that one day my children, or at least their children, will experience the same blissful ignorance as he. But I hope that ignorance will be from genuine progress. That somehow, society will have moved so far ahead we can acknowledge the richness of our ethnicities without stratifying them. That we can create a world that isn't gray, but is replete with color, culture, and diversity.

A world where my partner and I wouldn't be a stereotypical couple.

A world where we'd just be a couple.

## Research Subject *Elsa Williams*

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I was taking a graduate seminar at Harvard Medical School, and I didn't belong there. Every moment I was in class, I felt like I was drowning. I was totally unprepared for the coursework and terrified of being called out. I was 21, an undergraduate biochemistry student. My father had told me that if I wanted to be taken seriously when I applied to graduate school, I needed to take a graduate level class. I knew that this class was going to be too advanced for me, but I didn't have a lot of options that fit into my schedule. My grades were just barely above the B+ I needed to stay in the honors program, so I needed to get at least a B- in Virology 201.

It was my first science seminar class. In the early 90s, the Harvard undergraduate biochemistry major was oversubscribed and they didn't have the staff for small classes. My exposure to primary literature had been in the context of safe and circumscribed lists of easy-to-answer questions. In Virology 201, we were expected to read peer-reviewed research papers and offer incisive critiques. I could barely decipher the abstracts, let alone critique the authors' methods or the conclusions they drew.

There were about a dozen other students in the class. They couldn't have been much older than second year graduate students or maybe some of them were MD/PhD students who had already taken two years of med school classes. I remember them all being men (though that can't be right) and all with khakis, fleece jackets, and close-cropped hair. I looked very out of place, with badly dyed hair, a lip ring, a leather jacket, and combat boots held together with ShoeGoo. I was used to not looking like the other biochemistry students, and to keeping to myself, but there was a big difference between being one of two hundred in a lecture hall and one of twelve around a small table. There was one student in the class who I thought might be gay -- he had curly blond hair and an open, slightly puppyish face, and every once in a while he gave me an encouraging smile.

I was trying to maintain a double life. My public life was being an honors biochemistry student on track to a prestigious graduate school. In theory, going to graduate school was what I wanted — a chance to be a professional nerd — but the more exposure I had to actual biomedical labs with their egos and backbiting and petty drama, the less appealing it seemed. But I needed to do something — I was sure that structure and goals were what I needed to keep my life from slipping into chaos — and I didn't have a back-up plan. I knew I didn't have the unremitting drive and laser focus I needed; the best I could do was to get my credentials in order— the right classes, the right internships.

My private life revolved around a series of interlocking subcultures and identities — queer, punk, goth, slacker, druggy. Its credentials were your look, your politics, your obscure musical tastes, who you knew in the scene, what drugs you did. My drug of choice was heroin, and it was swallowing up my life. I knew of at least one other honors biochemistry student who shot heroin, but he was much more successful at presenting himself as an uncomplicated overachiever. My insistence on being so weird — the weird hair, the weird clothes, the weird friends -- was alienating the people who could have helped me in my career, but I couldn't give it up.

Virology 201 was held in a dim, overheated, too-small conference room at Harvard Medical School. The professor, Joseph Sodroski, was a ground-breaking HIV researcher and clinician. He was tall with a runner's build, an early-80s-style mustache, and a head of greying, tightly curled hair that seemed just on the verge of being too big. He wore dress pants and a dress shirt to class, like he had been dressed more formally for his clinical duties and had taken off the jacket for the class. The semester was divided into three sections -- herpes viruses, hepatitis B virus, and HIV. Each one started with a detailed lecture and then delved into important recent papers in the field. Dr Sodroski walked around the room as he talked, in the narrow space between our chairs and the bookshelves lining the walls. He was a good lecturer – knowledgeable and passionate – and good at leading discussions.

The month on HIV was a litany of catastrophic disappointments. Animal models with encouraging results that didn't translate to humans. Lab strains of HIV that had mutated so far from the real virus that years of research were found to be useless.

One paper, published in *Nature* in 1993, left us all cautiously optimistic: "Use of evolutionary limitations of HIV-1 multidrug resistance to optimize therapy." Up to that point, researchers had been trying to find a single drug that stopped HIV, but the authors of this paper had found that targeting HIV with multiple drugs put the virus under enough evolutionary pressure that it could not mutate out from under it. As we went around the conference table with our feedback on the paper, everyone looked at the instructor hoping he would confirm that this was the groundbreaking news it seemed to be. Dr Sodroski told us the paper's conclusions had already been undermined by an Erratum later in 1993. But something in his tone of voice suggested that even if this combination had failed, he thought the idea of combination therapy had real promise.

I didn't know it at the time, but in 1995, in response to pressure from ACT UP and its new Treatment Action Group, saquinavir, the first protease inhibitor against HIV, was working its way through an open label study. On December 6, 1995, the first combination therapy that included a protease inhibitor was approved by the FDA. By 1996, AIDS deaths would be dropping for the first time.

I identified more with the anonymized patients in the studies than I did with the researchers or with my fellow students. When I had first gotten to Harvard, I realized that the undergraduates who most loudly proclaimed that their plans to cure HIV were sociopaths. More interested in glory than in human suffering. The students in this class were older and didn't seem so nakedly ambitious. But they talked so casually about the patients as a series of risk factors. It felt like they were talking about me. I was overwhelmed by what those anonymized IDs represented. Each one was a person, someone who was probably already dead.

I was acutely aware that I was a series of risk factors, with injection drug use at the top of the list. The first HIV risk checklist I had encountered was the Red Cross blood donation form. The day I turned 18, I donated blood for the first and only time, and had to fudge the number of months since I had broken up with my first boyfriend. He was a former injection drug user who had quit years before, but he would always be considered a risk, and it hadn't quite been six months (the window period between exposure and a reliable negative test results) since the last time we had sex. Also on the list of risk factors was sex within the last six months (no matter what precautions you took) with a man who had ever had sex with another man. I was bisexual,

and so were many of the men I slept with. Piercings were a risk factor. As was doing any kind of street drugs. When I was 20, I injected heroin for the first time, and I've been banned from donating blood ever since.

Technically, I was already an HIV research subject. I was enrolled in the Cambridge Cares About AIDS needle exchange program. In 1993, Governor Weld authorized ten needle exchange programs in Massachusetts, but only as pilot programs. A pilot program, especially one forbidden to give out any needles beyond a one-for-one exchange, couldn't make much of a dent in a global pandemic, but access to clean needles made a big difference for me. I was also incredibly lucky that I hadn't started injecting until 1994. Needle exchanges in New York City had been legalized in 1992, and the infection rate among people who inject drugs in New York and New England was already dropping.

I was working as hard as I could to keep myself on the academic track while also knowing that it could all be overturned by a positive test result. There was a very real possibility that if I were HIV+, I would not be able to pursue a career in biomedical research. Not just that my career would be cut short — AZT didn't seem able to actually extend people's lives — but that if I became immunocompromised I probably wouldn't be able to work in a Biosafety Level 2 laboratory.

In the fall of 1995, I was in the middle of a six-month course of isoniazid, prophylactic treatment after I tested positive for tuberculosis. The test result had been so positive that it left a shiny, pink scar the size of a pencil eraser on my arm, where I had to look at it every time I pushed my sleeves up. A friend of mine, a fellow Harvard student, had had active tuberculosis that was misdiagnosed by Student Health. By the time he realized that he had something more serious than bronchitis, he just wanted to push through until he graduated, afraid that he wouldn't be allowed to pick back up after a medical leave of absence. People whispered that he must have AIDS to have gotten tuberculosis. But years of politicization, neglect, and underfunding of the public health infrastructure meant that by the early 90s New York, where my friend was from, was in the middle of a tuberculosis epidemic.

Some people can't tolerate six months of isoniazid because it causes liver inflammation. I had my ALT levels tested every month and apparently everything was fine. But I was nauseous all the time. I lost weight. My skin, which had never been great, tipped into full blown cystic acne. As my skin got worse and worse, I started to feel like a pariah, like I should be wearing a heavy veil to conceal my diseased skin from the people around me. For their good as well as for mine. I did not ever want to be looked at or to think about my body or my skin.

It was obvious how depressed I was, and it seemed to upset people, even people who would never have thought to ask if I was using drugs. I've since learned that isoniazid can cause depression, poor memory, and poor concentration. I was suffering from all three. Partly, surely, because of my drug use. But that fall was also the slow, grinding end of my first real relationship. We had been dating for almost four years, and at first I had tried to pour everything into the relationship. But Djuna and I had an open relationship with no guard rails, and every time she fell in love with someone new, it broke my heart. Eventually, I had nothing left to pour

into the relationship. Instead of saying so, I became absent -- wrapped up in school, in drugs, in depression. Absent even when I was in the room with her. One day, I came home to find that she had taped my isoniazid pill and the vitamin B I took with it to the fridge. I had set the pills on the counter before I went to my internship and had forgotten to take them. It was a kind gesture, but our relationship had turned to ashes, and I felt judged and put upon.

That semester, my last semester of college, everything seemed to hang on whether or not I graduated, whether or not I got into graduate school. I did my best to stay away from heroin and from everyone I knew who used it. I got high once that fall, in November, and both the fact that I had gotten high and that I had tried to hide it from Djuna was the biggest fight of our relationship. She moved out in December.

Over the summer I had taken an HIV test at the Sydney Borum Jr Health Center. I had convinced Djuna to get tested at the same time, as though it would somehow cement our relationship instead of revealing its fissures. She had never used needles, had never done heroin. She wouldn't even take Advil for cramps.

The counsellor seemed frustrated with me for being so stupid as to put myself at risk by injecting drugs. He told me that it was a bad idea to get tested every six months because it led to a dangerous sense of fatalism. He said it was better to just stop your risky behavior, which in my case was needles. He discounted every other risk factor — including a broken condom a few months before. I got the sense that he had divided risks into necessary risks (which seemed to mean monogamous sex with protection) and unnecessary risks. He didn't suggest that I try snorting as a safer alternative (a standard harm reduction suggestion); he seemed to think he could shame me into quitting heroin. I got stubborn and sullen and didn't get an HIV test for more than a year after that.

Sometime in October, I wore my favorite shirt to Virology 201. It was an extra-soft waffle-weave thermal. Very grunge. I had put in darts to make it more form fitting and had cut off the too-tight collar and given it a boat neck. I had never gotten around to hemming the neck and it was fraying badly. But the worst problem with the shirt was that the cuffs had a smattering of blood stains, gone black because I had used chlorine bleach instead of peroxide to try to get them out. After shooting up (while wearing my favorite shirt) I had pulled the sleeve down too quickly and the cuff had soaked up five drops of blood. Like Blackbeard's key, the blood stains would not come out and they were all the physical evidence that someone who knew what to look for would need.

I realized my mistake after I was already sitting down. In all of academia, a doctor who studied HIV was the person most likely to be familiar with injection drug users. Dr. Sodroski gave me a sharp look which turned quickly into what I could only read as resigned disappointment. In that moment, I was sure that he knew.

Even if Joseph Sodroski suspected I was doing drugs, academia didn't seem to have the tools to do anything about it. I think the assumption was that if someone had a real drug or alcohol



problem, they wouldn't be able to keep up and would just drop out without any intervention on the school's part.

In December, we chose topics for our final projects, which would take the form of a research proposal, practice for a life of writing grant applications. I chose Hepatitis C as my topic. To injection drug users, it seemed almost scarier than HIV. Testing wasn't widely available, bleaching your needles didn't seem to help, and no one really knew the death rate. But it had never come up in Virology 201.

I assumed that I could just find some paper where they made a small discovery by growing the virus in the lab, look at what they said they would do next, and propose to do that. It was a strategy that had gotten me through my undergraduate classes. But the more I read about Hepatitis C, the more frantic I got. Nobody could get Hepatitis C to grow in a lab. I spent hours in the med school library and got nowhere, because I didn't know where to start, but also because the papers I was looking for didn't exist.

What I should have done, as soon as I realized I couldn't complete the assignment, was to ask the professor to find me a project that he thought I could manage. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. When I had originally asked to take the class pass/fail, Dr Sodroski had said it wasn't possible. He couldn't have an undergraduate in his class who wasn't doing the work. I felt like if I reminded him how much I was struggling, he would suggest I drop the class, which would mean I wouldn't be able to graduate that semester. And even if he didn't, if I met with him one-on-one I would not be able to escape the full force of his disappointment.

I decided to just try to fake my way through, present my findings and propose trying to find high-risk but HCV-resistant people and study them. The assignment was to design an interlocking series of testable hypotheses, and my proposal did not in any way meet those criteria. It was a fishing expedition with no hypothesis and nothing testable.

In January, I stood in front of the class, in my best wool slacks, with a totally inadequate stack of overhead projector transparencies. My face felt hot and tight with shame. I was shivering with curdled adrenaline. I presented all the information I had found about the epidemiology of Hepatitis C, about what kind of virus it is (small, RNA, enveloped) and about the failure of various tissue culture models. With each transparency, I was digging myself deeper. A grim march towards inevitable failure. It was the single worst public speaking experience of my life. I concluded with my insufficient research proposal.

"So," Dr Sodroski said, "basically a longitudinal study." I felt myself flush with the embarrassment of exposure.

"Yes." I said and didn't elaborate.

I think there may have been another presentation after mine. If so, I sat through it numbly and absorbed nothing. After class, I left, exhausted and hopeless. I still had one more big assignment (my undergraduate thesis) to turn in before I could graduate. It was due in two days, and I knew as soon as it was turned in, I could start tracking down the drug connections I had been avoiding all semester.

I don't think Dr. Sodroski could have failed me – I attended every class and participated, however incompetently, in every discussion – but he would have been justified in giving me a C, enough to push my GPA out of the honors range. Months later, a B in Virology 201 appeared on my transcript. It felt like mercy. Or pity.

## Contributor Artist Statements

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*Andi Brown* — “I am a trans occupational therapist, writer, and artist living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Growing up, I never considered myself artistic. That was always the purview of my little sister. She was the artist, and I was the writer, in that strange way that siblings demarcate interests and talents.

In 2019, I took a contract providing occupational therapy in rural Oklahoma. One day, a car hit me and I sustained a brain injury. I was unable to work for eight months, and my wife had to take me to therapy appointments for my vision, balance, and speech. Because of the accident, I struggled with dysgraphia, meaning I could not read or write—my two great loves. On top of that, I had aphasia, so it was difficult to express myself verbally.

I didn’t who I was anymore. It’s common for individuals who have sustained TBIs to experience what’s called identity disruption where you feel like that person you used to be died and now you are someone new. I even thought differently. Where words had flowed for me easily before, now I thought in pictures, which was hard to translate into communication with others.

I began painting to say the things I could no longer find words for. I painted my isolation and hopelessness, my fear that I would never get better. Painting was and continues to be a healing and transformative experience. Although I still struggle with language at times, and all the sequela from a TBI, I’m grateful for who I am now.

This painting is called All Aflutter. When I look at it, it reminds me of how I feel when my wife smiles at me. I couldn’t put that feeling in words while I was recovering from my brain injury, and I still can’t now. It doesn’t matter. I painted it. It’s an expression of love for her and my disabled self. You can find out more about me at [andibwrites.com](http://andibwrites.com)”

*Tiffany Babb* — “As a queer, mixed-race writer, I am interested in moments of uncovering what has been buried or ignored or forgotten. I think of my writing as an attempt to reach into the fog and solidify it. My writing is driven by the attempt to slow the ever increasing unknown. Robert Frost wrote that poetry “a momentary stay against confusion.” He didn’t expect poetry to be the answer to all questions or even a step on the path to great enlightenment. It was a momentary stay, not a cure. Though I recognize that I construct an identity out of a history that may not be true, I can still create a foothold into my history as I understand it.”

Tiffany Babb is a poet, essayist, and cultural critic. She's a regular contributor to The AV Club's Comic Panel and the Eisner Award winning PanelxPanel Magazine. You can find her poetry in Rust + Moth, Third Wednesday Magazine, and Cardiff Review. You can follow her on twitter @explodingarrow and sign up for her monthly newsletter at [tiffanybabb.com/puttingittogether](http://tiffanybabb.com/puttingittogether).

*Subhaga Crystal Bacon* — “What a rare gift it is for a Queer person to be asked to write about love. I spent so much of my early writing life wanting to be a *poet*, not a “Queer poet,” to be seen for the value of my work instead of my identity. That was many decades ago. More recently, things have changed. The past year has brought the lives of LGBTQI+ people into the forefront. Burgeoning trans and nonbinary visibility has offered me a lens through which to investigate myself, my identity, my gender expression. To be genderqueer is to be a liminal being—not a lesbian, not a woman, not cisgender, not trans, but Queer—a person undefined by boundaries of gender expression and attraction. My friends used to say that I was a gay man trapped in a lesbian’s body. That was astute in the 90’s, but not anymore. Today, I wear my gender Queerness in comfort; how I look is no indication of how I feel. As an elder person in a long relationship with another Queer person, desire and sexual expression occur frequently in my dreams. This poem is about the frequent dreams I have about flirting or being sexual with another person and then remembering my partner of 30 years—with our many breaks and rejoinings. To dream of them and see them as someone desired, known and not known, touches on how liminal our knowing is. There is always something more than what we see with our awake, conscious minds. Dreams give us the chance to live in another realm, one in which the unusual becomes usual.”

Subhaga Crystal Bacon is the author of two volumes of poetry, *Blue Hunger*, 2020 from Methow Press, and *Elegy with a Glass of Whisky*, BOA Editions, 2004. A Queer Elder, she lives, writes, and teaches on the east slope of the North Cascade Mountains in Twisp, WA. Her recent work appears or is forthcoming in the *Mom Egg Review*, *Indianapolis Review*, *Transition*, and *Humana Obscura*. Her work can be found on [www.subhagacrystalbacon.com](http://www.subhagacrystalbacon.com).

*Trisha Cowen* — “If you asked me at seven years old what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would have told you, “A marine biologist, a storyteller, and a mother of seven.” However, in the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, parenting—or even the concept of parenting—would never be the same. After watching CNN clips of the attack on Sandy Hook for weeks, I questioned whether I still wanted to bring children into this world, imagining the daughter I might someday have and how we might navigate fear, anxiety, and love in the 21st century. Even though this daughter was only imaginary at the time, I mourned for her childhood that was already stolen by rising gun violence across America, despite not even being born yet. This fall, my wife and I will be sending our eldest daughter to Kindergarten. We worry about her being bullied because she has two moms, about COVID-19 finding its way into her asthmatic lungs, and about boys carrying misplaced anger and guns. When we drop her off, we will squeeze her until we can’t breathe—until our hearts almost stop—and then we will let her go.

Trisha Cowen works as an Assistant Professor of English at Westminster College in Pennsylvania. I received my doctoral degree in Literature and Creative Writing at Binghamton University (SUNY) after completing a BFA in Writing, Literature, and Publishing at Emerson College. I previously worked as the editor-in-chief of the literary journal *Harpur Palate*. My creative work has appeared in *The Portland Review*, *Bitter Oleander Press*, and *2 Bridges*

Review, among many others. I am also the author of the chapbook *Mobiles in the Sky* (2014), published by Gertrude Press. I live in Pennsylvania with my wife and two daughters.”

*Jonathan Ayala* — is a writer from El Paso, Texas, and a graduate of the Bilingual MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso. His work has appeared in several journals including *Foglifter*, *The Acentos Review*, *RiversEdge*, and *Gertrude*. Prior to beginning his graduate studies, he worked in Washington, DC for several education nonprofits.

*KP Vogell* — “As a kid, I always felt wrong, alien, and out of place. I grew up in a majority white, majority Christian part of America, and I am the child of a white Jew and a non-white Latin American immigrant. So, I absorbed the message that both halves of my identity were wrong, suspicious, criminal, and even satanic (not exaggerating, as other kids regularly told me I was going to hell.) On top of this, I was queer, although I didn’t even have that word at the time. I just knew that I hated everything people told me about what women are supposed to look like, act like, and do, and that half of my crushes were hellfire-worthy sins. I was too cowardly to risk being openly queer—openly myself, really. I thought that to be okay, I had to murder every part of myself that other people said was wrong. I got good at hiding, and I made that self-mutilation a kind of secret project. If I did it right, I could be accepted, and no one would find out that I was an interloper. I’m in my thirties now. It’s only in recent years, because of the hard work advocates and activists have done to make it a little bit safer to be queer and non-white in America, that, for this human, the pain of hiding has surpassed the fear of coming out. I’m still not out all the way, really, much like the speaker in this story, who is still fighting with self-hatred. (When you’ve been absorbing other people’s hatred of you your whole life, it doesn’t go away in a hurry.) She’s not free, but she’s trying to be. Even if there’s pain involved, which there will be.”

KP Vogell is an artist, musician, writer, and Californian whose fiction has been published in *PANK* and *The Good Life Review*. KP occasionally posts on Instagram as @komischevogell.

*Jack Bentz* — “Super Excited” is one of an interlocking set of stories about searching for a place to be in the American West. You’d think with all that space there would be room for everyone. Jack’s writing is usually a failing attempt to capture in words his own vulnerability and attach it to fictional characters. And in spite of Jack wanting to take on the big issues of fate, religion, injustice and death, his stories rapidly stray into the uncertain hearts of his characters who seek each other in everyday lives.”

Jack Bentz grew up on a cattle ranch in Oregon and has lived and worked all over the States and Latin America. He is a Catholic priest and currently lives and writes in a small room on the third floor of a girls' dorm on a university campus in the Bronx.

*B. Tyler Lee* — “About 10 years ago, when I was in my early 30s, my mother mentioned in passing that my grand-grandmother, Nana, had “liked girls.” Though my mother would entertain no further conversation on the topic, this revelation solved some long-standing puzzles—including the mystery of Catherine, Nana’s “good friend.” Catherine and Nana ran a thread store and taught needlepoint classes together, but I’d never understood what made Catherine’s friendship sacred and why our family still kept (and cherished) many pillows and tapestries that Catherine had made. Why hadn’t Catherine’s family kept them? Though I doubt I’ll ever get confirmation of this, the only plausible explanation is that Catherine and Nana were “family” in the only way two women in the 1960s could be.

At the time I learned this story, I was also still in the closet. Several years passed before I came out to my family, after I left my husband because I could no longer contain my queerness. When I finally did, I thought often about Nana and the world she built for herself in Fort Worth, Texas—the miniature life inside her life that allowed her to be who she was. What would I have done in another era? How would my children see me if I’d never lived in the fullness of my identity? For that matter, how do they see me now?

My short story in this issue is from the perspective of a girl slowly beginning to recognize that her mother is a lesbian, and it’s set in the era between Nana’s adulthood and my own. I wanted to think about what it would be like to view your mother with garden-variety childhood/teenage judgment while also implicitly understanding she’s holding in something more, some fundamental part of herself—bearing witness to her secret love and grief.

Much of my work centers on the intersection of queerness, food, and motherhood. I’m finishing a poetry manuscript on these themes, and several poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Hunger*, *HAD* (Hobart After Dark), *Blue Mesa Review*, *Qwerty Literary Magazine*, *SWWIM Every Day*, *Jet Fuel Review*, and more. “Undersong” is my only piece directly inspired by Nana, though. She’s been dead for over forty years—since I was an infant—but I hope her miniature life was enough.”

*Keshaun Chow* — “I’ve always been a writer in some form and capacity, but it’s only recently that I’ve really committed to “recreational writing”. And it’s only even more recently that I’ve felt empowered to write about my experiences as a woman of colour. Growing up in white-dominated Australia meant that, despite my parents’ best efforts, I grew up feeling more white than Asian. It’s this disparity between the internal and external that I’ve recently wanted to explore in my work. This non-fiction piece is an exploration of the way I (and greater society) have been conditioned to view whiteness as being the ultimate beauty standard. I figure it’s an issue that is uncomfortable for most—certainly it is uncomfortable for me. Writing this piece was very personal and, in many ways, extremely difficult. What I’ve found is that the times when

I've felt free to be vulnerable, to use my authentic voice as a woman of colour—these are the times I have produced my strongest work.

I was the 2020 winner of the Perito Prize, a short-story contest centred around diversity, for an allegorical piece of speculative fiction based on my experiences of racism. Since then, I've been short-listed and long-listed for various prizes, and been published (or have work forthcoming) in Maudlin House, Okay Donkey Magazine, Rust + Moth, Hobart Pulp, and others. I spend my days chasing around two kids, two cats, and various other animals, and spend my nights tinkering on a novel amongst other writing projects."

*Elsa Williams* — "I have had a lot of identities: nerd, queer, druggy, and now nerd again. I can never quite get the parts to fit together, but I can worry at the uneven seams until I find something true. I wrote "Research Subject" in response to Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's call for essays on growing up with the AIDS crisis. I missed the deadline, but I still needed to tell the story. In 1995 I had a disorienting double vision of being both researcher and researchee, with no safe way to talk about it. From a distance of 25 years, and under a pen name, I have the space to reexamine a time when I made terrible choices, and to see how many systems were failing me and my friends.

I left academia 6 years ago and now work in biotech. I live outside Boston with my husband and two kids. My essays have appeared in *The Manifest-Station*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Red Fez*, and *The Bi Women's Quarterly*. I am an alum of the Grub Street Memoir Generator, and I am workshopping a memoir about my early 20s. My website is [elsawilliams.net](http://elsawilliams.net)."