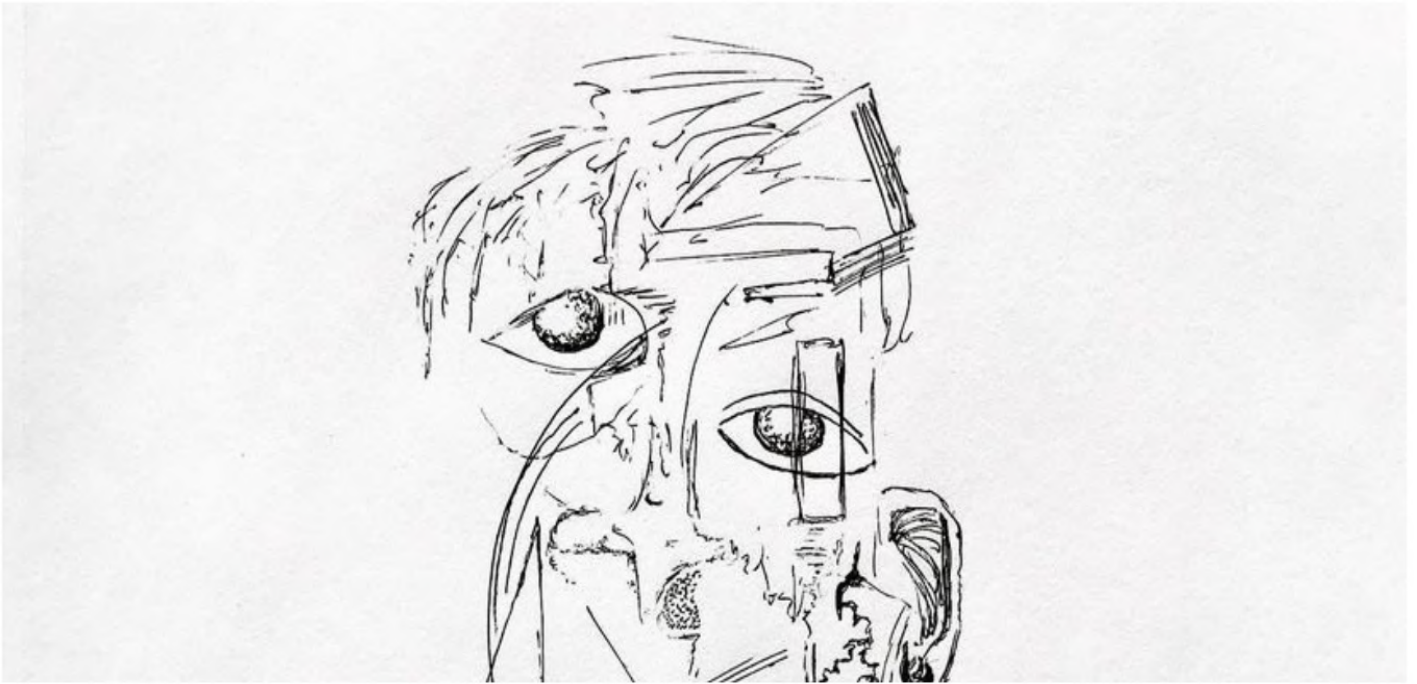
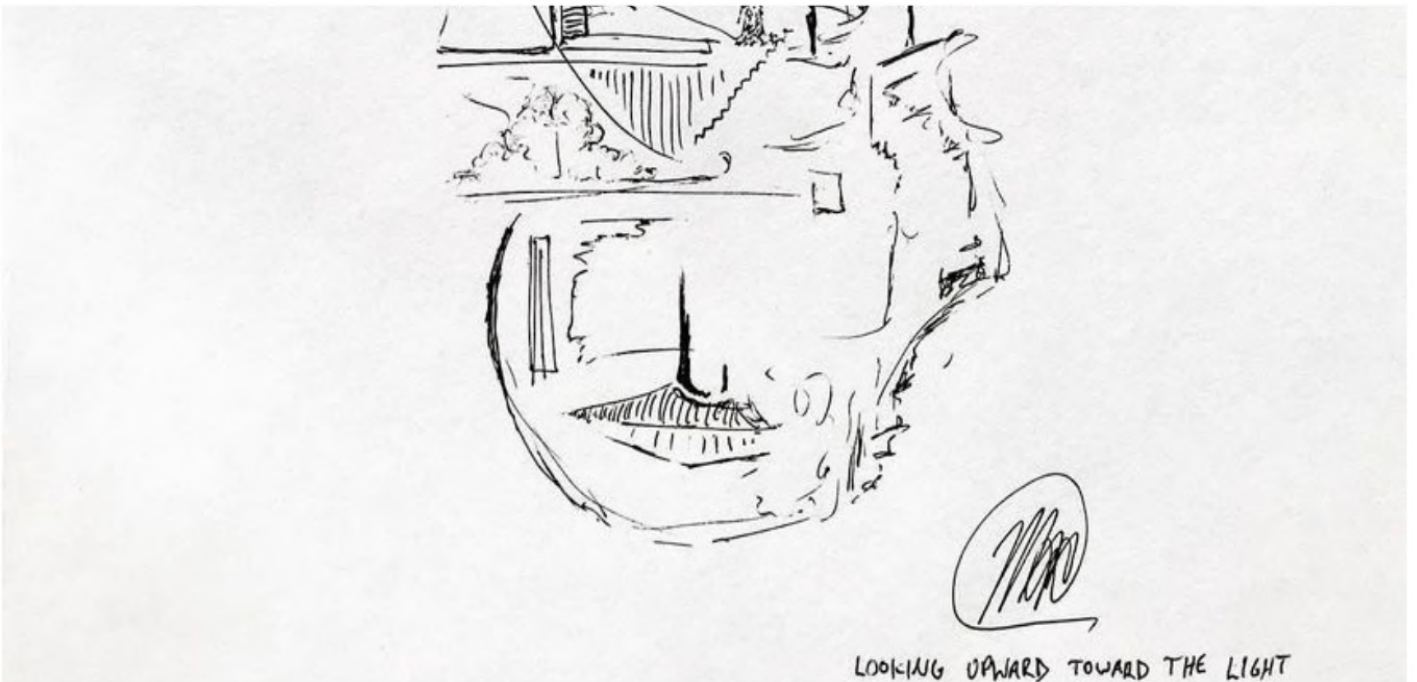


WINTER 2022
ISSUE NO.1

AN ECLECTIC ISSUE



CREATION MAGAZINE



AN ONLINE LITERARY JOURNAL.

CREATION MAGAZINE

EDITOR IN CHIEF ALEXANDRA FRANCESE

COVER ART BY MAC O'SULLIVAN

WINTER 2022

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AN ECLECTIC ISSUE

Editor's Note

Eclecticism follows no rules, succumbs to no theme, and the thrill of discovery awaits at each turn, each sentence, every page. Pick something off the table and hold it close to your chest, read a story that energizes you, indulge in art that quiets you, a poem that stirs you. An Eclectic Issue has no concept other than disarray and discomposure, whether you are looking for a bedtime classic to a Vampire short to abstract art. Introducing Issue 01, An Eclectic Issue, showcasing a range of inventive creations from talented creators. Enjoy, share, and consider submitting to be a part of future issues.

Alexandra Francese

The Table

Poetry

“I Explain Alcohol Insanity” by Jordan Ranft	61
“I Reconcile Issues of Core Identity” by Jordan Ranft	33
“Sebastian” by Russell Smith	6
"Of Tea and Cookies" by Russell Smith	43
“This One's for Me” by Denee Francese-Smith	37
“The Evolution of Moonlight” by Denee Francese-Smith	71
“What I Think About When I Think About You” by Lavínia Vianini	69

Fiction

“Along Cherrywood Lane” by Vesper North	13
“The Vampire Accountant” by Lori D’Angelo	7
“Dear Humans” by Bethany Jarmul	34
“How We Feed Ourselves” by Erika Nichols-Frazer	45

Non-Fiction

“Chalk Houses” by D. Walker	38
“Why I Stopped Writing For Men I met on the Internet” by Elyse Moretti Forbes	64

Art and Photography

“Disarray” by Arieon Frazier	36
“Morona” by Mirjana M.	60
“THE INEVITABLE” by Kaseto	63
“Home” by Russell Smith	31
"Annie" by Russell Smith	30
"Untitled" by Russell Smith	32
“Love Potion” by Veronica Winters	42
“Mother Mary Clutches Her Robes” by Mac O’Sullivan	70
“Cowboy” by Mac O’Sullivan	12

AN ECLECTIC ISSUE

2022

Russell Smith

Sebastian

The night sky lingered overhead.
I walked down the hill to the Watersedge
drunk from the wine of the new year
my loneliness lapped against the dock.
You appeared from behind the wall
and under the flowered trees we walked back
hand in hand laughing at the stars.

Lori D'Angelo

The Vampire Accountant

You wake up one morning and you feel different, better. You haven't felt this alive in well—really never. It's like you were dead, but you were never dead. At least you don't think you were dead. You really don't remember all the details.

Missy's father was the one who died. And you flew down South, down home to attend the funeral. You never take personal days, so your boss was like *sure, Leslie, go, go*. And then you were there on a plane, sipping your Coke in the plastic cup. And then you were there, graveside, watching them lower that man your father's age into the sweaty summer ground.

And then you said to *Missy, Hey, honey. I'm so sorry*. Put your hand on her shoulder. And she said, *Lakeside*, and you were so relieved. *That* you could do, even though you hadn't done it in years. You could go to the lake and smoke pot. You knew that ritual, even though you hadn't done the thing, not like that, not with Missy and the boys you used to hang out with. She used to hang out with badass motorcycle boys, who overlooked you because you were the brainy one. Pale faced, straight-laced. You didn't let your boobs hang out, and Missy, well, she was bawdy, messy. Big breasts, big boobs, a girl the boys were all over. And then she had Tyler and Taylor and Tommy. And you went to school and more school and got that good job at the accounting firm in Chicago.

I'll be back, you told your parents, who drank sweet tea and nodded sadly on the porch. You did come home sometimes. Though not as often as they wanted to and more often than you wanted.

Your mom said, yesterday, or maybe the day before, *Any plans for marriage?* There had been men, but the men wanted sex, sex, and more sex. And you didn't mind sex, but, after a while, sex with no ring got tiresome. And then they cheated. You never cheated. Or they said they'd call and didn't. And you realized you were expendable.

Middle-class, middle of the road, a take-home-for-dinner-with-your-parents kind of girl but not the one they really wanted underneath the sheets.

Oh, I met Layla, they said. *And Kayla. And Shayla.* And girls with more exciting, unmistakably female names.

But the thing that happened, it was after the pot. And after Missy's boyfriend tried to hit on you. She had three kids and wasn't looking as good as she used to. And you said *no, no, no*, and then maybe you said yes. She used to make fun of you. Remember that: Lesbo Leslie. *Eff you, Missy. Eff you.* But you never said that. You just sat there tight lipped and took it.

So what if you did make out with Karl? And then Christian. Or was his name darker? Like Draco Malfoy or something from Harry Potter.

So what if there was maybe something with a bat? And then a bite the size of a big embarrassing hickey. And then your eyes, your face. Pale white skin and red eyes that kind of glow. But, for some reason, no one's noticing the eyes, or if they are, they aren't saying.

Your mother says you look good, despite the bat bite. You worry about rabies. Call a doctor. Seduce the doctor. He's married. You're not that kind of girl, yet you don't care. You suck his blood or something like that. Maybe no blood. But lots of biting. At least some biting. And maybe blood but not that kind of bleeding.

And then you go home. Wear dark glasses during the day.

Your boss says, *Ah, Leslie. What happened? Your skin's so pale.* And he looks at you in a way that he has never looked at you.

Lori D'Angelo

Approvingly. And you wear red bras and white shirts that aren't buttoned up far enough, and no one says, *Oh you shouldn't do that. Shouldn't wear that.* Shouldn't be that kind of girl. The kind of girl you always hated, feared. Now, you are her.

And then you meet a guy on the el. He's wearing a nice white shirt and sporting slicked back James Dean hair. And you like him, like him a lot. He likes Gothic novels. Especially Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker. He tells you this, why, you don't know but you go with it. You're chill now.

You like Dracula? you say.

He says, *Yeah, it's great.*

You like Twilight? you say.

He says, *No, it's shit.*

You laugh. You haven't read Dracula or Twilight. They were on your list of things to read that you never got to. You were too busy crunching numbers, but now you think you might make time.

He says he's getting off next stop, Lake Street.

You say you're staying on a while, going all the way to Cermak/Chinatown. You don't know why you say this. You never go there. Truth is, some of the streets around there are kinda sketchy. But you are no longer afraid.

Wanna come? You ask.

He says no. Then he looks at you in your white shirt, red bra, reconsiders.

And then you go to the South Side to neighborhoods you would have never dreamed of going to before and you walk through them like you own them, like a modern day She-Ra, Princess of Power.

You like me? you ask.

It's like some old-time bodice ripping romance novel cover. It's fucking windy and your shirt is half off.

He smiles. He's just looking at your boobs. But it's not like that, you tell yourself.

Wanna go see the White Sox play, you say, even though you couldn't care less about baseball.

He nods, says yes. He buys you popcorn, peanuts. His hand is on your leg.

Sometime later, you're back on the el. Sometime later, you're on the Purple Line. Going out of the city headed North.

He says, as you head into Evanston, *People don't dress like that here*.

He hands you his jacket.

Where are we going? You ask.

He names some swanky high rise.

For sex? you ask.

Now that you're a vampire, what is there but sex and blood? Was there ever more than that? Was there ever less?

What do you think? he says. And he doesn't seem so sexy anymore. He slicked back here just looks greasy now. He is greasy and sleazy.

I see, I guess, you say. But, even now, in your slutty, skanky clothes, you want more.

I think I'm going back to Howard, you say, but he turns mean.

He says, *I don't think so*.

This whole el scene could turn ugly. But then like some Avenger Thor looking dude comes out of nowhere to help.

You throw that MoFo from the train. But just onto a platform. No one really says anything or does anything. This is Chicago. People are used to minding their own business and ignoring the man selling StreetWise, playing saxophone on the street corner or prophesizing the end of days.

Now, you turn your attention to Avenger dude. You think you've seen him before on the el. In attorney looking day clothes. But now he's in his fight for justice save the damsel in distress night clothes. And he's really fine. Avenger dude sits with you. He knows your name.

Lori D'Angelo

Hey, Leslie. You alright?

He just--. They all just--. Want sex, you say.

Isn't that why you became a vampire? he says. He's all black sunglasses and long coat, circa 1999. So much better than the attorney suits, you think.

Dude, are you like Morpheus?

He laughs. *Wanna pill?* He reaches into his pocket like he has one.

No, you say. Or maybe yes. *But my old life, that kinda sucked too.*

He asks if you wanna go to some hippy thrift shop in Belmont. You say no, then yes. He says coffee. You say no, then yes. And then there's sex and more sex. And blood. And rock n' roll.

What now? You ask.

He seems darker, but the darkness is comforting rather than alarming, and you want to embrace it, embrace him, unlock all its messy, sweaty, scary secrets.



Cowboy
Mac O'Sullivan

Vesper North

Along Cherrywood Lane

Poppy sat quietly, her lips casually pressed shut but jaw locked so as not to betray what little she had to offer to the conversation. A light layer of perspiration gathered on her neck as the afternoon May sun pressed down on her; the heat came early in 1946. Her friends made plans to visit the community pool after school, but first, they had to hear all about Cindy's first night with Mac.

"And then..." Cindy paused, barely able to contain her smile—she was bursting, "...it happened." The other girls squealed, some stamping their feet on the freshly mowed grass. Poppy smiled—no teeth. She felt happiness for her friend; Cindy had been going with Mac since Homecoming, and now he would be leaving their picturesque, perfect for a postcard town to a seaside university in California.

All of Poppy's friends had done it, and none of them judged her for being the holdout, but that didn't stop her from feeling it. Poppy didn't know what it was to have your heart beat like it might burst from your chest, to surrender your body and soul to another, to feel every muscle in your body tighten as you beg for release. She never went with anyone—not for lack of interest towards her, but from her; boys didn't appeal to her.

Poppy hit puberty late and fast. Her body transitioned through four sets of different sized bras over the course of the summer months between eighth and ninth grade. She looked the part of a woman, much to her chagrin, and tried—rather

futilely—to hide her bombshell breasts under high collars and cardigans. She even tried ace bandaging until the restraint on her breath took a toll. Poppy liked to walk—the outdoors stimulated her; she thrived in an unpredictable environment.

The girls tucked swimsuits into their bags and packs that morning. Kids from Stonewall Elementary to the high school celebrated the end of the year at the pool—a tradition in these parts. Cindy lit a cigarette on their sidewalk stroll; she'd recently taken up the habit. The ashes drifted away in the frequently disappearing breeze, floating into her thin, pale blonde strands (nearly the same shade as her skin.) Cindy and Mac were prom queen and king, of course—pillars of the youth community.

The girls went to their designated locker room to change, readying themselves to join the celebration of summer. Poppy sat down on the wooden bench, peeling off her white socks and setting her feet against the cool cement floor. She brought the same suit she'd been wearing for six years: a navy one-piece that covered her clavicle—not even a dip to show a little shoulder blade. The strain her chest put on the fabric caused a little bit of skin to show around the edges of the hem, though not enough to retire it. One by one, her friends took to wearing two pieces, like ones they'd seen Ava Gardner or Virginia Mayo don in photographs.

Zelda held up two opposing suits in the mirror of the girl's locker room—topless—her honeyed hair twisting to the small of her bare back, tickling the trim of her lace underwear. “Which one should I wear?”

Poppy particularly liked the one on the right, though Cindy preferred the lavender one on the left, thinking the cool tone suited Zelda's warm skin.

“What do you think?” Zelda asked, turning to Poppy.

Vesper North

“I like the other one,” Poppy spoke in quiet opposition to Cindy.

Zelda glanced down at her choices. “Okay,” she said, favouring the lavender. “You can wear this one.” She flounced across the square-shaped space and forced the red bikini into Poppy’s lap, who stared dumbfounded at it as Zelda stripped off her underwear.

“I can’t wear this,” Poppy stammered.

“Of course, you can,” Cindy chimed in.

Poppy stared at the flimsy suit with absolute apprehension.

“Well,” Zelda started, crossing back over to Poppy, still naked, “if she doesn’t want to wear it,” and snagged Poppy’s old navy one from the bench, causing her sweater to slide onto the floor, “we’ll have to make her!”

Poppy reached out to rescue her swimsuit, unsuccessful. “Give it back—please.” She tacked on the final word of her plea without hope.

“What are you so afraid of?” Zelda asked. “It’s just a bikini.”

“It’s *my* bathing suit.”

“She’s right,” Cindy said as she snagged the navy swimsuit from Zelda. Poppy sighed with relief. Cindy sauntered towards Poppy—the straps hooked under her index. She pulled a lighter from inside her bikini top and held the flame under the crotch of Poppy’s swimsuit, burning it.

Poppy leapt forward, snagging it all too late; she couldn’t wear this now. Her friends laughed as she examined the damage in horror. Tears collected around her eyes—she expected this from the other girls. “Prudish Poppy”: the girl, the outsider, the virgin. She stormed from the locker room, carrying her backpack and ruined suit—leaving the scarlet bikini behind.

Her calves burned as she hurried home, taking the old path which cut through the wash. Her hazelnut ponytail whipped back

and forth. Sore from the desperate exertion, she leapt across the front porch steps, crossed the threshold, and bound down the hall to her room.

Her mother, Bianca, entertained some of the neighbouring housewives with lemonade and gossip on the back porch on nice days. The latest bit, Poppy overheard, involved him. She listened to chatter that flowed in through her bedroom window. The housewives discussed the man at length, gushing over his rugged appearance while disparaging any woman who dared spread for him. He feared and delighted them: the bachelor who didn't attend any garden party or graduation. He hadn't any friends—save *maybe* for others like him. Some of the married women admitted to the passing thought, imagining how it'd feel to be devoured by him. “Just curious,” they'd say, brushing away stirring thoughts of shame.

Channon repaired the odd things here and there; he maintained Poppy's grandmother's house. The elder mother became infirm some time ago; she could make her way to the bathroom or kitchen without great expense. The family would help but left menial tasks for the hired help and, occasionally, Poppy.

Bianca hadn't noticed Poppy come home until she went searching for her around five that evening. “Poppy, dear,” she sang from the hall. Her mother, the Grace of Suburbia, knocked politely before opening the door to Poppy's bedroom. A vision in white, her mother's loose, dark waves grazed the bare slopes of her shoulders, rarely meeting the tight brocade fabric that hugged her arms. “How was the pool, dear?”

“Fine,” Poppy replied, forcing a smile after the word.

The doorbell chimed. “That must be Dolores,” her mother sighed.

“The Fosters are coming over for dinner?” Poppy asked.

“Her in-laws are in. Got the poor thing’s feathers ruffled. Set the table, will you?”

Poppy heard her mother’s heels click all the way to the kitchen and then back to the front door. She listened from the hall—Poppy liked Mrs Foster, and she pitied her. Rumours slipped into the house now and again; Mrs Foster had a shotgun wedding only a month out of high school, marrying a boy she barely knew and into a family she hardly liked. The woman frequently rang upon Bianca, the friend in the idyllic marriage.

“Bianca, you are a doll!” Mrs Foster exclaimed.

“Reheat at 350 for twenty minutes.” The door closed. “Poppy!” Bianca called.

After supper, Poppy returned to her room, settling onto her azure, lace down with a book from Bianca’s shelf—*Rebecca*. The doorbell rang. Must be Mrs Foster returning the dish—it could have waited ‘til morning—in-laws must still be over, Poppy thought. A knocking came rapping at Poppy’s door, and Bianca entered holding a brown paper bag.

“Zelda said you left this at the pool.” Bianca set the bag down on the vanity, then returned to the den, to Father.

Curious, Poppy rose to investigate the contents. She unrolled the top and carefully spread apart the opening. Inside was the sweater she’d forgotten. Poppy pulled it from the bag, unaware of the other item in the bag, which fell to her feet. She looked down to see the scarlet bikini. Poppy stared at it for some time before finally picking it up and tossing it in the bin.

The crooning coming from Father’s RCA floor radio streamed into the bedroom. Her parents would read in the den to the gentling sliding of a bow against strings and the soft blow of air through a tunnel of brass. The velvet voice that sang across the airwaves seduced Poppy to sleep. To this young woman, teenagers

were chaos, and she preferred the calm. Silence stimulated her—she loved it for the space it gave her to think and resented it for dreams born from it.

#

Poppy began the morning by taking a longer shower than usual, spending a great amount of time resting her forehead against the tile wall. She returned to the bedroom, sitting on the stool before her vanity in a calf-length pink robe. It'd once been white; Bianca accidentally washed it with a piece of red clothing—she never said what. Her damp hair clung to her skin, slowly drying into its natural curl.

Poppy stood before the mirror, running her fingers along the edges of the robe, gently parting it back to expose a field of unblemished cream. Her arms bent as hands reached her shoulders, pushing the robe off and onto the floor. Her eyes traced the lines of her collarbone down to her chest. She slid her hands up her side, over hipbones and onto the ribcage, reaching up towards—

“Poppy!” Bianca rapped at the door.

Poppy dove for her robe. “I’m indecent,” she called back, voice shaking.

“Grandma isn’t feeling too well today. Take a care package to her, would you?”

Poppy’s arms crossed over her, covering as much as possible. “Of course.” She looked back at herself in the mirror—horrified.

In the kitchen, Bianca put together a basket with a container of corn chowder, homemade buttermilk biscuits, Waldorf salad, and Blosser’s medical powder.

Poppy came through in her royal blue calf-length coat, buttoned from collar to knee.

“Awfully warm for that,” Mother remarked, dabbing her nose with a tissue, then tossing it in the trash.

Vesper North

“It’s cold at Grandma’s,” Poppy rebutted. Grandma lived atop the hill in an old cottage Grandpa built some fifty years ago. The temperature there ran a little cooler, true. A large scattering of trees shaded the private land. It was an enchanting place in Bianca’s youth; now, in Grandma’s final days, it had the warmth of a mausoleum.

Poppy took the basket and began her walk. If she made it to Grandma’s by noon, she’d make it back home before the hottest part of the day. Nothing about the journey bothered her; she enjoyed the accumulating distance between the neat rows of nuclear homes and disorderly wilderness. Though the trek was taxing on her body, the promise of her destination eased any discomfort.

Grandma’s house became continuously cluttered over the decades: ferns of all genera scattered about, farm and gardening tools dating back to her youth hung on the walls, empty Old Gold cigarette tins that belonged to Grandpa propped on shelves—save for one that had one smoke left in it. This castle nostalgic could preoccupy Poppy while she waited to see if Grandma needed anything else.

She’d helped Grandma to the restroom and made a cup of tea—age didn’t leave the old woman with the energy to chat, so they sat in silence for a good while. The lines on her face became shadows and hair thinned into spider’s silk. Her bones were stiff—she didn’t dance anymore and never would again.

Poppy had been saying good-bye for some months now—she knew Grandma was dying, and knew that all she could do was maintain her bravery as they all waited for death to come.

Upon returning home, Bianca directed Poppy to the refrigerator door. A note hung from a black, circular magnet: “Zelda called.” From there, the message made its way to the trash.

The afternoon hours ticked by. The sun arched its way overhead, like a cat having a thorough stretch. Poppy buried her troubled mind in the pages of *Rebecca*. She read as the young Rebecca sat with the equally reserved Mister de Winter—both alike, both alone. She didn't realize the evening had rolled around until Zelda stepped into the bedroom.

"Hi," Zelda said with a sheepish smile. "Look, I'm sorry about what happened at the pool. I admit we went a bit far."

Poppy showed no sign of forgiveness, giving Zelda only the courtesy of listening.

"If you don't want to forgive us, I suppose that's fair." Zelda looked down then back at Poppy. "It's just—well, it's just that we know the best girl in school. Can make all us other girls do some stupid things." Zelda sighed. "Anyway, we're going to the beach if you want to join."

Poppy shifted her gaze down.

"I'd like it if you'd go." Zelda bit her lip, anxious.

Poppy gave a resigned shrug—she couldn't stay mad at Zelda when she sounded truly sincere; she was the closest thing Poppy had to a best friend.

"I can't stay out late," Poppy qualified.

Zelda's lips turned into a twisted grin. "Already ran it by your dad. We have you for the night."

"I have chores—"

"Come on!" Zelda closed the distance, taking Poppy by her hands and holding them tight. "Live."

And so they were off to the beach in Mac's dusty blue Packard 160 super eight convertible with the downward sloping backend and flat nose. Cindy sat up front, relishing the wind blowing through her hair. Zelda took up the back with Poppy, loudly singing along to Dinah Shore's *Blues in the Night*. Cindy turned around in her seat, on her knees, to face them, singing along also.

Mac

Vesper North

reached his arm out, gently urging Cindy to sit down. She faced forward again; Mac wrapped his hand around her bare shoulder, keeping her close.

By the time they arrived, some of the others had already set up a bonfire and cracked open bottles of Schlitz.

Cindy hung on Mac, dancing her fingers along the nape of his neck, admiring the shine of moonlight in his gelled hair. She stole a cigarette from the pack rolled in his tee sleeve.

Zelda moved from group to group, making herself the nucleus of every one she invaded. The more she drank, the louder and more forceful she became.

Poppy sat some twelve feet from the bonfire, keeping her white Keds above the sand, watching as the flames performed a čoček—twirling and curving up towards the starry sky.

A boy took a seat next to her—one of Mac's friends from the football team. He didn't have as handsome a face, few acne scars here and there, and the rigid shape of his brow didn't match his small, softly shaped jaw. Jared sat down rather clumsily, dusting sand onto Poppy's shoes.

"What are you doing here by yourself?" he asked.

"Enjoying the fire." She avoided directing any more attention to him. Maybe if she kept her eyes on the fire and body pointed forward, he would take the hint and walk away.

"I remember you from the Homecoming," he said pointedly.

Poppy could easily ignore that comment. What was she supposed to say? I remember Lisa Kane throwing punch in your face?

He leaned closer. "Wanna Schlitz?"

"No, thank you."

Jared took a swig.

"You must be cold," he asserted.

“No—”

Jared swung his arm around her. Poppy ground her teeth together. She refused to add much to the conversation and kept her limbs tightly together. Eventually, he grew bored with her and left to go skinny dipping with some of the others.

Poppy searched for Cindy and Mac but could not find where they disappeared to, and Zelda was too drunk to operate her own two legs.

She returned home at the end of a long, miserable night—falling into Rebecca until she passed out.

#

The sun didn't shine as harshly today, intermittently hiding behind clouds. The overcast sky foreshadowed stormy weather. The air was warm nonetheless, causing Poppy to arrive with a sheen to her skin. Her thick, cotton, cap-sleeve dress didn't breathe well, especially under her coat.

“Hi, Grandma,” she called from the entryway, setting down the care package from Bianca on the small space available, the end table filled with family photos spanning generations. She headed straight for the bedroom. “Are you hungry? I came with—”

Poppy froze.

Channon stood on the far side of the room—arms stretched out with either end of the tape measurer in hand. The sleeves of his cool grey tee hugged the muscles of his upper arms. A splattering of shrapnel scars canvased the outer part of his right arm and neck. Poppy couldn't make out the half-concealed tattoo on his left bicep as he turned to face her.

“You must be Bianca,” he said.

“Poppy,” she corrected. There wasn't a need to ask who he was. His rugged appearance and off-putting charm told her that this must be—

“Channon,” he nodded in introduction. He took a step forward, leaning the upper portion of his body towards her. “I apologize. She said her daughter’s been visiting—I just assumed.”

Poppy examined the area around him. “Where is she?”

“On the deck.”

“She went out on her own?”

“No, I helped her,” he explained.

His gaze unsettled her; he didn’t look at her in a way she was accustomed. His eyes lingered on her face, rarely sweeping away from her eyes. She thought he had a searching stare—what he was looking for, she had no idea.

Poppy left for the deck without a word, her body resisting the movement. Something inside her begged her to stay but didn’t have the power to make it so—the air had turned incendiary.

Grandma sat back in her rocking chair, eyes closed, humming, for the remainder of the morning. Poppy heard Channon working in the yard by the shed, sawing this and hammering that. ‘Round lunchtime, Poppy heated a pot of chowder for Grandma, setting it on the collapsible tray next to the rocking chair. To keep herself occupied, Poppy went to work on imposing order on the chaotic organization of this home. Moth-eaten clothes were thrown out; nooks and crannies were cleaned for the first time in years. Poppy paused to wipe the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. Leaning over the sink, she watched Channon from the windows as he assembled a set of moveable steps so Grandma could easily climb out of her tall canopied bed.

At the hottest point of the day, when the sun beat down brutally, Poppy brought out a pitcher of freshly squeezed lemonade with the produce from the tree on the side of the house, and poured Channon a glass.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the glass

She watched him drink. A trickle of juice dripped off his short beard and snaked down his neck, mixing with the thick layer of sweat. The hair of his chest held up against the weight of liquid, peeking out from under the collar of his tank.

“Do you enjoy the heat?” she asked.

“I don’t mind it.”

He finished his glass. A smile snuck onto his lips, a compulsion he’d hardly noticed. Channon went back to work, sawing a plank of lumber. Poppy was content to watch him, but there were other things to do.

In the afternoon, Poppy administered Blosser’s medical powder (containing the curative powers of stramonium and belladonna) to Grandma. She sat in the adjacent chair, enjoying the last of the day’s sun. All went quiet.

The wind snuck through the branches, creating whispers with the leaves. Poppy watched Channon take a swig of water from her peripheral, pondering him and comparing notes with the idle gossip of desperate housewives. She could have sworn he was watching her too but would not turn her gaze far enough to confirm.

“I’m ready,” a firm and strangely familiar voice spoke. Poppy broke from Channon to look at her grandmother. The old woman stared off, almost smiling.

Channon helped Poppy bring Grandma back to bed for her afternoon nap.

Poppy saved the dishes for last, washing the ware from earlier. Despite the heat, the scalding faucet water felt wonderful on her skin. It wrapped around her hands like a cocoon as it streamed into the sink.

“Take care.”

Poppy spun towards Channon, his body fully facing her and legs planted firmly on the ground between the kitchen and living

room.

Her lips parted just enough to allow air to pass through—exhaling just before uttering, “You too.”

Channon lowered his head just a hair, half committed to the movement, and went for the front door, never missing a beat in the successive rhythm of his stride. Though he closed the door in a friendly manner, the sound rang harshly in Poppy’s ears.

The water reached the top of the sink, spilling over onto the counter. She turned the knob, shutting it off—noticing the redness fade from the skin of her hands and back to its usual colour.

#

Little could be said of Channon’s past. No one claimed to be his friend, and he rarely engaged in conversation with anyone—just polite banter to quell the anxieties of residents in this quiet slice of suburbia. An unmarried, unshaven stranger spelt trouble.

Poppy found herself drawn in by his isolating attributes. What made him strange to others made him familiar to her. Convention prevented her from accepting such a connection, and engagement was deemed dangerous.

Clouds blanketed the morning sky while the promise of precipitation moistened the air. Poppy lay in bed, staring at nothing. She hardly slept a wink, awoken by an anxiousness conjured from the depths of her dreaming mind. How abnormal, this feeling of discontentment that robbed her of sleep. She waited to fall back into an unconscious state and, when it didn’t occur, resigned to starting the day.

The morning chores took little time to complete. Poppy emptied the bins into the larger ones on the side of the house, ending with hers. She turned the wire basket, dumping the used tissues and crumpled papers. When there was nothing left to be

done around the house, she donned her blue coat, buttoned to the collar, and walked to Grandma's.

The bite of the cold softened the longer she moved, raising the temperature of her body with every step. Channon's truck wasn't in the driveway—too early.

Poppy stepped inside. "Morning, Grandma." After dropping the basket on the counter, she went to the bedroom. The four-poster with an oak frame could be seen from the opposite end of the hall. Grandma laid face up, still tucked under the covers, at peace. Poppy stood there for a few moments, waiting—wondering. Her teeth clenched, and the muscles beneath her cheeks twitched. She turned slowly on her heels and went for the phone.

#

Poppy sat with Mother while they waited for the undertaker to collect the body. Bianca could hardly watch as her mother was removed.

Father came from the hallway, a sweater vest over his long-sleeve button-up, tucked into his casual slacks that were folded at the ankles, grazing his loafers. He sat beside Bianca, convincing her with little effort to go home, to rest. Poppy offered to stay while her parents left; the home would eventually need to be cleared out, so she opted to be helpful in this time of sorrow.

The full weight of the loss hadn't yet rested on Poppy. What had occurred this morning felt more like an affirmation than a robbery.

What little food stored in the kitchen could be taken with her. Poppy packed up what she could reasonably carry. Channon passed the kitchen window, removing Poppy from her task. She set down the container in her hand and headed for the backdoor. The lumber had been cleared away, leaving his tool chest to be carried out.

He heard the clatter of the closing door. Upon seeing Poppy,

Vesper North

Channon donned a sympathetic expression, mournful for her loss.

“This is the hardest part,” he told her. “Know that.”

Poppy half nodded in agreement.

Channon motioned towards her, then stopped, unsure.

“Can I do anything for you?” he asked.

“Like what?”

“Talk.”

Poppy considered his proposition. “Okay.”

They sat side-by-side on the top step of the deck. Channon had draped his flannel over the railing, wearing only a white tank. She felt the warmth radiating off him, reaching her across the short distance.

The set of scattered scars stimulated her curiosity. “Where did you get those?”

Channon tilted his head to follow her gaze. “Ardenne.”

“Did it hurt?”

“No. Blacked out—don’t remember.”

She didn’t understand, couldn’t comprehend this brand of pain. The trials of men eluded her; they weren’t designed for her.

“What was it like? Over there.”

Channon’s shoulders raised into a slight shrug. “Different.”

“Were you scared?”

He wrapped his left hand over his right, squeezing them into one large fist. “Sometimes.”

“Do you wish you could remember?” she asked. “The pain.”

Channon’s eyes met Poppy’s; the intensity of her stare rivalled his own. His breath skipped—only once, easily missed. “Every day,” he answered.

Poppy broke eye contact, drawn by the scar peeking out from the top of his tank. She touched her fingertips to the pale patch of skin which caved in adjacent to his heart. “And this one?”

feel?”

Their eyes locked and breathing fell into harmonious rhythm as Poppy waited patiently for him to answer.

“Excruciating,” he said.

#

Channon offered her a ride home in the cab of his truck, and she accepted.

She walked down the front path to the shaded driveway, lifted the perishable goods into the bed, and secured between the wall and a heavy piece of lumber. Channon approached from the other side, dropping in his toolbox. They stood across the bed from each other; Channon shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He lifted his head just a hair, glancing at her briefly from under dark lashes. She stuffed her hands in her pockets, squeezing her fists so tight her nails dug into her palms—also hesitant to make eye contact.

“Ready?” he asked, giving the side of the bed a quick squeeze as he stared off into the trees.

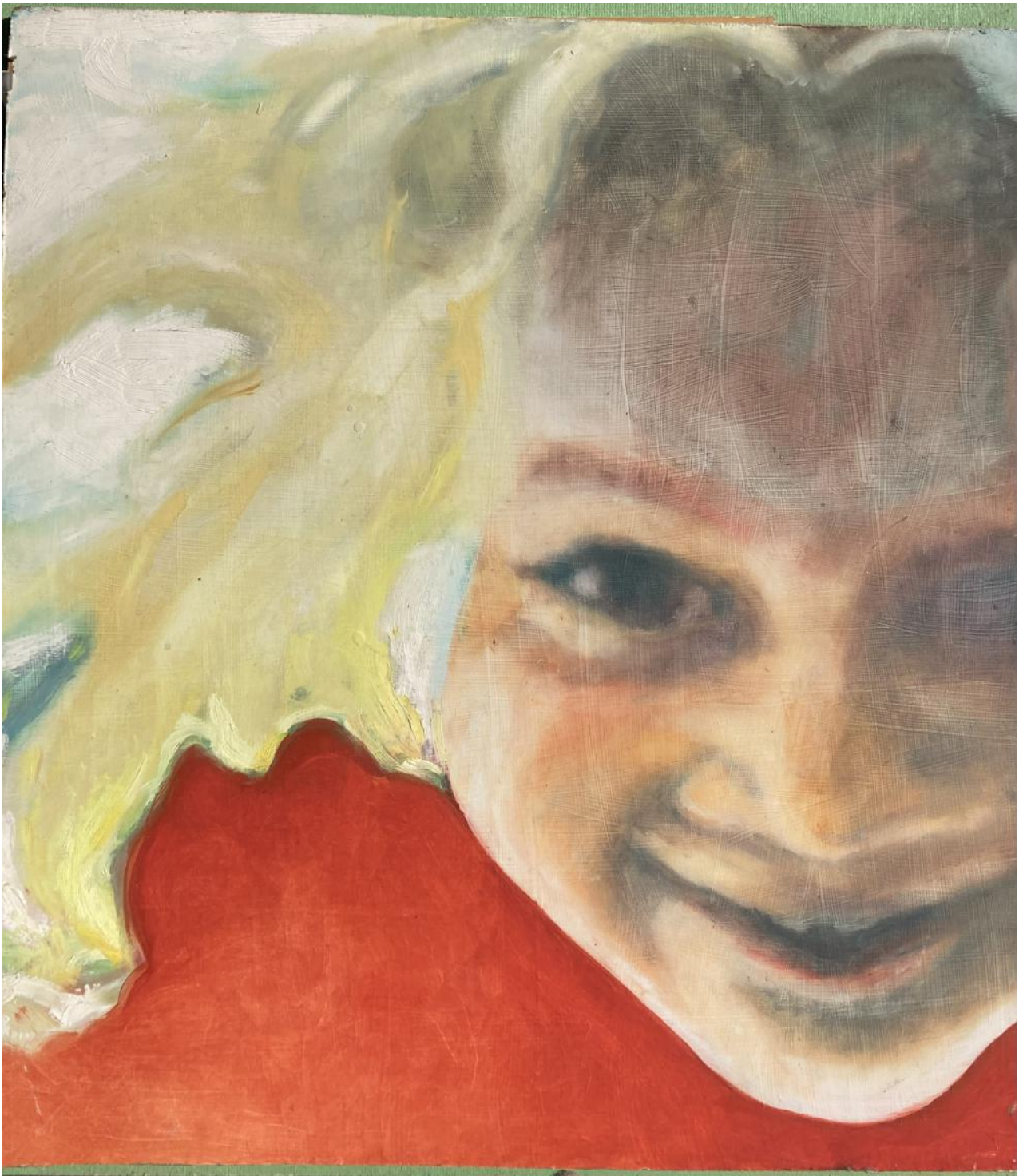
Poppy drew a deep breath, taking in the smell of wood dust, evergreen, and musk roses. Channon glanced back at Poppy, meeting her gaze. Her arms hung by her side, hands relaxed, and palms open. She counted her breaths—one, two—and on the inhale, Poppy unbuttoned her coat and brought her fingers to the edges, holding it closed. Her throat constricted as she held her breath in. She counted—one, two, three, four—okay. Air floated out between her lips as she pulled off her coat, revealing her mother’s scarlet sundress. It was an old thing from the 30s, collared with a v-neckline that buttoned down the front, and it fit Poppy well. It was a conservative garment yet bold. Poppy hadn’t seen Bianca wear it for some time and assumed it wouldn’t be missed.

The air felt refreshing on her skin, slowly drying the dewy surface. She folded the coat carefully over her arm and nodded to

Vesper North

Channon—"Yes."

They slid into the cab in almost perfect silence; the worn leather seats didn't squeak, but the door creaked as they swung open and closed. The ignition turned and the engine roared to life, catching Poppy off guard, but she wouldn't show it, remaining still in her seat. Channon pulled out of the driveway and took to the road, driving until the house faded from view, eventually disappearing entirely.



Annie

Russell SMith



Home

Russell Smith



Untitled
Russell Smith

Jordan Ranft

I Reconcile Issues of Core Identity

in silhouette relief, I resemble two men facing each other.
am I the edges? what they contain? how I'm observed?

this was a trick. the river edge is the river
communing with the shore. water laps

behind my knees. I'm not looking. I'm begging
to be carried away without absorption or divisions.

I feel most awake within moments of soft transgression.
a tongue investigates another mouth. music enters the ear.

my gentle catastrophe begins and the walls melt like muscle.
I sometimes feel like remaining completely still

amidst unceasing rotation
is political when it shouldn't be.

I wish to be held. who will hold me?
like dirt holds a fossil until it is washed

in air. saved from slow replacement
by minerals and moving water.

why is it
in this story

there's always
a river

to carry me
away

Bethany Jarmul

Dear Humans,

Dear Humans,

I, Faya the flamingo, have a confession to make. I've been watching you from my salty swamp in the zoo, studying you from behind the splashed, muddy glass.

You may have noticed me. I'm the most elegant, most deeply fuchsia diva in our twenty-flamingo flamboyance. The males seek to win me over with intricate dances and feathery magic shows. I'm supposed to spend my days eating shrimp to deepen my pink hue, preening my feathers. Little do my potential mates know, I'm a scientist, a researcher, an intellectual—and you, zoo visitors, you are my specimens, my lab rats, my secret obsession.

I've learned a lot about humanity from my perch. The intricate and convoluted mating patterns, some monogamous, others not. The way the feather-less children beg for ice cream cones then let them melt down their chins and arms and fingers. But one thing in particular has me stumped. You see, my perch is situated next to something they call the “lactation station.” I have a view to watch the mothers and their babies, even though other humans are kept out.

For flamingos when a new baby hatches, both parents provide the milk from our upper digestive tracts. Both parents are slowly drained of their vibrant pink hues, as they sacrifice their nutrients, their beauty for their gray, fuzzy hatchlings. It's why I've resisted pairing up, scientist or not, I'm deliriously proud of my deep, vibrant pink.

With you humans, only the ones with breasts can provide the milk.

That much, I understand. I've seen the baby-feeders drained of their color, their energy to provide for their babies. I've watched them wince in pain as their new babies latch, with older children tugging on their legs, for their little fish-shaped crackers they gobble up like fresh shrimp.

Here's what I don't understand. Why must they hide? I saw one mother try to feed her baby on a bench, near the zebra enclosure. She got screeched at by a gray-headed human, then a zoo employee escorted her to the lactation station. She had clearly violated some kind of social rule. Some version of this scenario has occurred exactly 37 times in the past year, and those are just the occurrences I was able to document. How can feeding one's baby be frowned upon? Please help me to understand.

Perhaps, and I know this is not my place to say—as a scientist, my role should just be to observe—but I can't help but wonder, how would things be different if all adult humans had breasts and fed young?

I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Faya, The Flamingo



Dissaray
Arieon Frazier

Denee Smith-Francesce

This One's For Me

The thing is
This poem is not about you
not to caress your ears
nor kiss your heart.
This one is selfish
for my body, my healing
To empty my brain and clear out my mind
To open a vein and watch each letter drip down onto the page.
did you know my body is made up of words?
good words
bad words
dirty words
painful words
and sometimes
they get stuck
wedged in the most inconvenient of places
caught in my back muscles
curled around my shoulders
weaved through my deltoids
jammed tight into my jaw
where only a fine tooth pen can chisel them free
sometimes I have to pull over
and let the words pour out of me
I feel the release so deep
so subtle
most wouldn't notice
but I do.
My body does.

D. Walker

Chalk Houses

As a young girl one of my favorite things to do was to draw with chalk on the pavement of the church parking lot. It was a large paved lot and when it was drawn on in white chalk the lines stood out proudly. My drawings always revolved around what my future life would look like. I would draw an outline of a house that I dreamed of, outlining each interior room with the bright white chalk. This house, my house, would not be in this sleepy small town where most times the church bells were the only reminder that life did exist here. It would be in a town with stores and movie theaters and streets with sidewalks. Someplace that had a pulse.

The chalk rooms in my house were not intricate in detail but each had just enough detail that anyone would be able to decipher the purpose of each space. A living room for big family gatherings, a kitchen, two bathrooms and four bedrooms. Looking back, this home was nothing fancy compared to homes now, but at the time, growing up in a simple, small country town, this was considered the American dream.

Each chalk lined room was separate from the next. Unlike the homes of today that all seem to have a wide open floor plan with no space of their own. There was one bedroom for my husband and myself and then my two sons would have their own rooms and my daughter would have her own as well. My husband would go to work each day and I would take care of the kids and house until they were old enough for school then I would start a career of my own. I don't particularly remember the career path I intended to pursue but this future life was worry free. Absolutely nothing to worry about... after all, isn't that what dreams are made of? As a young girl, that's what I envisioned my family would look like. Well, it's no surprise that what you envision as a kid does not necessarily become your reality.

My reality consisted of being married and a mother at 18 and a widow by age 21. During our short marriage, there was no “dream home” but instead a little 4 bedroom brick cottage that we rented but could not afford and then into a one bedroom apartment that we could not afford. Even buying food was a struggle. Without the support of my mother, my friend, I do not know how I would have made it through those tough times. Being a young wife and mom with a very limited amount of money surely made me think about those dreams I had as a young girl. I spent much of that time worrying about how to pay the bills and more time worrying about having the means to take care of a baby. Then, unexpectedly, I became a widow at 21. Widow and twenty one are not words that are meant to be used together.

I had no choice but to move in with my parents. Here, in my childhood home, I shared my childhood bedroom with my three-year-old son. Really not much had changed in that bedroom except now there were two beds. We had plenty of closets and dresser space but the majority of my previous life was in a black trunk at the end of the bed. You would think for two people to fit their lives in a trunk would be impossible but being so young there wasn't much that had been accumulated. This black, rectangular trunk contained things like our wedding album, baby pictures, graduation tassels, everything that a 21-year-old and a 26 year old would have collected. I remember one particular time sitting on the floor in that bedroom going through the items in the trunk, recalling sweet times when we were dating, like going to his prom or taking drives along the river in his white toyota supra that he was so proud of. Poison arrow blasting in the cassette player. That car did not stay in our possession for very long, after having the baby we had to sell it for something more suited for a family. At very least, we needed a vehicle that could fit a car seat. It really was not that big of a sacrifice as we were so excited to meet our baby boy. During that

time that I lived in my childhood bedroom with my son, I cried a lot and spent much time thinking about what my future would look like.

Now what? I was a 21 year old widow with a 3 year old living with my parents. What would that young girl with such dreams say now?

After about a year my son and I were able to move out into a trailer not far from my parents. It was not very big, about 950 square feet but we had our own bedrooms and a yard to play in! I enjoyed the time spent decorating our home, especially my son's room which he wanted in a dinosaur theme complete with bunk beds. We felt like we finally had a home. I spent the next few years working as a waitress and bartender making enough money to keep us going. However, I was constantly thinking about my future: this could not be all there is for me or could it? One night I was chatting with a very good friend who was also a local dentist.

“What am I going to do?” I asked, plainly.

“Go to dental hygiene school,” she responded with certainty, “finish school, and I will give you a job.”

I remember she said it so matter of factly. Almost like I didn't have a choice. As if it was a command. So, as commanded by my friend, I applied to the local community college, and by and by local I mean an hour drive there and an hour drive back. I was so nervous about going back to school but I knew this could change our lives.

As mentioned, living in a small town, everything was a commute– the drive to school was an hour each way, 2 precious hours of my day. Having a child made my study time very limited so I took advantage of that two hours by recording all of my notes on a cassette recorder each evening and listened to those recordings over and over again on my ride to and from school each day. I guess it would be kind of like today's book on tape.

It was not easy going to school full time, raising a child as a single parent, paying bills and finding time to study. However, the

thought of struggling financially and being 'stuck' in this small town was enough to keep me pushing forward. After 3 ½ years of hard work and dedication, not only did I earn my degree but I graduated number one of my class and was awarded the The Albert H Stevenson award for the highest in Academics and clinicals. I mention this not to pat myself on the back, I never considered myself a great student, but because I knew going into this that if I did not make it through, then what? I was already adding on debt. I could not fail and end up in worse shape than I started in. So I worked very hard making sure that was not going to happen.

So now, many years and careers later, what does my life look like? Well, at 56 I have been married for 25 years. My husband and I began a business before getting married and that business is still going strong. I have a 37 year old son, a daughter who is 22 and another son who is 20. Yes, 2 boys and 1 girl just like that young girl with the chalk house dreamed. I also have the added bonus of a 4 year old grandson. I own my dream home and yes, it has 4 bedrooms.

Looking back, maybe that young girl drawing in chalk all those years ago was creating more than a dream. Maybe it was a plan. A vision board of sorts. It just took a bit longer than planned with a few twists and turns along the way. But whoever said life is a straight line anyway. Nothing in life is a given but one thing about my future that I am certain of, I will continue to plan and of course, dream.



Love Potion

"Passing knowledge and promoting opportunity to new generations, so each evolves with more self sufficiency than the previous."

Veronica Winters

Russell Smith

Of Tea and Cookies

I sit by the fireside
and breathe in words
of love and cats that died
of graves in church yards
and dancing bears
and Jude lost and gone
and His loving stares

We no longer stretch
back to back
in silent repose
and sing our song
eye to eye

A dear old friend
old and tired
frail he never left my side

Barely walking
he climbed the hill!
going home I knew
to his sleeping spot
in natures lair
of grass and leaves
Earths moist aroma
deep and green

I stopped him
and hugged him

Russell Smith

and carried him back.
I should have let him go
never to return
and to sleep
peaceful.

I put him down
and down the drive he walked
towards his hunting field,
and like my father
I could see again
he was heading home
to sleep in his bed alone.

Oh but I feared
death was near
and again I couldn't face

I should have laid
back to back
in his bed of weeds
and old man smells
and cast off
beside him
for his trip back home
back to back
and not alone.

Erika Nichols-Frazer

How We Feed Ourselves

First, we feed from our mother—blood, then milk. We feed at her breast and then, at her table. She sustains us. Most mothers feed their children all their lives. These mothers offer their love, food they made with their hands. I didn't have a mother like that. I had a mother whose appetite for self-destruction swallowed us all whole.

My mother's unemployment checks bought pills, Wild Turkey, and Beefaroni we had to make last for days. When she wasn't working, my brother, Cal, and I survived on Slim Jims and the pickled eggs from a jar by the bodega register, four for a dollar. We squatted in apartment buildings with no heat or power and ate cold black beans on stale tortillas. When there was a stovetop or hotplate, my mother made "stone soup," which meant whatever she could find—beans, onion skins, the ends of carrots, leftover hamburger. I learned to cook early, simple things, when we got a few dollars: scrambled eggs, pasta, chili. I fed us all.

I wanted to be the kind of mother who could feed her child, to offer my love in loaves of bread I baked myself, in the carrots I dug from soil, in warm things pulled from the oven. I wanted to work for my daughter's love, to earn it. I boiled and mashed sweet potatoes and frozen peas once she graduated from my milk. I rolled out dough for pies and baked cookies to celebrate report cards. I mixed pancake batter on Sunday mornings and watched the drops grow on the griddle. I learned to dice, mince, and sautee, to slice and boil and roast. I taught myself these things. I wish I had family recipes passed

down, instructions for how to feed my child. I would give my daughter that.

Now, at fourteen, my daughter, Maya, won't feed herself. She stopped eating gradually. It started with her not taking seconds like she usually did, then declining dessert, then cutting out snacks altogether. When we went to the grocery store, she stopped asking for mint Milanos (her favorite) or Cheez-Its, or any of the things to which I knew I should say no but usually caved. She stopped eating the Parker House rolls I often served with dinner. Then stopped eating the sides, mashed potatoes or rice or pasta. She cut her meat meticulously, just a few small bites. She took her time chewing. Often, she just sat at the table staring at her food or watching us eat. Her anger seemed to turn inwards. She was quick to criticize herself, constantly examining herself in any reflective surface and finding herself wanting. She became quiet, unlike the Maya I had known.

After about a week of watching our teenage daughter refuse to eat, I brought it up with my husband, Michael, but he insisted that there was no problem, that she was just sick or going through a phase. He thought we should wait it out. Already, she was pale, sluggish, irritable. She withdrew and became quiet, sullen, responding curtly when asked a question, giving no more than one or two-word answers. My vibrant daughter was fading, a shadow of herself.

It must be my fault, at least in part. I think of all the times I complained about being too fat, worthless, ugly in front of her, despite my average size. How must that have made her feel about her own body? I taught my daughter to hate herself and I would have to live with that. I had thought I could be so much better.

I want to spoon my love into her mouth. I want her to swallow it, to let me feed her, as my body once fed her. I want her to hold the warm ember of my love in the empty cave of her belly, to keep her fire burning.

One dinner, Maya nibbled slowly on an undressed piece of lettuce, making it last. She didn't engage in our conversation or even look up from her lettuce. She was fixated on it. Eventually, Michael lost patience.

"You'll sit there as long as you have to until every bite on your plate is gone," he said sternly through clenched teeth. He didn't raise his voice but somehow, that was even worse, like he'd passed anger and moved on to something else. She said nothing and looked down at her lap. She didn't move.

"Is the meal your mother made not good enough for you?" Michael pressed her. "Don't you appreciate this food we've provided? We work our butts off for you, young lady." I felt like I was being chastised, too. Through tears she said, softly, "I'm sorry." She wouldn't look him in the eyes.

Michael eventually gave up and went to watch TV, which I could hear blaring from the living room. I sat with her in silence, in the dark, until ten o'clock, when she got up and went to bed without saying anything.

Growing up, Mom would take us with her to the park to beg. She probably knew she'd have a better chance with kids by her side. The trick was to look them in the eyes. She'd occasionally get work at a fast food joint or a store but would inevitably lose it when she was too fucked up to make it in.

Shopping on pay days was my favorite because we each got to pick out a candy bar. I always chose peanut M&Ms and ate them slowly, one at a time, to make them last. Cal preferred Twix and always scarfed them down right away. We'd eat our treats while Mom and her friends partied in whatever apartment we were living. No one cared if we stayed up late. Then there were the in-between periods

when we relied on the food shelf and our EBT card, when we'd have dinners of Wonder Bread and peanut butter all week, when we slept on her friends' floors. Those were the times she'd sulk around, and everything got her down. We knew not to ask for anything then, that the answer would surely be no.

Once, she was gone for three days, no warning, leaving me, at twelve, to feed Cal, only seven at the time. She didn't leave a note or money for food, or anything. We waited for her in the Section 8 apartment we'd been renting for a few months. It wasn't much but it had walls and our own space, two bedrooms where Cal and I shared a twin bed. When she wasn't home to make dinner, I heated the last dented can of Minestrone soup in the cupboard and went to bed still hungry. She hadn't gone shopping and I had only a few quarters, not even enough for a candy bar.

Cal pretended to be asleep but I could hear him sniffing. I pulled him close and wrapped my arms around him. He guided my hands to his round belly and held them tight. Eventually we both fell asleep. I thought maybe she'd be back when I woke up. She wasn't. I didn't want Cal to worry so I promised him that she was working hard and would be home just as soon as she could. I didn't believe myself. I knew her three months of sobriety and steady job housecleaning were over. Things had been better lately, a consistent place to stay on our own, money for value meals at Popeye's or KFC, metro cards to take the subway. I should have known it would end.

I woke Cal up early to make sure we got to school in time for the free breakfast—along with the free lunch, all we had to eat that first day. At night, as our stomachs ached, Cal asked, "Is she ever coming home?"

"I don't know," I admitted. I wanted to comfort him but didn't know how.

The second day, a Saturday, I stole bags of Utz's potato chips

and Snickers bars from the bodega down the street. They had to last us two days, until our mother finally came back after dark, bearing turkey and American cheese slices. She offered no explanation or apology. We pretended like nothing was wrong. I'd mastered the skill.

We continued to bounce around Brooklyn and I had to change schools several times. I rarely got my homework done and fell behind. The principal told me I'd have to repeat ninth grade. That was around the time I met Jared at a bar that would serve anybody. I didn't have any money the night we met, but I only had to stand at the bar for a minute before he came up and bought me a Heineken, which seemed fancy to me then. He was in his twenties, a DJ, which made him sound cool. He fucked me propped up on the dirty bathroom sink. It felt good to be wanted.

We began meeting in the park during my lunch period to smoke joints and fool around in the public bathroom, then I started skipping class to see him. I was going to fail freshman year for the second time, but Jared convinced me I didn't need school and that we should leave the city instead.

He got a job at the race track in Yonkers, only a twenty-five-minute Metro North train ride from Grand Central, he said. I'd been living in Mom's boyfriend's one-bedroom apartment, so I jumped at the chance to have a place of our own. I wanted to bring Cal with us but Jared wouldn't go for it. We couldn't afford to take care of a kid, he said. He told me we could get him once I got a job, and we'd saved up a little money. In the meantime, he promised, Cal could visit, if he could afford the subway fare and \$13 train ticket each way. But he didn't come. By the time I went back to look for him, a few months later, he and my mother were gone. She'd broken up with her boyfriend and he didn't know how to find her.

Jared took to spending his spare time at the track, too, and lost most of the money I made working at an all-night diner under the

table. He would come home drunk and empty-handed and find some mistake I'd supposedly made, like not cleaning the dishes well enough or forgetting to turn the heat down when I left the apartment, and flip out at me. Once he even threw a glass at me, which shattered against the wall. Though he often complimented my looks and made me feel pretty, he also told me no one else would want me, that I wasn't smart enough to support myself without him. I wanted to leave him but didn't have anywhere to stay, anyone else to take care of me. I believed he was right. I cried in my sleep.

I started saving up money, hiding it in my underwear drawer. Eventually I told him he had to quit gambling or I'd leave. He didn't quit. One of the other waitresses at the diner offered to rent me her spare room on the cheap. One night, after he'd been drinking and lost big at the track, he pushed me so hard that I tripped over the coffee table and landed on my wrist. I locked myself in our room and called the waitress, who came and picked me up in her Civic. She beeped the horn from in front of our building and I walked out with everything I could fit in my backpack, holding my swollen wrist, and never went back. This was before cell phones and he didn't know where to reach me. I don't know if he tried.

Worried that Jared would find me at the diner, I quit and my friend drove me all around town to look for other restaurant work. I borrowed her tight black dress and heels, hoping they'd make me look older than sixteen. I was turned down at six places before the manager of a café looked me up and down, leering, and offered me a job on the spot. That's how I met Michael, the twenty-eight-year-old insurance agent who came in for the soup of the day and a black coffee most afternoons. He always sat in my section and gave me a generous tip. It was months before he finally asked me out by writing his number on the receipt. I couldn't believe a guy like that, a guy with a grown-up job and a college degree, would want me.

I moved in with him after just a few months. He rented a condo in the fancier town of Bronxville, just one stop past Yonkers on Metro

North, but seemingly worlds away. Instead of the race track and liquor stores, Bronxville was sushi restaurants and stores that called themselves “boutiques,” which meant expensive. We went out to eat most weekends. We were comfortable.

I couldn't believe the way my life had changed so drastically in just a few short months. It was like I'd stepped out of my skin as if it were a pair of jeans and become someone new. Michael had saved me. Only a year after we started dating, one night we were eating at the restaurant on my break, and he got down on one knee right there in front of everybody and proposed. Of course, I said yes. I wanted a different life than the one I'd known.

It wasn't long before we had Maya. We traded the condo in for a bigger house with a yard. We got a dog. I didn't talk about my old life, never told my husband about living with no heat or water, staying in one place for no more than a few months. I thought by burying the past, I could erase it.

I searched Cal's name on Facebook and came up with a dozen profiles, some with pictures of dogs or vague silhouettes, but I recognized him almost instantly, his far-off expression, those familiar eyes. I sent him a message, inviting him to our house. It turned out he still lived in Brooklyn, about an hour and a half on the train. Maya was eleven then, the age he'd been when I'd last seen him. I could still see that child in him, that scared, lonely child. I wanted to cry for that child, to hold him close. When we hugged it, it was like hugging a stranger. We'd spent more time apart than we had together.

“So, Cal,” Michael had said over pork chops, “What are you up to these days?” As if they were old friends who'd fallen out of touch. Cal shrugged and mumbled, “This and that.” He didn't say much the whole dinner. He didn't ask questions about our lives.

He was twitchy, constantly moving, and unnaturally thin. I could

see his bones, just like with Maya now, his gaunt cheeks, hungry eyes. He looked like so many of my mom's boyfriends, skinny addicts, wiry men who couldn't be relied upon—there one day, gone the next. He looked like what I remember of my father before he left, slender and barely there.

Cal cut his meat violently, scraping his knife on the ceramic plate.

"Where are you living?" I asked, imagining the dumps we'd lived in as kids, hoping his life wasn't a repeat of our childhood.

"Bed-Stuy," he said. I wanted for him to elaborate and when he didn't, I asked, "On your own?"

He shook his head.

"I got a girlfriend," he said, "She's got a kid. He's nine."

So he was a father figure? We hadn't had one growing up, not for any period of time, anyway. The kid wasn't much younger than Cal was the last time I'd seen him. I want to ask about the kid, the girlfriend, what kind of life they had, but he didn't offer details.

We were eating the coffee cake I'd made for dessert by the time I finally got up the courage to ask what I'd most wanted to.

"Do you know where Mom is these days?"

At first I thought he hadn't heard me. He was focused intently on his cake, picking up every crumb.

"Nope. Last time I saw her a DCF worker was taking me away and she was freaking out. She was yelling and throwing shit and making a whole scene. I don't know if she ever tried to get me back after that. She just kind of disappeared."

"Don't you want to know, though?"

I didn't mention that I'd searched for her, too, but there was no digital trace of her. I'd even Googled obituaries, but the only person I found with her name was twenty years older than her and had a family she'd left behind. Then again, who would have written her obituary? Who would have paid for it?

"Not really," he said. "I don't ever want to see her again."

Though I resented her for the childhood we had, too, I also ached for her in a way that shocked me. Plus, I felt a desperate need to know. It was a need that I thought he might share.

Cal was embarrassed when he asked me for money as I drove him to the train station. We didn't have a lot to spare, but I wrote him a check anyway. I felt I owed him that. Then he disappeared, didn't respond to my texts or Facebook messages. He was gone from my life again, my last bridge to the life we'd had, once.

Maya was insatiable. When she was a baby, she fed constantly, so that my nipples were raw. It was a relief when she started eating solid foods, avocados and applesauce, then, fistfuls of Goldfish and animal crackers that she tucked away in her cheeks. She constantly demanded snacks until she got old enough to make them herself. She was a very active child, and, as she got older, competed in tennis and field hockey, ran in her spare time. I had to keep the house stocked with crackers and her favorite sharp cheddar, tortilla chips and salsa, honey-wheat pretzels, carrot sticks and hummus, trail mix, bananas, peanut butter, Greek yogurt. She usually went to the store with me to make sure I got it all right. She liked to compare brands, read nutrition labels, take her time deciding which apple looked ripest. She often helped me in the kitchen, unevenly dicing garlic or onions. I wanted to teach her to feed herself.

She was full of vitality but was a difficult child from the time she was a toddler, prone to mood swings and a violent temper. One teacher told me she had anger problems after she smashed another kid's block tower when he wouldn't let her help. She was like that, an only child, used to getting her way. A live wire, Michael's mother called her.

Maya has had an independent streak since she was a baby. She'd always push Michael and me away, try to do things for herself. Once, when she was four, we had both tried desperately to pull a splinter

from her foot before she had finally had it, grabbed the tweezers from me, and pulled it out herself. She always wanted to solve everything on her own. When she was a toddler, she insisted on dressing herself. At six, when she fell out of a tree she was climbing and broke her arm, she pretended to be fine for an entire afternoon before admitting how much it hurt. She doesn't ask for help, even when she needs it.

I know she puts a lot of pressure on herself to be perfect, and, I have to admit, maybe I put a little too much pressure on her, too. The thing is, I know what it's like to live in squalor, supported only by a mostly-unemployed mother without a high school diploma. My daughter won't live like that. She will graduate, go to college, succeed, be more than a waitress. My concerns for her have been focused so much on the future, what she will be and do, that I failed to really see the person changing in front of me.

She's lost so much weight that her clothes are shapeless and baggy on her already-thin frame. Her bones have become sharper, more pronounced. Her face looks hollow. She's slowed down. She's cold all the time and has started wearing two or three sweaters, layer upon layer, to warm herself. Her skin has developed a film of dark, downy hair. I've tried talking to her about it, but she dismisses me every time with "I'm fine." She isn't fine. None of us is fine.

I took her to the doctor, who said she was dangerously underweight and suggested I buy a scale to track her weight week-to-week. You'd think I was torturing Maya, making her get on it. I hated it as much as she did, I'm sure. I had to hold my arms tightly around her gangly body and shuffle her onto the scale. She begged—*nonononononono*—but I insisted. Finally, she gave in once the numbers started to tick up, curious. She'd lost twenty-seven pounds from her last physical, just a few months before. Tennis and field hockey kept her slim and she didn't have twenty-seven pounds to spare. This was proof there was a problem, as if I couldn't see it in

her bones. Maya's pediatrician referred us to a nutritionist and a child/teen psychologist.

On Wednesdays I had to pick Maya up from school early and drive her the forty-five minutes into the city for her appointments, which meant taking Wednesday afternoons off from the restaurant where I worked and not getting paid. This made things even more tense between Michael and me. He didn't trust psychotherapy and thought it was a waste of time and money. He thought it was as simple as just making her eat again. He was worried about paying for college, while I was worried about keeping her alive. It felt like she was slipping away, sinking into a dark place.

Michael got laid off and money got tight. My job at the restaurant barely covered the mortgage and our savings dwindled quickly. We had to dip into the college fund Michael's mother had started when Maya was born so we could pay for Maya's therapy when we lost our health insurance. \$300 a session. I tried not to take it out on Maya. She was so fragile, so quick to be wounded. She cried most days over the smallest things, exploding a bottle of seltzer in the kitchen, getting a B on a test, and of course, us trying to force her to eat. Michael lost his patience with her, yelled a lot, blamed her for putting us through this, which made her sink deeper into herself.

One time, I walked into the kitchen to hear his anger filling up the room, her cowering in the corner.

"Don't you see what you're doing to your mother? Do you know how selfish you are?" he shouted.

Maya was crying, that way she has of crying silently, red-faced and heaving. It makes her look younger, reminds me of days when her problems were easier to solve.

I know the therapy and nutritionist appointments have been stressful for my daughter, the anxiety that comes with her weekly weigh-ins, having to face the parts of herself she's trying to bury. I understand that, having a dark shame to hide—my mother, my past,

leaving my eleven-year old brother behind, losing touch. I want to be better for my daughter.

I want to do something to cheer Maya up, to offer some relief from the loaded silence that sits between us on the hour-drive home from the city. I had never thought about how much revolves around food, how I had always, without thinking about it, celebrated my daughter's accomplishments or comforted her disappointments with sugary treats, that I didn't really know how to celebrate her without food. A trip to the bakery that makes those cinnamon rolls she loves would not comfort Maya after the indignity she faces every week, laying bare the darkest parts of herself, the parts that hurt. She couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me what was wrong, what was hurting. I couldn't help her.

Maya shivered in the thin gown that revealed her bones, standing on the scale, waiting for judgment to be passed. Was it a gaining week or a losing week? Either way was bad. She'd be reprimanded by the doctor for losing more weight, not keeping to the rigid nutritional plan the doctor had given us. She might be punished for backsliding, having privileges taken away, like not being able to play in a tennis match. That was Michael's idea.

"She's running on fumes," he said, more scared than I'd heard him before. "More exercise is the last thing she needs."

Or, if she had gained and gotten the doctor's approval, she would be ashamed, furious, even, turning her hatred inwards. I wanted to tell her it would get better, to wrap my arms around her emaciated body, but she would pull away from me every time.

We had an hour to kill between appointments, so we started going to a coffee shop in mid-town in between them. The coffee shop was trendy, one wall brick and covered with chalk drawings. It was always full of young people, artsy types, college students. I held on to some small hope at first that Maya would order a large hot chocolate with whipped cream or ask for a scone, but all she'd have was plain black tea, no honey or sugar or milk.

Erika Nichols-Frazer

I saw the woman the first time we went there, sitting on the steps next to the coffee shop entrance, her body hidden beneath blankets, a cardboard sign on her lap with Anything Helps written in Sharpie, coffee cup with a handful of change at her feet. I probably wouldn't have noticed her if Maya hadn't asked for a dollar to give. She's big-hearted, always trying to help other people. The woman looked up to thank her and I saw her familiar eyes.

I only saw her face for a few seconds that first time, but those eyes—Maya's eyes, blue and bright, hungry—gave her away. She'd aged badly, skin pockmarked and red, wrinkles weighing heavily around her eyes, wisps of gray hair sticking out from under her too-big knit hat. It was hard to tell under all the blankets, but she looked like she'd gained a lot of weight. I could see it in her face. If she recognized me, she didn't show it. Unable to move, I stood there and stared until Maya called "*Mo-om*" and I followed her into the coffee shop.

My daughter has never met my mother. Neither has my husband, for that matter. I had no family at our wedding, no other relatives. The only family I have is the one we made. I haven't talked to my mother since I left. I wouldn't know how to find her, even if I'd wanted to. What did I have to say to her? I was a different person than the one she had known, more resilient, harder.

I left home when I was barely more than Maya's age because I wasn't strong enough to watch my mother kill herself. Now, my daughter won't feed herself or let me feed her. I have to watch her kill herself, and I'm still not strong enough.

Maya and I sat in silence for most of the hour, sipping our drinks on the coffee shop couch, and people-watching. I could see her taking mental notes, about what, I'm not sure. She's a quiet, observant kid. I'd found us a seat near the window, hoping I could catch a glimpse of the woman who I was almost positive was my mother, but I could just see the part of her blankets where her feet

would be, stretched out on the sidewalk. When we left, I slowed down and tried to look at her carefully, but she just stared at the sidewalk. I put another dollar in her cup.

Each Wednesday, I made sure I had a few dollar bills on me. As we approached her, Maya would look up at me, asking without saying anything, and I would silently hand her a few bills. I didn't tell her who I thought the woman was. My mother was my secret, my own private shame. I was used to being embarrassed by her, had been for much of my adolescence, by her unkemptness, her outbursts.

After a couple of weeks, I started writing on dollar bills and sticking them in my wallet to give her. My initials, my phone number, my birthday. I wanted to say It was your fault, or, you drove me away, or, you were the real reason Cal had to suffer. It was her fault I'd had to leave him behind, her fault that we'd lost touch, that we couldn't rebuild our relationship.

I had an urge to touch this woman, my mother, to let her hug me like she did when I was small. That's one thing I remember: she was a good hugger. Maya won't let me hug her anymore. She buries her frail body under layers, hides herself, pulls away if I try to put an arm around her, flinches if I put my hand on her back.

One Wednesday morning before I picked Maya up from school for her appointments, I cooked. I diced onions, minced garlic, chopped bell peppers, carefully diced hot chiles. I let three-bean chili simmer in the crockpot while I baked corn bread from scratch, mixing in canned corn. I'm no gourmet chef, but Michael loves my chili. I made chocolate chip cookies, which reminded me of how Maya had loved to eat cookie dough when she was younger; there would hardly be any left to bake. I slathered the bread with butter and scooped the chili into a thermos, grabbed a spoon, and packed it all up. I didn't know what to say to my mother; nothing seemed like enough, but I could feed her, at least.

This time, there was no one on the steps, no sign, no paper coffee cup. I'd missed my chance and let my family get away again. In

the coffee shop, cupping a hot mug in her hands, Maya said softly, “You didn’t do anything wrong, Mom. I want you to know that. I’m not your fault. You didn’t do anything bad or anything.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. She’s wrong, I thought; of course it’s my fault. I haven’t been good enough at loving her, at holding her close. I left my own mother, who couldn’t take care of herself and who’s who-knows-where now, and I can’t feed my own daughter. I reached for her bony hand and she didn’t pull away.

“It’s nobody’s fault, sweetie,” I said in my best motherly voice. “You’re getting better. You’re going to be OK. It’s going to be OK.”

“No,” she said, looking down at our intertwined hands. “It’s me. There’s something wrong with me. I don’t know what it is exactly. I’m just—broken. And I’m trying to be better, I want to be, I just, I can’t. I can’t do it, Mom.”

She started to cry.

“There’s tissues in my purse,” I pointed to the purse on the chair next to her. She reached in and pulled out the Tupperware container of cookies. She wiped her eyes, took a cookie, and chewed it slowly, her eyes closed, taking her time with each bite.



Morana

Mirjana M.

Jordan Ranft

I Explain Alcoholic Insanity

I kiss the bedroom floor
with my knees and ask
for *that* part of me to die

my sponsor says to accept
every aspect of myself
I contemplate the curve

of his hand wrapped
around a coffee cup
loneliness is a hand

holding anything
besides a source of thirst
powerlessness is

to be killed
by its quenching
I am living well

I say Good Morning
I Forgive You
Please Help Me Forgive Myself

the words do not change
if I say them
lying in bed or

Jordan Ranft

as I'm sawed in half

I do not sing anymore
there is nothing left

lurching towards me

or begging forgiveness



THE INEVITABLE

Kaseto

Why I Stopped Writing for Men I Met on the Internet

“Can you just write that up, hon?” I throw my phone on the table, not caring if it breaks. I’m done. I can’t keep erasing, ignoring big parts of myself for a paycheck. As I ponder what to do next, I remember how I got here.

I am 21. I meet Frank (all names have been changed) on Craigslist. My sister drives me to the public library to meet him because I don’t have my license yet. Frank has an idea for a gory, trippy short and wants help writing it. I type the script in Word on our boxy family PC, feeling grown up, like a real writer. Frank single-handedly directs, edits, and finances his project. In the film, a young woman is murdered and a trite plot twist clumsily revealed by an actor who once appeared in a National Geographic special. It is rejected from every festival he submits to.

I am 23. We are in the halcyon days of SEO. Ben needs someone to provide content for fitness and entertainment websites, and I’m up for the task. A bookish, decidedly nonathletic person, I learn the lingo of lifts and supplements, the differences between the NPC (National Physique Committee) and FAP (Fitness America Pageant). I write gushing fan profiles for a fresh-faced blond pop star. The most lucrative site is a now-forgotten corner of the Internet called Brofessional, where I get paid \$50/hour to turn Bros into Pros, whatever that means. Photos of scantily-clad buxom women flood the site, including a particularly gross feature, ‘Who’d U Do?’ I am the Bro behind the curtain, shoveling Taco Bell into my mouth while typing pearls of Bro wisdom.

I am 32. A pair of filmmakers want me to write their script. They are nice. They are dudes. They love Tarantino. They’ve spun up a story where a pregnant woman is violently assaulted, and need

someone to write the screenplay. Someone close to me asks if this is really the kind of work I want to do, given the gore, the trauma. I defend the project, thrilled at the opportunity.

I am 34, expecting my first child, when I meet a businessman with wild stories, decades of international escapades and political affairs. As I learn more about him, I realize our values are not aligned, not even a little. He throws money at me to ghostwrite his memoir, lots of money. I take it for a while. But he always wants more of my time, my energy. I do not like the words I am generating, do not want to be part of putting them out into the world. After a particularly bad phone call, I take a hiatus. When he reaches out again, I end the arrangement completely. I don't regret my decision even once.

The men in these stories do not behave badly. They do not commit overt, abhorrent acts. This is a subtler story, a tale of perspective seeping out, spilling everywhere. Who commissions art, whose stories are told? Who shapes what we see represented on page, stage, and screen? Whose gaze, in fact, are we peering through?

It's not always men perpetuating the patriarchy. A woman hires me to ghostwrite a few of her wildly successful self-published romance novels. They are chaste novellas that feature a plucky heroine marrying a handsome young man, culminating in a (gasp!) kiss at the end of 35,000 torturous words. I repeat the formula over and over, enjoying the substantial paychecks but not the writing process. I willfully ignore history in favor of producing biased, heteronormative drivel. After a few books, we mutually part ways. I think she knows my heart isn't in it.

I should mention that I'm a white, cis, able-bodied woman. White privilege and socioeconomic privilege allowed me to get the jobs above, to do them in my spare time, and have the benefits of healthcare and a stable paycheck to fall back on. Not every writer

has this set of unearned advantages. But many of the people behind the curtain, making decisions about books and films and art, do.

At the executive level, the people in the C-suite at production companies are 92% white and 80% male. Women struggle to find funding for their films, sometimes resorting to desperate tactics like selling a home to see a project come to fruition². In the independent, non-studio film space, there is a \$21M gap in funding valuations between men and women. The outlook is bleaker for women of color, queer people, and disabled people. A recent McKinsey report³ shows that Black creatives make up less than 6 percent of all writers, directors, and producers despite comprising 13% of the US population.

There are some exciting initiatives working to break the white, male-funded mold. Ava DuVernay's ARRAYNOW, founded in 2010, works to promote and distribute independent films made by people of color and women from across the globe. Reese Witherspoon's media company Hello Sunshine centers women both in front of and behind the camera. Mindy Kaling recently announced Mindy's Book Studio, an Amazon imprint that aims to diversify whose stories are being told, with opportunities to adapt works from page to streaming service.

Is there an inherent conflict in the goals of diversifying storytelling and who is funding the stories being told? Amazon's executive leadership is almost exclusively white and male. While Jeff Bezos has a net worth of \$178 billion, front-line workers struggle to make a livable wage. Hello Sunshine sold in 2021 to a new media venture by the Blackstone Group that's being led by two white men, Kevin Mayer and Tom Staggs. While the executive leadership of the Hello Sunshine brand still appears to be mostly women and people of color⁴, it remains to be seen whether the Blackstone Group's

involvement will impact the timbre of storytelling in a significant way.

Perhaps the goal should be to make money, no matter where it comes from, a Robinhood-esque take from the rich approach. One could argue that there are parasocial benefits from consuming media that highlights lived experiences different from your own. In fact, there's even data⁵ to back it up. Does it matter that your art benefits a greedy, stingy corporation, if the end benefit is a more compassionate, less biased society? How could an artist parse apart these two extremes, understand which side of the line their work falls on? How do we begin to subvert such a system?

With my freelance assignments, the extra cash was nice, for a while. Eventually, I got tired of churning out content that other people dictated. And then I discovered Lindy West and Jessica Valenti and Roxane Gay and Joey Soloway and R.O. Kwon and Samantha Irby and Glynnis MacNicol. In their work, I found a template for how I could move through the world as a writer without simply parroting back the perspective I had grown up with. The perspective that paid lip service to a generic notion of “equality” while centering white, able-bodied heteronormativity.

Around this time, I also moved to Chicago and completed an intensive conservatory program with my sister and other aspiring writer-performers. My sister and I wrote absurd songs together, making each other laugh until our bellies hurt. I began to take creative risks, sifting through what was my own perspective and what was background noise picked up subconsciously from society.

Although I don't have an answer on how to achieve systemic change, I've figured out an approach I'm comfortable with personally. In this next phase of my artistic life, I'm working only with people I want to work with. By happenstance, not design, they are largely women and non-binary writers, directors, playwrights, actors. They are the people whose stories I crave, the people who

Elyse Moretti-Forbes

who have captured my heart.

Since I made my shift, my projects haven't been profitable. That happens; there are far more talented writers than me who have yet to sell a novel, see their work produced, and many more who have accomplished these things but have yet to earn a livable wage from them.

I don't need the money, I tell myself. I should do what makes me happy, and this makes me very happy. Crafting and sharing stories with friends and strangers is what writing has always been about for me, from the fan fiction forums of my youth to finding community in dimly-lit back rooms of theaters as an adult. At what point will this good will run out? When will the prospect of making money from writing become necessary?

Maybe in a few years. Maybe next month. Maybe never. But I know that at the very least, this way of writing and collaborating feels good for my creative soul. It feels like I'm finally, inescapably, being true to my inner writer. I'm starting anew; listening to her voice and seeing where she will take me next.

1 - <https://www.thefemalegaze.com/soloway-female-gaze-tiff/>

2 - <https://variety.com/2022/biz/entertainment-industry/women-in-film-hollywood-gender-pay-gap-1235156776/>

3 - <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/black-representation-in-film-and-tv-the-challenges-and-impact-of-increasing-diversity>

4 - <https://theorg.com/org/hello-sunshine/org-chart>

5 <https://cmsw.mit.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/The-Parasocial-Contact-Hypothesis.pdf>

Lavínia Vianini

What I Think About When I Think About You

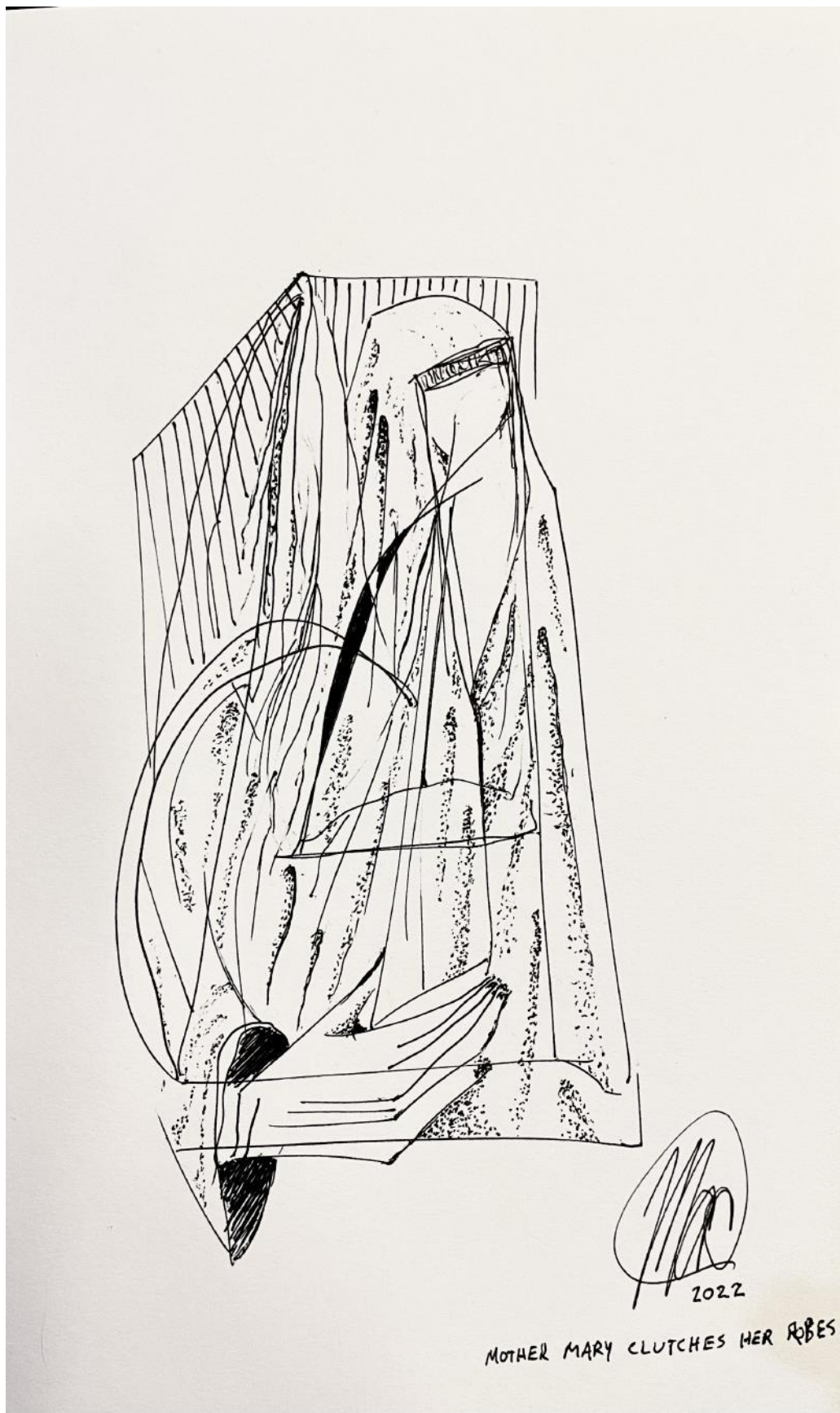
The unspoken profanities
Promises on lips shut
The heresy contained in the intertwining of fingers
The purple light that comes under the window at dusk

Bodies are their own language
Prose receptacles
that I annihilate in poetry

I think about language like I think about love
So latent, it's almost palpable
I write you because I see you in verses
Confusing semantics that reveal glimpses of secrets

Unexpected visits in dreams
Coffee drank over a welcoming silence
The plans that unfold in a spiral
Of moments that I keep inside a
pendant

love in metric
reunion in tears
catharsis in verse.



Mother Mary Clutching Her Robes
Mac O'Sullivan

Denee Smith-Francesce

The Evolution of Moonlight

The first time we met I was a baby and you woke me up
I cried until the sun swooped in and cradled me with warmth.
The next time I was 13 sloshing in the pits of my adolescence experimentation
Under the blanketed moonlight and star-filled night I dove into the abyss of believing nothing could
break me.

My dear friend, I anxiously await your return.
Watching as you fill up in the shadows of darkness
Until one day your pull takes my breath away

Sometimes the vastness of the moonlight can heal the vastness of our beings
feet to ground head to sky
breath awaits.

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CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

Jordan Ranft lives in NYC with his partner and small dog. He writes poetry and music criticism. He has been previously published in Rust + Moth, Bodega, and Midway. Twitter: @JordanRanft

Vesper North is a writer, among other things. Their work has been featured in Ourobourous Magazine, Meditating Cat Zine, with an upcoming publication in Kaleidoscope in January 2023. They are a contributor at the Los Angeles Review of Books, assistant editor at TAB Journal of Poetry & Poetics, and cast member at ImprovCity. They like cats, cocktails, and Irish goodbyes. They're online at www.vespernorth.com or @vericurious

Bethany Jarmul is a writer, editor, and poet. Her work has appeared in numerous literary magazines and been nominated for Best of the Net and Best Spiritual Literature. She earned first place in Women On Writing's Q2 2022 essay contest. Bethany enjoys chai lattes, nature walks, and memoirs. She lives near Pittsburgh with her family. Connect with her at bethanyjarmul.com or on Twitter: @BethanyJarmul.

Russell Smith grew up on Long Island, New York in a house built by his great grandparents on a dead end dirt road they named after themselves. Writing, drawing and painting at an early age were his loves and afforded an escape from the academic demands of school. He graduated high school as the most artistic, went on to art school in nyc where after a year he left and joined the army to see the world. Disillusioned from the experience he dropped out for several years, hitching around the US following warm weather. Returning to school briefly on the GI bill at age 30, with his wanderlust behind him, he was able to develop his artistic and creative skills. Today after 35 years as an architectural designer he resides in New Paltz NY retired and continuing his love of art.

Lavínia is a 25 year-old poet, translator and teacher. With a Bachelor's degree in English/Portuguese, her Academic research focused on poetry written by women, which later allowed her to be offered a scholarship in Comparative Literature. Links: twitter.com/vianinilavinia instagram.com/vianinilavinia/

Elyse Moretti Forbes is a writer and screenwriter based in the Midwest. Elyse's fiction has been published in Adelaide Literary Magazine. Her work has appeared onstage in Chicago at iO Chicago and Stage 773. She loves dinner parties, handmade pasta, and exploring nature with her family.

Mirjana M. are a digital artist and writer from Belgrade, Serbia. Their work focuses on exploring the juxtaposition of various elements through mixed media of photography, double exposure, textures and light. Their work most often explores concepts of duality and has appeared in "Gulf Stream Literary", "The Good Life Review", "waxing & waning" magazines and other places. You can see more of their work at their blog olorielmoonshadow.wordpress.com, <https://ello.co/oloriel>, get in touch on Twitter (@selena_oloriel); they are also the creator of Suburban Witchcraft Magazine (<https://suburbanwitchcraftmagazine.wordpress.com/>)

Veronica Winters is a production artist and graphic designer in NYC. She studied Visual Arts and Emerging Media at UCF in Orlando FL, where she was both trained technical drawing and introduced to new digital mediums and rising graphic programs. In a world of digital perfection, Veronica aims to preserve the honesty of studio arts- often mixing their raw quality and precision and control of digital graphics in post production- to create her work.

Mac O'Sullivan is a visual artist from the Hudson Valley (NY), currently residing in Astoria, Queens. Self taught artist working with drawing, digital art, and oil paint. Abstract, portraits and still life, taking inspiration from every day situations and scenes. Currently 100% of profits are donated to the preservation of the Hudson River.

Denée Francese-Smith has been writing poetry since she was 9 years old. It has been her practice of connecting with the self, working through issues, marveling at beautiful things or simply because it must come out right this instance. She uses writing as a way to explore, play and experience life through a different lens. Aside from writing, Denée is a part time restaurant owner, part time massage therapist and full time dog mom. You can find her in the woods, on her couch, on a rock cliff, or in the ocean--always observing, thinking, feeling--how to create this experience with words. How can she describe this moment so you, the reader, can experience and transport to a different realm.

Lori D'Angelo earned her MFA in creative writing fiction from West Virginia University in 2009. She is a grant recipient from the Elizabeth George Foundation, a fellow at the Hambidge Center for Creative Arts, and an alumna of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. Recent publications include stories in Black Moon Magazine, Bright Flash Literary Magazine, JAKE, and Suburban Witchcraft. You can find her on Twitter @scilly21 or on Instagram at lori.dangelo1. She loves reading both Shirley Jackson and Alice Munro.

Erika Nichols-Frazer is the author of the memoir Feed Me (Casper Press, Dec. 2022), about bipolar disorder, her eating disorder, multigenerational alcohol addiction and food. She is the editor of the mental health recovery anthology A Tether to This World (Main Street Rag, 2021). She has an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars and has published stories, essays, and poems in journals such as Gone Lawn, River Teeth's "Beautiful Things," Emerge Literary Journal, Idle Ink, Bright Flash Literary Review, and elsewhere.

Kaseto: founder of RMF (removemyfilms), is a multidisciplinary artist and electrical engineer. He focuses on the natural complex systems that surround us and the emotions they provoke. The Colombian born artist uses music and paintings to share his findings on the human experience.

“PLEASE REMOVEMYFILMS, only you get to know !”

D. Walker is a 56-year-old mother of three adult children. She dedicated most of her life to raising her children. She is now pursuing her passion in real estate flipping and investing with her husband of 23 years. She considers New York her home base, but spends much of her time in Florida.

CREATION MAGAZINE

EDITOR IN CHIEF ALEXANDRA FRANCESE

COVER ART BY MAC O'SULLIVAN

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AN ECLECTIC ISSUE

