

The image features a dense, intricate maze of red lines on a black background. The maze is composed of many small, interconnected paths and dead ends, creating a complex, non-linear pattern. In the center of the maze, there is a solid black square containing the text "RIPRAP" and "40" in a bold, red, sans-serif font. The text is centered within the square and stands out prominently against the black background of the square and the surrounding maze.

RIPRAP  
40

**RipRap**

# 40

RipRap is a literary arts journal designed and produced annually by students in the Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing program at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB).

RipRap is published in association with the department of English and with the support of the Instructionally Related Activities Fund.

RipRap accepts submissions from early September to mid-December. Genre specific guidelines can be found with the following link.

<http://www.cla.csulb.edu/departments/english/riprap-journal-submission-guidelines/>

Please direct all inquiries to [riprapjournal@gmail.com](mailto:riprapjournal@gmail.com)

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**R**ipRap is a literary journal designed and produced annually by students in the Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing program at California State University Long Beach (CSULB). Since its inception in 1951, the journal has evolved from its original title, Hornspoon, until it was renamed Gambit and finally, in 1979, RipRap. This year RipRap celebrates its 40th anniversary.

RipRap highlights new and emerging writers from across the country as well as enlightening interviews of award winning, published writers who are featured in the CSULB English Department's Visiting Writers Series or from the known writing community.

RipRap offers a humble invitation to talented and aspiring writers of all genres and is open to everyone. Specifically, RipRap publishes short fiction, flash fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and art such as photography, illustration and comics.

Being the 40th anniversary edition, this particular volume illuminates aspects of the current unique social and political climate of 2017-2018. As always with all our submissions, we seek out work that is innovative, forward-thinking, and as entertaining as it is thought-provoking.

New editions of the journal are published each May.

RipRap would like to express its sincere gratitude to all those who helped contribute, edit, promote, support, and produce this year's issue. We could not have completed this year's issue without the help of you all, and we are incredibly thankful.

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# **RipRap Literary Journal**

40th Anniversary Edition

Spring 2018

California State University, Long Beach  
Department of English

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# Poetry

*Noah's Raven*

Noah's raven didn't fly, but plummeted.  
In the same way, our brothers fell from the family ark,  
writhing helplessly,

adrift in the Sonoran Desert—  
lost between Mexico and the rest of the world.

Few people know of the three thousand dead bodies,  
because there is no staggering monument,

no pillar or black wall,  
for the victims of ambition & starvation.

Their commemoration is a silent one  
as the sun hangs high over unburied bones.

The names *Juan, Miguel, y Raúl*  
are just footprints baked into the earth.



**In The Midst**

Ben Shani

*My Baby Daddy Has Become the Rain  
in the Street*

ubiquitous as the road, his gold  
car greets me in every lane  
          he has woven himself into  
my address     I'm no good  
at keeping secrets     they said  
I shouldn't tell him my address  
when I moved out     maybe

he sprouted out of my thin  
beige carpet     maybe he took root  
in the concrete underneath     maybe he is made  
of dark orchids     waxy petals     maybe he is in  
my lotion bottle     he comes to my door  
at midday     vespers and night prayer

especially night prayer     he is holding me down  
on every mattress     couch     floor and bathroom sink  
and still I like it     and still     I long for his palm  
on my skin     I curse my desire     and like it  
his desire has become the glass in my windows

and the candles at my sill     their flames are his way  
of moving     of speaking     he has left a trail of himself  
in my body     and the two other bodies that roam my rooms  
they fight in the courtyard with sticks

the sticks have become their father     they hold them with his  
hands  
his hands are falling from maple trees     spinning like seed

I forget my curses in the bones of his face     symmetrical as  
cicada markings     ochre and green on black     the bugs

keep falling  
from our trees now that the season ends they lie on the lace  
of their winged backs and lift their limbs up to us

O God what is wrong with me?

**Los Altos**

I'm aware I'll grow old  
 like my mother's father  
 and her brothers—proud  
 ruddy men of the plains,  
 copper brown hair ceding  
 to white in tight-lipped  
 lines.

Not without a fight.

My mother,  
 her righteous fire. Her fire.  
*Neither you nor your mother  
 will fit dead and buried  
 in those three feet of land  
 that you're stealing  
 from me!*

That dirt gripped a cactus  
 her own parents planted.  
 Holy spirit of partitions.  
 Parcels of ritual anger I  
 feel steaming in me, too.

Honor of the landowner.  
 Sufficiency of cattle rancher.  
 Bronze-buttoned charro of  
 the high plain with a magical  
 control of twirling lassos.

And with all that in the mirror,

Father,  
 when you died I only looked  
 for your dark tan, scraped  
 for those humble hands  
 in fields of lettuce, your raw  
 fingers in steel beams,  
 broad arm bracing a machine  
 to cut into the growing fennel.

That navigating  
 brown core steering  
 heart pushing blood,  
 moving limb. Lungs in  
 melody still whistling  
 of good will and of fair  
 labor.

**World History**

World history is boring.  
 It begins with stabbing  
 and ends in treaty.  
 Priceless pens scratch  
 loudest across the paper.  
 Sometimes the treaty is  
 a bullet. A bunker. Besides,  
 they never tell the truth.

Mostly, someone waits in line  
 at the bank drive-thru  
 after they've put the can  
 in the tube and they  
 turn down the radio  
 when the teller says,  
*hello.*

The story on the news:  
 explosions of sand  
 take the fabrics, the books,  
 the fingers of children.

Justified or not,  
 the world inhales.  
 It manages.  
 The car behind honks  
 and the teller apologizes  
 for the wait.  
 Seagulls fight over a fish fillet.  
 The radio host  
 corrects the body count.

**Convo with Abe**

Abraham Lincoln and I are riding rapid transit.  
 He is sitting. I'm standing, holding on to  
 the greasy metal. Someone coughs on my  
 shoulder. The train is loud and full.  
 "Are you surprised at how far we've come?"  
 I shout. He doesn't look up from the iPad in  
 his lap. I think of what he must think,  
 today's news glowing brightly from his legs.  
 "You shitting me?" He whispers, yet somehow  
 his voice is louder than everything.

*Sunset District from the L*

Turner might've painted this.

Where Taraval slopes to the shore

pollen-heavy sunrays dust  
water and could and passenger

in luminous gilt, the south-  
side palimpsest of shops

layered in cedar-scented  
raw sienna, as if already deep

in memory. Wave unwrinkles wave  
along the sea's gold foil,

brief as the charred silhouettes  
of strangers walking toward the sun—

shadows in the hurry of their passage.  
Just so, masked in effacement,

smoke of the city, archetypal,  
we're witnesses, victims to

a star, which now submerges, overflows  
to yellow ochre laced in crimson rust,

a haze whose honeycomb-illuminating  
is thick as the caramel glaze

on Mother's flan. Given  
such immolative glory, why not

catch fire? Before my stop  
I nearly pray—an unfamiliar urge—

to float, ignited, ever in route, as if  
transmuted, like train track steel

to molten flume, once more  
to the erosive proliferation of the sun.

## *Mary, On the Brink of Neutral*

driving through LA, wonders  
*how heavy is a SmartCar?*  
*Where does adrenaline live*  
*when it's not being used?* The adrenaline  
 that makes a granny with arthritis  
 throw a chair out the window  
 when she's stuck in a fire, the adrenaline  
 of a mom lifting a car to save her baby,  
 the adrenaline of running until pain  
 turns to tingling that numbs the legs,  
 the adrenaline that cranks your mouth open  
 to talk to a crush, the adrenaline that billows out  
 of cliff-jumping. She bets, *I guess this is why people do meth.*  
 She wonders about how heavy pretense is—  
 why she feel the need to listen in on small-talk  
 next to the water cooler, why she craves the approval  
 from that girl Quinn because she has a neck tattoo,  
 why she pretended to care about Tom's cat  
 that has diabetes, why she broke up with her ex  
 because he "wasn't suitable" but she didn't care  
 that he "wasn't suitable," why she still goes to yoga  
 even though she hates that it's so quiet,  
 why she wears yoga pants to show off her ass  
 when she doesn't want to show off her ass,  
 why she spent \$60 on crystals, why she drinks beer  
 even though it makes her sick,  
 why she says *yes* when it's a *no*—  
 maybe pretense makes her boobs sag,  
 gives her bad posture, causes insomnia,  
 makes her hair fall out. Maybe pretense  
 is the impulse that craves invisibility,  
 whispering *blend in.*  
 Where does pretense pilot the body  
 while adrenaline hides?

Driving through LA,  
 graffiti blurs through the window.  
 The car swirling in a blender of color,  
 a pool of purple cement; a pool filled  
 with the stench of piss and trash  
 and spilled *Miller High Life.*  
*Pretense must weigh*  
*roughly the same as a SmartCar.*  
 Tunnels, roads, bridges  
 and underpasses link  
 unmovable vehicles,  
 all these fixed facades,  
 wading to keep afloat.  
*I'm fine,* her mantra—  
 Mary, on the brink of neutral, stuck.

*In the Year of the Cover-Up*

Everyone has their own peculiar way of doing it,  
 convoluting, obfuscating. Each room too has its way  
 of covering up what has been bad, or old, or past.  
 For dry chicken the kitchen provides white gravy packets.  
 For burnt toast, peanut butter.

For wrinkles, blemishes, pits, and pocks,  
 the bathroom brings balms, salves, lotions,  
 powders, polishes, and creams SPF fifteen.  
 In the living room it's floral scented candles—  
 so many scented candles—small cakes and fake smiles.

Then of course the rooms we're not allowed to see:  
 congressional sons with their DUIs, bags of coke; conservative  
 lesbian daughters; everything extramarital,  
 everything whispered; the creeping illness kept  
 from the public and the family and the secret family.

The spaces we inhabit are layered and illicit.  
 In older cities, busted up tenements reveal histories,  
 layers of multi-colored paint like lead-laced jawbreakers  
 in their calved walls—mint green, salmon, darkest mustard—  
 with thin shavings of cigar smoke and hushed talk between.

*Peppermints from August*

*I.* Sharp, smacking cold on chapped lips;  
 streams of sticky, finger-picking bass; golden  
 Old English bottles in the nervous ocean  
 palms of boys watching girls whose dancing  
 could tickle the moon blue.

*II.* Red-and-white striped spray paint  
 dripping off wax record sleeves, scattered  
 with Newports mashed into inchworms  
 munching on James and Sinatra's greatest hits  
 spinning cocoons of jazz and silk.

*III.* Sweet, gushing washcloths  
 squeezed by grandmothers—shaped  
 with police batons and magnolia-scented  
 cardigans—soothing foreheads of husbands  
 with the flu, as pine needles outside their windows  
 beg the wind to hurry, and twirl their bodies  
 free to quilt the earth under candy wrappers.

**Montezuma County**

We run barefoot down the gravel road.  
 (Never mind that it hurts our feet; this is the way  
 we've decided children must live.)  
 We reach the top of a small hill,  
 eyes glowing orange from the fire  
 on the hillside—it's so close, we swear  
 it singes the hair on our arms. You stand,  
 blonde hair collecting ash, the coalescence  
 of sweat and smoke like diamonds on your skin,  
 asking "What should we save from our house?"  
 and I am ashamed of my excitement,  
 my belief in the possibilities in disaster  
 and in the destruction of the old.

There is no need for hearse or coroner;  
 the fire is put out by morning, white smoke  
 rising, mingling with clouds.  
 Picking through the wreckage, we find  
 a sprout emerging from the blackened earth,  
 our father explaining to us: If the old trees  
 had not burned down, this one would not have  
 enough sunlight to survive.

**Montana Farmer Meets Designer Dirt —  
 After The New York Earth Room art exhibit  
 by Walter De Maria**

A tourist book sends him to the second floor  
 of a SoHo building in the midst  
 of Michelin starred restaurants and designer boutiques  
 Where knee-high dirt fills a room  
 forty times larger than his homestead house  
 The dirt employs an attendant who for 40 years  
 has raked, watered, pampered  
 Pulled mushrooms, wildflowers, grass, earthworms  
 from the field until it's barren

Visitors may look over the plexiglass barrier from a hallway  
 To swallow with their eyes the ebony infused earth  
 The silence with their ears  
 To inhale the virgin musk, to touch but not take  
 People pop-in between shopping and sipping cocktails  
 Who whisper as though in church  
*Never before saw open ground . . . shrine  
 of the natural world . . . transcends the art market . . .  
 visceral . . . search for equilibrium . . . anti-commercialism  
 . . . back to basics . . . ancestral longing . . . object poetry  
 . . . no secrets . . . just the truth*

The farmer remains as mute as the dirt  
 but the voice in his head chatters like a magpie  
 in the ash trees that hem his homestead  
*No damn truth in Mother Nature stripped  
 of her God-given ability to bear . . . nothing  
 natural about perversion . . . even the smell's some  
 kind of Frankenstein . . . Maria guy wouldn't know art  
 if it fertilized him with cow shit*

Yet the farmer returns each afternoon  
 With the circus of Times Square still performing  
 vertigo through eyes and ears  
 The ant farm of Wall Street crawling on skin  
 The subway sardine push of panic  
 While the street hosts men insulting the air he breathes  
 Women on corners wearing only paint  
 who offer themselves to his camera  
 He supposes they call that art too

In a city where even parks conceal dirt in shades of green  
 the farmer gulps air in this earth room like a suffocating man

### *First Generation*

Weekends meant driving with my dad  
 to pick up burgers and a movie.

I stood in a cloud of double doubles  
 grilled onion, extra cheese, and fries,  
 hoping no one rents out *Toy Story 2*  
 for a second week in a row.

My dad asked the woman taking our order,  
 "Can I have some *paper* too?"

"Paper?" she looked confused.

"Paper," he said again.

I stood on the tips of my toes  
 and said to her, "Pepper."

He smiled, nodded, his cheeks  
 flushed with embarrassment.

**Stretch Marks**

My mother never forgave my father  
for taking us away that rainy April  
all the daffodils drowned in the garden.  
She kissed our mouths as my sister  
and I cried and our father pulled us  
into the rented car that would take  
us all the way to Colorado.

After we were gone, I imagine she looked  
in the mirror at the purple stretch  
marks wrapping around her bellybutton  
like misshapen fingers, which she had  
once loved, but grew to resent for their  
unwillingness to let her forget us,  
to let her forget that they were all  
she had left.

**Beat Ghazal**

*"Yeah, it's sad losing the person that you care for.  
Now he gone you only see him on a t-shirt  
With his picture, same picture he was chilling with his people,  
His people even crying now saying God is evil.  
I remember momma word saying mijo,  
After life is something better like a movie with a sequel,  
And live life for them cause death is real.  
Don't ever feel sad cause they can feel you.  
You can still talk to them, they can hear you.  
God is the only person you should fear for."*—student

city sunken      loss rushes under like a flash flood  
hollow-bellied boys      crying *lucky we got black blood*

boys who show up      sopping wet with hungry fat words  
drops filling pages      with the memories of lost blood

white chalk white skin      standing at the blackboard  
teaching boys words      knowing shit of living bad blood

dry bone white bone      hound before its first hunt  
wet nose red nose      shoved in someone's fresh blood

wet maw wet month      grieving for a loved one  
no hand answers      for the spilling of his red blood

boys with red ink      write *teacher this is true love*  
*howl for holy grace*      *when a brother loses lifeblood*

## Science Solves the Mystery of the Elusive Yeti

Why did it take us so long to discover the yeti hiding among us in male form, in plain sight, their monstrous behavior no longer a myth, cryptozoology confirmed, pawing our sisters, shaking genitals at our daughters, cupping behinds like snow globes to see what shakes? A yeti and a man walk into a bar. This is no joke. They exchange briefcases and phones. They occupy the same seat, the large space, drawn to the cameras and glow on screen, glare at us like half-eaten fish and blame us for their opinions on our deliciousness. They try to make us feel sorry, for Frosty the Snowman, a cautionary tale for men behaving badly when stories are shared, when heat is applied. The Yeti kingdom has ice ceilings that need to be smashed, furry beasts posing as fathers and friends, rulers and caretakers, while victims hope for passage in blizzards, for us to believe.

## Urban Legends

In the middle of class my fingers curl toward my palm and my wrist turns up:

I examine my nails this way—but *only boys do that* some thirteen-year-old once told some thirteen-year-old me; girls flex the wrist instead, stretch the fingers straight and push the whole bent figure of hand away from their face, it's a show of five-pronged choreography, not the male's stoic furl. And why am I afraid of spiders?

I'd rather not say...but maybe you know, maybe you read that thing in that one issue of *Seventeen*, all the rage in seventh grade, Gracie or Megan puffing out a new chest at the sleepover to recount the harrowing tale of that one girl this one time in the shower with an earful of spider eggs, the unknown sac exploding while she sang, her naked shower song turned shrieks as they poured, arachnid, from her most inside place, appearing like she thought them up and they sprouted from her brain. The chilling thought, *I have a brain*, it too can bear spiders, even now can suddenly bulge, fertility's primal reminder, with every urban legend ever heard, even though I've tried to stay pure, learned not to fall in love with a lie.

*Wild Water Adventure Park // Russian Roulette*

I thought his eyes were clear?  
 Like the water in the wave pool  
 that had moved our bodies.

    Before we met the ocean.

        Before we learned what it was to drown.

We only knew we had waited all year for this  
     one day. To feel the cool water  
         against our mottled skin.

Even if it wasn't ever really clear,  
     as it baptized us with chlorine and bacteria.

        As it fell off his eyelashes

I saw his eyes close.

I watch his eyes now melt like wax  
 down his face—

    he never cries aloud.

        But if you listen close it almost sounds like  
 a thumb rolling a lighter  
     under a metal spoon.

        For some reason, I can still see him  
 smiling, water dripping down his face,  
     forming small bullets as it falls from his chin.

        I can see him catch them in his hand  
 and load the gun.

    One, two, three,  
         he's free.

*Pool Party Civilization*

We caroused at the neighbor's pool,  
 topless old drinks and tropical ladies  
 blue in the veins, I was doing the trick  
 where I twirl my undies over my head  
 lasso-style while reciting David Lee Roth,  
 not much of a trick to it, really, but it  
 drew a few laughs, we were momentarily  
 restrained from our smartphone alerts  
 about lone gunmen, cult suicides, police  
 barbarism, we were filled to the brim  
 with a tumescent love for one another,  
 good to the last drop, then the love started  
 sloshing over the sides and I was sent  
 to the store for paper towels, the quicker  
 picker-upper, my love cottony soft  
 yet highly absorbent as I flip-flopped  
 over the egg-white tile. I was the spill  
 in aisle three, drip, drip, the guy I envied  
 mid-week in his aggressive shorts and charbroiled  
 face, a case of Coors under one arm and raw  
 meat under the other for the dogs  
 to converge upon. On his way to gas up  
 the pontoon. Usually I was the drip  
 dressed in clearance rack Dockers.  
 Whatever floats your boat. I was the goat,  
 my hull full of holes, no amount of towels  
 could staunch the flow. All hands below, I bellowed,  
 underpants in hand. I can barely see  
 the pool for the heat coming off of it.

*En Medio de Esto*

I sit not alone,  
 but drunk with the moon.  
 A mosquito shuffles in through  
 a half open window. The three of us  
 together at last. Enjoying  
 what little time we have left.

*Per Aspera Ad Astra**From Hardships to the Stars*

It's 1977.  
 The US launches a time capsule  
 into space. The Voyager  
 Golden Records are constructed  
 of gold-plated copper,  
 coated in Uranium 238, so that aliens  
 can know its age.  
 The selection of the contents  
 takes a year.

The sounds:  
 surf, wind, thunder, whales,  
 hello in 55 languages, *Per aspera ad astra*  
 in Morse code, Bach  
 and Chuck Berry, brainwaves.

The images:  
 DNA, insects, Egypt,  
 Jupiter, humans drinking and licking,  
 a woman in a supermarket, a page  
 from a mathematics volume.

The instructions:  
 diagrams, time frames,  
 calibration tools, a pulsar map  
 of the solar system, the chemical  
 composition of the Earth's atmosphere.

We send this distillation  
 into interstellar space  
 with no guns, no images of war.

\* \* \*

It's 1998.

Two astronauts hold  
onto the international space station,  
drops of humanity against its steel.

They cannot see  
the woman being led away  
by her wrists.

They have shed the gravity of a man,  
sitting on a curb, being read  
his rights. They float  
in a different darkness.  
Even though  
they are tethered, their hands  
grasp metal.

It's human nature  
to hold on.

\* \* \*

It's 2017.

Everything is about containment,  
but a new solar system is discovered.

They name its sun  
Trappist-1 for the telescope  
that can see it.

We imagine life on this rocky planet—  
a chance of water,  
a sky perpetually sunset salmon,

one side always facing the light,  
an infant sun that will burn  
for 10 trillion years.

What would we send  
into space now?

Beliefs  
are not easily unfastened—

even our voices  
stick to our throats,

and we don't know  
the consequences of letting go.

## Flash Fiction



**Bearded Succulents**

Sarah Davis

### *Why I Hate Beards*

I liked my friend, Jason, like a whole lot. But I was fat and ugly and sweet and he was thin and incredibly smart, and he knew this, so he was also condescending and arrogant. Truthfully, he was rather plain-looking. Kind of a big nose and crooked teeth and a receding hairline, but he had a damn good beard. Damn good beards shape a face nicely. Damn good beards made me swoon.

When I first met him at our queer support group, he had described himself as a celestial shaman with an interest in old role-playing games, theoretical physics, and horror movies. Before we were friends, I could count on half a hand the amount of people I'd come out to. That number was now closer to two hands, and I felt I owed that to him. When he wanted to be, he was jovial, welcoming, supportive. Today hadn't been one of those days. He'd kept mostly to himself. If anyone had approached him to talk he'd either not heard them or ignored them. But at least today he didn't storm out angrily over something trivial like an empty tissue box or a missing pen.

We were walking together to his truck, which was on the way to my residence hall. I liked to think he parked there on purpose so he had a reason to walk with me at the end of the day. Tonight was the last night I was supposed to see him for a month until the new semester began. If I was going to ask him out, it would have to be tonight. I'd put it off for too long.

Jason told me that he was feeling happy, at least in the moment. He stopped suddenly and reached down to tie his shoelace. It was unusual for him to wear closed-toe shoes at all. He normally wore leather sandals and insisted on walking around barefoot whenever indoors. But it was a cold night. It made sense for him to wear shoes. We continued walking on, silent now, close to each other, occasionally bumping shoulders. I got the sense that he wasn't much for talking at the moment. Conversation was at his behest. I was shy anyway.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked. I grinned. He knew my quirks. He knew one of my quirks, anyway. I had a habit of running my fingers through my beard when thinking or daydreaming. I brought my fingers away from my face. I almost held his hand.

“Nothing. I’m just going to miss you,” I said. I felt strange saying it out loud, perhaps because we were both guys. Perhaps because this was the first time I’d said this to any guy. He said nothing for seven lukewarm seconds, and then he cackled. It felt like an angry cackle. It felt cruel.

“You’re the only one who will, then,” he said. I didn’t know what he’d meant by this, but then he mumbled a “thank you,” and began to walk just a little bit faster than me.

We neared his truck. The light post he’d parked under was the brightest thing in our vicinity. He hugged me, hard, like he’d never done before. I wanted to nuzzle my cheek against his, smooch my beard and his beard together and form a superbeard. His hold on me lessened, so I let him go. He swung off his backpack and placed it on the back of his pickup truck.

“What’s this?” he asked, pointing at something nestled into a corner on the back of his truck. It was feathered and vibrated. I realized it was a bird. Tiny and most likely a fledgling.

“It’s tiny. It’s cute,” I said. “It’s sick,” he said.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. It’s going to die.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe it’s just cold.”

He rolled his eyes. I bit the inside of my lips—another one of my quirks. I wanted to call him an asshole. But instead I scooped the bird into my palms. It flapped its wings a little, but otherwise gave no resistance as I pulled it away from the truck.

“Why don’t you just put it underneath one of the tires of my truck?” asked Jason.

“Why?” I asked.

“There’s no way it’s going to survive the night. At least

this way it will die quickly.” It took me a moment to understand what he was suggesting.

“Could you please just do it?” he asked. There was a strangeness, under the surface of his voice, like desperation.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked.

He hit me in the face, hard, immediately, as though he had anticipated my exact words. I stood, stunned, looking at the side of his face, feeling the afterburn of his bony fist on my cheek. I’d never been hit like that before. He turned to me with an odd expression like surprise or confusion. I watched him get into his truck calmly and start the engine. In the parking lot he drove slowly but once he turned onto the street he floored the gas pedal and sped away.

Somehow, I’d managed to keep hold of the little bird. I didn’t know what to do, so I began walking to my room. I cut across the middle of the street rather than walking to the crosswalk and all the while I kept massaging the back of the bird’s head and neck for calmness. The inside of my lips bled a little bit.

It was an extra-long walk to my room because the gate I normally entered from was closed and I couldn’t get it open without freeing my hands. But once I reached the door to my building I needed to get my key out of my pocket. I knelt to put the bird on the ground for just a moment. But the little bird wouldn’t sit up straight. Its feathers weren’t rising or falling anymore. I didn’t know when it had happened, but Jason had been right. The little bird didn’t last even twenty minutes.

I did think about burying the bird, but there were too many people around and the ground around the residence hall was too firm to dig into without a shovel. I thought about just leaving the bird underneath a bush, but that didn’t seem right either. I knew that if I did that I would feel compelled to check on it, every single day, to see if it was finally gone somehow, and if it wasn’t I would have to witness its decomposition. Instead, I dropped the dead bird into one of the large dumpsters nearby. Somehow that felt better.

I thought of Jason’s face and how his beard had started

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looking like a bird's nest recently. I rubbed my fingers against my palms and they felt dusty and I remembered the time when I was seven and found a fragment of a bird's nest underneath a tree. I brought it to my teacher, excitedly, who screamed and ordered me to dispose of it and accompanied me to the bathroom and washed my hands for me with hot water because birds were dirty, disease-ridden animals. She'd scalded my fingers and for the rest of the day they felt both hot and cold. My face felt simultaneously hot and cold right now, in front of this dirty dumpster. I ran my fingers through my beard and felt dirty now too.

In the bathroom I washed my hands and rubbed soap and water into my beard until it was white and glistening with foam. White and pale like Jason's skin. Pale as if he had been sick or nervous. Glistening like his eyes as if he had been on the verge of tears all night, but I ignored it. I didn't rinse the soap out. I had no shaving gel, but I got rid of my beard that night and haven't grown one since.



### Lunchtime

Sean Dennison

### Nirvana

In prison, when Siddhartha felt a bad anxiety attack coming on, he'd murmur a little Buddhist chant from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Something about attachment and emptiness. He was never sure he was getting the words exactly right, however. Not that it mattered. He'd never been much of a Buddhist. His parents, Mormon backsliders, had chosen his name after the Hermann Hesse novel, which they'd read together in a course on New Age religions when they were undergrads at Berkeley. *He who has found the meaning of existence*, was the Sanskrit gloss. A cruel joke, all things considered. Sid's mother, a dreadlocked oil and auto parts heiress, was a direct descendant of Brigham Young. When she drowned at Monastery Beach in Carmel, Sid was eleven. In lieu of a Latter Day Saints church burial, Sid's father, a PhD dropout who raised honeybees behind the guesthouse, had her body cremated illegally in a huge bonfire amidst a grove of Lombardy Poplars on the family's seaside compound, the remains of a much bigger property that had diminished over several generations. His mother's skin had burned off in less than a minute and Sid remembered how, all that night, the big flames had sawed agitatedly in the wind.

Sid's bunkmate, Mike Jagoda, a lawyer convicted of insider trading, had a squeaky laugh, like somebody twisting an inflated balloon. Almost anything could provoke it. He was a pear-shaped man, and a piddling kleptomaniac, with a jowly, Nixonesque face. Two days earlier, he'd pilfered the Nutty Bars and the Little Debbies that Sid had hidden under his mattress and wolfed them down while Sid was wasting time at his make-work job in the dining hall. Sid, by then, was blowing more than three hundred dollars a month on junk food. In addition to his food-service salary, which was electronically deposited into his prison account, Sid's bookkeeper would regularly drop petty cash into the account as well. By prison standards, Sid was fairly flush. But he'd put on more than

twenty-five pounds in the three months he'd been there and was beginning to look like he had a bowling ball stuffed inside his jumpsuit. When Sid asked Jagoda about the missing Nutty Bars, the guilty party had only cracked up at his accusation. "I don't know what you're talking about, my man," he said. Petty hassles like this occurred all the time. However, things almost never got out of hand. The prison wasn't remotely like what they showed in the movies. It was Camp Cupcake. The brightly colored buildings and open spaces reminded Sid of a college campus. After finishing his shift in the kitchen, Sid, who had the rest of the day to himself, would head straight to the prison library and pore over translations of the *Quran*, the *Buddhist Sutras*, and *The Marvels of Zoroastrianism*. All of this voracious reading had been slowly sensitizing him to his spiritual impoverishment. He began to abhor his strong attachments to the flesh—his low, animal cravings for alcohol, cigarettes, and sex. By the fifth month of his incarceration, he was participating in group psychotherapy and sending off self-abasing letters of apology and regret to his ex-wives. And yet, his efforts at meditation were unavailing as ever.

He'd close his eyes and attempt to focus on his breathing, but he was easily distracted and his mind kept wandering. Twice after the nine P.M. head count, Sid had, of late, been afflicted with such an irresistible cigarette jones that he'd even sneaked off to the 7-eleven up the hill to buy a carton of Kamel Reds. The prison had no perimeter fencing so there was nothing to stop him. He stood in the dark parking lot in his baby blue jumpsuit and puffed away like a chimney. *The Supreme Self is our true identity*, he'd written to his second wife earlier that day, a real estate agent in Redding CA. *Universal and divine*. Even after his fracas with the IRS, Sid figured that he had enough money to last a few decades if he lived frugally. He would buy a small ranch house and grow his own food, he thought. He could do that. He didn't need much. He lit another cigarette. It was a damp, chilly night, and a nearby traffic light momentarily bathed the slick parking lot in an eerie red light, like in a zoo exhibit of nocturnal mammals.



### Judgement Day Charlottesville

Sophia Zarders

### Christian Warrior

I teach in a classroom where pigeons roost just outside the window, on thick stone cinquefoil tracery. At first it was charming. One of the students, during a freewriting session in the first week, got a decent poem out of it. But now, the guttural coos and the shit-smears on the glass merely remind us that, though we are high in the sky, we are fallen.

Two weeks ago, we were workshoping Dan Albright's poem. Dan is a tall surfboard-shaped man in his mid-twenties, fair-skinned, with light brown hair that comes close to a buzz cut. In first-day introductions, he told us that he had worked as an EMT for his suburban municipality until budget cuts led to his being laid off. He has a soft voice that ends up being a rustle, except when the words "Christian" and "Jesus Christ" surface; these words stand up like soldiers, loud and clear. The draft was titled "Christian Warrior"—a squadron of clichés, and as he read it, the students looked down at their desktops. I kept my face as open and neutral as I could, breathing mindfully the way the self-help book by the Buddhist nun instructs.

There was a line about loose women opening their legs wider than the Whore of Babylon. Meghan Pecuto immediately crossed hers, but her skirt was so short that a triangle of peek remained where the tops of her thighs met her skirt. There was a line about the black president being the Antichrist and handing sacks of gold to drug dealers, crack whores, and street thugs. DeVaughn Abbot avoided looking over at Kiera Clark, and she avoided looking over at him, while Jason Litman opened his eyes up wide with disbelief. Jason resembles the version of white Jesus most frequently shown in pictures, right down to the beard; he has long, loosely dreaded hair and alternates between Bob Marley and Che Guevara T-shirts. He's asked me to write him a letter of recommendation to do an internship with the Southern Poverty Law Center. I think the deadline's coming up.

I thought that Jason would be the first to comment on Dan's poem. Instead, Leah Kyne, who hardly ever talks, started off. From inside a nimbus of whitish-blond curls, she said that it was brave of Dan to *come out* as a Christian, that she too was a Christian, but didn't feel comfortable revealing that at a large, urban, secular college. That's when Jason Litman burst out, "Well, what, exactly, *is* a Christian? The word's tossed around a lot by people who don't really sound very much like Jesus Christ." Good point, I was thinking, but since I was the teacher and hate confrontation, I asked the group to focus on the poem's diction and images.

As soon as it came out of my mouth, I realized my question was too broad. I was trying to narrow it down when Renee Bobluis screeched in the corner. She is a pale, small woman with randomly chopped red hair and bobby-pin placement; she hides in oversized hoodie—frequently pulling up the hood in the manner of a Jedi or the Grim Reaper—and always looks as though she's only just stopped crying a second ago. She'd told me on the first day of class that she has bipolar disorder and agoraphobia, and that this might affect her attendance. In the meantime, she was having roommate troubles and some problems with the titration of her medications. Around her exists a slight protective space so that she seems both apart from and a part of the class.

At Renee's feet was one of the pigeons from outside the window who had decided to come in and join us. Just as we were all realizing this was a pigeon at Renee's feet, the pigeon exploded. There was a sound that went with it—like a zipper being pulled on a puffy parka—but first we saw the pigeon explode, sending Renee and her chair back against the radiator, wailing now, wailing and shaking.

Then Dan Albright put his gun back into the holster under his capacious New Jersey Devils hockey shirt and gathered up his papers. It crossed my mind to stop him because I wanted him to be there when I finally found my phone and called campus security and campus security finally arrived. But Renee was chanting in measure with her sobs, "Could.

He. Killed. Me." A few students in the class had stood up to do something just as I had, but we were all thinking the same thing: He has a gun. None of us chased him. Meghan and Kiera were comforting Renee and, soon, all of us were in our own ways.

"I think that guy has some serious issues," said Robert Lentz, an affable business major who wasn't very talented but liked to write rap lyrics about his white suburban childhood using software-generated beats.

"I feel bad for the pigeon," someone else said, and that reminded us of the creature on the floor.

"He died for our sins," Leah said.

"It's not a sin that we didn't jump up and down in praise of Dan's poem," Jason countered.

"That's not what I meant," Leah said. But a security officer came, with city police following on her heels, so we never really got to hear what it was that Leah had meant. We talked to the police for quite a while. It was understood that Dan would be arrested for bringing and using a firearm on campus. I also wondered if being in that classroom would be traumatic for us, especially for Renee.

In the end I decided to stay in the pigeon room, but first we had to have a group session with someone from Behavioral Health. Now, each week, a security guard stands outside the room; he tries to look nonchalant as students walk in. Though it sometimes gets stuffy, we keep the window closed.



**Elbow Room**  
Michael Vizcaino

## You

You like to point out constellations and tell me about them—thinking this makes you smart. But anyone can point out some stuff and rattle off memorized information. When we are in your uncle's big backyard, at night, looking at the sky, I always wanna tell you how I don't care about no stars and no planets and no moons. I just care about you and your brown eyes and how sometimes you touch my thigh when you talk about the babies you wanna have with me. We'll call the first one Ursa you had said one night and I said I don't know about all that. I wish, instead of pointing out stars and shit, you'd pull out some of those maps in your uncle's garage and point out a place, on Earth, you're gonna take me—like north, like New York. You think I'm obsessed with getting out of here and I am. I just wanna get out of here with you. Your uncle says we are too young to be worried about staying together but he understands and that's why he lets us sit side by side in his backyard (sometimes on school nights). My mama doesn't mind so long as we "talking science." That boy is smart my mama always says, and my sister says that you're going places—with or without me. That always makes me panic and she knows it. You don't know it but I'm finally bleeding now (mama was getting worried 'cause at fourteen I shoulda been started) which means if we ever get to doing something in your uncle's backyard, we might could make you your Ursa.

Lately I've been thinking a baby's the only way I might be able to hang on to you, Solomon. I know that sounds silly, especially since you always telling me there's no one like me and telling me (and your brothers) how much you love me and how you swear my name could be a planet's—Zenobia. You had said, when I told you my name, that it sounded like I belonged between Mercury and Venus. You said you loved it! I had wanted to kiss you then (and more!) but I didn't want you thinking I was fast. You never try to shorten my name either, although sometimes I wish you would call me Zee like my

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mama and sister do since you've known me long enough.

Last night, when I came by to your uncle's to see you and those stars I care nothing about, you weren't home. Your uncle said he didn't know where you could be and he shut the door. I panicked just a little and stayed out front for a while until I heard a dog bark and you know how I can't stand no dogs. I ran home 'cause I wasn't trying to get bit. While I was running, though, I was thinking. Thinking how maybe you and me don't have that much in common and how, even though I love you from my top to my toes, I'm never gonna love constellations and comets and craters the way you do. And even though I could listen to you talk all night long about space, maybe you would like someone who does more than just listen. I know this is silly, but my sister always says I should at least pretend, for you, to be into stars and shit. She says that's what girls (and women!) do. I think that's dumb, though. I say the way I love your brown eyes and your hand on my thigh should be enough.

## **Creative Nonfiction**

*“Do you know what they do to guys like that in prison?”*



**Face #2**

Paul Digiandomenico

I'm thirteen years old and my father is driving me to middle school: wild-eyed and high, he zips through the winding hills of Orange County like an escaped convict mid pursuit. It's a typical school day morning with my father; he's listening to the *The Howard Stern Show*, slurping glugs of coffee and Kahlua from a Styrofoam cup, and yelling. Much like Howard Stern, my father yells about everything: Anti-Semitism in Keebler Elves, the overlooked brilliance of performance artist Karen Finley, Frank Zappa, Twinkies, Rosie O'Donnell, and on this morning, pedophilia. My father's morning tirades always spanned a variety of topics, but pedophiles seemed to be the one we circled back to more than others.

It's a warning, but for whom, I do not know.

That year I spend all my time with Nichole and Macy, two fellow middle school train wrecks identical to myself complete with thick black bracelets masking our dripping self-harm scars. One particularly sweltering afternoon, we decide to make the trek from Macy's house to Nichole's house where there is a pool. As we clomp past rows of Spanish style manors with gangly palms that line the front yards, I text my father to let him know we're going to Nichole's house to swim, something I had done multiple times before. Not even ten minutes after we walk to Nichole's house, my father shows up honking erratically and yelling out the car window. He pounds on the front door, screaming and cursing until my attention is caught, insisting that we have to go right-fucking-now. He pulls me from the house, frantic like there's a bomb about to go off inside. He drags me into the car, scowling at my friends who are watching the scene unfold from the front porch.

My father and I never speak about the incident again.

Three years later, I would find out about Nichole's father; the hidden cameras in the bathroom, and the videotapes, hundreds of them, with saccharine titles like "fun pool party"

and “10th birthday celebration.”

It was the first time I came to understand that no one can sniff out a predator better than another predator.

\* \* \*

My parents watch TV together in separate rooms. My mother watches in

the living room on the flat screen, and my father watches the same TV show in the garage on a tiny, obsolete screen from the early 2000's. My father is in fact allowed inside (he's housebroken and everything), but prefers to watch by himself and intermittently wanders into the living room to talk to my mom about whatever they're watching. After years of a lukewarm to an oftentimes hostile and abusive relationship, it's about as close as they are willing to get to each other.

This evening, they sit in their respective rooms, watching a rerun of *To Catch a Predator*, a reality series from 2005 about men who prey on underage girls. I sit perched at our Amish wood kitchen table, balancing a melodramatic young adult novel about lesbians behind my U.S History textbook. On a commercial break, my dad busts through the garage door, an angry, dark storm cloud of weed smoke and unresolved trauma. He accosts my mother, talking rabidly and pacing in circles.

“Can you believe these sick fucks? Sick, filthy fucking monsters. Monsters.”

He's rubbing his temples and repeating himself, and my mother makes a rookie mistake and engages him, pointing out that at least these men had been caught. My father ruptures into a state of pandemonium once again, swearing and keening, working himself near hysterics.

“It doesn't matter. They won't stop.”

It's an ominous statement and it hangs in the air above my mother's head until *To Catch a Predator* comes back on the screen. He returns to his grimy little area in the garage, still muttering, circling an idea too fearful to name yet.

\* \* \*

It's with this same kind of energized ferocity that my father attacks our family therapist a few weeks later. In a cramped, windowless office, he is feral: he charges through the session, barely letting the therapist speak, and leaving my mother wild eyed and squeamish, a terrified rabbit caught in the mouth of a vicious beast. I float above them all, a master of leaving my body without moving a muscle. This dissociative, maladaptive headspace I enter when I'm feeling threatened or afraid protects me.

They fight. They fight from the second we sit down until it's time to leave. They fight about money, drugs, addiction, my mother's botched lap-band surgery, my bad grades, my father's decade long unemployment, and pornography hidden in the guest bathroom. They fight about the parking spot we picked in the lot outside of therapy.

After the session, my father goes outside to wait in the car, completely ignoring my presence as he storms past me in the waiting area, still cursing and muttering to himself. Inside, my mother pays for the appointment and the therapist tells her that she has never feared for her safety the way she did during our first session. The therapist has some questions for my mother.

1. Do you feel that your home is a safe environment?
2. How often are you afraid of your husband?
3. Do you feel you and your daughter are in immediate danger?

There are no answers my mother can give to satisfy the therapist. Are we afraid? Yes. Is our home a safe environment? Probably not. Is the danger immediate? No. We are frogs in a warming pot of water; we edge closer to the precipice every day, but the burn is too slow for us to notice. While being boiled alive, it's hard to remember what the world feels like without heat.

My mother, a pro at having to answer for the poor behavior of men in her life, offers a thin-lipped smile and weak excuses for my father's behavior. Tiredness, hungriness, and day four of sobriety are some of my mother's past excuses for him;

she mumbles something vague along these lines. My mother promises to be in touch for our next session.

We will never return to the therapist's office, but it's important to her that we keep up the illusion that we will. We can never go back because the therapist is circling too close to the truth.

\* \* \*

The first thing I notice is that he's wearing his dead father's sweatshirt. It's

a ratty green thing that reads 15 Brooklyn, homage to Brighton Beach where my grandparents lived until my dad was six and the family moved to Phoenix, Arizona. Phoenix is where it happens.

It's December 18, 2013 and my parents have been separated for two years. I'm home from college for winter break, lying on the couch with my mom, our Bichon Frise, Cocomuff, snoring in between us. Life is gentler now, not perfect, but freer from the chaotic turmoil and pain of living with my father. We're talking about getting Skyline Chili for dinner, a savory-sweet Ohio delicacy consisting of chunky meat goops and lethal amounts of cheese, when the first call comes in. Mom glances at her phone, noting that it's her best friend Donna. Mom doesn't answer, and just as she's telling me she'll call Donna back later, her phone rings again. And again. And again. Her iPhone blinks and buzzes rapidly, all incoming calls and texts from our family and friends in Arizona. She answers one of the calls. It's her younger brother, David. Mom puts him on speaker and before she can say a word, he's off, talking a mile a minute.

"Oh my god Laura, oh my god. I'm so sorry. All those years, we suspected of course, but we never knew for sure, and Rachel, poor Rachel, do you think he ever-?"

Mom cuts him off, begging him to explain what's going on. David doesn't have to explain much, because as it turns out, we can see it for ourselves. Mom hangs up the phone and opens one of the numerous texts she's just received; attached is a video. We lean our heads over the screen and begin.

"This dramatic video shows what happens when men are caught trying to buy sex from someone they think is a minor. In this case, it's two police detectives posing as sixteen-year-old girls." Elizabeth Erwin of ABC 15 Arizona News starts us off quickly, leaving nothing to the imagination.

The video abruptly cuts away from the reporter. All of a sudden, we are inside a sallow hotel room, my father's baldhead and sweatshirt-clad torso clearly visible on a bed. We are entering the room mid scene, the undercover police detective speaking in a teasing lilt.

"I feel like I told you, we're sixteen, we don't want any trouble. Like, we would get in so much trouble."

My father groans and shakes his head, standing up and approaching the girl. His voice is thick with lust and it's hard to understand exactly what he says, but it sounds like, "Okay, well, save it for the cops, just touch me, that's all."

The detective pushes him against the chest as he approaches her and says, "Touch you like that?"

Elizabeth Erwin's professional, clear voice is once again the focus. "These men clearly know they're trying to pay underage girls to have sex with them."

I watch the moments tick past on the little black time bar on the bottom of the screen. It feels like the seconds are going in reverse: I cannot make sense of any of the things I'm seeing. The voiceover continues as my father stumbles over himself, trying with desperation to touch this girl, this child. As the segment featuring him ends, we see his hands circling the front of his pants, unwilling to give up.

\* \* \*

*"Pugs are the goddamn ugliest sons of bitches to ever stand on four legs."*

My father used to tell me this every Christmas, Hanukkah, and birthday when I would inevitably beg for a pug of my own. I would have settled for any kind of dog, a cat, a hamster afflicted with rabies, a plank of wood with googly eyes glued on it. I was an only child in a family of rootless wanderers: we belonged to nowhere and no one but each other, and I was

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starved for companionship. My stuffed animals, each with a name and complex origin story, filled the four-legged hole in my life a bit, but as I got older, a dog felt more crucial. I wanted a pug the most because my father wanted a pug the least.

“The man who *molested me* had pugs,” he told me, vitriol thick on his tongue, accusing, as if I personally had something to do with it. There is something else behind that cruelty, a look on his face, something that my father is masking: it’s shame— a secret unable to be taken back.

I see that look upon his face again in the video I watch with my mother on that frigid December evening. I see it and it makes me wretch. I, too, am ashamed of the way these cycles repeat themselves, of how I am unable to stop it, of my very own DNA.

He does not mean to be, but my father is a rotting husk of man: menacing and fruitless in his sorrow. He knows he cannot expect pity, but he also cannot take blame. It rips him in half, and I stand far away, trying to avoid the splash back of my father’s dark deeds dripping from the walls. On the rare occasion we talk, it’s not a conversation so much as it’s a bombardment of “I’m sorry’s”.

“I’m sorry I ruined my life.”

“I’m sorry I destroyed our family.”

“I’m sorry I’m alone.”

They are apologizes, technically, but they are more for himself than for me. He speaks in almost the same dramatic flourish of his that I remember from years ago, but he is weaker and older and afraid. I don’t know if he is actually sorry, or just sorry he got caught.

## On Guilt and Grooming

Being pampered is my hell. It's not that I don't spring for self-care or certain modes of primping when it feels appropriate. I get my haircut—albeit, not as often as advised; I succumb to the occasional mani-pedi; I've been known to have a choice spot or two waxed.

For all the attendant superficiality these indulgences might imply, I do feel better about myself after all is said and done. The silken feel of a post-salon wash and trim. Pristinely filed and painted nails—a source of pride, rather than the typical, shameful bloody stumps jammed into my pockets or balled-up fists.

Nobody here is arguing the positive after-effects. It's the actual *processes* that kill me: Strangers' paid hands kneading, painting, cleaning—all, ostensibly, to make me look and feel better. Something about it feels so wrong.

Let's take the most brutal example: the mani-pedi (that's a dual manicure-pedicure, for those who've not partaken). Most nail salons have the same setup: large, pleathery chairs (more like thrones; each must weigh about a ton) with massage capabilities; foot-soaking tubs filled with soapy, warm-but-not-too-warm water; soothing lotions; calf rubs with hot stones.

The amount of engineering that goes into making this process "luxurious" and "comfortable" is where my base level of anguish comes into play. I feel intense, panicked pressure to enjoy myself—a feeling which invariably ends in disappointment (the same principle applies to birthdays and New Year's Eve celebrations).

After several minutes of struggling to pick out a nail color—with full knowledge I am keeping the manicurist waiting, and with full knowledge that I will regret whichever hue I choose—I take my seat in one of these behemoth contraptions. Regardless of the temperature or season, I become swiftly sweat-glued to the plasticky material.

My manicurist hands me a massage chair controller with



**Tab › Spaces**  
Michael Vizcaino

as many (or more) incomprehensible buttons as a TI-83 calculator. I pick a setting at random and accidentally select “Knead” at the highest setting. As the remote is whisked away and my manicure begins, I realize that my massage is set for a client two feet shorter than I, and my ass will be subjected to an hour-long bruising.

This lead-up is awkward, yet tolerable—the hour that follows is where the real hell begins: an interminable cocktail of guilt and sheer boredom. Guilt that she, he, or anyone must touch—let alone pumice—my concrete-soled, busted and bunion-afflicted clown feet. Guilt that I am engaging in an epitomizing example of excess and frivolity. Guilt that I am so narcissistic that I think my pedicurist actually gives a shit about MY clown feet when she’s performing her job with the slick professionalism of someone who’s done it hundreds of times before.

Steeped in self-consciousness, I attempt to show my appreciation through occasional eye contact and over-eager smiles, but these manifest as more grimace-like than anything. And yet I persist in screwing my face up in a way that I hope conveys my exact thought process—something like:

*I am appreciative of your efforts, and I hope you're having a wonderful life, and you're doing your job well but I'm just as frustrated to be here as you are! I'm not having THAT much fun, but you're also doing it so fucking well you should get a prize for it, and thank you so much, and I'm sorry, but I really care about you as an individual and not just as someone cutting my cuticles and wrapping my legs in hot perfumed cloths, and I would totally be happy to talk to you, but I don't want you to think I'm doing it just because I have to, so I will keep looking around at things with a vague smile pretending to be interested in them, and if we make eye contact I will broaden that smile to a fucking nightmarish expression of clown-like glee so you know how fucking great you are at your job and probably in life, too.*

Shockingly, this does not endear me to the attendant. Good impressions are not my *métier*.

And then there’s the boredom. It turns out that being unable to use your hands or move around can be somewhat dull. I think longingly of the interminable newsfeed-refreshing I could be doing on my phone, my muscles tweak and tense in frustration. Most salons offer little in the way of entertainment except for small televisions set to crappy soap operas and local news. Nearly 100 percent of the time, these televisions are on mute, without closed-captioning. And so I spend my hour alternately making awkward eye contact with employees, then quickly averting it, gazing at the TV for a moment, and repeating the vicious cycle.

I desperately wish I knew how to make small talk, but I feel paralyzed trying to bridge the gap by subjecting them to whatever stammering sentences I can summon to mind about the weather.

Something I’ve realized is that, while I do enjoy the “finished product” of such experiences—the silky afterglow, the softness, the neatness—my zeal for the outcome rarely (if ever) outweighs the degree of my boredom while undergoing them. Patience is a virtue I lack; therefore, I am a wreck from start to finish.

How much of this fretfulness is legitimate, and how much can be attributed to my Catholic guilt-induced insanity, I’ll never quite know. It’s tough to imagine a world where every fiber of my being doesn’t scream, “You don’t deserve this!” during such a frivolous display. Having all four of my limbs held, primed, and painted, I feel like some hubristic empress of ages past. All I’m missing is the grapes being dropped into my mouth one-by-one by some young, handsome attendant.

There are, however, more legitimate factors to my discomfort. For one thing, I have had no less than four manicurists make fun of my cuticles to my face (whenever I have a manicurist who speaks a language other than English, I am convinced they are also giving my cuticles shit without my knowing—a theory once confirmed when the Spanish cognate *cutícula* punctuated a long, fast stream of words from my manicurist’s mouth). For some reason I have really thick

cuticles; maybe it has something to do with the fact that I voraciously bite the nail and its surrounding skin on a regular basis. One manicurist made a big show of cutting my cuticles, huffing and puffing cartoonishly as the little pile of skin cells heaped up humiliatingly next to my hand. Another manicurist took a more direct approach, uttering one phrase in the course of our time together: “Cuticle a lot.” I’m self-conscious about most things, but it hadn’t even occurred to me to be self-conscious about my cuticles until this revelation.

Furthermore, I have reasons I don’t like strangers touching me—there are a lot of real freaks out there. In fact, last time I went to the salon with my mother, the in-house masseuse was literally led out in handcuffs as we watched. Turns out he had inappropriately touched multiple clients (some underage). The fears are not *all* unfounded.

The same discomfiting principles apply for all kinds of grooming: haircuts, massages, and other such occasions to that same miserable line between paid service and extreme intimacy. Salons and spas are spaces of militant pleasantries—until the attendants get down to whichever unspeakable “business” is at hand. I stave off visits to the hair salon for as long as is considered remotely socially acceptable, delaying the inevitable until my hair is ratty and rope-y (this tactic has garnered negative attention from stylists). I’ve waited in God-knows-how-many cushiony waiting rooms, harmonious pipe music playing over the speakers, dribbles of water cascading down some artfully placed stones—only to be whisked away to a sterile room for that muscle-tweaking, hair-ripping, and altogether demoralizing procedure we call a bikini wax. Heaven forbid we don’t reach all those “hard to get places.” But I can only put off such occasions for so long until I decide I should (or must) indulge.

“Indulge” may be the wrong word—since, in my case, the amount of tension created by such circumstances outweigh nearly all the supposed mental and physical benefits. And, after all is said and done, I can’t fathom why that makes me the weird one.

## **Fiction**



### Visitor

Thomas Gillaspy

### Canvassing

**B**y the time my phone buzzes with the text from Leah, I am already halfway down Weber Street, an unwieldy mass of brochures clamped beneath my elbow. I stand in the thin wavering shade of a grainy telephone pole, hemmed in by rows of townhouses that shimmer forbiddingly beneath the California morning sun.

I retrieve my phone from my back pocket, my fingers clumsy as I struggle to balance the clipboard and the brochures. My pen clatters across the asphalt. Leah's message appears on the screen: *Sorry have a migraine can't make it.*

I exhale, leaning precariously to pick up the pen. Knocking on doors is hard enough with two people, but I hate doing it alone. I hate the awkward moment of standing on the porch, eyeing the scuffed welcome mat and the frog-shaped doorknocker and the brittle hollyhocks lining the walkway. I hate the moment of indecision as I ponder whether they heard the doorbell, whether I should ring again, whether I should knock. These are the questions that plague a canvasser.

They can see me coming, I'm sure. The glossy brochures give it away, or the clipboard, the brisk movements down one walkway, across the street, pausing at the edge of a driveway to squint at the address list, then up the next walkway, my flats slap-slap-slapping against the concrete.

Mostly they don't answer. I stand on their doorstep, an interloper, waiting, eyeing my surroundings with a combination of guilt and curiosity. Sometimes there's a window near the door, a long thin slice into people's lives, and through it I get glimpses of the human paraphernalia inside. A sagging white couch. Picture frames dotting a bookcase. Glinting windchimes above a polka-dotted beanbag chair. I try not to look too closely, resist the temptation to peer inside. No need to seem more invasive than I already am.

Secretly, I like it when the people behind the doors don't

answer, because when they do, I'm stuck trying to talk to them. I stammer and smile, hastening to explain. I can see their eyes moving, their expressions wary as they decide how long they have to listen politely before they cut me off.

Some of them skip politeness altogether. "No," a brunette woman in a long T-shirt said flatly last week, swinging the door shut. Another man said, "I'm sorry, we're not interested," before waving me away. "I'm sorry, we're not interested" is a phrase I've gotten to know quite well lately.

I'm not cut out for this kind of thing. In my regular life, I'm pretty shy—the kind of person who grimaces vaguely at strangers on the street and then avoids eye contact. Whenever I have to give a talk in church, I dread it and put it off and then stumble through it, usually resorting to the scriptures everyone already knows. Some people claim they feel the Spirit while they're speaking up there, with all those dozens of eyes on them, but I don't. I feel the Spirit when I'm in my garden early in the morning, when I'm lying in bed late at night next to my husband, or in those silent moments during Sacrament meeting when everyone's just thinking with their heads bowed, waiting for the metal trays of bread and water to come to them, and no one is talking and no one needs to. I rarely give my testimony out loud, but I feel it every week, sitting there in the silence, feeling the power of the Holy Ghost. And I say it to myself, quietly confirming my place in the universe: I know that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is true.

And this—this knowing that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is true—is how I came to be knocking on doors. It's a Friday morning and there are so many places I'd rather be. But the Church needs me, so here I am.

A week ago, our bishop stood up in church and read a letter from the First Presidency. I don't remember most of it, but several phrases stick in my mind—"marriage ordained of God," "formation of families," "donation of your means and time." I have yet to donate means, but time, at least, I have: my husband Frank's medical fellowship has allowed me to leave my job as a substitute kindergarten teacher and stay at home.

Ideally, I'd be getting pregnant right about now, but that's not happening yet, so I might as well be knocking on doors.

I've been assigned as a "walker," which means I'm supposed to canvas two adjoining ZIP codes. It's already hot outside, even though I tried to time it so I wouldn't be stuck on sidewalks in the bad part of the day. Gable Springs has been going through a heat wave lately—well, so what else is new—and the usual warnings have been issued: stay inside, no strenuous exercise, don't water your grass, and so on. My white blouse sticks to the back of my neck, and the flats pinch my feet. It doesn't help that I was an idiot today and managed to forget my water bottle. I've only knocked on three doors so far and my throat is already dry.

No one has answered yet. I frown at the address list, flipping through it. So many houses, and it doesn't help that half of them don't have house numbers. I wander in a confused zigzag around the neighborhood until I finally stumble upon 7 Weber Street, a brick ranch house with a brown porch and a cherry tree in the front yard. I drag myself across the unwatered grass—they're following the Gable Springs instructions, at least—and knock on the polished wood door. There's a tiny bit of shade beneath the awning. I pull my elbows in, trying to fit inside it. The sunshine lurks just at the edges of my skin.

They're not going to answer. I am already anticipating the next house on my list, 11 Antelope Drive. According to the squiggly map, Antelope Drive is a tiny non-street snaking up counterintuitively behind the foothills. As I stare at the address, I can feel my motivation sagging like a deflated balloon. If I can't handle the flat neighborhoods, there's no way either my shoes or my parched throat will survive the altitude.

The door swings open, and a man with sand-colored hair and a Seahawks T-shirt frowns at me.

"Hello," I say, looking up quickly from the list. "Um, hi." I laugh nervously. "I'm wondering if I can take just a moment of your time."

“What for?” I detect a hint of barbed wire in his voice.

I take a deep breath and say, “Do you believe that marriage was created by God?”

“Depends. Which God?” His eyes move down to the flyers in my hands.

I clench them reflexively to my chest—spoiler alert! spoiler alert!—and plunge on. “Because Proposition 8 would restore the definition of marriage God intended. Do you believe marriage—” I break off as a tall Latino man moves out of the hallway.

“Steve?” He peers at me, stopping a few inches behind the man who answered the door.

I say, “Um.”

Too late, though, because the sandy-haired man has finally figured out what I’m about. “You have no business being at this house,” he says.

“Steve,” says the other man. “Come on. It’s okay.” He touches Steve’s arm, and I recognize the gesture: it’s the one I use to offer silent comfort to my husband when he’s angry, when he’s frustrated, when he’s had a bad day at work.

Steve jerks away. “No, it’s not okay!” He is livid, all tense energy, and there’s nowhere to hide. “How dare you show up at my door and preach this kind of hate—” He gestures at the brochures. “You people always look so nice and harmless, but I see right through you. You say you’re helping families? I don’t see you helping my family.”

I’m horrified. I’ve never encountered a social situation like this before. “I—I—”

Steve shakes his head. “You know what, I don’t have to deal with this.” He stalks away. I can hear the clunk-clunk-clunk of his weight on a staircase, receding into the unseen bowels of the house.

I am shaking. My throat is crying out for water. I know I should turn and walk away, but I’m frozen on the porch. The Latino man stares at me, his hand braced against the doorframe.

“You’re Mormon, aren’t you?” he says.

I nod. I’m clenching my flyers, close to tears.

“My brother was a Mormon,” he says. I blink. “Yeah, he went on a mission and everything. They sent him to Nevada, which I thought was a ripoff. Super boring.”

I grin. “Yeah, that is pretty boring.” I laugh, trying to get back some semblance of normalcy.

“And people were assholes to him. They slammed doors, they swore at him like all the time . . .” He pauses. “But it’s really hard not to be an asshole when someone comes to your door and attacks who you are, you know?”

I don’t really know. Not at all. I swallow, trying to figure out if I can get the conversation back on track. “We’re not anti-gay,” I say. “We’re pro-marriage.” This was one of the lines given to me by the other volunteers. The man stares at me with his brow furrowed.

“Really?” he says. “Cause you’re definitely not pro my marriage.”

I open my mouth, then close it. “No, not really,” I say. My throat feels dryer than ever. I look down at my flyers, sleek blue. A well-groomed family—man, woman, little yellow-haired girl—shine up at me from the front cover. They are immaculate and joyful and mocking, and for a moment, I hate them.

“Hang on,” the man says abruptly, disappearing down the hallway. I hover in the doorway uncertainly. The bookcase beyond the door holds a loosely-stacked bevy of how-to books—everything from cooking to tennis to auto repair. A tiny cuckoo clock ticks above the bookcase, its repetition soothing.

The man reappears with a plastic water bottle. “It’s too damn hot out there,” he says, holding it out. “Stay safe, okay?”

I take it. “Thanks.” And I can’t resist: I immediately unscrew the cap and take a long gulp. It tastes like salvation, like those early mornings in the garden when I feel my Heavenly Father all around me, protecting me, loving me, reminding me why I’m alive.

“Hey,” he calls as I’m walking down the driveway. I turn. “I hope your proposition fails.”

I pause, confused. His tone sounds like he’s wishing me

luck, but his words say the opposite. I don't have an answer for him, so I just nod and walk away.

11 Antelope Drive beckons. I should keep going up Weber, but instead I walk to the end of the street and turn the corner sharply. A house on the cul-de-sac has a butter-yellow door and trimmed gables. It looks friendly. Friendly is what I need right now. I walk up the front lawn and raise my hand to knock.

My fist wavers in midair. My other hand clenches the neck of the water bottle. It's too hot. I can't think. When I close my eyes, I can see the man who gave me water touching his partner's arm. I've touched my husband's arm that way so many times: *Frank, calm down.*

I lower my fist. It's too hot for this, and besides, Leah isn't here. I take a step back from the yellow door and turn to walk home. Perhaps I will try again tomorrow.

Leah has abandoned me. The rumor in church is that she's met a man, and apparently, her romance takes precedence over our canvassing mission. I am left to cover the ZIP codes alone.

I knock doors on Monday and Wednesday mornings. As the summer progresses, the address lists get longer instead of shorter. When I deliver the completed ones back to the church volunteers, they praise my work, then pass me another heaping stack of names. In this, as in so many other things, the reward for doing good work is more work.

Weber Street is the gateway road into one of the main neighborhoods I've been assigned, so I often find myself walking it. Occasionally, I will see the man who gave me water pulling his Subaru into the driveway or reading on his front porch. He glances up, meets my eyes, looks away. He always looks startled and mildly bemused, as if he's caught sight of an exotic bird. I trudge past his driveway, clutching my heavy stack of flyers, trying to look confident and indifferent.

After a few weeks of this, I walk past 7 Weber Street one day to find him kneeling in the dirt patch between the driveway and the yard, peeling the leaves off a sad skinny row of

frayed-looking daffodils.

"You're doing that wrong," I say without thinking.

He glances up. "Yeah, that's pretty much your whole motto, isn't it?"

"You're not supposed to prune them until they turn brown." I know this because gardening is a family sport. My grandfather taught my mother, who taught me.

He squints at the shorn leaves. "You could be right," he says. "Normally it's Steve who does this kind of thing."

I hover awkwardly at the edge of the driveway. The elms with their hundreds of dancing leaves toss tiny circles of shade in my direction. I glance down at my list, which is still several columns long.

"How's the hate-preaching going?" the man asks.

I shrug. "Not great."

"Good."

If I were a bit more quick-witted, I'd create some sort of twist in the conversation. I'd know just the right thing to say to make him understand that I am not preaching hate, but love. That it's the protection of families I care about, the most sacred thing in the entire world, even though I have yet to successfully create one of my own. But the heat has made my thoughts slow and muddy, and my legs ache in anticipation of the foothill roads.

"We're not supposed to be growing things in the desert anyway," the man says, setting down his trowel. It cuts into reluctant dry dirt, sending a spray of tiny rocks across the driveway.

This, too, I disagree with. Our entire purpose is to grow—to multiply, to plant, to inhabit barren places and turn them into gardens. "Good luck with the daffodils," I say, and turn to walk away.

Eventually, I learn that the man who gave me water has a name. It's Emilio, Milo for short.

He learns my name too, and he doesn't hesitate to use it. "Hey, Marissa," he'll shout as I'm walking by. "I hope your

proposition fails.”

If this were coming from anyone else, it would be heckling. As it is, it feels strangely comforting, a benign routine that brackets the sometimes nerve-wracking uncertainty of going door to door. We are not friends, not exactly, but we have abandoned the premise of pretending to ignore one another.

My feigned confidence and indifference are both shattered in early July when I trip over a piece of loose gravel in the road. My knee is stained with glittering red from the asphalt, and my flyers spill out of the rubber band, their pages fluttering on the ground like the confused wings of moths.

Milo watches me scramble after the flyers, leaning back in his orange-and purple-striped lawn chair. I get the impression he’s enjoying it. At some point, though, he asks if I am bleeding and I say no, I’m fine, and he sighs loudly and puts down his book. A leathery garden hose coils in the shadow of the front steps, a shape to strike fear into any desert-dweller who’s ever found a snake in their lawn. Milo unfurls it and gestures me to come over.

“You’re really not great at this walking around thing,” he says later as I sit on the bottom step, framing an owl-patterned Band-Aid over the newly-pink skin of my knee.

I laugh in spite of myself. The flyers are piled at the opposite edge of the lawn, a blue marker signaling the edge of property.

A few days later, I bring him a Tupperware container of no-bake oatmeal cookies. They’re meant as a thank-you, an expression of vague polite gratitude. I plan to drop them off while barely breaking stride up the street. Instead, I end up eating two of them myself, the Tupperware perched on the deck railing as we talk.

Through veiled questions that Milo clearly understands the nature of immediately, I learn that Steve works some administrative job at the community college and is gone all day. This piece of information makes it much easier to linger at the edge of 7 Weber Street. Occasionally, Milo asks for my help with the plants, and I direct him while taking a

welcome break in the cherry tree shade. Milo works from home, which as far as I can tell means he works in bits and pieces, sneaking breaks outside or with his books, snatching brisk walks, clicking around aimlessly on social media with the laptop perched on the lawn chair. The heat doesn’t seem to bother him; his skin shines brown and his hair slicks back across his long forehead, but he seems impervious to the cross lethargy that has invaded the rest of Gable Springs. I envy his unflappable good nature.

Through our mutual procrastination toward the jobs we should be doing, we learn more about each other than either of us probably intended to find out. He knows I am trying to get pregnant and have had no luck for almost a year. I suspect he also knows how much this bothers me, even though I try to speak lightly, as if the whole business of trying to conceive a child were a massive joke. He knows that my beagle died in April and that I still feel a quick, warm flash of loss every time I see a dog bounding across one of the yards. He knows that Frank works long hours and comes home exhausted every night, his khaki coat wrinkled and his face drawn.

I know that Milo is left-handed, allergic to beans, a bookworm stuck in a marketing job. I know that he and Steve will drive hours on their day off just to visit one tiny crab shack in Pismo Beach. I know his parents live in Santa Barbara and that they don’t talk to him. He doesn’t say why, but I can guess.

We both studiously avoid any mention of gayness—specifically, the fact that he is gay, and that I believe his gayness is wrong.

The flyers stay stacked at the edge of the yard. Eventually, they recapture my attention, and I reluctantly move to gather them and keep on my way. The bishop keeps reminding us how important it is for us to gather support. We are the last defense of the family, he tells us from behind the podium every week. And if family doesn’t matter, nothing does.

“Absolutely,” a woman says three blocks away from where Milo lives. “I’ll sign whatever you have.” She reaches for a

brochure, scanning the red fonts and the pictures. “I mean, have you seen the way they parade it around? What makes them think that’s okay?”

I laugh, but it sounds like a moan. A French bulldog peeps his tiny black nose through the curtains next to the door. It moves through the filmy material as if disoriented, its movements frenetic and distressed. I tear my eyes away from the window and hand the woman the clipboard.

Milo becomes less talkative as the summer moves on. There is no reason to give gardening tips now; it will be cold soon, time to shore up for winter. Wind gusts the cherry tree leaves as I sit cross-legged in the shade.

“I should go,” I say one day after a particularly halting conversation.

“You don’t have to do it, you know,” he says as I reach for the clipboard and drag myself to my feet.

“Do what?”

“Knock on doors.”

And I know then that he knows how much I hate it, the canvassing—even though I’ve never said a word, even though I’ve tried to speak of it in vague, upbeat terms, when I spoke of it at all—he heard the things I didn’t say.

“Just stay home.” His eyes are fastened to the deck railing, and I can hear the struggle in his voice to stay casual, to make it sound like an offhand suggestion.

I snag the last of the brochures and stand up, my fingers clenched around the glossy pile. Milo’s breath rushes out. He leans back in his wooden lawn chair, his bare feet perched between the spokes of the railing, a red baseball cap shading his eyes from the sun. He really doesn’t look all that gay. But I am coming to realize that I don’t actually know what gay looks like. I feel certain, suddenly, that this is the kind of person they warn you about in church, the non-believer, the one false note in your otherwise on-pitch life—the person to stay away from, lest they lead you astray.

“Good luck with the daffodils,” I say. It’s become my

standard way of saying goodbye.

He shakes his head, still not looking at me. After a moment, he smirks. “I hope your proposition fails.”

The proposition doesn’t fail.

I get the news from Leah, who, after months of non-involvement, has suddenly decided to feel like she had an instrumental part in the whole thing. She calls me in excitement after the voting results are announced in November. Frank and I are lounging on our brown velvet couch when the phone rings, watching Obama give his four-more-years speech on TV.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Leah says, her voice tinny through the earpiece.

“Mmm,” I say. “Yeah. That’s great.”

Frank is watching me from the couch. “Good news?” he asks as I hang up the phone.

I smile and nod. It’s been a rare day off for him, and I’ve cherished every moment of it. I sit down and lean my head against his shoulder, my hair spilling across his arm. He puts an arm around me. I can feel his hand moving, kneading against my side, a slow, subtle progression toward my chest. Perhaps tonight, I think, closing my eyes in relief and contentment and something else I can’t quite name. Perhaps tonight we will finally start our family . . .

There is no reason to walk up Weber Street now—no doors to knock on, no address lists, no scripts with crumpled pages—but I go back anyway. The grass is wilted in Milo’s front yard, the daffodils long gone. I walk past the brown porch and hesitate, my fist raised to knock on the door.

I haven’t been here in months. As summer melted into a sluggish autumn that brought no relief, Milo found more reasons to focus on work. I marched up the street without stopping, perhaps offering a quick wave as I walked by. I was never able to shake the cold suspicion that had gripped me—the suspicion that to Milo, I was a number in a voting poll, just

as he had once been to me. That the water, the Band-Aid, the conversations in the driveway, were all so he could talk me out of what I believed. And maybe there were things he couldn't shake either, because he stopped calling my name as I walked past.

Somewhere beyond the polished wood door, I imagine I can hear the cuckoo clock, its relentless ticking heartbeat warning me away. I don't know what I want to say, even. I don't know why I'm here. I have my victory, but it tastes sour. I no longer need to knock on doors, but I feel no relief. I imagine Milo and Steve inside the ranch house, watching a movie or a Seahawks game, head resting on shoulder, perhaps, their bodies tangled carelessly on the couch. My mind shies away from that image.

As I stand there caught in indecision, my fist raised, the door swings open, and Milo stops short in the doorway. He is clearly on his way out, bundled in November gear and carrying a reusable shopping bag. His face darkens with surprise when he sees me.

"Get out of here," he says.

"But—"

"Look, you got what you wanted, okay? Now get out of here." He turns his heavy-coat back to me, twisting his key in the lock.

"Milo—"

"Don't." His voice is sharp.

"I didn't do this," I say. "All I did was knock on a few doors—"

"A few doors?" Milo turns to me. "Marissa, if you didn't do this, then who do you think did?"

I stare at him, groping for words. He pushes past me and clambers down the cold concrete stairs. The Subaru door slams and he peels away, the car an angry blue blur around the corner. I am left on the doorstep, fighting the urge to knock again, even though I know no one is there. I want to tell him I'm sorry. I want to explain to him why he's wrong. I want to say, *Good luck with the daffodils.*

I trudge across the yard and down the street, and climb into my lonely parked car at the end of the cul-de-sac, and drive away.

My garden is a marvel in springtime. Tangles of hyacinths shaded by looming bearded irises, shy daylilies opening like doilies, pastel thin-petaled asters with yellow centers like small suns, sea lavender spraying in clumps, trumpeting red fuchsia and the glowing bird-of-paradise rearing up like a sea monster above a chaotic thriving sea.

In spring the garden is teeming with life. In the winter it is all dry sprigs, dirt packed beneath the cold. A stone bench faces stiff brown weeds. A plastic frog peeps out through the sparse foliage, his lips curved up in a smile.

I kneel in my garden and try to pray. *Dear Heavenly Father*  
...

I can't find the words.

*Dear Heavenly Father* . . .

The garden is silent.

I have never felt silence, not in all my years of praying. Even when I haven't known an answer, I have never once doubted that He does.

I reach for the nearest plant and tug at its base. The stalk gives easily, releasing, shooting upward like a rocket rising from Earth. I reach for my trowel, propped dormant against the back wall, and stab the ground. I attack the dahlias until they are nothing but broken stems and chunks of winter dirt. Next comes the zinnias, and then the roses, then the chrysanthemums. I work methodically, naming them in my head: *zinnias*, *roses*, *chrysanthemums*. They are old friends, and I tear them apart.

As the sun slants dimly across our white backyard fence, I set down the trowel and draw my knees up to my chest. Uprooted stalks surround me like pick-up sticks, a wild tangle across the ground. I know that Frank will be home in a few hours, and he'll see that the garden has been destroyed, and I won't be able to tell him why.



**December**  
KC Geronimo

## Recuerdos

Everything smells like urine. Overnight, Lola's father has torn his diaper off and now the damp bedding is tangled—suspended—over the bed rail. He is frailer now than even a week ago, but when Lola guides him to the bathroom, he catches her ponytail in a determined grip and shouts, “You’re hurting me!” when she pries his fingers loose. She washes him on the toilet, soaking a hand towel in soapy water and wringing it out over his lap. “I’m cold,” he says, though the heater is blowing, and Lola says, “I’m going as fast as I can.”

Mayra arrives at lunchtime. She offers him a puree of butternut squash, but when he feels the spoon at his mouth, he purses his lips and turns his head away. “He doesn’t want to eat,” Mayra says, setting the bowl on the bedside table, and Lola tells her sister, “He can’t taste anything.” Lola has been coming every day, riding the 232, retrieving the key from under the mat and letting herself inside. She’s been away for years, but the house is the same, the carpet still a muddy-colored shag, the twin plaid sofas still sagging, side by side, in the living room. Her mother has been gone so long there’s hardly a trace of her.

The washing machine is always running now, a continuous succession of soiled housecoats, slipper socks, towels, underpads. Lola’s hands are dry from the folding. When the bed sheets come out of the dryer, she and Mayra stand in the kitchen bearing opposite ends, drawing them together, pinching the corners, passing them to each other in silence.

Lola’s father has stopped recognizing a straw and she’s started using a dropper to give him water. Sometimes he doesn’t swallow and she winds up sponging it out with a lemon-flavored swab, sweeping the wand over a charred-looking spot the size of a penny that’s appeared in the middle of his tongue. He calls out for his cat, and an orange tabby with a crooked tail pokes its head in the door, but when it sees Lola, it flattens its ears and slinks away. It never did like

her, she remembers, and she didn't like it either. Lola pulls a plush bear from her knapsack and sets it on her father's chest. "Here's Kitty," she says, positioning his hand on the stuffed animal and guiding it down the bear's furry back, and he whispers, "My *gato*."

While her father sleeps, Lola roams the house, opening drawers, sifting through stacks of old papers. In a wood box marked *Recuerdos*, she finds his wedding ring, his green card, a black- and-white photo of him as a child, standing with his brother and sisters at the gates of the family's avocado farm, chewing the end of a sugarcane shoot. In the bedroom she once shared with Mayra, some of her sister's clothes are still hanging in the closet: a frizzy black faux-fur coat, a lizard-printed dress, a pair of patchwork jeans. One of Lola's leather purses is hanging, lopsided, from a hook on the door. She reaches into its pockets to see if there's anything left inside and when she pulls her hand out, her fingertips are covered in tobacco flakes.

\* \* \*

When Lola and Mayra were young, people mistook them for twins. They had the same heavy-lidded eyes, the same kinky, black hair. They spoke in pig Latin and gibberish, dared each other to swim the length of the YMCA pool without taking a breath. Summers, they spent the night in a makeshift clubhouse in the backyard, and when they were teenagers, they used the fort to smoke and drink and entertain. The girls had furnished it with a cast-off couch and easy chair, dragged off the sidewalk, down the block, through the alleyway.

Lola had been in love with an older boy with greased hair and a low-rider bicycle, and he and his cousin came over almost every night. In anticipation, she lined her eyes and put on a coat of red lipstick. Lola was a different person when the boys were there: clever, adventuresome, beguiling. She and the boy would disappear into the dark garden, and the cousin would stay behind with Mayra. He called her his *ruca*, his *hyna*, and Mayra was afraid to tell him no. Pinning her with his weight, his hands went everywhere. Lola would return home

late, flushed, smelling of Tres Flores, and collapse into the chair. Breathlessly, she'd recall how the boy had kissed her earlobes, her fingertips, the arches of her feet, and Mayra would sit across from her, hugging her knees to her chest. "Don't you want to hear everything?" Lola would ask, lighting a menthol cigarette, and when she got no answer, she'd say, "You're just jealous."

\* \* \*

Mayra calls to Lola, "He needs to go to the bathroom!" and Lola pads down the hall. Mayra holds up the back of the housecoat while Lola does the wiping. Lola has discovered a trick: if she puts two latex gloves on her right hand, she can pull off the outside one when it's dirty and use a fresh glove to apply the diaper cream. Mayra looks away while Lola pulls the diaper up over her father's loose skin and asks him, "Are you ready to go back to bed?"

He's started to forget how to walk. Lola and Mayra loop a bed sheet under his armpits and lift him, sharing his weight, pushing his feet along when they drag behind. They've learned to use the underpad to move him along the length of the bed: they each hold two corners, count to three, and slide. "You're not pulling hard enough," Mayra says, and Lola says, "I'm trying." When Lola's father cries out in pain, she retrieves a pre-filled morphine syringe from the bathroom cabinet and empties it into the side of his mouth. She watches as the liquid pools in the space between his cheek and gums and then dissipates, leaving a shimmering film behind.

Lola sits by her father's bed while he sleeps. He's dreaming—laughing—and he waves his arm and shouts for her mother. "Socorro!" he cries, and then he's quiet, his eyes welling with tears. There was a time he had good days and bad days, but now Lola thinks she's put too much faith in the illness's power to wax and wane. The last time he was lucid, he wanted to talk to his brother, and she'd gotten him on the phone. She could hear her uncle through the receiver, and listening to the men talk, she was struck by the ease of their conversation. Alternating between Spanish and English, they

completed each other's sentences. Lola's father remembered everything.

\* \* \*

Before her mother died, Lola visited her in Oakland. Lola had said she was on her way to tour a college in Oregon, but really, she went because she couldn't imagine what could be keeping her mother away. The directions Lola's mother had given her were rambling and disjointed, and Lola barely found her way from the Amtrak station. Looking at the address, she thought it would be a second-floor apartment, but as she drew closer, she saw that the unit number was an upstairs motel room. Waiting for an answer at the door, she felt she might have to perform some valiant feat to bring her mother home.

A man with a shaggy gray mustache opened the door, and with his free hand, crushed a can of malt liquor on his thigh and pitched it over Lola's head into the parking lot below. "You're Socorro's daughter," he said. "I seen a picture." The room was dark except for the flickering of a tiny TV set. Lola's mother was there, sitting cross-legged in bed, wearing only a man's undershirt. Her cheekbones were more pronounced than Lola remembered, and she looked haggard. She patted the bed and said, "Come sit."

She lit a cigarette asked how Lola was doing. She asked about Lola's schooling and whether or not she had graduated. She asked about Mayra, and then about her own parents, who were both still alive, but barely. She recounted, in detail, her courtship with the mustachioed man, and asked if Lola had a boyfriend. On the train, Lola had rehearsed all the things she wanted to ask her mother, but in the end, she didn't ask any of them. After a while, Lola's mother shuffled into the bathroom. The soles of her feet were nearly black. Lola sat silently at the edge of the bed while her mother's boyfriend chuckled at a game show. Each time the host made a joke, he huffed and repeated the punch line under his breath. When it had been almost forty-five minutes and Lola's mother still hadn't emerged, Lola got up and walked out of the room, into the sunlight. She felt warm and exhilarated, and she stopped into

a liquor store and bought herself a bottle of lemonade, which she drank in gulps on the sidewalk. At the train station, she called Mayra from a payphone. "How's Mom?" Mayra asked, and Lola said, "She's fine." Mayra's voice was expectant and Lola continued brightly, "Don't worry. She'll be home soon."

\* \* \*

Lola calls out for Mayra. Her father needs to go to the bathroom again, and she and Mayra pull him up with the sheet. They put him on the toilet but instead of straightening, he slumps to the side, and Lola hooks him under the arms and lifts while Mayra pushes him back by the knees. "He's falling," Mayra says, and Lola says, "I can see!" His body goes rigid, and the back of his head knocks against the toilet tank. "You're letting him hit his head!" Mayra cries. "What am I supposed to do?" Lola says. He's vibrating—convulsing—and Lola can't bear his weight anymore. "We need to lie him down," she says, and they lower him onto the floor. His eyes are half open, drifting, and he's urinated on the floor. "Are you awake?" Mayra asks him, and after a second, he says, "I am."

\* \* \*

Lola's mother never did come back. Letters arrived from time to time, and then, after a while, they stopped. Lola left home and Mayra stayed behind, and their father, after he retired, spent most of his time in his workshop. There was a bench with a vise, a radial saw, and a pegboard wall, on which hung an array of tools. There was an old AM radio and he listened to talk shows. He woke up early and worked until sundown, stopping only to drink black coffee and eat bologna-and-American-cheese sandwiches. Growing up on the farm, he had learned to take advantage of the daylight hours.

He made furniture. He made shelves and bookcases and chests of drawers. He stained or varnished them, and when they were done, he gave them away. Once, Mayra asked why he didn't sell them, when she had wandered out into the garage, looking for a bottle of glue. She was standing in the doorway holding the broken base of a lamp, kicking wood chips across the floor with her bare toe. Her father took off

his glasses and rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand. He was bleeding from a cut on his knuckle, and the hairs on his forearms were covered in shavings. He said he wanted to leave something behind. He wanted people to think of him after he was gone, when the only thing left of him was dust.

\* \* \*

The nurse comes in the evening, a small Filipino woman with an armful of jangling bracelets. She tries to rouse Lola's father, but he sleeps through the exam. She pulls up his housecoat and points to his shins. "See these purple marks?" she says. "The blood is being shunted away from the extremities; the body is trying to preserve its vital organs. When the marks move up toward the knees," she says. "It usually means we only have a few hours or a maybe few days left." Mayra snuffles and the nurse squeezes her shoulder.

When the nurse is gone, Lola pulls the blanket back and takes one of her father's hands in hers. His skin is smooth and thin, and the veins are raised up on its surface like a mess of tangled yarn. "His fingernails are dirty," Lola says, and Mayra disappears into the bathroom and returns with a bowl of warm water, a nail brush, a washcloth. Lola takes the bowl and balances it above her father's chest while Mayra dips his fingers in and out of the water, passing the brush under the brittle nails, drying them, pressing each one, in turn, against the hem of the towel.

It's late, and Lola sits by her father's bed and watches him sleep. His breathing has grown ragged. Every few minutes, there's a long pause and Lola holds her own breath and leans closer, listening. The cat, who's been outside all day, appears at a hole in the window screen and jumps onto the edge of the bed. It freezes and stares at Lola, its yellow eyes dilated in surprise, and then gingerly steps across the blankets and settles between Lola's father's feet. It begins to wash itself, drawing its tongue down the length of its back, licking its paws and circling them over its face. Lola reaches her hand out and the cat stretches toward her, curious, its white whiskers grazing her fingers like a whisper, a secret, a memory.

## Interviews

## Interview with Gail Wronsky

By Marissa Sumiré

October 2017

*Gail Wronsky is the author or translator of twelve books of poetry and prose, including Dying for Beauty, Poems for Infidels, So Quick Bright Things, and her most recent collection, Imperfect Pastorals, published in October 2017. She also teaches Women's Literature and Creative Writing at Loyola Marymount University (LMU). In October, Wronsky read from Imperfect Pastorals at CSULB's Anatol Center, and RipRap's Senior Multimedia Reporter, Marissa Sumiré, corresponded with her over email in the following weeks.*

**RipRap:** As I was doing some googling about you, I came across an interview on Poetry.LA with you and Mariano Zaro. In it you discussed the question of "What is LA poetry?" At the time, you called it "a west coast lyrical longing." I found this idea fascinating, especially being a writer who loves LA, though I am not from here either. I wanted to know more about what you mean by the west coast lyric. As you have now lived in Los Angeles for (I believe) over twenty years, what have you discovered is unique or a characteristic of LA poets?

**Gail Wronsky:** It's almost impossible to describe or define an LA poetry—there are microclimates of it everywhere. There's anecdotal humorous poetry, there's wild experimentation, there's political intensity. I'm not sure what I meant by "a west coast lyrical longing," but I do think we Angelenos tend to be more lyrical than narrative, more hungry than satisfied. What impressed me most about LA poetry when I moved here continues to impress me, and that is that we don't really give much of a damn about what's going on in poetry on the east coast. In the best way, we really don't take our cues from the east coast poets.



Courtesy of Gail Wronsky

**RR:** Your new poetry collection, *Imperfect Pastorals*, has many poems about your home in Topanga Canyon, a beautiful and strange town in the Santa Monica Mountains. Many of your poems describe trees, creeks, skies and the like. What draws you to the natural world in your writing?

**GW:** It seems to me that the natural world is the basis for everything in our lives. We walk on the ground; we eat food the earth provides us. Even though I spend a lot of time in my head, as a poet and as a person, I think it's important to keep ourselves attuned to the world of plants and animals and rocks and rivers. I learned that from Gary Snyder many years ago and I believe that that constant contact with the natural world has saved me from unhappiness and despair on many occasions. I'm having, you might have been able to tell from my book, a love affair with a 300-year old oak tree by my house.

**RR:** Almost all of the poems in this collection begin or are titled with a line from Virgil. What inspired you to do this?

**GW:** I turned to Virgil because I wanted a return to the natural world in my work—my most recent books before this one had been influenced more by surrealism, by culture, and by interpersonal relationships than by nature, although nature was always present. Virgil can write about plowing a field and make it gorgeous and resonant. I wanted to be able to do that kind of thing in my poems. It's a crucial time in our country in terms of the environment—I wanted to bring the earth more visibly back into my work. Also, more simply, reading Virgil, I kept coming across lines that I thought would make great titles, lines that I wanted to investigate in poems.

**RR:** What is the common thread or theme that you sought (or discovered) as you wrote this collection? How did you choose which poems to include, or not, and how to arrange them?

**GW:** The poet is the last person you should ask to describe the theme of a book of poems! But, I'll try: nature as an antidote to despair. Most of the poems I actually finish when I'm writing a book of poems end up in the book—there are many poems I abandon before finishing. I arrange poems intuitively in a manuscript. I don't have a formula, or a theory, about organizing a book. I pick the first one, the one I think will be a good introduction to the book, then spread them all out and piece them together in a way that I think best allows the poems to talk to each other.

**RR:** Some of your work alludes to biblical themes or passages as well as ideas of reincarnation from eastern religions. What role does spirituality play in your writing? Is it something you think about often? Does your interest in surrealism connect with your spirituality?

**GW:** I was raised in a variety of Christian religions, all of which had the Bible in common. So Bible verses got into my head at an early age and many of them have lingered there. They are beautiful bits of poetry, like phrases from Shakespeare, that I consider to be part of my inner anthology. Post childhood, I've studied eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism) and have adopted many of the beliefs from those into my own hodge-podge of spirituality. I love the emptiness school of Buddhism, for example, and the sense that Hindus have of time and eternity. These ideas inspire me to imagine vast worlds, vast possibilities. I explored this in my chapbook *Blue Shadow Behind Everything Dazzling*, written after I spent half a year in India. I believe that my experiences with those religions/philosophies have given my poems a spaciousness they wouldn't otherwise have had. Surrealism is also about possibility, so, yes, there is a connection between my spirituality and my "belief" in surrealism. There are other worlds, other realities, and part of the poet's task is to discover them.

**RR:** I love the cover art of *Imperfect Pastorals*. How did you and Gronk get to know each other? What is the cover art depicting and how does it relate to the theme of your collection?

**GW:** Finally, an easy question! Gronk and I met through the poet Ramón García, an Angeleno who I met in Prague while I was teaching in the Prague Summer Program. Gronk is an incredibly generous artist, who has given me several book covers. We share a love of the absurd, of B-movies, of French writers. I like to say that the cover art on *Imperfect Pastorals* is a picture of me and my dog, Nadine. Of course it's not, but I loved the quirky, plant-like creature. I felt an affinity to her, and felt that she represented something of the playfulness and oddness I think is in these poems.

**RR:** At LMU, you teach a woman's literature class, and you identify as a feminist. How does your knowledge of women's literature and your ideologies about feminism play into your poetry?

**GW:** I am a feminist, and have been since my high school days, whether it's been in or out of fashion to say so. I love it that now it's absolutely acceptable and even unremarkable to say you're a feminist. My students say it now with pride and matter-of-factness about themselves. I teach classes in women's literature every chance I get because I love it, and also because it is still under-taught, under-represented on syllabi and in course descriptions. How can you not want to know what all of these women were thinking about and writing about all these years? And yes, that knowledge and that interest in women's literature finds its way into my poetry. It's not something I do consciously—it's just so much a part of me that it's always there.

**RR:** As we all know, we are living in tumultuous times with a country divided politically, sexual assault scandals all over

Hollywood and the government, mass shootings, wars, natural disasters, and the list could go on. I often ask, do writers have duties? What are our duties? How should writers respond to the troubled world? Do you have any insight on this issue?

**GW:** Writers have a duty to write. And even apolitical poetry has a place in our politically divided and troubled world. To paraphrase Zbigniew Herbert, it's ok to offer to the betrayed world a rose . . . But I do find myself making more conscious choices these days to write poetry that speaks to the current political moment. The world needs our help right now, more than it has in the recent past. So I've been marching, and speaking out, in addition to writing. Not just writers but all thinking people have an obligation to do so.

**RR:** Relating to the previous question, how do you engage, if you do, with the political climate of our country in your writing? How have you done so in the past?

**GW:** I've just written a poem called "Historians of the Defeat" which is sort of about what Walt Whitman would think of Donald Trump. It's interesting, I teach a class on poetry of witness, because I believe in it and love it, but I haven't really written much witness poetry. I translate Alicia Partnoy's poetry—Alicia is a refugee from Argentina who was imprisoned during the military dictatorship there—and that is most definitely poetry of witness. So by translating her work, which is so strong, so political, I also feel that I'm contributing to a conversation about the political climate of our country. As I said before, all of my work is feminist. My book *Dying for Beauty* has poems about the environment, which I am passionate about

**RR:** For my last question, I will quote from an essay you wrote for *The Drunken Boat* called "One Woman's Jonesing for Wonder." This quote resonated with me and seemed to sum up a lot of what I see in your poetry.

*But one can invent strategies for finding  
wonderfulness—even through the awfulness  
which sometimes has to be confronted—  
and one can, armed with inspiration and the  
constraints of art, through language, attempt  
to satisfy our deeply neglected need for the  
strange, for the fabulous, for the bewildering,  
for the unsettling, for the revels of the mind.*

How are you currently seeking that wonderfulness in your own work? What advice do you have for young writers who also long for wonderfulness?

**GW:** I try, like William Blake, to see the wonderful in everything. But of course I fail more often than I succeed. Right now, for example, I'm waiting for the oil to be changed in my car. Is this a marvelous experience? No! But there's a man waiting here with a golden Aztec calendar hanging from one of his ears—that image is something I could investigate in a poem, or start a poem with. I like the metaphor of “turning the lens” on things. Look at something, then look at it in a different way, a way that's open to its magic and “wonder”fulness. That potted plant, for example. When I brushed past, did it notice me—even in its quiet, vegetable way? I think it did. There's poetry everywhere. Sometimes, obviously, we are more receptive to it than other times. When I'm writing poems every day, which is something I do only once every couple of years (blessed times!), everything speaks to me—I don't have to look for it. How to get there when you're not in one of those heightened times? READ! Find it in the pages of other people's poetry. (Virgil, anyone?) Poetry will enter your brain and eventually your own poems will come flowing out of your hands. Or trickling out. Or flooding out.

## Interview with Chris Kraus

by Marissa Sumiré

January 2018

*Chris Kraus is a filmmaker and the author of five novels, including I Love Dick, Torpor, and Aliens and Anorexia. Her most recent book, After Kathy Acker, published in 2017, is a literary biography about the late avant garde writer. In 2016, I Love Dick was translated into an Amazon Original series based on the novel. Kraus also teaches as a visiting professor at Art Center College of Design, and she is the co-founder of Semiotext(e), an LA based publishing company. In January, Kraus read from After Kathy Acker at Edendale Branch Library in Los Angeles, and she corresponded with RipRap's Senior Multimedia Reporter, Marissa Sumiré, over email.*

**RipRap:** You are the first person to write a biography of Kathy Acker. What inspired you to embark on this project? You also mention at the beginning of the book that you don't even know if you should call this a biography. What does it mean to be Kathy Acker's biographer?

**Chris Kraus:** I thought about doing it for a long time. Kathy died in 1997. We hadn't known each other, but we moved in the same circles and I'd been moved by her work. She was a huge figure in the art and cultural worlds in the 1980s. I admired her and was also a little afraid of her. After her death, I talked to some of her early friends and associates in San Diego – the first round of research for her biography. But then I put it away, and got involved in other projects. Finally, I went back to it in 2014, thinking I could write something in a more literary critical vein, about her writing process. If I'd done it too soon, it would have been too weirdly personal. To write someone's biography is to know them very intimately. But everyone "knows" a person differently.



Courtesy of Chris Kraus

**RR:** You and Acker sometimes shared the same space and same friends, but you two were never friends. What was it like getting to know a person through the texts and documents written by her or about her?

**CK:** It was a vicarious thrill, reading diaries, letters and emails in the archives of libraries! I knew some of the people she corresponded with, and it was fascinating to see their relationships with her. Also, seeing the way she'd tell the same story differently, depending on who she was writing to ...

**RR:** In the introduction to *After Kathy Acker*, you discuss how when sifting through her letters and journals, you were amazed and interested in how she could tell the same information to a variety of people but frame it in so many different ways, and sometimes she would even blatantly lie. As you wrote her biography, how did you see the lines of fiction and nonfiction blurring as you curated pieces of her life together?

**CK:** Well, I think to Kathy, "fiction" means something is emotionally true, through its intensity, and the mark that it leaves upon you. So whether the literal facts are true or false doesn't matter. Her work was always autofiction, collage – she didn't invent plots and characters. Still, writing her biography, I needed to pin down certain facts that she often misrepresented – where she went to school, when she received her inheritance, her family background. So there was a lot of digging through public records for that.

**RR:** The blurriness of fiction and non-fiction is a common thread in your repertoire. In *I Love Dick*, the protagonist is named after you, Chris Kraus, and in your other novels, your female characters share many similarities with your own life. How do you see yourself in your own writing? What happens to the self once it is transmitted to the page?

**CK:** In the case of *I Love Dick*, it becomes a character. There

were two phases to writing that book. The first phase was the letters written to Dick, the 'original documents.' I lived through that, and the letters were real. But when I sat down to write the book, I added a third-person narration, and "Chris Kraus" became a character. I try to be extremely present in my writing, but that isn't exactly my "self" – it's something else. That is: I'm writing fiction, not memoir.

**RR:** Kathy Acker's life was a performance, often times an outrageous one, and she was constantly blurring the lines between her persona and her self. Do you relate to this aspect of Acker's life? Does this aspect of her life correspond with your own novels which contain both blatant and hinting autobiographical elements?

**CK:** Kathy's real problem was when her persona followed her outside her work, and people expected her to be "Kathy Acker" 24/7. Of course, she was partly responsible: she wanted fame, to reach a wide audience, and she constructed a persona that managed to do this – the tattoos, motorcycles, gold tooth, etc. I don't do that at all. The only time I've felt people approaching me in real life as if I'm a character was after the Amazon adaptation of *I Love Dick* streamed. Otherwise, people read the books, and they realize it's not the same person.

**RR:** *The New Yorker* published an essay by Leslie Jamison in 2015 titled "This Female Consciousness: On Chris Kraus," where she analyzes your body of work and draws attention to the female consciousness present throughout your novels. She discusses how you write unapologetically about your sex life, and those of your characters, in a way that is often aggressive, and contrary to the cultural narratives of how women should relate to men. What role does sex play in your story telling? When you write about sex, do you intentionally write in a non-passive way?

**CK:** I actually don't write as graphically about sex as a lot of other contemporary writers. There's maybe one, actual sex scene in *I Love Dick*. I write more about the social situations around sex. That's something I loved about Kathy Acker's earlier work – she did that too. In my book *Video Green*, I write about BDSM in the first person but at a little remove.

**RR:** In your conversation with Bruce Hainley at Edendale Branch Library, you briefly discussed the importance of cultural timing in determining the reception of your works. For example, *I Love Dick* has had two resurgences since its publication in 1997, most recently since it was picked up for an Amazon original series. Similarly, during the conversation the two of you discussed how *After Kathy Acker* might not have been received as well if you had published her biography twenty years ago, immediately following her death. What is it about our current cultural moment that makes your work popular now?

**CK:** *I Love Dick* describes experiences women have in their 20s, and the Acker biography is a book about Acker becoming herself, too. I was lucky that my book reached this audience of younger readers – first through bloggers, and later through publications like *Lenny Letter*. Definitely it's a moment when women are rejecting the old rules about circumspection and privacy. People are more receptive to the humor in my work now, as well – instead of asking, Why is she debasing herself?, readers think – That's funny, I've done that too.

**RR:** Many would label your writing as feminist literature. Is this something that you do intentionally? Do you see yourself as a feminist writer?

**CK:** Sure, if people want to read my work that way, I won't disagree – I've been a feminist all my life. You could say I'm an anti-capitalist writer, as well. I don't sit down to write with a political agenda, but any writer's values are going to be manifested in their work.

**RR:** In the past two years, the political climate of our country has become extremely polarized, while at the same time women from many different industries are speaking up about sexism and sexual assault and harassment. In this context, what do you see your role as an artist and writer? Is this something you consider in your writing?

**CK:** It concerns me as a citizen, but not so much as a writer. My fourth novel, *Summer of Hate*, was published in 2012, and is set during the height of the Bush years – 2005-2006, during the Iraq invasion, during a wave of crackdown on Mexican border migration. I soaked up that atmosphere, and it came through the book – which is a story about a recovering alcoholic who's just getting out of prison for petty crimes. But, to me, fiction addresses the bigger picture of how people live, think, feel, exist.

**RR:** In your writing, you often refer to yourself as a failed filmmaker. Yet, now you are a successful author, publisher, and professor. Many of the readers and contributors of this journal are aspiring writers and artists. What advice can you give to them as they seek to succeed in their work?

**CK:** It sounds really corny, but – persist! Find a way that you can continue doing your work, and continue being in touch with other artists, writers and thinkers. I've noticed over the years that the people who persist, who do lots of work, usually prevail. But life can take lots of different turns. Calling myself a “failed filmmaker” was a joke. There's no failure in dropping something, if you realize it's not right for you. If I hadn't stopped filmmaking, I wouldn't have started writing.

## **Contributor Bios**

**Rachel Pesavento Brownell**

is a first-year MFA poetry student at CSU Long Beach. She plans to pursue literary publishing after graduation.

**Steven Christopher Carey**

is a graphic artist and designer living and working in for the past decade in Brooklyn, NY. He was born and raised in Southern California where he attended California State University of Long Beach. His poems have previously been published in *Spot Lit Mag*, *Chiron Review*, *RipRap*, *Transcurrent*, and others.

**Mouminat Damer**

is a first generation Arab-American poet whose writing explores middle-eastern history and culture by combining elements of longing, nationalism, family, and identity. There was always an imbalance between her American and Middle-Eastern cultures throughout most of her life; however, as she has grown older and embraced her creativity in writing, she found that she is able to bring light to a culture that is so often looked at negatively, and her creative writing, in both poetry and short fiction, is her own way of helping invalidate common misrepresentations of her culture. As an Arab-American Muslim woman, Mouminat is a positive example that creative writing and all its emphases are valued, taught, and enhanced by the minorities of America.

**Sarah Davis**

is an alumni of CSULB's MFA program. She currently teaches English in Japan and paints in her free time. More of her artwork can be found on her Instagram @sarahanddavisart.

**Jacques Debrot's**

stories have appeared or are forthcoming in many journals and anthologies, including *Nothing Short of: Selected Tales from 100 Word Stories*, *The Collagist*, and *Hobart* (web). He has been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize and recently won The Thorn Prize in Fiction.

**Sean Dennison**

is a Marine Corps veteran and a graduate of UC Berkeley. He enjoys writing, comedy, and biographical statements.

**Paul Digiamdomenico**

is a Columbus painter who works from his mind, using the human body as his subject, to portray the world around him.

**Darren Donate**

is a recent graduate of California State University, Long Beach. His poetry is concerned with expressions of latinidad and Mexican identity. When Darren is not writing, he works as a Boilermaker in Los Angeles.

**Rocky E.**

is a first year candidate in The New School's MFA Creating Writing program, with a focus in Nonfiction. Their work centers on themes of transgenerational trauma, LGBTQ identities, travel, sex, gender, and mental illness. They work in an office in Manhattan on Fifth Ave. during the day and at night somnambulate through the streets searching for queer artfilms and the perfect onion bagel.

**Shealyn Engfer**

is a senior nursing student minoring in Creative Writing. She finds that poetry in partnership with belief in God allows the space to re-contextualize our experiences in a way that facilitates healing and hope. The poem featured is just that, an attempt to create something beautiful from a part of life that was painful and ugly.

**KC Geronimo**

is a Los Angeles-based computer graphics artist who practices digital and traditional art, both 2d and 3d, as a hobby. Self-taught, she is not married to one single style and likes to explore different genres, mediums, and subject matter. She currently works as a 3d generalist and visual effects artist for the entertainment industry

**Thomas Gillaspay**

is a northern California photographer. His photography has been featured in numerous magazines including the literary journals: *Compose*, *Portland Review* and *Brooklyn Review*.

**William Godbey**

lives in Long Beach, CA. His work has been published in the *Chiron Review*, *Slipstream Press*, and *Sixfold*. He is pursuing an MFA in Poetry, and is 22 years old.

**Michael Haeflinger**

has published two chapbooks, *Love Poem for the Everyday* and *The Days Before*, both from Dog On A Chain Press. He lives in Tacoma, WA.

**Gustavo Hernandez**

is a Mexican poet. He was born in Jalisco and was raised in Santa Ana, California. [hernandezpoetry.com](http://hernandezpoetry.com).

**Christopher Hewitt**

is from Dallas, Texas and Oakland, California. He is now an MFA candidate at Cornell University and an assistant editor for *EPOCH* magazine.

**Kaely Horton**

is a second-year MFA student at the University of New Hampshire and the fiction editor of *Barnstorm Journal*. Her work has appeared in *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and *Five on the Fifth*. A native of Salt Lake City, Utah, she spent four years in the rainy green of Oregon and now lives in Dover, New Hampshire. She has an annual tradition of bringing home daffodils in the middle of winter.

**Hannah Kimbal**

lives in Alexandria, Virginia, where she teaches high school. Her poetry first appeared on *The Ellen Show*. Recent works have appeared in the inaugural issue of *Virga Magazine*, *Atlanta Review's Contest Issue*, and *Atticus Review*. She is pursuing her MFA at George Mason University.

**Ellaraine Lockie**

is widely published and awarded as a poet, nonfiction book author and essayist. *Tripping with the Top Down* is her thirteenth chapbook. Earlier collections have won Poetry Forum's Chapbook Contest Prize, San Gabriel Valley Poetry Festival Chapbook Competition, Encircle Publications Chapbook Contest, Best Individual Poetry Collection Award from *Purple Patch* magazine in England Competition, and *the Aureorean's* Chapbook Choice Award. Ellaraine teaches writing workshops and serves as Poetry Editor for the lifestyles magazine, *Lilipoh*.

**Michelle McEwen**

is a writer of poems and short stories and is the proud author of "Delicious Dangerous" (a poetry chapbook published by Didi Menendez for the Mipoesias Chapbook series in 2010). Her work has been published in numerous online and print journals (*Poets/Artists*, *Umbrella Journal*, *Big City Lit*, *The Caribbean Writer*, and *the Naugatuck River Review*) as well as in these anthologies: *The Best New Poets 2007* and *Woman's Work* (an anthology of short stories). Two of her poems ("Sucker" in 2010 and "Daydream Me" in 2017) were nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She was also the winner of the 2010 echapbook contest for a collection of flash fiction titled "Trouble" which can be found here: <http://www.echapbook.com/stories/mcewen/index.html>.

**Jacob Minasian**

received his MFA in poetry from Saint Mary's College of California, where he was the 2016 Academy of American Poets University and College Poetry Prize winner. His work has appeared in *poets.org*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Causeway Lit*, *Linden Avenue Literary Journal*, *Museum of Americana*, and *These Fragile Lilacs Poetry Journal*, among others. He currently lives in Cincinnati, Ohio.

**Catherine Northington**

is a creative nonfiction writer from Philadelphia. She is an MFA candidate at Columbia University and can be reached at [catherine.northington@gmail.com](mailto:catherine.northington@gmail.com).

**Martin Ott**

has published eight books of poetry and fiction, most recently *LESSONS IN CAMOUFLAGE*, C&R Press, 2018. His first two poetry collections won the De Novo and Sandeen Prizes. His work has appeared in more than two hundred magazines and fifteen anthologies. His poem in RipRap is from his manuscript *FAKE NEWS POEMS - 2017 Year in Review, 52 Weeks, 52 Headlines, 52 Poems*. More at [www.martinottwriter.com](http://www.martinottwriter.com).

**Stacey Park**

is a first-year MFA student at CSULB. Previously, she has worked as an English, adjunct instructor and holds an MA in English literature from the University of Toronto.

**Brook Pellam**

is an English Literature and American Studies student who lives in Long Beach, California. When not studying or writing poetry, she continues her quest to find the perfect chocolate chip cookie recipe.

**Dan Pinkerton**

lives with his family in Urbandale, Iowa.

**Jose J. Prado**

is a Fiction MFA candidate at CSULB from Anaheim, California. He loves writing quirky stories about weird people.

**Ben Shani**

is a recent CSULB alumni, residing in Signal Hill and originally from the Bay Area. After getting a Bachelor's degree in Film with a specialization in Documentary Filmmaking, he's been focusing on creating documentaries, photography, and writing fiction. He's had a short story published in a

recent issue of *Caustic Frolic*, a journal ran by NYU's Center for Experimental Humanities. This is the first time he's had photography published.

**Ellen McGrath Smith**

teaches at the University of Pittsburgh. Her fiction has appeared in *Thumbnail, Switchback, Weave, Wordgathering, Atticus Review, Extract(s)*, and *Kestrel*. One of her stories will be included in *The Right Way to Be Crippled and Naked: The Fiction of Disability*. Her chapbook *Scatter, Feed* was published by Seven Kitchens Press in 2014, and her book of poetry, *Nobody's Jackknife*, was published in 2015 by West End Press.

**Natalie Solmer**

is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Indianapolis Review*, an online journal of poetry and art. She teaches composition and writing in various institutions all over Indianapolis, and lives a mile from the famous Indy 500 racetrack. Her work has been published in journals such as *Willow Springs, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Cimarron Review, Tinderbox* and forthcoming from *MidWest Review*. More of her work can be found at [www.nataliesolmer.com](http://www.nataliesolmer.com).

**Alexandra Umlas**

who is originally from Long Beach, now lives in Huntington Beach with her husband and two daughters. She has an MA in Education with an emphasis in Cross-Cultural teaching and is currently an MFA student at California State University, Long Beach. Her work can be found in *Rattle, Poets Reading the News, The Poet's Billow, Southeastern Review Online, Lipstick Party Magazine, Indicia, Modern Loss, f(r)iction*, and others.

**Michael Vizcaino**

is a 28 year-old graphic artist and runner from Los Angeles, California. His visual work explores abstract tendencies in industrial design with strong influences from architecture and cartography.

***Laura Zapico***

was born and raised in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared previously in *RipRap*.

***Sophia Zarders***

is an illustrator, comic artist, and film freak from Long Beach, California. She has been published in *The Nation*, *Resist! Magazine*, *Shameless Magazine*, and other independent publications. Forward Together and the Long Beach chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America have commissioned them for bold and powerful poster designs. Her work illustrates their intersectional feminist ideals, spiritual infatuations, and twisted sense of humor. They're currently working on a graphic novel called *Jesus Freak* and often table at local zine fests.

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