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# Blue Mesa Review

## Issue 37

*For Silver*



# Blue Mesa Review

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*Founded in 1989*

Issue 37

Spring 2018

*Blue Mesa Review is the literary magazine of the University of New Mexico MFA Program in Creative Writing. We seek to publish outstanding and innovative fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, along with compelling interviews.*

*Brooklyn Chairs*

*Cover Art by Joseph Heathcott*

# BLUE MESA REVIEW

Spring 2018 Issue 37

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## Dedication

*To Mark and Cedar  
and their sweet Silver Brant Sundeen*

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# Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

The bones of Issue 37 are filled with pain, loss, and ultimately hope, which you'll find in the beautiful work of our contributors and in the hearts of the Blue Mesa Review staff. While reading and selecting final submissions, our friend, mentor, and faculty advisor, Mark Sundeen, and his wife, poet Cedar Brant, lost their infant son, Silver. He passed away within hours of birth.

After a short absence from the magazine, and still in the depths of grief, Mark returned to visit with the staff. It wasn't intended as a memorial service, but it became something similar. Together we wept and laughed and ate and tried to make sense of the tragedy. Mark shared with us how he turned to literature to help him process his grief. He told us how important our work is in not only entertaining but helping people in difficult times, and how vital it is that we help these stories find their way into the world.

At the time I heard of Silver's passing, I was reading *Becoming Earth* by Eva Saulitis, a meditation on mortality and grief as Saulitis fought, and ultimately lost her battle with breast cancer. A passage has stuck with me since. She writes:

*"I do believe each suffering being deserves a legion of candlelight, all over the earth, burning in his or her name, in times of trouble. I believe the gesture matters. So I do my part."*

With this issue, which we dedicate to Mark, Cedar, and Silver, we try to do our part in bringing forward a little light in these times of trouble.

Steve Howe  
Editor-in-Chief

# Issue 37





Purple Aquarelle  
*Pat Tompkins*

# Kooka on Fire

*Francesca Allegra*

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I move to New York in June 2016 after spending a year living in France. I'm excited to be back in the same country as my boyfriend, Will. My first week here, I walk to view an apartment with a broker. Between Sixth and Seventh Avenue, I feel a tremendous stabbing in my left side. I ask myself "Cramp?" and when it continues, "Hospital?" and when it subsides 10 minutes later, "Don't be dramatic." Later that week, Will and I try to have sex—try being the operative word, because about two minutes in, my teeth clench with pain and we stop. I'm not trying to brag, but Will and I used to have fabulous sex.

I make an appointment on Zocdoc for my annual gynecological check up with a random doctor who accepts my insurance and whom I assume to be female. Dr. Durig turns out to be a no-nonsense man whose smile always remains in the horizontal axis. He tells me he'll be doing a vaginal ultrasound, which I've never done before, but I am glad he does it, because as he's taking a tour of my uterus, he points to a small blob on the screen.

"That's blood," he says. "Did you experience any sharp pain in your side recently?"

I tell him about the horrible cramp I had two weeks earlier on the way to meet the broker. "Yup, you had an ovarian cyst erupt, a pretty substantial one. Your left side. Come back in two months to check on it."

A few weeks pass and I can't have sex at all. There is a searing, stabbing sensation at the base of my vagina that brings tears to my eyes and renders me inarticulate. I go to Dr. Durig again. "You must be stressed; try a lubrication gel," he says, as though this is very novel thing to do.

I go to a doctor in Midtown East who has a basement office and zero bedside manner. I go home to California and see my gynecologist there, who prescribes me an MRI, a blood test including blood count, a chemistry panel, tumor marker Ca125, sed rate, and 300 milligrams of gabapentin, which is used to treat nerve pain. "Try to have sex at least once a week," she tells me. A prescription for intercourse.

Will and I try. While the nerve pain subsides for about a month, I begin to feel as if I am being impaled, as if my boyfriend's penis has a razor's edge. I cry a lot. He hugs me a lot. We kiss, we sleep in the same bed, and yet when we watch movies together and the characters begin taking off their clothes, I watch Will watch the fornication, the thing we can't do, the thing we used to do.

"Are you feeling, you know, *in love*?" my mom asks me as we walk the dog while I'm visiting home.

"Maybe you're frigid," my father tells me over a gin and tonic, and I resist the urge to throttle him.

"Try butt stuff," my friends tell me as a joke.

A year goes by.

One day in mid-October 2017, I'm on the phone seething to my mother after being told a specialist at Stanford Medical can't see me for another six months. When I hang up my roommate Dana says, "This shouldn't be this hard." Her father knows someone who knows someone, and I am swiftly emailed by the

personal assistant to the Gynecology Chief at the foremost research hospital in New York—would I like to make an appointment, can the doctor assist me with anything else in the meantime? This is the world of medicine I both despise for its elitism and am grateful to, privilege rearing its head for the bodies it is asked—in even-keeled, well-educated voices—to listen to, while those it does not know continue to suffer. When I show up to the appointment, there are three people waiting ahead of me, but I’m herded in first.

Something very interesting happens: I am listened to. For 40 minutes, I speak to a nurse practitioner named Andrea who asks me everything from my sexual history (pleasant but not noteworthy, no double digits) to my pubic hair removal preference (waxing when I find a good Groupon) to the amount I douche (never). She asks about my pain, my stress level, my exercise regimen. She doesn’t write things down because she’s too busy looking me in the eye. I want to thank this woman for the free therapy but I’m also questioning whether I’m going to have to do this whole routine again when the doctor enters, in which case I’m going to be stupendously late to work. When I’m done talking she says she’ll be right back in with the doctor, can I remove my clothing from the waist down and put this sheet over me? I can. I play Bubble Shooter pantsless for ten minutes.

Andrea returns with a skinny man who greets me warmly: “Andrea told me about some of the issues you’ve been having; okay if we do a physical exam?” I’m confused, but deeply grateful: Andrea sat with me and asked me the nitty-gritty because she knows what a profoundly difficult thing it is to tell a stranger, let alone a male stranger, about your non-existent douching habits and sexual pain. I leave with two diagnosed conditions whose names are vague and whose courses of care are even more nebulous: vaginismus, pain of the vagina with penetration, and vulvodynia, pain at the opening of the vagina. I leave with a referral to see a pelvic muscular specialist, a prescription for gabapentin six times stronger than the one I had before, and a gnawing sense of hope.

When I see the doctor’s bill in the mail a week later for \$400—the portion insurance refused to pay—I cross out my name and put my parents’ address. In the envelope, I put a \$20 bill with a post-it—“My contribution.” My mother calls me when she receives it: “At least you have a sense of humor.”

I think it’s important to say I’m lucky. I’m lucky to have support, both emotional and intellectual. I’m lucky to have insurance. I’m lucky to have parents who, in spite of my purported adulthood, have paid for every compound medication and doctor’s appointment, in network, out of network, deductible met or still a stranger, without complaint. “You have a rich person’s condition,” as my friend Kristy puts it. She’s not wrong.

I research: The University of Michigan Medical School did a study in 2011 which found that about eight percent of women surveyed suffered from symptoms of vulvodynia. Other studies have found this number to be even higher—around 16 percent of women globally will experience vulvodynia at some point in their lives. And yet, only half of the women who had vulvodynia in the study sought treatment for it, despite experiencing pain for an average of about 12.5 years. Dr. Barbara Reed, one of the study researchers, opines that “a lot of women think this is just [how] they are, and that it’s as to be expected and nothing can be done.”

When the six o’clock position of your vagina burns or stings or aches, you need to suffer for at least three months to receive the diagnosis of vulvodynia, according to consensus made by the Committee of the International Society for the Study of Vulvovaginal Disease. From there, there’s a number of

treatments you can try: antidepressants, SNRIs (serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors), anticonvulsants, opioids, hormone creams, lidocaine gels, all with the disclaimer: “It may take time to find a treatment, or a combination of treatments, that works for you.”

When I Google “Vaginismus,” I get angry. The Google tool “People also ask” pops up, and beneath it is: “Why does it hurt after having intercourse?”, “Why did it hurt when I had intercourse?”, and then “What is the definition of frigidity?” I remember my father’s words and I click the down arrow for the response: “Frigidity: Failure of a female to respond to sexual stimulus; failure of a female to achieve an orgasm (anorgasmia) during sexual intercourse.”

Failure of a female. It is a fault of mine, of my body’s, to not achieve arousal. By experiencing pain, I fail—but fail whom? Myself? My partner. A 1994 study by Jane Ogden and Elaine Ward states that “Vaginismus should not be regarded as a psychosexual problem but as a psychosocial experience in which defenses have been created to protect the self.” I do not feel protected. I feel annoyed.

On November 21st, I go to Regenerative Pelvic Medicine, which is on the 20th floor of an ugly building in Midtown. The waiting room is playing Zen music, and there is a water pitcher with cucumber and lemon. I sign a lot of consent forms. Yes, you can text me. Yes, you can email me. Here is my emergency contact, my mother, and yes, you can tell her what’s happening. Yes, to HIPAA. Yes, I know this is out-of-network. Yes, I acknowledge that the following procedures will likely be out-of-network. I see words like injection, trigger point, levator ani, the coccygeus muscle, the pudendal nerve. I pretend not to see them.

I’m shuttled into the exam room, which is playing ocean sounds. I don’t feel like a beacon of tranquility yet. My vitals are taken, and Dr. Sykora emerges. She’s a petite woman who is very pregnant, which gives her the look of a breadstick with a bowling ball attached to it. “You must have a strong pelvic floor,” I tell her. She is gracious enough to laugh before she begins to ask questions:

Are you in pain when you walk? Are you in pain when you urinate? Are you in pain when you sleep? Are you in pain when you sit? No, no, no, no.

Are you in pain during intercourse? Yes.

When did it start? A year and a half ago.

Describe the pain. Sharp, stabbing, throbbing.

On a scale of 1 to 10? 10.

Unbearable? Unbearable.

Describe your course of care. I tell her about this “care:” four different gynecologists, each with their own non-solution. The vaginal ultrasounds. The bloodwork. The MRI with contrast I got at NYU, where I didn’t realize what “with contrast” entailed until I saw four syringes of jelly lined up on the MRI table like soldiers on parade and was given a maxipad for when it all inevitably gushed out of me later. The MRI returned displaying all structures normal, no signs of endometriosis. Ditto the bloodwork. The ultrasound showed more cysts on my ovaries, but none that were a sign of concern. I tell her about the \$500 vibrator my gynecologist in California suggested, one that could get you to climax in 20 seconds, so that at least my sex drive could potentially start creeping back. I didn’t buy it—the cost of climax should

be free. I tell her about the bespoke \$300 cream the gynecologist in Midtown prescribed that made me feel a burning so bad that one day, curiosity got the best of me and I took a mirror to those parts. It looked as burned as it felt, scorched, angry red skin, a welt.

“That’s odd,” the gynecologist in her basement exam room said when she saw me the following week. “Sorry.”

I never know when to add that I’ve had a boyfriend this whole time. It feels defensive; I’m not just complaining and want to get nailed. No, I’m in a caring, happy relationship with a man whose patience seems limitless, who has transformed over the past year into someone who doesn’t even reach for me, doesn’t even try because he knows I live in fear of those moments, knows I’ll try to perform and knows I won’t be able to, or on the off chance I *am* able to, I’ll be waiting for it to end. I ask him why he stays with me and each time he laughs and says, “For more reasons than sex.”

Dr. Sykora begins the exam. We start from the outside: pressing on different parts of my abdomen, then on my hips, then on the outside of the vagina, and then she puts a gloved finger inside me. She asks me to do a kegel, the thumbs up of womanhood, and then asks me to do two more.

“Are you releasing?” she asks me.

“I think so?” I say.

She removes her gloves. “Let’s talk.”

I’m hoping she’s going to say something to the effect of: “You have a hot Cheeto lodged firmly at the base of your cervix; I’ll take it out real quick and then you’ll feel better.” Instead, Dr. Sykora tells me about the pelvic floor and the pelvic saddle, showing me diagrams and 3-D models. Lots of scientific words, but what it comes down to is nerve pain—the vulvodynia—and my pelvic muscles, which are in shambles, tangled like ropes. “If you were pregnant and needed to deliver a baby right now, you would need a C-section, otherwise your pelvic floor would collapse. And if you don’t do anything to untangle these muscles, it still could collapse regardless of any pregnancy.”

What this means, she tells me, is that if untreated, I could wind up on bedrest for six months with my legs at an incline and a mesh net slung in my vagina like a hammock holding in my intestines and bladder. I’m floored by the sophistication of modern medicine, and what it does for an organ that is vital to the perpetuation of humanity.

“But how did it get this way?” I ask.

“Was there anything that could have triggered this for you, a UTI or a yeast infection or anything? Because a lot of the time, when something’s different in that area, the muscles clench to protect the inner structures, it’s called ‘guarding’—”

Suddenly the cyst is all I can remember, the exploding cyst and the cramp and the dark blob on the screen. “Could an erupting cyst do it?”

“Yes. If that’s what happened, your muscles clenched to guard you, and then...”

“They never unclenched.”

“So you need to go to a pelvic floor physical therapist who can help you stretch these muscles. Obviously this is an incredibly niche practice. There’s only one place in the city I can recommend.”

I don’t know what she means by “stretch these muscles” but all I can envision are vaginal beads and huge, clownish dildos. I don’t tell Dr. Sykora this, and instead take her brochure for North Star Physical

Therapy. She prescribes a lidocaine gel to be applied to the vestibule of the vagina, heat patches to be worn at night over underwear, meditation, and valium suppositories. I blanch at this last prescription. Which hole?

“Whichever you feel better about—either way, they’ll get to the right group of muscles. And,” she adds with a smile, “A lot of our patients like to try having sex after they’ve popped one in. Gets them all *loose*.” I decide right then I like Dr. Sykora.

I call the compound pharmacy in upstate New York later that day for the lidocaine gel and the valium suppositories. Neither of these medicines are covered by insurance, and they’re \$185 each. When the medications arrive, Will and I marvel at how the suppositories are shaped like missiles, and how the pharmacy graciously included finger condoms in the baggie with them.

I’m told via email that physical therapy will be \$298 for the initial session, and \$228 for every session thereafter. The physical therapy office emails me a sheet of questions I can ask my insurance carrier, because pelvic physical therapy, I’m told, isn’t covered by insurance. I call Anthem Blue Cross and stay on the phone for two hours, mostly on hold, periodically being notified by a monotone automated voice that my call is very important to them. I’m then told by the agent that I can file a claim and that Anthem will review the claim and send me back the amount they decide is fair. “But what’s the amount?” I ask the agent. “And what’s fair?” She tells me that’s all she has on the screen in front of her. She tells me to have a good rest of my day.

On December 2nd I take the LSAT. Afterwards, Will and I go to a bar we’ve always talked about but have never been to on Greenwich Ave and 12th Street and have two cocktails each. A few hours later we are going to bed and I pop in my valium suppository. I’m tired and happy and prepared for deep REM when I remember that valium and alcohol are not meant to mix. Will researches drug interactions while I run to the bathroom, pajama pants at my ankles, attempting to kegel the suppository out of me.

“What does it say?” I call to Will from the bathroom.

“Um, well, uh...”

“Hello?”

“... It’s not great.”

Pantsless I go to the bedroom and snatch his phone out of his hand. He’s on some blog called Bluelight where I read that not only can “benzos and booze” make me high, they can be fatal. One user writes: “My sister took 10 mg of diazepam and had two glasses of wine and was dead by morning. Stay safe fellas.” I look at the valium dosage on the package. 10 milligrams. Will is staring at me tenderly, in a way that tells me he’s certain my passing is imminent.

“Urgent care or emergency room?” I ask.

“Okay, hang on, my insurance has a 24/7 nurse hotline,” Will says, fishing out the card and dialing. I’m grateful it’s a female nurse who takes the call. I laugh when I can tell she’s trying not to laugh when I say the words ‘valium suppository.’

“Okay, well I *think* you’re going to be fine since the drinks should have metabolized by now, but I have to tell you something you’re not going to like,” she tells me.

“Uh oh.”

“I need you to call poison control.”

Will and I look at each other.

“Is my vagina going to kill me?”

“Honey, you’re doing great,” says the nurse.

We call poison control. This time I speak to a man, and I try to make a bit out of it: “Okay, so I took these things whose names I don’t like to say, but they’re the reason I’m calling you, valium suppositories.” The poison control man doesn’t appreciate this highbrow piece of comedy.

“Stay awake for another hour and if you don’t feel nauseous or signs of a headache or have a seizure or diarrhea, then it’s okay,” he says, deadpan.

When we hang up, Will assures me I was probably his least interesting call. He then puts himself to the task of keeping me awake for the hour, which means he lists dog breeds I like and I say what I would name them.

“Great Dane?”

“Theodosia.”

“English Bulldog?”

“Rambaldi.”

A few days later, I go to my first physical therapy appointment, which is on the 8th floor of a nondescript building. When I walk in, I’m overwhelmed by the smell of essential oils. There’s a fake orchid and a stock painting that says: “The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts.” I’m wondering if my vagina smells like a swamp and whether or not this physical therapist will mind, which doesn’t feel like a particularly high quality thought. The receptionist, a woman with a perma-scowl named Cora, checks me in and tells me Sophie will be with me momentarily. A blonde woman emerges from around the corner and shakes my hand. We walk to a room with pale gray walls and yet another stock painting: “Life is beautiful,” it says, amidst red flowers.

“We’re just going to talk for the majority of this appointment. You can tell me what’s going on, and maybe for the last twenty minutes we’ll do some stretching.”

We, stretching? Does this mean we do lunges side by side? I give Sophie the rundown, she listens, she asks questions. 40 minutes pass.

“Okay, so now I’ll step out for a second and you can put this sheet on you and we’ll stretch.” I oblige and lay down on the pillow. She comes back in and puts on a pair of pink gloves. If my vagina does indeed smell like a marsh, she is kind enough to pretend not to notice.

“So what I’m gonna do is start pulling and pinching those muscles to get some blood flow going, so that they can hopefully start to unravel,” she says. And that is what she does.

“So what’s going on in there?” I ask her as her hand roams inside me.

“It’s kind of like...you know cat’s cradle, with the strings all jumbled in someone’s hands?”

“Yeah.”

“Like that.”

At the end of the appointment, Sophie opens a cabinet. “I want to give you some at-home exercises to do, which means you’re going to start using a dilator every night. It’s a silicone tool that you can use on your muscles the same way I do, just to get them to start untwisting.” She then pulls out eight different candy-colored phalluses, ranging from the size of a tampon (orange) to a \$5 Footlong (purple). Sophie sees my eyes bulge at the largest one.

“Don’t worry about that guy,” she says. “But do you see something in here that resembles your boyfriend’s size?” I’m no longer surprised that an almost-stranger is inquiring about the magnitude of Will’s penis, at how picking out my boyfriend’s dick in a lineup of cheerfully-dyed appendages has become quotidian.

“Probably somewhere between the blue and the green?” I say. When I explain this to Will later, he will demand to know exactly what the sizes were, how many colors there were to choose from, and the dimensions of the blue and green. “Toxic masculinity in action,” I will say, to which he will respond: “But how big was the big one?”

“We’ll start you off with this one, and then we’ll work up to the blue or the green,” Sophie says, handing me the second to smallest size, bright pink, which is the length of a mozzarella stick and the width of a grape, and thoroughly, deeply unappetizing. I put it in my coat pocket, and when I walk home from work that night, I rub it between my index finger and thumb, thinking of that colossal purple dilator, and how I’ve never seen anything like that on neither man nor statue in my life.

The next day I attempt to use the dilator. Will sets a timer and reads aloud the instructions Sophie printed out for me.

“Put lubrication gel on dilator. Put dilator into base of vagina. If vagina clenches, remove dilator. If vagina does not clench, proceed.”

I proceed.

“Does it hurt?” he asks.

It feels nearly impossible to describe pain that cannot be seen. A bone is disjunct. A bruise is purple. There’s athlete’s foot flaking between two toes, red and angry. This is the pain people take seriously. “It’s like there’s something there that I wish wasn’t,” is the only way I can describe it.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

A week later, Sophie and I are easing into a routine together, starting to chat like people getting to know each other over coffee and not like my leg is perched chicken-drumstick style on a pillow while her hand pulls and stretches the muscles inside the left and right sides of my vagina for 20 minutes each. Her daughter Ava is two and already expressing curiosity about potty training. But her husband incenses her.

“He’s trying to teach Ava to call that part of her body her ‘kooka,’” she says. “Is that not the stupidest thing? And I’m like, no, it’s your *vagina*. What if someone does something terrible to her and she’s in court like, ‘and then he touched my kooka.’”

“Vagina is a pretty hard word to say.”



“Yeah, right now it’s still ‘gina.’ We’re working on it,” she says. “Some of Ava’s friends are jealous, I think, that she gets to go to the potty and they don’t. They sing that song, you know, liar liar, pants on fire--”

“Or kooka on fire, in this case,” I say.

\$228 later, I pull up my pants and walk back to work.

On my way to the airport a few weeks later, my best friend Elsa texts me. She’s on Canadian health insurance and getting birth control. The doctor is pushing her to get an IUD, to avoid the hoopla of snail-mailing birth control to LA. Elsa is scared. “Also, I’m crying ‘cause it’s expensive,” she texts me. “I’m just pissed how hard it is to be a girl.” I cry for her in that moment, wishing I could be there in that exam room in Vancouver. I cry for me—for the love that cannot heal me, for the pain that throbs invisibly. We cry for our bodies, our bodies that fail us. Our bodies that can create and grow people, be loved and lusted after, our bodies that withstand waxing, shaving, plucking and picking at, verbal and literal. How do we learn to mourn ourselves well?

Over the Christmas holiday, I share a hotel room with my sister, Allie. When we go to breakfast in the morning, we laugh at what the hotel cleaning people must think of the pink erection on the nightstand. We hope they have a vision of us as cool lesbians with a not-so-sizeable toy, instead of sisters, one of whom uses a medical dildo. By the end of the trip, the dilator no longer hurts or even bothers me when I insert it.

On January 3rd Sophie passes me the yellow one with a smile: “You’ve graduated.” That night, I go get a wax. It’s leftover from a cheap Groupon and about to expire, and I’m determined not to let those eight dollars go to waste. I go to a small and very crusty hole in the wall on Seventh Ave and strip by the strip, the waxer rips off the hair. I’m struck by how painless it feels, this ritual that once brought tears to my eyes. The first time I got a wax, I was 19 years old, and all I wondered the whole time was what the beautician thought of my vagina. Now I feel like everyone’s seen it, and nobody’s thoughts really matter. At the end of it, the waxer gives me a hand-held mirror to inspect her handiwork. She leaves the room for me to get changed and instead of putting on my pants, I keep the mirror in that position, studying this structure I never really thought twice about until it made my eyes well and my throat clench a year and a half ago.

This is days before I will go back to Dr. Sykora, who will tell me that the physical therapy and the medications aren’t doing enough, and would I be open to trying trigger point injections, which are \$8,000 per shot and so painful they can cause me to pass out. This is days before I need to call my new insurance and go through the physical therapy worksheet for the out-of-network and non-deductible game. This is days before I will call my mother and tell her, facetiously but furious, that I am ready for a hysterectomy. For now, it’s just my vagina and me in the mirror, this cantankerous hoof of a body part: a wound, a scab, a blossom.

**Blue Mesa Review**  
**2018 Summer Contest**  
**June 1, 2018 – August 31, 2018**  
**\$500 prize per genre**

Each year Blue Mesa Review holds a writing contest in Poetry, Fiction, and Nonfiction. The 2018 judges are **Franny Choi** for Poetry, **Leslie Jamison** for Nonfiction, and **Luís Alberto Urrea** for Fiction.

Blue Mesa Review accepts previously unpublished work in Fiction (up to 6,000 words), Nonfiction (up to 6,000 words), and Poetry (up to 3 poems). We have a rotating editorial board, so each issue is fresh and unique. In general, we are seeking strong voices and lively, compelling narrative with a fine eye for craft.

We encourage you to submit your very best work online through our Submittable. First place winners in each genre receive a \$500 cash prize and publication in Blue Mesa Review. Second place will also receive publication. We look forward to reading your work!

*For more information and to submit, check out our website:  
[bmr.unm.edu/contest/](http://bmr.unm.edu/contest/)*

# ghoul

*mud howard*

---

i wake up in the morning. stomach empty from the nightfeed. the twelve hour  
dream churn of violet spears. i am pregnant again. and again. no one knows.

sex is a dry wave i surf with two hands. i would punch the mirror if i was  
a violent person. my mom used to say. the beach boys lift us up where we  
belong. i use the dog tooth to sculpt my own joy. i am no witch but i curse  
men anyway. i have a father who won't say sorry. i witness people grow  
everyday. calling an orgasm a spiritual experience doesn't make you a decent  
person. you have to burn the house of your trauma to the ground. you have  
to dive into the murky oil of your pissy mood and find pearls. you have to make  
secret allegiances with yourself. baby the sky. make him crawl to you.

it's okay to transform everything you touch.



The Wall of UnSilence  
*Terun Cherian*

# A Nonfiction Craft Conversation with Leslie Jamison

## By Hayley Peterson

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Leslie Jamison was born in Washington DC and grew up in Los Angeles. Since then, she has lived in Iowa, Nicaragua, New Haven, and Brooklyn. Leslie has worked as a baker, an office temp, an innkeeper, a tutor, and a medical actor. Every one of these was a world; they're still in her. These days she teaches at the Columbia University MFA program, where she directs the nonfiction concentration and leads the Marian House Project.

Her new book, *The Recovering*, came out at the beginning of April 2018. Leslie has also written a novel, *The Gin Closet*, and a collection of essays, *The Empathy Exams*. Her work has appeared in places including *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *Oxford American*, *A Public Space*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *The Believer*. For several years she was also a columnist for the *New York Times Book Review*. Leslie lives in Brooklyn, with her family.

On April 17, 2018, Leslie Jamison visited the University of New Mexico to give a public reading from her new book, *The Recovering*. Earlier in the day, she met with a group of MFA students to discuss writing, craft, and process. Nonfiction Editor Hayley Peterson led the Q&A session and Editor-In-Chief Steve Howe made a cameo.

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**Hayley Peterson:** Your first book was a novel, and now you've published two books of nonfiction. Was there a driving force behind that shift in genre?

**Leslie Jamison:** Absolutely. From a young age, I loved making up stories and had always identified as a fiction writer, so I got my MFA in fiction and wrote a novel that had roots in my real life and experiences. Then I began working on a second novel, about the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, and part of the appeal of it was hurling myself away from my own experience and doing a ton of research and becoming deeply fascinated by that place and historical moment. However, the novel had trouble breathing under all of the research I'd done. I think because the connection between



Author Photo by Beowolf Sheehan

my psyche and these researched materials hadn't quite developed.

What I really wanted was to find a form that would allow me to encounter the world that was not me in some kind of meaningful way, and it wasn't working in the novel. At the time, my experience on a day-to-day basis was frustrating. I was working in a bakery and as a medical actor, and trying to wake up and work on this novel on my days off, and it felt like walking up a long, endless hill. So I started to write essays, largely as an escape from this novel, and I started to think of them as a mistress project, this thing on the side, and because I wasn't putting pressure on them to be serious, they felt really liberated.

I love essays for a lot of reasons. Essays allow you to bring together personal narrative, literary criticism, cultural criticism, reportage, etc. I liked that they felt like this very capacious space, where all of those genres could play. But to loop back around to the question, I think essays ultimately helped me figure out this space I'd been trying to find in the novel where I could stage an encounter between my own psyche and the world. So that's how I found my way into this thing I'd been craving in the novel but wasn't able to find.

**HP:** Are you still working on that novel? Or has it turned into nonfiction now?

**LJ:** Actually, my dad, who's a Health Economist, was recently at a health policy meeting in Mexico where he met a man who had been the Health Minister in the early Sandinista government, and of course, because he's my dad, he was like, "My daughter was trying to write a novel about the Sandinista Revolution!" And this guy was

like, "Oh, she should come down to Nicaragua. I'll show her all the archives!" which would be amazing.

I finished a draft of that novel and didn't look at it for five years, and I actually just looked at it for the first time this past summer and realized it wasn't actually as bad as I'd told myself it was. So someday I would like to go back to it, in some form or another.

**HP:** Since we're in a room full of MFA students, I thought I'd ask how you think you've changed or grown as a writer since you were a student?

**LJ:** There was a particular workshop with Charlie D'Ambrosio during which he told me a couple things that have haunted me in great ways, mainly because I didn't understand what they meant at the time. At one point he said, "You have to abandon your citizen self." I wrote it on a piece of paper and put it on my mirror because I liked the sound of it and because I felt like I was too beholden to my citizen self. I always felt like I had to be a good girl and get gold stars and make people like me, and there was something appealing to me about abandoning my citizen self.

I think part of what he meant was that, in fiction, you can't keep your characters safe. You have to let them experience risk and do things they're not supposed to do, and that's where you find the knot at the heart of a story. But I also like how it applies to nonfiction. It's basically this idea of being bold, and writing into the truths you're afraid to articulate, or the mess of personal experience that you don't yet fully understand.

There are definitely things from my MFA days that have stayed with me, things I teach my own students, but I don't teach my students things I already know. I teach them the things I'm still struggling with. So, when I tell my students, "Don't give me the two-sentence version of your breakup story because you're afraid it's trite and no one wants to read it. Give me the specific story, because that is the only breakup story I have never read before," it's because commitment to specificity is something I'm still wrestling with in my own writing. Sometimes I still think, "Who even cares about this? Maybe I should just summarize it because nobody cares anyway."

**HP:** What about your growth as a writer from book to book?

**LJ:** Retrospectively, every book I've written has had seeds of future projects in it. I just wasn't always aware at the time.

For instance, my novel was about alcoholism. I had one character who looked a lot like me and drank in a way that was maybe problematic, maybe not, and another character who was older and living in the Nevada desert, drinking herself to death. Her life didn't look like mine at all externally, but the way she drank was the way I felt like drinking. I just didn't ever talk about that with anyone. This novel was a way of articulating both what my life looked like from the outside and then what my life felt like on the inside, or this possible place I felt I might be headed. So, there was a wrestling with alcohol in that novel that hadn't come to the surface in my own life yet.

And there were other questions driving the

novel as well: What does intimacy look like? How do we encounter one another's pain? How do we encounter someone's pain and want to save them? How is that also a method of ego-assertion? Some of those questions were really synonymous with the questions driving my essays in *The Empathy Exams*, which are very much about what it even means to experience empathy for another person. So the questions were similar in each project, I was just exploring it through invented dramatic narrative in one and reportage and cultural criticism in the other.

And then there was one line in the final essay of *The Empathy Exams*, called "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," and the line was something like: "Suffering is interesting, but so is the story of getting better." Not much of that book is about getting better and I'm not sure I totally knew what I meant when I wrote it, but in a way, *The Recovering* is a 450-page exploration of that line. I was thinking about addiction and recovery from many directions, but certainly also asking: How do we tell the story of getting better, and how do we keep that story from becoming overly simple? How do we let that story unfold in complicated, enthralling ways?

**HP:** Going along with that, *The Recovering* is memoir-ish, but it's also a lot of other things: cultural history, literary criticism, and journalistic. Was that premeditated or did it emerge out of the story itself?

**LJ:** Memoir-ish. I like that; "ish" is such an interesting appendage. My step-daughter is nine, and when she started fourth grade they all had to make "ish" drawings using an "ish" adjective to describe themselves. Hers was "crazy-ish." I was confused by it at first, but I

actually really like it, because “ish” gives you a kind of margin instead of pinning you down. You’re not saying, “I’m crazy,” you’re saying, “I’m crazy-ish.” When I was walking down Central Avenue earlier today, I saw a restaurant called French-ish...

**HP:** Ha! So your expectations aren’t too high...

**LJ:** Right, a little bit of breathing room there... But yeah, *The Recovering* is memoir-ish, I think. The book started in two ways. I did some writing in early sobriety, about eight years ago, for which I didn’t have a destination in mind. I was really just writing to survive those early raw and difficult times. I was waking up inside my own life and trying to make sense of what that felt like.

So there were these personal notes and the beginnings of personal reckonings, but I was also a little bit terrified by this question of what sobriety was going to do to my creative life. Not because I was having a really successful creative life at that point—I was having a lot of hangovers and fights with my boyfriend—but I had such fears about what sobriety would feel like and one of those fears was about my creativity. I started to do research about writers who had gotten sober and about how it had impacted their work. That research was part of my doctoral dissertation, but it was very much “speculative autobiography” because when I was researching these writers’ lives, I was also trying to think about ways my life might look. That’s not to say it was all about me, but I was carrying a lot of baggage into those authors’ archives.

So there were two strands: the personal writing and the dissertation research happening in

archives. And I love archives! I’m a real archive geek. It’s like an intellectually-sanctioned way of reading other people’s mail.

Anyway, at that point, it felt like I knew I was in this particular structure, but I didn’t know where the edges of the structure were. New rooms kept opening up, and I started thinking, “Well, if I’m thinking about all these authors and their stories about addiction and recovery, and if I’m thinking about recovery as a specific space where people tell stories of addiction and recovery, what about this even *larger* space where people tell stories about addiction and recovery, which is America in the 21st century? What are the stories we’ve told and why is addiction a disease in some of those stories and a crime in others? Why do we make the addict a villain sometimes and a figure of sympathy other times?”

I started to think about the War on Drugs and what kinds of story-telling have supported that war. There are certainly things I didn’t think would become a part of the book at the beginning of the process, like that cultural history, but they started to feel integral to this question of how we tell stories about the paradoxical, inexplicable experience of recovery. So certain things were revealed as I went along and certain things I knew from the beginning. For example, the idea that I wanted my story to be part of a chorus of stories and not the only story on the page.

**HP:** That kind of leads into my next question, which is maybe my most selfish question because I’m struggling with it right now...

**LJ:** I love selfish questions, so...



**HP:** Perfect. So, what was the biggest difference for you in putting your essay collection, *The Empathy Exams*, together, versus putting *The Recovering* together, which has a narrative through line?

**LJ:** Yeah.

**HP:** I mean, how does one even do it? In three steps, please.

**LJ:** (*Laughter*) I think in a certain way essays were a lot easier for me. Partially because I enjoy being able to write personal narrative in a much more choosey way. For *The Recovering*, I realized I wanted my personal story to comprise a narrative arc over the book. Part of that was the demands of a book are different from the demands of an essay, and one of those that felt more necessary than it did for an essay was the spine of a narrative with a certain momentum. I wondered how I was going to move a reader through these pages and make a reader want to move through these pages, and I felt like my story was one useful way of doing that.

But I didn't enjoy the process of having to narrate my own story in a linear way. I had to do some of the logistical "How did I get from A to B to C?" stuff that I didn't really have to do in essays. I could feel myself struggling against that and wanting to elide certain eras or parts of my life in a way the essay is constantly doing. However, in an essay it doesn't feel as evasive as it starts to feel in a more memoiristic narrative.

I tried to trust fall into this idea that as long as I wrote something that was interrogating my life, something deeply specific and faithful to the grain and interest of my life, then that was where

truth lay, in the particularities of our lives. And that's the talisman I hold up against the voices in my head that say, "Why would anybody care about your life?" and "Is your life exceptional?" and "Is exceptionality a prerequisite for writing your story?" I don't believe it is. But those fears about my life being worth narration were much louder for me when I was working on this book than the essay collection.

**HP:** That was a very helpful answer.

**LJ:** I still feel like I'm figuring out what it means to bring life to the page and put those pages into the world and hear what people have to say about them.

**Steve Howe:** You mentioned you have a nine-year-old step daughter and now a three-month-old. Does having kids change the way you write about yourself? You know, you expose yourself on the page and it's like okay to have strangers think you're a jerk, but...

**LJ:** Ha! The first thing I think about is how having kids has changed my writing process and how it's made me, more than anything, much less precious about my writing time. I was never *that* precious, but now it's kind of like whenever and wherever the writing can happen is good, which I think is actually liberating in a good way. There's a sort of energy or propulsion that can come from scarcity.

But I guess the answer is: no, I haven't necessarily thought about the risks of exposure in terms of what my kids would someday see. I've also learned that I'm never a good gauge about whether I'm going to emerge as a sympathetic narrator or not, you know? I

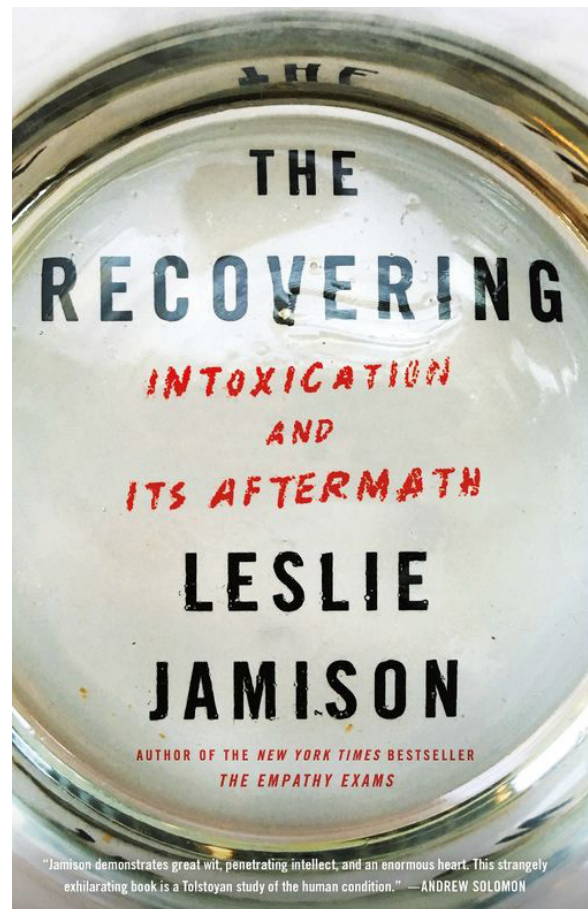
recently read a review of my book where it was like, “This writer is hell bent on making us hate her,” and I was like, “Oh. I didn’t think I was making you hate me...” But you never know what somebody is going to take from your book!

And it’s the same thing with writing about other people. I have actually developed some specific practices around writing about other people, but if I’ve learned anything, it’s that I have no fucking clue what somebody’s going to think about what I’ve written about them. So, I might think I’ve written an ode to somebody, a love song to them on the page, and they might hate it. And I might write about someone expecting them to be like, “I can’t stand that,” and they might say, “No, that seemed pretty accurate to me!”

The most important thing is humility and understanding that you can’t know what someone will think about a representation of themselves, so I think to that extent, I can never presume to know what someone will make of the character I’ve created myself to be.

**HP:** So, what are your rules for writing about others?

**LJ:** If I write about someone from my life, usually I try to offer them the chance to read it far enough in advance of whatever editorial timeline it’s on. What I say is, “If you want to, I would love for you to read this so we can have a conversation about it and so that I can edit from that conversation.” I’ve come to that language pretty carefully, because it’s not giving them veto power, but it is saying, “Your feedback is going to become part of my editorial process.”



And you know, in *The Recovering* there’s a relationship that’s a big part of the story, and the other person in that relationship read the manuscript not once, but twice, which was amazing and says a lot about him, and those conversations we had about his readings really shaped the book. I revised and thought harder about how I was narrating our relationship.

Sometimes, I think, people are afraid it’s all about compromise, like someone’s going to say, “We have to take that out!” and sometimes it is like that, but sometimes it’s not. Sometimes it’s actually incredibly generative. Those conversations with my partner, where he said, “This wasn’t how I experienced it. I experienced it this way,” forced me to go back and tell a more complicated version of the story that made it

a better book, not a hobbled or scratched out version.

But the one place I have granted veto power was people whom I met through recovery. I didn't tell many stories in a very in-depth way, but even when I narrated a little bit, I would always show them the pages and if they had any issue with anything, I just took it out because it wasn't something I wanted to exploit.

**HP:** Do you think knowing you're going to show the pages to the people you're writing about changes the way you write about them? I guess we can all assume people will read the things we write about them eventually, but when you're in the process of generating, do you let yourself say all the things you want and then go back, or...?

**LJ:** I'm sure it does change the way I write about them to some extent, but I try to build that conversational stage into the process so that I'll be as free as possible in the early stages of drafting, rather than trying to bring a censoring self into the early stages. You end up thinking, "What is this person going to think of that, and what is this person going to think of that?" or "I can't write it because maybe they won't like it."

Instead, I try to let myself write the thing as I want to write it, knowing later I'm going to go through this process of re-thinking and re-shaping it based on what that person says. I like to have a very, very rigorous editing process so that I'll be as liberated as possible in the drafting process.

# Derailed

*Jean-Marie Saporito*

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19:00 Report received on this fifty-six-year-old female patient, day three post-thoracotomy for a biopsy of a suspected malignant mass. Patient's history includes smoking, skin grafts, and alcohol abuse. The initial assessment revealed her shoulder sockets angled backwards, straining for an "itch" she can't seem to scratch. As the patient's manicured coral-colored nails aimlessly swiped, her gold Rolex, of questionable authenticity, but remarkable shine, rode her forearm. Crisscrossed ridges of contracted skin grafts screamed across the patient's back. No rash, nor urticaria seen. Scribe of these notes (henceforth known as the "Nurse") admonished her patient (henceforth known as the "Patient") to stop scratching for isn't it wiser to leave the past behind?

As the Nurse applied hydrocortisone 2% cream (per MD's order) to the skin grafts, the Patient recoiled from the touch, stating that the nurse's hands felt like, "a cheese plane peeling my skin." The Nurse hoped this rudeness wasn't a premonition for the twelve hours ahead because she had not slept well, if at all, before coming to work after receiving the postcard from the Priest. His pious handwriting demanded to know if she would greet her no-longer-presumed dead, no longer missing-in-action husband (or what was left of him) at the station when he arrived the next morning.

Chest tubes draining serosanguineous fluid into the pleur-evac container bubbling on the side of the patient's bed. White gauze dressing at chest tube insertion site dry and intact. Vital signs stable.

Addendum – please ignore all mention of postcards, premonitions, and husbands. This being a nursing note, the Nurse cannot alter what has been written or history.

20:18 Call light on. The Patient tapped the face of her questionable Rolex, accusing the Nurse of "not answering the call light for fifteen minutes." The Nurse reassured the Patient that the call bell had rung not for fifteen, but for five minutes, during which she had called her eight and ten-year-old daughters. The babysitter, once again, had not shown, and though the Nurse's belly seized at the thought of her girls at home alone, the hospital administration was sick of the Nurse's sick calls. The Nurse neglected to mention that in that five minutes she'd also locked herself in the staff bathroom and reread the postcard from the Priest. The time in the bathroom had been measured by the blinks of her eyes and not the sweeping second hand of her watch. She had not blinked once.

"God damn, this bed is uncomfortable." The Patient tore at her sheets. God be damned, the Nurse agreed and the government too, who sent her husband to Iraq, the sharpshooter that he was (is?). She couldn't imagine that he'd still be able to fire a gun without his hands. She pictured his train hurling through the night. The Nurse assessed the Patient's chest tubes, peeking underneath the gauze and Vaseline coated dressings. She explained to the Patient that dislodging the tube from her fifth intercostal space could result in a life-threatening situation, and tonight the Nurse was not up to saving anyone's life. Vital signs remained stable.

22:34 Call light on (again). This time the Patient demanded to know if her “bastard husband” had called the nurse’s station. He was supposed to bring the Patient something to drink. No call had been received from the husband, but the Nurse had received many calls from her own husband, ever since he’d learned to clamp a pencil between his straight white teeth and guide the eraser tip to tap the numbers. Her husband had been missing for months. The Nurse had grieved his presumed death and now she grieved his limbless life. She had ignored her husband’s calls from Walter Reed, where he’d been recovering, if one can ever recover from such trauma. Twenty calls a day for three days, and then she’d changed the phone number. She didn’t know what to say. Maybe he’d become missing again.

The Patient stated she was thirsty. The Nurse bit her cuticle and offered the Patient cranberry or apple juice, even a stick of Juicy Fruit from her own pocket to quench the Patient’s thirst. The Patient arched her severely plucked eyebrows and snatched the gum. Her hands fumbled and were noted tremulous as she struggled to remove the wrapper. Note the importance of hands.

Instead of thanking the Nurse for the gum, the Patient inquired if the Nurse’s children had a father. The Nurse answered that he was “away on business.” What business, the Nurse did not elaborate, but suddenly became acutely aware of the pricking postcard in her back pocket. If her calculations were correct, her husband’s train was already stuttering through Texas, edging the Mexican border. The Nurse fingered the malachite necklace her husband had given her on their honeymoon in Cabo many years ago. Sometimes when the Nurse was on top of Juan Carlos RN, coworker and lover, the stone struck him in the nose. She brought the stone to her lips. The cool, green reminded her of her newlywed husband’s lips as he’d bent down to kiss her on the sandy beach. Without his legs, she’d be the one to bend now. How could the Nurse have envisioned that “through sickness” would come to this? Or should she consider her husband to be “in health”? The Priest had written that her husband had had a “miraculous recovery.” Though, his arms would never wrap around her waist again. The Patient happily jawed the gum. Vital signs stable.

22:45 No more than five minutes had passed when the Patient pressed her call bell again, as if the Nurse wasn’t mid wipe with her other patient. The Nurse ungloved, washed her hands, and upon entering found the Patient thrusting her call bell at the TV. CNN paraded the war across the screen. On dusty roads tanks rolled, hemmed by cheering (or were they jeering?) crowds. The camera zoomed in. The screen filled with an attentive soldier standing in the turret mounted on top of a Humvee. His hands held a gun, saluting the sky. The Nurse was particularly interested in the soldier’s hands. Now there were man hands, hands that could cup a breast. What sort of hands did her husband have now? The Nurse shuddered. Her eyes followed the jut of the soldier’s jaw and the curve of his lips. She quivered for her husband’s lips, a longing that disgusted her.

Between the wiping of the other patient and the call bell ringing of this Patient, the Nurse had still found time to calculate the percentage of arms and legs to trunk and head. She wondered if in her calculations the brain and heart should yield a greater percentage because of their weight, not in kilograms, but in their importance for sustaining life and perhaps as residence for the soul. She’d always considered her husband her soul mate until learning that his arms and legs were blown from the Humvee and left in a thousand tiny crumbles mixed with foreign soil. Would a trunk and head be enough?

The Priest had scrawled on the postcard – “Despite all, he is still a man and still your husband.” She wondered where his cock was. Had he left it behind, along with his arms and legs? She’d read the blogs of other military wives about how this could happen. She couldn’t imagine to whom or how to pose such a question about her own husband. The CNN footage looped on the screen. Was that the very road where the Nurse might find what she had lost?

The Nurse squared her shoulders and snapped off the Patient’s TV, pronouncing that war was not good for anyone’s health. With the open-faced innocence of a child, the Patient asked, “Did you bring my drink, Juliet?” The Nurse pointed to her nametag. “My name is Valerie, not Juliet.” The Patient stared at the Nurse’s armpit. “I never said it was.” The Patient’s eyes roved around the room as if confused by her surroundings. The Nurse assessed the Patient’s orientation, asking, “Do you know where you are?” The Patient answered, “Do you think I am daft?” The Nurse frowned. She had not yet decided if she could do what the Priest had asked her. “Has your itching stopped?” the Nurse asked. “What itching?” the Patient replied, and the Nurse wondered if the Patient had dreamed the whole goddamn thing. Vital sign stable.

00:30 The Nurse returned from her smoke break and discovered that the Patient had wedged her legs between the bed’s side rails and had wrapped the call bell’s cord around her neck. She held her cell phone and said she’d been “texting my husband.” The Nurse called for Juan Carlos, RN, to assist the Patient back into bed. Noted spilling out of the Patient’s Prada purse were several wadded tissues, a half-empty pack of Winston cigarettes, two rattling prescription bottles, and three empty minis. The Nurse reminded the Patient that cell phone use was prohibited in the cardio-thoracic intensive care unit because cellular wavelengths interfered with pacemakers and emergency helicopter transmissions. The Patient clicked her coral thumbnails, tapping her text and said, “Who gives a shit?” “Please stop,” the Nurse said. She grabbed for the phone, and before the Nurse knew it, she was grappling with the Patient. The Patient had a surprisingly strong grip. She breathed an aroma of week old meat into the Nurse’s face. Where the hell was Juan Carlos? Beads of sweat bloomed from the pores running alongside the Patient’s nose. The Nurse suspected that this was the beginning of DTs because in hospitals martinis are not served at 4 PM. The Patient twisted her wrists and whined, “You’re hurting me.” The Nurse released the Patient. She readjusted the stethoscope around her neck. She laid the back of her hand on her Patient’s forehead, checking for a fever (a sign of DTs). The Patient scratched like a feral cat, leaving a burning welt on the Nurse’s hand. The Nurse licked her wound.

Enter Juan Carlos, RN. His swarthy hips glided to the Patient’s bedside. He lifted her wrist to admire her Rolex. He gave the Patient a generous smile, revealing his gold-rimmed front teeth, which the Nurse has tongued numerous times. Juan Carlos was the salve and the dressing change to the piece of flesh that had been blown out of the Nurse’s chest by the same IED that had masticated her husband’s arms and legs. Though her husband had been found, the return guarantee had expired, and besides the goods were damaged. And then there was the question of his cock.

Juan whispered to the Nurse, “Where have you been? Your other patient is steeped in shit.” The Nurse dropped her gaze and noticed the loosening laces on her white shoes. The Nurse told Juan that the 1196 Union entitled her to a break, despite one of her patients sitting in shit, and the other hanging out of bed. Her break had lasted the time it took to smoke one or two cigarettes; she didn’t inhale. She’d

smoked and walked and smoked and walked and by the time the first cigarette was a glowing stub, she'd crossed several desolate moonlit desert streets and had arrived at a vacant lot. She hid in the shadow of a three-armed Saguaro cactus, each arm one hundred years in the making, asking the moon shadow of herself, what of this merciless fate and this cruel Creator? This she would like to discuss with the Priest!

The Nurse takes a tissue from the Patient's bedside table and dabs her red-rimmed eyes. Juan Carlos didn't mention the Nurse's absence again. Instead, he maneuvered the Patient's jiggling buttocks and thighs back into bed, fluffing and flipping the Patient's pillow to the cool side, even flirting with her, though she was well past her prime and had aged in a way that too much drinking and smoking ruins beauty. Juan Carlos was a generous man. He didn't know about the postcard in the Nurse's pocket or the unopened letters or unanswered phone calls. The Nurse wished she could discuss her husband's cock with Juan and whatever else might be missing—then she might be able to sort through her inconvenient contradictory feelings. Even with his affection for narcotics, Juan had always been level-headed. She wished to kiss him now.

The Nurse had not expected a handwritten letter from her husband because his hands were minced in Middle Eastern dust. Before she understood that first letter postmarked from Walter Reed in Maryland was an IED, she'd ripped it open. Though the handwriting (note the word hand) wasn't her husband's, she'd recognized his words. Optimistic in nature, her husband had always lined her clouds with silver. Walter Reed served rare prime rib (his favorite). One of the nurse's cut his meat, he exclaimed.

Her husband wrote that he had a lead on a cabin tucked away in the shadows of the Sequoias for her and their girls. He believed, and begged her to believe too, that among trees of substance, they'd both find the courage to begin a life where the four-limb status quo was inconsequential. The Nurse would be able to keep her head on straight, and oh, how impressed their girls would be with their daddy, who'd learned to pop wheelchair wheelies using his new, high-tech arms.

After reading that missive, she'd returned all her husband's other letters unopened, until the postcard, which didn't need to be opened, had hijacked her. Damn the Priest who sent the vintage postcard. The smiling couple waved from their convertible. Greetings! Why nostalgia at this time? The past should be buried, along with her husband. She couldn't help but wonder, if he'd be better off dead. After all, "nurse" is not synonymous with martyr and this Nurse was proving that true. Perhaps a walnut, instead of a heart, was cracking in her chest?

Juan waited quietly at the Nurse's side, then lifted her ponytail and rubbed her neck. "Are you okay?" he asked. His fingers felt familiar, yet strange. The Nurse nodded at the Patient. "Only if her vital signs are stable."

01:30 "Can't you do anything about my itchy back?" The Patient squirmed. The Nurse offered cold compresses and asked the Patient if she were having pain. The Patient replied that pain was a point of view. She agreed to take two Percocets. She insisted on chewing them, and then chased the gummy particles with a sip of water. The Patient said she wished her prick husband would get there and concluded no man could be counted on. The Nurse agreed. Vital signs stable.

02:05 At the two o'clock checks the Patient was noted to be thrashing in bed and thumping her legs on the side rails. She was given 2 mg. of Ativan IV for increased agitation. Immediately, the Patient's eyes rolled back into her head and she dropped into a stupor with her limbs twisted at obtuse angles. Her gown flipped above her belly button. A tangle of scars, similar to those on the Patient's back, were now visible on her pelvis and abdomen. Her pubic hair had been scorched. The innocent belly button obscured. The Nurse tentatively palpated the webbed ridges on the Patient's belly, hot with the reminiscent terror of the fire. The Nurse closed her eyes. Her sighed breath cooled the back of her throat and the heat in her fingertips. Vital signs stable.

03:00 The Nurse was in the middle of a pros and cons list entitled "Husband" when shouts tumbled out from the Patient's room. A silent and odd man, assumed to be the Patient's long awaited husband, stood at her bedside. He maintained an imposing stance as he held out his hand in greeting. His metal rimmed glasses glinted in the dim room. The Nurse drew her hand to her throat. The pleur-evac bubbled. He turned his palm up, as if offering his vulnerability and when the Nurse hesitated to touch his hand, his serene expression slid into contempt, as if challenging her scrubs, her nursing degree, her license, and her ability for compassion. The Nurse wanted to scream, I am limited, but instead laid her palm on top of his. When the husband withdrew, his fingernails grazed her skin.

The Patient chewed the inside of her cheeks. "Johnny, what about that drink?" He held a Sonic soda cup to her lips. Her lips puckered for the straw. Her thirst smacked dry. The Patient attempted to steady the straw with her own hands, but her fingers fluttered uncontrollably. Her husband stood by and watched her struggle. The Patient's mouth gaped, and her tongue wagged with desire. The Patient grabbed the cup with such voracity, she inadvertently crushed it. Soda bubbles exploded in her lap. Her gown soaked to her skin. Did the Nurse smell bourbon? But the vital signs remained stable.

03:45 Unable to fight the tidal wave of exhaustion, the Nurse rested her head on the nurse's station outside the Patient's room. She dreamt of a call bell echoing up from a craggy canyon carved by an endless river of patients floating in their beds. She wanted to dive into the canyon, but her legs could not find the agency to spring. The Nurse woke to the Patient's husband stroking her back. The Patient was seizing. As she hurried toward the Patient's room, she remembered the train steeling through the dark. Her knees buckled. The Patient's husband caught her elbow.

The Nurse righted herself and hurried to the medicine cart. Then she entered the Patient's room with another dose of Ativan for her DTs. The Patient's eyes wildly migrated until they fixed on the syringe that the Nurse injected into her IV line. "Give it all," she said as if she knew how a syringe could be filled with normal saline and then injected into a patient, saving the Ativan perhaps for a nurse's pain, not rooted in the body, but in the abysmal crevices of her brain, where fear twists the imagination into an enemy. The Patient sighed, the drug washing over her, soothing her in a way no human power could. The chest tubes were patent and the vital signs stable.

04:00 The Patient's husband held a Winston cigarette between the Patient's lips. "No platitudes



about smoking, please,” he said to the Nurse, grinning. The Patient sucked greedily on the cigarette, but the cigarette wasn’t lit. She dropped her head in defeat and said, “Won’t you scratch my back, Johnny?” He untied her gown and it dropped from her shoulders. He took in the thick rubber tube exiting her skin, took in her naked breasts. He smiled. The Nurse turned from their intimacy and stared out the seventh-floor window into the starless desert night.

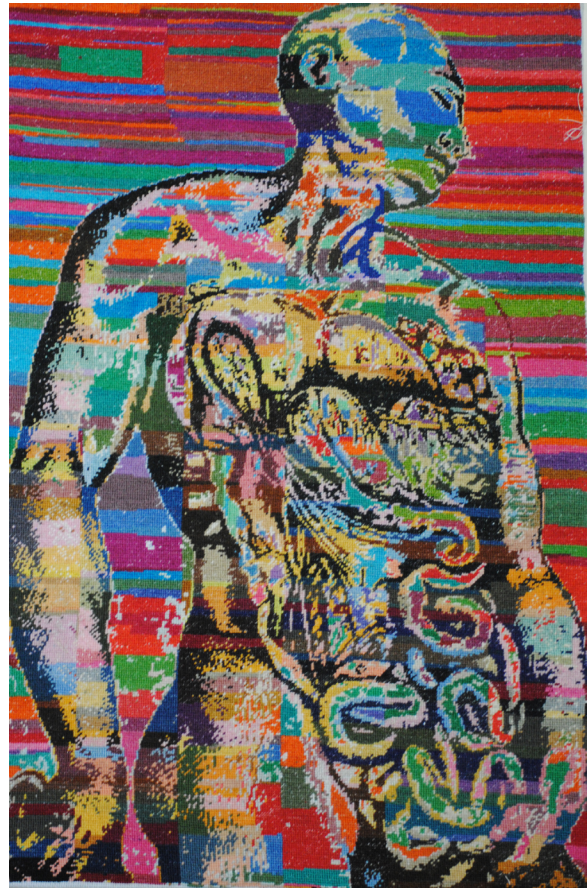
The Nurse remembered being on her knees and begging her husband to stay. In reply, the buffed backs of his regulation army boots clipped-clopped away. “You, fucker,” she’d cried. The children had huddled behind the couch. Months later a psychiatrist had prescribed lovely peach-colored pills to help the Nurse sleep. She slept with those pills before she’d started sleeping with Juan Carlos. Her friends at the hospital had looked the other way. She wished she had one of those pills now. The Priest’s postcard had unhinged her – that much can’t be denied.

The Nurse’s focus sailed back to the Patient and her husband where a ripple of desire had begun to spread throughout the room. The Nurse got caught in their ripple. She missed her husband. The time had come to confess. Where was the Priest?

“Disgusting, isn’t she?” the husband asked the Nurse’s unsuspecting reflection in the glass window, snagging her, the way the Army recruitment window on University had snagged her husband. The Patient’s husband tenderly fingered his wife’s scarred back. The Patient’s husband leaned over and rested his lips on the train tracks of knotted tissue. A shudder ran the length of the Patient’s body, surrendering something inside. The Patient’s nipples stiffened forcing the Nurse to find excessive interest in the bubbling pleur-evac.

“There, there, you’re embarrassing the Nurse,” the husband said and tied his wife’s gown. He gestured to his wife and said to the Nurse. “You know the end of the story, but do you want to know the middle?”

The Patient grabbed her husband’s hand and pulled him towards her. “How about another cigarette, Johnny? How about a drink?” She batted her lashes. The husband ignored her and said to the Nurse, “Those Winstons almost killed her once, and are killing her now. But she’ll never give them up. What’s drinking without smoking, right?” He twisted his hand away and said, “Shut up. I’m telling a story.” The Patient pouted and threw her head back on the pillow. The husband swooped down and pressed his lips



to hers. He held them there for an interminable time, then jerked away and laughed. “Sealed” he said decidedly.

The husband sat and crossed his legs. “She’s been to Betty Ford three times, and I can tell you Ativan never does the trick.” He pulled an empty mini from his pocket and sunk it in the trash basket across the room, dead center.

The Nurse was impressed with his aim.

The husband began. “I was driving home from work, inching along in traffic. The brake lights of the car ahead flashed. I had plenty of time to chew on how sick and tired I was of my wife. I exited the freeway and discovered a power outage had occurred in our town. For the last five miles the stoplights had become four-way stops and were blinking red. I gradually lost my patience with the other drivers’ politeness: the wave, the nod. Is it my turn to go? Is it my turn to go? Finally, I pressed the horn and barreled through. Like a madman.”

The husband shrugged and the room grew exceedingly quiet except for the gurgling pleur-evac. The Nurse imagined their three faces, encased in one of its bubbles, foreheads pressed up against the taut membrane on the verge of bursting. The husband pinched his eyebrows together, as if forcing the memory of that night to crystalize, and then continued with reverence.

“I loved her or hated her—I didn’t know then and sometimes still don’t. But that night, I convinced myself of hate.” The husband crinkled his nose as if his words smelled rancid. “I pulled into the drive, determined to let that be the last time I ever pulled into the drive. I saw an orange glow. Flames escaped our bedroom window. I was out of the car before it had come to a full stop.”

He played his fingers, admiring his hands, then clasped them together. “She had fallen asleep with a lit cigarette. Later, the firemen brought me a Scotch bottle melted. Her blood alcohol level was so high she would have died from alcohol poisoning if she hadn’t almost burned to death.”

The Nurse murmured something about love and courage, to which the husband replied, “It wasn’t love and it wasn’t courage. You never really know who you are or what you’re going to do until that moment comes. Did they teach that in nursing school?”

The Nurse tried to remember. Her cell phone rang the bells of Notre Dame. The husband nodded for the Nurse to answer. She slid into the Patient’s bathroom. Her oldest daughter cried, “Mommy, I’m scared. I’m trying to be brave the way you said Daddy wants us to be.” At that moment the Nurse’s husband substantiated around her. The train was determined to deliver him, their father, home. The Nurse bit her lip, steadying her voice. “Tumble into fairyland,” she whispered and directed her daughters to take the little pink and white pleasant dream capsule (Benadryl 25 mg.) in the silver cup left on their bedside. As the Nurse listened to the pill being gulped down the gentle slope of their throats, she questioned herself for the thousandth time over the three years since her husband had gone to war, been missing, assumed dead, and then found maimed, whether working the night shift was worth it. She ran the numbers in her head: an extra \$3 an hour, an extra \$108 a week, an extra \$432 a month. But with returning every single government check in protest, she circled back to the same conclusion. After the daughters had swallowed their pills, the Nurse instructed them to rest the phone between their lovely ears, and sang “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright,” not because it was anywhere near Christmas, but because the girls loved this hymn. The Nurse waited until their breath whistled with sleep

and then pressed end. She looked at the phone. The train aimed its headlights at her and her heart flung itself against her ribs, throbbed in her throat. She held the phone between her legs and splashed hot water on her face until it stung, and then cold water until it burned. She dialed her husband's cell phone number, memorized since their first date. A pleasant recording requested she enjoy the music and she did. She'd forgotten all about her husband's love of classical music, she'd been so focused on his limbs and the space they no longer occupied. Now, she pictured that tiny, tender childhood scar, an X on his upper lip, a scar she could love forever. He'd lick that scar when nervous, and she'd take his hand to reassure him. What would she take now? Suddenly, the phone recording asked that the Nurse leave a message. Her mouth wetted, but words would not form. She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek to the cold antiseptic wall, being comforted by the slight smell of bleach.

The unexpected hand of Juan Carlos on the Nurse's shoulder jolted her. The phone dropped into the toilet. She fell to her knees, plunging her hand into the cold water, reaching for her husband's voice. The message the Nurse left was a splash of the toilet. She handed the postcard from the Priest to Juan Carlos and as he read she hung onto his legs and shook. The Patient's vital signs were stable, but the Nurse's were not.

05:15 The Patient slept deeply, her mouth ajar. The Nurse wiped the syrupy saliva from the corner of the Patient's mouth. Chest tube insertion site intact, dressing dry. The Patient's husband snored in a chair. The Nurse left the postcard from the Priest on the Patient's bedside table. She knew the Patient's husband would appreciate the nostalgia. The Nurse will leave the hospital and wait on the platform, her hands open at her side. The call bell is within the Patient's reach and her vital are signs stable.

# Blue Mesa Review

## 2018 Summer Contest Judges

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### Leslie Jamison – Nonfiction

Leslie Jamison was born in Washington DC and grew up in Los Angeles. Since then, she has lived in Iowa, Nicaragua, New Haven, and Brooklyn. Leslie has worked as a baker, an office temp, an innkeeper, a tutor, and a medical actor. Every one of these was a world; they're still in her. These days she teaches at the Columbia University MFA program, where she directs the nonfiction concentration and leads the Marian House Project.

Her new book, *The Recovering*, comes out in April 2018. Leslie has also written a novel, *The Gin Closet*, and a collection of essays, *The Empathy Exams*. Her work has appeared in places including *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *Oxford American*, *A Public Space*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *The Believer*. For several years she was also a columnist for the *New York Times Book Review*. Leslie lives in Brooklyn, with her family.



### Luis Alberto Urrea – Fiction

Hailed by NPR as a “literary badass” and a “master storyteller with a rock and roll heart,” Luis Alberto Urrea is a prolific and acclaimed writer who uses his dual-culture life experiences to explore greater themes of love, loss and triumph. Born in Tijuana to a Mexican father and an American mother, Urrea is most recognized as a border writer, though he says, “I am more interested in bridges, not borders.”

A 2005 Pulitzer Prize finalist for nonfiction and member of the Latino Literature Hall of Fame, Urrea is the critically acclaimed and best-selling author of 17 books, winning numerous awards for his poetry, fiction and essays. *The Devil's Highway*, Urrea's 2004 non-fiction account of a group of Mexican immigrants lost in the Arizona desert, won the Lannan Literary Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Pacific Rim Kiriyama Prize.



### Franny Choi – Poetry

Franny Choi is the author of *Floating*, *Brilliant*, *Gone* (Write Bloody Publishing, 2014) and the forthcoming *Soft Science* (Alice James Books, 2019), as well as a chapbook, *Death by Sex Machine* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2017). She has received fellowships from the Vermont Studio Center, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, and the Helen Zell Writers Program. Her poems has appeared in *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, *New England Review*, *Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. She is a Kundiman fellow, Senior News Editor at *Hyphen Magazine*, co-host of the podcast *VS*, and member of the Dark Noise Collective.

## Eighty-Eight

*Jessica Yen*

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*Ba ba*

“*Popo*, do you know who I am?” She turned her face toward me. Her eyes had faded to the color of bleached raisins, but her hair was still more black than white, and she still had more of it than some of her children.

I sat on her bed to place myself within her line of sight. Dad and Mom sank into the chairs behind us. “It’s Jessica. *Jiahui*.”

She nodded slowly, eyes scanning my face, so different from the grandmother who once spotted visitors across the nursing facility, eyes brimming with anticipation. This time, I could not tell if she recognized my name or my face. Probably my name. At least I still resided somewhere in her memory, though more and more that seemed uncertain, ebbing and flowing with the days.

Grandma suffered a series of strokes and heart attacks in the last five years, and though she once bounced between the hospital and stints with her children, she now spent more and more time in nursing homes. Her shared room was as sparse as a dormitory: two beds, two dressers, two chairs for visitors.

Three months ago, before her last major stroke, she would have reached her hand out to me, as I always held her hand when I visited. Now it sat limply in her lap. I reached for it, and the motion triggered a half-buried memory, for she lifted it to meet mine. I looked into her eyes and smiled, and she returned the smile tentatively.

As I did each time I saw her, I reminded her that she stayed with us for several months when I was a baby. Perhaps I was misguided in believing that if I linked my face to her memories, she would keep recognizing me. Perhaps, if I kept repeating the same memories back to her, this would keep them from fading. I told her all the anecdotes she once told me, stories I could not possibly have remembered, and which she could no longer recall unbidden. How, as a baby, I used to wave and call for her every time I saw her, insistent, standing up in my pen, eyes following her everywhere. How I used to pat the ground next to me, because I wanted her to play with me. How I was *guai*, well-behaved; how she was my first Chinese teacher, before I went to daycare and forgot everything and had to be taught again.

“I have one brother.” I held up my index finger. “Do you know who that is?” She waited expectantly for the punch line. Dad prodded her to guess, but she shook her head. “Michael. *Jiaqing*.” I drew out the syllables to mimic the way she would have pronounced it in her Wuhan accent.

“Mi-chael,” she repeated obediently. “*Jiaqing*.”

“He’s in New York, studying to be a doctor. We’ll bring him to see you when he’s back visiting.” As her memory faded, there was an unofficial competition among the extended family over who she still remembered and who she did not. Every time I visited, I made sure to update her about Michael. I wanted

him to beat our cousins.

In all of this, my edge was that my Chinese was the best of my generation, and Grandma had taken to pretending that she no longer understood English, especially with the staff. Dad chided her over this, but she just chuckled, a gleam in her eyes. She had such little control over her life, and this was one of her few remaining pleasures.

Even though she was days from her ninetieth birthday, because eight is a lucky number in China<sup>1</sup>, I liked to tell her she was eighty-eight years old. She usually laughed, cheered at the thought of the double auspiciousness, or maybe quietly humoring me. Really, I wanted to freeze her in time. As long as she stayed eighty-eight, maybe the twin eights could continue to protect her from the dual companions of stroke and heart attack that followed her for so many years.

This time, she just nodded.

“*Popo*, can you believe that you’re eighty-eight?” I tried again.

Nothing. Dad thought she still understood the number itself, but had lost the ability to conceptualize her age. The cognitive decline made me the saddest, watching as she was slowly robbed of her memories and linguistic abilities. I had always felt closer to Grandma because we spoke Chinese together, one of the few people in my life with whom I had this connection. And as that slowly disappeared, I felt her slip away from me.

### *Luu Chaoren*

Luu: pictograph of vertebrae; a surname.

Chao: surpass, exceed.

Ren: assume a post<sup>2</sup>; appoint; allow, let.

Grandma was born *Luu Chaoren* in Wuhan, China in 1923. Her mother was a peasant and her father was a schoolteacher. Enamored with western ideals of a love-based marriage, her father left *Chaoren* and his uneducated wife for a fellow schoolteacher. Thus it was that Grandma was raised in her grandfather’s household—her paternal grandfather’s. In 1923, China was in a long slide into civil war. The republic that replaced China’s final dynasty had quickly succumbed to internal politics. Soon, there was an all-out brawl between warlord factions, a tumult that eventually coalesced into the conflict between the Nationalists and Communists.

When Grandma was eight, Japan invaded Manchuria. Japan harbored ambitions of a pan-Asian empire; China was weak, its doors forced open with the 1868 Opium Wars and Unequal Treaties,

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<sup>1</sup> Eight is *ba*, which sounds similar to “good fortune” or *fa*.

<sup>2</sup> Used in phrases like *zeren* (responsibility, responsible).

its territories far-flung and poorly protected, a nation facing an identity crisis about the best path to modernity. The skirmishes started in the northeast, at the Marco Polo Bridge in Manchuria, and inched their way south and inland, toward Wuhan.

When Grandma was thirteen, China and Japan stood on the precipice of war. China's internal squabbles, between the Nationalists and Communists, still hadn't been resolved, in spite of the broader threat to national security. Grandma's grandfather was the head of Wuhan's triad, and it was rumored that he collected so much money each day he kicked it under his bed at night without counting. Wuhan was China's second largest port, and Grandma's grandfather hadn't risen to that position without political acumen. As tensions with Japan escalated, sensing danger, he asked Grandma to take her eleven-year-old cousin 500 miles south to stay with a relative, further from the fighting<sup>3</sup>.

So at thirteen, Grandma set off across a war-torn country, her younger cousin in tow. She brought her mother, for Grandma was her mother's main tie to the household that hosted them, and where else could her mother go? A traveling theater troupe promised to take them to their final destination, then promptly swindled them of their money. Grandma was so mad she cried, but what could she do? The troupe was gone, as was the money she had been entrusted with to make it south.

Instead of turning back, they forged ahead. At one point, the three shelled nuts for a living. They were paid by the piece; it was just enough to get by. Eventually she delivered her cousin to the relative safety of the south. Mission completed, Grandma turned her eyes to the provincial capital Kunming, buried deep in southwestern China, 700 miles away. People all along the east coast were fleeing to Kunming, dismantling factories that were vulnerable to Japanese bombing and resurrecting them there, out of harm's reach. Universities relocated there as well. Kunming became a Nationalist stronghold, and Grandma was swept up in a nationalistic fever, eager to contribute.

When Grandma was eighteen, her home country was one of many fronts for World War II. The Communists and Nationalists had struck an uneasy truce to throw off the Japanese. Grandma was in college in Kunming, on a Nationalist-sponsored scholarship. She found a tiny room under a stairwell where she and her mother could stay, and when she could, Grandma smuggled leftovers from the school canteen to feed her mother. Initially she wanted to become a doctor, but after she threw up during anatomy dissection, she studied to become a postmistress instead.

When Grandma was twenty-two, Japan was defeated and the long-simmering tensions between Nationalists and Communists broke out again in earnest. Newly married, she gave birth to her first child. I imagine Grandma in bustling, chaotic Kunming, hurrying up and down rows of vendors, a baby strapped to her back as the tropical sunshine swirled through the dust. She would have investigated square baskets holding vegetables, wide shallow baskets displaying roasted pumpkin seeds, wooden trays heaped with dried chili peppers, their skins shriveled and bright. Eggs were a luxury, powdered milk

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<sup>3</sup>His request proved prescient. Two years later, Wuhan was the site of a four-and-a-half-month battle where casualties topped half a million.

scarce, but Grandma would have wanted a protein source for her husband and daughter, and she would search until she found one.

When Grandma was twenty-six, the Communists emerged victorious and Grandma caught one of the very last planes to Taiwan, where the Nationalists were fleeing to regroup and formulate plans to retake the mainland. Her husband was an aerospace engineer with the losing side, and was therefore able to secure passage for himself, his wife, and their three children. Dad was one month old. On the crowded train, she threw a blanket over him to shush his cries. The train swayed, bags brushed her knees, children complained of boredom. Suddenly Grandma started. She hadn't heard the baby fuss in a number of minutes, and she scrambled to remove the blanket, afraid she'd smother him.

### *Liangyidian*

When I was twelve, I asked Grandma to teach me to knit.

At six I'd taught myself to crochet by following a how-to book; at eight, my aunt showed me how to hand-sew doll clothes and mini quilts. Grandma seemed surprised by my request, probably because it was the era of flannel shirts and combat boots, CD players and slap bracelets, boy bands and divas. But she brought two sets of bright aluminum needles to the next family event, and we found a quiet spot on the downstairs couch, where she handed me a small ball of curly yellow acrylic yarn, leftover from a project. In her hand she held a navy ball. Grandma's fingers were gnarled and bent by arthritis; while my index finger rested flush against the cool metal needle, her right fingertip bent away from it at a 90-degree angle. Yet the needles were so stable in her hands, her fingers so deft as she used needle to manipulate yarn, whereas mine slipped and wobbled all over the place, unable to carry the yarn or guide it through the loops. The needles quickly warmed to our touch.

Thus began my pattern of withdrawing from my extended family. They were a dense cacophony of siblings and in-laws and children who blustered about science and medicine and material success and prestige. I was an introvert who liked to knit and loved the Chinese language. Knitting and conversing with Grandma were spaces I could carve for myself in this larger group.

Our sessions may have revived Grandma's interest in knitting, for in the following years she gifted each grandchild with a hand-knit blanket, large enough to cover a queen bed, formed from variations on the two basic stitches—knits and purls—that she showed me in our first session.

In my mid-20s, as knitting began its resurgence and online tutorials proliferated, I graduated into more complex stitches and with them, projects beyond the realm of rectangles and squares. My first hand-knit sweater was a fitted raglan boatneck with bell-shaped sleeves, knit entirely in stockinette stitch with hem and neck facings. I chose a deep rose wool, and shortened the pattern to hit at high hip. Grandma cast a professional eye over me. "Did you make that?" she asked.

I nodded and grinned. A small chorus of ooh's and aah's collected around me. Grandma noted the evenness of my stitches and the neatness of the construction, said nothing of my unsteady increases and



decreases, instead complimenting me on the gentle slope they created at the waist. Aunts wandered out of the conversation, unsure of its content.

“I like the color,” she said finally.

“I like colors that are *liangyidian*,” I agreed, meaning colors that are brighter, warmer, and livelier. It was a phrase I’d learned in China and I pulled it out now, sensing it might speak to Grandma. Her face lit up. She plucked at the sleeve of her red sweater. We both nodded and laughed. In those later years, Grandma always wore some shade of red. She loved colors that were *liangyidian*.

When she was a child, Grandma said, she also knit herself sweaters. One new sweater a year. Sometimes money was tight, and she ripped out last year’s sweater for the yarn to make next year’s. She even, and here she bent her head conspiratorially, brought her sweater to class and knit under the table. “We all did!” she laughed. She held her hands in her lap, imaginary needles sliding against each other, eyes wide with faux concentration as they followed an invisible teacher who paced the classroom.

When Grandma laughed her shoulders heaved, synchronizing with her slow hiccupping mirth. I loved it when she laughed. I’d grown up with stories of Dad goofing off in school while Grandma hounded him to study, and I was glad to hear she’d had moments of childhood mischief.

Knitting was the last thing Grandma could do. After she stopped helping in the kitchen, after she stopped taking walks, after she stopped hunching over Dad’s *Jin Yong* martial arts books with a magnifying glass, she continued to knit, the swoop and glide, wrap and pull, slip and tug of needle and yarn still manageable. The further she got into her illness, the bigger her knitting needles became.

Eventually, she gave up knitting. Maybe she finally succumbed to the arthritis, although it’s tough to imagine Grandma giving in to anything. Sheer determination had carried her through war, two rounds of immigration, raising seven children while working full-time as Taizhong’s first postmistress when her husband pursued a PhD in America, learning a new language in midlife, retraining in the field of accounting at an age when others retired. More likely, that last stroke stole her motor skills, particularly on the right side of her body, the side most affected by the disruption in blood flow to her brain.

### *Yan Jiahui*

Yan: strict, rigorous, severe; a surname.

Jia: household, family; house, home; specialist.

Hui: intelligent.

Taken one way, my Chinese name is aspirational, a wish bestowed upon a newborn. In it, you can read the optimism of new grandparents, eager for the arrival of the next generation. Taken another way, you could say my grandfather valued intelligence above all else: he named his two oldest grandchildren

after the trait (my cousin and I are intelligent-heart<sup>4</sup> and family-intelligence). Taken a third way, it's a lot to live up to.

Grandpa was an aerospace engineer who left Taiwan at forty-eight to start a PhD program in physics. His classmates were half his age, if that. He scrimped through the cold Pennsylvanian winters to send home as much of his graduate stipend as he could spare. Still, I imagine Grandpa was in his element. He prized learning, and at a time when the world had not yet put a man on the moon, science was the king of learning and physics the king of science. Then Grandma developed breast cancer, so he left his program with a Master's degree, found a job, and brought the family to America where the medical treatment was better.

In America, dinner conversations were all science, all the time. Grandpa loved brain teasers and mind puzzles, and he often applied scientific inquiry to daily life. *When a car drives through the rain, what determines the angle at which water is thrown from the spinning tires?* Dad spent days working through that one. Science was the way to engage Grandpa in conversation, the yardstick by which to measure intelligence and career aspirations. Most of his children studied science, although when it came to jobs, many blended Grandpa's reverence for science with Grandma's hard pragmatism, landing in a health profession.

I never really knew Grandpa. He developed Alzheimer's disease when I was young, but Dad said he had a poetic soul. He named his two eldest daughters after a poem<sup>5</sup>, and I imagine I could have bonded with him over Chinese. But Grandpa passed away in my early teens, so I bonded with Grandma.

In college I majored in Chinese Literature. I'd attended a bilingual Mandarin immersion program up through middle school, and the intricate cadence of Chinese entranced me. As I dove into my studies I began to see that literature, philosophy, history, culture, geography, and art all wound their way through the language. It was beautiful and intuitive, and it led me to a stronger relationship with my cultural heritage.

Grandma was a living, breathing talisman of this heritage, and I relished the opportunity for *in vivo* encounters in the midst of my otherwise *in vitro* studies. Plus, she fed me tidbits about her life in China and Taiwan, like joining the Nationalist Youth Brigade, or feeding herself only after her children and husband had finished, moistening rice from the bottom of the pot with bacon oil. Grandma was from another world and another generation. Knitting and Chinese were the two bridges I had to cross that chasm.

When my brother Michael and I were small, I'm told my uncle Chung once wandered over to play with us, then ruffled Michael's hair, saying, "I feel sorry for you—having an older sister with a brain like

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<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, the Chinese believed the heart is where the mind resides. The character for "intelligence" is composed of the characters for "well kept" and "heart."

<sup>5</sup> The line was *yanru taoli, lengruo shuangbing*, which described feminine beauty as "shapely and rosy as a pear or peach, aloof as frost and ice." The first word was homophonic with our last name, thus Grandpa used the first two words and last two words in the line to create their names: *Yan Ru Shuang* and *Yan Ru Bing*.

that.” I’ve never seen much difference in our intelligence, except that Michael is better at science and spills forth incisive social commentary, whereas I have a more creative, associative, integrative mind. Although I now believe there are more important measures of self-worth than intelligence, back then I felt my family’s judgments keenly, how it was a waste to throw intelligence away on a fluffy major like Chinese, one pre-med used to pad their GPAs.

Because I wasn’t yet ready to distance myself from their ways, I said I planned to go to medical school, and since admissions committees loved applicants from diverse disciplines, Chinese *improved* my odds of admittance. I don’t think my family bought it. I needed a way to rationalize my decision to them and to myself, even if, deep down, part of me knew I could never stomach medicine.

I must have puzzled them, this wayward child facing the wrong way along the assimilation gradient, but I had enough distance from Chinese to love it like a foreign language.

After all, Chinese didn’t accent my English and mark me as Other. It wasn’t the language I needed to forget in order to build up a new life from scratch. I had the luxury of nostalgia, of a roof over my head and food on the table, and I was one of those assimilated kids who picked up all the wrong parts of America, the parts about following your dreams to impractical places, instead of doing it right like my cousins, using my privileges to launch myself into a stable, prestigious, lucrative career that secured my future.

Grandma never pestered me about classes or careers; I’m not sure she even knew I’d chosen Chinese, and as long as my grades were fine, she was content.

### *Liangmashi*

Grandma was stubborn. After her first major heart attack, she refused to ask for assistance in the middle of the night, only to send a loud bang through the house, where she’d be found on the bathroom floor in a pool of blood, having hit her head on the way down. At this point her children had brought her to northern California for medical treatment, and then insisted she live with one of them. They wanted to keep an eye on her, and the local doctors and hospitals were known quantities.

Grandma was furious. She wanted to go home. I wasn’t privy to those conversations, because I was of the younger generation and only heard about select matters long after the fact, and even then only in a carefully filtered way, but the little I knew seemed challenging enough.

Grandma could badger you from the minute you got home from work until the time you went to sleep, trying to get back to her house, trying to change her living situation, trying to change her treatment. One by one, she lived with four of her five children in the area. She was in regular contact with all my aunts and uncles, offering up different angles of the story, currying sympathy and indignation, trying for any angle she could. I wonder now if she felt echoes to her childhood, living in her paternal grandfather’s household, a charity case dependent on the goodwill of others. Those ghosts must have been particularly difficult at an age when, but for immigrating to America, she would be in her golden years, revered as an elder instead of shunted between households.

By this point I was largely absent, having veered from medicine to land in a safety net clinic as a project manager, where I spent my days wrestling personalities and putting out fires, trying for the trifecta of security, prestige, and a good paycheck so valued by my extended family, but on my terms. Silence had crept into my relationship with Grandma. My life no longer centered on Chinese, and I hadn't taken the time to find the vocabulary to translate my world to her.

I once came home to find Grandma on the sofa, eyes trained on the television. Dad beckoned. Would I take Grandma for a walk? he wanted to know. All she does is sit around, he said. I'm trying to get her to do a mile a day, he told me as he helped her into a black down jacket, under which she wore a gray sweater over a fuchsia turtleneck.

We set out. Red leaves shimmered overhead, glowing in the afternoon sun. To our right, tires sped over papery leaves.

"Come on Grandma, just a little farther," I said.

"No." We stood in front of a major bank, one street off downtown. Office workers hurried by, disposable coffee cups in hand, brimming with gossip, their words tangled with the jargon of tech and venture capital, human resources and finance.

"How about to the end of the block?" I said.

Grandma turned sideways and eased herself onto a brick planter that surrounded pink and white flowers. I shrugged and sat down next to her. There was only so much cajoling you could do with Grandma. It was strange seeing her give in, as walking had always been a point of pride for her. As a child, Grandma was the fastest walker I knew; whenever we visited her, I was forever hurrying to catch up, Grandma striding under the relentless LA sun as I hopscotched between spindly patches of shade.

I could have used this walk as an opportunity for a rare conversation with Grandma, but she'd already started our walk with one of her standbys, "Grandma *ku*."

She said this nearly every time she was with family: Grandma's life has been difficult, or Grandma's life is difficult—it wasn't always clear, as Chinese don't conjugate verbs<sup>6</sup>. Maybe she meant both. Having exhausted her list on the way over, or the portion she was willing to share with me, she was now silent. And I, tired of massaging egos all day, let the quiet linger.

In a way, our relationship was like my relationship with China, its language, and the culture. I lived in China for a year after college, and though part of me fantasized about staying indefinitely, another part of me was aware that the honeymoon period had ended, and I didn't trust that I was yet mature enough to let our relationship evolve into something more complex.

I patted Grandma's hand. When she looked up, I raised my eyebrows in the direction of home. She shook her head. I nodded and began counting the blocks between home and us.

"Four blocks," I thought ruefully, calculating how short I'd fallen of the mile benchmark.

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<sup>6</sup> Instead, there are time markers. The Chinese equivalent of "I went home" might be "yesterday, I go home," or "in the past, I go home," etc.

“Four blocks,” she was probably thinking, wondering how she would make it all the way back.

Grandma spent her whole life being useful, and it must have been hard, at the end, to have no contribution left that others would accept. She’d taken the move to America in stride, going from running an entire post office to running a household. She left the house at dawn every day to buy the day’s groceries, walking over a mile each way, her strong hands grasping bags and bags of food on the trip back. Apparently, at one point she cooked nine meals a day: a Chinese breakfast, an American breakfast, and Chung’s breakfast; a Chinese lunch, an American lunch, and Chung’s lunch (I think her youngest son was in a hamburger phase); and so on.

When Chung left for college, Grandma worked toward her Associates degree. She took English and Accounting classes, eventually landing a position with FICO that she’d keep well into her 70s. When Chung called home, she badgered him about his grades. “I’m getting A’s, why aren’t you?” she’d say.

“Mom! I’m at Stanford—you’re at Saddleback Community College!” To her, it made no difference.

*Liangmashi*, I thought when I heard this story, apples and oranges. The phrase would have turned the exchange into a joke; transplanting old world logic into a new world context often made Grandma laugh. It was one my uncle could not have cracked, not only because he immigrated at the age of five, but also because a granddaughter’s relationship is weighted with privileges that are absent from a son’s.

### *Nenggan*

At Grandma’s funeral, my third aunt wraps me in a hug. “Oh, honey.”

In Grandma’s last years I moved away to Oregon, and finding the California sunshine unexpectedly oppressive, I take the opportunity to hide behind large, dark frames. Even so, my aunt spots my red eyes. Dad scheduled several hours for the viewing, and people mingle in the courtyard, helping themselves to *banh mi* and fruit. Every time I slip into the darkened room to view Grandma’s casket, it’s her hands that get me; she’s the only person I knew whose fingertips stood at right angles to the rest of the digits. Those *nenggan*, or capable, hands, which symbolize everything I knew about Grandma.

“Don’t cry,” says my aunt. Her arms are still around me, like a leech. I know she’s trying to comfort me, donning the role of elder, protector of the younger generation. I want to wriggle out of her grasp, shout at her to let me have my emotions, as they are my way of honoring Grandma and saying goodbye.

Instead I say, “She was a strong woman.”

My aunt releases me. “You have some of her in you. More than the rest.”

I shudder. I’ve never worn my Chinese degree with pride around my family. I’ve been a coward my whole life, only removing my mask with Grandma. I used our relationship to flaunt my Chinese, a passive aggressive way to justify my choices without having to outright defend myself.

By request from my aunts and uncles, the funeral is small and private: family only, no friends. One by one, Dad’s generation speaks about Grandma. Toward the end Chung stands, the family baby whose hair

is more white than black. He stares out at us, speechless. His eyes are tinged crimson and bugged wide. They seem to say that if only the floodgates could open, he would cry. If only he knew where to begin, he would speak. This image of grief will haunt me for months.

The day after Grandma died, I sat in the storage closet at work for nearly an hour. Dad had warned me Grandma was dying, but after so many strokes and heart attacks, I believed I had more time. I called Michael. Michael said he was working on his application to residency programs, that he'd been working on them before he heard and was now working on them again. It registered but it didn't, he said. I nodded. I was planning meetings but in a distracted way, repeatedly forgetting who I was inviting, or to which meeting.

At a loss, I called Dad. He told me his cell phone had been off when Grandma passed; the nursing home called his brother, who called Dad's landline. Going in to identify the body. The death certificate. Funeral arrangements. Who was where and when, what plans they made. I cataloged Dad's reactions—the need to take care of business, relay the details, coordinate logistics—all corporeal minutiae, completely devoid of emotion. I noted myself cataloguing Dad's reactions; ever the writer: making notes, drawing connections, conferring meaning.

"After she had her last stroke and couldn't swallow," he said, "I knew the end was coming. She couldn't get enough nutrition to live."

"Ever the doctor," I thought. As I processed his words, I tasted salt gushing into my mouth. He'd lived with that knowledge for so many months. I swallowed hard, trying to keep my breathing even, conscious of my coworkers seated outside the door. I was perched on a footstool beneath a row of computer servers; normally they warmed the closet to an unbearable stuffiness if the door was shut for too long, but I could feel no heat. I pressed my lips together, not trusting myself to speak.

Dad cleared his throat into the silence. "She told me once she would've ended it, but she didn't have the courage," he said.

I knew he wanted to ease my sadness, but now I felt her unhappiness mingle with my grief. We saw her increasing listlessness, and still we approved medical intervention after intervention, tethering her body even as she displayed little interest in staying.

"Don't be sad," Dad said. "She's no longer suffering." He sounded mournful that nothing he said halted my shuddering inhalations, as though if he kept his focus on comforting me, he could ignore the fact that his mother just passed.

"I know." My voice wobbled again. "But selfishly. I'm just trying to figure out how to say goodbye."

He said nothing. The servers beeped and chattered around me. Then he, too, began to cry.

I imagined Grandma as I last saw her, curled up in a tiny ball on her side, swaddled in patterned pajamas that smelled vaguely of disinfectant. It didn't seem anybody could be so small. She snored slightly. Her exhales were dank, as though the nursing home staff only made cursory passes at brushing her teeth. A sign above her head said: No socks, fungal feet. "That's new," I thought.

I remember marveling at these tiny, odd, unremarkable markers of decline before returning my gaze to Grandma. I had knitted her a pair of red and pink and purple socks, *liangyidian*, and each time I came I

brought them for her to wear. I wondered if these new restrictions were applicable to them.

Usually if I found Grandma napping, I wrote her a note in blocky Chinese, thirty characters to a page so she could read it without a magnifying glass, my characters lopsided from disuse. I never realized the pride she took in those letters. She read them repeatedly, pointing out to Dad the places where I missed a stroke in a character or accidentally wrote the wrong word. I'd sent her several letters in college, and she always replied in her square, boyish handwriting. She also corrected my letter and included it. The first time that happened, I was hurt. Those letters were for Grandma; I wanted her to have them. But Dad said she did the same to his letters when he was in college. That was Grandma.

### *Touxiang*

Yan: strict, rigorous, severe; a surname.

Ji: to ford a river; to aid.

Kuan: wide<sup>7</sup>; lenient.

Dad was Grandma's oldest son and the family's sole physician. He was faithful in his visits, and after that last stroke, whenever she stayed in a nursing facility close to his hospital, he dropped by most days out of the week, plus a weekend pilgrimage twice per month. He pushed her wheelchair into the garden, and he tried to see her during meal times to take over feeding duty, carefully spooning oatmeal or pudding into her mouth. When she drooled onto her chin, he gently wiped it away with a napkin.

He came so often the staff called her Mama, and he knew this dormitory-like room well, settled himself readily into one of the two uncomfortable chairs intended for visitors. Once I finished with my stories and my promises to bring Michael to visit, once I trotted out my jokes and noted which ones—eighty-eight—now fell flat, he bent over Grandma to examine her ankles and hands, searching for signs of edema. “You can see the swelling,” he said, pointing out the wrinkles that encircled his knuckles, the way those disappeared in her swollen joints.

To alleviate this, he had her do light exercises to maintain her range of motion and increase circulation. He prompted her to do leg lifts in her wheel chair. Grandma complied dully. Then he pressed a foot on top of hers and asked her to kick up against him. Dad grinned at the force of her kick. “She likes that one,” he said.

“Now raise your hands above your head!” said Dad.

I was stroking her right hand in slow, circular motions, hoping to improve her circulation. That hand was cold and limp, and I tried to ignore the faint stench that came from it, a combination of spittle and decay that permeated the entire place. At his words, I relinquished my hold and leaned back to watch.

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<sup>7</sup> Used in phrases like *kuanda* (magnanimous) or *kuanguang* (vast, extensive).

“*Ju gao! Gao! Gao!*” He coaxed her arms higher, higher, higher. Grandma sat in her wheelchair, her left arm by her ear and her right arm at shoulder height. “That might be as good as she’s got,” he said to me.

Then he turned back to her. “*Touxiang!*” Surrender!

Grandma laughed, her shoulders heaving. It was her first laugh all visit. Watching them together, mother and son more bound by Chinese than any of her other children, I laughed too. For a moment, the three of us could pretend the last stroke was no different from the previous ones. For a moment, I could believe Grandma was still enveloped in the protective power of those twin eights.

He had her lower her arms, then raise them again, then down, then up.

“*Touxiang! Touxiang!*” he cried. She laughed.



Red Center  
*Anna Davidson*



## *Hambre*

*George Such*

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In Spanish we're not hungry, we have it – we say, *tengo hambre*, I have hunger, as if hunger is a possession or affliction, something like *love* in English, a thing we are in which is also in us, a state of having and being had.

Once hunger spoke to me in Spanish saying: *te quiero*, I want you. *Abrázame* she said, and let me embrace you. *Quiero tenerte*. Will you have me? Her voice was lusty. Don't be afraid she told me, don't run to stuff yourself – that will only make you dull and heavy. Sense me in your cells, let me permeate your body. I can teach you how to savor everything you put inside your mouth.



Bears  
*Jen Kindbom*

# Haunting the Hallowed Grove

*Mario Giannone*

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Mom taught me to drive when I was ten. She appeared in my doorway like a vampire. I thought she was a dream, but then I felt her fingers lace around my arm. I let out a yelp. She put her finger hand over my mouth and shushed me. “Don’t wake your sister,” she said. She led me to the driveway. She didn’t say where we were going, just pulled me through the darkness of the house.

“Get in,” she said, holding open the driver’s side door of her minivan. The dome light fell at my feet, and the security bell rang. Her eyes were small and tired. She smiled then kept nudging her head towards the seat.

“I won’t get in trouble, will I?” I asked.

“No, no you won’t. I promise.”

She took my hand and yanked me into the driver’s seat. Dad’s car was still parked next to the van. It hadn’t moved in months. Layers of wet leaves had become its new skin. Whenever I would ask Mom where he was she’d say, “He’s still sick, honey, but he’ll be back. He’ll be okay.” Then she’d ask what I wanted to eat even if I just ate. If I asked what he was sick with, she’d tell me they were still figuring it out.

The driver’s seat towered over me. The shoulder belt stuck to my face. A sticker on the sun visor warned that you couldn’t sit in the front seat until you were twelve. I hesitated to grab the wheel. I wasn’t even sure how to hold it. Mom grabbed my hands and placed them where they should go. “Ten and two,” she said. “It’s just like a clock.”

First, she taught me how to back out of the driveway. Then how to pull back in. Her hands were a bony cloud floating over the wheel and shifter. She spoke to me like a hostage negotiator. “Okay, easy now, go very easy.” The engine yanked the car down the driveway. Stones grumbled beneath the tires. “You can go a little faster,” she said. But I only hit the gas hard enough to let the van roll on its own until it ran out of speed. I was afraid to let go of the wheel, fearing the van would take off and fly out into the street, across the fields with us still trapped inside. Once I pulled out into the road, she made me switch seats then turned the car around and put it back in the driveway. Then we started over, only stopping so mom could run into the house to check on Ada.

She came again the next night, whispering, “Brendan get up,” before ripping me out of sleep and into the car. We worked on breaking, U-turns, and K-turns. She recited the rules of the road from a driver’s manual while I practiced. Her teaching was sleepy but relentless. I had to do everything perfect ten times in a row before we moved on. She came the next night, and the night after. It got to the point where I would lie in bed waiting, for her to open my door with the van keys jingling in her hand. After a couple of weeks, she let me drive on the road, our road only, and I could only drive as far as our closest neighbor’s mailbox.

“I just want to make sure you’ll both be okay,” mom said one night. “That if something happens you can take care of yourself and Ada.” I had parked the car a few feet from the McAllisters’ mailbox. The focus of our lesson that night was sudden stops. Mom had her head against the window and used the

rearview mirror to watch the darkness behind her. Her breath made a patch of fog that she rubbed away between sentences. “Things won’t be like this forever,” she said.

“How much longer will they?”

“I can’t answer that right now.”

Then she was knocking on my window, telling me to get up.

“What happened?”

“We fell asleep. Hurry up, we need to check on your sister.” She looked hollowed out and afraid.

She didn’t bother to turn the car around. She drove in reverse the whole way. The van wobbled back and forth. We were on the verge of spinning out of control. She slewed into the other lane and barely missed a telephone pole. The back bumper slammed into the end of our driveway. I was left in the van as she ran into the house.

One morning, I came downstairs and dad was sitting right there in the kitchen, in the chair he always sat in, the one with the uneven legs. He looked different, sunken and dried. He didn’t have that pale sick people look. Everything else around him was how it always was. His coffee mug sat at the corner of an unfolded newspaper. He read and sipped while mom banged pots and plates and slammed cabinet doors. I sat across from him.

“Hey bud,” he said. He swallowed hard and grimaced. His voice was so small.

“Brendan got third place in the science fair last week,” mom said.

“Hmm, what’d you do?”

“How music affects plant growth.”

“I thought it was a lot better than that one about ethanol and the cleaning products thing Katie Terrini did,” mom said.

“Are you better?” I asked.

“I liked the papier-mâché dinosaurs the fifth graders hung from the ceiling,” mom continued. “It was like a little Jurassic Park in there.”

Dad attempted a smile. Then he went back to flipping through his paper. I wasn’t sure if mom was keeping him quiet, or if he was finally calm now.

The last time I saw him, Ada and I were playing cops and ghost robbers in the backyard. It was dusk and October, and the days were just starting to get shorter. I was the cop like always, and Ada was the robber. We had reached the turning point of the game, where I would corner Ada against the porch and shoot her with my stick gun. She screeched as she pawed at her bullet wounds.

“You’ve killed me. I’ll be back. I’ll haunt you. I promise,” she yelled before collapsing on the ground with her arms and legs folded behind her body. Then her limp body rose, arms straight in front with hands dangling. “I told you I’d be back.” This was where she was supposed to chase me around the yard while moaning her plans for revenge. It was her favorite part.

We ran into the backyard, screaming threats at one another. We didn’t notice dad. The game had distracted us. I thought he was a tree at first. He stood in the middle of the yard, staring out into the woods. He was naked and still. Some parts of his body were thin and bony; pieces of flab hung from others. Ada and I slowly approached him. Trees blew in the wind around him, but he never moved.

“I can see dad’s no-no,” Ada said.

“Put your hands over your eyes,” I told her.

I stood in front of him.

“Dad?”

I poked his hip.

“Dad?”

Mom came running outside with a towel. “Cover your eyes. Cover your eyes,” she yelled. Through my fingers, I watched her walk dad into the house. She whispered in his ear and rubbed his back in tiny, fast circles.

Ada and I tried to run upstairs, but Mom stopped us. She made her body into a big “X” that blocked our way. “Go downstairs and wait for Aunt Marissa.” We could hear Dad wailing and punching the floor.

“A ghost has Daddy,” Ada whispered to me in the backseat of Aunt Marissa’s car. “He’s possessed. I read about it in this book.” Potholes and Aunt Marissa’s sharp turns bounced us into the air. Ada pulled the large hardback book on ghosts that she had bought at a library sale out of her backpack. She carried it everywhere. The title’s gold letters shined in the headlights of passing cars. *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal and the Occult*. We spent three nights at Aunt Marissa’s and had to share a sofa bed with her beagles. Then mom took us home, and dad was gone

Ada said it was a possession whenever I brought up Dad. The morning he returned, I examined his movements at the breakfast table. Would the ghost know how to do everything dad did? Would it know to lick the corner of its lips after every sip of coffee? I shoved the idea out of my head. Ada stood in the kitchen staring at him, wondering if it was safe to come closer. I knew she still believed it.

“Come here, honey,” dad said.

He wrapped his arm around Ada and pulled her against his ribs. Her hands hovered over his torso and back. Mom stopped making breakfast to watch. “You’ll be late for school if you don’t hurry,” she said, handing us our lunches and jackets.

“That’s not dad,” Ada said while we waited for the bus.

“Of course it is.”

“He didn’t smell or feel like dad. The ghost has completely taken over.”

I could’ve argued with her, told her this was serious, but I didn’t have the energy. It was something she was just going to have to grow out of, I thought. Her imagination was at the peak of its wildness. She believed mermaids lived in our toilet and that forks and spoons had feelings. I used to believe in dragons and think you could keep a lion as a house pet, but then I grew up. And eventually Ada would have to, too. She recited highlighted passages from *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal and the Occult*. “The most common symptom of a ghostly possession is a sticky layer formed on the face and body of the affected person. See, Dad’s skin is sticky. I felt it when he hugged me. The second most common symptom is dry eyes.” She babbled about exorcisms until the bus came. I sat in the back with my friends, and she sat alone, flipping through her book.

Before dad got sick, he took me for a tour of developments he helped plan. The neighborhoods he planned and built were his pride and joy. If we ever drove by them with him, he’d say, “That beauty is

brought to you by yours truly.” Ada was sick with the chicken pox, and dad was in charge of keeping me out of the house so I wouldn’t catch them too. A grand tour of his developments was the best activity he could come up with. He snaked through rows and rows of homes. The roads had all been named after trees and nuts. The houses were identical. Others broke the pattern with their bad paintjobs and overgrown grass. Dad waved at the residents as if they should know him. Just when I thought we’d reached the end, more homes revealed themselves.

“You see, I wanted to go for regular straight roads that made blocks, so we could make better use of the land. But everyone else said that we could attract more high-end buyers with curved roads, because they would give the neighborhood a more whimsical feeling,” he said one day as we drove through one of the nicer neighborhoods. He explained the way the roads wound and diverged, the different lot sizes, that the nicer houses were hidden in the back for more privacy. Every bit of this place was filled with intentions.

We spent several afternoons doing this, even after Ada was better. He drove us all over South Jersey, through miles of crabgrass and strip malls. Sometimes, we’d stop in ones he hadn’t worked on. He’d list and point out things that were done improperly or lazily. “Amateur hour,” he’d said passing a home with asymmetrical front windows. We looked at abandoned homes with overgrown lawns and yellow notices stuck to the front doors. He tried to explain the housing crisis by comparing it to swimming pools and balloons. It didn’t make sense. He was like a haywire theme park robot. If I stepped out at a stop sign, would he just pull away and keep talking?

One day, he took me to a neighborhood near our house that we had always avoided. We passed by the sample house with the large red, white, and blue welcome banners in the yard. A half dozen of its clones were lined up beside it, all abandoned. Dad stopped. The road ended in a gravel field a quarter mile away, and that gravel field ended in a wall of pine trees.

“What happened?”

“We started working on it, drew up the plans and everything, then the contractors ran out of money and took off. We had such great names for some of them too. Pegasus Avenue, Hollow Wood Drive. Those roads led into other sections of the development that split off again, then ended in cul-de-sacs. Sort of like a bunch of big tree branches. Hallowed Grove. That was its name. We never even got the sign up.” It was the first time I realized he could be sad about things. He went on about Hallowed Grove for half an hour, moving his hands as if he expected the completed homes and paved roads to rise from the ground.

\* \* \*

The crawl space smelled of mouse poop and mold. Torn pieces of insulation hung from the ceiling like stalagmites. Mom had been forcing Ada and me to play outside all the time since dad came home. But the yard had grown boring, so we decided to find out what was under our house. We wanted to catch the bullfrogs and mice that lived there with an old fishing net. When it started to get cold, all sorts of creatures holed themselves up in there, eating, humping and crapping in there for months. Ada crawled around with a flashlight while I followed with the net. I found three kittens shriveled and dead in a corner. I

pulled a fallen piece of insulation over their bodies then gently patted it down.

“What’d you find?” Ada yelled from the other side. She had a small frog trapped under her net. She listed off possible names for him. “King Slurp, Telemachus, Mr. Bigs, Bloop.”

“Nothing, just mice poop.”

She squished her face in disapproval. “Well don’t touch me with your hands until you wash them. What do you think of the name Mr. Green?”

Ada had put Mr. Green in an upside-down bucket. We could hear the rim of the bucket skidding against the floor as he tried to escape. I tried to hold it down with my hands. Ada sat on top of the bucket. Sweat dripped down our faces and soaked our clothes. It was hot down there, where all the things we forgot about ended up. Toys left outside, trash that had fallen out of the garbage can, things that clogged pipes and vents, extra pieces of the house from when it was built. Ada fell off the bucket, and it flipped over. Mr. Green hopped across the crawl space. We lay on our backs, staring up at the duct work and dangling yellow insulation. The ground cooled our limbs and collected moisture into small puddles. The weight of mom and dad’s steps made the floorboards squeak above us. We could only hear their muffled voices, not the actual words, just the shapes of sounds. Mom’s were much longer than dad’s low, short mumbles.

“I wonder if they’re talking about us,” Ada said. “I wonder if they know where we are.”

“They do. We told them, remember?”

“We could’ve run away, though, and they’d be totally clueless.”

“They can hear us through the vents.”

“I bet mom is nagging dad. She’s probably like, ‘You left the peanut butter opened on the counter again, and your dirty socks are on the living room floor.’” We laughed and rolled on the ground, not caring if we ended up in a puddle. Then I tried to do my best impression of dad.

“He’s probably like, ‘Alright, alright, but I got things I need to work on that are more important than peanut butter and stinky socks.’” I started to laugh but stopped when I noticed Ada staring at me.

“Dad doesn’t work anymore,” she said. Mr. Green croaked. Mice squeaked and ran to their next hiding place. I heard her fumbling in the backpack that she kept the net in. “I think I know how to make him better.” She dangled a circle made of sticks and strings with a twig cross in the center. A combination of black bird and fake craft feathers hung from the ends of old shoelaces.

“What is that?”

“A dreamcatcher. Ojibwe used them to catch nightmares. So, I made one with a cross to catch the ghost and kill it.”

“You can’t kill a ghost. It’s already dead. It’s a dumb idea.”

“Well, all your ideas are dumb. Oh wait, you don’t even have any ideas.”

I made my way towards the exit. “Sticks and craft supplies aren’t going to help Dad.”

“Well neither are you.”

If dad did have a ghost, I thought I could talk it out of him. In school that year, we’d learned all about dealing with confrontations through conversation. The process had been explained to us through a puppet show. Mom was gone for a few hours. She had begun to leave us in dad’s care for small increments of time. As a precaution, she left me the car keys. Dad lay on the couch, watching the ceiling fan spin.

“No input detected,” the TV read. I sat on the love seat, watching dad watch the fan. I didn’t know how to start this conversation. The puppet show didn’t give us a set of ice breakers for this situation. I waited for dad to start. I fidgeted and cleared my throat so he’d notice me.

“What have you been up to, pal?” he asked. He kept his focus on the fan. He’d never called me pal before. “I feel like I haven’t seen you around.”

“You were gone for a while.”

“I was,” he said nodding in agreement.

“Why? Mom won’t tell me.”

“Starting off with some hardball questions.”

“Mom said you’re sick. Is it like a fever or something?”

“I’m not sick. It’s not like that. Sometimes things upstairs stop firing correctly. The brain is a complex machine.”

I hadn’t heard dad speak more than a few words since he’d been back. He struggled to speak those four little sentences. Were those dad’s words or the ghosts? What kind of words do ghosts know? I blurted out exactly what I thought a ghost would say.

“Boo.”

“Boo?” dad said. He finally sat up and looked at me. “I’m sorry, but I’m not feeling up to you and Ada’s games.”

If there was a ghost in dad, it was one of the smarter ones. He came and sat next to me. He hit every button on the remote, trying to get the TV to work. After a bit, he gave up and put his arm around me. Even though all of his weight was on me, he felt light. It was like he wasn’t even there. I wondered if ghosts were contagious. I went to wiggle away, but he gripped me tighter.

“This isn’t how any parent plans for things to turn out,” he said. “Things will be back to normal soon enough.”

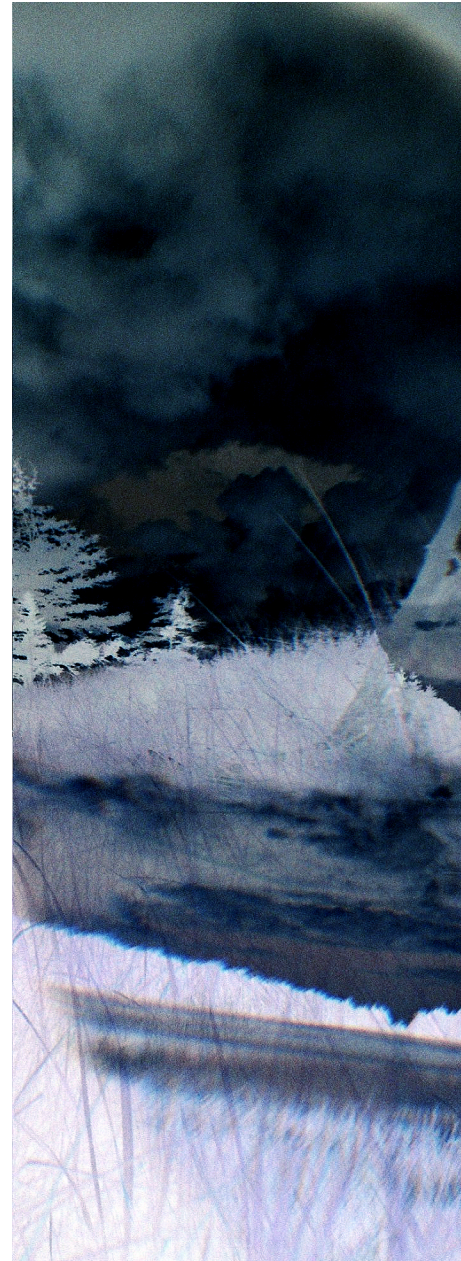
“Mom keeps saying the same thing.”

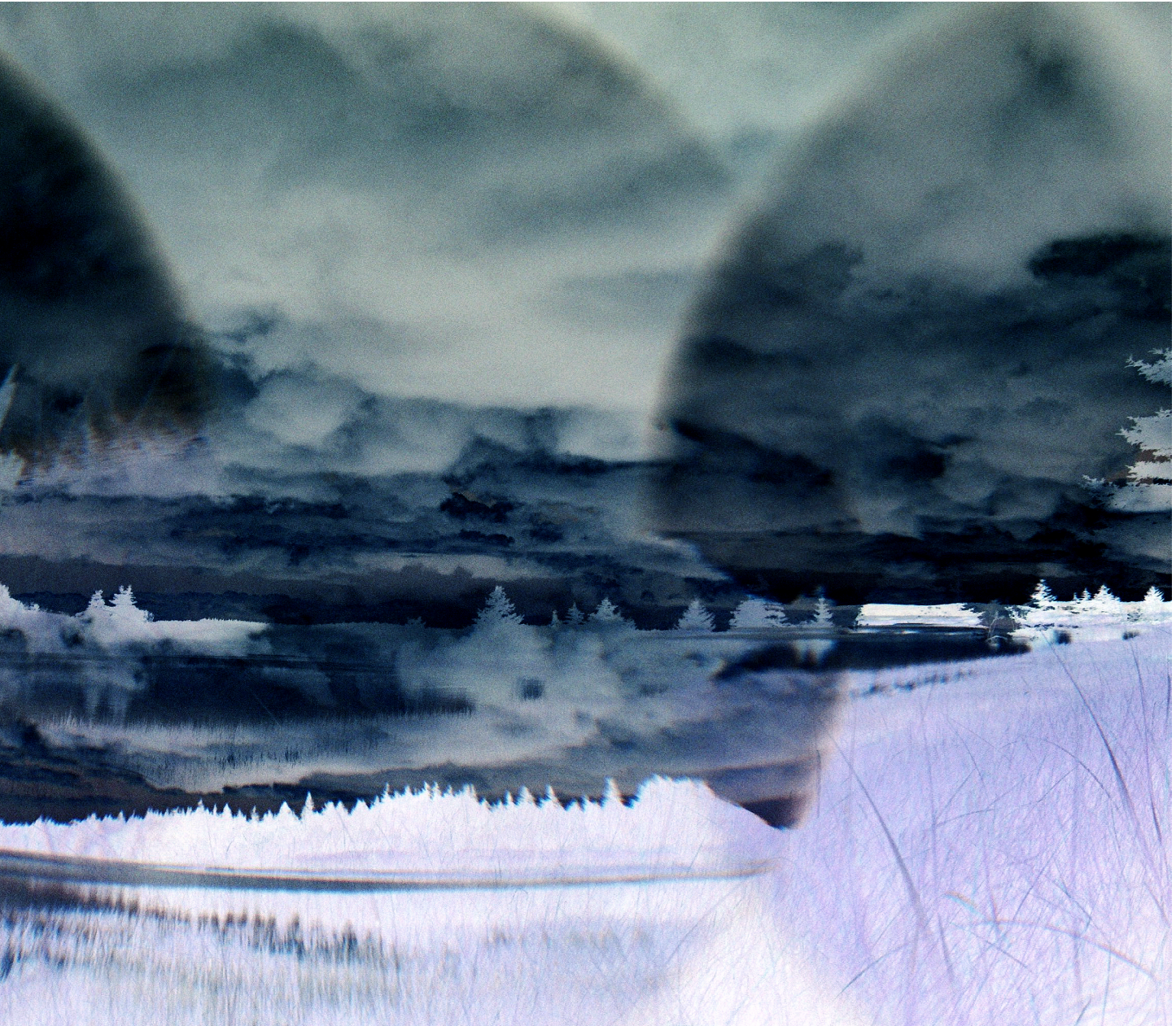
“Then it must be true.” He grinned. His teeth looked yellow and weak. The TV finally kicked on and cast blue light all over the living room. Dad held onto me as we watched a daytime talk show. The first lady was the guest. She and the host danced to old disco songs. “See, just like old times,” dad said. Then mom pulled into the driveway, and he retreated to the couch and pretended to sleep.

I thought I might’ve fixed things, but that night dad got a butter knife out of the drawer then went over to the fridge. He opened the freezer and started chipping away the ice that had grown on the sides. Little flakes fell away and landed on the floor. When the end of the knife broke off, he stopped to look at it before he went back to work.

“Dad?” I said.

He kept hacking away. I tapped on his shoulder. Ice flakes landed on my shirt. His eyes were wide and empty as he stared into the freezer. Packages of frozen broccoli and peas got in his way, so he pulled





them out of the freezer and let them hit the floor.

I left before mom could swoop in, before she would send me upstairs or carry dad away wrapped in a towel. I went to check on the birdhouses. The remains of ones we'd built years ago had been scattered all over the lawn. The replica of our house hung by itself deep in the woods. It had cracks in its high peaks. The chimney had fallen off and was buried under leaves somewhere. I checked for new nests, but it was still too cold out for that. There were just pieces of the sticks and broken eggshells from last year's nest. Dad had a whole city planned out there. "It'll be the Vegas of birdhouses," he said. He had drawn up plans for a Seattle Sky Needle and an Alamo. Hours had been spent trying to make an Eiffel Tower, but he eventually accepted that some things couldn't be made into birdhouses. The replica of our house was



the only one we ever made. Dad, Ada, and I had spent an entire weekend putting it together. The three of us studied the outside of our house closely. Dad taught us how to use a protractor and a compass as we drew up plans in the garage. We made identical window panes, a front porch, and even hedges for it. When we were done, we hung it proudly from that tree.

I picked up the fallen chimney and placed it on the birdhouse's roof. I imagined living inside it in a nest made of blankets. It seemed much more comfortable than a regular house. There was all that opened space. You could fill it with whatever you liked. I could see dad through the sliding glass doors. He was still chipping away at the ice like a dentist cleaning teeth. He moved like he didn't fit in his own body. Maybe Ada was right. The guy that came home, the one chipping away at freezer ice, who also spent entire nights crying in the bathtub, that wasn't dad.

\* \* \*

The exorcism was Ada's idea. Doctors and talking didn't seem to help dad, so we tried the spiritual approach. There was a chapter in *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal and the Occult* titled "The Exorcism at Home". Ada insisted we could easily perform it ourselves. But exorcisms were for priests with big wooden crosses and ropes of garlic. Even if we could do it, how would we handle things if dad started floating or vomiting swarms of locust?

"It's not that hard," Ada explained. She pointed to a picture of a ghost being sucked out of a human body and into a goldfish. "It's called transference. We need to find the ghost another soul to grab onto, an object of transference." Mr. Green would be our object of transference. He'd been living in a shoebox full of grass all week.

Since we were too weak to restrain dad, we had to wait until he was asleep. The bedroom rumbled with his snores. Mr. Green responded with ribbits. Ada held her encyclopedia open while I waved a cross made of sticks at dad. I waited for him to wake up, float across the room, and strangle us both. He was a deep sleeper though.

"Okay, Mr. Green has to be out of the box," Ada ordered.

I held the frog inside my fist. He was wet and smooth. He struggled, and I worried he might burst inside my hand.

"Next," she said, "we must present Mr. Green to the ghost. We really gotta sell it to him. You have to recite this chant with me."

I followed Ada's finger across the yellowed book pages. Some of the words were long and frightening. There were letter combinations we'd never seen before. We took it slow, sounding out each word carefully. We didn't want the ghost to think we were stupid.

"Dear spirit, we benevolent, living humans request that you leave the body of our loved one. Your possession of our loved one has caused great suffering, and we wish for our lives to return to the way we were. In return, we present you with and equally, if not greater, body. This body offers new experiences and pleasures. If you accept this offer, we will be forever grateful to you."

Dad snorted and coughed. Mr. Green croaked.

"Was that it?" I asked.

Ada nodded.

It was a little disappointing. I didn't expect it to be so quiet. There was no head spinning or bleeding walls, just a couple small noises. We didn't even get to see the ghost. Ada and I released Mr. Green in the backyard. I wondered what it'd be like to be trapped in a frog body. The ghost must not have been very happy with us. "Goodbye, thank you," Ada and I said, waving. Mr. Green hopped towards the door. We slammed it in his face.

To celebrate Ada's school play performance, we went to Applebee's. She was one of the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*. She had no lines aside from yelling incoherently with the rest of the tribe. We were all a bit on edge. Even though mom had started leaving us alone with dad, and dad hadn't been walking around the house like a zombie, we still watched him closely. We paid attention to every blink and finger tap. Ada insisted his problems had hopped off with Mr. Green, but I still worried.

"So, Ada, did you have fun?" mom asked. "You were the best little Lost Boy I'd ever seen. Isn't that right, honey?"

"Oh, yes she was, and the cutest," dad said. His voice was returning to normal. He even did things like talk like a 20's Radio announcer when we played Monopoly and sing in the shower again. Sometimes though, he still looked like he was slowly caving in. Earlier that night, in the dark of the school cafeteria, I could see his eyes retreating into their sockets. His cheeks and lips had shrink-wrapped his teeth while Peter Pan and Wendy sang "You Can Fly".

"You were such a cute little angel in the Christmas play too," mom said. "You've become quite the actress." Ada soaked in the compliments while trying to mash as many chicken fingers into her mouth as possible. Mom thought that being incredibly nice to both of us would help make up for the past year. She'd call me handsome every morning when she handed me breakfast.

"When were you an angel?" dad asked.

"At the Christmas play. You missed that one. I told the shepherds, 'God's son has been born in Bethlehem' and got to wear a halo." Dad nodded his head in approval.

We continued our meal and talked about plans for summer. Mom mentioned a possible camping trip in the Poconos as she continued to order more food. "Hey, how often do we have a night like this," she said. She was starting to look heavier. Some nights, I'd come downstairs and find her grinding her teeth and eating bags of chips and candy that she hid on the top shelves. I could hear her pacing on the hardwood floor, opening and closing cabinets until three in the morning.

"I'll be right back. Gotta use the latrine," dad said.

We ordered deserts while we waited for him, even though we were all moaning and holding our stomachs. Outside the window was a wall of fence surrounding the foundation where they were supposed to build another restaurant, but nothing more than a hole had been there for a year now. Coming to Applebee's was something we did to feel alright after every little event, after all my baseball games, after daytrips to grandma's. We knew the wait staff and half of them now addressed Ada as Cutie Pie and me as Little Man. I'd memorized the local sports memorabilia hanging from the walls and which seats were the most comfortable.

"Brendan, can you go check on your dad? He's been gone for a bit," mom said. She sipped from her

drink then tried to get situated on the bloated booth cushion.

As I walked into the men's room, a man stood in the doorway, keeping the door jammed with his shoe. "You don't wanna. This guy in here's getting dangerous." I slipped under his arm and found dad punching and kicking the wall tiles. He didn't say anything. He just breathed heavily with every blow. Air shot through his teeth in little hisses.

"Dad, dad, stop it."

"Jesus Christ," the guy in the doorway said. "Listen kid, come over here so I can help out your old man." He tried to grab me and bring me back into the restaurant, but I pushed his hand away.

"Dad, what are you doing?" He tried to rip the paper towel dispenser off the wall. He pulled on it with his entire body. He put his foot up on the wall for more leverage. It looked like he was dancing. Once he realized it wouldn't budge, he leaned against the towel dispenser and hugged its awkward shape while he cried.

A crowd gathered in the doorway. Mom came in followed by a team of teenage managers. "Derrick, what are you doing?" Mom and one of the managers tried to pull him off the paper towel dispenser. She fell and took dad down with her. The dispenser opened, and the rolls landed on them. Then the managers tried to pull them both off the floor. Dad's hands flailed in front of his face, trying to wipe off the mucus and tears.

\* \* \*

We knew we could never go back to Applebee's again. Mom left us home with while she ran what she called emergency errands. Aunt Marissa played Jenga with us on the kitchen table. We could hear dad pacing and moving his desk chair across the floor. Despite her long, thin fingers, Aunt Marissa had trouble grabbing the wood blocks and would collapse the whole tower when she pulled one out. "Motherfucker," she'd say, followed by, "Don't tell your mom I said that."

Dad passed by and went into the garage. There was some moaning and then the sound of things being thrown. Aunt Marissa turned on the TV and turned the volume up all the way. Four games of Jenga later, Mom came through the door with plastic bags and file folders. Aunt Marissa pointed to the garage. Before we could say bye to her, she had slipped out the door and was already backing out of the driveway. Ada and I quietly rebuilt the Jenga tower as mom went to let dad out of the garage. "Derrick," she yelled. We heard her open and shut doors throughout the house. "Derrick." She kept searching, going up into the attic and out to the shed.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Ada asked me. She kept arranging the blocks.

"I'm heading out," mom said through the sliding glass door. "Aunt Marissa is going to come back and watch you."

Once she left, Ada disappeared upstairs, then returned, holding the dreamcatcher. "We need to find him and get rid of the ghost for good."

"We can't. He's gone forever. That dumb thing won't do anything."

She threw the dreamcatcher on the floor as hard as she could, but it just fluttered slowly. Then she stomped up the stairs, trying her best to make as much noise as possible. I went up to her room and found

her cocooned in her purple comforter.

“I’m sorry,” I said

“Go away,” she yelled back.

Her room was cluttered with the leftovers of dozens of phases. Stuffed animals were stacked under Disney princess dolls. Dinosaurs were scattered all over a bureau covered in ceramic horses. And the walls, they were covered in strangers’ family photos with specters lurking in the background. She had spent hours in dad’s office printing them out.

“What if we left?” I asked her.

“Where though?”

“I don’t know, anywhere.”

“What about dad?”

“I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“Can we go to the Grand Canyon?”

“Wherever,” I said.

We packed what we thought we’d need to live on our own. Clothes, batteries, and two frozen pizzas. We walked around the house and said goodbye to everything. Goodbye couch. Goodbye chipped Mickey Mouse mug. Goodbye creaky closet door. I went outside and put the birdhouse in my backpack. “We’ll put it in our new home so we don’t forget,” I told Ada. Then we yelled goodbye to mom and dad out the backdoor as loud as we could. They’d hear it somehow.

Ada sat with her bag on her lap as I tried to get dad’s car to start. The engine kept turning over but went out with a whimper. The two of us sighed with each disappointment. We hit the dashboard, begged God, and yelled at the car until it finally turned on.

I sped down the backstreets searching the flat, dark landscape for any sign of mom and dad. The leaves came off the car in large sheets that took flight before bursting into pieces. Some of them flew in through Ada’s window after she opened it to call for dad. They stuck to the inside of the windows and our face. I didn’t want to take my hands from the wheel to wipe them off my eyes, so I waited for the wind to take them. For a bit, we hoped we’d find our parents on the side of the road or in a field. We wanted to invite them to come with us, but they were nowhere to be found.

Ada held up a map. She couldn’t read it, so she just made up directions. I turned randomly throughout town. The windshield wipers couldn’t clean off the months of dirt, so I had to drive with my head out the window. The check engine light blinked. Ada’s window fell off the track, and she couldn’t roll it up again. But we kept going. We drove forever. We drove until the car fell apart. We drove until we didn’t recognize a thing.

# An Interview with Francisco Cantú

## By Olivia Padilla

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Albuquerque's Bookworks recently hosted Francisco Cantú, author of *The Line Becomes a River*. Cantú's book tells of his time working as a U.S. Border Patrol agent after graduating college with his bachelor's degree in international relations. He later received his MFA in Nonfiction from the University of Arizona. Cantú explored the reasons he joined the border patrol and the events that led to him leaving the institution, which included its dehumanizing ways.

Cantú was joined for a Q&A after the reading by community member Rafael Martinez from the New Mexico Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice. The two discussed topics from the books and other issues raised by the standing room only crowd, including immigration reform and the U.S. Border Patrol. The warm welcome offered by the Albuquerque audience was a contrast to some of Cantú's previous book tour stops where protestors reacted to an NPR tweet quoting Cantú's work, but was later seen to be taken out of context. After the event, Francisco sat down with our staff reader Olivia Padilla for an interview.

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**Olivia Padilla:** Did you have the mustache while you were a border patrol agent?

**Francisco Cantú:** I only had the mustache for a short period of time while I was in the border patrol. Actually, this exact mustache is the only kind of facial hair you are allowed to have. There are all these rules, like your facial hair can't come below the corners of your lips, and you can't have side burns that are longer than your earlobes. So, if you ever wanted to have facial hair, a mustache is as far as you could go.

**OP:** Was that your inspiration for the mustache?

**FC:** Actually, I shaved my beard into a mustache right around the time I was graduating with my MFA. I thought it made me look more like a grown man, so I kept it. Also, it has a good "80's Dad" aesthetic that I really like.

**OP:** How do you compare your experience as a border patrol agent to what has been previously written about the border patrol, such as in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*?

**FC:** Honestly, I think that Luis' book *The Devil's Highway* comes the closest to capturing some of the tension of that job. I think a lot of the books that exist about the border patrol are



Author Photo by Keith Marroquin

either memoirs or war stories by former agents. There are a few important journalistic critiques of the border patrol. As well as a history of the border patrol, called *Migra*, which looks at them as a colonizing force in the Southwest.

There is a whole genre of veteran literature, by writers like Tim O'Brien, where people who have the experience of being soldiers and have come back from the war are trying to process what they have participated in, and the violence of it. I don't think that really exists for the border patrol. So, I didn't have a lot of guides when thinking about what this book would be. I also did not want it to only be a book about the border patrol. It's a book about the border, and the border patrol is the thing that brought me closest to it.

**OP:** In the beginning of the book your mother states, "The border is in your blood." This is a curious statement because most people try to further themselves from the border and all its hardships. Yet there is an incorporation of the border in your identity. Why do you feel that you must continue to recognize the border, rather than disassociate with it?

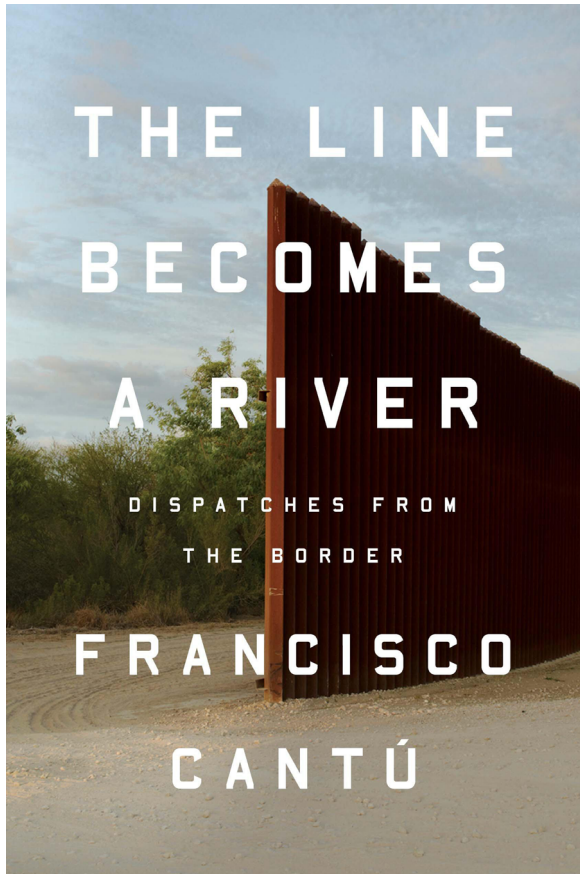
**FC:** Part of it is looking at different generations of immigrants. There is a part in the book where my mother is explaining that the first generation that comes into a new country is hyper concerned with fitting into a new model – a new culture – and preparing their kids to be Americans, and clearing out all the obstacles to do that. The second generation grows up feeling American, but also hears Spanish spoken in their home and are more closely tied to the tension of their family as immigrants. By the time you have the third generation, a lot of times

people are very removed from such tension.

So, in my experience, I didn't grow up hyperconscious of my Mexican identity or the border, or even the Spanish language because I didn't grow up speaking Spanish. I think a lot of times when you're part of the third generation you get older and you start to look back at your family. I mean I think a lot of people have that experience, right? When you get older you start to think more about who came before you, what put you where you are, and what makes you unique. For me it came later. And because I was already interested in the border, I became interested in knowing more about that connection and knowing about my grandfather's story.

**OP:** Can you describe the transition from being an agent to becoming a published author?

**FC:** It was a very long transition. I did it primarily through academia. The first thing I did was leave the border patrol to do a research fellowship with a Fulbright Scholarship. That was the first time it was my job to report and interview people and try to write from a more academic research standpoint. I liked it and I wanted to continue to do that form of work. I applied for an MFA program, and that's when I really started to think about writing down my experiences. It made sense for me to step into an MFA program after coming out of an institution because it was a structure that made sense to me and it was a very clear path forward. I think a lot of writers struggle with having such structure and with the idea of calling themselves writers. A lot of times, until you have a book, people are very shy to call themselves that. I think one thing that is very beautiful about MFA programs,



is that they train you to think of yourself as a writer.

**OP:** Did you feel you had more knowledge and perspective while working as a border patrol agent than some of your colleagues because of your background in international relations?

**FC:** When I first stepped into the Border Patrol Academy, I was like “Uh, I don’t want to be the know-it-all college boy.” So, I really didn’t talk about the fact that I had just finished my degree. But I quickly found out that a lot of guys in the border patrol had college degrees. Some people in my class even had master’s degrees. And of course, a lot of people had a law enforcement background. But I was surprised. Maybe I shouldn’t have been. But I was surprised by how many different types of people I encountered in

the job.

**OP:** Can you offer any advice for aspiring writers from the Southwest?

**FC:** One piece of advice is to lean fully into what makes the Southwest what it is, because I think there are a lot of times when the Southwest and the border get defined by people who aren’t from there. I think for writers who are from the Southwest, I think it is up to us to correct that and present the places that we’re from with nuance and complexity in a way that honors the true nature of this place. I think it’s important to not shy away from those labels. Embrace the label of a Southwest author. Don’t let it pigeon hole you but embrace it. I think that it’s an honor. There is a great literary tradition in the Southwest.

The other piece of advice that I always think about that was really powerful for me in my own life is, no one is ever going to give you permission to write the thing that you want to write. So often as writers we’re kind of like, “Ah, you know I would really love to write this essay about this thing, but there are other people who are so much more educated about it than I am. So, who am I to write that essay?” You have to put that out of your mind. You have to give yourself permission to write that essay. If there is something out there that you wish somebody would write about, be the one to do it.

**OP:** Did you feel that the people you encountered in the desert felt more comfortable with you being a Hispanic male who is also bilingual?

**FC:** Speaking Spanish is absolutely the most

powerful tool that I had as a border patrol agent. It enabled me to connect and understand people. It also kept me safe and enabled me to have more control in dangerous situations to communicate more clearly. I really think that the moment of being apprehended in the desert is such a moment of extreme vulnerability. There are few moments like that. I think that just being able to hear someone speak to you in your own language, it sounds like a small comfort, but so many people are told by coyotes that if they are captured by border patrol, that they are going to be killed. I think it was really important to me to engage with people as human beings because I don't think the job necessarily encourages it. I think it is important to push against those things that don't encourage us to see each other as humans and interact as human beings.

**OP:** What makes up your *latinidad*?

**FC:** To me, first and foremost is Selena. Tejano music, I love Tejano music. Norteño music. Food is a big part of it: birria and Sonoran hotdogs. The language. I didn't grow up speaking Spanish, but slowly I built up the ability to switch in and out of languages. There are so many phrases that are better expressed in Spanish. One of my favorite things about living in El Paso, when I used to live there, was that you could more fluidly switch in and out of those two languages.

And also, the warmth of Mexican culture and border culture is profound.



# In the Safest Suburb in the World

*Tresha Haefner*

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-San Jose, CA, Circa 2008

It started with a series of small crimes.  
First the mailman, with his grotesque face  
punched his fist through my window,  
*Too many pieces of junk mail piling up*, he screamed  
when the cops carried him away. Then the day I found  
yellow tape all over the apartment complex,  
some woman had wrecked her car, driving drunk.  
her husband wailed like a cold gust of wind,  
when they told him, she had been  
putting another man's stick shift in gear.  
Even here? The girl in the hallway said.  
*My heavens. My stars.* Everyone I knew was drunk,  
doing unspeakable things in their cars,  
crying. *Too many missed opportunities.*  
*Too many anonymous calls.* I had a one night stand  
with a one inch man who gave me a phony number.  
Everyone was trying to bone each other, even in the burbs.  
I left the scene and came to find some stranger,  
parked in my slot, a French clown blown  
out of a cannon. All white face,  
but no fun. *Whassa matter with you?* He asked,  
*Breaking Into my bedroom,*  
*like you was the light of the moon?*  
Even when you tried to kill yourself, I had to laugh,  
how you called me on that late, lazy Sunday  
afternoon and said, *Help. I've taken all my anti-depressants*  
*But I'm still depressed.* Too many parking tickets.  
Your brother getting married. You couldn't fit  
into the bridesmaid's dress.  
Later, after the hunky paramedics had hoisted you  
onto the gurney, and made you vomit into  
the little plastic bowl, shaped like a kidney,  
I came to pick you up in the emergency room,  
And made you promise never to do it again.  
We were so young, and full of dope then.  
You made me drive you home, with the top down on the car.  
You just kept screaming at the sunlight, the lamp posts, the radio,  
the billboards of skinny women in skinny jeans,  
*O god, how lucky we all are!*



Bathers  
*David Rodriguez*

# Authors

## *Francesca Allegra*

Frankie Allegra is a California native currently living in New York City. Her essays have been published in *The Briar Cliff Review* and *Prompt Literary Magazine*. Her one-act play “The Auction” was performed in Vivarium Theatre Company’s Lost and Found Festival in Chicago. She a graduate of Northwestern University’s nonfiction program, where she studied under John Bresland and Eula Biss.



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## *mud howard*

mud howard is a non-binary trans poet from the states. mud is co-editor of the blackout queer zine project *pnk prl*. they write about queer intimacy, interior worlds and the cosmic joke of the gender binary. their work has been published in *THEM* journal, *The Lifted Brow* and *Clever Magazine*, for which their poem was selected for The Best of the Net 2017. they are currently enrolled in a Creative Writing MA abroad, but you can find more of their work at [www.mudhoward.com](http://www.mudhoward.com).



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## *Jean-Marie Saporito*

Jean-Marie Saporito received her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She’s been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and is a recipient of the AWP WC&C Scholarship and the UNM Taos Resident Award. Her fiction and creative non-fiction has been published in the *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Ilanot Review*, *Numero Cinq*, and in the anthology *The Notebook: A Grassroots Women’s Project Publication*.



# Authors

## *Jessica Yen*

Jessica Yen's work explores the intersection of memory, family, culture, language, identity, and history. Her work has appeared in *Oregon Humanities*, *The Drum Literary Magazine*, and *1001 Journal*, and elsewhere. She is currently at work on a book of creative nonfiction. By day, she writes grants for safety net clinics and edits academic manuscripts for scholars seeking to address health inequities. You can find her online at [www.jessicayen.com](http://www.jessicayen.com).



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## *George Such*

George Such recently graduated from University of Louisiana with a Ph.D. in English, a significant change from his previous incarnation as a chiropractor for twenty-seven years in Washington State. His creative writing has appeared in *Arroyo Literary Review*, *Barely South Review*, *The Cape Rock*, *Dislocate*, and many other literary journals. His poetry collection *Where the Body Lives* was selected as winner of the 2012 Tiger's Eye Chapbook Contest. George enjoys cooking, hiking, traveling, and learning more about the world, which presently includes studying Spanish and personal fitness training. Occasionally he will fast, which is how he got to know *Hambre*.



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## *Mario Giannone*

Mario Giannone holds an MFA from Cornell University, where he is currently a lecturer. He is currently at work on a novel.



# Authors

## *Tresha Haefner*

Tresha Faye Haefner's poetry appears, or is forthcoming in several journals and magazines, most notably *Blood Lotus*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Poet Lore*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Radar*, *Rattle* and *TinderBox*. Her work has garnered several accolades, including the 2011 Robert and Adele Schiff Poetry Prize, and a 2012 nomination for a Pushcart.



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# Artists

## *Joseph Heathcott*

Joseph Heathcott is a writer, photographer, and educator based in New York, where he teaches at The New School

## *Pat Tompkins*

Pat Tompkins is an editor in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her photos have appeared in the *Stonecoast Review*, the *New Southern Fugitives*, and *Sunlight Press*.

## *Tarun Cherian*

Spiritual teacher, healer, and aura seer from India, Tarun Cherian is cofounder Creator's Child & Devadhara Healing; focusing on spiritual awakening, healing the incurable, aura sensing & animal communication. He's had 5 solo art exhibitions, works in Revelatory, Symbolic, Conceptual, Yantra, Shamanistic & Assemblage paths. "One of the key things I do is salvage, refurbish humans. I am like a rag picker, awake to the odd thing, the person no one appreciates..." For 18 years he's been advertising creative director at O&M, Saatchi's, Bozell. His published poetry & non-fiction include *Buffy's Doggy Revelations* and *The Chronicle of Death & Rebirth*.

## *Holly Day*

Holly Day's published books include the nonfiction books *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*, and *Piano All-in-One for Dummies*, and the poetry books *Ugly Girl* (Shoemusic Press) and *The Smell of Snow* (ELJ Publications). Her needlepoints and beadwork have recently appeared on the covers of *Your Impossible Voice*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *QWERTY Magazine*.

# Artists

## *Anna Davidson*

With roots from the Pacific Northwest, Anna Davidson lives in the love of Oakland, CA as a queer female-identifying artist, teacher, mentor, and believer of dreams. She practices in mixed-media collage, photography, and poetry—which has taken life on both the stage and page and most recently, the covers of her first chapbook, *Phases of Bone*. At twenty-seven, her art and writing is most inspired by women, relationships, connections in nature, and the journey to see strength in every emotion. She is most passionate about invoking spiritual healing, self-love, and confidence within at-risk youth and young women of undermined/oppressed identities and communities through the use of artistic expression. She sees herself one day living amongst the trees and implementing these practices into countless corners of the world. Website: [www.adcreativespaces.com](http://www.adcreativespaces.com). Email: [davidsonanna90@gmail.com](mailto:davidsonanna90@gmail.com). Instagram: [annnnnaje](#).

## *Jen Kindbom*

Jen Kindbom is the author of *CADBBRA*, a collection of poems from Cascadia Publishing House and the chapbook *A NOTE ON THE DOOR* from Finishing Line Press. Her work has appeared in *Adroit Journal*, *Connotation Press*, and others. Originally from Cleveland, Jen lives in Wooster, Ohio and works as a high school teacher and designer.

## *Leah Oates*

Oates has had solo shows in NYC at Susan Eley Fine Art, The Arsenal Gallery, The Center for Book Arts, The Brooklyn Public Library and the MTA Arts & Design Light Box Project at 42nd Street. Oates has been part of group shows in NYC at The Pen and Brush Gallery, Nurture Art Gallery, Momenta Art, and at Denise Bibro Fine Art. Works on paper by Oates are in numerous public collections including The Brooklyn Museum, The Smithsonian Libraries and the Franklin Furnace Archive at MoMA, NYC. Oates is a Fulbright Fellow for study at Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland.

## *David Rodriguez*

David Rodriguez is from Spain and considers himself a lover of photography. He loves surreal photography and fashion photography. His main influences are Man Ray, Erwin Blumenfeld and above all Guy Bourdin. Growing up in the Canary Islands, water has always been a source of inspiration for Rodríguez. His last series is “Bathers” (2018) and it is inspired by a photograph of Horst P. Horst of the same name and represents on a summer day in which we can see two bathers enjoying the sun and the sea. This series is formed by a series of photographs of minimalist character, in which the simple compositions stand out, where blue and white are the predominant colors. The bathers show sensual and elegant poses under a backdrop of surrealist air. The funds are simple to give greater prominence to the subjects that appear in the photographs.