

PhiladelphiaStories

Cultivating a community of writers, artists, and readers across the Delaware Valley

FALL / 2023 / FREE



FEATURING THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION WINNING STORIES

MIRAGE ASTHA GUPTA / THE DOPPLER EFFECT MADELINE MCGRAIN GITHLER / THE GOD OF UGLY THINGS AJ BERMUDEZ

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THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION IS A NATIONAL SHORT FICTION CONTEST MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE MCGLINN AND HANSMA FAMILIES. CONGRATULATIONS TO THIS YEAR'S WINNERS!

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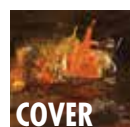
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ART



Living Area by Janet Williams

Janet Williams studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and holds degrees from The University of Delaware and from Philadelphia University. For years she worked in a variety of aspects of media and has a renewed interest in painting. Williams aims to achieve interesting subject matter, good composition, and appealing color in artwork that is skillful and well-executed. The artist resides in Delaware and enjoys painting live events with palette knives. janetwilliamsart.com



A Fixed Language by Colleen Hammond

Visual artist Colleen Hammond holds art and art history degrees from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the University of Pennsylvania. In recent years her oil paintings have moved toward abstract realism in which color, rhythm and atmosphere dominate her work. Hammond is a member of the Artesa Alliance and the Philadelphia College Works. Her award-winning work has been included in many exhibitions. The artist currently resides in South Philadelphia. colleenhammondart.com



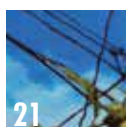
Maine Rock by Kristen Conway

Award-winning photojournalist Kristen Conway owns a portrait and headshot business in Chester Springs, Pennsylvania. During the summer months she travels to east coast beaches from the coast of Maine to South Beach, Florida to document the ocean and the life around it. Conway shares a life-long love of and connection to water through creating photographic images which impart a sense of peace and simplicity. kristenconwayheadshots.com



Diurnal Quartet Dusk Descends by Gail Morrison-Hall

Philadelphia native Gail Morrison-Hall earned degrees from Tyler School of Art and Arcadia University. Years of teaching art to young students inspires her to practice the inventive openness and lack of inhibition she observed in her students and to make work that is playful and bold. Primarily an abstract painter, Morrison-Hall's recent paintings are color-driven works incorporating various methods of paint application with traditional and non-traditional tools. gailmorrisonhall.com



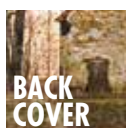
Wire Nest by Sarah Barr

Award-winning multimedia artist Sarah Barr has exhibited her work in such venues as the Griffin Museum of Photography, The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts, The Biggs Museum of American Art, and the New Orleans Photo Alliance. Wire Nest will be on view in January 2024 as part of a two-person show, Stay Awhile Among the Trees, at the Patricia M. Nugent Gallery. rosemont.edu/about/patricia-m-nugent-gallery/



Catenary with Corner by Paula Cahill

Paula Cahill is a contemporary Philadelphia artist. She is known for her abstract paintings composed with color changing lines reminiscent of the bioluminescent light that emanates from sea-life at deep, dark depths. A graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Tyler School of Art and architecture, she has worked out of her Olde Kensington Philadelphia studio since 2013. paulacahill.com



Ominous by Ernest Koch

Ernest Koch's heart was always in his photography. Upon an early retirement from commercial construction, he was able to devote his full attention to that passion, focusing on landscapes, seascapes and cityscapes in black and white or color. Since his first group exhibition in 2008, his work has appeared in many group, solo and juried exhibitions in Philadelphia, Montgomery and Bucks counties. Koch served as curator for the annual Pennypack Ecological Restoration Trust photography contest until 2021. ernestkoch.com

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Mirage

Astha Gupta – First Place Contest Winner

The fiery sun is losing its edges, a reddish gold singeing the sky. Fishermen pull in the day's catch close by, shouting instructions to each other over the clamor of excited seagulls.

I am staring down at the yoga school built on stilts over the Arabian Sea—a sleek villa that offers rich foreigners a coastal break with a side order of spirituality and houses a hive of soul-searching beach bums who keep my aunt's small cafe afloat. The same aunt who moonlights as the parents who left me behind, and for whom I bring to mind her dead children.

I drum my fingers on my lap to the rhythm of the gentle waves, waiting for a few yoga students to trickle into the cafe for Kerala fish curry. The usuals come in here at least once a day. They like to take the other meals in one of the fancier restaurants in the tourist town nearby.

The weekend has just started, and families are entering the luxury health resort across the street. I watch mothers holding babies in their arms and wonder what that might feel like. I listen to fathers give instructions to their children and imagine how I would respond. Then I lie face down in the sand and feel the fine grains chafe against my skin, afraid I don't belong in my own life.

When nobody shows up even until nightfall, I lock the cafe and head to the tourist town where the circus troupe has been camped for one week.

Most of the performers are sleeping outside on the hot sand. Some are awake, talking, idling, playing cards. In one corner sits a carousel and next to it fiberglass elephants, Ferris wheels and mini bicycles. Making sure nobody sees me, I circle the structures repeatedly, touching the vintage canvas material of the tents and the circus wagons. I fiddle with the games, the puppets, and window displays lying around. When I turn around, I see the circus master observing me.

"Just a mirage," he says.

I feel shame, as if caught thieving. I duck under the elastic cord holding up a tent and step away from the installations. How long has he been watching?

"A circus is a film is a book is a world is another life," he says with a knowing look. "A mirage of a family for those who do not have one."

Behind him, I see fishermen on handmade log boats vaporize into thick folds of water.

Late at night, when my aunt comes back from the city, her hands loaded with supplies for the beachside cafe, I wonder if I

should tell her about my visit to the circus camp. When she sits next to me in the cafe kitchen, I notice how the ancient silver hoops have gouged out her earlobes. She uses the edge of her sari to wipe sweat off her face and a few drops fall on my feet.

I want to ask her if she has another photograph of my parents—I have folded my copy so many times it has started cracking, the image separating from the photo paper like dead skin. I want to ask her to tell me something new about them, anything that might resuscitate my fading memories of them. But I have learned to leave her alone as she retreats further into the black hole of her past.

She washes her face in the stainless-steel sink. "How were things at the cafe today? Anything special?"

"A little slow—" I begin.

"I am so tired," she says.

I make her a cup of tea and do not ask her what a mirage means, just how I never ask her how my mother vanished during the 2004 tsunami or why my father left the next day, or if there was a link between the two events.

Then I start on the prawns that a surfer ordered earlier. Once they are pink and perfectly crisp, gently fleeced in the butter, with roasted garlic forming an aromatic base at the bottom of the pan, I plate them and carry them out to him. He is young, white, stationed in India to look for inner peace and Ayurveda. He also teaches Vinyasa yoga at the school on stilts and has a late dinner at the cafe every day.

"You never fail me." He leans back in his chair. "Traveled everywhere in the world, Santiago, Madrid, Tokyo, New Orleans; never eaten seafood like this!"

How do I know he is telling the truth if I have never been to any of these places?

How did the circus master find the dark place in my mind to set up shop in?

We smile for the guests at the cafe, my aunt and me. Despite our tired eyes and hungry stomachs, we always do. We repeat stories we cooked with fragments overheard around the village, texts read in passing, memories, dreams, wishes; stories that would tug at the guests' hearts and swell their lunch orders and gratuities. Sometimes, when my aunt is in a good mood, she sings for them songs she grew up listening to, songs about fishermen and mermaids and what would happen if the two got married.

I sing or joke with the guests only when my aunt is away; I don't know why but I feel shy around her, like I am not good enough, like I will make a fool of myself, even though she doesn't say anything when I attempt joviality, only turns around and leaves.

When she goes to the city, I twirl around the tables and balance multiple dishes on my forearms like I have seen servers do on TV. I show magic tricks to the children and praise the women's clothes.

"The song is my husband," I once hear my aunt tell a curious guest. "Always at my beck and call, always melodious, always on my lips." She laughs. I stare in shock. Even though I know she is trying to please the guest, I suspect a true part of her has seeped through. She has never talked to me about her husband or if there ever was one. In their pictures her children look like nobody I have ever met.

That night, I dream about my aunt attending my parents' wedding with her husband, blessing her younger sister with a love as glorious as hers. As if I'm directing a movie in my sleep, I control how the action unfolds. My mother asks my aunt to look after her future child. Only until we return for her, my father adds. But I am unable to play out my aunt's response; no matter how many times I rewind the scene, her face remains elusive, her voice faraway.

Soon, some members of the circus troupe begin recognizing me. I manage the cafe during the day and when my aunt takes over in the evening, I spend my time with them. They say they like the pleasant expression on my face. I find it intriguing that my loneliness masquerades as pleasantness.

Two days before the troupe's departure, Shirin, a dancer and a trapeze artist, and I sit together on the beach and watch the sun turn into the moon. The waves keep refilling the rock pools. The moon keeps burnishing the sand. I ask Shirin why she isn't taking photographs of the sunset. Everybody who comes to this town does that. She says she has over five hundred sunset pictures from all over the world and she cannot distinguish one from another anymore.

When Shirin gets up to leave so she can finish packing her bags, I decide to return to the kitchen. It is surfing season and the beach is steadily spouting hungry people into the cafe. Shirin makes me promise I will join the farewell party the next day.

"My children loved the circus," my aunt says when I mention the party to her that night.

I did not know that. I look at her face: stormy sea, big dark waves crashing on the shore. Her eyes: neat little banks of pain.

"Who sent the tsunami, do you know?" she asks me. "It did not belong here. Those were not its children to take," she says.

The ground deforms under my feet, like the ocean floor does during a disturbance. This is the only time she has ever talked of the 2004 tsunami—grieving the children it stole from her. I learned of my own parents' disappearance from a village elder. He said my aunt took me in the evening my father left. I was a year old, too little to remember.

I open my mouth to comfort my aunt, but words fail me, as always. I wish I knew her children, but not as much as I wish I knew my parents.

"I tried to save them. They did not know how to swim." She is crying now, softly. "I failed my children." I have never known

my aunt to bawl like other mothers. Her life is an unending procession of low moans.

"You tried, Valiyamma. You did the best you could," I say. "You made sure I learned how to swim."

"We are good people, and yet the water came for us." She turns to the window to watch the sea, the eternal object of her accusations. "Why?"

Suddenly I am not thinking about my parents or about the calamity that took them away. All I can think of is that my aunt will be forever unmoored from the present, and from me.

"I miss my children. And now I am so old, so tired," she says.

We sit like that for a long time. We are two broken people trying to fuse into a whole family. But the fracture runs too deep.

We are shorelines on the move, continuously drifting together, before breaking apart in a never-ending cycle.

"What if she did not disappear?" I say to the thirteen-year-old kitchen boy the next morning. "What if he did not run away?"

For the last two years he has been washing dishes at the cafe in exchange for meals. For the last eighteen months he has been listening to me mourn my life. "You could go look for them," he says.

"Look where?"

"Everywhere."

"What about my aunt?"

"What about your aunt?"

"She has already lost her children." I picture my aunt searching frantically for her little ones while I looked on from the sling crisscrossed around her back.

"Before taking you in or after?" he says conspiratorially. Then he shrugs. "You could be happy here."

He has said these things before, but they sound different today. The circus is playing tricks with my mind.

I look in the mirror that night, combing my hair with my fingers. One day I plan to cut it short like my mother's in the picture but for now I like how it reflects the moonlight. Or I could find her, and she could cut it for me while my father gives her instructions on how to. If my father could escape the tsunami, he must be an expert at everything. A warmth floods me but I am unable to decipher it. What does a thought without language sound like?

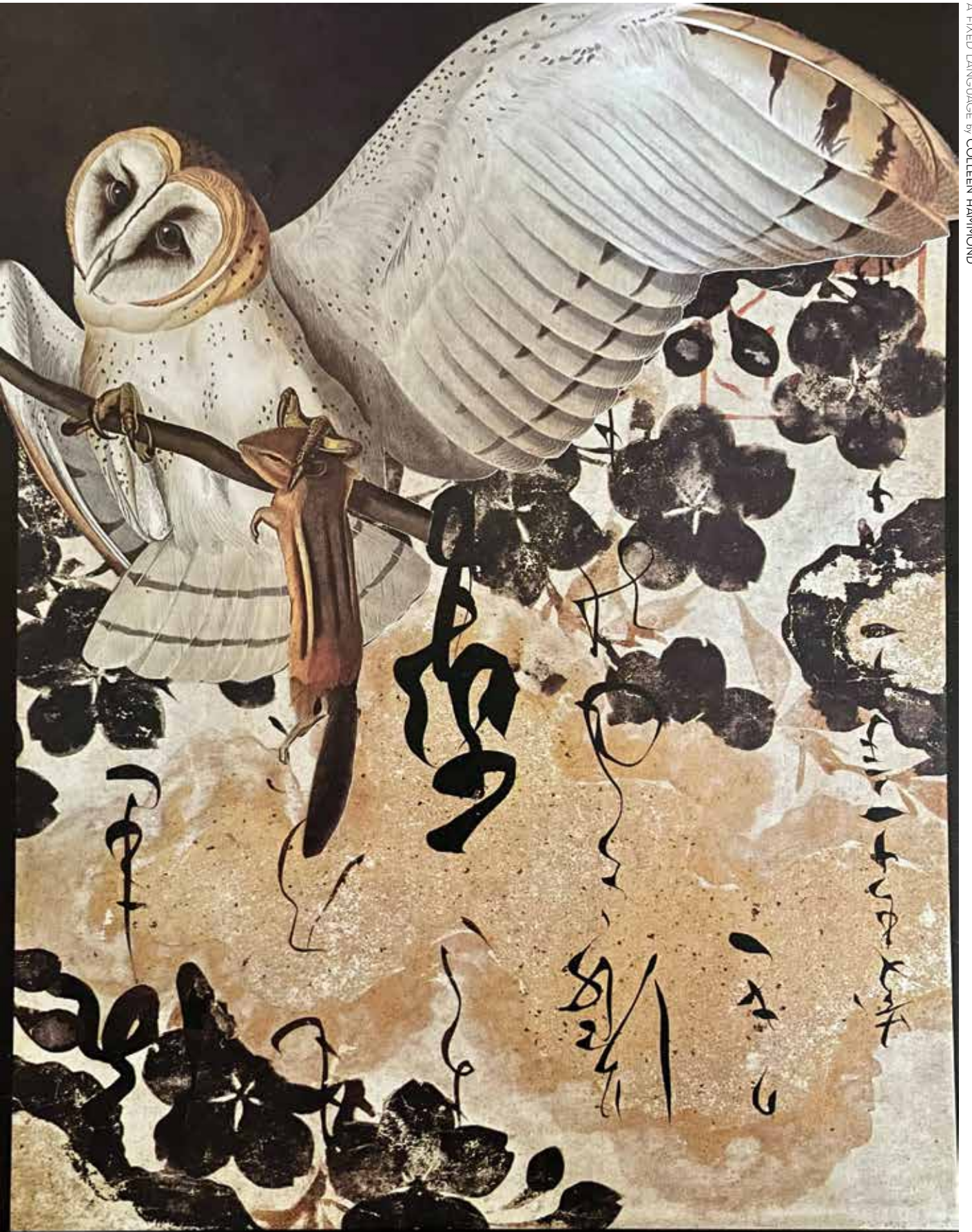
I step onto the party boat, bewitched by the lights and the laughter. The circus master finds me. He introduces me to his wife who smiles wordlessly, her eyes wrinkled around the corners.

Shirin hugs me from behind. "There she is!" she says, and I feel all grown up. Nobody has ever been thrilled to see me.

Then she takes me to the food counter and offers me dishes I have only ever seen on TV and never tasted. I accept generous helpings of everything and try to pretend I feel at ease. Someone laughs loudly at a half-told joke. Someone imitates a movie actor. Someone breaks into a song. Shirin excuses herself. "I hope you will be there to see us off tomorrow," she calls out over the babble just before she disappears into the crowd.

I look over at silhouettes dancing on the upper deck. Stars change colors in the sky above as they issue starlight. Red-blue-red-blue.

The circus master's wife brings me more food. "The boundary between family and friends is blurred here because we all live



together," she says. "We look after each other."

"Are there vacancies?" I say, surprising myself, feeling like the jellyfish in the water below that float to wherever the current brings them.

"We're always looking for performers with a strong stage presence," she says.

I take the long way home, my ears still ringing from the loud music. Back at the cafe, a few pots and pans are waiting to be washed. I mix water in baking soda and apply the paste all over the bottom of a dark skillet. I scrub the burnt copper with an old rag, releasing the scent of stale garlic. Then I sit down on the floor and imagine the beach cradling a lone boat dancing in the frothy tug of the Arabian Sea.

The engine booms. After four weeks in the tourist town, the circus boat is ready to depart. I have to make a decision. It is now and forever, or never and what if.

I look at the flimsy wooden fence, waving gently. Then, at the meandering lanes beyond the fence, leading to hookah bars on one side and indie music lounges on the other, before connecting to the state highway.

Excitement bubbles on the boat. Hysteria of the beginning, panic at the letting go. Shirin hops on, but not before looking questioningly at me one last time.

The cafe door continues to rock on its hinges. The milk needs to be boiled. The table covers with prints of apples, oranges and strawberries need to be set out on surfaces crammed with coarse sand. The radio needs to be tuned to the local beach station. The coconuts need to be grated for Malabar chicken curry that needs to be cooked at noon. The Gods need to be freshened up and appeased for a hopeful day of business.

I close my eyes for a last-minute sign. Nothing. I walk to the boat. Then I stop, dash back to the cafe, lock the door without looking inside, run back to the boat and climb aboard. Navigation lights come on as I begin my new life.

It has been over a month in the circus and yet I have not spotted anyone in the audience who could look like my mother or my father. As a magician's assistant, I hold props that I shift onto and off the stage, imitating a joyful character wholly unlike myself.

Shirin and I spend a lot of time together. She introduces me to all her friends. When we are alone, she talks a lot, as if in a hurry to tell me everything. Sometimes I try to narrate stories of my own, but I have so few. I embellish the actions of the cafe regulars, of the people who vacationed at the hotel and of those who passed through the yoga school, but I always feel less worldly, my stories less sophisticated.

She is an aerial wizard, moving like she is drawing a delicate pattern in the air, spinning midair with perfect grace. She tells me her family enrolled her in the circus without telling her. At the age of twelve, she lost her balance and fell backward while performing on a wheel suspended thirty feet above the ground.

She says she picked herself up, waved to the crowd and went back to her room to read a book. She tells me she likes historical fiction.

"Don't you blame them for the accident?" I say to her in Siam Reap.

"I did, not anymore. You have to forgive your family one day, release the past to make place for yourself," she says.

I have learned that circus mealtimes offer some of the only opportunities to talk to other human beings, so I eat with people from all over the world as they exchange stories. Most stories start with the old joke about running away and joining the circus.

Sometimes I watch mothers playing with their babies or listen to fathers narrate stories to their children. When the images of all the happy faces get too overwhelming, I hide in the bathroom.

"Fear is natural, but possibly irrational. Safety nets remove fear," my acrobatics trainer says.

I agree. I found things like handstands and backflips scary when I was new. The trainer eliminated the fear by using pirouette bails and foam pits.

"Once you recognize your fears and learn that the risk is minimal, you can unlock your true potential," she says.

I disagree. The more I see my fears, the more they tighten their fist in my throat, revealing a ghost that trails me everywhere no matter how hard I try to banish it back to my past. It feels as though I am a dedicated observer of events happening in my life, only to realize later that I am never a part of my own memories unless the ghost is also in the frame.

Although I had befriended a few members of the troupe back home, I am subdued around them. When they gather for drinks or games, I observe them quietly, sometimes laughing at inside jokes I do not understand so they do not think of me as foreign.

A few older people enquire suspiciously about my past life—dissatisfied no matter how I respond—but most others try to be familial, the men paternal, the women maternal. It rings false. My parents are impossible to replace, despite the fact that I never knew them. Plus, I prove unsuccessful in performing the part of a child. I do not know how to. Nobody ever taught me.

Some younger ones invite me to join their cliques where I struggle to act like them, never feeling like a good fit for those around me. Even the friendless and the family-less heighten my uneasiness. I want to tell them my innermost thoughts and fears, but I do not know where to begin. I want to feel attached to them, but I miss the intimacy I shared with the sea and the wind. I have learned that I am one of them and yet I am not. I am that leftover fish at the back of the circus refrigerator that the main cook always buys and forgets about.

Eight weeks since I joined the circus and Shirin is always busy now. Her stories have dried out, suddenly and with no warning. Has she tired of me? When she does approach me, I avoid her in resentment. Fever, I say. Or, late for practice. She never tries to make me stay, never adjusts her own day for me. I cannot remember if she was always like this and I never noticed, or if she has changed now. I am reluctant to approach her friends without her. What if they reject me? So, I wander the circus grounds alone, naming all the props and inventing lives for them. My heart races when someone catches me doing that. I try to tell myself I belong here as much as they do, but I am unable to believe it.

I pick a fight with my tent-mate in Cebu City, blaming her loud breathing for my lack of sleep. She apologizes, then defends herself. The next day she calls me crazy, and points at me when around her musician friends in the dining hall. I storm out without eating as if that would make any difference to their lives.

The circus master makes it a point to smile when he sees me, but it happens rarely. Once, when he has a moment to spare, he pulls a chair next to mine and says his life is cluttered with

small worries. He says he admires how I look at things as if I'm seeing the world for the first time. I can see he is being kind, but his words make me sad, because they tell me that on the day of our first meeting, he had read his own mind, not mine. If he had read my mind, he would know that I see everything as if for the last time.

The circus has begun intimidating me. I feel like a trespasser here, visiting other people's lives, uninvited. Like a stranger trapped in an alien body, inhabiting a reality that is not hers, deceiving the whole world.

The kitchen boy said I would find my parents if I looked everywhere; why haven't they shown up yet? I want to run away.

Just when my thoughts look ready to collapse under their own weight, my trainer introduces me to Samar, the star acrobat who presents death-defying acts to adoring crowds, and I feel my head spin. His grey eyes remind me of warm sunlit sand. His calm voice evokes the village fishermen's nightly song. Meeting him is like tripping over something and falling into the deepest hole on the Earth. Everything feels right again.

I start watching him all the time, deliriously, keeping a distance so he does not notice. While he is rehearsing his act, I pick up cleaning duties in the practice hall. I start going for early morning jogs and late-night strolls around his tent and lose a lot of weight. In Singapore I am convinced I love him. Is home an end point or where one starts from?

I ask my tent-mate where Samar is from, and she says she is not sure. He has been with the troupe since he was a boy of two, left in a bundle next to the circus master's tent at night, not crying, just waiting to be picked up and trained to be a circus performer.

I offer to cook a meal for the whole troupe and, as expected, Samar seeks me out to offer compliments. We start talking regularly.

"As a child I learned all kinds of music, singing and acting to hone my craft," he tells me in Makassar. We are seated among pots and pans in the moving kitchen van, shelling and eating peanuts, with him doing most of the shelling. Every now and then, the van goes over a speed bump, and we fly, our heads hitting the ceiling, the shells sticking to our clothes and hair, the pots clattering and knocking against each other. Each time that happens, we go quiet for a minute as if an announcement might follow, and when nothing happens, we clean our hair and clothes and go back to eating and talking.

That evening he casts a spell on the audience with his perfect acts of balance and flexibility. I feel my face burn.

I walk up to him after the show and before I can say anything he reads my feelings. Afterwards, we lie in an open circus wagon, and he kisses me for the first time. I close my eyes and feel his mouth brush against mine. From the stories told by village elders I know I shouldn't be doing something like this before marriage, and yet I urgently feel I should be storing this feeling in my mind forever.

That night I dream that the two of us are surfing in the Indian Ocean long before the tsunami altered its temperament. We paddle out for glassy waves breaking over a rock shelf as the moon melts over our heads like a candle.

I have been in the circus for three months. Samar and I talk

about life outside, which means I speak, and he pretends to listen. He is a circus person like he is a man or like he is tall or like he hates milk. It is a fact.

"Is this what you want our kids to grow up doing?" I ask him, only because I want to say 'our kids.' I pinch my cheeks secretly because I know he likes them flushed.

"Our imaginary future kids might be stronger than we think." He laughs.

In the end, I cajole him to try life outside the circus, which means I lock eyes with him, and he smiles before looking away.

"Will you come find me?" I say in Hanoi, the wind whipping across my face.

"I will come find you," Samar tells a star in the distance.

I look up at the star and the vastness overwhelms me. The sky appears ready to unleash a torrent of asteroids.

It suddenly feels as though I have arrived at a secluded house that no one invited me to and now I have to stay. I feel afraid while walking down long deserted corridors. Before I get over the first terrifying shadow, I find another one to fear. A lifetime passes but I never manage to work out why I am endlessly afraid.

The circus camps by the coast again, this time with me as an insider. In Da Nang, I walk out into the stray sun and reach the My Khe beach. As foamy waves rock me like a baby, I drift off to sleep on the smooth sand. Golden light squats on me.

Later, I watch my shadow grow and fade under the setting sun. Though the water is breathing life into my body, I cannot drink a drop. Light is converging on the ancient silver hoops in my mind. The blurred ghost is slowly coming into focus. Holding my waist so I can keep my head above the water, fashioning fictional mermaids with long hair like mine. I want to call my aunt and ask her if she misses me, but I do not. I am afraid the answer might be no.

"There is a path that leads back to her," the waves say.

I shake my head. "Whatever I run behind, runs away from me," I say.

"You keep running away because you are convinced you do not belong anywhere."

"No!" My screams are towering storm waves, crashing into the rugged coast and churning high into the damp air.

I brush my hand against an umbrella-shaped jellyfish washed up on the shore. It is dead, and yet it stings me.

"What is a mirage?" I ask Samar that night.

"You," he says.

A week later in Bangkok, I gather the nerve to walk faster than the rest of the troupe until I am out of sight. My thoughts are stuck in a junkyard like a rotting old fishing boat. My fear is not that if Shirin and the others see me escaping, they wouldn't let me go, it is that if they see me escaping, they would let me.

The coastline stretches before me, waves rushing to the seashore like playing children, wearing out and tumbling over. Behind me sprawls the bustling night market, where the day's catch—fresh lobster, prawns, clams, and whole fish—is displayed on ice. Recent rain lies on my path like beads. Families stroll around, skipping children, smiling parents. Backpackers sit in a circular arrangement of black plastic chairs, exchanging tales and preparing for their next adventure in Seoul and Singapore, or further down the Pacific in Sydney or Adelaide. Disco lights flash



from clothing and footwear stalls. Red-blue-red-blue.

I want to call Samar and ask him if he misses me, but I do not. I am afraid the answer might be yes. So, I sit down next to a man selling banana sweets and think about my aunt. If I go back to the cafe, I will become her in fifteen years—sitting on the beach, near the reef, listening to the chants from the yoga school during the day and to the roars of the raucous waves at night. Going to the city every month to escape the listlessness of the beach, to escape the people who couldn't stop talking about how they were escaping the cities.

It is that time of the day when the sun looks like a jar of honey. I use most of my money to buy a cheap phone and a temporary calling card. Then I take a train to Ayutthaya where I sit among the restored ruins of Wat Maha That and call my aunt. I remember her number by heart.

The phone rings several times. My aunt's voice comes on the other side just as the last few tourists leave the temple area and the bricks change color from a burnt orange to a deep red.

"You called," she says. She must be sitting outside the cafe, watching the lonely beach rise from lacy waves.

"How could I not?"

"I sent in the annual donation to the orphanage a week early so they could cook a feast for your birthday this year."

"The children must have really enjoyed it," I say.

"The director sent me a card signed by many of them. I wish you could read the messages." Her voice is even like the sea's surface on a calm day.

"I am in Thailand."

"My children always wanted to travel the world." This time, I am not jealous. This time, the invocation of her children comforts me, as if I am fulfilling their wishes.

"And how about you?" I say.

"I am tied to the water. I can never leave it."

"You won't have to, Valiyamma."

I hear her shift in her chair. She pauses only briefly before she says, "Will you take me to the circus if I come and meet you there?"

Astha Gupta is a semi-finalist for the 2022 Marianne Russo Novel-in-Progress Award presented by Key West Literary Seminar and a fiction finalist both for the 2021 Porter House Review Editor's Prize (chosen by Yiyun Li) and the 2020 Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards competition. Her writing has received support from The Hambidge Center, The Sundress Academy for the Arts and The New York State Summer Writers Institute, and was nominated for the PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize. She holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she was an MFA Fellow and won the 2021 Deborah Slosberg Memorial Award in Fiction. She lives with her family in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Scenario in Surreal

Poem by Harvey Steinberg

Spy into her casement's window
At her apartment she putters
Front door fastened, two closets shut, cabinets
She has a nest at the office where she clicks away
She has a nest at the movie house

Stadium 5 seating re-running *Gone With The Wind*
A daunting grand buck
At a doorsill swears at her, "I don't give a damn"

The woman is not trying any more, last week she tried
She walked herself into a Chagall painting at the museum
To realize its encompassment
To query how lovers decalcified float in the air
To observe in the gallery next how winged cherubs inviolably hover

The lady's purse holds a book and a pencil
The point's been blunted from lists
The yellowed paperback has tea stains
She repeats to herself, "Give me Peace"

The sun radiates
A fact comes upon her
She cannot grasp what it is, it was there and gone
The woman cannot move, she is pinioned
The moment void of weight
A neither before nor after the moment

She drifts to the gardens
It is the vacant end of the mall by the lake
Debit and credit cards have not discovered it
A bluebird and a cardinal flit on a branch
A great blue heron wings low over water
An updraft exits toward blue
A fluttering, soft, as in askance

The woman flies up



Aside from his writings and professional career, including 20 years of university teaching, Harvey Steinberg of Lawrenceville, New Jersey has devoted time to voluntary leadership in arts and civic organizations. His poetry and prose have been published extensively and his artworks have appeared in dozens of juried shows. Many of his poems can be read in *Agitations and Allelujas* (2022, Ragged Sky Press, Princeton, NJ) and in numerous literary print journals.



The Doppler Effect

Madeline McGrain Githler – Second Place Contest Winner

The car ride was a quiet one. In the front sat the Realtor, sneaking looks back at Miles and his mother. Miles had seen those looks before; the Realtor was wondering how the pert young woman could be the mother of an 11-year-old boy. When the Realtor had called earlier that day, he insisted he would pick the pair up from their current motel residence, give them a ride—really *it was no issue*—and he would treat the confidentiality of their case as a personal crusade. They had been through enough. His lips were sealed, “No matter what.”

Miles thought it was funny the Realtor said the part about the lips. He couldn’t find a single lip on the man’s pocked face.

Now, thirty silent minutes later, they drove. Outside, the sky offered nothing but monotonous gray. The earth seemed tired. It had only the mud and slush to show for a month’s snow and rain.

“This house is one of two that are handicapped accessible,” the Realtor spoke up. Just by the way he said it, Miles knew the Realtor had been sitting on that nugget of information for a long time.

Miles could sense what was coming next.

“That’s nice, but we don’t necessarily need a house that’s handicapped accessible.”

“Oh,” the Realtor cleared his throat. “I just figured—”

The Realtor glanced to the crutches leaning between Miles and his mother, adorned with blue medical tape, miscellaneous stickers, and towel-wrapped handles.

“No need to figure anything.” Miles’ mother spoke quickly, each word annunciated with months of practice. She was smiling, but her tone held a bite. Miles closed his eyes and leaned his head against the cold, damp window. He hoped this house would be different than the last ones. His mother had found something inexplicably wrong with each.

They arrived at the next house, a white-shingled ranch, it was long and flat, and had no other homes around it. Miles twisted himself a bit, looking through the car’s salt-crusted rearview window. There really were no houses around it. The emptiness of its surroundings was disheartening at best, but he shook it off. With a little spark he realized something: it was big enough for him to have his own room.

Still peering from the car, Miles noticed the thick rows of trees flanking each side of the home, still, quiet, and unmoving. He couldn’t see the backyard, or, frankly, anything at all behind the house. He figured they must be atop a hill; it was as if the earth disappeared behind the house. He watched his mother’s gaze

fall to the small ramp leading to the front door. Still in the back seat, she turned to Miles and tightened his scarf.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

Miles nodded and reached for his crutches. The Realtor was already out of the car and making his way to the front door—red with two perfectly square windows on both sides. In an instant, his mother appeared at his door, pursed her lips, and helped him get to his feet.

“Don’t worry, Bun.” She nodded her head toward the crutches. “We’ll be done with these soon.”

Miles smiled, though he never understood why his mother said things like that. He couldn’t remember a time without the crutches and didn’t mind them.

Inside the house was nothing to report. It was empty, and Miles overheard the Realtor mention something about “early 2000’s.” It felt like a box and smelled of citrus air freshener and something akin to cigarettes. Miles had faint memories of houses like it, but he didn’t let his mind dwell. He separated himself from his mother and the Realtor.

Without furniture, sounds echoed in the house. Miles examined the rooms, popping each flimsy door open and peeking in. Each room nearly identical to the last. He was on the cusp of boredom. Each light in each room, a yellow-hued dome with dead bugs piled up at the bottom, cast a dim warning: the windows, a single small one in each room he visited, had been plastered over—or somehow sealed over—on the outside.

In the biggest room, which Miles assumed would be his mother’s, was a door to the backyard. It resisted as he wiggled the doorknob.

Suddenly: a rumbling. The house lurched, the sound almost guttural, yet parts of it mimicked a screech. It was big and it was close. Miles’ reaction to the sound was physical, his hands tightened around the handles of his crutches, and his face warmed with a flush of blood. It was so close he could hear the rhythmic clacks, the sound of metal on metal. Then, finally, the abrupt sound of an exhausted horn shifting its tone as the thing hurled by. A train. Just by the sheer weight of the sound, Miles knew it was a freight train, probably a B36-7 locomotive, four axles. This house quickly became the most appealing on the docket of homes they’d visited. He rushed to tell his mother; the clacks of his crutches silenced by the train’s roar.

Miles’ mother and the Realtor were standing in the kitchen, seemingly unbothered by the sounds that shook the house. He



was looking at his phone and she was opening and closing the gently worn cabinets.

"Do you hear that?" Miles shouted above the noise, poised in the doorway.

Miles' mother and the Realtor stopped to look at him. The Realtor's mouth flicked to an anxious smile, and Miles' mother went to the Realtor's side. She touched the Realtor's shoulder just as he began to say something. Miles' mother nodded once, locked eyes with the Realtor for an intense, fleeting moment, then returned to her cabinet prodding.

Miles stood in rapture for as long as it took the train to pass. He wished it were longer, but after a few minutes it was gone.

"I..." Miles struggled for the right words. "I haven't heard a B36-7 in a long time."

"Crazy," she paused. "That's exciting."

The Realtor said nothing. His eyes slid over to Miles' mother, now smiling, large and forced.

The house was cheap, Miles was sure. You could hear everything from the outside, there were drafts in places where he thought wind wouldn't be able to reach, and the fake-out windows in the back still unsettled him. But he could make it work now that he knew about the tracks. It also sure beat moving around and sleeping in hotels that smelled like the breath of a hundred people.

After more examining and poking, the three returned to the Realtor's car. This time Miles' mother sat in the front, an uncomfortable change Miles would soon ignore.

"You like this house, Bun?" she peered over her shoulder, and reached behind to give Miles' knee a quick pat.

Miles didn't want to lie. "I like how close it is to the train tracks."

And that was that.

It was only their fifth night at the house and the dreams already descended upon Miles. They weren't new to him. In an act of quiet, blind hope Miles assumed the change of scenery, "positive thinking" (as his mother would say), or some force of sheer willpower would keep them at bay. The dream was always the same, it came with a paralyzing familiarity.

It started with a small, nondescript house. Perhaps it changed each dream, though Miles wasn't entirely sure. There was a new man in the house, always the same man, though Miles could never place him. A friend of his mother's, an uncle, sometimes even a dad. The man brought with him a very young boy. Miles and the Boy politely avoided one another, silently accepted they would be in each other's lives. Boy was three or four, he had a square face and large, wide-set eyes. Miles' mother and the Man made a habit of forcing Miles and the Boy outside in the afternoons. This house didn't have a television, nor did it offer any form of entertainment besides the great outdoors, so Miles and the Boy were content to run outside. (In the dream Miles had no crutches). They would busy themselves with a rock or potato bug until his mother and the Man let them back inside.

The beginnings of these dreams were always peaceful. They took place somewhere warm, nearly tropical; a world so real, almost precious, Miles didn't dare tell anyone about them. Day in and day out: Miles, the Boy, outside, Mother and the Man with his forgettable and everchanging face, innocent, numbing, fun.

Then, as it always did, the chaos descended quickly. Shouts,

sounds—rasping, animalistic, nothing that sounded like his mother or even the Man, emanated from all around. These noises were high-pitched, whining, evolving to shrieks. Either something was in the house with Miles' mom and the Man, or something was outside and wanted to harm Miles and the Boy. In these dreams Miles was never sure which it was. He would leave the Boy where he sat on the grass, instruct the boy to remain where he was, and run to the door. The door would be locked. Of course. Sometimes Miles realized at this point that it was just a dream, though that rarely changed its outcome despite Miles' attempts at waking.

The sound, now deafening, would radiate through the closed door, through the air around him, knocking Miles over, pulsing through his body. The poison of the sound strapped to his muscles, oozed out his ears, filled his nose with an acrid sweetness. Miles was plastered to the grass, his back seizing up, his breaths hurried and painful. Paralyzed, a single thought would emerge. The Boy. With a creaking strain, Miles twisted his head, finally able to catch the Boy in his peripheral vision.

It would be too late. It was always too late. There lay the Boy, dead, bleeding, his body gorged and destroyed by something Miles had missed. Maybe the thing in the house, *or had it been outside?* had escaped. Hopefully it had avoided his mother and the Man, as it had already feasted on the Boy. Then, as if pulled through a small tunnel, Miles saw the scene disappear before him, slowly at first, then intensifying to a jolt which left him breathless.

He sat upright in his bed, panting. Thankfully awake. Hot tears peppering his blotchy cheeks. The room was bare save for a new star-shaped nightlight. It was comforting enough. Miles squeezed his eyes closed, silently pleading for his mother to come in. Perhaps some intrinsic connection she shared with her only child would wake her and draw her into his room. But in an attempt not to stress her further, he didn't dare call for her. The move had made her jumpy.

There he sat, perfectly still. He glanced at the crutches leaning next to his bed, longer and spindlier than he remembered.

He tried to slow his heart down, not letting the unknown terrors that emerge at night get to him. He was 11 after all. *You're too old for this*, he sheepishly assured himself.

A moment of mercy. The rumbling of the 02:45. Miles wasn't sure what kind of train it was just yet, but he knew it passed nightly on the tracks behind the new house. Though he hadn't seen the tracks themselves yet, every time he brought them up his mother would turn him down, politely at first, and soon with a brusqueness that told him he only had a limited amount of asks left. He would need her assistance to maneuver out the front door and around the thick line of trees to head toward the backside of the house. Or, even easier, through the apparently permanently locked door in her room.

The train let out a low honk and Miles felt something unfurl in his chest. He took a deep breath. He loved night trains. Whatever was happening now, as he sat in bed immobile tonight, somewhere out there, someone was awake, doing their job, radioing with people, dutifully moving things to where they were meant to be. He could almost count down to the second that the tone shifted with the horn, the locomotive no longer barreling toward the house, but now ushering its freight past. He had learned this was called the Doppler Effect. The sound of an object as one thing when it heads toward you, another as it moves past.

Miles lay back down, he could see it all in his mind's eye: the machine cutting through the night, the robust, quick intentional rotations of the wheels, and Miles' eyelids began to close. His guard was down.

For a brief moment something slipped out, a memory maybe, of the Boy yelling Miles' name.

Miles and his mother sat on the sofa across from the Doctor. The Doctor said to call him by his first name, and it was news to Miles that you were allowed to call adults anything but mister, missus, or by their career (doctor). The Doctor and his mother chortled at Miles' realization. Then they fell quiet.

The Doctor was the most interesting man Miles had ever seen. He was old, donned a shaved head, well-trimmed gray beard, and a permanent tan on his skin, the kind of tan that shows he had spent ample time in the sun, and it decided to stick around years later.

"Miles, your mom told me you and Dr. Persimmon really hit it off these past few months. I'm here to step in while she's on maternity leave." The Doctor spoke as if Miles should know what he was saying. Miles peeked at his mother, who didn't take her eyes off the Doctor.

"I want to hear from you," the Doctor continued on. "What are some things you want to talk about? How are things?"

Miles pretended to ponder—*what did he want to talk about?* He was stuck on Persimmon, though in truth, he couldn't place the name. *Persimmon*. All at once every topic of conversation drained from his head.

"He's only recently become verbal again," Miles' mother said calmly. The Doctor raised a weathered hand at her, keeping his attention on Miles.

"I know you and Dr. Persimmon were really making some great progress, and I'm sorry about this change, but I just want to let you know that I have a different way of approaching things. Can I tell you how I approach things?"

Miles nodded. *Who is Doctor Persimmon?*

"Great," the Doctor looked to Miles' mother. "If you could, usually I like to do my first session with the kids alone."

A cold pang of fear. Miles' hand grasped onto his mother's denim-clad leg.

"I think I ought to stay." Miles recognized the tone as the one she used on the Realtor.

The Doctor exhaled. "Alright." He wrote something down on a clipboard Miles hadn't even noticed.

"Okay Miles," the Doctor raised his eyebrows in a quick up-down. "Tell me about the past few days. What goes on in an average eleven-year-old boy's life?"

Miles realized he was still gripping his mother's leg and released, putting his hands flat on his slender legs as professionally as possible.

"We got a new house." Miles' voice was a dry whisper. Unexpected. In his head his voice was louder, crisper.

"That's super cool," Miles had never heard an old man say 'super cool' before. "What's your favorite part of it?"

Miles shrugged. The Doctor wrote something on the clipboard.

"How is school?"

"He's homeschooled for now," Miles' mother interrupted. The Doctor put down his pen and shot her a glance.

"Sorry."

"Going back to the new—"

"Actually," Miles' didn't mean to interrupt. The Doctor smiled and gave him a nod.

"What does 'maternity' mean?" The question had been pestering Miles. Next to who Dr. Fruit-lady was.

"Oh, like with Dr. Persimmon." The Doctor didn't miss a beat. "It means she's pregnant. Going to have a baby."

Miles absorbed this.

"But she should be back with our practice in a few months, so don't worry, you'll see her soon enough."

More writing by this new doctor. With a small *slap* he put his pen down.

"Is it okay if I do some quick-round questions with you, Miles?"

"Sure."

"Favorite subject when you're at home or in school?"

"Uh, math."

"Dr. Persimmon wrote here you like trains a lot. Favorite train?"

"C44-9W... it's called the Dash 9."

More writing.

"With Dr. Persimmon in mind, do you like babies, Miles?"

Weird question. "I think so" Miles' voice was quieter than he wanted. *Speak up*, an attempt at self-encouragement.

"I haven't spent much time with babies, but I like the ones I see on TV."

No one said anything for longer than Miles would've liked. Was he supposed to not like babies? Now was definitely not the right time to ask who Dr. Persimmon was, and why he should be informed that she's pregnant.

Miles' mother shifted to face Miles and lowered her voice. "Miles, it's okay to just tell the truth in there. I know it can be really hard and scary, it's hard and scary for me too, but this is the time to just talk about what's on your mind." She grinned at him and returned to facing the Doctor.

"We can go back to trains. Is that okay with you?" the Doctor lowered his voice.

"Yes."

"Have you ever been inside a train?"

"I... I haven't." *Say more, Miles, come on*, Miles thought to himself, tensing. "I figured they'd be hard to get in and out of with my crutches."

The Doctor hummed as he frantically wrote something else down. *Is he writing things about me?* Miles felt hot.

"And you've had those crutches for..." the Doctor trailed off. Miles didn't know the answer. His mother stepped in.

"About seven months."

Seven months? Miles glanced at his mother.

"Interesting." More writing.

"And... you..." the Doctor spoke slowly, writing as he talked. Finally, "You didn't have these crutches when you were down in Florida? Just seven months ago and consistently ever since then?"

Florida. Miles bit his lip. *Florida?*

"No, he didn't have them in Florida. Just toward the end." Miles' mother's voice had a sudden acidity to it. She turned to Miles and then to the Doctor. A small pebble of tension dropped in Miles' stomach. Something was off with his mother, a vein of rage emerged from her forehead. A new emotion within her had been switched on.

Her voice went up an octave. "You said you wouldn't bring this up. Not in the consultation."

She reached over and grabbed Miles' crutches, leaning on the wall beside her, then shoved them at her son. This was a clear cue to get ready to leave. He prodded the crutches under his armpits as his mother increasingly fumed.

She continued. "And Dr. Persimmon made it very clear throughout our work these past few months that we are not to mention Florida, not to mention—"

"I understand, but I'm just trying to take a different approach." The Doctor kept his voice calm, but Miles could tell he was not expecting such a rapid turn of events.

"We can discuss something else." His voice was firm, but Miles' mother was already up and at the door. Her coat and Miles' coat both folded over her arm. Miles thumped toward his mother. He felt bad for this doctor, and something in his chest longed to stay, wanted to see him again. The Doctor held Miles' eyes as long as he could. They did not say goodbye to the secretary on the way out.

Miles' mom did not turn on the radio on the drive back from the Doctor's. Never a good sign. An attempt at distraction, Miles looked around him at the worn leather interior. The seats looked like they were dry skin, cracking. He wasn't sure whose car it was they were in. His mother had a lot of friends, maybe she was borrowing this one from them.

"What the hell," she kept saying over and over. Miles stayed quiet.

"Miles." His name was an order.

"Yeah?"

"Did you like that doctor?"

Miles paused. "Yeah."

She let out a low hiss of air, like a steam engine. "Really?"

Miles didn't answer.

"I guess I'm just so used to Dr. Persimmon. God, she was great. She was just so... easy to be around, you know?"

Miles did *not* know.

"Well. Sorry, Miles. I didn't know you liked him."

They turned onto their street. Their new street.

"I bet he'll agree to see us again," she was no longer talking with Miles.

The car slowed, and they pulled into their driveway. Miles figured it was time to ask, better now than never. Panicked, he blurted out, "Can we go to the back of the house? Maybe go see the tracks?"

His mother turned off the car and reached for his crutches in the back. "Not right now, Bun. I have to go in and make an apology phone call. I need to mentally prepare to grovel." She made a pretend gagging sound. Miles didn't laugh.

She went around and opened Miles' door, helping him out of the car. He looked over her shoulder to the long line of trees. They seemed thicker than ever. Maybe he could try and venture around there while his mother was on the phone. His mother noticed his staring.

"You really want to go to the yard?"

"I do."

She paused, her eyes, gray and intense, studied Miles for a moment longer than he would've liked.

"Listen, we can go, just don't go back there without me, okay? The ground is..." she looked for the right word. "Uneven. Tricky to walk on, so I really want to be with you when we go."

"Can't I just cut through the door in your bedroom?" Miles felt energized by this newfound persistence. She sucked in one of her cheeks, leaving her face hollow for a moment. For the first time Miles saw his mother as old, tired. Something was different about her. The skin under her eyes suddenly seemed thin and taut like a bat's wing. She stood up.

"Miles, I'm sorry but no. We can go later, but I have to do some things." Miles didn't leave the car.

His mother crouched back down, putting her face close to Miles; and locking eyes with him.

"Look at me," her voice was quiet. Miles looked.

"Do not go alone."

"Did you know," the Man said, chewing with his mouth open. Miles didn't dare say anything. "That if you lie flat under a train, it'll just go right over you?"

Miles, surprising himself, let out a laugh. It was the single most absurd thing he had ever heard. The Man grinned, "I knew that'd get a rise out of you."

Miles' mother, spoon feeding the Boy at a worn highchair across the table, let out a playful *tisk*.

Miles went back to quietly eating. The night was hot, summer was quickly upon them, and the windows, old but screened in, let in a damp breeze. He could tell the Man about how, even if you miraculously managed to get past the protective locomotive cab protector, built like a plow in the front, there are so many hoses and wires dangling under a train, it could snag you and drive you for miles and miles. *Snag you and drag you. Clever.* He smiled.

But the Man was always saying silly things, Miles knew this wasn't a real conversation.

"Can you feed him? I'm going to head out for a sec," Miles' mother said to the Man. She pulled a cigarette out from behind her ear, giving Miles a quick kiss on the top of his head as she passed. The Man picked up where she left off, spooning a pale, sweet-smelling substance into the babbling Boy's mouth.

"Here comes the train into the station," he cooed at the boy. Miles could've sworn the Man shot him a wink.

The Boy had been following Miles around for a few weeks

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now. And Miles was sick of it. He wasn't sure when or how the idea occurred to him.

The house was decaying and old. Its paint, pastel pink and soft, flaked off the side of the house like dead skin. The dullness of the house offered little reprieve to Miles' and the Boy's boredom as they spent their afternoons outside. Miles, however, found the one thing that could make the days bearable, borderline enjoyable: the train tracks.

Just less than a quarter of a mile away, past the extension of the house's grassy yard, then through a brief ankle-deep marsh, and guarded by a chain-link fence with barbed wire atop, lay the tracks. Then, through a small hole in the fence, Miles could easily access the tracks.

The trains that came by were not on any discernable schedule, but they did come. Usually GP40-2s with three locomotives for the incredibly heavy cargoes. On the sides in bright, warning letters, advertised *Florida East Coast*. Sometimes—very rarely—they would let out a quick toot at Miles as he stood by the fence (even at a very young age he knew the dangers of these machines and would always scurry to the safe side of the fence as a train approached).

Unlike the northeastern trains Miles now was accustomed to, the trains bustled through cityscapes at slow paces. In very small towns, however, the trains rarely slowed. Towns like McIntosh, Florida. Its population was 400, rarely warranting a honk or even a slower pace.

Miles usually went alone, but recently the Boy took interest. Usually, the Boy would just follow him to the marsh and then stop, deterred by the warnings Miles' mother and the Man spewed about gators or snakes, though neither boy had ever seen one.

Today, however, the Boy followed Miles to the fence. Miles tried to shoo him away, but the Boy was persistent, toddling behind, pleading to stay with Miles.

Miles wriggled through the hole in the fence. The Boy did the same. Wordlessly, they approached the tracks. Miles looked left and right; the Boy looked too. The tracks spanned as far as they could see, perfectly straight.

Miles crouched down and touched the metal beams, one and then the other. They weren't yet hot. It was only morning.

"Don't tell them we come out here," it occurred to Miles to say. His mother and the Man had also told Miles and the Boy to stay in the grassy part of the yard, and never ever go by the fence. Miles doubted they knew about the hole.

The Boy didn't seem entertained by the tracks. Miles caught him looking through the chain-link fence, past the marsh, through the grass, and to the house.

"We'll go back soon, I just have to check some things," Miles put his hands up, implying the boy to stay where he was. Miles headed up the tracks—he had a line of pennies he'd been flattening, left out for a few days now. It was time to collect. On these pennies Miles had managed to sharpie the abbreviated title of the trains as they passed. Miles picked up the small, flattened gems. Miles grimaced, as expected, they were too squished, and the sharpie was illegible. He held the pennies to his nose. Flattened, they smelled brittle, the odor cold somehow; it could be the smell of the steel train wheels. A small win.

He heard a call behind him, the Boy was awkwardly perched on the edge of the railway. Miles shoved the pennies in his jean pockets and scurried to the Boy.

"What happened?" Miles asked, kneeling beside him. The Boy, now crying, yanked at his pudgy leg, his foot wedged beneath the iron of the railway and the gravel that lay beneath the tracks. The more the Boy pulled at his leg, the more space allotted for the gravel to fill in the hold his foot had created. It was unlike anything Miles had ever seen; the gravel seemed to be emerging from the ground, little gray monsters swarming, latching themselves around the flesh of the Boy. The hole filling, filling, filling. The gravel had an unnatural, eager quickness. Miles shivered but forced himself close to the Boy. He knelt down, trying to help the Boy into a new position, but that led to more cries, evolving into shrills. Miles knew better than to actually walk on the tracks. But he forgot to warn the Boy to never walk anywhere near the smooth rails of the tracks, let alone the treacherous center. A stab of guilt—a tangible sickening feeling he could only hope to forget—waved through him. His mother and the Man would be so angry, and they would definitely fix the hole in the fence.

With a single rumble, the guilt turned to fear. Miles and the Boy felt it together and at once. A train. Miles' attention jerked to the machine approaching in the distance, then to the Boy. The train was not going to slow. Something in Miles knew this.

What had Miles done? The Boy, confused by Miles' tears, clutched onto the arm iron of the tracks, and attempted to pull himself up. Miles positioned himself behind the Boy and gave him three big tugs. Nothing would move him.

Miles took off. He ran through the marsh, only ankle-deep in this dry weather, but deep enough to suction off his boots. Miles didn't stop to retrieve them. He didn't even have it in him to glance around for gators. Finally, he got to the backyard. Grass, hot, scratchy, pulling at him, slowing him down again. The blood pumping through his ears muted the world around him. Should he have stayed with the Boy so the conductor could have a chance at seeing them and slowing? Did the conductor even see the Boy yet? They almost never slowed down here. No real town within three or four hours, just the swamp, the fence, and the lone house.

The door was locked, God, why was the door locked. Miles screamed. He slammed his open palms against the door, his throat tightening on his senseless noises. The rumbling swelled and grew as the train approached.

The Man answered the door first, opening it without urgency. Miles, wordlessly, cried and pointed to the fence. Now Miles' mother arrived at the door. Her eyes widened. She understood, and said to the Man, "The train!"

This was enough, Miles ran again. Ahead of the adults, through the grass, tugging, through the marsh, sloshing, and finally wriggling through the hole. The adults were close behind, pumping their arms and huffing through the different terrains. The Man would be too big to get through the fence, and the barbs on the top stopped him from scaling it. Though he did try.

But his mother could fit. Miles glanced behind him at the young woman running full speed next to the Man. Through their running they pleaded for Miles to stop.

"Stay away from there! Get away from the tracks!"

But Miles wouldn't. He ran, and finally he made it to the side of the tracks, a few feet away from the Boy, still stuck, face red from the tears and attempts at pulling himself free. His cries swelled with the presence of adults. Miles' body stopped him from getting any closer. *Miles, stop, a train is coming*, his gut pleaded.

His mother was wedging her way through the hole, parts of its rusty spindles tore at her shirt and arms. She pushed through, joining Miles and the Boy. The Man, helpless, shouted from the other side of the fence. The Boy wouldn't move. Miles yelled. Maybe if he was loud at the Boy, he'd roll away from the track somehow, he'd manage to unlatch himself. Miles knew it took a train that size, with that much freight, at least a mile to come to a complete stop. An EMD SD70MAC, Miles guessed.

Miles opened his mouth again but all that came was the sound of the locomotive, its horn, the dual-tone wheezing for them to get out of the way, the roar of its clacks close, and, despite the imploring screeches of the brakes, not slowing in their beats. The wheels chirped like loud, angry birds at this sudden change of pace. The beast was loud, present, caught off guard. The warning was over now. The train was already there.

Miles lunged forward, through the sound, the shrieks of the wheels felt like they pierced his eyes, his ears, it seemed to even prick his skin. He didn't dare look at the front of the train, the face of it marked with its faded, yellow, beady little headlights. It let out final bleats to get them out of the way. Miles wrapped his fingers around the Boy's arms, pulling as hard as he could; his own limbs burned.

He closed his eyes, any second now. He could feel the heat of the train.

Once he felt the pain in his legs, he had to release his grip. Excruciating, the needles—no, knives— of the sounds finally penetrated through his jeans, through his flesh. Faster than anything he had experienced, the pain of his legs rushed to the rest of his body, and he felt, in a moment, a sickening crunch beneath him.

There were no other sounds but the horn, still atop him, not yet a new tone. Then the breaks, still pleading to stop, to slow. Quickly, the smell of diesel, new and brief, stifled as Miles urgently started breathing through his mouth. Hot air whirled around him, dusty, if he weren't able to inhale from the sheer pain in his legs he probably would've choked.

Unexpectedly, Miles fell backwards. Something had taken him. Grabbed him under the armpits, though he wasn't sure. He could only feel his legs. He couldn't focus enough to open his eyes, the sensation of his legs, the sounds—how could he? Miles allowed his head to fall. It was suddenly incredibly heavy, his skull seemed to be pulled down, closer to his legs, his neck gave way and his head bobbed forward.

He was dragged. He tried to piece together what was happening, he was being hauled now, pulled. He managed to open his eyes. In front of him was nothing but long, crimson streaks from where he was carted. They left two parallel lines, like the tracks of a train.

Once they were far enough away, he was laid flat. The sun blinded him, but he didn't care. There was no time to make sense of anything, the pain stepped in the way, blocking any coherent thought. His mother, in a whirl, appeared above him.

"Miles! Miles, honey, please!" She blocked the sun.

He could not yet speak and very quickly wanted to go to sleep. She knelt and lifted Miles' head off the gravel surrounding the tracks. They were close to the fence. Far enough from the train, as it began to finally slow.

"Miles, hey, it's okay," she was yelling above the noise. *What was she doing? She needs to go help the Boy.*

There was a large thump beside Miles and his mother. Miles

could not turn his head to look, or even to move his eyes to see. He heard his mother say something—loud, urgent—toward the thump.

"Oh, god," the Man said. It was closer to a wail, but Miles couldn't imagine the man, or any adult for that matter, being upset enough to wail or cry. The thump must be the man. Did he climb the fence? Miles couldn't focus on the thought of the man scaling the metal, going over the barbed wire. His thoughts were on his legs.

Miles was now alone; his mother had left his side. The never-ending sun made his eyelids feel not real, translucent, the sun now shining red.

Back to his legs. He could not take deep breaths. It felt as if he had bumped his tailbone on a slide or rock—the pain creating stones in his throat, his lower stomach tightened. Yes, breathing was out of the question.

Alone for as long as he could remember, he didn't reminisce enough to think that he was lucky. Lucky to live, lucky to not see.

The engineer finally got out of the train, his voice strained, yet his words loud. Miles didn't remember—really, he didn't—what was said among the adults, what happened with the Boy.

That's as far as his mind let him go. And that others remembered this day well made him queasy. This was the biggest difference between him and those around him, and it got bigger each passing day.

EPILOGUE:

After dinner. That's when Miles would do it.

It wasn't adding up. He wanted to go to school. He knew it was a new school, but he was tired of being at home. Tired of seeing the Doctor, of being cooped.

Miles and his mother finished their nightly physical therapy, which, apparently, they had been doing for months now. Each night Miles would position himself on the ground and his mother would stretch his legs. Left then right. She never let him take a good look at his legs, covering them with a blanket every time.

Miles was tired of not remembering either. People were babying him, the dishonesty of it all was wearing him down. But when he turned to himself, a chance to tell himself a truth, there was nothing there to say.

Faster than Miles expected, the chance was upon him. He had barely finished his hot dog (third time this week) when his mother had to take a call. She covered the base of her phone.

"I'm going outside," she mouthed, heading to the front door. Since the weather had warmed Miles and his mother had put two folding chairs beside the door, next to the row of trees, which, Miles noticed with disdain, were thicker than ever. Miles gave her a thumbs up.

The door clacked behind her. Miles had to make his move. Only needing one crutch now, his left leg apparently worse than his right, he stumbled, quickly, frantically, in the direction of his mother's room. He had been so patient, staying inside, keeping to the front of the house, backing down when his mother became heated at the topic of going out back. One time she had been so upset with him for bringing up the yard, the tracks, that she broke a cup in the sink. Slammed it down too hard.

He closed the door of his mother's bedroom behind him. In a few quick strides he was at the back door. Miles' mother had taken up smoking again, a vice she was failing to hide from him. He could smell the smoke in recent nights, stalking down the

hallway from his mother's room to his. He was upset at first, the smell bringing back memories he couldn't quite place, scenes that didn't make sense. But this meant the door to the outside was likely unlocked.

He wrapped his fingers around the sphere of the knob, and with an exhale, twisted his wrist. Smoothly, too effortlessly, it opened. Miles let it go. A shiver rose through his body. Did he really want to do this?

It's just the backyard. Miles nodded, he let himself indulge in a blasé shrug just to prove to himself how little of a deal it was.

He grabbed the knob again, twisted again, and pushed the door open. The sun had just set, still offering enough light to see perfectly.

He stepped out, his mind scrambling to imagine what the yard could possibly hold. If his daydreams—if he could even call them that—were correct. In his mind the yard had a sweeping hill, and below it, tracks. Or, another possibility, it was flat. The tracks would be half a mile away. Maybe even a full mile.

He took one step out.

The line of trees that flanked the house were surprisingly dense even in the back, spanning for as far as Miles could see. A nature-made fence. A rush of air flurried around him, which Miles could've sworn was a breeze, though none of the leaves on the trees made any sign that there was a gust. It became hard to focus.

His jaw slackened and he couldn't help but hunch a bit as he surveyed the yard.

There, behind the house, was nothing. Grass for a bit, yes, but then a road, a single slope down to more houses a mile or so away. Why hadn't he heard the road?

There was no space, no indication of any tracks.

He took more steps out, his crutch sinking into the sod. He peered to either side of the house. There, too, was nothing but shrubs.

"No," he managed to say aloud.

He heard a sound behind him but did not turn. It would be too difficult with the soft earth and crutches. He could see her without turning.

There, in the doorway, his mother leaned. Her arms limp at her side. She bit her lip and offered a deep, aching look at her son. She opened her mouth as if to say something.

Miles let himself lean into the crutch, pinching his armpit a bit. His mind was still.

His mother approached him slowly, reaching him and engulfing him in her arms. Miles let go of the crutch and leaned onto her.

There were no sounds. Miles didn't even hear his crutch fall to the grass.

"Oh, Miles," his mother finally cooed.

It hit Miles in two small waves: The tracks were gone. The tracks were never there.

A single fact, bodyless and light, floating in the air, made its way to Miles as he stood with his mother. The Doppler Effect only works if you compare your relative motion to other things that are not moving with you—the sounds of things moving around you. If you stand alone, you hear one thing. If everyone else is in motion, leaving you behind, the tones shift. Even if is only ever so slightly, they will not hear the train the same way you do.

Madeline McGrain Githler is a short story writer and aspiring novelist. She graduated with a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing from Connecticut College and recently received her MLA from Harvard University. She currently lives and works in Cambridge, MA, with her dog (and muse) Babs and supportive partner. She has had work featured in *Sad Girls Diary*, *The Weird Reader Magazine*, *Come and Go Literary Review*, and other publications. She is passionate about scrapbooking, traveling, and trying to write as much as she can. With each piece she writes she strives to spend quality time getting to understand her characters and loves to blur the lines between what is light and what is dark.

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Rosebuds

Poem by Chris Faunce

The headline says, "Rosebuds on remote island die from water shortage," and for the next three weeks, the networks broadcast the bees that are lacking honey, shaming the greedy Americans for their plastic water bottles.

"If only they could wait a day for another cup of coffee," the article begins, "the rosebuds would receive their fair share of water and could feed the bees that are shriveling into jellybeans."

Overcome by guilt, the Americans try to save the dehydrated blooms. They shut off their water and live like gatherers. Anyone seen within arms distance of a faucet is fined three hundred dollars.

After three months of conservation, they're told the rosebuds still haven't recovered, so the Americans storm the island carrying truckloads of water, heartache, and honey. Upon arrival, flocks of bees buzz overhead, and the Americans are greeted by a field full of vibrant red. The Americans clink their keys in their pockets and shuffle around. The next minute, everyone gets a headline alert that says, "Rosebuds on remote island have risen."



Chris Faunce is a writer from Pennsylvania. He graduated from Drexel University in 2023 with a degree in Civil Engineering. He won Drexel University's Creative Writing Award for Poetry in 2019 and Honorable Mention in 2023.



The God of Ugly Things

A.J. Bermudez – Third Place Contest Winner

The vacation had been Ada's idea, of course. The word "vacation" had also been Ada's, although the term now seemed like a bit of a stretch. She'd buried the lead, speaking of the unspoiled beauty of the shoreline, the unfettered wildness of the vegetation, the local birdlife uncorrupted by centuries—nay, millennia—of mainland evolution. She'd used the phrase "private island" about a hundred times.

Now, in a canvas tent of their own slapdash construction, Emin was beyond un-thrilled. Even at the outset, in the exquisitely appointed breakfast nook she shared with Ada, she had been suspicious.

"It'll be fun," Ada had insisted. "You know, surviving together."
"Isn't that what we're doing now?" Emin had said.

Ada had laughed, and Emin had laughed, and even Wilder, whose expressions most often began with a popped-out earbud and a theatrical eye roll, had laughed.

They had all known, even then, that the "vacation" would move forward. Ada took care of all the arrangements, as was her penchant, and Emin both teased and took pleasure in her instincts for fastidious fun. Ada had been this way about their honeymoon in Crete, the surprise Christmas in Bogotá, the business-turned-pleasure trip in Philadelphia shortly after they'd started dating. Beneath a pretense of spontaneity was something better: an unflappably focused assurance that everything would go to plan.

Always, but especially on occasions like these, Emin was both keenly aware of and totally unbothered by her irrelevance. She was happy to float through Ada's life like an accessory, latched like a filter-feeding barnacle on a whale, beneficial but not strictly necessary. Wilder, Ada's child, was similar. They'd given their mother access to a certain class of experience, the privilege of talking openly (albeit humbly) about *giving life*, the credibility of working motherhood, single motherhood, access to private school meetings and mommy message boards, a sheen of personhood as could only be enhanced by someone else's. But they were, like Emin, a body in orbit, blissfully slung around whatever was at the center of Ada.

There had never been a man in the picture—Ada had built Wilder from scratch, a "one-woman experiment," as she was fond of saying—and had been both thrilled and a little disappointed when it went so well. Wilder had never asked the whereabouts of Donor #11308D, had never required the therapy for which their mother had budgeted. They understood the role of a man in their existence the same way Ada did: vital, but more of a

one-time donation than an ongoing contribution.

The proposed trip was, in part, intended as an occasion for Emin and Wilder to bond. Ada had fretted about the psychological ramifications of introducing a stepmother to the only child of an only parent, especially at the tender age of seventeen. *What age isn't tender?* Emin had wanted to know. But the trip was irrelevant; she and Wilder got along fine. They were birds of a proverbial feather: Wilder the created one, Emin the curated one.

Wilder and Emin were so similar that they made similar jokes about the notion of a "survival vacation." Emin teased that Ada had summited the peak of Maslow's hierarchy and was now so bored she was starting over again at the bottom. Wilder's joke was more novice and crass, simply that the pinnacle of the hierarchy was wedged firmly up Ada's ass. In both instances, Ada was a good sport, amused that the event was already bringing them together.

They went to the REI on Lafayette together, the one that energized Ada and made Emin feel like trash, and picked out rain gear, long johns, headbands in slightly different colors and sizes. Afterward, they walked to Rubirosa, where all of their dietary restrictions were met.

Deep down, Ada harbored concern about Emin and Wilder's facile, unfussy kinship. She hoped the trip would uncover something more profound, less superficial. She was delighted, obviously, by their camaraderie—Emin was the best, Wilder was the best; why shouldn't they get along?—but she didn't trust it. She'd seen fighting fish in aquaria and knew, from her perspective as whatever metaphorical third-party fish was not a fighting fish, that it was only a matter of time.

"Survival has a way of bringing out the best in people," she had told Emin in the kitchen.

"I think you're thinking of the worst," said Emin.

Before the survival excursion is the survival training, which is intended not only to teach hedge funders how to make fires, but also as a gentle segue between high-rise and toilet-less campsite. They will be alone on the island for ten days, with only their wits, numerous supplies, packaged food, toiletries, a sat phone, sunscreen, and a team of professionals with a speedboat on standby to protect them, so it's fitting that their not-inexpensive "vacation package" would include training in the art of survival.

As they're arriving, a gang of five tech bros is headed out.

Emin can't help herself. She sways near Ada and whispers,

"You're sure you want to do something *they* want to do?"

But Ada is ready. Ada has been thinking about this for weeks. "I want to do what *I* want to do. Why must the paradigms of desire and experience be oriented according to the male hegemony? Why should my interests and actions—*our* interests and actions—be evaluated in relation to the impulses and behaviors of males, let alone males a fraction of our age, *cis* males for gods' sakes, males in industries which are gutting our prospects for reconciling the wage gap and thwarting economic mobility for female and non-male-identifying workers?"

"For systemic reasons," Wilder mumbles behind them.

A tech bro who's just passed glances over his shoulder and snorts. Ada ignores him. "Alright, alright then, even so—even if everything we want and do is about what *they* want and do—why should they have all the fun? Why shouldn't we have what they have?"

"Because *they* shouldn't have what they have."

At this Ada stops. She is delighted and horrified. She's created a monster.

"The one-woman experiment worked," Emin whispers. "You must be thrilled."

The training camp on Kapiti Island is helmed by two guides: Tanemahuta and Ben. Tanemahuta is a Māori conservationist with a master's in environmental science from Auckland. Ben is a former snowboarder and travel agent who, a few years ago, was "feeling a change."

"See?" says Ada. "Something for everyone."

They're greeted at the entrance to the lodge by Ben, local representative for Aventura Regia. "More like an *ambassador*," he says with a wink.

"More like a *sycophant*," Wilder says under their breath.

Ben smacks his hands together like they've all just won something. "Welcome!" he says, gesturing them inside but not offering to help with the bags. Part of the process of acclimation toward self-reliance.

The interior of the lodge is all lumber and organic muslin, straying from natural aesthetics only when absolutely necessary. Ben is grinning about everything like he came up with it. "Dinner at six," he says, "you. will. love it. Then a short video presentation, then orientation at eight tomorrow. Although if I were you"—he punctuates his hype routine with an over-the-shoulder wink—"I'd get up at six thirty for that can't-miss Kapiti sunrise."

Wilder has earbuds in but can hear enough to roll their eyes.

Ada sets an alarm for six fifteen on her phone.

Emin is genuinely curious but has had enough with the winking.

Dinner is local and impressive: pūhā-laced toroi mussels and karengo dressed with karaka berries. Ada repeats every unfamiliar word aloud, eager to retain the knowledge. Wilder drinks sauvignon blanc with abandon, with no objection from Ada, who understands the trip to be a rite of passage; nor from Emin, who not only doesn't believe in minimum drinking ages, but who considers parenting to be beyond the scope of her office; and certainly not from the staff, who, given what their guests pay, would let Wilder do lines of coke at the table if they wanted.

There's a short presentation after dinner, redundantly designed to get the travelers enthused about something they're already committed to doing. All along the walls, framed photos of past "survivors" beam down at them with identical rows of

white teeth, different timbres of sunburn. A general sense of triumph prevails, though it's hard to tell from the photos whether this is something the "survivors" acquired during the course of their adventures or arrived with on their own.

Tanemahuta shows up around seven thirty, confers quietly with Ben in the entryway while the dregs of dinner are cleared. Wilder, who's insisted that a Polaroid mini camera is one of their "desert island items," snaps a quick image of Tanemahuta, admiring in his mien the suggestion of a *sympatico ennui*.

Ben bids them all "a fond goodnight" with a light palms-together bow, which only Ada reciprocates, and Tanemahuta takes over the post-dinner orientation/presentation video, with considerably less fervor than Ben.

In the video, a San Francisco yogi in an orange halter-style bikini spears a fish. The fish, a tuna maybe, writhes on the tip of a branch she's sharpened like a shiv with a knife she's brought from home. In the YouTube version, there's a link to buy the knife.

After the yogi, there's a trio of brothers in near-identical variations of the same pullover sweater. Each looks stoned as hell.

Then there's a talking heads segment, the CEO of Aventura Regia, mostly haircut, followed by footage of a bearded entrepreneur standing nude on a cliff, facing the water, limbs spread in gratitude to the universe. Ada and Emin, who have always found amusement in the male buttocks, share a private smirk.

The video is lousy with drone shots, all twirling around volcanoes, beaches, rock formations at a wildly fluctuating frame rate. The score is definitely stock music, but the expensive kind. Something with "victory" in the file name.

Wilder, who's been quietly filching gum from the hospitality cart for the past four hours, applauds drably as the video winds to a conclusion.

"Any questions?" Tanemahuta asks.

Wilder snaps a mouthful of gum. "Has anyone ever died?"

"Not yet," says Tanemahuta, and the way he winks, you can tell he was encouraged to wink more during a management meeting.

The next two days are a blur of naval-grade bowline knots and passably constructed fires, quizzes on poisonous leaves and K12 flashbacks to dissected dogfish sharks. On the third day, Tanemahuta, who's mostly been teaching, stands back to let Ben, who's mostly been announcing, announce that the team is ready for the wild.

As a graduation gift from the mandatory basecamp training, Ada, Emin, and Wilder are each given a guidebook, each in a slightly different color and size. In addition to invaluable footnotes on local flora and fauna, each includes a blank sketchpad section in the back, with an encouragement to "write what you see."

Beauty, writes Ada.

Tangata Pokanoa, the "private island," is roughly eighty kilometers north of Kapiti. It is, as promised, private as all get out, not even a fleck on maps of the Tasman Sea. Ada takes care to model excitement over this and other aspects of the trip, as she did when Wilder was a toddler, teaching them to appreciate ice cream and positive election returns.

Tanemahuta steers the speedboat into a designated cove on the western shore. Ben points out various trees from their various guidebooks. He's right about half the time.

When they land, Wilder leaps from the boat before they've ful-



ly moored. Ada recognizes in their rashness an element of growing up, of going before one's ready, of coming of age. Damp to the knees with seafoam, Wilder fishes the guidebook from their back packet and consults it. Feet planted in the unsteady surf, they look up, then down, then over their shoulder, grave with concern.

"That goat should not be here."

"Right you are!" Ben exclaims, as though they've won a bonus round. He lashes the boat to the mooring, talking as he stumbles over the side, less elegantly than one might expect from someone whose job this is. "Goats were introduced to New Zealand in the '80s—the 1780s—and then, for reasons not totally explicated, were sort of transported around to various islands."

Behind him, Tanemahuta seethes.

"Turns out feral goats are pretty good for brush-clearing, but bad for other things," Ben continues.

"Like... the ecosystem?"

"Yeah, exactly."

Ada and Emin disembark with minimal pomp, each trying, in her own way, to be present.

The world is all blue and green, dripping with majesty. Indifferent ocean, algal profusions. Clots of gorse over icing-white sand.

"What's gorse?" Wilder asks.

"Ah," says Ben, grimacing. "They're sort of—how would you put it, Tawny?"

"They're the feral goats of the plant kingdom."

"That's it."

They all take a walk around the shoreline adjacent to the cove, and Ben keeps gesturing with the full length of his arm. "The island is yours," he says. "You can set up camp wherever you like." Wilder watches as a feral goat bounds back into the dark through a patch of underbrush. "Though Tanemahuta can suggest some good spots if you want."

"Happy to," says Tanemahuta, although he doesn't sound happy at all.

When the speedboat disembarks from the shore, Emin stands at the place where the water kisses the sand for a very long time. She is, despite herself, ecstatic.

The truth is, she has always wanted this life, this woman, this place.

She is, for the first time in a good long while, at ease.

Ada, Emin, and Wilder have agreed on a campsite (the spot suggested by Tanemahuta) by unanimous decision. "Not because he's a man," Ada says grandly, "but because he knows the island." Then, looking pointedly at Wilder: "We don't discriminate against men because they're men any more than we'd like them to discriminate against us."

Wilder cocks their head. "Yeah, I know."

Ada leads them through the grubby fanfare of tent-building and fire-building with the enthusiasm of a den mother presiding over a gingerbread house contest. There's a great deal of excitement at first but, despite six collective hours of knot training, they're concurrently overqualified for and not terrific at it. Nonetheless, the tent—a sand-white flap strung between multiple half-assed knots—and the fire—a glowing slur of salvaged branches over the pre-packaged fire-starting kit—go to plan. In the end they are, one has to admit, magnificent.

"Christ, would you look at that?" says Ada. And she's right,

of course, it's totally magnificent. It is inarticulably beautiful, this dumb tent and rollicking paint-by-numbers fire against the indigo swell of the Tasman Sea. Birds are everywhere. The gorse, whether it's technically supposed to be here or not, is a flourishing civilization of flowers in caution-tape yellow and dusk-dark green. All is right with the world, for at least five meters in every direction.

Once the tent and fire are built, and in the absence of news, phone calls, closets, appliances, work, school, and the generic din wafting up from Spring Street, there's not a whole lot to do.

So they find things to do.

Ada composes several works of hybrid poetry in the back of the journal gifted by Aventura Regia.

Emin reads her guidebook with alacrity. She builds fires, harvests edible flowers for garnishes on their half-planned/half-foraged meals. She learns about the local wildlife, on the whole less spectacular and less hampered by evolution: birds that can't fly, mammals that can't run, insects that can't sting. She keeps reading, fascinated, but the general takeaway (as far as she can tell) is that evolution is a drag and that things should basically be left alone.

Wilder drinks moodily from their canteen and stares into the distance, but not toward the water. Emin asks what they're up to, and they reply that they're watching for goats.

Wilder, Emin, and Ada go on hikes and discover innumerable treasures: fluorescent-green flightless parrots, centipedes the size of your thumb, two-hundred-foot waterfalls. A mid-air rainbow because, according to Wilder, "science." They have a picnic in a cave and Ada and Emin twine their fingers like an obscure braided pastry of which neither can remember the name.

They're all lodging in the same tent, so Ada and Emin go on a conspicuously vaunted "walk" about which Wilder couldn't care less. The sex is fast and hot and uncomfortable, with Emin pinned against the trunk of a kohekohe tree. Emin and Ada come at the same time and are profoundly grateful, with the unspoken understanding that every pleasure, no matter how gratifying, has a half-life.

By the end of Day Three, things are getting a little strange. Ada, who's always loved good coffee and, to Emin's chagrin, has occasionally touted this as a personality trait, has begun brewing coffee via the "sock method" introduced by Ben during Day Two of training. Emin has never hated Ada, not really, but when she devoutly calls something Emin's grandmother has done for sixty years—something Emin's worked very hard not to do, something she's worked very hard to subvert with the likes of three-hundred-dollar espresso machines and other vestiges of assumed privilege, but nonetheless still knows how to make better than this affront—"cowboy coffee," as Ben does, as though he came up with it, Emin hates her, just a little. It's not a dealbreaker, but it's not ideal.

When they go to bed, ten inches from Wilder, shielded by the flapping corner of their increasingly precarious tent, Ada rolls over and locks eyes with Emin, gaze glowing with "survival."

"Don't worry," Ada says quietly, "nothing trite is going to happen. This trip isn't going to dredge up weird shit like how you hang your shirts wrong or whatever."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" says Emin.

Ada leans back, glamorously arched in the waning firelight

like she's about to say something crazy, but then, because they're both extremely tired, they're asleep before the conversation goes any further.

By Day Four, Ada has given up on inviting the other two to either sunrise yoga or sunset yoga, although what she did this morning was really just stretching. She's read about how, prior to the widespread adoption of time zones, villages would set their clocks to noon whenever the sun reached its zenith in the sky, so this is what she's done. Working from an illustrated fragment of text in her guidebook, she's constructed a primitive sundial close to the tree line. It's more aesthetically interesting than useful—she borrows Wilder's camera to take a photo of her handiwork—but she takes pleasure in saying "Dinner's at six," and having it mean something.

By mid-afternoon, they're all a bit hungry and bored, passive-aggressively reading books across the communal fire. Facing the forest and not the coast, Wilder is perched over a paperback copy of *Julie of the Wolves*.

Ada watches Wilder keenly over the haze of the fire, dunking a sock into a pot of tepid water.

"Why do you think they're reading that?"

Emin, inspired by the pro-self language of her guidebook (actually Wilder's), is lying against an unsteady pile of tōtara leaves at a forty-five-degree angle, trying to reclaim her tan. "Maybe it's for school."

"No. That's a middle school book." Ada bobs the sock in the water with the rhythm of whetting a weapon. "You think they're trying to send a message?"

"Send a message?"

"That they'd rather have done the polar vacation."

"No. No one wants that."

"Or..." Ada softens. "Or they're genuinely interested in survival."

"Christ, who isn't?" Emin means for it to sound playful, but it doesn't. "I mean *obviously* they're interested in survival. Recreationally."

"Are you drunk?"

"How the hell would I be drunk?"

"I just feel like they're reading it at me."

Yesterday, while on the prowl for feral goats, Wilder offered to trade guidebooks with Emin. Emin agreed. Wilder's had more pictures, more natural wellness tips, more artists' renderings of botany and fewer of wildlife. Emin's had more animals than plants, many of which were endangered or extincted, which she was beginning to find depressing. They didn't find any goats, but Emin was grateful for the company.

Wilder offered Emin a sip from their canteen. Emin coughed, and Wilder blandly clarified that it wasn't water, that they'd been stockpiling white wine for the duration of their training on Kapiti. Emin should have, of course, lectured them, but why? Who was to say Wilder didn't know better?

There was a moment. An understanding.

Wilder laughed and then Emin laughed. It wasn't even a whole scene. Just a moment, really. Hardly worth mentioning.

Truth is, it had occurred to Emin, just once, just for the split-test of split seconds, how fun it would be.

She used to go for younger girls. Not *young* young, obviously, but younger than she. Emin liked having something to offer.

"It's normal to have involuntary sex dreams about people you

know," Emin's therapist had once told her. "It's inevitable."

"Inevitable?"

"Normal."

Emin had looked out onto a partial but legitimate view of the Park off 83rd. "I don't need to be told I'm normal," she'd said.

Her therapist had grimaced, then smiled, then said, "Copy that."

Emin had dozed to the sound of custom pen on custom notepad, vision lapsing between lashes and leaves, sunlight glinting through slats of black tupelo and American elm.

And that had been it. Nothing had been resolved.

That had been the lesson.

"It's not that you're drunk. You just seem drunk."

"Thanks," says Emin. She turns away, as though she's tanning each side of her face at intervals, but really because she's had a lot of Wilder's squirreled-away wine and is super drunk.

Over dinner on Day Six, Wilder is difficult to engage. They've become very concerned with the goats.

"Honey," says Ada. "Honey, honey."

Wilder, who has about two hours of battery life left before their contraband iPod becomes a glorified brick of trash, switches it off and turns slowly, for effect. "What if something dreadful happens?" they say.

"What are you talking about?" says Ada.

"If something happens to one of us. Do you think they'd really get here on time?"

"What is wrong with you? Of course they would. It's in the contract."

"I read about this woman on one of their South Pole trips. She was a total convict, and no one knew."

"Well, that's one of the good things about a trip like this," says Ada. "It's just us."

The photo that winds up on the wall of "survivors" is taken on Day Six. It's Ada, staring straight into Wilder's Polaroid camera, pinching a two-inch crab between her thumb and index finger. In the photo, you can still see the dregs of her last manicure, from Lucky Nails on Seventh. The color is Khaki Vert by Chanel. Vogue will reference it briefly in a future article on "strong women."

Wilder has spent the bulk of the "vacation" tracking down the creatures in their guidebook (really Emin's), asking questions of no one, because there's no one to ask and also no internet. On Day Seven, they find an insect the size of a gerbil scampering through a patch of gorse and are over the moon. "Can you believe it?"

"Yes," Ada says confidently, although she's doing something else.

"It's a *wētāpunga*. The guidebook says it's endangered. Almost extinct."

"Really?"

"Here." Wilder brings the guidebook to Ada, and they look at the entry together. Ada feels a nostalgic pang, a surge of déjà vu. She remembers this, her and Wilder perched just so over elementary school textbook passages on icebergs and rain forests, diagrams on South America's slow secession from Pangaea. Wilder's small fingers tracing the words of the informational display at the museum's butterfly conservatory, eyes darting between the illustration and the real thing, near-panicked with

fascination, as though they might have to choose.

"It's one of the oldest animals on the island," Wilder expatiates. "These little islands, they broke off from other landmasses like fifteen million years earlier than Australia—or, no, before the dinosaurs were extinct—so then other places got mammals like crazy, but here never did. So, you know how Australia's like nine-for-ten or something on the world's scariest insects?"

Ada nods, following along, maybe about to cry. She's so proud of Wilder.

"But here never got mammals the same way, so without predators, the insects didn't have to get scary. They didn't have to survive. So instead of getting smaller and faster they got bigger and slower."

Ada nods. "Survival makes us all better."

"No, no," Wilder says, talking so quickly that they interrupt their own laugh, "they are better. They're basically mice or rabbits or whatever. On a long enough timeline, they're essentially you."

Ada laughs and squeezes Wilder's hand. "Honey, you're brilliant."

The insect is lumbering so slowly that Wilder is able to get their camera from the tent and snap a photo before the creature's made even a meter of headway. They wave the Polaroid like a fan, watching.

"This is the best part," Wilder says. "Wētāpunga is named for a myth. It means the god of ugly things."

The insect is undeniably ugly, Ada supposes, but in a sort of adorable way. Bulbous black eyes and flailing antennae, a plump, scaled body propelled by notched legs that seem to have no awareness of what the other legs are up to. It bumps against a bundle of undergrowth and then finds its way onward, clambering between the hazard-yellow flowers of the gorse.

"Wētāpunga," she says, eager to retain the knowledge.

Day Eight is by far the worst. The shadow hasn't even reached the tenth rock in Ada's sundial before Wilder is stumbling out from the tree line, pinching a new Polaroid.

They head straight for the water, where Emin is standing barefoot, toes flirting with whatever flotsam and jetsam the Tasman Sea has to offer. Emin has in mind to procure some edible seaweed for dinner, which Ada has vociferously approved, but Wilder's guidebook is more artsy than informative on the subject of sea plants. She turns at the sound of Wilder's approach.

"Hey, kiddo."

Wilder thrusts out the Polaroid. A grisly half-insect, definitely wētāpunga, split along the seams of the scales two thirds up its back. It's crushed from the neck up, innards smeared over the cuplike shell of the carapace. Two legs hang like chopsticks draped over the lip of a cup.

"Christ," says Emin. "Same one from yesterday?"

Wilder shrugs. They don't know. "These fucking goats," they say hoarsely.

"You don't know it was them."

Wilder clutches the photo with both hands now, careful not to touch the part with the pigmentation. "I touched it," they finally say.

"What are you talking about?"

"I thought, when will I be this close again to something like this again, right? So, I touched its back and it stopped for just like a *second*, and then it kept going but like, what if it's one of

those things like when you touch a bird and then the mother bird won't take it back? Or those two seconds altered the course of its day? So, you know, now it got stepped on? Because of me?"

Emin sloshes through the surf and pulls Wilder into a hug, careful not to disturb the photo.

From the entrance of the rapidly devolving canvas tent, well out of earshot, Ada sees them bonding and smiles.

"This wasn't your fault," Emin says.

"I mean, probably not, no, but in a truer, more historic way, yes."

Emin isn't sure what to say to this, so she turns back to the surf, where she's just in time to see the next bad thing emerge. The Polaroid of the dead insect, along with the ensuing exchange, is why Wilder is also right there, and why there's a second person to scream when it happens.

A thin ribbon of black swells up from the froth of the surf. The ribbon—a snake, in fact, its underside a vivid gorse-yellow—twitches its head curiously, as though gauging its prospects, then, with a decisive, bantamweight lunge, latches onto Emin just above the ankle.

Wilder, finally traumatized in a way that will require therapy, watches as Emin collapses and, with the snake still attached, stomps on its back with their bare heel. The snake lets go, and Wilder is unsurprised when it limply drifts off. They felt the vertebrae snap underfoot.

For a second, everything is quiet. It isn't until Wilder places their hands on their knees and screams "WHY DID YOU BRING US HERE" that Ada realizes anything is amiss.

Emin opens her eyes to see Ada and smiles, vision bleary with a rush of affection. Ada is here. Ada will know what to do.

Up the coast, Wilder is photographing the corpse of the snake, which has washed ashore, like a forensic investigator.

Ada, who's purchased every new edition of the EMS Field Guide since the year Wilder was born, has pulled Emin into her lap by the torso to elevate the heart above the wound. She's traced the initial bite and marked the progress of the inflammation with a ballpoint pen. She's pressing two fingers to Emin's pulse with one hand, clutching the sat phone to her ear with the other. "What about the *speedboat*?" Ada shouts.

There's a pause on the other end, slightly longer than the standard lag for a sat phone. "One of the fellows on Kaipahua," Ben says grimly, "got himself bit by a stingray."

"That is not a fatal injury!"

Ben clears his throat. "It can be if it takes a testicle."

Emin laughs deliriously, maniacally, loud enough for Ben to hear. She gets it now, kind of, the sliver of fun women in labor must have. The all-access pass to honest reactions.

"Then get the goddamn helicopter here RIGHT FUCKING NOW," Ada yells. Emin is still laughing.

Wilder races across the sand and drops to their knees, Polaroid and guidebook in hand. "Mom," Wilder says. "Mom, mom."

"Honey, what?"

"It's a yellow-bellied sea snake. It's—" Wilder drops their voice—"very. *poisonous*."

"I thought you said they don't have those here."

Wilder shrugs, helpless, already crying like it's their fault. "I don't know," they say, "I don't know anything."

"We thought it was extinct," Ben says over the sat phone, "but they found one in New Zealand—"

"I DON'T NEED YOU TO BE FUCKING PBS, BEN. I NEED THE FUCKING HELICOPTER."

"It's already on its way." The way he says it, you can tell Ben is crying.

Emin, for her part, has never been more in love. This is the Ada she knows, survival Ada, whether or not survival is required. Right even when she's wrong. Ada who works out and knows all the right creams, who looks good from every angle. Ada who's going to take her to Egypt in the fall.

It seems extremely possible, in this moment, that Emin will die. She wonders what it would be like, to be an occasion. A calendared tragedy. A perfectly good date, annually ruined. She wonders whether Ada would resent it or be into it.

Emin remembers a line from the orientation video that made her laugh:

We are prepared for every reasonable contingency.

She can imagine this word in court, *reasonable*, the lawyer practicing it in front of the mirror.

If Emin dies, Ada will blame herself, then the travel company, then the tech guy with one testicle, then the island itself. Her stages of grief will be the different entities she blames. The snake, interestingly, will never make the list.

Overhead, a cloud shifts from something that looks like a whale to an eel, one part of the cloud outpacing the others.

Ada monitors her symptoms. They're all textbook, trite. Numb fingertips and toes, shuddering limbs, heart palpitations. The works.

The emergency helicopter will get here in time, probably. It'll be a story they tell over cocktails at New Year's. She imagines the polite gasps of their guests, the play-acting of who should tell it. Emin will tell it, but her version will lack important details. Ada will jump in to help.

Wilder rocks in the surf, knees hugged to their chest, while Ada strokes sweat from Emin's brow, monitors the wound, glances around the perimeter for nonexistent threats. Her face hovers above Emin's face, eyes focused but frenetic with concern. The fussy, frustrated attentiveness of nothing-to-be-done.

Dipping in and out of darkness, Emin imagines Ada's face over the lip of a coupe glass, flushed with remembered worry.

In the end it'll be her hand on Ada's arm, reminding her that the danger is past now.

A. J. Bermudez is an award-winning writer, filmmaker, and Editor of The Maine Review. Her first book, *Stories No One Hopes Are About Them*, won the 2022 Iowa Short Fiction Award and was a 2023 Lambda Award Finalist. Her work has appeared in a number of literary publications, including The Kenyon Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, Boulevard, Story, Creative Nonfiction, and elsewhere. She is a former boxer and EMT, and is a recipient of the Diverse Voices Award, the Page Award, the Alpine Fellowship Writing Prize, and the Steinbeck Fellowship.

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Poem by Chapin Cimino

Chapters, timers on stoves, toothpaste—
these things warn about their ends. Timing
belts. Miscarriages. A skinny little trans-
planted tree giving up on itself. These
don't. Like an open-armed daughter who
tears across a playground. Like a tired one,
almost grown, pleading *carry me carry me!*
Ghost moments. Like you and I talk.

That daughter kisses me goodbye and
gets on the Metro de Madrid. Three stops
to her apartment. I turn into the day.
An old metal-cased phone booth rises
up and out of the concrete crossroad.
Sky-blue side panels, grass-green tented
top, matte metal face, buttons to nowhere.
Nothing to hold onto. Slathered in symbols:

resta'irador / Hello My Name is / De meulbles y

antigüdades / numtas / 91 478 30 42 /

Nana Karamel Tatoo / IBIZIA59 / JUAN GALGO /

FCK PIGS

Palimpsests and echoes, messages crawling out of
bottles, regrowing tentacles: acetylcholinesterase
in action. We have this protein, too. Los Madrileños
reaching out and receiving. Even though their ghost
lines ache. Even though those lines have been



Chapin Cimino is a creative writer living, writing, and teaching near Philadelphia. Besides connection, she loves daughters, cities without skyscrapers, raising her heart rate, and the Lansdowne Writers' Workshop. Chapin's creative work has appeared in *Stone Poetry Quarterly*, *Hippocampus*, *The Write Launch*, *The Dewdrop*, and *The Curator*.



The City of Brotherly Love

Jillian S. Benedict

Philadelphia, a city of blue glass that shines bright against the clear sky like a fish's scales in a river, sits perched between two metropolitan behemoths: New York and Washington D. C. Known more for its attitude and aggressive sports fans than its kindness, it can be difficult to see the attraction of the "under-dog" city; however, for those who have spent time here and have grown to appreciate its gruff nature, there's a uniqueness to Philadelphia that separates it from other cities. "We are what we are, don't care what others think, and can rightfully stand on our own just fine without needing to convince others of some sort of magic that exists here," my friend Nate said after returning to Philadelphia, having spent two years in Mexico. It may not sound glamorous, but it's real. It's more than just a symbol of prosperity and potential the way all cities are. Philadelphia just has this vibe. Even before I lived here, I knew it was different. Even before I lived here, it felt like home. My friend, Claire, said it perfectly, "It truly is a thriving city with so much personality and character with the charm of community I sense I would not feel in a larger city like New York. Philadelphia is known for being the City of Brotherly Love, the more time you spend living here the more you truly understand that motto."

On my third day in Philadelphia, I laced up my running shoes early. It was July and without the cover of the lush trees of the Schuylkill River Bike Trail that I had grown accustomed to, it was likely to be a sweaty run. The air outside was dense. I could feel the particles of moisture move around my body as I walked down the front steps of my new brownstone building, but I didn't care. The city—my city—was just starting to wake up. Cars choked the stretch of Broad Street on their way to work. People walked the streets with their newspapers and podcasts. As I started my music and began the run that I had mapped out, I thought about how good it felt to be a part of something larger than myself again. How, after a year in isolation with only my father and grandfather, I was one of the masses. A Philadelphian.

Running in the city is like trail running in nightmare mode. Not only do you have to make sure you don't run into any potholes or rusting bulkheads, but you also have to weave in between people, bikes, and the dreaded cars. I had been running for a few months at that point, clocking fifteen miles a week on a good week, but I had to readjust my expectations for that morning. Head on a swivel, I darted between slower pedestrians and looked both ways before crossing streets. It was a higher risk, but

fun. It made the time go by fast and, of course, further fed into the idea that I belonged to this new place that I had decided to make my home.

"In Mexico," Nate continued, "Everything felt like a dream or adventure. And most people there are happily participating in that dream and adventure. But that makes taking life seriously difficult. As I started to focus more on my work and professional development, that environment became counterproductive, and I didn't quite fit in anymore. So, I began to miss the normalcy of Philadelphia and the 'corporate America' environment. Normal people with normal jobs, careers, goals."

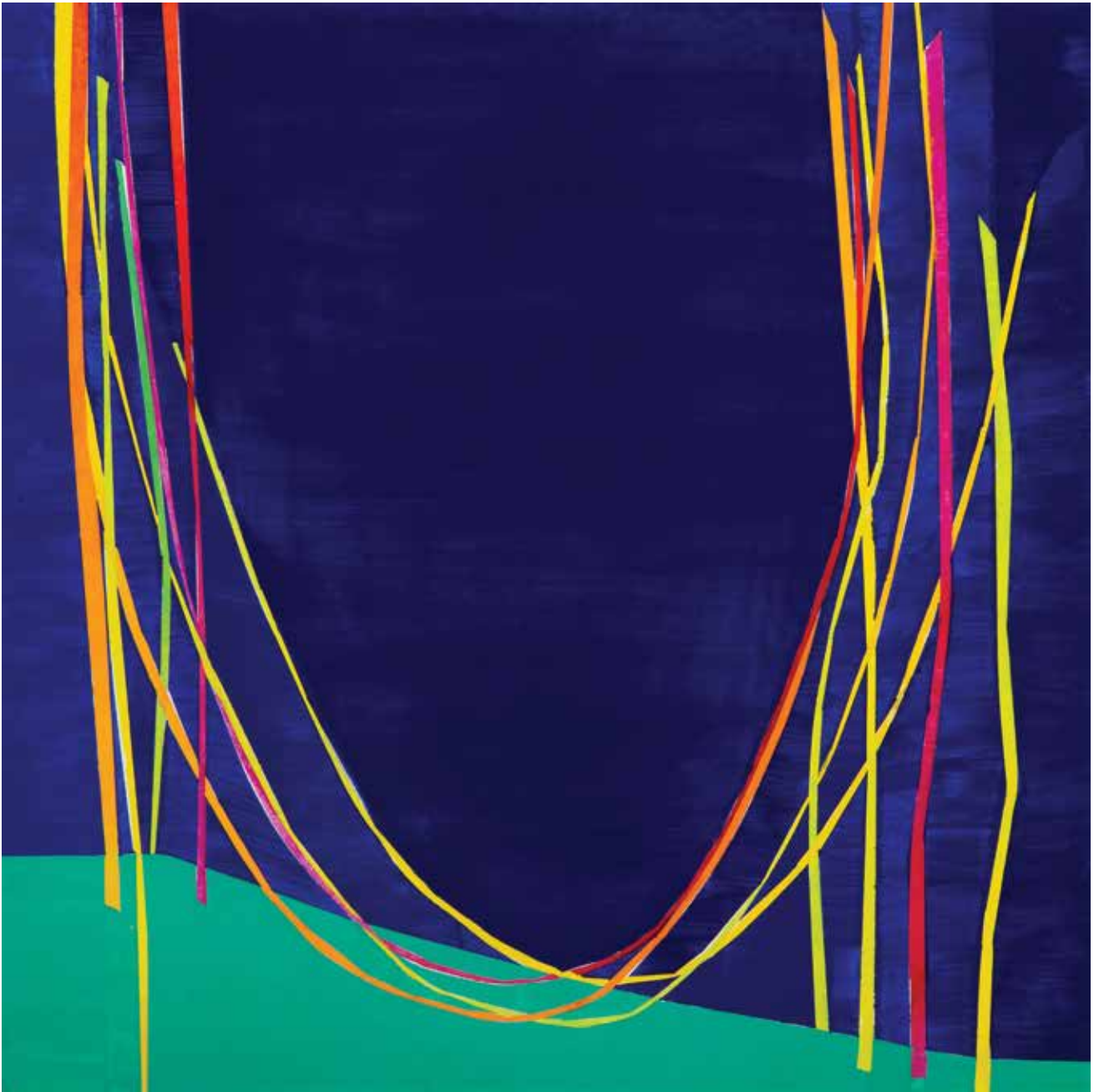
That's what Philadelphia is, a working-class city full of people just living their lives. Dreams do not come true here. We do not make promises we cannot keep, and it's this authenticity that attracts people, or, sometimes, repels them.

Three miles. That was my goal. A nice, easy run to get myself into the mindset of running in the city. It was a good run for the most part, albeit hot and the cement was tough under my feet. I felt confident and capable as I charged down Passayunk, vibing to my music and thinking of how good the shower would feel when I reached my apartment a mere half mile away.

Crossing the slanted intersection at Dickinson, I saw a beat-up red pickup truck out of the corner of my eye. They'll stop, I thought, continuing through the intersection. He'll stop, I thought again as the truck approached. By the time I realized the driver wasn't going to stop, it was too late. The truck hit my right shoulder, sending me hurtling towards the ground. The intersection froze. My AirPods skittered across the road. It wasn't even eight o'clock in the morning.

"We are nice but not necessarily friendly," Claire said. "We help each other out but will also quickly curse each other out should the occasion arise." Picking myself up and dusting myself off after an elderly man with crazy white hair bonked me with his car, I could commiserate.

"Are you okay?" he asked, somewhat perplexed. I murmured a weak "no" as I hobbled to the curb, scared that I would cry if I said anything else. The man, Joe, pulled his truck over and sat with me until the police arrived and we could file a report. As we sat, we talked through what happened. How the stop signs were askew and where I thought he had yet to stop, he



already had and had begun driving again. We also talked about life and health. He gave me his insurance information as well as his phone number. He would check in on me three times in the following weeks just to see how I was doing.

Waiting at the urgent care for my shoulder to be x-rayed, I thought about the events of the day. Embarrassment burned the back of my neck. It was only my third day in the city, and it was rejecting me. The one dream I had been working toward for years, the thing that kept me sane during the pandemic shutdown, had been smashed before my eyes like my left AirPods which had been run over after the accident. What was I to do now?

When I told the nurse what had happened, he nodded his head. "You'd be surprised how often people get hit by a car running or biking."

"Really?" I asked, rolling up my sleeve to show him my budding bruise.

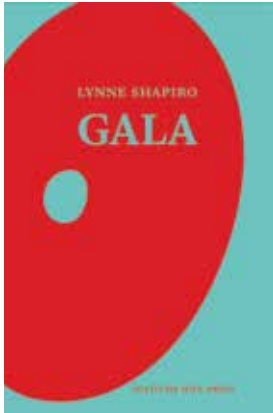
"Oh yeah, it's super common," he continued before welcoming me to the city.

It's our experiences that make us. This was the first of many experiences that would shape me over the next three years including heartbreaks, publications, diagnoses, and friendships. Even though it was a little painful, I feel strong now, aware. When I charge up the same stretch of Broad Street that I ran just three years before, I know I've earned my confidence. What felt like a rejection at first has shown itself to be a baptism into the city. I think about this as I walk to my local coffee shop on Saturday mornings or sit in Columbus Park and watch my neighbors come and go. As my friend Nate once said, "I cut my teeth in Philly figuring out who I was."

Jillian S. Benedict is a creative writer living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In her free time, she enjoys yoga, reading, and listening to music while people watching from her stoop. Her work can be found in *Feels Blind Literary*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Roi Fainéant*, and on Instagram @writerwithoutacause.

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Gala

by Lynne Shapiro

Review by Susan Williams

Gala by Lynne Shapiro is a transcendent collection exploring in detail the intricacies and themes of art by using a few specific works pictured in the book to guide the reader through her experience. By folding and unfolding themes of Christian Mythology, temptation, and art history with these pieces, Shapiro highlights the importance of the consumption of art in our everyday lives and how doing such can build connections and widen our view to a perspective beyond our own sometimes narrowed views of the world.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org



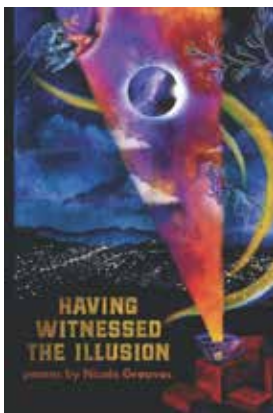
Esprit de Corpse

by EF Deal

Review by Anna Huber

Esprit de Corpse by EF Deal is a unique tale of adventure and mystery set in a french steampunk setting, largely separating the book from novels that traditionally place the steampunk universe in England or America. Through discussions of the female body and survival through the feminist lens, *Esprit de Corpse* provides views of how many women working in predominantly male-led fields may feel in trying to forge paths of their own.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org



Having Witnessed The Illusion

by Nicole Greaves

Review by Amy Small McKinney

Nicole Greaves in her book, *Having Witnessed The Illusion*, moves her readers away from the peephole, away from the porthole, away from the small openings between herself and the world, and invites us into her world of deep imagery and lyricism joined with storytelling. In struggling to understand her single mother's immigrant experience, and her own shuttling between languages and profound sense of being viewed by others, an outsider, we journey with Greaves as she, daughter, teacher, mother, and writer, moves closer to her own sense of belonging.

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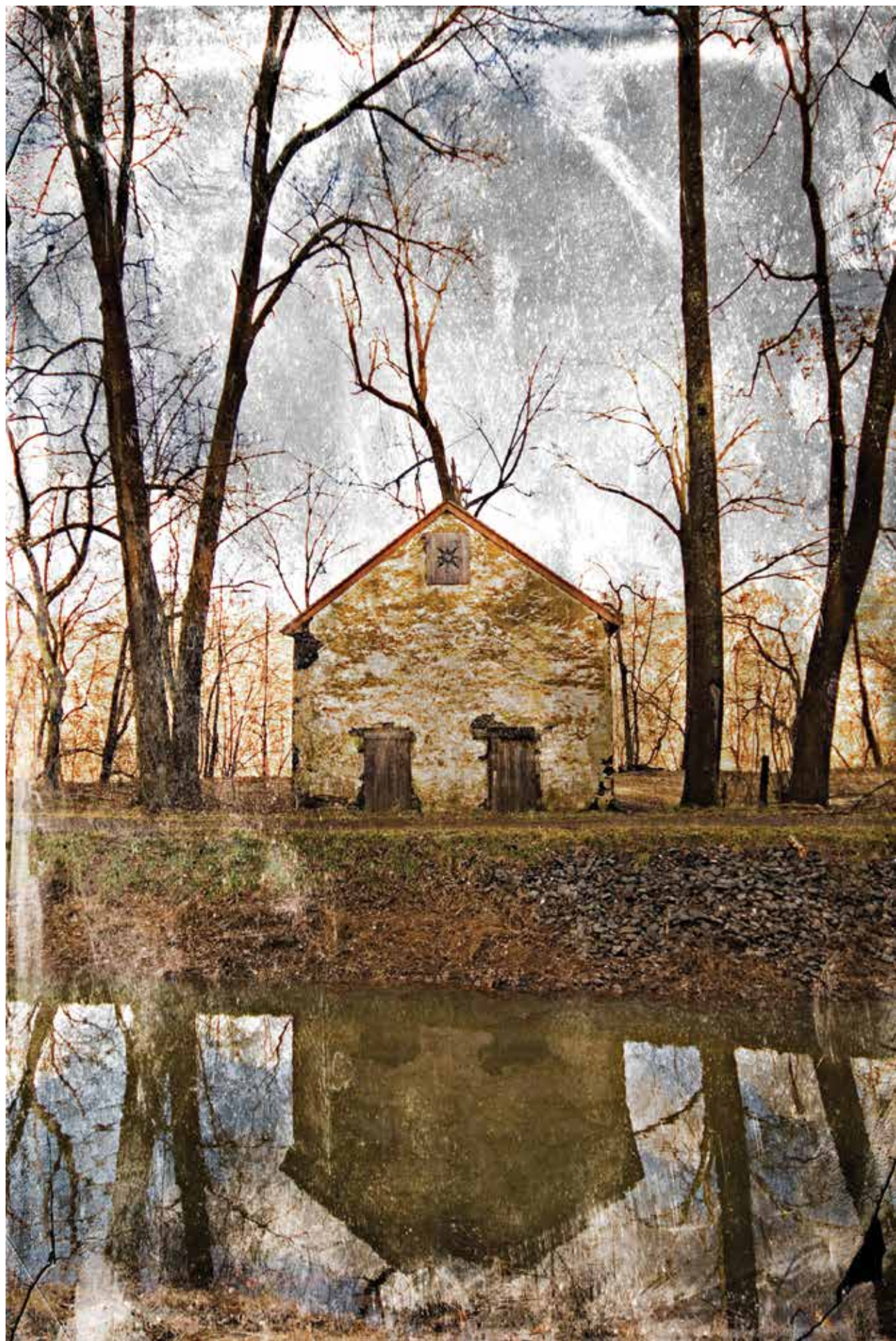
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