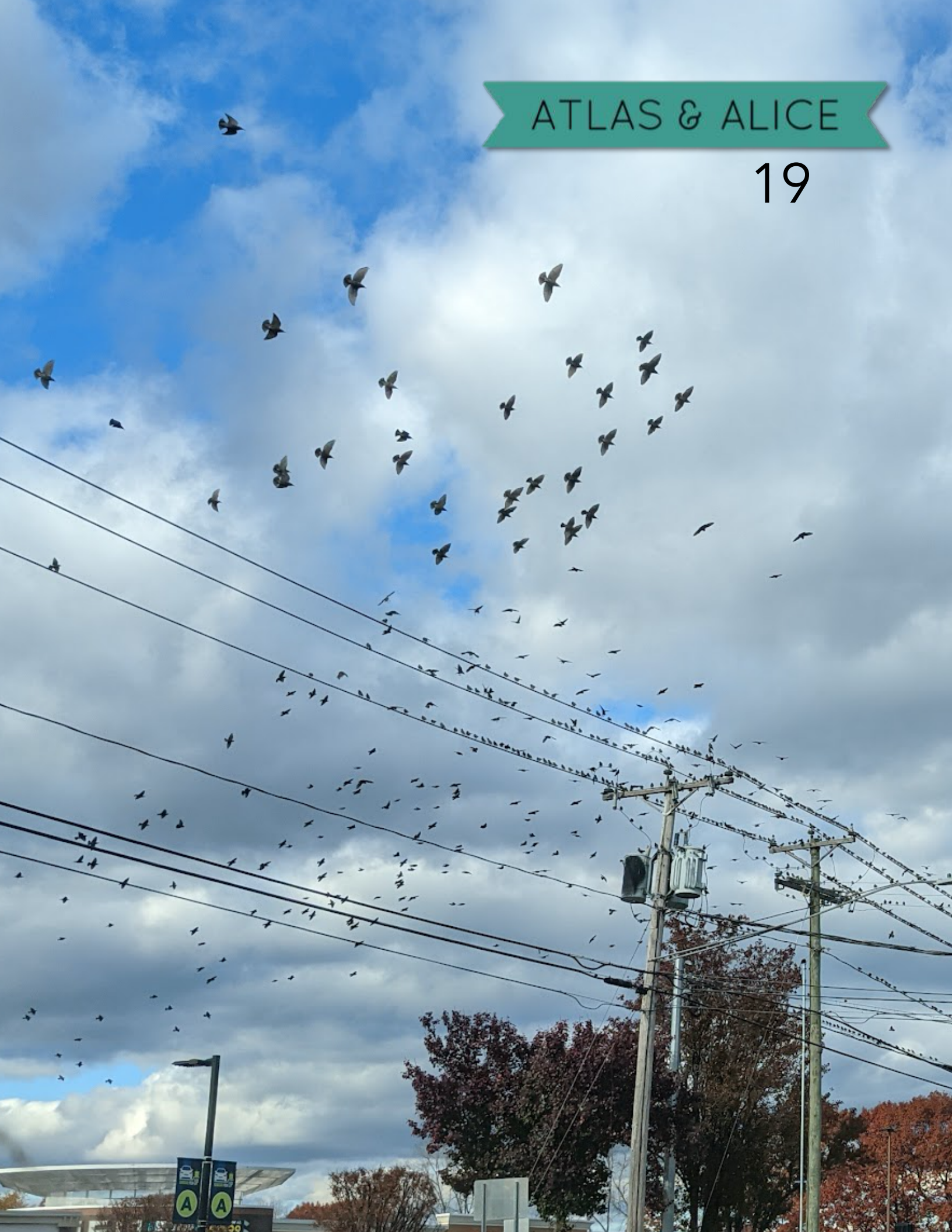
ATLAS & ALICE
19

Letter from the Editor

Somehow, we published two full issues this year.

That shouldn't sound like much of an accomplishment, but like many of you, we're all finding it hard to concentrate these days. Time has started to act funny. What used to take a few moments now stretches into hours. I suppose that's what happens when the world tries to return to "normal" in the middle of a pandemic. Maybe that's also my excuse for the delay in this issue's release!

That writers found ways to continue to create over the last year astounds me. I'm in love with the variety of voices in this issue, which come to us from all over the world. We have experimental pieces, fun sci-fi, nonfiction that cuts deep, witches, eulogies, a first-time fiction writer—the list goes on. And despite the spectrum of tone and genre, these 23 pieces fit together like a beautiful mosaic. I hope you take the time to read each one.

I wish you the best as the end of the year approaches. Be well, and we'll see you in 2022.

XO,
BW

Table of Contents

Fiction – *ƒ* CNF – ≈ Poetry – †

Issue 19, Summer/Fall 2021
Atlas and Alice Literary Magazine
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Jill Witty

Glossary: An Enlightening

Encircle
When a newcomer arrives, we will all bow in reverent welcome. We will clasp our arms around her and dance a sacred circle of belonging. We will calm her fear.

Enfold
We will choose a comfortable fabric that breathes and sways. We will drape a sheet over her, cut out the eyes, and fit it to her shape. In her vestments, she will feel one with our community.

Enable
We will teach her to ululate, whisper and wail. We will demonstrate the movements of flying, appearing, wandering, and vanishing. Her weightlessness will feel foreign to her. She may bump into objects. We will be ready with bandages.

Encounter
We will supervise her first haunts. She will make mistakes, spooking when she wishes to comfort. She will want to visit her loved ones, to dwell with them. Her presence will remind them of her absence. She will learn to linger in shadow.

Entrust
When she is ready, we will send her on her own. She will discover how to inhabit rather than torment, to awaken memories, not fears. She will find her own rhythm, the way to breathe new life into their deprivation, to color in the void.

Rhienna Renèe Guedry

Map, Quest

The book I haven't finished takes
place somewhere I can't get back to, it's
the heartburn of longing, senses I have to fictionalize
(so there's sadness too): the specificity of jambalaya
songs and Google Image Searching along
the basins and backroads of Louisiana, a
route eclipsed by water and waterways
that behave like roadways which the maps
sometimes can't tell which is which, I've got to fake
the whole damn thing from a fever dream of memory.

Chelsea Stickle

Belly Full of Witch's Stew

The luxurious smells that came from the witch's house at the end of Watercress Lane made everyone wish they had problems monumental enough to bring her. It was said that when it was your time, you'd feel compelled to buy a bundle of meat and appear on her stoop. Without knocking, the door would swing open and the witch would appear. The more observant of the meat-bringers might notice her familiar face. One they recently saw during a challenging moment. But most failed to recognize her.

The meat-bringers settled into chairs while they explained their problems. The witch cleaned the meat and removed the excess fat. Out came the seven-and-a-half-inch cleaver designed with sparks on each side of the blade that blurred as the swift thwack of the cleaver made her guests jump. Though it was impossible to tell if it was from the sudden noise or the sharpness in their nerve endings. The witch was rewiring them. She cleaved the meat into manageable pieces—understandable ones—that she froze and fed into her meat grinder, gently turning the handle. The meat-bringers slumped in their seats, relieved that their nerves weren't constantly touching and screaming.

The witch sprinkled in herbs from her garden. Never overwhelming the meat, but making it more palatable and delicious. Ragu for the couple that spread their problems onto every aspect of their life until everything was infected. Dumplings with ginger for the couple that dressed up their issues as other things. Hamburgers for men stuck in old-fashioned American ideas.

The meat-bringers feasted as she cleaned the cleaver. Nothing had ever tasted so familiar and yet improved. There was a fullness, a completeness that came with every bite. As if they were reincorporating what had been lost or mangled by the outside world. Once reunited the meat-bringers possessed a sense of wholeness. Like their slip sliding edges had firmed into place. When asked what happened, they could never quite explain what transformation had taken place, just that it made everything a little better.

John T. Leonard

Instability

There were shards everywhere for a while
but then I forced the nausea down and crept
my way to the front door, hands shaking as I limped
across the neighbor's lawn and tapped on their door.

Picture frames, road maps from the 1960's, our parents'
wedding blanket—children in a sea of things unwanted.

What you and I resembled was a fistful of urchins—needles
that people forget are alive unless they've spent a month under water.
The entire town, deaf and devoid of voyeurs. Erase the air and pick up the phone,
We're calling to tell you about back pain or some type of new dish soap.
Always during dinner, and the vein in our father's temple would scream.

The damage happened quickly, like the first line of a song about drinking.
He got right to it with the plate smashing, the drawers sailing through
our kitchen window, crushing the neighbor's petunias. White wine
and whiskey spilling down the fishbowl. We wanted to hide our heads
in the oven, to crawl into the lie of daylight. A week later, you whispered
something about placing a canary bird in our mother's casket. Now,
blue curtains hang in our memories and we never pick up the phone—
even if we want to call each other. We fall asleep like acid.

Deirdre Danklin

Father Whatawaste

He was handsome like a ‘50s superman. Hair so black it was almost blue. Eyes the color of Listerine. Our mothers called him Father Whatawaste. This was before we knew about the things priests do to children. We still thought the collar meant close to God. God’s mouth on Earth. We went on a trip to the woods. Father Whatawaste and Sister Theresa and thirteen girls from St. Lucy’s Preparatory School. In the woods, we were told, we’d feel closer to God.

On the bus ride to the woods, we were silent. Watching Father Whatawaste talk to Sister Theresa and envying her habit, her marriage to Jesus, that let her lean in, pretending she couldn’t hear the things he murmured to her. We watched her neck flush pink with blood. At night, in our tent, Annabell Hurley said she’d like to take off Father Whatawaste’s cloak and sink her teeth into him. She’d bite him all over until he was purple with her bites. We nodded, we agreed. We, hot-headed Catholic school girls, conspired with Annabelle Hurley to consume him whole.

I got up, pretending I had to pee, but really looking for a spiritual experience in the dark. At that age, I thought God was just waiting for me to be alone before he’d show me a sign or grant me His favor. I walked to the edge of the lake, looking for a bolt of lightning or a burning bush. Instead, there was Father Whatawaste, his cloak hiked up to his hips, tentatively trying to walk on water. I believed that he could. He, so handsome, so authoritative. I would have believed he could fly. He stepped once, twice, into the cold water and sank. I watched from the shadows of the trees as he lifted his befuddled head to the sky, searching, like I was searching, for any sort of sign.

Back in the tent, Annabell Hurley was still talking about the things she’d do to Father Whatawaste. She’d tie him up in her father’s toolshed and feed him birdseed out of her

hand. Yes, yes, the other girls nodded. She'd encase his feet in cement and bury them in her grandmother's garden and train peas to vine up his legs. Of course, of course, the other girls said. Listening to them plan their pagan rites, I heard the clarion bell of my vocation. I thought: he is looking for favor in the wrong place. We girls are the priestesses with violent visions. He, his feet wet with failure, should come home to us.

"I know where he is," I said.

The girls' eyes shone in the dark.

So, when Sister Theresa found him the next morning, strapped to a tree with ropes taken from our tents, his naked body bedecked with flowers, a bird's nest resting like a crown on his head, blood running like vines down his legs, her first thought was that it was a beautiful tableau. The center of an Italian triptych. Out of habit, she sank to her knees.

The thirteen girls from St. Lucy's were nowhere to be found, even though our parents searched for us, we'd heard a higher call. We wait, teeth sharp, for the next group of children led by a beautiful man to the forest, looking for a sign, trying to get closer to God.

Carolyn Fagan

Graveyard Girls

The five friends were buried together. The sixth one couldn't make it. She needed to be buried with her husband, her children—*her family*, she said. The five had sensed this long before the planning and planned accordingly when it came time. By the time the sixth friend needed to be buried, there was no question with whom she would be buried. To ask the question, sometimes, is to make the choice.

Three of the friends had significant others close by: a wife, a lifelong boyfriend, a husband. They were cushion, padding, additional joy to lives already full. The significant others were let in on certain secrets. They entered parts of their respective romantic friend with fingers and other appendages that the friends had never tangibly explored between themselves.

They built homes with their friend. They listened as their friend cried or yelled or whispered anger or resentment about the other friends. But they watched, too, at times with jealousy but often with relief, as the friends found and rewound themselves against each other like phone cords around wrists, slinky cats around ankles. They understood that the burden of being everything to someone could be too heavy to bear and they thanked their friend's friends with lavish wedding, baby shower, Hanukkah, etc.-gifts. They accepted their plots with steady, simmering gratitude that they were loved by someone with so much love in their life already.

Two of the friends had argued at first with the other three. To be buried, they explained, was a waste of precious land. The environment, they explained, was collapsing under our very feet. They didn't even know if their kids would live the entirety of their lives with clean water, breathable air. They pleaded to burn. We can have our dust sprinkled in all of our favorite places, be together everywhere we've loved and where we've loved, they said. The three friends looked at one another. They exchanged side calls and emails, leaving the two out, for the next several years, developing their argument. They chipped away at the two with visits to graveyards, beachside and firefly-

haunted. The two folded when the three conceded to save up extra for compostable caskets.

One of the friends wondered for a long time: Will the entirety of my life be summarized by these women I've loved, yes, but watched make choices I would never make, heard say things I'd never say? Women I've had my heart broken by when they did not show up for me at times I needed them most. She loved them. But was all she was, them? Was there any her to her?

She died first. And as she was slipping away, feeling death run warmly through her body to take her like a sweet-breathed friend, she thought finally of how she couldn't wait to be with them, whether in the unknown halls of an afterlife or in the rain-soaked, mossy nothingness of the graveyard they'd chosen. She breathed out, happy.

They all thought of it in different ways, what it would mean to rot together, forever, side-by-side. Would one of them be bones, while another, newly arrived? Would worms and bugs bite bits of each of them, bring them together, again, in one digestive track? Would they filter through their compostable coffins into each other's dreamy skulls? They thought of this and more and more and more, and while they wondered what their families and friends would think and say to them while they were alive, they never once considered what would be thought when they were dead. Names piled atop one another, bodies next to each other, years beginning with the same digits, then fanning out to their different conclusions.

They never thought what people would think of five women who couldn't die without one another. What could it mean? They never thought to ask, but they already knew. Sometimes to not ask the question is what lets trees grow from seed, survive to anciency despite lightning, despite fungus, despite woodpeckers, claws of bears, sugar-powdered dreams of Christmas kids.

The last one lived so long beyond her friends. Her husband died thirty years before and she'd never love someone like that again, but she was okay. When the second to last of the friends died, though, leaving her with nine years to herself, she felt as if she'd deflated—her skin a balloon, now sagging, now purple. Her body translucent, veins slow and swooshing. She hoped for her heart to stop, (felt ungrateful), knew that life was beautiful, propped up pictures of her children, grandchildren, on mantles and counters. She looked forward to their birthday calls, holiday hugs. She watched TV late into the night, pain in her knees and anthology of memories trudging through her mind, holding her sleep hostage. Don't grow old, she told her grandkids, sometimes with an accidental intensity. Don't let all your friends die first. The grandchildren called less and less, but she looked at pictures of them and loved them so.

One day, ankles swollen beyond walkability, she crawled to her living room. In the corner, beyond the pictures of her kids, were framed photographs of the five friends.

They had been young, she knew, those memories crystallized inside her, blinding her brilliantly and frequently with the drama, the high stakes of youth. Then they were less young, but so young still. Skin taut when they'd already thought they were old. They'd still had so long to go.

Then, grown, they had held each other through real darkness swallowed into mundanity. Heartbreak that bruised them lifelong, miscarriages and cancers, loss of parents, of dreams, of things they thought they'd be. Her hands, now, were so different from the way they used to look. But she loved their thin stillness, their quiet, papery tolerance. When her heart gave out, she knew that was the last of them. A life, she knew, complete.

Steve Carter

Translucence

take an apple
green
place it in a room
fill the room with green
paint
a picture of it

take a red wheel
barrow
place it in the rain
red against white
paint a picture of it

don't say a word
about it

Olabisi Bello

A Perfect Canvas

We didn't want her.

No, we didn't. We really didn't.

She's an accident. A leftover. A babe dropped on the outskirts of our town with nothing but a swaddle to her name.

Who would have wanted someone like that?

We wanted to return her,

But there was no one to do the returning to.

Katherine wouldn't raise her,

Neither would Jon or Alice or Peter,

And there was no orphanage for miles.

*Why should **we** be forced to drive that far?*

So, we took her in and raised her.

Yes, unfortunately so.

She is an oddity, that girl. Truly a peculiar case.

It's obvious she doesn't belong with us.

She walks different,

Talks different,

We don't even have the same type of hair.

It's why we cut hers.

She laughs different,

Smiles different,

And all our kids are scared to death of her.

Who could blame 'em!

She didn't even let my Charlie play on the swings.

But why?

Said she was there first.

Well, was she?

She was.

Then what's the problem?

'Cause that's not the point. My son has every right to be there just as she does.

But it's a public park. Emphasis on public.

Who asked you?

Calm down, Jonathan.

Wasn't he the one that dragged her out of the cafe just last month?

Mama needed the booth.

And my son needed the swing!

– Enough, Jon. We agree with you.

– I don't.

Shut up, Alice.

…

She taught Ronnie a bad word.

– No!

– How could she?

Now, our sweet little boy is running around town dropping f-bombs.

Not lil' Ronnie.

We should never have taken her. Should've let the vultures—

And the eagles

And the itty-bitty rats

Take care of her instead.

We should have a talk with her.

Let her know her place in this community.

Anyone seen her these past couple of days?

– I haven't.

– Neither have I.

Not in the park where she stays all day?

No.

Or in the shed we raised her in?

Only let her in once a month.

Or by the community pool?

No one taught her to swim.

Is she missing?

Such a bother.

Did she run away?

She's only six.

Should we look for her?

I have pottery class today.

Fred?

Going fishing.

Peter?

Mama needs me to scrub her back tonight.

Are we all too busy?

Yes.

Do we really want her back?

…

Then it's settled.

She's dead.

What?

Saw her body in the lake just last week.

You sure it was her?

Which other person here looks like that?

Why didn't you tell us?

Forgot. Had to grill the fish Fred gave me.

How do you forget something like that?

– Dunno. Just happened.

– He's hiding something.

– No, I'm not.

– Yes, you are, Jon. Out with it.

You know the rules, Jonathan. No secrets.

Charlie said he saw her sitting by the lake.

Oh no, did she fall in?

He pushed her in, you know, as payback for the park.

So he killed her?

– Poor thing drowned.

– But that's murder! Mama said God hates murder.

– Then she shouldn't have disrespected my boy.

– Doesn't give you the right to take her life.

– I didn't do it.

– Yeah, your son did.

– Was she not a problem? An ugly spot on our canvas?

– Yeah so?

– So, problem solved.

– Through murder?

– You would do the same if you had the chance.

He's not wrong. Maybe now we can have some peace.

– There can't be peace. His son's a killer.

– Mind the way you talk about my boy!

Enough. We don't need to fight over this.

But she was such a young girl.

Peter, what's the law we follow around here?

– Ask Katherine. She's the know-it-all.

– Funny.

Peter.

Fine. We must protect—

Louder, please.

WE MUST PROTECT OUR OWN

Before who?

Before anyone else.

Simple. Fred will go and fish out the body before an outsider sees it.

But—

We are not to speak of this ever again.

…

Never again.

She never existed.

Didn't belong to anyone, anyway.

We might be horrible people,

But we're horrible together.

And we don't want lil' Charlie going to juvie for someone like her?

No, we don't. We really don't.

Do we all agree to this?

– We do.

– I don't.

Shut up, Alice.

Margarita Serafimova

The Passing Holder

I have names, I have days, I have lands –
with unevennesses, with long laid grasses –
they are not mine, but I have them.

Mara Lee Grayson

The Veteran I Met in Reparatory

He was handsome for an older man with scars.
Rumors hopped from mouth to mouth backstage.
We were always trying on the truth,
never fully comfortable without a costume.

Rumors hopped from mouth to mouth backstage.
I knew what it was like to be an actor,
never fully comfortable without a costume.
His scar looked deeper under the stage light.

I knew what it was like to be an actor.
Soldiers were a different story.
His scar looked deeper under the stage light.
I closed my eyes.

Soldiers were a different story.
I knew your old man, the old man said
I closed my eyes,
but it hadn't happened yet.

I knew your old man, the old man said.
This was the year the towers fell,
but it hadn't happened yet.
It separated men like him from men my father knew.

This was the year the towers fell.
I was raised not to believe in violence.
It separated men like him from men my father knew.
He kissed my forehead gently, like a father does.

I was raised not to believe in violence.
His hand was warmer than I'd expected it to be.
He kissed my forehead gently, like a father does.
You take direction well, he said.

His hand was warmer than I'd expected it to be.
He was handsome for an older man with scars.
You take direction well, he said.
We are always trying on the truth.

Colette Cosner

Jesus Year

When you're eight
and your mother's boyfriend
buys you a calendar
that's just past
and you don't stop crying
in the stationary aisle
of Barnes & Noble
until you have a daughter
of your own. Time
just one of those things
we say. Like that letter
I wrote you, bottled up now
and floating in the belly
of our last great white —
had I known there
was going to be all this
talk of mercy, I would have
bucked the fuck up
a long time ago.

Laura Miller

Sonnet for the sleeping (utilitarian poem)

The same about a three-armed bench
is true for a supermarket;
true for little concrete pyramids
beneath an overpass;

cornfields that bear no crops,
but highschoolers, dressed
for Halloween, painted by smoke
and incense, begging you

through damp hay and plywood
to call them for liars.
The whole contraption falls
every time I try to close the blinds;

In the morning, I am in a whole city
of second-story windows that face the sun.

Abbie Barker

Alice, Some of the Time

Sometimes Alice waits at the end of her driveway for the bus. Sometimes she stomps in the slush, water seeping through the cracks of her boots, and she spends the day in damp socks. Sometimes Alice takes too long picking through her hamper for something clean, or mostly clean, and she has to ride to school in her mom's Subaru. Sometimes the Subaru smells like skunk. Sometimes Alice's mom jokes that Alice was late to her own birth. Sometimes Alice's mom grinds her teeth without saying anything, searching the rear-view mirrors, the side mirrors, for cars that aren't there. Sometimes her mom drifts over the rumble strip while tapping her phone, and Alice imagines swishing into a snowbank. Sometimes Alice imagines the car slamming into an oncoming truck, the airbags inflating with a hiss, bits of windshield skidding across the dash. Sometimes Alice wonders how it would feel to wake up in a hospital. Instead, she wakes up alone in her twin bed, missing her dad's warm palms.

Alice's dad never calls.

Sometimes Alice waits at the top of her driveway for a senior named Tyler to pick her up in his Jeep. Sometimes Tyler brushes the side of her leg when he shifts gears, his knuckles tepid and damp on her skin. Sometimes Alice presses her face on the passenger-side window so she can feel the chill against her cheek. Sometimes Tyler swerves while he sips his Starbucks and Alice wishes she could slap the cup away, spilling hot liquid across Tyler's crotch. Sometimes she imagines his Jeep plummeting to the bottom of an icy river, a tower of bubbles floating to the surface. Sometimes Alice drives herself to school in her mom's Subaru, reeking of smoke, and before she slides the car into reverse, she checks every mirror again and again. Sometimes Alice's mom asks if Alice is okay. Sometimes Alice digs through her mom's medicine cabinet, twisting the lid off every prescription, and later she forgets to twist the lids back on. Sometimes Alice wakes up in hospitals. Sometimes the blank walls and scratchy blankets make Alice miss her dad's fickle warmth, how seeing him every other holiday was almost enough. Sometimes

Alice's mom squeezes her daughter's wrists and says, *I wanted so much more for you*. Her hands are always cold.

Michelle Brooks

The Better Part of Yesterday

My heart is a deserted street
in the middle of winter, dead
leaves skittering in the dying
afternoon light. I am a stop sign
riddled with bullet holes,
pinpricks of sunlight streaming
through me. And you? You are
everything – the light and shadow,
the broken glass pane in which you
can see everything. You are a street
upon which I used to live, and I
don't need a house to haunt you.

Amanda Dettmann

Self-Love in the Afterlife

"Hour of the rooster, what belongs there.
Hour of the rooster, what belongs there" ~JinJin Xu

If your face is my face, press your forehead to my forehead.
You are the baptism to my gasping bathtub. Shower me
like a sunburned synecdoche. If in the afterlife I don't recognize you,

remind me how my orchid teacup split your lips blue. Sister me
like a foreign language slipping between us, akin when there's wind.
There's always wind. With and without our separateness:

my pear plucked chair rocks your shadow into ricochet
your rosewater coats my floating throat to high tide
our blood orange peels back its own grave just in time

When the world begins with breakage:

December will curl its midnight toes pink.
There will be no difference between grasp and gasp.

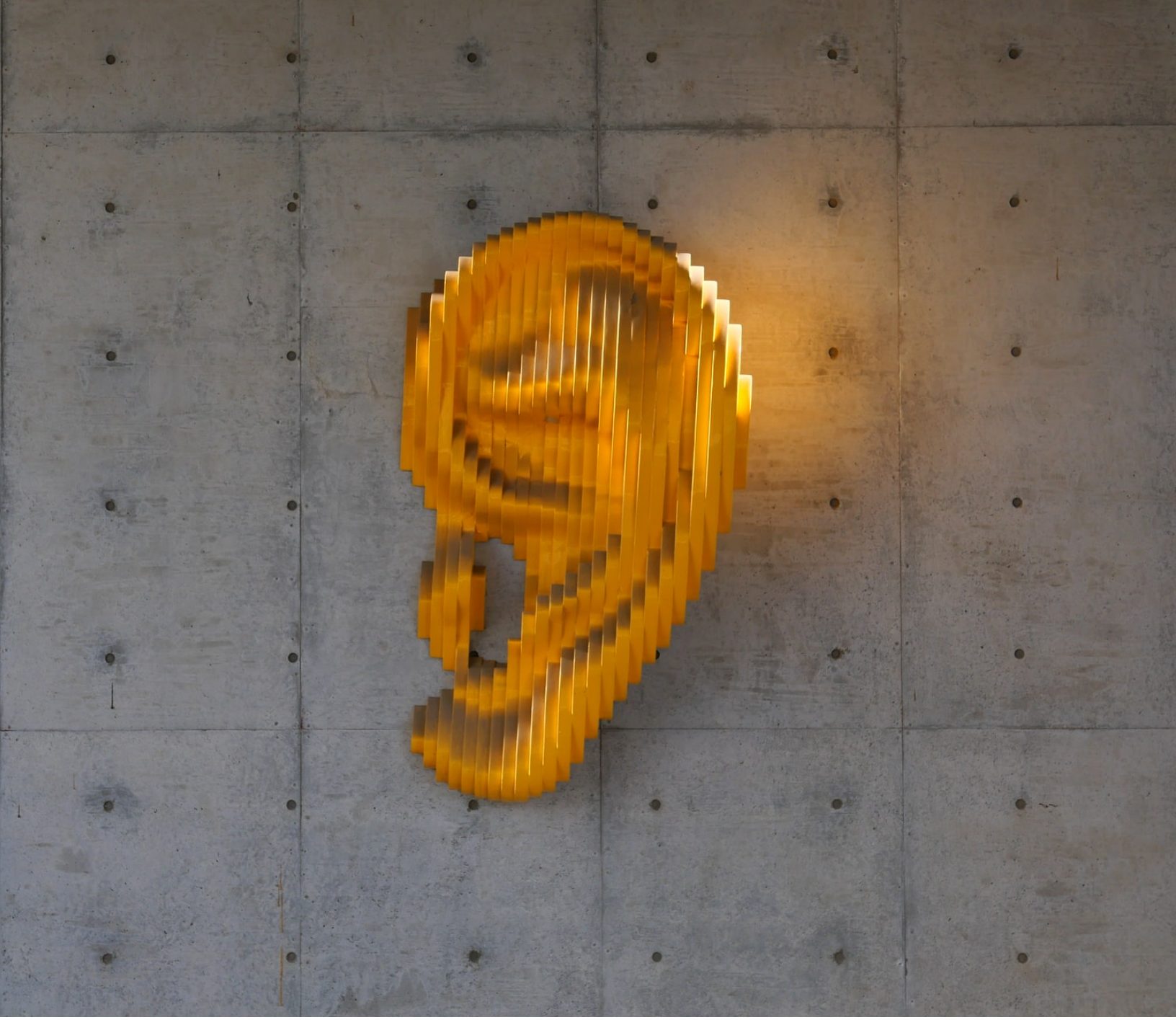
That moment right before
we fall asleep.

A fire no one knows.

Preeth Ganapathy

Mornings

Silence is a thick blanket over the morning air. The damp mud shoots wisps of warmth up into the sky, its strength not enough to achieve the purpose of its intention. Grey works its way into the minutes, into the words and into sleep. Rain whispers in drops, to the concrete trimmings lining the edges of the square house. The amplitude of its conversation is nimble. It travels up to your chest, its lightness settling in the blank space in your ear canal. You try to preserve it, to guard it there for as long as you can, as if it were the song of a momentary sun. Later, you know, the sound of civilization will try to rob you of it. You sharpen the saw of your breath in the softness of morning's solitude so you are ready to swim the waters of day's foaming sea. Obsidian watches you like a feral cat from underneath the cloak of wait, waiting for the heart of night to descend.



Bassam Sidiki

Uninvited Guests

Author's note: The following personal essay is an example of the Indo-Persian mode of oral storytelling called dāstān or qiṣṣah. The essay adopts a very specific subgenre of this mode, the ṭirāz. According to Urdu scholar Pasha M. Khan, the ṭirāz was grouped into four chapters called "ḳhabars," plus a conclusion (ḳhātimah), and the names of the khabars signaled the situations in which they were to be recited: razm, bazm, ḥusn o 'ishq, and 'ayyārī—battle, courtly gatherings, beauty and love, and trickery. The essay, in its homage to this oral tradition, takes the "telling" in "storytelling" seriously, defying that hackneyed commonplace of writing workshops in the West today: "show, don't tell."

Esteemed listeners, invited, uninvited—or, if you were invited but worldly matters got in the way of your attendance at this mehfil, and you have only these pages to read from—let me preface this dāstān with a little glimpse into what you can expect. This is not a "content or trigger warning" of today's literary circles, but it can be if you so wish. Accordingly, in this dāstān you shall find magic, sickness, demons, healing, empire, family ties, and even a little poetry. Join me.

Bazm: Courtly Gathering

My mother said that Saeen must have been about 110 years old when he died last year. I grew up in Karachi, but my family frequently visited my aunt when she lived in Hyderabad, the second-largest city in the Pakistani province of Sindh and the place where my parents were married (and not to be confused with its namesake town in southern India). Saeen lived there and he was an omnipresent, if not omnipotent, figure in our lives: my mother zealously believed in his mystical powers. As a child I sometimes accompanied my mother and aunts to the little shack Saeen called home on Sarfraz Road. I don't recall what he looked like beyond the silvery shock of hair and the wrinkles on his face. Most of all, I recall that he was a woman.

Saeen did not have much in his living room by way of furniture except a charpoy on which he held court, always smiling, silently mumbling Quranic remembrances and tying black woolen strings which he blessed. He gave these strings out to those who wanted them, like my mother, who had me and my siblings tie them around our necks and tuck them away discreetly beneath our clothes. I remember that these Kabbalah-like stringy necklaces were often a source of embarrassment for me in school when they treacherously emerged from the collar of my uniform to the horror of my more orthodox Muslim peers: you visit the shrines of saints! That's kufr! I ignored them.

Saeen's reverent disciples and visitors who came to him from all over Hyderabad sat on the floor, some massaging his feet, others begging him to intercede with Allah on their behalf. They wanted questions answered: is my husband unfaithful? Will my son get that promotion? Should my daughter marry into that family? And it seemed like Saeen's answers were always correct, because these women kept returning. Saeen never asked for compensation, only voluntary donations which his followers surreptitiously slipped under his pillow on the four-poster canopy bed, adorned extravagantly by his disciples with roses and jasmine.

Most of all, his followers wanted to prevent or heal all manner of afflictions. In fact, my mother and aunts were first introduced to him when they were desperate to seek a cure for my grandmother's cancer. But when they got to Saeen, he told them that they were too late; Nani died a few days after. As it happened, Saeen's own story began with a successful cure.

What had always perplexed me was that Saeen, despite being a woman, was addressed as a man and with masculine pronouns. I dismissed this as a symptom of my culture's indigenous patriarchy; a mighty and powerful woman must, of course, be a man. But as I found out later, the reality was more complex. Saeen wasn't always Saeen. In Sindh and lower Punjab, "Saeen" (pronounced sah-een) is a title of respect, mostly reserved for elders. God is addressed as Allah saeen, an elder brother might be addressed ada saeen. In fact, my parents called each other saeen as well—perhaps it was their conversations with each other and this term of endearment spoken so often in our house which made Saeen the mystic an even more ubiquitous force in our lives. I don't think my mother or any of Saeen's other disciples knew his real name. In her version of Saeen's story before he was Saeen, Mom spoke of a woman called Bibi.

Bibi was never Saeen, even though we called her that. Saeen was a Sufi personage named Saeen Mustafa Shah, a powerful mystic with a supremely intimate connection with God. A long time ago Bibi visited him because she could not conceive. Lo and behold, fifteen days after her visit to him, she did, and gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Her faith in Mustafa Shah grew so much that she became his murid, or student. Mustafa Shah had no children of his own, and on his deathbed he appointed Bibi not only as his

successor but as his medium. He told his followers that after his passing he would speak to them through her. Bibi became a vessel. Bibi became Saeen, two spirits in one body.

Saeen's strings and prayers were just one aspect of the mysticism, Sufi and otherwise, which enveloped our lives in Sindh (and when we relocated to America—the oceans are no impediment to the spirits). Nazar, or the evil eye, was and remains a potent etiology for ill health and rotten luck. It is a notion so pervasive in our community and in many other Muslim ones, so that even a secular, non-practicing Muslim like me cannot rest easy without saying MashAllah or Alhamdulilah when blessed with good fortune. But the treatments for evil eye, or "taking off nazar" were even more intriguing to me because they were so heretical. Sometimes my mother would have us three siblings sit together, take a chicken's egg in her hand, and circulate it over our heads, seven times clockwise and seven counter-clockwise, after which the egg was smashed by throwing it at a wall. Another remedy consisted of a mixture of red chillies, hermal, and alum which, after a similar circumambulation around the head, was set on fire. I remember this mixture was set ablaze once and the ensuing chemical reaction (or destruction of nazar) produced slimy, mauve tentacles which solidified in the shape of a heart when they cooled. My mother says that the fire usually leaves visible the face of the person who cast the nazar, but sometimes it might even reveal the instrument through which a dark spell was cast: like a goat's heart. In any event, the unwelcome face or heart or liver must be left at a four-way intersection to be destroyed by oncoming traffic.

'Ayyārī: Trickery

> "Superstition is rife throughout Sindh; scepticism rare."
> — Richard Francis Burton, *Sindh and the Races That Inhabit the Valley of the Indus* (1851)

Many would find it a paradox of the highest order that Sindh, like the rest of Pakistan and its diaspora, abounds with professionals trained in Western biomedicine, and yet folk remedies, spiritual healing, and magic prevail to such an extent in the present day. Others assume that a monolithic and "scientific" colonial medicine entirely displaced indigenous practices. But as medical historians and anthropologists have shown, these indigenous systems were very resilient against outside influence, with the result that a kind of syncretism emerged which would allow, for instance, my mother to expect her children to go to medical school while holding on to her traditional healing practices. Dua and dawa, she says, reveling in the rhyme. "Prayer and medicine."

Most British colonists actively dismissed these practices as superstition. Thomas Babington Macaulay in his infamous "Minute on Indian Education" (1833) called them

"medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier." The Orientalist and traveler Richard Francis Burton, who lived in Sindh for five years a little after the East India Company's annexation of the province in 1843, meticulously recorded and belittled the Sindhis' views of the world as irrational, if not entirely insane. For instance, he describes the cures doled out by Sufi saints at shrines as follows:

> Curing all kinds of diseases and complaints, structural, organic, and whatnot? The *modus medendi* is generally, the administering of drop of water to the patient—hydropathy in embryo you observe; on passing the hand over the part affected—a rude form of animal magnetism. The maladies are of the class upon which the hydropathist and the mesmerist love to exercise their natural magic, such as deafness, dumbness, blindness, hysteria and nervous affections; but failures are common, and success must, I fear, be pronounced rare and unsatisfactory.

But we South Asians weren't the only mesmerists, as anyone with a cursory knowledge of Victorian England would know. "Animal magnetism" or "mesmerism" was developed by the German doctor Franz Mesmer who believed that a natural, invisible life force pervaded all matter, and if successfully manipulated, could bring about physical effects such as healing. Mesmerism was all the rage in Europe in the nineteenth century, especially toward its end. In fact, British mesmerists tried to proselytize their art in the far reaches of the Empire, including in India. The most famous of these was a contemporary of Burton, the Scottish surgeon James Esdaile, who served the East India Company for two decades. He arrived in Calcutta in 1831 and was appointed to numerous posts in Bengal's medical administration, such as Civil Surgeon of the Hooghly Imambara Hospital and the doctor in charge of the Hooghly Jail. He began his mesmeric experiments on the convicts of the jail in 1845, with the first procedure successfully inducing analgesia in a convict who was to undergo surgery for an inflamed scrotum. This was the era before chloroform-induced analgesia became routine for surgery, so Esdaile's mesmeric methods became quite popular in India for a while, mostly among native patients. Even a "mesmeric hospital" was built in Calcutta in 1848 at the public's expense, until it closed eighteen months later and Esdaile left India for good.

Historians of science and magic in the British colonies such as Waltraud Ernst argue that Esdaile's case gives the lie to any stark dichotomy between Western, "objective," colonial medicine on the one hand and the more superstitious traditions of the natives on the other. Esdaile himself, in his 1846 book *Mesmerism in India, and its Practical Application in Surgery and Medicine*, writes that "if the Mumbo Jumbo men of Africa, the medicine men of America, and the charmers of this country, ever succeed in relieving their patients (and here they do), I am disposed to think that it is generally in

cases curable by Mesmerism… and that Mesmerism is actually practiced in this country, and has probably been so [since] time immemorial."

Razm: Battle

To this day my mother continues to insist that what happened to me wasn't depression. It was asr, or "influence," a euphemism for demonic possession.

During the fall term of my seventh grade my family and I traveled five hours north from Karachi to Wazirabad, a village on the outskirts of Shikarpur, my paternal family's ancestral town. We were attending the wedding of the youngest daughter of one of my paternal aunts, who was married to a wealthy landowner and politician. As my father drove through the dilapidated shanties and lean-tos of Wazirabad, there emerged amongst the squalor the family mansion. It was unlike anything that surrounded the poverty-stricken village, complete with two gargantuan verandahs, a swimming pool under construction, and somewhere about ten bedrooms (although I think the number could be much higher). Servants and nannies, hired from the local village community, ran frantically after my aunt's numerous grandchildren, the would-be heirs of this veritable monarchy in a presumably democratic nation.

Despite my mixed feelings about the excessive display of wealth, my brief time in Wazirabad was the first time that I felt I belonged. I appreciated the deep camaraderie and friendship that developed between the many cousins while staying together in the house. I was famously a loner in school, with no one to befriend me but my books, and until that point I never felt the need for deeper human connection.

The wedding festivities lasted a week. The last night before our departure we had a large bonfire celebration under the somewhat ominous date palms lining the edge of the property. By the next morning on our return journey home my mood began to darken. A few days after our return to Karachi, as I sat at my desk trying to solve a math problem, I broke down completely.

That is how the asr started, with an inability to concentrate and an unwillingness to do my schoolwork. Along with those symptoms, an unmitigated, uncontrollable, and violent sobbing as if the world were ending. Prior to the wedding I was a carefree child who studied hard to do well in school. The deep despair that I experienced has dulled over time, perhaps for the best. For my mother the incident was a phase. But I am convinced that it was a malady that was here to stay.

There are no words that can accurately represent the harrowing sensations of asr: the bottomless pit like an anvil in the center of my chest which would pull me deeper and deeper into the mattress; the excruciating loneliness and sense of mundanity and notions of ephemerality which overtook me if I listened to a sad song or even looked at a solitary object like a potted plant.

More frustrating than the asr's symptoms was my inability to name the etiology: why was I crying? My parents and siblings and teachers and classmates kept asking me that question, but all I could tell them was *I don't know*. Over the years I have tried to answer that question for myself: was it just puberty? Was I lonely? Was it because I missed the community I had found with my cousins in the village? Was it because I envied the riches of my aunt's family? Or was it because I was evincing an unconscious guilt or outrage about the impoverished villagers I saw in their slums right next to the big house? The only thing we could be entirely convinced of, though, was that the asr had started after our visit to the village in the north.

We had no school counselors. I was not taken to a therapist or psychiatrist. My mother was at the end of her tether. She consulted Saeen and another medium she knew from Hyderabad named Baby Apa. They both warned my mother that this was no ordinary affliction. According to Baby Apa, the asr must have caught me on the night of the bonfire when I was beneath the trees; it is widely believed in rural communities that trees are the homes of diabolical spirits and the jinn. They suggested that I be taken to a spiritual healer in Karachi.

He was a tall and skinny man with a beard, dressed in salwar kameez and sporting a skullcap on his head. I do not remember his name, so I will call him Ahmad. The blue walls on the inside of his house reminded me much of Saeen's. It was about 2 miles away from my family's apartment, near the railway tracks where other mystical practitioners lived such as the "Peeliya Baba" who diagnosed jaundice by rubbing a chalk-like substance on your hands and washing it away; if the water turned yellow, you were positive. The healer and his family—a wife and a young daughter—looked at me with pity and confusion as I sat in the wicker chair in their living room, staring at the floor as the tears flowed unstoppably and I crumpled tissue paper in my anxious hands. Thus began my therapy with the healer which lasted about four months, and consisted chiefly of us sitting together, him gently holding my hand, reading Quranic verses from memory and blowing them on me, a kind of spiritual mesmerism. He also had me drink water blessed with the same verses. I got better, but I cannot say for certain if it was the healer's therapy or the mere passage of time.

Unfortunately, like most cases of childhood or adolescent depression, the asr returned the next year as I was about to begin eighth grade, albeit with a much-reduced magnitude. I think the healer had died by this time (there were rumors about his being the target of black magic), so Baby Apa took charge of my treatment. She had my mother write out Quranic verses in black ink on scraps of camel skin and regular paper. The former were set ablaze and kept on my stomach. The latter were put in bottles of water which I imbibed daily, the sodden paper disintegrating into tiny fragments which waded in the liquid like a snow globe's white flitter. I imagined the heat from the smoldering

paper and the water transmitting invisible energies through my skin and my stomach into the heart of the asr, where the deadly anvil weighed so heavily. I imagined it breaking up, melting, being washed away like molten sludge.

The asr did not return for a long time. I began to reach beyond my secluded world of books and family. I developed a personality around humor, attention, outspokenness, controversy, fights, prestige, popularity, creativity—big things outside myself but which still shamelessly enlarged my ego and asserted my right to belong to a community. Anything that took me out of that oppressive interiority which could at any moment condense into the asr. Anything that did not make me feel the solitude and banality of a lone potted plant.

I did not encounter "modern" psychiatry until after my migration to the United States when I was seventeen, a traumatic event which caused the asr to rear its head once more. The gloomy winters of my new town, Kalamazoo, did not help, neither did the fact that high school here was so different from what I was used to back home. I missed my friends and yearned nostalgically for the familiar cadences of Urdu and Sindhi. I would excuse myself from my Organic Chemistry class in the math and science magnet school where I was enrolled, lock myself in a cubicle and weep. My schoolwork suffered. What shocked me was that the response of the teachers here did not differ much from that of those back home. I of course did not know that I had the option to see a professional, given my lack of exposure to any notion of psychiatric care. But I was not recommended for treatment here either, even though the teachers saw that I was struggling. The Organic Chemistry instructor, a white lady with auburn hair who wore tie-dyed lab coats and trained service puppies, once humiliated me in front of the entire class by asking me rather callously: "Are you going to cry?"

I never forgave her, even though she visited me in the hospital when I was diagnosed with leukemia the next term. And that was the first time my mental illness was ever considered in the context of Western biomedicine—and only inadvertently, because what they were really treating was cancer-associated depression which was an entirely separate thing. In fact, it came nowhere close to the misery of asr. The first psychiatrist to treat me was a curly-haired Pakistani woman from the community who visited me in the hospital because I could not sleep. I told her that I resisted the urge to sleep because if I closed my eyes I might die.

Husn o 'ishq: Beauty and love

I first received sustained psychotherapy and medication in college. Dr. Jones was tall and bald with elvish ears and, as a specialist in psycho-oncology, worked for the cancer clinic. He wore purple shirts and ties, biked to the hospital, and donned a belt holster with a

pager which beeped when it was time for him to take his insulin. Dr. Jones's practice was deeply influenced by Eastern traditions. He trained me in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a practice derived from Indian yoga traditions and which involved actively *noticing* the feelings of anger and guilt and sadness in the body, to locate where they were present, and to disarticulate them from the Self; to acknowledge the coexistence of competing and conflicting emotions without judgment. When Dr. Jones found out about my history of interactions with Sufi healing and my interest in Sufi literature, he recommended that I read Rumi's "The Guest House." It begins:

> This being human is a guest house.
> Every morning a new arrival.
>
> A joy, a depression, a meanness,
> Some momentary awareness comes
> As an unexpected visitor.
>
> Welcome and entertain them all!

I do not know to what extent my MBSR, a practice of welcoming this uninvited guest and which would have delighted Sufis like Rumi or Saeen or Mustafa Shah helped me. But I do know that the medication has. Who would I have been as a person if I was not made to wait eight years for the asr to be biomedically treated? Should I, as Rumi says toward the end of the poem, "be grateful for whatever comes / because each has been sent / as a guide from beyond"? Can one be grateful for, and even love, one's demons?

Khatimāh: Conclusion

I'm conflicted.

I am often overcome by indignation at not being shown to a psychiatrist sooner. I swear by my Zoloft. I find myself rolling my eyes sometimes when my mother touts the clairvoyance of Saeen or Baby Apa. I doubt the effectiveness of strings, blessed water, verses written on camel skin. I was mildly annoyed when, as I was recovering from leukemia, my mother made me sit and listen to recordings of Surah Rahman, a chapter of the Quran which she said would aid the chemotherapy, the refrain of the classical Arabic poetry still ringing in my ears: *Fabi ala irabbikuma tukazziban—so which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?*

But I am equally aware that historical representations of these indigenous practices were instrumental to the subjugation of my ancestors by white people—aliens like the uninvited guests of Rumi's poem. We did welcome them with open arms, as

Rumi had suggested, and look where that got us. The British disparagement of native culture, including healing practices, engendered its own psychopathology in the colonized. Frantz Fanon noted this when he described the inferiority complex of colonized Black people in relation to the whites. As he wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), a "normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world." The same could apply to the postcolonial Asian who, though never having met a white person in his life, speaks and writes in their language due to historical circumstance. This engenders a new form of asr: alienation, deculturation, unbelonging.

My mind is host to conflicting histories, to guests both invited and otherwise. They are always engaged in some kind of altercation, not unlike the guests at a wedding in some obscure village of northern Sindh. And maybe Rumi was right: there are no neat resolutions to the contradictions of history. For now, I sit silently and notice them.

Douglas Cole

Re-entry

An absurd storm, everything coming down,
rooftop littered with cedar limbs.
I dream a road and road appears.
The country store with pelts and shotguns,
camping supplies, rattlesnake floating in a jar,
door slamming at my back as I slip away,
emerge on your porch as you say, there you are.

Celeste Rose Wood

Excerpts from *Disability Evaluation Under Social Security (12.00 Mental Disorders – Adult)*

12.4 Depressive disorder, characterized
by five or more of the following:

a. A disembodied wing;
b. Flapping with no intelligible purpose;
c. Attaching between the shoulder blades;
d. Beating the back of your neck with;
e. Something unseeable;
f. And wrong;
g. Breezes widen their mouths;
h. To take your body in;
i. To take you in.

12.06 Panic disorder or agoraphobia, characterized
by one or both of the following:

a. A severed tail fin, a twitching without
traveling, sutured to your tailbone, flicking
the backs of your legs with the secret
geometries of your spine; or
b. Flowing water tightens on your ankles
to reel your body in,
to reel you in.

Subhravanu Das

In a Kitchen

Ants came dribbling out of the tap. They licked the skillet clean. They cartwheeled over bubbles. They carouseled along the dinner plates. They took the steel glass out of Bulbul's hands and tore it into tiny straws. They presented Bulbul with a ruby drinking horn as recompense. They enacted scenes from Bulbul's life. They made a family. They sipped seawater. They crossed swords. They adopted. They played Monopoly.

Ants came jumping out of the bin. They planted herbs along the windowsill. They distilled perfume from the damp walls. They spritzed Bulbul with the colors of a nail bar. They colored the edges of every kitchen tile. They rearranged the tiles to form all the smiling faces with whom Bulbul had ever shared candy.

Ants came spinning out of the juicer. They stitched a long scarf and soaked it in honey. They wrapped the gooey scarf around Bulbul's neck. They didn't let go of the scarf-ends, however, and pulled with all their might. So as not to get choked, Bulbul threw the scarf to the floor. Before Bulbul could reach for the pump abutting the tap, ants drained out all its soap.

Ants came whistling out of the stove. They dove straight into the vials of oil. Mustard, groundnut, coconut. They lit molotov cocktails. They launched the molotov cocktails into Bulbul's neighboring compound. The neighbor had usurped Bulbul's parking space. The neighbor had stockpiled mile-long tweezers with which to pinch Bulbul, any time, any day. Bulbul had never raised an objection. Ants showered off after their swim and hugged one another as they watched the neighbor's house go up in flames.

Ants came popping out of the oven. They pinned the solar system onto a chopping board. They won a prize for their efforts. They plucked out the sun and rolled it through the

gap between Bulbul's legs. They wrote letters on grains of rice. They blew balloons out of every alternate grain. The balloons hit the ceiling and burst into show tunes.

Ants came gushing out of the flour. They kneaded together a Pillsbury-man for Bulbul to go bowling with. They prepared a quicksand of dough and drowned every knife, every peeler, everything sharp. They plugged the gaping wound on Bulbul's knee. They nuzzled against Bulbul's skin. They climbed up Bulbul's bulging veins. They swallowed every speck of dirt buried deep within Bulbul's pores. They trampolined from Bulbul's left ear to Bulbul's right.

Ants fled roaring into the freezer. They locked the freezer from within and didn't let Bulbul in. No matter how much Bulbul pounded the door with fists, no matter how much Bulbul pleaded to be made privy to their plans for him, they didn't give in. They didn't comfort Bulbul. Like the bearded bellies and rustling thighs in foster homes, ants partied on inside their ice castle, unheeding of Bulbul's sobs.

Ants reappeared, flooding out of every switch on every kitchen wall. They brought wires with them—chopped up, peeled, with the plastic as shields on their backs, and the metal as spears on their snouts. They lacerated the ceiling, the racks, the countertops, the mats, all the equipment and the supplies. The whole kitchen turned to rubble and caved in towards the center, catching Bulbul by the ankles. Unable to leave, Bulbul flailed about. Ants brought thunder down. They erected a cross and let electricity sizzle through it. They made Bulbul bow down in obeisance. They opened up the heavens.

Kevin Brennan

Eulogy

You had a way of changing on a dime. We'd wrestle you on the living room floor, cramping with laughter, till you roared a gnashing syllable and ended it, crawling up on knees red-in-the-face. You took us out on long drives and made us wait in the car for an hour while you talked to a man. We watched. The two of you smoked and laughed about who you had been before us. It was confusing. You arm wrestled us and never lost. Undefeated, you said. You had us on KP duty each night while you sat in the recliner and watched news on the black-and-white Magnavox. We were in bed by nine o'clock so you'd have plenty of quiet time. Mornings you were already gone when we got up for school. You left early to beat the traffic you said, but we pieced together that sometimes you went out late and never came home. You dared us to ask too many questions, see what happens. We had questions, but we asked each other instead of you, and the answers were obscure. We sat on your lap and smelled your special breath and the stale pipe bowl on the stand, and you were sometimes calm for that, until you ordered us down. You took us to a baseball game once and told us to be quiet. The radio was telling us what just happened. You blew raspberries on our stomachs and made us cry with laughter, and then you left. You were away for days, on business trips, and came home with dime-store trinkets to make it okay. You didn't say much about where you went or what you did. And then you left for good. You started a new life without us. You became a mythical being that we lied about at school—a spy, an undercover cop, a pilot. But the truth is that you became, when we think about you now, a set of scant memories that have waned into ever-darkening gray.

Kathryn Fitzpatrick

Raggies: A Natural History

> *"Mount Raggie is somewheres over beyond Salisbury. I met an old farmer up there…I was walkin' along the road and I see this lad lookin' at this pile of bones over in his pasture. 'That there used to be a cow, mister,' he says. 'That's all they left me.'"*
>
> – Ed Robertson, Thomaston, Connecticut, 1939

Cindy Garry's been a teller at Torrington Savings Bank for fourteen years. She walks to work every day in slippers, carries her satin kitten heels and her Danielle Steel paperback and her cigarettes in a Stop & Shop bag she's been saving on account of the plastic bag ban in Connecticut. She lives with her son and grandson on Center Street, in a two-bedroom apartment above Sawyer's Bar, which she's never been to 'cause the crowd is too trendy, and anyway, she goes to the packy twice a week after work for her fifth of Dubra, which Sawyer's doesn't keep on hand.

Sometimes Cindy yells at customers. When they enter the lobby shirtless or pull pints of Fireball out of their briefcases or ask too many dumb questions or loiter too long or want their cash back in small bills. Most customers at Torrington Savings Bank want small bills. Cindy yells at most customers.

Before, Cindy was a server at the Bertucci's in Simsbury, in a plaza with an AMC and a Banana Republic and a Kiehl's. She still pronounces bruschetta with the crunchy "c" because she thinks she's classy, and she makes it every year for the office potluck for an excuse to pronounce it that way. But Cindy's been wearing the same kerchief-hemmed dresses since '93, so when she whispers *fuckin' raggies* after the lobby's cleared out, it feels more like an acknowledgement than a slur.

Raggies live in northwest Connecticut, in the armpit between upstate New York and Massachusetts. If you drive around Torrington, down past Coe Park and the Cumberland Farms that always gets robbed, near the Knights of Columbus building with its monument for all the dead babies lost to abortions, you'll see them walking. They

snap cans of dip and spit into Dunkin' cups, carry backpacks filled with liquor and dollar bills rolled up in a sock. They smell like motor oil or fried onions, the way a body smells when left to ripen for too long.

Think of the Melonheads of the Naugatuck River Valley, who, left to themselves, morphed into inbred cannibals and would gobble up anyone who went too deep into the woods. Think of the Satanic village outside of Lake Quassapaug, the miniature houses formed with cement and pebbles, built by a man who heard voices then killed his wife. Think of the spaceship deep under the waters of Bantam Lake, rising up among the cottages and spotted by a cop in the 90s. Think Bigfoot, cloaked by the Berkshire Hills.

Raggies are legendary, but not mythic. Like Halley's Comet or a solar eclipse, raggies are the real deal; white trash boiled down to its most basic form. Find them in any Litchfield County town upward mobility passed over, where people keep piles of tires on front lawns, drape Don't Tread on Me flags over their porches: Winsted, Torrington, Thomaston. They might work as nurses' assistants or auto mechanics or grocery cart boys, and spend their wages on Joel Osteen DVDs and end-of-days meal prep.

The word raggie comes from Salisbury, Connecticut. Situated in the uppermost corner of the state, nowadays it's filled with mansions and horse stables and helicopter pads, and the area around Mount Riga is the site of summer homes where New York hedge fund executives go to connect with nature. The homes are angular and white because it takes a lot of money to make a home look barren and cold. But in the early 1800s, Mount Riga was an iron mine, operated by immigrants from Latvia and Poland. They lived in log cabins built into the woods, played fiddles and did all the woodsy downhome things associated with people in deep Appalachia. Raggie is a bastardization of Riga.

The Appalachian Trail runs through this part of Connecticut; the people, forced out, are still poor. As the miners' descendants moved south, the word changed with the people. Became loose, became harsh. It settled into places with mills and factories, with jobs for the unskilled or illiterate. When the factories went under, the people stayed and raggie took on new meaning as a catch-all for the white working-class. The ones that Connecticut, as it built up its shoreline and summer homes, left behind.

Patti's Place in Thomaston is the place we work in high school. It's a windowfront diner where they pay kids fifty bucks a week to peel and dice potatoes, wash dishes, mix a broken hollandaise. Each windowsill is cluttered with shit customers bring in: toy soldiers, framed pictures of somebody else's grandchildren, broken turntables and plastic hamburgers and vintage McDonald's Happy Meal toys. The regulars have been going there since it opened in the late 80s: Double Jerry, drinking his black coffee and shouting numbers into his newspaper; George Seabourne and Mike Burr, Thomaston elite who

can afford to eat all their meals outside the home because they no longer have wives to cook for them. There's a man who comes in every day for a birch beer and nothing else. He's been doing that for twenty years. Nobody minds.

The guys at Patti's always talk about raggies. "They gotta be Polish," they say. "They're only Polish."

"What about the Leather Man?"

"Different *entirely*."

Some people think the Leather Man was the original raggie, some prophet sent to warn us of the slow end of days. He lived in the state park on the far edge of town, in Leather Man's Cave, named on account of his living there.

Here's how the legend goes: the Leather Man walked across Connecticut eleven times a year, carried a walking stick and a suitcase and an axe. Shop owners left scraps of fabric outside at night, food and water and blankets. He made his own clothes. From the soft squeak of the leather, they could hear him coming, the shopkeepers, and they'd make signs to hang in their windows that read, "The Leather Man Stopped Here."

Some versions say he was a French shoemaker who followed his wife to New England only to find her dead upon his arrival. Some say he was the son of a leather merchant who squandered his money in pursuit of a woman.

We tell romantic stories. We pretend life is charming and bittersweet.

We go to Patti's for gossip, for home fries griddled on a dirty flattop. We go there to figure out who's moving into that empty storefront, the one that used to be Vi-Arms Restaurant, and then a tobacco shop. Patti knows. There's this running joke that Patti is the mayor of Thomaston because she knows who's having an affair or had kids out of wedlock, who just lost their job, whose son got busted most recently for narcotics possession. Once, she played the Mayor of Munchkinville in a community production of the Wizard of Oz, but that was years ago now, and anyway, the cardboard sets were nicer than downtown Thomaston, where everything is closed and we have to go out of town for groceries, for clothing, for Valentine's bouquets, tampons and Benadryl and cans of cat food and printer ink.

To fill in the empty storefronts, the town put cardboard cutouts of Donald Trump and "Jesus Heals" signs in all the windows. Someone's always chalking penises on the sidewalk. Someone's always leaving stolen shopping carts in the neighbor's backyard. It's like a movie where some natural disaster is coming, fast, *fast*, and everyone's trying to repent before the great flood.

I grew up with the word raggie bouncing off high school hallways. It was an everyday word, a recognition of mutual poverty, a sharp jab at circumstances that stuck us here like gum to a desk.

During Spirit Week, we had "Raggie Day." We borrowed our fathers' work clothes—overalls and plaid flannels—fashioned togas from leather scraps and potato sacks. Or we wore house dresses and gray wigs. We blacked out our teeth, wrapped water bottles in paper bags. We pretended to be garbage men and farmhands and out-of-work laborers and pregnant housewives. Churchgoers, waiting for tithe to pay off.

I went as my mother, a waitress. A third-generation resident of town who dropped out of college 'cause money was good at the restaurant until it wasn't. She's worked at many restaurants. Each a fine dining place with a wine list and a small fork for salad. Each far away, like she doesn't want people to know what she's doing. The last one she quit 'cause she was the oldest staff member. "I don't want people thinking I'm not going anywhere in life," she says. "No one wants to be oldest."

She's always pissed when I describe us as raggies, always brings up the fact that I never had to take the bus to school.

She says, "I was a good mother."

She says, "I did the best I could."

There are raggies and there are raggies; those who've settled comfortably into the lifestyle like a body in bed, and those who fight it, who deny it, who spend their life savings on nice cars and oriental rugs and beautiful, landscaped front lawns.

This is the truth: Litchfield County is dying. It loses people every year, to lung cancer, to job opportunities in other states. It is hemorrhaging people like blood. There is nearly nothing left worth staying for.

Cindy Garry makes $14.75 an hour. She is sixty-seven. She will work till she dies.

My mother used her divorce settlement to buy another house in Thomaston; we've lived here forever. It is the fifth house she's purchased in town, each slightly smaller than its predecessor.

Once at a bus stop, I spoke with a woman from Hartford. I said I was from Thomaston, near Torrington, and she told me I lived on the edge of civilization.

Once, I asked my mother about Thomaston. I said, "Why stay?"

She said, "Where do you expect me to go?"

Michael Sasso

Charlotte's Quantum Ride

On a summer day in 1989, Charlotte bafflingly avoids certain death and slices through the solid block of Time. The six-year-old is given a narrow glimpse of things immutable and true, present and ever-existing: No matter how you fool yourself into looking to the alleged past or the so-called future, she sees events that *are*, which *is*, who *am*. On that day, she sees that which will, to her, one day *be*, but which always *is* and *is* and *is*.

Charlotte lives in a big house with a Jacuzzi and a bathroom no one ever uses. It's on two acres of property that abuts vast New England woods to the south and an even larger estate to the north. Her kindergarten classmates are all the same pinkish color, and she never asks for a toy that she doesn't eventually get. Poor people, hungry people, people in serious pain: they all happened sometime before she was around, when the world was black-and-white and there were no remote controls. It's impressive, her insulation from most of humanity.

She rides her bike, bright green and black with white handlebar streamers, up and down the quarter-mile driveway. Charlotte's ten-year-old brother, somewhere near, kicks a soccer ball. Sunshine makes both the metal of the bicycle and the dark hair that falls to her shoulders hot to the touch. A breeze stirs the trees' billion leaves and makes them sigh. In spite of her insulation, despite of the fact that it's the kind of day that could make the most jaded soul forget about death, her heart is not light, her mind is not *zen*.

But why? How can it be?

The nervous heart is impossible to avoid, when you consider her family. Take, for example, that when juice is spilled on the Persian rug, the world has gone to hell. Her straight-A brother's first (and only) B+ is worthy of furrowed brows and panicked investigation. The invisible angst that her father brings home every day silently exhausts him. Whatever it is that vexes him, Charlotte feels its relentless, scaly pulse. The grown-ups' worries may be material, having to do with new money or the burden of the American Dream, but for Charlotte, her disquiet is more elusive. It's just that the walls

of her well-decorated home are always on the verge of collapse, so it seems; disaster crouches, ready, at the dawn of each day.

As for that day in '89: Charlotte is wearing the novelty slippers, giant pillowy things that look like cartoon sneakers, given to her by her grandmother. They are her favorite possession, for the soles are a full inch of memory foam on which her forty-two pounds bob; to walk on them is to float, lighter than air.

Her mother has given in, letting her wear them outdoors, in the yard, on trips to the store. But not in the woods, and not on your *bike*, she warns. Charlotte doesn't remember the warning, or she doesn't care. Or maybe it's an act of defiance, a challenge: What *wrong thing*, what *badness*, can come from this? She wears them as she pedals.

The last stretch of driveway is a steep hill—steep to Charlotte, anyway—flanked by ancient oaks and a patch of wild blackberries. The drive levels out as it opens onto a busy two-lane country road, double golden lines down the middle. On the far side of the road, just after the pavement ends, a deep ravine drops suddenly. From its floor grow maple trees which, at street-level, open up their branches wide, wide as if offering up their hearts to the skies.

Charlotte likes to cruise full-speed down this hill, then slam the brakes at the bottom—a quick, hard, reverse-pedal action mastered while still on training wheels—sliding to a halt, leaving rubber on the pavement. On this particular day, for a dozen lazy trips to and from the crest of the hill, Charlotte ruminates on her mother's raised voice and her father's incessant brooding. As if she can flee the family's next disaster and the screaming urgency that is sure to accompany it, she decides she's ready for the rush and the thrill; she decides to go down the hill.

She gets up some speed, lets gravity do the rest. She watches the oaks zip by on either side. A Buick passes on the street, then a minivan going the other direction. Her pink helmet slips back on her head. When she tries her braking maneuver, it doesn't work, not this time, not in the tractionless slippers, and she keeps going. Accelerating still.

There is panic, a quick squeeze of her heart and a diaphragm that forgets to bring in air. She brakes harder, to no avail. The clichés are true: time slows; vertigo stretches out the space between each tree, and between her and the golden-striped road. Even with all this extra time, there isn't enough to devise, let alone execute, a new plan to stop. Even as a bright red Jetta speeds by, she never considers steering into the woods or leaning over and crashing *now*.

Then the furniture delivery truck, with its momentum of seven-hundred-thousand pounds per square foot, approaches. Her panic does rise, breaking through a ceiling she hadn't known existed. Then it abandons her completely. Void of other options, for the first time in her six years, she altogether relaxes. Ride the course out—ride it, ride it, and let whatever may come, come. It is all there ever is to do.

From her vantage point, as well as from the truck driver's (if he were to notice in his periphery the little girl on the green and black bike zooming towards his wheels), and from any other rational place based on Euclidean geometry, the truck should strike her. That is also to say, when you press a hand to a wall, it should not slip through the paint and sheetrock as if both were vapor. But as the physicists know (which is reason to believe it may even be true), there is the possibility, however infinitesimal, that the hand *will* pass through. The septillions of atoms, and each of their smaller parts, might vibrate in just the right way that they dance around each other, never colliding, zipping by in an act of perfect, random choreography, the macro bodies passing through each other like ghosts.

Charlotte reaches the far side of the road, not struck and perfectly solid, handlebar streamers flapping wildly. The truck rumbles away, the driver none the wiser. Perhaps it is because of her uncanny survival, the ability to be a ghost, that suddenly Charlotte is aware of all moments in her lifetime, and of some thousands beyond it—like seeing an endless length of film, but where each frame is cut out and stacked on top of each other, making a translucent series of infinite moments, each their own entity, and yet one great mass of happenings.

As the front wheel of her bike leaves pavement and finds the road's shoulder, Charlotte can see her living room's Italian sofa—an enormous, swollen thing bought on credit—and that in six years' time, it's being fought over, one of copious contested spoils. She hears the grown-up voices get louder and louder. Then her father moves out. Subpoenas issued, lawyers hired, money burnt, nighttime tuck-ins and bedtime stories forgotten. A great black hole opens up in Charlotte's house. First it eats her dolls, then the rest of her toys. It sucks up her brother's optimism, too. The last night in the house, she cries in her brother's arms, but it feels like it's he who needs consoling.

Charlotte's well-to-do comforts fall away, just like her bike is falling out from under her back in 1989. Six-year-old Charlotte is hurtling off the edge of the cliff, into the air. That's when she sees the new houses, one for Mom and one for Dad. Both small with chain link fenced-in yards, each a museum of stolen things. The bloated Italian sofa ends up at her mother's, looking ridiculous in the narrow, low-ceilinged den. A number of her mother's first edition books, which her father has never and will never read, line the shelves at her dad's. In either house, her brother broods and resents and forgets about when he used to let Charlotte host toy-china tea parties for him.

Charlotte gets good grades, has lots of friends, and is a decent softball player. In 1999, some of the mystery of sex is revealed, its allure nearly snuffed out, when Charlotte gives Jared Oldrin a hand job in the basement of her mom's house. Her wisdom teeth are removed. She scores a 1380 on the SATs. She concludes that her parents are aging backwards, becoming more selfish and less rational by the day. Her brother is arrested for selling dope.

When the towers fall, her second cousin sees the smoke from her house in Stamford. A lot of real people, most of whom thought their day was to be as banal as the one before, are incinerated, crushed, or suffocated. More planes take to the skies, and some of Charlotte's peers—just old enough to enlist—are on them. Full of American troops, they go east to kill and be killed. But all of that is background noise: seventeen-year-old Charlotte is struggling with calculus; she is in love for the first time; she learns that her college fund was spent on divorce attorneys' fees.

Kindergartner Charlotte's bike is gone, snagged by a branch when she collides with a tree. She tumbles through the web of branches, twigs nicking her, stealing away her left slipper. She plummets, nearly headfirst, and sees more.

At the height of the 2020 pandemic, Charlotte's mother is surrounded by the goggled, gowned, and masked. Family is not allowed in the room. It makes no difference, for grown-up Charlotte is in a hospital three hundred miles away, also infected, in dire condition, hooked up to tubes and fluids and wires, struggling to breathe.

Charlotte's husband, whom she would have distrusted in her youth for being optimistic and generally well-adjusted (which happen to be the reasons she loves him now), hoofs around at home, rubbing down door handles with alcohol, rocking their newborn daughter in his arms, and periodically weeping. Six-year-old Charlotte of 1989, through entangled particles, an arm stretched through the mass of Time, rests a hand on his shoulder. His heart becomes lighter. He smiles without knowing why. Their baby stops crying.

Little Charlotte sees that, to her surprise, verge-of-death Charlotte knows the exact moment when her mother will pass. With her knowing comes a sweet sense of peace, and an odd relief—for entwined with it is knowing how her own end will come. The sense of peace stays; this knowledge evaporates completely.

The pandemic kills her mother, spares Charlotte, and bankrupts the dive bar that her brother opened, owned, and loved. A year later, he tries to kill himself. He recovers. He and his girlfriend move in with Charlotte's nuclear family. Charlotte's child, Nadia, never hungers for an adult willing to play.

Nadia is told only good things about her late grandmother. When Charlotte's dad comes to visit, he and Nadia find in each other perfect playmates. Adult Charlotte is charmed to see that her father's reverse-aging is complete, and instead of altogether childish, he has become perfectly childlike. His eyes are as full of innocence and wonder as Nadia's. Six-year-old Charlotte has seen her father like this before, when he played with her a mere two years ago.

Nadia grows up with few toys, no pillow-slipper comforts. For how could she, with jobs so scarce, only two of the adults work full time; the five of them in a three-bedroom, one of which is Charlotte's home-office; her kid's bed a fold-out in the living room next to her uncle's weight bench? But the house is full of love, love, love.

During the second pandemic (a worldwide surge of a new and ruthless variant), the Internet goes down for days at a time. They are ordered to stay home for nearly five months. Even when they hate each other—when all they have are paper books and useless smartphones to eat their time; or when Nadia leaves sharp Lego bricks for unsuspecting feet to find; or when Charlotte's brother's girlfriend threatens to leave him and runs into the dangerous unknown, coming back nine hours later to be forced to quarantine in their bedroom alone for sixteen consecutive days, throwing bodily waste out the window, taking her meals through a hatch her boyfriend cuts into the door, taping over it a black trash bag at all other times—the clan loves each other. You might even call the place *zen*.

When the third pandemic hits, the whole family gets sick. Foreheads glistening, feverish and shaking, valiantly they maintain dumb hope. When they regain their health, Charlotte gloats, *Nothing compared to '20!* But to sixteen-year-old Nadia, the illness is simply a nuisance. She is restless and in love with a boy who lives two towns away. With the Internet as unreliable as it has become, the teenage couple takes to writing each other flowery paper letters, each in a modern blend of cursive, print, and drawn emojis. The wait time between correspondences is excruciating. They might as well be living in the Nineteenth Century.

Over the years, whenever gloom begins to edge its way upon Nadia, she finds herself studying her mother when she is unawares, when she's washing a dish or running data on her computer. Charlotte sees herself through her daughter's eyes and is struck that Nadia's impression of her is like that of steady, pulsing ocean waves. Even as Charlotte's crow's feet deepen and her hair thins, to Nadia she is always the same, enduring being. This makes it hard for Nadia to believe in death, even though she knows a score of people who have died. This quality keeps disaster at bay.

Beyond her daughter's teenage years, things get hazier from Charlotte's pink-helmeted Now. There is her father's death, then her brother's, her husband's, her own, even her daughter's—none of which are at the hand of a virus. Later, there are the inevitable wars between the great superpowers. They surprise everyone for having taken so long to finally come. Generations later, there is shrieking annihilation, hot and loud; Charlotte and her family and everyone else are (re)united in the refulgent kiln of the sun.

Her shoulder slams into a broad, strong branch, and it catches her. She's suspended upside down, covered in scratches, leaves stuck in the air vents of her helmet. Her bike is in the branches just above her, one wheel sluggishly revolving, the whole thing threatening to fall onto her and knock her out of the tree for good. The ground is dangerously far below. Precarious as she is—above the ravine floor, just below the road—her heart is not anxious. She does not cry, she does not holler for help. She knows they will come.

First comes her brother, searching, shouting her name. When he looks over the edge, Charlotte can see the panic in his eyes. He runs and returns soon with the grown-ups.

All of Mom's love spills into the ravine, keeping the branches from snapping. Dad reaches in a big gorilla arm. He can just reach the little bike. He hauls it up to the road. Mom can swear she sees her baby slipping from the tree's hold. Charlotte's brother is asking about calling the police, the fire department. Dad says, No, no time.

Charlotte watches the three of them have a short, sober discussion. Then, they go to work.

The brother, who feels the plan gives him too much responsibility, ignores his fear. Mom holds Dad tightly by the waist of his jeans and plants the heels of her Reeboks on the ground. Dad grabs the trunk of the nearest tree with one hand for support. With his other hand, he lifts up his son by an ankle, then lowers him into the ravine. Inverted like a bungee jumper, hanging inside the tree, the boy feels like an action hero. He can reach her! He hugs his kid sister around the ankles as tightly as he can. The grown-ups pull them both to safety, fishermen hauling in a truly bizarre catch.

No one cheers; there is no self-congratulation for this rescuing triumph. Cooperation gives way to shouting. You could have died! You could have *died*! Dad curses and curses and takes the remaining slipper from Charlotte's foot and hurls it deep into the woods. They check Charlotte for injuries, brush leaves off her little body. Mom's tears are angry and elated. The brother, suddenly aware of how frightened he was to be hanging over the ravine, vomits in the road. Then he calls his sister a big idiot, a total moron. The parents scold the boy now. Don't speak that way! She's only a child. And why weren't you watching her? From him, blame shifts to the mother: How could you let her wear the slippers outside? Then to the father: Your ridiculous mother *gave* them to her.

The plagues of the far future, the domestic upheaval of the near, and even the hugs and kisses Charlotte receives in mere moments, might as well be aeons away. The ground is firm beneath her stocking feet. She smiles from ear to ear, her heart never lighter. Her family wonders how she can be so glib, so serene, when all about her on this perfect day is conclusively perfect *badness*: scolding, blaming, berating, begrudging, and blaming some more. The sounds of the chaos of the End of Days.

Oh, if only they knew.

Call for Submissions

We're always looking for writing that spans genres, that demands to be read, that might be considered the black sheep of a family. Art and science thrill us, but so does the simple image of a man standing at a crossroads. Surprise us. Thrill us. Make us laugh and cry and cringe. Tell us your thoughts. We can't wait to hear from you!

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Contributor Notes

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Olabisi Bello (she/her) is an aspiring biomedical engineer from Oyo State, Nigeria, currently studying chemical engineering. Despite her passion for science, she has always loved the fluidity and joy writing grants her, and she hopes to make an impact in society with this gift and her overall devotion to making the world a better place. Her works have appeared in the Kalahari Review, the Neurological Literary Magazine, and The Open Culture Collective.

Kevin Brennan is the author of six novels, including Parts Unknown (William Morrow/HarperCollins), Yesterday Road, and, most recently, Eternity Began Tomorrow. His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Berkeley Fiction Review, Mid-American Review, Bright Flash Literary Review, Twin Pies Literary, The Daily Drunk, Sledgehammer, Fictive Dream, The Bookends Review, and others. He's also editor of The Disappointed Housewife, a literary magazine for writers of offbeat and idiosyncratic fiction, poetry, and essays, which will be represented in the 2021 Best Small Fictions anthology. Kevin lives with his wife in California's Sierra foothills.

Michelle Brooks has published three collections of poetry, Make Yourself Small, (Backwaters Press), The Pretend Life (Atmosphere Press), Pretty in A Hard Way(Finishing Line Press) and a novella, Dead Girl, Live Boy, (Storylandia Press). A native Texan, she has spent much of her adult life in Detroit.

Steve Carter is a writer and jazz guitarist. He taught music and English at Berklee College of Music. His first book of poems, Intermodulations, was published by Maat Publishing (www.maatpublishing.net). His poetry has appeared in many magazines, including Hanging Loose, Carolina Quarterly, Stand, and Clackamas Literary Review. He has 10 CDs of his music available on his independent record label, Frogstory Records (www.frogstoryrecords.com).

Douglas Cole has published six collections of poetry, a novella, and The White Field, a novel. His work has appeared in several anthologies as well as The Chicago Quarterly Review, The Galway Review, Bitter Oleander, Louisiana Literature and Slipstream. He has been nominated twice for a Pushcart and Best of the Net and received the Leslie Hunt Memorial Prize in Poetry. He lives and teaches in Seattle. His website is https://douglastcole.com/.

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Deirdre Danklin holds an MFA from Johns Hopkins University. Her flash has appeared in Hobart, The Nashville Review, Pithead Chapel, Longleaf Review, The Jellyfish Review, and Typehouse Literary Magazine (which nominated her story for Best Small Fictions), among others. Her nonfiction has appeared in CRAFT. She writes an experimental book review, one month of which was published by CAROUSEL. Her multi-genre artistic collaboration with the sculptor Rochelle Botello is forthcoming from 7×7.LA. She's on Twitter @DanklinDeirdre.

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Amanda Dettmann's work can be found in her published poetry book Untranslatable Honeyed Bruises as well as the following literary journals: The Oakland Review (forthcoming), Underwood Press: Black Works (Dark Imagery Issue), The Mosaic, Angles, and The National Poetry Quarterly, among others. She received first place at the Terry Plunkett Maine Poetry Festival, and her recent work has been featured on Maine Poet Laureate Stuart Kestenbaum's podcast Voices of the Future. She is currently an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at New York University.

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Rhienna Renèe Guedry is a Louisiana-born writer and artist who found her way to the Pacific Northwest, perhaps solely to get use of her vintage outerwear collection. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in Empty Mirror, HAD, Oyster River Pages, Bitch Magazine, Screen Door, and elsewhere on the internet. Rhienna holds a MS in Writing/Publishing from Portland State University. She is currently working on her first novel.

John T. Leonard is an award-winning writer, English teacher, and poetry editor for Twyckenham Notes. He holds an M.A. in English from Indiana University. His previous works have appeared in Poetry Quarterly, december, Chiron Review, North Dakota Review, Roanoke Review, Punt Volat, High Shelf Press, Rappahannock Review, Levee Magazine, Mud Season Review, The Blue Mountain Review, Genre: Urban Arts,Stonecoast Review, and Trailer Park Quarterly. His work is forthcoming in The Showbear Family Circus, Passengers Journal, and The Oakland Review. He lives in Elkhart, Indiana with his wife, three cats, and two dogs. You can follow him on Twitter at @jotyleon and @TwyckenhamNotes.

Laura Miller (she/her) is an undergraduate studying poetry at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, PA. She believes that art should seek to dismantle structures of capitalism, whether in viewers' minds or hearts, and hopes to take even a tiny role in building a more compassionate world.

Formerly a filmmaker, **Michael Sasso** left Los Angeles and the media industry in 2017. His mélange of experiences since includes substitute teaching, instructing yoga, being a nanny, and tending bar. He also paints, draws, and builds things out of wood. Sasso is a graduate student in English at Rutgers University-Camden. Find him on Instagram @MickSasso.

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Bassam Sidiki is a Pakistani-American writer, scholar, and critic. He is the Nonfiction Editor at Asymptote Journal and a PhD Candidate in English at the University of Michigan. Read his writing at bassamsidiki.com. An earlier version of "Uninvited Guests" was part of a submission that won a 2021 Hopwood Graduate Nonfiction Award from the University of Michigan.

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