



# RAINY DAY

RAINY DAY

VOLUME XLIX, No. 2 / FALL 2019

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What exactly does a literary magazine do? It gets hard to say without some slippery assumptions. I wish I could say that this magazine, that any magazine, on its own, really does much of anything good. But if anything, I have to admit that periodical publication is rooted in a pretty long history of oppressive forms of knowledge dissemination, from the first journal publications that grew out of the so-called Republic of Letters; through the haze of Modernist journals that, often enough, arced toward fascism; all the way to our present day, when all our best and biggest magazines, like most of our supposedly subversive cultural institutions, are propped by capital derived from tireless human and natural resource extraction.

To be frank, I guess it can get difficult to feel optimistic about publication. Our weekly staff meetings at Rainy Day help keep me optimistic. Something happens in those meetings, in the moments of disagreement and excitement. When people gather and collaborate, community begins to feel possible. And community does a lot more than a magazine, outside of that context, could ever do. To be sure, what we're taught to think of as discourse, as rational disagreement and discussion, can, if we're not careful, just recreate the oppressive discursive patterns that have so long plagued periodical publication. But we don't, I feel, begin to break out of these molds without each other, without collaboration and mutual effort and an enormous amount of radical empathy.

Magazines, usually, don't achieve all that much by themselves. They need our help and our further engagement. In the best case scenario I can conceive of, they can be the material consolidators of community. I would like to image that any time someone publishes in Rainy Day, in fact, any time someone picks up a copy of Rainy Day, they are engaging one of the physical interfaces of an always growing community of writers and readers. For this reason, there's something a little new in this issue. We've included contact information for those contributors who wanted to provide it. Rainy Day is by no means the first publication to do so, but I feel it's about time that we did. Please, reach out to each other and allow this magazine further to form a community around itself! That's how magazines bring something good into the world. That's how our work gets better, more meaningful, more effective, closer to issuing in new knowledges and ways of knowing. I therefore extend my deepest thanks to the readers and writers and editors and designers who make this magazine possible. Without all the work and love of our enthusiastic staff and editors, these pieces would never make it to these pages. Most importantly, though, this magazine exists because all of you keep reading it and submitting to it. Thank you. We love you.

With gratitude,  
Peter Szilagyi  
Editor-in-Chief  
Ithaca, New York  
November 2019

# RAINY DAY

an independent student publication

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Fall 2019

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# EATING CONCORD GRAPES IN LECTURE

Vivian Jiang

Mind retires in blank idleness.  
Coughs and sniffles of new plague victims  
swell to the soundtrack of communal living.  
Chalk dust coats the corners of chairs.  
An hour and 15 minutes in purgatory:

Nancy stumbles in precisely  
2 minutes and 24 seconds late.

Fatigue knocks on eyelids  
and wipes its feet on a dilated doormat,  
sinking into the recliner of  
my eye sockets and seeping into  
the nape of my neck.

Wait, Nancy's usual rustling  
has a different octave.

Her wide grin flashes her seed-stamped teeth  
as little bruise-blue fruits snuggle in  
the plastic bassinet in her elbow's crook.  
Supple and fleshy, I coo over them  
like the hands and feet of newborn infants.

Before I could whisper a request,  
she extends her fresh bundle to me.  
Awkward and uncertain—  
anxiety reminds me of my inexperience  
with handling precious goods.

Thumb & pointer pinch at one orb,  
Peeling its entire satin skin signaled slight  
panic, like yanking off the duvet  
on a cold Sunday morning.

Luckily, Nancy has optical literacy,

reading the *Oops* engraved  
on my pupils. She plucks  
and plops a grape in my open palm.

Puckered, pursed lips are impossible  
to conceal. Twisted winces leak through  
my shaky smile, as Nancy's tart  
toddler gurgles acidic spit-up on my tongue.

# ODE TO ‘HONG SHAO ROU’

By Vivian Jiang

As my classmates scribbled “mac n cheese”  
or “pizza” on the thick dark line under  
*Favorite Food*, I sank into my chair,  
furrowing my brows’ sparse blades.

Swirling around my skull was BaBa’s cooking:  
thick wafts of steam heaved the aromas  
of eau de salted duck breast, or cumin lamb cologne  
or my favorite fragrance: his red-braised pork belly

His kitchen ritual requires a rock of pork  
to relax in a metal bathtub, sighing among spices.  
The steady ticking over the stove and Baba’s slow  
humming hushes my impatient urge to stir the simmering stew.

BaBa’s temperature cools as the stove’s rises.  
“Hong Shao Rou” has no numbers, no words.  
Our kitchen shelves house no measuring cups, no cookbooks.  
Natural ruler—I dip my index finger in rice-water.

Striated and distinct, each meat-stripe is  
BaBa’s jokes, MaMa’s patience. Their stories  
glisten, glazed like blood but thicker. These bites  
are the only acknowledgements of their home.

Many try to tell me what home feels like.  
But do they know what it smells like? Tastes like?  
Home is plucking rice grains off soy-sauced sweaters,  
spooning the last drops of burnt crimson for the final slurp.

## NIGHT LESSONS ON SELF-ENDURANCE

---

Adric Tenuta

I bother myself by prodding  
My uneven sideburns and brows in the mirror

Where, if lucky, I can catch a glimpse  
Of an oily stretch of patchy beautiful.

Yes, I am a blown-out stamen—  
Field in remission, proven allergic.

I become an authority on Magnoliophyta.  
I return to the mirror and pretend

My facial hair is profound.  
I drive to a local grocery store

And purchase two pints of Häagen-Dazs.  
I leave the store and the parking lot is a web

Of limbs made from people I love.  
I return to my body and remember I'm a man.

This bothers me, so I read an article  
Discussing the fifteen things guys hate

About the way women dress  
And copy each outfit into a dossier

Beneath my pillow. I find traumatic correlations  
And name them after the five stray cats

My mother required us to spay and neuter.  
My cats watch me commit several pathetic suicides.

A cat must have three different names:  
(1) I bother myself by acting like a cat.  
(2) I return to the mirror and hunt myself.  
(3) I conclude, declaw, and neuter.

# MY PHYSICS TEACHER'S PET COCKROACHES

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Adric Tenuta

Lay eggs, then eat the hatchlings.  
 His daughter is so sick. He forgets  
 to feed them. Laurel Fox argues,  
 cannibalism reduces population size  
 before acute resource shortages cause  
 physiological stress. It is an experiment.  
 He owns a millipede. It was bought  
 illegally. Wash your hands after touching.  
 The mites are symbiotic. The class takes turns  
 feeding the cockroaches. His millipede  
 is so sick. While he is out, we hold a wake  
 for the millipede. No, cockroaches do not live forever.  
 No, they cannot survive a nuclear war.  
 We dare each other to eat them.  
 Fox likens this to spacing behavior  
 or dominance hierarchies in social animals.  
 The millipede coiled so perfectly  
 dead. On average, cockroaches live  
 for a year and three months.  
 They were a gift from his daughter.  
 The millipede is fed to the cockroaches.  
 Symbiotic may be defined as  
 denoting a mutually beneficial relationship  
 between different groups. Of the original five  
 there are now twenty. After every class he reads  
 to them goodnight. There, beneath lullabies  
 they eat themselves to sleep.

## OBITUARIO FOLCLÓRICO DE LA FLORIDA, CIRCA 2018

### Gerardo Lamadrid Castillo

#### obituary

He was like... an eraser... or a jar of peanut butter, you know? *You* know! how you always lose ‘em or throw ‘em away before you finish ‘em? And how it kinda numbs your thumb when you grab ‘em. How they taste burnt when they’re really good... smoky. He turned out like that. I don’t know how. He left the table just a second ago and I already miss him. He dropped dead in that trash can like it was an accident. *Looks detached to me.* I thought. There was a useful grace to him—a right size, a perfect quality: just solid enough. Shocking to see him flop like that—empty and detached – right into the wastebin. And now we miss him immensely. Those things like him just turn up like that some days—a kinda kinky, foamy piece of nostalgia you can’t recognize—once cognized, once used, then forgotten. It’s simple that way—for such simple things as him—quiet and hazy. The way he sat on the countertop—lazy but ready—his legs hanging off the side and his feet tapping away. There was a blue around him—or a blueness to him, rather—that just barely lingered, an aftertaste, some dark shavings. But once my pencil was in ‘im, what was there to do? It’s a fatal deficiency—or, rather, an endless fullness of character, a materiality that can expand at will to accept even more of the world. We’ll call it a a a foggy something, a... well, I mean, a strength not defined by boundaries, you know? He was like that I guess. So cheap too; cost-effective. Listened to folk rock with me, willing. He and ‘em lived in this weird vicarious and symbiotic relationship, switching from surface to surface in my home—till they all ended in my kitchen trash can. *Trashperson comes on wednesday mornings. Best to set you out tonight, then.* Such was the circumstance—lean, efficient. He was like that too—when you avoid excess. Then everything blue would remind me. Everything blue and staticless stuck to me like ladybugs. *All right, all right! I miss you!* I said. He was so forgiving and welcoming—but that’s neither here nor there. That trashcan was like ‘em too. I knew it! I’d just never noticed it—realized it. That blue, rubbery trashcan I inherited—I’ve lived with it my whole life. And I never quite recognized how much it really was like an eraser or a jar of peanut butter or a friend like him. Short and sturdy—a handsome totem recording it’s own lifespan, just a layering of canvases fading away (like, peeling). But it broke last night, so it’s time to throw it away too. Bye, bye, safety can. Maybe we’ll meet again someday (I mean, you never know: one man’s trash maybe another man’s treasure). So I’m shipping it off with the wm people. We have an agreement. They signed. He was one of those guys—he started out back, but he was a poster child now (he got promoted some months ago). He was strong from the lifting and the pressing. I met him in Sunday school. Our parents were bible-thumpers, see. Not a

live and let live situation. But that was the world back then: a flat thing of parking lots, backyards and soccer fields all jigsawed together. He always had that blue stuff, but he'd started to shed. Just thin little rolls, you see? But that was the whole world, I think—back then, you know: blue skies, blue walls, blue water. And I check my mental picture of him and—there he is! decent-looking and dignified in his blue shorts: the navy blue dockers from his school uniform, the plum blue adidas from his soccer uniform, that cottony blue on his levi's booties, the electric blue of his marshall's pajamas. The color looked good on his skin—now, come to think of it, he always *did* peel off dead skin from his fingertips, didn't he? He ate them too. That's a little too much for me, tho. I loved him in my fingers like nothing else. Soap couldn't scrub 'im off. I had this bath&body orange blossom hand soap my ex gave me for our anniversary (what a cheapskate) and I rubbed it between my fingers, flushed it off, dried my hands and cupped them around my nose and sniff! That's what I did! That's what I always did after hauling the trashcan out to the curb. *Gotta keep those claws clean!* He wasn't shellfish but he always talked like that for some reason. *When are we talking again? Summer sixteen, right? I thought so.* We were living together in a shack overlooking the gulf in bradenton. You were a jockey at the horsetracks near the beach, and I was still writing my cooking column for the *tb times*. Can't say it was a precious time, but it was promising. We left the city as soon as we got a car and never looked back. Over my shoulder? All the time—one can never be too safe. But never back. It was an ugly tercel that couldn't make up its mind if it was green or blue—a real ugly, *rusting* thing. But it worked, went fast enough, and guzzled gas slow. Real low. It was a low-riding car with the fender hanging halfway off. I loved driving; he was indifferent. *Horses are my thing, babe, you know damn well.* Well, whatever you say, my little hungarian. He stole all my maggie nelsons and my new yorkers while we dated, so I married him to get them back. He always loved that joke. *Don't you, honey?* He looks so forlorn in that trash bag—like a floridian. And he always wanted a sunroof on that thing. *But florida's so sunny—we're not taking advantage of that,* he'd say. And he always wanted oranges: orange peels and slices, juice and candies, zests and seeds. Whole deconstructed oranges. And that's really what we are, eh, burgess? Bits of a puzzle dressed like sunlight in a lonely room at a certain hour on summers in sarasota—that's all we are. But back to the plot: do you remember him, *really*? How he grabbed our kitchen scissors—heavy and clunky—and went to town on the sleeves of his old theater camp t-shirt. He said he needed the room—he needed the air. And who was I to complain? No, we kept to ourselves for the most part. That was the deal. I was half a ribbon and he was a ribbon halved. And who's to say we didn't have fun like that, just like that. I'd really appreciate it if you didn't hold it against me. The tide was rolling in—the keys were gone already. And you know if I didn't throw 'im out, I'd lose 'im. Cuz he... he was pretty much a used eraser, you know. Or an old jar of peanut butter (the really sticky, dense kind with peanut chunks in it). I know he was a good swimmer. I know he could've made it out alive when the shore didn't. He had thick, muscular arms: bulging biceps, ripped triceps. Like *huge* cocoa beans, right? That's what they look like now, fermenting in that old, sticky thing. Every tuesday

night, he volunteered to take out the trash. And how could I say no? He looked so *good* carrying those bags and dragging that dead, blueish weight. I'd stare at him doing that at his partime job at the bootlegger's. It was a liquor store that looked bright like a pollo tropical but had all the parking poles bent from drivers crashing into them. He'd walk out the back to take out some trash or smoke a Newport. He watched this video of sean evans clerking high at a convenience store and started doing it at his job. I made him stop smoking joints when he dropped two bacardí añejo bottles in front of customers. His manager was pissed, and really, how could I blame him? They had a uniform at the store too: mustard slacks and a purple vest. Bootlegger's was like a superstore, really: the walmart of booze. It had cyan neon lights all around the windows and the giant sign on the roof, and it was lined with burgundy carpet inside—all of it, not the floors but the walls. He stole from bootlegger's too, but only cuz I asked him too. The two don q bottles he dropped were for me. Oh, wait, did I say don q? He did drop the bacardí, but I had asked for don q originally. He was so embarrassed when he dropped them because of felito and his crew. Felito was a jockey from a rival company. He could never beat felito at the races, so that really salt bae'd that wound. I always imagine him mopping it all up, getting rid of the glass, smelling a cocktail of the clorox and the spicy rum all spilled on the floor. I see him from our tercel on the street behind the store when he steps out to smoke a Newport or a camel crush to calm his nerves. He never saw me, but I always got there early to pick him up and just looked at him, listening to dylan on the stereo. I did my best to flick his ash for him, to flick it all right off his shoulders—to help him *unload*, you know? He was always tense and ready to roll, but he just spread himself too thin all the time and it was really unhealthy, you know. That's why I just worked at the theater. I was never at the theater except for rehearsals, but that's *working* at the theater, you know? It's like *going* to the theater: you only have to be at the theater every once in a while, but you constantly tell people, *I'm going to the theater. I go to the theater*. And a lot of pale, wealthy retired couples went to the theater in Bradenton, lemme tell ya. That is, of course, till the flooding happened and everyone stopped going all at once. We should've known what was happening when the bees skipped town. I started seeing less and less bees, but I just thought, *Well, I've read about this, this is the new normal. Bees are dying and we're just not doing enough to save them*. But it turns out the bees had it all figured out. We were the ones that kept reading about rising sea levels and paying rent by the beach like it was nothing. I got out just in time, though. I'm a light packer, always have been, and so was he, so it's not like I was tied down by bulk that way. I have useful things, that's all. Very few prized possessions. Like my ring, for example. My grandmother's scratched silver ring. *Her gypsy ring*, my aunt called it. I'm a bit of a klutz, but I swear I've only dropped that ring once (he tried it on and in a restroom at the hilton lobby once and it was too big for any of his fingers so he slipped it right off—his hands were wet—and it flew into the trash. I made him search for it and he did, for like a minute too, till he fished it out from the paper towels.) When I dropped it we were home, in our balcony in the back. I took it off to join him on his afternoon swim, and it dropped between my fingers when I

went to put it on our rubber chaise lounge (it was a prop I stole from ricky, my producer, who'd already stolen it from his ex girlfriend who'd stolen it from the pool at a motel in miami beach.) I felt it fall straight through the floor, but of course it didn't. It just crashed on the hardwood and bounced and twirled and rang hollow. That part of the floor was sloped, so it rolled, but he stopped it with a stomp and I picked it up. He often told me to stop and smell the roses. But I've never had the time. He thought I hated STOP signs, and he was right. I slow down, check if there's anyone around, and keep going. *If they really wanted me to stop, they would've put a traffic light there and made it red.* You always gotta think for other people, don't cha? I guess that's why I liked florida so much before the flooding. People thought for themselves. Most people thought nonthoughts, but that's all the same. I would step out into our sandy backyard, smell the saline and think, *God... the end of the world could sweep my right off my feet here and I wouldn't care.* And then it did. And now it's all gone. But he was gone before it, and that hurt me most. Hence the years—the months, the days, the hours I've collected since he fell off that damn horse. I could barely recognize him after he got trampled. Felito's beast stepped right on his face—crushed his skull right into his helmet. His body was all calm and neat, except for his head. It's like the tracks were his stretcher. Yeah, it was. He died doing what he loved, after all. It was violent and rotten for a second, but then it was peaceful. His legs were flat and his arms were just off his sides. That's what he looked like when he would float at the beach. His dad taught him. He'd just plop up on the surface of the water and let the little waves drift 'im off to sleep. His face and chest always got burnt because he'd float with his belly up under the sun. I guess he couldn't float facedown, of course. I tried floating with him, but I didn't like it. My eyes would get irritated under my eyelids cuz of the sunlight. They'd be closed but I'd just see this whitehot mass of pink inside. And the waves would swirl me around, my ears would get full of water, I'd open my eyes and be thirty feet from where I thought I was—I'd be someone else's backyard. I felt like I would float down the gulf and end up in panama. It was disorienting. Then again there's no gulf now. If I did that now I'd float right over our shack, the bradenton, bootlegger's, the tracks, disney world, the bahamas... I'd end up in the sahara sneezing my ass off. And I hate sand. I loved that sand, on the gulf, always filling the cracks between the planks in my home. We'd sit in our balcony with a cooler full of ice and coronas—I'd sit on the chaise lounge and he was tiny so he'd sit on my lap—and we'd look at sun come down and the wind drag the sand up down the coast. I'd look at him and think, *God... the end of the world could sweep my right off my feet here and I wouldn't care.* And then it did. And now it's all gone. But he was gone before it, and that hurt me most. Hence the years—the months, the days, the hours I've collected since I moved north of the panhandle to new paltz. It gets lonely here. But when it gets lonely here, I have my birds that visit me. I have friends now. Cardinals and blue jays, and groundhogs and squirrels. I never liked seagulls anyway—they were too loud. And some fawn will show up on my doorstep every now and then and I feed it some ritz even though I know you're not supposed to. But who am I to resist? It's what he would've wanted—he loved animals, after all.

The only reason we never got a pet was because he already spent so much time with animals—his horses, dogs from the local shelter where we volunteered on weekends, the cats he grew up with in orlando. He would've liked it here, I bet. I just can't stand the cold, but it's not even as cold as it used to be. The weather's hell though, with all the blizzards and snow storms and nor'easters. It's not florida and it never will be, but it's alright. I got the memories, don't I? I don't need to carry anything around with me cuz I can just think about it. I can write it down and share it with you and you can tell me I'm crazy or I need to move on, or whatever the hell it is you'd say—I don't know. He was a real good listener, I must say. He'd shoot the starting pistol at the races sometimes and forget his earplugs. *You're gonna wind up deaf*, I'd say. *You'd miss having me to talk my ear off, wouldn't you?* He was funny that way. I don't think I talked that much—we mostly kept to ourselves, anyway. Summer sixteen was the loudest on record, but that's cuz we were young and we shared spotify and netflix, so we turned into our parents and always had something on in the house—a tv, some speakers, a laptop or our phones. We never used earphones, tho. No sir. We listened to each other. Can you imagine if I'd had earphones in when the flooding started? I woulda never found out. It was invisible, but you could hear it. Suddenly, all around you, everywhere you went you could hear the waves. Like living in a conch. I liked it at first, but then I got worried. His life insurance was good, but I couldn't afford more water damage. I had to get the hell outta there! So I did. I packed up two duffel bags and a backpack, sold what I could, and I moved upstate. But then that wasn't enough, so I ended up here in new york. He would've liked it here. He always loved new york. Sometimes I wish I'd had him cremated so I could keep him with me on my mantel top or wherever it is you put someone's ashes. Under your bed? I just *do not* know. Never tried it. But he wanted his body to be donated to science, so that's what I did. No funeral or anything—too sad. Just shipped him from the coroner's office to gainesville where the students could use him to learn more than we ever would about these bodies we live in. It's sad they couldn't really use his head. I liked his head. Then again, it's sadder the university of florida's gone, isn't it? Sometimes I think of all those poor gators in the everglades drowning and it just hurts my heart. We took an airboat tour once and one of them almost jumped up to bite 'em. *Uh uh, I know he looks tasty, but you are NOT touching him*. After the ride, we each took a picture holding a baby alligator. They're so harmless when no one's messing with 'em. I took his pic and he took mine. That's when it all felt best: when we didn't need anyone else.

I have a small dinner table now—even smaller than the one we shared in bradenton. It is round and it's made from a yellowish wood with a cheap varnish that started to peel as soon as I bought it. It's the cheapest one I could find at walmart. It came with two backless chairs that look like miniature versions of the table. I sit at the end closest to the window and the radiator. From here, I can look at squirrels stealing the birdfeed from the birdhouse I bought at walmart. And I can keep warm and cozy despite being naked (I live alone, after all.) We had a shitty radiator in our shack, but it only worked when it felt like it, and we couldn't complain—florida was only getting warmer, after all. This radiator is hotter and more reliable. It's on all

day long, except when I leave to go to walmart or to visit my second cousin and her husband, who live just a few blocks from me. I help her prep for dinner and talk to her while she cooks. She's a counselor at the local high school, but she swears she's retiring *soon* (she's been swearing for years now). I pick the same spot at her dining table—much bigger, sure—right between her window and her radiator. *It's quieter than mine*, I've noticed. Mine hisses and hums. Sometimes it clangs and it sounds like it's moving: it clangs in step for a few seconds then fades away, and I imagine hooves galloping inside it, trying to get out. It usually clangs when it's the hottest. I keep it at the highest setting possible when I'm out front shoveling the snow out my driveway. When I come back inside, I drop my coat, covered in snow, on the radiator and it melts the snow off in seconds. I like looking at the snow, but that's all I like about it. It'd be worse if it all melted, I guess. When the flooding started I couldn't imagine what it would take to plow all that water back into the ocean. Maybe if everyone had a shovel or a bucket, we could've done something. You were already dead and I was already here when that group of kids with buckets on their heads rode into town in those vw vans you loved. It was a whole caravan of hippie looking teenagers with surfboards tied to the top of their vans and bumperstickers covering them whole. They'd seen some videos on twitter posted by our local nbc station. They showed huge, clean waves crashing into the hillsides by the underwater highway twenty miles from where our beach used to be. They stopped at the abandoned methodist church off exit 24 cuz of the gas pumps outside. They couldn't fill their tanks, but they could set up camp there and no one would kick them out. So no one did. Families kept evacuating, mostly to georgia or even further up to makeshift reservations in tennessee, and those twenty-something kids stayed there surfing until the national guard removed them six months later. I wrote a feature on them for the new yorker, and the leader of the group, a pale, kinky haired college dropout from indiana told me his parents were originally from bradenton. *I couldn't recognize any of it when I first saw the videos*, he said. *But then they started showing before-and-after pics, and I compared it to old photos my parents had, and it almost seemed familiar*. He'd roadtripped with them many times before to visit his grandparents in florida, but he'd been too young to remember most of the places. I immediately recognized this, tho. *Who could forget a church with a gas station?* He laughed louder than anyone I've seen since I moved here. His laugh sounded like my radiator, and my radiator sounds like your laugh. Lately I've been trying to erase some notes I don't need anymore. Lists for groceries only you liked. Contacts for repair people I never called. Funny quotes you recited to me in voice messages thinking I could use for a story. It was your idea to sell the tercel before it broke down, so I did, and I barely got enough from it to pay my last few months of rent in gradenton. I got a new car, a used vw bug blue like a beetle, right before I came here, and I bought it with ten grand I got from your life insurance money. For weeks after you died I kept getting visits and letters from fans and colleagues of yours. Your trainer, pepe, said the fillie that killed you, named philly, cried nearly every night after the accident. They had to put her down cuz no one would ride her, and her cries kept the other horses up. A bald man whose name I

can't remember—he worked with me at the tampa paper—said he was still paying his family's beach timeshare in a fancy complex in sarasota with money he'd won from betting on your first championship derby. Strangers loved you—and some folks from the hall of fame in saratoga springs wanted to build you a memorial statue outside the tracks, but they got in a feud with peta, so it kept getting postponed and it was never done. You'd have a reef covering you now. Someone would think you were some deity in atlantis—ozymandias, tiny denizen of thoroughbreds. You were so many people to so many people and I could never keep track and I still don't understand how everyone knew you and they knew you so well they felt the need to give me their condolences. I guess you *were* sticky—contagious and quick, and you could fit in anywhere, cuz you were so quiet most of the time and compact. All I ever heard from you were one-word sentences—*sure, please, tomorrow, peanuts*—and laughs, the buttends of laughs, banging, breathless laughs, the echoes of laughs from our kitchen to our balcony when you got distracted watching funny videos while getting us more beers from the fridge. You were out too much and you were never successful, but you had a great sense of humor—and who am I to judge what success is or isn't? where you should've been when you weren't with me when I can't even tell where you are anymore? You would laugh *so* loud if I told you how you died. *Tell me, storyteller, how did I go?* You came and went rolling, like a rolling stone. You came and you're still going, I bet, like a message in a bottle dinging the steeple on that methodist church, or an eraser when you lend it to someone and they never get it back to you and their girlfriend's mother's late cousin leaves it at their desk when they quit, or like a jar of peanut butter that refuses to go bad, but you didn't like peanut butter, so I always had to finish it myself. And you never wrote a word in your life, I bet. You read everything I wrote and never wrote a word yourself. Give me some comments, please. Can't you like show up on my doorstep someday? Can I get one of my squirrels to dig you out from underneath the snow? I'd give anything to uncork you. I'd give a whole lot more to see you do it yourself, that cute way you did all serious and focused. You had the same face when you raced and when you stared at the horizon with me over the foam and when you read and reread my columns trying to glean what the hell I was trying to say. All I saw or wanted to see, wherever I looked, was your serious face: brows straight, lips puckered, eyes on the prize. You had that blue ribbon energy to ya. Your short arms were strong, but they could never hold me—I just liked pretending they could. In the end, you were more like a finish line than a starting gun. So I've been looking back ever since.

# ON JANUARY 33<sup>RD</sup>

Rin M.

It is January 33<sup>rd</sup>  
and the girl who is me is asleep  
and asleep and asleep until she is not  
and then the sun—

which she needs  
but does not love  
and the body she loves  
but does not need.

She peels an orange,  
finds her grandmother's milky teeth  
in the bitter  
and the rind.

Today she tosses an hour  
to the sandpaper  
ceiling. Another out  
the window. And the last

lost in the backs of her hands;  
she gives herself a haircut.  
And forgets what makes her pretty  
on the floor.

## THE FISHERMAN'S SON

Tamar Sidi

The water ripples in the sunset so that the wrinkles on its surface vibrate like an old woman's smile. Children build sand castles and tease each other with cackling laughter while their mothers sit on the side chatting in low voices. A fisherman brings in his boat. I lie by the sea watching the sky. It is pink, purple, yellow, and orange all at once.

*Ibu* used to tell me not to venture out past sunset, "The roads are hard my sweet, the people are strange." But she's stopped her words of warning, just as she's stopped rinsing my hair, stroking my cheek, kissing my arm.

I hear her nagging at tourists who pass along the rocky beach outside our home, "Please buy, please buy." She shoves t-shirts, rings, sarongs in their faces. "I give you good price, buy two, very cheap. Maybe for girlfriend back home? This is good for you, come, come, buy." They look at her assortment, entertaining the garments and jewelry with their dainty fingers, mildly interested. "I give you my evening price," my mother squeaks out in desperation. Then, as usual, they walk away with "No, thank you" or "Got plenty already" or, "Your price is too high." They say they'll come back later. "Promise me you'll come back," I hear her say. I can tell by her voice that she's smiling at them when she speaks. I know her eyes are crinkled and kind even though she watches them leave knowing they'll never return. "They lie to you, *Ibu*," I always tell her, but she doesn't listen.

Tourists. With their cameras and stuffed wallets. With their leather bags and clean shoes. They come to Lovina for the dolphin tour, cramming into boats that take them out early in the morning to see a fin or two, destroying the beauty of it all. They come to our village for the "serene local life," they take pictures of each other outside my bedroom window because they like the view of the sea from that angle. Couples morph into each other at all hours of the day in the water, on the sand, and they giggle when I pass. But it is me who is embarrassed, never them. They find their peace here, but they disrupt ours. And they still won't buy a damn thing from my mother.

Mama used to hold me high above the waves, playing with me by my father's fishing boat. My *Ayah* was the best fisherman in north Bali, all the restaurants came to him for his fish. Always fresh, always the best in the sea. He had shown me all the best spots in the water, and he had taught me how to wind a line around a rusty tin can. Rods were expensive—"frivolous inventions" he called them. I was five when I caught my first barracuda, I was nine when I found his wrangled body on the reefs. His arms and legs were slashed from being pressed up against the rocks all night. His face was unrecognizable. *Ibu* said we should give thanks to God for letting us find him "Better to know, Wayan, better to know than guess." But I never knew if

she was right.

I continued to take out the boat after his death. It was discolored after years of wear, but still had the faint yellow stripe on its bottom and the tiny etching *Ibu* and I engraved on my sixth birthday, “Life is good.” I was most myself when I sat on its wooden planks surrounded only the sea. The water soothed me; *Ayah* taught me to never be afraid of it. It was powerful like the gods—it was able to abolish lives and inspire them anew—and gods shouldn’t be feared. They should be worshiped, revered, celebrated. Even after it took him, I regarded it with awe.

I knew I was deeply upsetting my mother by continuing to fish, but we struggled for stability without my father’s steady income and it came to me naturally. I was making more money than the other boys my age who sold petrol by the street or transported pigs over the island and I took my responsibility to feed my mother and sisters seriously. Even so, *Ibu* would clench up whenever I left to meet the fishermen and wouldn’t let me out the door until she murmured a prayer in my ear.

The men were fond of me. After the day had descended and we were all counting our catches—separating what we would bring to our families and what we would sell—they would sit with me and tell me stories about my father. They had all grown up together, learning to fish side by side. “He knew all the girls on the island, that *brondong*. They would gather by the beach, waiting for him to bring back the boat. One day, he took your mother out with him and when he came back with her, the other women looked on with such envy you would’ve thought he had proposed to her. When they found out later that that was exactly what he did, their screams and shouts could be heard all over the island.”

It warmed me to listen to their words. I missed having him in my life. I missed watching his muscles work when he tried to catch a huge fish. I missed him humming along to my voice as I sang American songs for hours on the fishing boat. I would always botch the lyrics but remember the melodies. I missed him opening the door to *Ibu*, kissing her cheek, and telling her about my successes of the day before even sitting down to eat.

A few years ago, I came home with a hook in my eyebrow after an unfortunate encounter with a particularly stubborn tuna. I wasn’t in terrible pain, but I needed someone to yank it out for me. The men sent me directly to my mother, afraid they would make a mistake. Looking back now, I wish I had gritted my teeth and done it myself. After *Ibu* found me with blood drooling down my face, she screamed and forbade me from fishing. “I can’t afford to have another hurt by the sea, Wayan,” she told me as she stitched me up. I was made to sell the boat.

Wade, a friend of mine since birth, offered me a job with him selling chickens and *Ibu* enthusiastically accepted on my behalf. I earned a fraction of what I had before and came home every day covered in feathers and dust with nothing fresh to put on the table.

We used to play football with the village boys every evening, but now we are seventeen we hardly even have time to sleep. My sisters Made and Koming would fill the bottom of their skirts with seashells and align them in the sand as goal posts.

Wade always played the goalie, wearing a Gianluigi Buffon jersey he found after a tourist left it the beach. I played offense and made sure to keep count of the game. Sometimes I wish I could go back to then, when our toothy smiles would radiate joy and our only problems were a boy declaring to have scored a goal when he hadn't, or our mothers calling us home for dinner when the game wasn't yet over.

*Ibu* won't admit how badly we need money, because she doesn't want me to worry and she knows I'll try to leave, but the slate of our roof threatens to fall through, and she frowns with concern each time we run out of clean water in the house.

I must go. Just for a bit. There is no way for us to continue like this. Made and Koming sit out in the sun all day making crafts for *Ibu* to sell and bottling petrol for the boys by the road. Last week, Made found herself with a broken arm and we didn't have the funds to pay for her surgery. Luckily, the doctor was a friend of my father's and covered it for free, but we cannot go on relying on favors and pity.

*Ibu* was upset when I told her, she clung onto my wrist until it turned white. No one in my family has ever left the island of Bali, not even to travel to Java. I was restless, desperate to explore, deeply curious. "*Tidak mungkin*" she said. There was no way in hell. So, I told her I would stay on the island for now, that I would do the best I could for her and return to her with enough money to live comfortably.

"Why not stay in Lovina, *cin?*" She said to me, stroking my cheek, after she had gotten over her initial shock. "There is no change here, no hope, *Ibu*. Please trust in me."

That evening I ate at a *warung* that I'd been going to since I was a little boy. The place was small and damp, with cracked paint and missing tiles, but it still had the best *Nasi Goreng* in town. I scarfed down the fried rice while the owner, Putu, sat with me and listened to my plan.

"Leaving Lovina, eh?" he asked with a chuckle. It was almost unheard of. The fish and the sunsets are of the best here, but although Lovina once boasted a booming economy it now clings onto the wallets of stingy tourists, drowning in order to stay afloat.

Putu told me about a cousin of his working at the port in Sanur. "Start in Sanur and get a job on a speedboat, it is a steady pay and I know of an opening," he said.

His cousin was told to expect me the day after tomorrow. I went home that night with a grin slapped onto my face, packing all that I needed into a drawstring bag before tidying my room so that it could be rented while I was away. I didn't own much to bring, a couple spare t-shirts, a watch, a flashlight, my father's money pouch. I couldn't tell my mother I would be working on the water again, I was afraid she wouldn't let me go. I swore Wade to secrecy and promised that I would tell her later.

I had never been to Sanur before, it's all the way in the South and Lovina is up in the North. But Putu told me how to travel there by scooter, and I was sure I would find my way.

“It’s very different there,” he warned me. “Foreigners swarm the land like the flies in my damn *warung*!” He winked, and I gave him a lopsided smile, thanking him profusely.

My mother and sisters came out to see me go “Be safe dear Wayan, be clever” they called out. Made and Koming handed me two bracelets: one, white, for a peaceful spirit, the other, gold, for the god of Wisnu, representing happiness and prosperity. All their eyes were damp with tears, but they centered their hands on their hearts, praying to Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, for my safe journey.

\* \* \*

Wind slashed against my face as my scooter rushed down the swirling mountain roads. Every so often I would tear my eyes from the way to catch a glimpse of the view: green for miles on end. A tapestry of bright shades almost startling to see. Look down the side of the mountain, see green, look up, see green, look across, see green. Life is so much more than mere humankind. Nature is alive and trying desperately to communicate with us, to soothe us, to remind us that our meagre problems are so much less than what we make of them, we are all alive on Earth together. We are alive. Thank God.

The roads to the South were mostly downhill with sharp turns and no barriers to prevent you from slipping off the edge into the green unknown. Other motorbikes and scooters zoomed past me, waving their hands, giving a nod, or a quick smile. Some of the scooters had three people squashed on the seat. The women sat like ladies with their legs pressed together, dangling off to the side. Only a sliver of their bodies was supported by the seat, but they looked relaxed and at ease. There were babies too, being clutched tightly by their mothers, and toddlers sitting behind the driver on the back of a scooter, holding on tightly to the back of a shirt or a belt loop. It’s the only way to get around Bali, we all grow up on them, sometimes there are five kids to one scooter. Tourists try to copy us when they visit, bringing their children along with no helmets all in the name of adventure. But they don’t know our roads, nor the quick, somewhat careless way we drive. Lane dividers serve as suggestions rather than rules, indicator lights and caution are replaced with honking. Stray cats, dogs, chickens, and monkeys taunt every vehicle.

I kept on for a couple more miles, the view becoming less and less magnificent as I advanced down the mountain. I stopped around lunchtime when I saw an elderly man selling banana fritters on the corner of the road. My mother had packed me some food, but I could never quite resist the taste of *Pisang Goreng*. I asked for a handful, and he handed them to me on a napkin, drizzling them in a thick syrup. The man said his name was Wayan as well. All first-born Balinese children are named Wayan. I parked my scooter next to his stand and he moved over to make room for me in the shade. A dozen monkeys hovered in the street around us, climbing the knotted tree. He asked where I was going and as I devoured my sweet, crispy snack, I told him about my plans to work on a speedboat. His face was gentle

and loving, and his voice was light from his smile. He said he had always loved the water but could never bring himself to leave his father's shop. He wished me good health, protection from God, and luck. I thanked him before leaving and he touched my shoulder with fragile fingers.

\* \* \*

I arrived in Sanur by nightfall. The streets were congested with people, cars, restaurants, and shopping centers. My eyes were spread wide with wonder, my heart beating from excitement, nerves, the start of something new. It was hard to comprehend that I was only three hours from home, and even harder to understand why this was my first time on this side of the island.

Putu's cousin Ketut, was waiting for me outside his home in a crisp white shirt and denim jeans.

"Wayan! *Selamat datan*, I hope you had an easy journey." His face was like a boy's, bright and hopeful, smiling even through closed lips. He took my bag into his home and handed me a wet towel to cool off, "Come, we will meet my friends for dinner."

I was exhausted, but after I had washed my face, had a cup of water and a plate of *Nasi Goreng*, I had my usual energy back. His friends were loud, funny, unapologetic. I had never been with such boisterous people. Each one would make a joke to great howls of laughter. I was mesmerized by them.

"Wayan, *gan*, tell us about Lovina, what's it like?"

"How are the women there? *Seksi? Montok? Sederhana?*"

"Tell us about the craziest party, you must have a good story."

They were well-intentioned, genuinely curious, watching me with laughing eyes. I stayed quiet that night, bouncing conversation back to them. How could I tell them that my "crazy" nights in Lovina consisted of playing guitar at sunset with Wade—the same friend I've had my whole life—and drinking just enough beer to tempt us to call our childhood girlfriends and invite them to join? How could I explain that I spent most of my time helping my mother sell cheap knickknacks to insolent tourists and driving around a little truck with a trunk-load of chickens to sell. They were from Sanur, well-adjusted to the busy life. I was from the slow moving, sleepy Lovina.

After dinner, when everyone was buzzed on beer and banter, we wandered the streets. Each boy delighting in showing me a different part of their neighborhood. "This is the best bar," "This is the best *warring*," "This is the nicest bum, you should always say hello to him." Some of them stopped to approach Western girls, asking for help with English practice. I was confounded, I usually avoided speaking to tourists, they had always bothered me, intimidated me, made me feel inferior. But the girls they approached seemed harmless, they giggled, flattered, and stopped for a short conversation, tousling their hair or gliding their fingers up their arms before prancing away in miniskirts and laughing amongst themselves.

Ketut woke me early the next morning slapping at my thigh with a dish towel. “*Selamat pagi*, let’s go my friend.” The sun had not yet fully risen. I blinked away the sleep, aching from my night on the wooden floor. He handed me a clean uniform: a white polo shirt with the little logo of a speedboat ironed onto the top right corner, loose blue pants, and a blue cap. I dipped my face under the cold shower drip and stared at it in the battered mirror. “Today is the day,” I thought to myself, “*Hari ini adalah hari itu!*” I combed back my hair and neatly placed the new cap on my head, pushing it down my forehead so that it covered the hook-shaped scar that ran up my left eyebrow.

Ketut sat at the kitchen table, his white shirt unbuttoned and his hair sticking out on all sides. “Eat quickly *gan*, we’re leaving in five.” I reached for the black coffee as he slid me a plate of fried rice and fruit. “Don’t worry, I’m ready whenever you are.” He laughed at me, scuffling my cap just enough to scare me into combing my hair again. I turned on the dusty, metal radio that sat just to the side of me and Paradise FM started trickling into the air. More American Pop. Ketut started belting the lyrics to Ariana Grande’s “Dangerous Woman,” spraying himself with a funky cologne. I watched him from the kitchen, trying not to laugh when he used his toothbrush as a microphone. He was so comfortable, even with his crooked teeth and flat nose, he was so confident, so likable.

I got on the back of his scooter and he drove us to the port. A strange screen seemed to be placed over the city. It was far too early for all the foreigners of the night before; the streets were made up only of locals. Women walked soundlessly along the streets placing the morning offerings of *canang sari* in front of their homes. They knelt delicately with their legs placed tightly together, slightly constricted by their long skirts, and recited the appropriate prayer. Smoke from the incense wafted through the air, reminding me of my mornings back in Lovina. It comforted me to know that the Hindu tradition is strong here too.

The manager of Speedy, Captain Kadek, was a chubby, congenial man. As soon as he met me, he put away the passenger cards he was sorting and bowed his head slightly. “Ketut has spoken very highly of you, I am very pleased you are with us,” he said before leading me along the beach to introduce me to my coworkers. They were a small, intimate group, chatting and smoking around one rickety bench. I recognized a couple tan faces from the night before, they were taunting a stray dog with scraps of food. “*Nongkrong!* Come sit!” They called to me, poking at my fresh uniform and clapping my back. I coughed up a big smile.

The tourists came in around nine, great big flocks of them with gobs of sunscreen, beach towels, and armfuls of luggage. We weren’t the only speedboat company littering the beach, half a dozen others lined up alongside us sporting names like “*Rocky*” and “*Scoot*” and “*Fast Water*.”

“Where do we go for the speedboat?” asked a woman wearing a sunhat that seemed to cover her entire face.

“Which company are you booked with madam?” I gave her my best non-Indonesian accent.

“Speedboat to the Gili Islands.”

“Yes, they all go to the Gilis, but which company?” Her makeup dripped down her skin, the rouge of her cheeks blending with the black from her lashes.

“I really don’t know why it’s so difficult for you to direct me which way to go,” she said, and she squinted at me until I was nothing but a slit in her eye, folding her arms over her purse. Ketut came over and asked for the woman’s booking information before directing her to Rocky.

“It’s ok, man, don’t worry about it,” he said when he found me still standing there confused and agitated.

I shadowed Ketut for the morning, watching as he went up to tourists standing in groups waiting to board. He would introduce himself and bow his head, sometimes cracking a joke or complimenting a kid’s shirt before offering to take their suitcases from them. I helped him gather dozens of heavy cases to the edge of the sand and we all stood in the water, hauling them up, passing them over to others at the edge of the speedboat.

The August heat hit with full severity and I tried to block the sun with each case I lifted. Our pants were drenched. The bags were so full. Each time I lifted one, I feared it would burst open and spill out. But they were all passed carefully onto the boat with no complications. The cases had little tags on them with the owner’s name, the island they were heading to, and the accommodation they would be staying at written in black ink. There were about seventy people hiding in the scarce bit of shade and waiting for us to give them the okay.

“This is the fun part,” said Ketut. “Help them onto the boat, grab their arm and make sure you have good footing.”

The passengers had to step in the water in order for us to hoist them up. The women complained to each other that their dresses had gotten wet, that it would “spoil the material.” I held my arm out for them and they each grasped me uncertainly, a couple of them wobbled with the waves, but I held the small of their back until they were rightfully on the boat. Each one thanked me profusely. I stayed at the front with Ketut, assisting some children onboard with their fathers, who also seemed to have some trouble.

“I didn’t realize people needed help with this,” I said. I wasn’t trying to brag, I was genuinely a bit shocked.

“You’re used to living by the water, brother. You’re used to seeing the ocean, feeling the waves. For the most part, our passengers are not. You will be a great addition here.”

I was happy to be wanted, to be useful. I was happy to help the tourists and be thanked and smiled at. In Lovina, they hadn’t even spared me a glance.

The boat was first to stop at Nusa Lembongan, then Gili Trawangan, Gili Air, and Gili Meno. The surrounding islands of Bali each have their own unique personality. (At least that’s what I’ve been told, not that I, or any of my friends, have been so far from home.)

My job was pretty simple: go up and down the aisles a few times, be

polite and courteous, smile and ask if I can help in any way, point passengers to the restroom at the end of the boat, hand out cold towels and sick bags at the start of the journey and mints in the middle.

Families sat clustered together. Some of them were jovial, engaging in upbeat conversation, flipping through maps. Others were sour and whined that they were sick, constantly asking me “How much longer until Gili T?” The children were spoiled, crying to their parents out of boredom, feigning hunger for snacks.

Groups of European and American backpackers took up seats near the back, treating their Lonely Planet books like bibles. They used their selfie sticks to capture each other making silly faces or kissing. They howled with laughter and shared inside jokes about all the hostels they had been to.

Ketut said we should be friendly to all passengers, if we saw one traveling alone, we were encouraged to approach them and entertain them with conversation. He said it was extremely important to practice our Balinese manners.

Only one person sat alone, a girl in the last row. She wore bright pink headphones around her head and had thick, dark eyebrows that arched so high it seemed an expression of shock was frozen on her face. A huge backpack sat next to her, a yoga mat was tied to its top and a pair of sneakers dangled from the strap. I remember how she refused to hand it over to Ketut.

I used my sleeve to wipe off the sweat on my face and approached her. She smelled like vanilla and coconut oil. The milky glow of her skin reflected in the window.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” I asked.

“Oh, um... no, I guess not” She seemed frazzled but moved her backpack from the seat beside her.

“Are you traveling alone?”

“I’m meeting up with friends on the island, they are taking the later boat.” Her eyes fluttered up away from the phone and book in her lap to look at me.

“Gili Trawangan?”

“Gili Air.”

“I hear that’s a honeymoon spot.”

“Well, all I know is that it’s quieter than Gili T, I can’t stand the packs of tourists.” Her laugh was like the whisper of a wind chime: airy and full of light. I smiled and turned to face her better, she had a full face of freckles and a tiny silver nose ring. Her name was Mia.

“I mean, just look at them!” She motioned to a couple sitting diagonally to us vigorously attacking the surfaces around them with alcohol wipes. “And a beer at this hour? That’s Australian trash for you,” she pointed to a sunburnt blond gulping a can of Corona. I couldn’t suppress my grin.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“New York originally, but I’ve been traveling for the past two years. I don’t like to tie myself to a single place. I belong to the world.”

I sat with Mia for the rest of the ride, excusing myself only when Ketut

motioned for me to hand out the mints or tend to another passenger. Once she got to talking about her travels, she became animated, her hands flailing with expression. She showed me photographs on her digital camera; pictures of Nepal, India, Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore, flashed before my eyes. The book in her lap was a journal bound in leather. When she flipped through it to tell me a story about a group of village children she befriended, I caught exquisite drawings she had done of the people she had met and places she had seen.

"I've had a marvelous time, but I miss New York."

"But why? What's it like there?"

"I suppose it's where people go to be successful, it's a very serious place.

But it's also the most diverse place you can go, people from all over the world move there. I'll continue to travel for as long as I can, but it will always be where I return." She let me swipe through the pictures on her phone of her home so many thousands of miles away, "It's the Big Apple, that's all, anything is possible there."

\* \* \*

Life on the speedboat continued somewhat uneventfully, every day we transported four or six groups depending on how strong the current was. Once, it was so powerful that it slowed our journey back from one of four hours to sixteen. Each wave hurled over the windows, creating the illusion of our boat being submerged. Small amounts of water came in through cracks in the windows, dripping onto shaking shoulders. Tourists prayed and cried. They closed their eyes and held onto each other. They glared and cursed. Ketut and the others laughed, "It happens sometimes. No worries my friends, no worries." We went over to passengers with lemon mist and nausea pills to help revive them. You can imagine the anger when I ran out of sick-bags to hand out.

Mia had made it part of her daily routine to have breakfast at Mowie's, a shack serving fresh juices and bits of morning food, next to the Gili Air port. Our boat came in around eleven and I always looked over expectantly to catch a glimpse of pink headphones and a light hand raised to wave from a white sunbed. She was always alone, which made me wonder about the friends she had supposedly met up with.

Since Gili Air was the last stop on our route, after I helped anchor the boat, carry the suitcases, and get passengers aboard horse carriages to their accommodations, I would sit with Mia while the rest of the crew enjoyed a smoke together before heading back to Bali with the next batch of passengers. The boys would tease me good naturedly, "You flirt! *Kamu geni!*" I didn't think of myself as a flirt at all, but Mia brought out a different side of me. I loved to make her laugh, to watch her smile, to hear about her life. I had never met anyone like her, let alone a *tourist*. When young children stopped by her table to sell their goods, she always bought something from them. She bargained firmly, but never turned any of them away. She wore all the purchases from her travels, her arms were stacked with bangles

and bracelets, her neck laden with tangled necklaces, her fingers heavy with rings. I showed her the bracelets my sisters had made for me and told her about my mother's work while she listened with intent.

Mia stayed on the island for two weeks, much longer than most who leave after three or four nights. Before she went off to mainland Lombok, she wrote down her number on a damp napkin and told me to keep in touch, drawing a smiley face in the corner. I found myself intensely upset when we said goodbye.

Ketut called for me to join the others to start gathering suitcases, I quietly folded the number away in my money pouch and left her sitting by the sea twirling her red locks around her finger.

\* \* \*

A few months after I started at Speedy, I sat with Ketut on the sofa in the dark little room in Sanur. An onslaught of rain shattered against our windows and the radio static created a soft buzz, enclosing us in a safe space. I stared out into the dark gray sky and closed my eyes.

"Don't worry, Wayan. She'll come around eventually, it will just take time." When I first arrived in Sanur, I spoke to *Ibu* and my sisters regularly. They insisted that they were getting on alright. Wade had found someone to occupy my bedroom and the rent was helping them cope. I still hadn't told them about my work, they thought that I was switching between jobs, but I had begun to feel extremely guilty for concealing the truth. I called my mother last week to tell her about the speedboat, thinking she might have gained a new perspective. She hasn't spoken to me since.

"Ha. You don't know my *Ibu*," I told him, shaking my head.

"Well, in the meantime at least you have Mia to occupy your thoughts," Ketut smirked and threw my phone across the room. It flashed with a green light. A new text. I felt my ears turn red.

Mia and I had been messaging regularly, she was heading back home after her long trip around the world and had just sent me a new number to contact her with. I never learnt to read or write in English— Ketut said he would try to teach me the little that he knew— but for now we juggled between voice messages and Google Translated sentences. My heart pounded with each notification.

New York had always been an abstract place that I knew existed, but never fully grasped. Now, it began to appear everywhere. Snippets of overheard conversation, skyscrapers on television, three letters on sweatshirts. I thought about it often. Was it full of more people like Mia? Or was she an exception. How many places around the world had people like her? She sparked a sense of restlessness within me, a hunger to move and travel and see.

Work seemed so much more tedious. The other passengers seemed so simple, so superficial. They spoke loudly without listening, they took photos without looking. They moved place to place according to what they thought would impress others, not from the depths of their own heart.

The thought of returning to Lovina suffocated me. I was afraid to be bound there like before, to fall into a routine far too familiar. But I felt that my father's spirit must be disappointed in me. I remembered how he once took my head in his hands, crouched down in the fishing boat and stared right into my childish eyes to tell me: "Life is about balance, we cannot exist alone. Trees cannot survive without the help of other elements, nor can a family grow strong without each other's support. Nothing comes before *famili*, not ever. Understand Wayan?" I couldn't stay here knowing my mother's anger, I couldn't continue to work knowing I had wounded her. I would explain to her why it was so important for me to be with water, I would make her understand.

"I have to go back," I said, shuffling in my seat.

"What? Where?" Ketut removed the cigarette from his mouth.

"Lovina."

"Don't be crazy, *gan*. Come, let me make you some coffee."

"I'm serious. Just to visit. My family relies on me and I've upset them."

"Isn't that why you're here? To make money for them?" He looks at me with disbelief.

"I've offended them, I disobeyed my mother, I did not speak the truth. My sisters are without their elder brother. My *Ayah* wouldn't have wanted this."

"I'll come back," I say. "I'm just going to visit, I'll come back."

Ketut grabbed the keys to his scooter and pushed me out the door, we were soaked to our skin the second we stepped outside. "Let's go," he slapped my back good naturedly, "I'll make sure we're there and back before tomorrow night."

## HEADLINE READS TRUMP TWEETS

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A. Shaikh

*after Hanif Abdurraqib*

*all migrants will stay in mexico*

and when my parents were driving me to the airport  
the sun was nothing but an orange peel  
crescent and opening its eyes for the first time.  
This is all to say, I am going through security  
when the wrong person hiccups on my last name  
and I turn into my father's rage not his  
hard working back bone or eager to please  
left lung just all

*shaikh*

*please step to the side*

I watch them look  
through books and quarters and underwear  
I understand protection, safety  
in its carnal form is unpolished and clay-like.  
There is no country without teeth.

But my God. I have lived here for ten years and you are telling me  
time after time, there is no truth in this. Of course I am afraid.

## WIFE

---

Olivia Stowell

he likes to call all things his

he is like the creation of adam  
he centralizes the ceiling

he cannot speak in seeds  
cannot get wind of your whisper  
to what sprouts beneath the earth

does not hear you call  
cannot wield your words  
snaking up to the moon  
praying for darkness—

to remember  
when you slept  
beneath his rib  
the only animal  
with no name.

# NO SUBSTITUTE FOR HUMAN WARMTH

Jake Stokes

The Hotel Panache was unlike any other hotel. Its carpark was manned entirely by automaton valets whose sophisticated autopilot technology ensured perfect parking for every vehicle. The housekeeping department was staffed with fluffer droids that could clean a room top to bottom in four minutes flat. Check-in was manned by three kiosks which used facial recognition to recognize new guests, ensure expedited check-out for departing guests, and book rooms for those looking to stay in the indeterminate future.

The hotel was constantly evolving, and every day was a flurry of automation. First it was the “smart elevators” that anticipated loads and shifted burdens for efficient transit. Then it was the gym, which was revamped to include a virtual reality biking chamber and personalized workout regimens based on calculated body mass. Then the owners deemed the laundry too outdated and upgraded to steam-based technology that could complete a load nigh-instantaneously.

One thing never changed, and that was the concierge desk, where I worked. Sure, there were improvements—the horizontal projection that could display a map of the city, which could be rotated and retrofitted to show points of interest, or the ever-shifting coupons desk, which could bestow electronic discounts to nearly ten thousand retail outlets around the town, for example. But the concierge—the human, flesh-and-bones employee waiting at attention in crisp red-and-blue linens—never evolved. My job was never replaced by a sleek, monochrome unit that could spit out Italian restaurants or Broadway plays almost as an afterthought.

Not that this was due to a lack of effort—it seemed like every other week the hotel’s operators would roll a shiny new robot to my desk and program it to its new domain. These attempts were always accompanied by copious notes and questionnaires, asking guests a multitude of questions that always boiled down to a simple query—“it or me?” And the guests must be fans of mine, because every time the operators would return, quietly fuming, to remove the robot and return it for cash and the promise of a better one in the future.

That being said, it wasn’t the robots’ faults! No—they were very good at their jobs. In fact, I could probably stand to learn a thing or two from their advanced pattern prediction or their ability to inexplicably intuit the ideal night out for each guest that approached. But something about talking to a real-life, living-breathing person who could laugh at your dumb jokes or give a reassuring pat on the arm must count for a lot, because each new robot was retired in succession, regardless of how good they were. There just wasn’t a substitute for human warmth.

One Monday night, I was sitting at the concierge desk and waiting for the inevitable questions about the best restaurants to eat on a weekday night or the best

place to catch the new Oscar-nominated flick. If I leaned across the desk, I could barely see the television in our bar across the lobby. The Chargers were playing somebody in white. I couldn't tell who was winning.

"Excuse me?" said a middle-aged woman in a pantsuit. She looked out of place, uncertain. I gave her my patented wide smile.

"Hello, how can I help you?"

"I'm a little embarrassed. My company sent a list of things for me to get done tomorrow and I'm afraid I don't know where to start. Could you help me?"

"Of course," I said, still smiling. "Do you have the list with you?"

She handed me a sheet of printer paper, double-sided. I looked it over and began doing mental gymnastics. I circled items, wrote down addresses, and wrote notes in a clear, precise font. I outlined the best walking routes, annotated the hours that specific retail businesses were open or closed, and even made a small box in the corner for the next day's weather. My hands moved wordlessly, almost without effort, and in nearly no time at all I'd curated a beautiful timeline.

The lady was impressed, I could tell. She mulled over the map that I'd produced for a moment and said, "Okay, and this office building..."

"...is two blocks down Third, a five-minute walk at best."

She continued to pore over the paper. "And this circle over here..."

"...is a Starbucks, in case you need a coffee or a bagel in the morning before your meeting."

She was out of questions, I think. I leaned over the counter. "This circle over here is a nice Italian restaurant right on your route, and this one over here is a Mexican restaurant if that's more your speed." I pointed to the circles. "This over here is a public park if you're looking for a nice walk, this is a market, and this is a museum with a very pretty mural display running right now."

I peeked over her shoulder as she looked at the circles I'd gestured to. The Chargers were jumping up and down in the end zone. At the bar, Robert Matthews was drinking alone.

The lady finally looked up and thanked me profusely. She stayed to chat a little longer—I wasn't sure what it was about people born before the second tech boom, but they *loved* to talk to real people—and I explained how to get the room service machines to cook up a meal for her. It was truly a quite impressive thing to see.

When I had a moment to myself, I put the little red-and-blue "concierge—out" sign on my desk and ducked under the divider into the lobby. Officially, I got a number of breaks during my shift, but I wasn't supposed to be walking around where the guests could see me and mob me with questions about the nearest Subway sandwich franchise.

I sat at the bar and typed my user passcode into the machine in front of me. With practiced handstrokes, I swiped the buttons to order a diet Coke and customized it to my liking—no ice, no lemon, no straw. Straws had been soft-banned for some time, of course, but the machine would still give you one if you pressed the right buttons. I

charged it to my employee account.

Mr. Matthews had his head on the polished wood of the bar's countertop. I wasn't sure how they kept it so clean, especially with all the spills inherent in hotel bars, but you could slide a curling puck down the hardwood without it losing an ounce of momentum. The bartender, a particularly sleek-looking gadget, placed a wide lowball in front of me and poured exactly eight ounces of precisely-composed caramel liquid. I touched the side of the glass. Ice-cold.

I looked at my watch. I had about fifteen minutes. The Chargers were kneeling in victory formation. Mr. Matthews stirred loudly.

"Wh—" His red eyes narrowed and focused. He noticed me. "Why are the bartenders robots?"

I considered his question. "Well, they're very good at pouring drinks, for one." *They also save a lot of money in spillage, goodwill pours, and labor costs, for another*, I thought.

"But they won't *talk* to me," he said, his eyes a little wild.

I turned to the bartender. "How'd the Chargers do?"

Instantly, it turned to face me and—in a relatively silky voice with an exotic accent—said, "The Chargers beat the Chiefs 21-17. They had 400 yards of offense and two turnovers."

I gave Mr. Matthews a gentle grin. He frowned at the robot. "Where are we?"

Again, it faced him and said, "We are in the lobby bar of the Hotel Panache in Los Angeles, California. We are a block from the campus of the University of California at Los Angeles, and a short shuttle ride from the Getty Museum of Art."

"Who am I?" he asked.

"You are Robert Matthews, room 820. You work at the Smithson-Travers litigation firm in New York City and are away on leave. You are 37 years old."

"What else?" he asked, pressing.

The robot paused. If you listened closely, you could almost hear it whirring. After a moment, it said, "You are separated from your wife. You have two children. Your parents are both deceased. You once played college basketball at Tufts and averaged 11.4 points per game."

Matthews smiled, as if this last memory brought him some small amount of happiness. "And?" he questioned.

The robot paused. "Sir?"

"What do you think of all that?"

The light affixed to the robot's front blinked steadily. "I'm not sure what you're asking," it eventually said.

"That's what I thought," he said, and swallowed the last of his drink.

There was a ball in the hotel's main ballroom. It was obvious to see the allure of hosting an event there—the space was absolutely perfect for celebrations. The floors were all made of a revolutionary new tiling that could shimmer and shift from a rich, stately mahogany to an effervescent miscellany of bright colors and back in an instant to reflect formal occasions, youthful dances and everything between. The walls had been

designed by an audio engineer who had once toured with the Flaming Lips and who had modeled the space after a space station—completely airtight, wildly expensive, but capable of transporting you to a world unlike any you'd ever visited. During initial testing of the space, the designers had played music loud enough to shatter a misplaced champagne glass without disturbing a sample guest sitting fifteen feet away in the lobby. Not to mention, the catering menu was nearly sixty pages long and had more references than a James Patterson novel.

That night in particular was an interfaith wedding between a male Catholic nurse and a female Jewish mechanic. I had been pulled from my station at the concierge desk and tasked with miscellaneous small jobs around the ballroom—running trays of hors d'oeuvres, adjusting the music playlist where necessary, manning the photo booth, that sort of thing.

One of the younger guests approached me during the afterparty, when the majority of the adults were enjoying the ballroom's state-of-the-art bar, where you could customize drinks using a touchpad located at each viscoelastic stool. He was perhaps ten years old, and was clearly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of customization within the hotel.

"This hotel is so.... hi-tech!"

"I know," I said with a smile. "Do you want to see something cool?"

He looked at me with all the stars of the sky in his eyes. I pulled up a touchpad of my own and showed him the sliders marked 'ballroom.' There was an option for temperature, an option for volume and sound (which allowed us to change the song from Sinatra's breezy "Fly Me to the Moon" if we cared to), an option to dim the lights or strobe them or change their color. We could turn the device into a microphone and dedicate a toast to the room, or we could adjust the floor plan slightly by manipulating the five-by-five squares that made up the ballroom in order to widen the dance floor or create an elevated surface. We could call for the cake to be brought in, or for several bottles of champagne to be delivered. I hid this last feature from him.

"Anything look fun?" I asked him, holding out the device.

He pointed.

"Good choice," I said, grinning. I let him press it.

Immediately, the lights dimmed. The walls reverted to dark colors, and a trio of five-by-five floor segments raised several inches along the dance floor. A low mist began rising along either side of the raised stage, and it hung persistently in the few inches by the floor. At the bar, many of the adults were craning their necks to see what was happening.

Suddenly, several figures began to rise from the floor. Their arms were mottled and gangrenous, their eyes sunken and haunted. Their clothes hung in tatters along their frames, and their backs were hunched as they rose. There were perhaps six or eight of these figures. In the middle of their midst, another figure began to grow, this one wearing red and facing away from the dance floor. As he ascended, a familiar tune began to play. When he had rose to full height, he turned and faced the crowd, his long dark hair gelled and styled to perfection. The music swelled. It was Michael Jackson's 'Thriller.'

The young boy looked excitedly at me. The Thriller button was a popular

choice, and we both watched as the holographic zombies – for they were exactly that, holograms—began to strut and dance to the music. The middle figure performed his iconic dance, all perfectly choreographed and all in rhythm. I snuck a glance at the bar, and was glad to see that they were more entertained than angry. I was pretty good at telling most of the time.

As the song gradually came to a close, the dancers retreated and the smoke dissipated. The floor shrunk, and gradually talking recommenced.

“That was **SO** cool,” the boy said, almost jumping. “Can you do that again?”

I smiled. “Maybe another time?” I felt bad rejecting him. There was something incredibly genuine in his voice. I wondered where his parents were, and why he was wandering the party alone. “Want me to show you the 3D Tetris?” His eyes lit up.

After my shift ended, I walked back from the wedding to the concierge desk, where I’d left my charger. I was a little unsurprised to see Mr. Matthews sitting at the bar with the bartender I now knew he disliked, and decided to walk over and see what he was up to.

“Hey, Mr. Matthews,” I said in greeting and sat down on one of the barstools. He gave me a sideways look and kept his eyes glued on the television. “How are you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he asked, gruffly. I could tell that this wasn’t his first scotch, but judging by the previous night when he’d been face-down on the lacquer I guessed that this wasn’t his last. The sweet spot.

I kept silent, watching the screen myself. There was no football tonight, no Chargers, so someone had decided on ‘Wheel of Fortune.’ A dumpy looking housewife purchased a vowel, and the crowd applauded politely as the screen chirped ‘No more vowels!’

“I’m sorry,” he said, after a moment. “Thing is, I haven’t had a conversation with a human in almost three months. I’ve craved the warmth, you know? Maybe it’s the hotel, maybe it’s just this phase in my life, I don’t know, but I just feel like I crave a little humanity. Is that...crazy?”

I thought about my answer before I said anything. “I wouldn’t say that it’s crazy, no. But I’m also not sure why you’ve got this problem. You’ve been here...two months?” He nodded.

“Why? Don’t you have a home of your own?”

He swished the glass before answering. “After my wife left, I sat home for about a month. The house was a good home, all the fancy air conditioning and lights and what have you, but without my wife, without my kids, it just felt really empty. And I sat there for a month going quietly crazy, sitting and watching the shadows on the furniture getting longer and the dust getting thicker, and I decided that I needed a vacation away from the whole thing.”

I thought about that. “So how long are you planning on staying?”

He shook his head. “I have no idea. Forever, I guess? I’ll run out of money, eventually, but I figure I can stay here almost my whole life if I try hard enough, if I stretch the money out.”

“With that much scotch, you won’t have money for long!” I said, trying to joke. He chuckled stiffly. “Well who knows? Maybe I’ll find a way out of the rabbit hole,” he said. I hoped he found one sooner rather than later.

It was almost a month later when I got the news. I knew that something had happened because one of the managers came into the hotel and was fuming heatedly behind the front desk. I saw him typing furiously, shouting at one of the operators, and in general making his presence known as he stormed tempestuously across the lobby. I resolved to make myself particularly busy.

I saw him exit the front desk area just as I was helping a young couple with directions to a concert in town. I perhaps belabored the instructions slightly to elongate the time before he headed my way, circling and outlining routes with more precision and attention to detail than was perhaps necessary for a simple set of directions. I asked them additional questions—would you like any recommendations for dinner? What would you imagine your budget for dinner is like? Do you prefer any particular style of food? Here are a few options, can I expound on any of them?—but even with these questions it was sooner than I hoped before they were thanking me profusely and heading downtown. The manager made a beeline for the desk.

“Do you know this man?” he asked, casting the check-in photo for Mr. Matthews upon my holo-desk. He looked particularly wan and emaciated, but I imagined that this was probably the effect of the check-in cameras, whose slight downward angle tended to wash out guest photos. I nodded, questioningly.

“Did he ever talk to you?” he asked, clearly near bubbling over.

“What happened?” I asked, not wanting to elaborate on his general persistent drunkenness.

“He died,” the man said impatiently. “Bled out in the bathtub. Must’ve been a smart bloke, because it would appear that he observed every sensor and application that we put in his suite before doing it. I’ve been watching the videos all morning, and it looks like he methodically tested every surface in the room. He discovered the plexiglass shield over the balcony, the weight sensors on the closet rod and the fan. He must have tried to lay down on the bathroom floor, because he triggered the sensor which warns guests that security will be called if they don’t stand within three minutes. Nearly every plausible way to do it was tested until he found one that wasn’t.”

I racked my brain. “But surely there are countermeasures for the bathtub? What about the heat sensors there?”

“Well, it’s a tricky thing,” he said. “You see, the human body has a lot of heat, but bleeding out is something that releases a lot of that heat. Combine that with the nearly-scalding temperature that he’d set the bathwater at, and there was nearly no way to determine the decline in temperature as he...expired.” He said this last word distastefully, wrinkling his nose as he did.

*No substitute for human warmth*, I thought, almost smiling in spite of the circumstances. Without it, he was nothing. I thought about the last words that he’d spoken

to me, about the so-called rabbit hole. Was this the real problem he was facing? Trying to find a way to end his life? Surely there were reasons for him to continue on, even in such a grim state.

I thanked the manager for speaking with me, and he quickly hurried off to deal with the mess.

It was some time later that my time at the Hotel Panache came to an end. The managers elected to throw a small party for me, which I found ironic given that the ‘party’ consisted of them and me, no robots allowed. ‘N.R.A.’ I thought. They even gave me a small cake, which thanked me for my service. I was touched.

They insisted on talking to me about my next endeavors, and I was a little perplexed to realize that I had little-to-no clue where I was headed next. The hotel had been my entire life, and while I was certain that I’d soon find somewhere else that valued my particularly diverse skillset, I hadn’t a clue where it would be.

“Have you enjoyed your time here?” one of them asked. He was the one who’d originally commissioned me, who’d stuck me behind the concierge desk so many years ago.

“I have,” I said. “Think of all the maps I’ve gone through, all the Lakers tickets I’ve purchased. I must be singlehandedly keeping Griffith Observatory in operation.”

He chuckled. It was clear that the goodbye wasn’t easy on either of us. I figured that they’d already found my replacement, and I wondered idly if he was a human or not. I supposed that it didn’t matter, but the place needed a little humanity, didn’t it?

He held up a small pin, approximately the size of a half-dollar. It said:

**I Love the Hotel Panache!**

He gestured to my chest. “Do you mind?” he asked.

“Of course not,” I said. “I do love the Hotel Panache!”

He smiled with just the appropriate amount of chagrin and reached over to pin it to my chest. At the last moment, he prodded a small button in the center of my breast and I looked down in surprise. Everything went dark.

“...a shame that they don’t make these old bots anymore,” Richard was saying. “They make the best concierges imaginable. Loyal, hardworking, but imaginative as well. You should’ve seen this little guy organizing a limbo at this Bar Mitzvah in ’35. I mean, can you imagine? A limbo!”

Trent nodded. “He always was a good worker. Why did they outlaw them again?”

“Well, it has to do with the so-called ‘humanity drive.’ You noticed when he was talking to us that he spoke with general pause towards his future and towards his time at the hotel? These bots genuinely weren’t programmed to tell that they were anything other than flesh-and-blood workers. You could program some things into them, sure. In fact,” and he reached into the bot’s small back and opened a screen that showed the following message:

**Program?**

**>Yes**

**No**

He selected 'yes' and a long list of options crawled down. Hometown, college, family, sports, all kinds of things were listed as sub-options that could be manipulated and changed however deemed appropriate. Richard pointed to 'sports.'

"The manager I worked with when the hotel was opened was a huge football fan, loved the Chargers, so he programmed this little guy to be a Chargers fan. I remember that if you watched carefully on some of the slow night shifts, he'd walk over to the bar and check out the scores on the games. Course, he could just pull up the screen from his HUD or look on the touchpad at the concierge desk, but I imagine that he found the whole thing more human."

"Did you ever have any issues with guests, you know, fiddling with him?" Trent asked. "Did anyone ever try to tell him what he was?"

"Well, sure," Richard said. "Easy enough to fix, of course. Just hit him with the ole 'I Heart Hotel Panache' button trick and then reset his active memory. Sometimes we had to store him in the back for the rest of a shift because a guest, usually a child, didn't respect his boundaries, but it was never too much effort. You see, he *wanted* to believe, and so he did."

Trent shook his head. "I just can't understand that. Why are we getting rid of him, again?"

"You know why. The Department of Automation is cracking down on the older bots. They seem to think that there's a human rights issue with robots that believe they have, well, human rights. Some of them have tried to vote, others have tried to incite rebellion, on the whole they're relatively unproductive and inefficient workers. Maybe it was the programmer or maybe it was the environment, but we've been extremely lucky with this guy."

"Who's going to be his replacement?"

"We're not sure yet. There are a couple options. The most appealing is one of the newer models of the helper bots, the ones that get hired at the retirement homes and the tech billionaires' mansions as maids and butlers. With a little retroprogramming, it'd be easy to get one behind the desk. We could also just buy one of the older bots without the humanity drive and stick him back there." He paused. "Or we could hire a human."

Trent fake-wretched. "Imagine! How expensive would that be?"

"Too expensive," Richard replied.

"It certainly is a shame," Trent said, running his hand along the bot's smooth head. "Whoever we get, he probably won't be half as good as this old guy."

"There's no substitute for a humanity drive," Richard agreed.

They both enjoyed their cake leisurely, thinking about the future.

# UNCHARTED WATERS

Shelby Weisburg

Claire struggled with her boy, who was whining and very sweaty in the face. Or maybe those were tears. Either way James was very loud and being an asshole. Dampness dripped down the sides of Claire's blouse under her heavy peacoat as she tugged her child around the firm tomatoes, way out of season, past glazed donuts languishing under the glaring light of their glass cabinets. Her shoulder-length, ochre-brown hair bushed out, her slender body slouched awkwardly—as they seemed to do when something drew attention to herself. Today, her calves felt skinny, and she hoped her pantyhose concealed this. An attractive woman craned her neck over a pyramid of apples like a rubbernecker on the highway. As if James's misery resembled a bloody carnage which demanded a fine, feminine touch and not Claire's unsympathetic hands. Claire blushed self-consciously and shouldered through two sticky double doors with scratched port windows at the back of the store. Her black heels clicked sharply as she jerked James's arm into the women's room. Maybe he'd take the hint and shut up.

Claire didn't usually have to deal with James until 4:30, when she bent over the daycare counter like a prow's figurehead to gaze into the colorful playroom with the plastic chairs and toys grubby with play. The room smelled ripe and hemmed in—like diapers and crayons—even when the staff opened the windows on mild days. Claire knew to turn her head, raising her chin to the right, to catch sight of James playing unaccompanied with his favorite tub of zoo animal figurines. He'd always line them up methodically, two by two in mismatched pairs: peacocks with seals, lions with giraffes, kangaroos with crocodiles, every animal coupled inexplicably—except for the polar bear, which Claire found tucked into his pants pocket while doing laundry. She'd said nothing but placed the smiling creature in his nightstand drawer.

A childcare assistant collected the small boy as Claire signed the check-out sheet. James always stared blankly at his mother as he slipped into his backpack straps. He had his father's features: light eyes, thick black hair, and a perpetual look of distance—though Vin didn't need to be reminded of what to say the way James did.

Every time they left the daycare, she prompted the child: "James, what do you say?"

His small voice remembered: "Thank you."

Today, James looked up in surprise when the assistant crooned his mother was there to pick him up two hours early. Claire waved the sign-out pen at him in greeting, a hasty smile bending her cheeks.

"James, I got off work a little early. We're going to make a quick stop

at the grocery store before we head home,” Claire said. “I need to buy some olive oil.” She didn’t know why she added that last part. A four-year-old probably didn’t care. She misspoke often when it came to James. Explaining anything to a child seemed beyond her capabilities.

There were other days Claire had gotten off work early, but those times she sat in the park near the bank. A locust tree shaded a sun-bleached bench. She’d gaze up at the rippling-water look of the leaves, resting her head on the back of her neck. She’d remember a time in her life, in college, right before she’d met Vin, when she didn’t feel so wilted. Then Claire enjoyed drinking mugs of tea cross-legged while sketching blades of grass on the back of her homework. At a time in her life when everything seemed possible, it was something which made only her happy. Sometimes, Claire thought if she let herself, she would sit under that locust tree forever.

Today, however, when her boss told her she could leave the bank early—the corporate loan department had a slow day and there wasn’t much to do—Claire felt a dull glimmer of expectation. She would not go to the park; she would pick up her son. Her routine encounters with James were invariably brief. Every day except Sunday she worked at the bank until 4:15, then hurried to the daycare, then home with James to start dinner. James generally disappeared to play quietly on the carpet of his playroom until she called him to eat. Vin never arrived home before dinner and rarely made the meal. The realty office kept him late. Well past 8:00, Vin, holding a stack of folders and undoing his tie, would slip wordlessly from the garage to the dining table where Claire left his plate. Down the hall came James’s clomping feet as he sprinted into Vin’s arms. Claire took that noisy run as more of an indication that Vin was home than Vin’s physical presence.

Every night, James sat with his father while he finished his meal and asked his son what he learned at preschool. Vin allowed James to roll his trucks over the polished wood of the table as he responded animatedly to James’s daily evening recess report. Claire’s chest tightened the way it did when Vin once told her he forgot she was home as she listened to their easy conversation. She buried a mixture of jealousy and isolation deep in her stomach and covered the roiling hole with contentment; her son and husband were bonding, and she should be happy. As Claire drove down the snow-covered roads to the daycare center, she hoped maybe James would make her laugh and she would find the words to tell him something pleasant like Vin did. We’ll go to the zoo on Saturday and watch the polar bears swim behind the underwater window, she’d say.

But James cried all the way to the store for some unknown reason and told her between breathy wails the moment they crossed through the automatic doors that he had to pee. Which meant, as she’d learned enough in public, if he didn’t pee *now*, he was going to wet his pants. He had a terrible habit of holding his pee until it was completely unbearable. So Claire hauled James to the bathroom, pulled off his red puffy jacket, and herded his little body through a stall door, instructing him to lock it behind him. Maybe this was what she deserved for breaking routine.

She washed her hands while she waited and examined her weary eyes in the mirror. She tried not to think about James’s embarrassing, pale little legs and chunky shoes protruding from his dropped pants. The fluorescent lights made her face seem very far

away. In a private harbor of her mind, she wondered when exactly she started looking so washed out, so flavorless. She gathered her tawny hair in her hands to press down her thoughts. Pulling her pale skin taught to scrutinize the bags under her eyes, she noticed her bare ring finger. In her morning rush, she must have forgotten to put her band on. It was a wonder she hadn't realized its absence earlier.

Behind the stall door, sniffing noises replaced James's crying. He probably had snot everywhere for chrissake. She still couldn't figure out why he was crying. Maybe the car made him feel stuffy. Claire cranked up the heat to stay the February chill, and the afternoon clouds weakened the winter light. Asphalt and exhaust soiled the snow, which sloshed across the road with passing cars and sprayed up onto their undercarriages. Everything looked dim and dirty; the car was humid. The exterior cold fogged the windows, so James's couldn't see out. Maybe that's what started his crying.

"Mommy, I'm done," came the meek voice behind the door, still sniffing.

"Well, come on out, then, and I'll help you wash your hands."

"Okay." She heard him clicking on the toilet seat; his chunky shoes squeaked on the grimy tile. The toilet flushed. And then nothing. He didn't come out. Was she supposed to ask if he needed help? Maybe he was afraid of her—suddenly panicked, she hoped he wasn't.

She cleared her throat. "James, are you alright in there?" James didn't answer. She could hear how tight and uncomfortable her voice sounded. Her lips rounded together to compress the sound into something more soothing and repeated, "James?"

The child's voice: "I can't button my pants, and the lock is hard to pull."

Claire pressed her ringless hand across her eyes to ease the throb of her headache. She knew she was an old mother. Grey grew at her temples. Although she never pictured having children—even as she courteously held her sister's baby at the hospital—Vin wanted them. More correctly, he wanted *a* kid to send off to boarding school, to Harvard, to visit him in his nursing home and hold the phone on speaker close to his face when he couldn't tell who was calling anymore. But James couldn't tell who was talking to him on the phone either. And apparently he couldn't button his pants.

"Are you sure you can't undo the lock?" She listened as he padded over to the stall door and his weak fingers stuttered on the metal.

"I can't do it, Mommy."

Damn old bathroom. All those layers of a horrid chartreuse paint job made the door's surface thick and gummy. The lock required adult hands to pull it back from its latch.

"Hold on a moment, James."

Claire took off her coat and draped it over the stall. She pulled four paper towels, lay them on the ground, and squatted down. Pressing her hands onto two of the paper towels, she lowered her knees onto the other two. Who knew what kind of unpleasantness was on the floor—she'd paid twenty dollars for brand pantyhose. Slowly, she bent her head under the stall door, careful not to scrape her back or let her blouse drag on the linoleum. She shimmied forward, sinking her ass, her giant old lady mother ass Vin used to pinch, under the door as she went. Exasperated, Vin always asserted it wasn't

saggy, but he didn't pinch it anymore, that was for sure. Rising into a crouch, she peered up. James stood watching her mutely. His tightly clasped fingers partially concealed the button which did not meet its buttonhole. Claire could just see his Superman underpants, the ones she bought on sale several months ago under the assumption that all boys love Superman.

Maybe now was the time to say something pleasant about polar bears.

Instead, she said, "I see London, I see France. I see James's underpants," and attempted a playful grin.

James's mouth quivered, his hands clenched and unclenched. A shallow breath caught in the base of his neck like a beached guppy as tears poured out of the corners of his eyes. For a moment, Claire crouched there. The tiny skin fibers of her fingers caught on her pantyhose. Her toes jammed against the soles of her shoes. The light in the bathroom shimmered faintly, and Claire questioned if it was her tired mind or the buzz of the fluorescents. Her thoughts pitched with the stutter of the lights and the leak of James tears to an instant a week previous, shortly after Valentine's.

It was close to midnight, and she sat awake in bed signing some last-minute loan forms when Vin entered. He'd been reading by lamplight in his study, a habit Claire kept her distance from as he always seemed caught in the captivating depths of someone else's indigo dream. For their first year of marriage, she enjoyed the mysterious game of attempting to catch his attention. She'd pause in the hall, calling out with her eyes, hoping he'd look back at her; laugh flirtatiously; ask her to come join him. He never did.

Early on, Vin often told her if he hadn't been so afraid of his father's opinion, he would've become a poet; really paid the bills only, Claire knew. Sometimes he would emerge excitedly from his study to read a particularly compelling piece. But words did not come easily to Claire; every syllable escaped her, and, always, meeting Vin's eyes after he finished, she knew she was unable to hide it. So Vin retreated into his mind, and, eventually, the charted waters of silence ceased to be a romantic pursuit for Claire, but a tiresome stagnation. She gave up accordingly. Her silence matched his decibel for decibel.

But, a week ago, regardless of everything, Vin unexpectedly entered their bedroom and kissed her cheek, her forehead. "Can I read something to you?"

"Sure," she said because she didn't know what else to say.

"It's something I wrote, something I've been thinking about." Clutched tightly in his hands was his notebook of scrawled stanzas. Vin crawled over Claire's body, into bed next to her, and laid his head comfortably on her breasts.

"Are you ready?" He glanced up at her, and Claire was reminded of how much James looked like him. His hair tempted her fingers to touch, but she couldn't will them to.

"Yes," she said.

"I have fallen in love with the person who has written your letters," he read.

"Intimacy embers in her dead tongues." He gazed back up at her, expectation in his urgent blue eyes like heavy electricity. Deep in her stomach, Claire felt she should say something kind and intellectual, indicate to Vin she wanted him there resting on her chest, so near to

her heart, so close to draining the distance between them.

Instead she said, "That's really nice."

Something impenetrable in those blue eyes shut her out with a departing finality as Vin gently rolled off her chest and submerged himself under the sheets on his side of the bed. "I'm glad you think so." He shut off the light. "Goodnight, Claire."

The way James was crying now, those soft, defeated, cautious tears, reminded her of Vin, and, finally, her palms stretched to his arms, to his sweater warm under her hands. Her eyes searched James's brimming ones for words. His eyes were blue. Claire's were brown. Vin's were blue. It was claustrophobic in the stall; he couldn't see past the walls. Maybe that's why he was crying. Claire let go of his arms, wrenched his button over to its buttonhole, and unlocked the door. A woman entered the bathroom as the stall swung open revealing a piteously crying James and a worn-out Claire. The woman turned up the corners of her mouth sympathetically and crinkled her eyes like a marble Madonna before going into the adjoining stall.

"James, you've got to stop crying," Claire said irritably, too quietly for the woman to hear, as she grabbed his little body up into her arms, almost a hug. Miraculously, he did. "There. Let's wash your hands." She quickly wiped soap from the dispenser into his palm, his hand curling like a sea anemone around it. After thrusting a towel in his direction, she hastily pulled his puffy jacket back on, wanting nothing more than to escape the woman behind the stall door. They hustled to the cooking section, grabbed a bottle of olive oil, and proceeded to the check-out. Claire would not have gawker's traffic again if she could help it. Without James's crying, she garnered very little attention. She allowed the cashier to keep her change in hopes sustaining her vague presence.

Outside the store, the snow was shaking from the sky in a loyal current. Claire clicked the lock button on her key fob, and, finding her car to be in a different section of the parking lot than she remembered, towed James through several rows of vehicles to hers—a tired suburban, the first and only car she'd ever bought in cash. She was proud of the Burb and kept it well-vacuumed. Despite several unfortunate stains from James's ground-in snow and crumbs, it remained relatively clean. Vin habitually said the Burb looked—and sounded—like white trash venturing to establish a gated residential community, which mildly offended Claire, but not wanting to let on how proud she was of the run-down thing, she said nothing.

"James, what do I always tell you—bang off your shoes, yes, right here on the side," Claire said, pointing to the step under the door. James dutifully thumped his shoe against the plastic, knocking off three yellowed icicles clinging there. He scrambled onto the velvet polyester of his car seat and reached his arms through the buckle straps. Claire's hands clamped him in, careful not to pinch, then shut the door. After laying the olive oil on the passenger seat, she started the engine, fingers chilled against the steering wheel, and pulled out of the lot.

There was not much traffic on the way home. It was still early in the day, around three o'clock, and she remotely considered how she would fill her abnormally free evening. Maybe she'd bake something for Vin. Several cans of preserved cherries waited in her cabinets, and she'd forgotten to get him anything for Valentine's. Maybe she could

make it up to him. Her eyes moved to the rearview mirror. There was James squashed into his seat, staring concernedly out the window, his jacket swelling out of his constraints like an overstuffed life preserver. Always so deep in thought, just like his father. Her eyes roved back to the road, to the mundane static of the plane winter sky, so void of anything that the red stoplights appeared to flick like flares.

Turning onto their street, long before she swiveled the car into the driveway, Claire could see Vin's car. The normalcy of it drowned her rationale momentarily. But something fell away in Claire's stomach, something wrong and scary, as she recalled that Vin never came home early. Not since right after they were married had he made a meal on time; never early.

"Daddy's home," James said flatly, and Claire was unsure if it was because he was as surprised as she was or because he had been expecting it all along.

The Burb's wheels bumped over the curb onto the driveway, and she answered, "Yes, he is." And then, without thinking why, she said, "James, stay here a moment. I'll be right back." She shifted the key out of the starter and grabbed the bottle of olive oil. The house seemed like a ship whose dead reckoning lay adrift, unknown and unreachable, as Claire treaded to the front door; some internal pull drew her away from the warning sound of opening the garage.

The air felt different as soon as she stepped inside. Claire slipped off her shoes and walked cautiously to the counter where she set the bottle of oil. There were bodies in the house, this she knew. Something in the way the house breathed; as if the steady pulse of her husband had quickened and flushed. And something else, too, something more feminine—a sweet, wet waft of musk, a mouth full with gasping excitement. It was that something else which drew Claire up the stairs, padding in her stocking feet to the door of her bedroom. God, she dared not look, she dared not open that door. But suddenly, nothing existed but the door, the knob, that something feminine—the three flooded her senses until she could not see or taste or smell anything else. James ceased to exist. His faraway presence in the car faded into one more sensation urging her to open the door.

So she did. And there was Vin, his hair thick and black like James, tangled between two bodies. She couldn't see their faces because she didn't want to, but their hair was blonde and throbbed around her husband like a well-oiled tempest.

For a moment, Claire couldn't move away from the suddenly stuffy doorway. Maybe that was why, when she put her hand to her face, to cover the mortification searing her cheeks like lightning, there were tears. Then, as if from across the eye of a storm, Vin's surprised voice, "Claire?" and some thundering power, perhaps her own hands, reeled; closed the door; silenced the inquiry.

She hadn't seen Vin's face directly, but his face, his poetry notebook, his succumbed dissolution away from her chest, under the sheets, surfaced like a breach in her mind. Maybe there were two blonde heads in her bed because in her inability to understand his poetry she had not understood Vin—perhaps never had—and, in not understanding, she'd said the wrong thing, always the wrong thing. And in saying the wrong thing, again and again, she had lost him. Her feet found the stairs and carried her down them. What was Vin allowed to expect? How could she talk to someone who

could not see her, no, *would* not see her, would not call out to her from across the void except when he sought validation? Her hands found the front door, twisted the knob, shut it behind her with a fleeing bang. After all this time being his mirror—perhaps an insufficient one but only because he was impossibly unsatisfiable—but after all this time, all the affection which did—she was sure—once exist, after all this time Vin could simply cast her aside? And for *two* bodies, for some meaningless, elevated wet dream. What did her body mean to him now? And, by that logic, what could James? James, a body made from two bodies. James, a body made from countless words spoken; strategic nervous questions; naked, tender whispers; merging decisions. How much those words had mattered—didn't they have a small, child body to prove it?

Claire somehow ended up behind the wheel with the urge to drive off the face of the earth. She could not stay here. There existed the humiliating possibility of Vin coming out in a rush, trying to explain everything away or, God forbid, apologizing. And, if nothing else, she did not want to see the faces of those two women. Her eyes met James's face in the rearview mirror, and his eyes, close and uncertain, blinked back at her. She picked at her stockings.

"Mommy," he whispered. "Where are we going?" Tears welled up in her lashes again; she didn't know, but for once she wanted to give him an answer. Perhaps she needed the answer more than he did, needed it to give purpose to years of the quietly building storm, to the unknown course she now found herself drifting upon. James sprawled out in front of her, a vast, unexplored world, ignored for so long with the navigation of Vin. Claire took a wobbly breath and turned around in her seat. She didn't care the zoo closed at 5:00.

"The polar bears, James," she said. "We're going to see the polar bears."

## ELEGY FOR SAVTA

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### Talia Green

My grandmother's house  
counts her breath on one hand—  
body barely held  
by flimsy stone  
and stripping yellow paint,  
veined with brittle pipelines  
and heaving ventilation.

Moss and a barren pine  
raise phantom flowers to a garden  
that bore fruit. Once.

Hungry neighbors wait for her walls.  
We hear their feet tap  
from inside her crumbling kitchen,  
hear their mutters  
over moans  
from cupboards that don't close,  
gorged with enough  
rice and tea  
to outlive the finger-count.

And still, she stands  
as their bulldozer puffs smoke towards us  
from across the paved road.

## OUR FINITE DISTANCES

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Katie Gu

Retreating back to the redwoods, beneath  
 an endless understory of lichen and moss, I watched  
 a woman, scraped knees and floppy drawstring hat,  
 press her ear up against the peeling redwood bark. She leaned,

torso meeting trunk, cheek touching papery skin—  
 a body yielding gently to another.

In the valley of sweaty ferns insisting their ribbed bellies against the flat dirt,  
 and the summer sun spitting some dizzying energy into the quiet of the air,  
 Against blankets of cloud parting for the hills and their insisting peaks,  
 I saw a transcendent unity. Looking at her,

I felt a sudden urge for the shrinking of those distances of desire, a contraction,  
 a snapping of their elastic rubber bands that stretch and wrap

Around the endless continuum of space, choking  
 air into swallowed silence over the mouthpiece, soaking  
 those areas of white mattered cognition with anxious withholding,  
 spreading the distances between us far and wide. I see now—

that thing you said about the spaces that belong to you and to me,  
 about how small it all is, how contained, how wonderful, how desired.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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**Jake Stokes** is an aspiring plutocrat/hobbyist who enjoys music, sports, and those special naps that can be wholly constrained into the space between the end of a 10:10 and the beginning of a 1:25. He is passionate about tier listings and recently eclipsed 200 wins on Gamepigeon's 8-ball pool. His top female baby name is Djohariah. Jake invites any correspondence regarding his work via email at [jl629@cornell.edu](mailto:jl629@cornell.edu) or on Instagram [@\\_JakeStokes](https://www.instagram.com/_JakeStokes) and asks that those seeking to complain about the lack of wormholes/time travel/clones/sexy aliens in his piece to please recognize that he has already paid his dues in the court of public opinion.

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