

*Diverse
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Diverse Voices Quarterly, Volume 8, Issue 30

Cover art: *Painting Lines Across the Sky - Birds on Wires* by Chris Crabtree

BIO: Chris Crabtree is a Kansas City singer-songwriter originally hailing from the sagebrush plains of the Texas Panhandle. His music provided the soundtrack for the award-winning feature documentary *Corporate FM*. Formerly of the electronic-space-music duo, Tacit Blue, he turned his attention to his first love of songwriting and released his first rock album, *Counterfeit Heart*, in November 2015. That record served as a soundtrack to his novel, *Zen and the Art of Killing Your Self*, also released at the same time. His music draws from the sounds of Ryan Adams, Daniel Lanois, Tom Petty, Bruce Springsteen, U2, and Bob Dylan.

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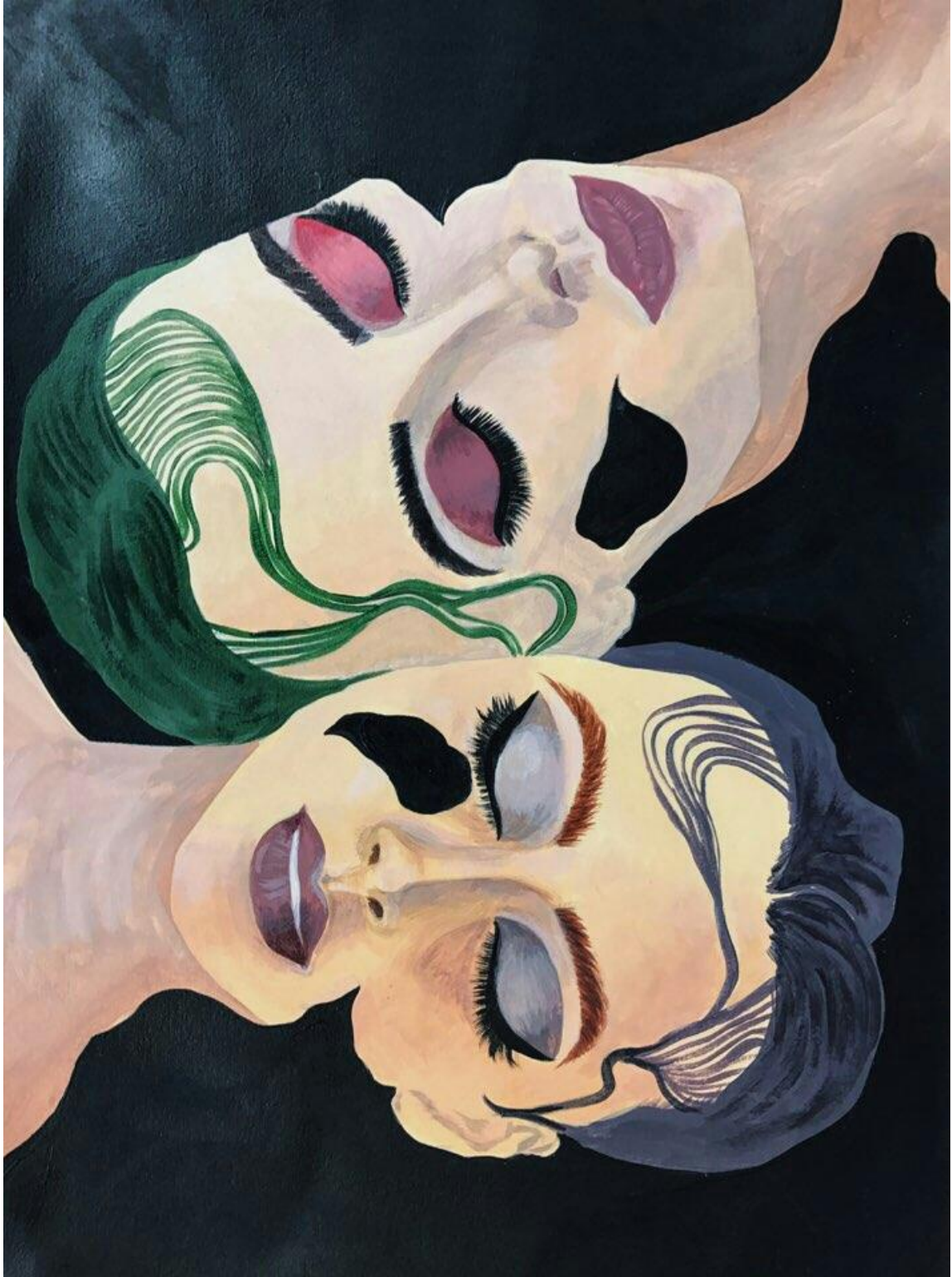
THE LONELY AND THE BRIGHT

I introduced myself to happy
the way that the morning
introduces itself to the sky;
there was no hand-shaking,
no card-exchanging,
just the silent observation that there was something
so equally beautiful
about both the lonely and the bright,

in the same way,
I suppose,
that you can spell
sacred and scared
with the same letters.

—Rayne Affonso

BIO: Rayne Affonso is fifteen and from Trinidad and Tobago. She spends her time with her head in lots of books and is currently in two committed relationships with both Chinese food and Pinterest.



Two Faces
—Nayeon Hong

DUMPLINGS

by Sarvat Hasin

Iris often set menus ahead of her visits, requests of what she wanted to eat when she got there. The lists would crop up in Hina's emails or on her phone, once even scrawled up the back of a postcard from Stockholm. The menus were signals of her arrival. She never called to say she was coming to stay, only showed up three days (give or take) after her lists. On these lists, Iris referred to each food item by the names they'd coined when they lived in Jericho and cooked together all the time. So bread pudding was *Post-Whiskey Duvet* and cherry pie was *American Roadtrip*.

Hina never knew what to do with these lists. Iris's sense of humor was strange and unclear so even ten years into knowing her, she could never tell if it was a joke or if Iris really expected three puddings on a two-night visit. She'd stick the list up on the fridge the morning of her arrival and circle one thing to make, treating it with the same percentage of seriousness as the rest of their conversations.

She knew the whole business with the menus was an extension of how Iris saw her. It made her want to answer the door in an apron and pearl earrings just so Iris could complete the picture in her head, the fifties housewife pulling a roast out of the oven for her husband. Instead she zipped herself into a pair of jeans she'd not worn in six years, snuggler on her waist than they'd ever been, swooped her hair off the back of her neck and stepped into the kitchen. Bruce Springsteen was playing on the radio; she bit on her

bottom lip and carefully circled the *Breakup Dumplings*.

* * *

Of all her relationships, Iris was the most rewarding, the least forgiving. Some friendships cut off mercifully quick—two people who realize that their lives have diverged can often easily disassociate from each other, relying only on the occasional text message or Internet updates on their lives—but clearing out the emotional involvement without any sense of loss. Between Iris and her, there was no such easy detangling. They could go months without talking to each other and within minutes they were sunk into years of knotty history, like quicksand.

Hina was nineteen when they met and Iris twenty, both students at the time in different departments—Iris read English, Hina studied arch and anth, but they'd both gone to a journalism seminar and sat together in the front, each frantically taking notes. Hina had never seen anyone with penmanship as loopy and messy as her own. At the end, Iris asked if they could swap.

“Just to make sure I haven't missed anything.”

Hina looked down at the three sheets Iris had filled both sides but ripped out the pages of her yellow legal pad anyway. She knew then that they'd know each other for a long time.

* * *

It wasn't that she didn't have friends before she met Iris. It was only that there was no one else who quite understood her in that way. Her mother used to send her magazine articles about the psychology of love, how to know when

you'd met the perfect person. For Hina, there'd never been a boy who fit that description but Iris was close, the only meeting of minds she knew. Once they got to know each other, Oxford began to feel smaller—not quite as busy or broad. The streets between their colleges became familiar. The smell of greasy fry-ups at the end of Iris's road, the libraries that were closest for both of them to get to, the last pub to close on a Thursday night.

The year after, they moved into a house with six other people. One of those crammed in properties that was probably illegal or should be, living rooms quartered to bedrooms so snug that if you sat up on the bed, you could touch each wall with the tips of your fingers. There was a fireplace in the bathroom and nothing worked. The kitchen was so dirty that they could never bring themselves to do more than make scrambled eggs and coffee, kicking through empty beer bottles and takeout containers to eat breakfast on the slab of cement they called a patio and share a cigarette. Before she met Iris, she was not really in the habit of eating breakfast; a cup of tea and a smoke would do.

“My grandmother calls that a whore's breakfast,” Iris said, sloshing soy sauce into the eggs, and Hina had been offended enough to accept a plate. “And anyway, if you want to write about food, you'd better eat up. You can't write a piece on cigarettes and coffee.”

“You could describe the coffee.”

“And I, of course, would read ten pieces you wrote on that cup of instant alone. But who else will want to?” Iris leaned back in her chair, the rickety frame creaking under her weight. “Strictly speaking, food writing isn't really

journalism, is it?"

Hina put her eyebrows up. "Says the travel writer?"

"Touché."

"Proust wrote about food," she said.

"Don't tell me you want to be a food writer because of Proust."

"No actually," Hina said, "it was Dickens. All the pies and sandwiches."

Iris stubbed her cigarette at the bottom of her cup, stirring the ashes in with the dregs. "I hate Dickens," she said.

"Of course you do."

* * *

Then with their first jobs, they'd moved to London, into a tiny miracle of an apartment in Balham over a chip shop. The space was small but theirs, a bay window curving one corner of the living room where they hung paper lanterns—and Iris, who was a temp in a lawyer's office, said she wanted their apartment to look as far away from reality as possible. Neither of them had taken to the city particularly well, not yet won over by its dirty charm. There was never any time to write, and the days seemed to start before they even begun.

"The simple truth is," she said, lighting a tall red candle that smelled of cinnamon, "I want to be as far away from here as possible. So let's make this apartment the ultimate escape."

Hina was lying on the couch with her knees tucked up, a magazine flapped over her lap.

“We could do that. Or we could leave.”

“Where would we go?”

“I don’t know. We could go to Mexico.”

That night she made what they called *Escapist Tacos*, plotting itineraries as they cooked, trying to figure out how long on their current salaries they would need to save to get away: It would take eight months, give or take, if they were thrifty in the meantime, if they stopped eating out and never bought new clothes. They mapped their passages in the kitchen, dreaming up new names for each dish. That was the summer she made Pakistani food for the first time, plotting through her mother’s recipe book at Iris’s request: pakoras and daal chawal, everything she remembered from home.

“Maybe I should name the food,” Iris said, chopping onions for the guacamole. “*Escapist Tacos* isn’t that inspired, is it?”

“Those are too big.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, looking down at the chopping board, knife balanced on her hip. “They’re supposed to be chunky.”

“They are massive. They’re practically shallots.”

Iris narrowed her eyes and lifted the knife in a mock-menacing gesture. “I will cut you.”

“Do it. You’ll chop me in such large pieces that it should be easy enough to put me back together.”

“You’ve burnt the fish,” she said, and Hina looked down at the frying pan where the strips of battered cod were so singed they had duck tacos instead,

shoving the contents of their leftover shredded Chinese roast into the tortillas and complimenting themselves on their originality. Washed down with *Sex with Strangers* margaritas, a bottle of Sol each. It wasn't so bad—only in the morning, they both felt sick, staying in bed till eleven with tea and slices of toast with butter smudged to the corners, watching horror films till they could think again.

* * *

In the end they never got to Mexico or Tokyo or Iceland. Six months after the *Escapist Tacos*, Hina met Hasan. He was a lawyer Iris knew from work. It was never meant to get so serious. He was only another man like so many she knew. But when they went to the movies together, he let her get the kind of popcorn she liked, half-sweet and half-salty, which Iris always said was an abomination. He told jokes about the weather, folded down sections of the newspaper to read later, and ran on Sunday mornings, a thing she could never wrap her head around. Somehow they were engaged before the year was out. Iris came to their wedding dressed in black; it was on the 31st of October, which she thought was the best joke. The slow dissolving of their plans, Mexico stirring out of the new makeup of their lives went undiscussed. When Hina moved out of their flat, she and Iris cooked one last meal together. They made *Breakup Dumplings* with prawns and chives, little soft spheres of comfort, something they used to make for beaus they were trying to dump, a final kindness.

Between them, there had been no such formal acknowledgment of the

end. “Nothing will change,” Hina said, though of course they would no longer sleep in the same house and Iris would no longer leave a cup of coffee outside her door in the morning. Someone else would learn all the things about her that for now only Iris knew: how she sometimes wore tights under her jeans in the winters when she ran out of clean socks, how she hated the sound of the washing machine so she could only stand to be in the same room as it if she were playing *The Beatles* at full volume.

Instead they poured soy sauce into little dishes that her father sent them as a housewarming present and toasted to their new lives.

* * *

She made those dumplings this morning, rolling the wrappers out and dicing the shrimp to fry. There was a certain stillness in the kitchen, a flash of anxious brightness as there always was when Iris visited. She knew the dumplings would not impress her. Iris, who had spent the past month taking wintry trains through the north of Japan, writing an assignment on Hokkaido. There was nothing in Hina’s kitchen that she could match, though she still made sure that they’d stocked up on nice coffee, that there were fresh-cut flowers by the windowsill.

More importantly, she prepared herself for the stories Iris would tell—the ease with which her conversation could shift between reminiscences about their youth, the wild things they’d done, to accounts of her walking the Inca trail or eating oysters off the coast of Sicily, detailing the slip and grit of them, how the sea tasted different everywhere you went. It stirred an itch in Hina that she’d

long since buried.

“You should come with me next time,” Iris would always say, nudging her with socked feet, and Hina would smile and play along like it was possible, like she could step out on her job, her husband, and her life. Iris who had built her life on “never giving a fig” did not understand. She would understand even less now.

* * *

There were drunken noodles to go with the dumplings, and a fish curry. She read the papers while the fish was marinating and was glad her husband was out of town. He and Iris no longer got on as well as they used to. The menus in particular were a sticking point; he hated how she arrived with no proper notice, how she peppered the visits with inside jokes that he could be a part of. “She thinks she’s original,” he said, “but really it’s just rude.” It was easier with just one of them.

She unbuttoned the top of her jeans, the waistband pressing into her. There would be marks tracked into her flesh later. She would not last the evening in them. Iris seemed to get thinner and longer every year, and Hina barely fit into any of her clothes. At least this time she didn’t have to be ashamed of it. She changed into a white tunic and thought of ways she could break the news to Iris without turning it into an announcement or making a fuss. It would be best to wait till the morning, to bring up over breakfast. Breakfasts had been some of the best parts of their friendship.

In their last week of university, they’d both finished their exams on the

same day and been at parties every hour that weekend. On Sunday morning they were the only people in the house to wake up early. It was seven and the living space was cluttered with the debris of the night before, so they'd gone out for breakfast to the only place that was open: the Old Bank hotel, sunlight glowing through the windows, their hair still greasy with gin. Over pancakes, they talked about all the lives they wanted to live. The countries that would fill them, the lovers in each port. Always the promise never to settle for anything ordinary, anything less than what they deserved. In that moment Hina had perfect faith in this, buoyed up by the double strength of their enthusiasm.

But she knew the news would not hold till the morning. Iris would arrive at six as she usually did. She always got the five-twenty train from the airport, and would arrive weary but flushed, pinked cheeks and a bag in each hand. She'd unpack a little in the hallway and come through with a bottle of champagne in her fist. When Hina said she couldn't have a drink, she would know why immediately. There would be no point in trying to say she was being healthy or that champagne gave her headache. Lying to Iris was harder than walking a tightrope, all their years of knowing each other balanced out on the high wire. She felt nervous, even more than when she told her husband. It was likely that after tonight Iris would begin to disappear, a thing that had probably been inevitable for some time. And maybe when they stopped speaking, some part of Hina would even be relieved—but a world without Iris would need rethinking.

For pudding, she made siwayan. A variation on her grandmother's recipe.

Stirring the golden-brown strands of vermicelli in a cauldron that spit witchy with oil. When she poured it into the pale ceramic dish, she found herself thinking of a name. It was around five-thirty, the kitchen shot through with the last light of the day. It was not a game she'd indulged in for a long time. Iris really was better with them, cleverer and sharper.

She could call it *The Last Dessert*.

Iris would be here any minute.

BIO: Sarvat Hasin was born in London and grew up in Karachi. Her debut novel, *This Wide Night*, was published by Penguin India. She is also fiction editor of *The Stockholm Review*.

CLIMBING INTO THE BUS

Having snapped
a tiny padlock
through the zippers' eyes,
I hoist my backpack up
where a boy ropes it
down with other bags,
then step inside
and squeeze
into an open space
sitting among the other
passengers,
the sticky air,
the engine's sound
and fumes.
I've come here to learn
español, to find words
that speak the ruins
that mark me,
the testimony
of damage, the road
that curves itself
across the land.

—George Such

BIO: George Such is a fourth-year English Ph.D. student at University of Louisiana. He completed his M.A. in English at Western Washington University in 2012, and before that was a chiropractor for twenty-seven years in Washington State. His poetry collection *Where the Body Lives* won the 2012 Tiger's Eye Chapbook Contest and is available from Tiger's Eye Press.

GIRLS, GOD, AND MYSELF

by Carissa Hanson

Be born into a Christian family. Accept Jesus into your heart at four years old. As soon as you can control it, never wear dresses or skirts. Think girls rule and boys drool.

Be six years old. Overhear the two boys sitting behind you call one of your classmates “gay.” They’ll spit the word like poison. Wonder why.

Sit on it for a couple days. Try to find the word in dictionaries and old books on high shelves. The dusty pages will reaffirm what you thought you knew.

Ask your parents after church what “gay” means. They’ll ask you what you think it means. It means “happy,” doesn’t it? They’ll say, that’s right. But that isn’t what the two boys in class meant. There’s nothing wrong with being happy. They’ll tell you again that no, you’re right. There are no other meanings. Believe them because of misplaced pride in your six-year-old intellect and fervent trust that your parents love you and would not seriously lie to you.

The twist: your parents love you and would not seriously lie to you.

Make a habit of accepting Jesus into your heart, just to be sure it stuck.

* * *

Be ten years old. Talk with the other girls in your class. They’ll talk about boys they like-like. Are you already supposed to like-like boys? Boys are weird. Even the ones you regular-like are weird. They’ll ask who you like. Need an answer, fast. Pick a sweet boy from another class, a quiet one whom you don’t

speak to much. Wonder what distinguishes like-liking someone from regular-liking someone.

Be twelve years old. Be convinced that “gay” has another meaning besides “happy.” Ask your best friend what it means. She’ll ask why. Tell her because you don’t know. She’ll tell you what it means. She’ll ask if you are gay. Say no. You don’t think so, anyways. She’ll say OK. Go get frozen yogurt.

Meet a girl at church: a ninth grader. Be fascinated by the girl. Think the girl is cute. Everything will feel exciting and dangerous when you are with the girl, even if you are just talking about movies in the church sanctuary. Call the girl your friend. Tear the heads off your old Barbie dolls with her and slingshot them across the basement floor. Hope she doesn’t realize you are not nearly cool enough for her. Feel a strange emptiness when the girl disappears.

Go to the library. Find a book of skits that read like afterschool specials. Read the one about the gay man coming out to his family. Be baffled by the idea that others would think he would be interested in every single man on the planet. Think about the allegation that he is not normal. Think that God is creative and God is love.

The first time a boy asks you out, say no. He’ll ask why. Say: “I don’t like you.” (Because you don’t, you are thirteen, and you are tactless.)

Hang out with some old friends. They’ll mention a girl they know. She’s a “lesbo.” The new term will catch you off guard. Not that it takes rocket science to figure out what it means. Say: “She’s what?” They’ll say it again, this time with the question if you’re a “lesbo.” Say no. The answer is confident for them,

but you can't feel it in yourself.

* * *

Be fourteen. Go to the mall with your mom and younger sister. It will be nearly deserted. See two women holding hands. Your mom will click her tongue against her cheek. She will say, "Do you see them? They're lesbians." She will say it like the two boys in first grade said "gay." Be confused.

Go to the Family Christian Bookstore. See a pamphlet on "Homosexuality and the Bible." Remember the skit you read. Think the pamphlet will say more or less the same thing. It won't.

Pray like you're accepting Jesus again.

Rethink everything. Read and reread the Bible verses late at night under your covers. Accept what this means (what everyone around you says this means). Bury that meaning deep in your head, and hope it reaches your heart. Believe it when the pastor says there are lots of couples with people who used to be gay. When he says that most same-gender couples still follow heteronormative gender roles, and that meant something.

Be young and be trusting. Believe the adults in your life are intelligent, capable people who do not want to mislead you. Here is the funny thing: They are intelligent, capable people who do not want to mislead you.

When your youth group is told to start praying for their future spouses, pray for wisdom instead.

* * *

Start high school. Listen to the debates around you about politics, about

relationships, about food, about your classmates. Make friends. Keep your head down. Really, keep your head down so no one catches you staring. Don't give anyone any reason to accuse you of being something you shouldn't be.

The second time a boy asks you out, pretend you don't hear him, and walk away in quiet horror. Don't think too deeply about this. Still have no tact.

After homecoming, spend the night at your best friend's house. She will ask if you like anyone. Delay because you don't know. She will pressure you, so pick a boy you never talk to but everyone likes. This will satisfy her—but not for long. Pick another boy. One you do not talk to much, but think you like the best. Lather, rinse, repeat ad nauseam.

Write stories for the Internet, and read them too. Learn keywords and how to find very specific plots. The backdrop of "stop, stop, stop, stop" will disappear within just a paragraph or two. Your heart won't stop pounding, but the weight will disappear from your stomach. Find yourself coming back to the same stories like a lifeline.

The pastor will warn against living two lives: one fit for church, one not. Be nervous. Think about the stories. Think about praying for salvation again, but decide against it. Close your eyes and say, "Dear God." You won't know what else to say. Be still and wait.

* * *

Dream a lot about girls. Dream about girls you know telling you that they're gay. Dream about girls you don't know holding your hand. Kissing you. Whispering things that leave a pleasant sort of queasiness inside you. Be angry

at yourself when you can't stop thinking about them. (The dreams. The girls. The feelings.)

Try to convince yourself it doesn't mean anything because you like [boy x]. If you keep telling yourself that, then it will eventually be true, right? It's like the placebo effect.

At age sixteen, a boy will ask over AIM if you like anyone. Fight and argue to change the topic. Win. Talk about movies and school and everything but her.

(You don't like her. She's your friend and you have a close bond. And she has the prettiest eyes you've ever seen.)

Love a girl as only a seventeen-year-old can (selfishly) and hate yourself. Hate her a little too. Be angry when she gets too close to you or calls you beautiful. Wish you weren't a girl. Think that if one of you were a boy, you would have gotten together. That doesn't make you gay though. It makes you someone who, in another world, would be a romantic-comedy lead. Think about how when you were born, the doctor thought you were a boy because of your shoulders. Feel self-conscious about them.

Pick boys who are like her in small ways. Attempt to like them. Really give it the old college try. But don't actually, like, *do* anything that would indicate you were interested in a relationship or dating or anything that came near it.

Pick one more boy to like after high school, someone who's interesting and fun. When your friends ask about him, say: "He's good. We're friends."

They want you to ask him out, but they know you never will. And you won't.

* * *

With time, start saying: "I don't want to date" and "I'm too busy to date." and "I don't want a boyfriend." Blame factors like your less-than-ideal living situation, school, work, everything under the sun. Say you're happy without a boyfriend—which is true enough.

Go to bible study. Someone will say that she knows a same-gender Christian couple who have sound theology, but they "still live in sin." She'll think it's bizarre. Something in you will click. Be cool. Don't tip anyone off yet that you have a million questions and you need answers as of last decade.

Consider the argument that a person can't be queer and believe in God. Consider that your faith is contingent on your orientation. Consider that people are not meant to be complex and diverse and fearfully and wonderfully made.

Think people are flawed. Think truth can be found somewhere in dissent.

Google "bible and homosexuality" in an incognito window. Find what you expect to find. The verses you've read, the commentary you've heard over and over again. Also find essays hosted on what looks like Geocities with points no one has let you hear before (especially yourself). Find similar essays and speeches all over the Internet. Go back and forth on it for ages. Read essay after essay and instead of just reading the verses, read the chapters and books. Read the histories. Try to understand.

(For the record. You're interested because you know a number of GSM folks. Keep telling yourself that you're definitely heterosexual, and you just

want the facts, well, straight.)

Read about every sexual orientation and gender under the sun because you want to get this right. Call yourself asexual because hey! You did like boys, but you didn't want to like, do anything with them. Ever. And actually, you had a hard time seeing yourself in a relationship with a guy or marrying a guy.

That's asexuality, right? (Right...)

Meet a girl who's passionate. She thinks you're cool and funny and talented. Make her laugh because that is what you do, and you like when she laughs at your awful jokes (you really, really like it). Laugh at her awful jokes too. Only they're not awful; they're hilarious. She'll change the way you see humor. Think if she wanted, you would probably kiss her.

(Maybe you're bi?)

Think about it some more. The penny will drop.

Whisper the truth in the dark in the dark. *I'm gay*. Think maybe it's the most honest thing you've said about yourself. Think that maybe you just came out to Jesus? Wonder if that's possible?

Wonder where you go from here. Wonder how many people you'll lose. Wonder if they'll see you differently, if they'll treat you differently. Wonder how you're supposed to tell everyone. Wonder if anyone will believe that *you* still believe.

BIO: Carissa Hanson is a gal from Kalamazoo, Michigan. She graduated from Western Michigan University from 2011 with a bachelor's in creative writing. She is currently writing a book about two sisters trying to find each other across different dimensions, blogging, and doing other freelance work.

THE ISLAND OF DISAPPOINTMENT

by Nora Shychuk

Waiting with packed bags is never easy. Time moves slowly. There's that pulsing, churning feeling of inevitable change deep within the pit of your stomach. I want to throw up. It's not that I'll miss home, but it's all I know. Our tiny brick house. The fireplace. The cramped kitchen. The mismatched silverware. The thick, scratchy carpet. The garden out back. The moldy basement. The basketball hoop. The dog. The couch, worn and old but so soft. That's where I sit now. I fiddle with the rip in the right arm. I make it worse.

It is the ugliest yellow-orange color, like dehydrated urine or vomit.

Mom called the couch her Island of Disappointment. In fact, it was command central. The heart of the island. I heard her say this often, even as a kid when I was too young to really know what she meant. Her friends laughed at the name. Mom would sit there and mostly stay quiet. Watch television. Drink tea. Drink wine. Read. Do a word search. Knit. Talk on the phone. I'd watch. Sometimes I'd sit right next to her and feel her warmth. She'd call me her copilot. She told me the color of the couch reminded her of sand. I told her it reminded me of fire.

Other times I'd sit in the rocking chair across the room. She didn't talk much then.

She got mad—never at me, but at other things. The tea was too weak. The couch too springy. The TV too loud. The sand too hot. The book too predictable. She liked to break things. Dad gave her pills.

They fought a lot. Usually at night, but eventually during the day too. It became warlike. Almost poetic. When I was trying to sleep in bed, they still screamed as if the measly wall was a special, noise-canceling force field. It wasn't. Their voices rang through clear. Dad's yell was the worst. Low and gigantic and booming and violent. It shook the roof. Little bits would fall off into my eyes. Sometimes they mentioned me. Dad said I was too delicate. My skin too pale. My lips too plump. My hair too styled. My clothes too nice.

I guess he didn't approve of the fact that his son liked to kiss boys.

He called me names behind my back, and Mom cried in retaliation. I heard the words; I felt them cut. *Faggot. Fairy. Pussy.* Some of the names sent shocks through the walls and electrocuted me so I'd jump out before I got burned and went off to the couch. Island of Disappointment. Command central. Welcome back, kid. I'd lay down and try to sleep. Their voices weren't so close anymore. We had a heavy quilt that hung over the back of the couch, and I pulled it down and wrapped myself inside tightly. I put it over my head. That was good. Almost silent. Doug the Dog would jump up and sleep on top of my legs. I'd wake when the sun came up and streamed through the window. My tears were dried to my cheeks. My nose was stuffy. Doug the Dog was still there with his raspy breathing.

Other times, Dad would take the couch. The fight got too bad. He hit Mom's head a little too hard. She got headaches a lot and wore an ice pack for the swelling and clogged her pores with makeup to hide the dark circle under her eye. Dad called her a raccoon.

Dad was too big for the couch. He slept with his eyes shut in this hard, pained way. The wrinkles on his forehead were always present, always distorting his face and twisting it up. A sleeping animal. His feet and hands hung over the edges of our island and plopped onto the carpet. In the water. I wanted a shark to bite his fingers. Doug the Dog never crawled up on Dad's legs. Dad's island wasn't big enough. Besides, he'd probably hunt Doug the Dog on the island. Kill him. Skin him. Cook him over the fire. He'd chant as Doug the Dog's flesh burned. He'd drink out of a cut-open coconut or pineapple. Then he'd rip off a leg or the tail or the tongue and eat it. He wouldn't worry about sharing because nobody came near him on his island.

The couch and I were close too. I waited there a lot, looking at the big grandfather clock in the corner. It chimed. She didn't come. Stood up again. Mom made me popcorn even though I hated it. It was always popcorn. The kernels got stuck in my teeth. She'd put on a movie. We'd sit on our Island of Disappointment. I didn't really care that the girl didn't come. That I got ditched. She didn't have a dick, and so that was a deal-breaker. My interest was fake. Constructed. For him. For the tribal elder. To impress the old man.

It only hurt because I wanted to be wanted. I wanted to sit on the couch, cool and calm and collected, then go off and do something better. Do something I should be doing. I needed to send a signal. I needed to escape from the island.

It hurt worse when friends blew me off. The guys. Jeremy. He didn't know, but it was so clear. I would have sat on that sandy beach all day and night for him.

I was on the couch when Grandma died. When Mom came in with the news. She cried and it was faraway and controlled in the saddest way. She didn't want to upset me so she didn't look at me, but she shook. That hurt worse. The waves grew darker and sloshed over each other. A storm came. I dug my feet further into the sand and hoped to feel water. I hoped I wasn't so far from drowning.

It was during my shift at command central on the Island of Disappointment when Dad found my porn. He dragged me from the shore and kicked me in the ribs.

It was on the Island of Disappointment where I studied for my final chemistry test and failed anyway. I had been failing all year. I didn't get into my first choice for college. I got into my third. A college close to home. My initial plan was to go as far away as possible, but this would have to do.

Command central. A winter night. Parents gone. Jeremy got drunk and played around with me, and I came too fast, and I never talked to him again.

After that, I ran from the shores of the Island of Disappointment and found a cluster of palm trees. Parrots squawked and monkeys screeched. I asked them to peck and rip my eyes out but they refused. Mom's pills were close, buried deep under the sand. I took seven or twelve and couldn't feel my legs.

Mom found me at command central. On the beach. She screamed over the monkeys.

Oh, Mom. The couch. That was hers. We all knew it. It was her Island of

Disappointment most of all. She was the mayor. Or the queen. She knew the lay of the land. She knew the secrets. Her husband beat her and her son was a gay druggie. It was the worst for her.

Now I sit at the couch with my bags. I got a dorm at school. I will live on campus. Mom insists I come back on weekends. She will pick me up. Then we'll row across the sea, past the whales and dolphins and sharks and schools of fish, and come back to shore. The Island of Disappointment, in all its unchanging glory, will wait. Dad will spend most of his time past the palm trees. By the caves. Hiding. From me. From the wild boars. From the crazy wife. From the howling baboons. He'll sip from his drink and then, when he feels like it, help us build a sand castle.

BIO: Nora Shychuk grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania before she hopped across the pond and earned her MA in creative writing from University College Cork in Ireland. Her work has appeared in *The Quarryman Literary Journal*, *The Rose Magazine*, and *The Lonely Crowd*. More of her work can be found at [Think, Breathe, Write](#).

FINGERPRINTS

Your fingerprints left a trail climbing up the
mountain of my spine, every vertebrae
another protruding rock, and rolling down
the valleys of my clavicle.

You created a map of my skin, yet I still
feel lost without you.

I spend hours each night tracing the
curvatures of your glowing fingerprints,
digging my fingernails into my fading flesh
and inhaling sharp breaths.

I thought that my blood would be an antidote
for your love, that I could drain you out of my
soul, but the deeper I dig the brighter you burn
and the faster I fade away.

I have turned the map of your love into a
constellation of scars so that whenever I stare at
my shadowy reflection in the mirror, you are all
I can see.

I have lost myself in the midst of my self-
sabotage, intensifying the memory of you as I
wane into a distant memory myself.

—Victoria Laboz

BIO: Victoria Laboz was born and raised in Manhattan. Her writing has been featured in *Souvenir Lit Journal*, *Navigating the Maze Mag*, *The Apprentice Writer at Susquehanna University*, and *Thought Catalog*. She landed in the top 20 for the 2014 Eichner Poetry Contest, was a reader for *Souvenir Lit Journal* at the 2015 NYC Poetry Festival, and is currently an intern at Poets House where she assists with literary events.

I SEE YOU

We sit on the couch, TV on
I'm drinking Mexican beer
You're reading historical romance
Or something.

I see you in the floor
Pouring strong cider into cheap glasses
Wearing a T-shirt and socks
And nothing else.

I see you in the dark
Your face to the wall.
Sucking tears and snot back inside
Because you'll be damned if you'll let me see.

I see you in the photographs
All teeth and eyes and music
Captured blissfully unaware
But you don't like pictures to be taken anymore.

You interrupt my show to ask for a blanket
When you have two perfectly good feet
But I say of course and fetch one
Because I see you.

—Gregg Winkler

BIO: Gregg Winkler is a writer from a small town in Oklahoma. He received a Master's Degree in Composition and Rhetoric in 2004, which he uses to hide an unsightly stain on his bedroom wall. He has been published many times online and in print, in such places as *The Tule Review*, *The Grasslimb Journal*, and *A Fly in Amber*.

OVER

by Eleanor Haglund

The sleepless nights and worrying over the choice between family and career have driven people to drink. I never thought of it as a choice. Children, I knew, were the only thing that would make me happy. Jason, while he had started out as a perfect husband, chose career. He thought babies were cute when he saw them in someone else's stroller, but he blanched at the thought that they could be in his.

I guess I should have ended it early, when I saw the signs. I should have cried and roped my friends into making chocolate-covered strawberries. Chocolate-covered strawberries that we would all pretend were his head as we chomped down and splintered the chocolate in our mouths. My friends suggested I consider other options, try to find someone else. But I loved him and I thought he would change. But of course, he couldn't. And of course, I tried.

I know now that the deer was the beginning of the end. I was walking upstairs for a sweater, to protect against the cold edge of the night, when I saw her. Her sweet face was pushed against the door, and her wet nose brushed the glass.

"Jason! Jason, come here!" I beckoned to where he was, still drying dishes in the kitchen.

"What?" He took his time, dishtowel thrown over his shoulder.

I guided his head to the transparent part of the frosted glass.

“What is that?” he said.

“Shhh...you’ll scare her!”

He rolled his eyes.

I would have taken it as a teasing roll of the eyes, but there was something more annoyed in the ways his eyes seemed to flick the image of the fawn away.

“I think she lost her mother,” I said.

“I bet a neighbor fed it and now it’s confused. Please don’t feed it. It’ll imprint on our house and never leave.”

I stared at the side of the youthful, unmarked face I had fallen for just a few years ago. I tried to conjure the patience I had started being forced to practice, to see the fawn as the disruption that Jason believed she was. I felt my heart blister.

I stepped away from him. “What if I did feed her? What are you worried about? The landscaping?”

“Please don’t start with me, Laura. You know you have a weakness for big eyes and small faces. You’d probably want to adopt it as a pet!”

“Why wouldn’t you?” I shot back.

“How is that even a question? It’s a wild animal and should be left alone.”

“Look at her!”

“I don’t need to. Ugh, we’re fighting over a deer. That deer is not important right now. You’re important right now.”

“How can you say that? You say I’m important, but you obviously don’t

care about me or what I care about.”

Jason grabbed his head. “Listen to yourself! Or listen to me! Why can’t you be rational and see that children are not something that would make our marriage or our lives better? Why does everything always come back to this?”

“Look at her!” I yelled. I threw open the door.

There she stood, her sage eyes reflecting us and the home we had chosen. Jason stepped back. I stepped forward, welcoming her critical vision.

Jason recovered his senses and closed the door, separating us.

That night, I *pad-pad-padded* down the stairs toward the kitchen. As I walked through the kitchen, I slammed my hip against the corner of our table.

“Ow,” I said, shattering the silence. I had misjudged the space the table took up in the dark. The table was far too big for the two of us. The salesman had sold it to me as big enough for the kids and all of their shenanigans. Wink. He had sold it to Jason as big enough for the full spread at parties. The salesman was right. It was big enough for both.

I dug through the refrigerator drawers to try to find a vegetable my fawn would like. I pushed aside almost-rotten beets and piled limes on top of each other. When I found carrots, I pulled three from the bag and tried to obscure my work so Jason wouldn’t notice it in the morning.

I tiptoed my way to the door and peered out. Her soft face was only inches away from mine. She had noticed my presence. I loved the way she lifted her soft face to stare back at me when I placed my face near the glass.

I unlocked the door and pulled at it, cringing at the squeak, trying to be

inconspicuous. She jumped up and stared at me, waiting for my next move. I pushed a carrot between the crack in the door. She paused for a moment but then took a step forward. And another. She bit the tip of the carrot, as if she was tasting it, making sure it was up to her standards. She took a bigger bite and a bigger bite. As she got closer to my hand, I let the carrot drop, protecting my hand from the deceptively powerful choppers she had in her mouth. I rested my head against the door and watched her nibble away at the carrot nub. I fed her the carrots, one by one. I relaxed, the dark cushioning by vision.

As I felt myself drifting off, I wondered how Jason and I had strayed so far from being happy. It wasn't so long ago that we had been thought of as the perfect couple, with my friends begging me for our secret. Why didn't we fight? How did I find someone who was so attentive? Did Jason have any brothers or friends?

We were one of those cheesy couples that went on picnics whenever the weather was nice enough. Jason and I both loved cooking, and we relished the challenge of ensuring that every dish had been adapted to be finger food. Our mini cinnamon buns were our proudest transformation.

"Can you pass the sparkling wine, baby?" I had said.

Jason poured some into my glass and reached for my hand. He brushed his lips against my fingertips, sending goose bumps jumping from their previously sleeping positions.

"Of course you can, love."

I popped a mini cinnamon bun into my mouth. It melted, still warm from

the oven.

I scooted over to Jason and curled up at his side. We spent the next hour lolling around and talking about the latest drama with my younger sister's job search and we debated what was going on in Libya. We were so open with each other. I figured we could talk about anything. I wish we had discussed children as much as we discussed everything else.

The fawn pushed her small head through the door and rested it on the hardwood, near my leg. I chained the doors together, but left them open so she could stay with me. I ran my fingers over her velvet ears. As my eyes started to close, I curled up beside her and fell asleep.

I was jarred awake by Jason scooping me from my slumber. I pretended to be asleep, keeping my eyes closed and my breathing as even as possible.

He plopped me on the couch and knelt down beside me.

I cracked one eye open.

"Jason," I yawned. "Is that you?"

He ignored my question. We both knew who it was. "Sweetie, why didn't you sleep in our bed last night?"

"You snore like a lawnmower."

"I've snored for years."

I ignored him. He knew what the problem was. This deer was the closest I had gotten to having what I really wanted.

His face took on his lost puppy look—a look I tried to pretend didn't still melt my heart. "I miss you. I want us to be like we were before. You used to

smile when I walked in the door. I don't feel like...like you want me anymore."

"I do. How could I not?"

He tried to smile. "But you don't really. You don't want me. You want the me who wants what you want. It's something I can't give to you."

I put my hand on his cheek, stroking his sandpaper stubble. "It's not what I want."

* * *

I had just fed her a carrot lunch, and I was about to close the door when I saw her. My fawn's mother held her head high, like a queen, taking her surroundings in slowly. When she saw her fawn, she took a few steps forward, toward the house. I stood by my fawn, ready to jump in between them if my fawn moved. I know the thought was wrong, but I couldn't help what I felt.

There was an energy radiating from my fawn. She had stood up when she saw her and wouldn't take her eyes off of her mother. I was frozen. My mind raced through possibilities. What could I do?

My fawn moved quickly. She walked away from the door, straight toward her mother. I tried to grab her before she got away, but she had already vacated the space my hands occupied.

When my fawn reached her mother, she put the cold little nose that had been pressed against my front door against her mother's side. She nuzzled her mother and her mother bopped her on her head with her own chin. I imagined it had been a light scolding. And when they were done with their reunion, they walked away. My fawn left without a backward glance. I watched them until

they disappeared into the forest.

And then I crumbled. I don't know how to describe it, unless to say that I could feel a part of myself being ripped away. Every step my fawn had taken away from me was a kick in the stomach. I doubled over, gasping for air as my eyes rained misery. I wished for more tears so they could form a river and take me away from here and everything I had lost, and everything I had not gained.

When Jason found me, I was weak, exhausted by my own despair and lying on the ground. I was curled into the smallest formation my legs and arms could handle. He became frantic, trying to figure out what was wrong. I struggled to speak and when I did, I sounded like a coal miner.

"I can't live like this."

He picked me up and hugged me close. I let him. There was nothing else my exhausted body was capable of.

"Please, Laura. Please try. I'm trying. I'll try harder."

I wonder if he felt the end coming then. I was too empty to feel.

But I tried again anyway. For him and for us. Every day for the next week I put all my effort into trying to rescue what was left of our short marriage. I kissed Jason at surprising moments like a fairy godmother bestowing blessings. I cooked exotic foods for us to enjoy and discuss. I even put away the picture frame containing the pre-printed insert of a baby girl that bothered Jason so much. I made us a romantic dinner on Friday of oysters and lobsters in butter sauce. I dimmed the lights in the dining room and lit the tall candles.

As we ate, we were quieter than usual. The clinking of our knives against the plate felt like a clock, our plates counting every second wasted. We went through two bottles of wine. After dinner we carried out plates into the kitchen and placed them into the sink. I whirled in my short dress and kissed him, holding his head between my hands.

We danced and tripped our way to the bedroom upstairs, trying not to let go of each other. I tugged at the buttons on his clothes, and he let me take my time, patience he had learned over the years. He pulled off my dress in a swift motion and enveloped me in his arms. We were in bed. I kissed him hard, proud of my victory. We tumbled like teenagers, almost falling off the sides and rescuing each other just in time.

“Yes, yes. Come to Momma,” I whispered as he kissed my neck.

Jason shot up. “What?”

“It’s nothing. Why did you stop?” I tried to pull him closer.

He resisted. “I can’t. This is wrong. You don’t want me.”

I propped myself in a half-sitting position with my elbows. “Jason, that’s not what I meant.”

He rolled away from me.

“It’s not,” I said again.

“I don’t know what we’re doing anymore. I think we’re pretending we’re happy. I don’t think we are.”

“Are you ever going to want a child?” I said.

“You know the answer to that. I want you though. I love you. It wouldn’t

be right to have kids and not want them.”

“I guess that settles it then.” I let myself fall back onto the pillow.

He didn’t answer. The light turned off and he pulled the covers up to his chin.

“I guess it does,” he said.

* * *

When we woke up, it was like we were strangers. Roommates but strangers. He didn’t look at me as we dressed to go to my friend Sheryl’s house. I stared at the odd assortment of sweaters and shirts I had accumulated over the years and had the strange urge to throw them all away. I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

When we arrived, Sheryl’s floor was littered with toys in primary colors. They were positioned so close together that we couldn’t walk without hearing the squeaks of plastic under our feet. I almost sprained my ankle trying to avoid breaking any of them. I breathed in, trying to stay calm.

I hugged the kids and they started trying to drag me toward the playroom.

“Aunt Laura, come play!” they said. Their soft, buttery hands implored me. I felt Jason’s pleading stare at my back.

I pretended I didn’t notice. “Sure, guys. What would you like to play?” He had made it very clear that this wasn’t going to work.

I felt him withdraw, his entire demeanor going cold.

Sheryl felt it too.

“What would you two like to drink? Water? Juice?” she said.

“Water’s fine,” Jason said. He followed her into the kitchen.

A few days later, I sat in the window seat overlooking our front yard. I was wrapped in a blanket, and the window was open. I loved the feeling of the wind stinging my face. It brought tears to my eyes. I closed my eyes and let the numbing agent wash over me.

There was a crunch. And another. And a rustle of a bush.

I opened my eyes again. I was staring straight into the eyes of my fawn. She had come back to me! I reached out my hand. I tried to stop it from shaking so it wouldn’t scare her. I touched her ear and she shied away. She came back and I reached my hand out again, petting her soft, spotted coat. She nuzzled my hand and my eyes started tearing again.

From my spot in the window seat, I watched Jason’s car pull up the driveway. The tints on the window prevented me from seeing his face or gauging how he was feeling. I wish we had spoken more after that night, but what had followed had been polite and nothing more. We didn’t speak about anything unless it was absolutely required that we did. I was hurt by his silence. I wanted screaming and fighting. Anything to show he still cared. But he had shut himself off to me, and I didn’t feel any better about it.

His footsteps echoed up the stairs as he entered the house. He let the keys clang as he dropped them into the metal bowl instead of placing them there, like he always did. He clomped up the next set of stairs to change his clothes from work. He always changed when he got home, his way to

transitioning out of being an in-control engineer to being a husband. I was surprised to see that he was still trying. But perhaps it was just habit.

I tensed as he started descending the stairs. My fawn looked up at me, confused at the change in the air's energy. Her little white tail went up, something she had learned in her absence. I sat up a little straighter. His steps slowed as he reached the bottom and entered the room. I stared at him, a dashing figure in blue.

He tried to speak, but his words lodged in his throat.

"Are you OK?" I said.

He took a step forward and began to try again. But at that moment, he saw the fawn. His face slammed shut and he began to breathe as if unsure where his next breath would come from. He ran for the front door.

"Jason, no!" I leaped after him.

Jason sprinted for the fawn. The fawn sprinted for anywhere Jason wasn't. When Jason got too close, the fawn would shoot off in a different direction, disorienting Jason and causing him to stumble.

Unintelligible garble began to spew from Jason's mouth to try to terrorize the fawn.

"Please!" I said. "Stop this."

He didn't stop chasing until the fawn was well off the property. When he stopped, he bent to catch his breath. I stared at him, this man whom I had thought to grow old with, doubled over in flannel pajamas. I wanted him and his brand of crazy to match with mine. I wished I had been beside him in red

flannel pajamas chasing away our demons.

I sat down on the grass and inhaled, welcoming in the frigid air. We both caught our breath.

BIO: Eleanor Haglund is a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University's creative writing program. She wrote her first novel, entitled *Glass Wounds*, in 2016. She received an Adamson Award for her screenplay *Pippa*. Currently, she works as a business analyst in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. You can follow her on Instagram or Twitter (@EleanorHaglund).

THE GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT

I stumbled my way to a Great Disappointment
A journey half-drunk and the last of its kind
And given to me was a pen for my effort
So on dotted line, beneath "Great Disappointment"
I took up the pen and I signed

The finer print was full of my folly
A fen of my word in a font colored red
And my triumphs took little or no space at all
Just sins with odd names and never-mind lovers
In the ruby-red record that speaks for the dead

I recited my reasons to all who would listen
One shrunken old thief who could not meet my eyes
Who muttered to me "I don't think you're a failure
I have always been called a Great Disappointment
And I choose to remain so; to live in disguise."

—Miguel Eichelberger

BIO: Miguel Eichelberger writes out of Vancouver, Canada, with his authoress wife. He is a traveler, highwayman, and untrained flautist. His poetry has appeared in literary magazines such as *Vancouver Review*, *Existere*, San Diego State University's *pacificREVIEW*, Indiana University's *From The Well House*, *Joypuke*, and many others. His first play, *Cave*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Vancouver Fringe New Play Prize.

LIBIDO

by Lenny Levine

I never saw him coming. He must have been hiding in the fire stairs, because there was no one in the hallway when Linda (I thought her name was Linda) and I came out of the elevator. We made our way to her apartment, clutching each other and kissing feverishly as she groped in her purse for the key.

She finally found it, turned, and with my arms still around her, opened the door. That's when I felt a hard shove in the back.

It sent us both stumbling into the apartment. My hip slammed against a table, and I was spun sideways and deposited onto her couch.

I looked up and blinked, as two sights flashed before my eyes.

One was the horrified expression on her face. The other was the man in the doorway, filling it with his bulk and holding a very large knife.

He gave the most deranged grin I ever saw. Then, never taking his eyes off her, he closed the door behind him.

“Hello, Lydia.” (Lydia, that was her name.) “Am I interrupting something?”

“Ray!” she gasped. “What are you doing here?”

Why do people always say that? I stared at the knife and hoped Ray wouldn't answer her by demonstrating.

“What am I doing here?” His grin turned to a sneer, and he shot a vicious glance at me. “What's that asshole on the couch doing here?”

It was a good question, and I felt I should tell him so. “You’re absolutely right, man. What am I doing here?” I spread my arms and opened my palms in a gesture of peace and goodwill. “I certainly should not be here. And I swear, if I’d known...”

“Shut the fuck up!”

He pointed the knife at me, resulting in major cringing on my part. His gaze flicked back to her.

“You think this is how you get even with me, Lydia? Screwing that sorry piece of shit over there?”

At the moment I couldn’t quibble with his description.

“Where’d you pick this one up, at the concert? Who is he, the fuckin’ bass player?”

I was, actually, the lead singer, not that it had any significance at all. Jimmy Lacy, of Jimmy Lacy and the Rock Pile, the band with the hit back in 2003 called “Itchin’ to Scratch.” And I knew what I was doing here.

This was where I was going to die.

* * *

We’d had a contest going among the five of us: who could get the most women. It was the only thing that was remotely exciting about our current tour, and a helluva lot more exciting than the number of people we were drawing. But that’s what happens when you’re one-hit wonders. They eventually forget you.

Prostitutes didn’t count in our little game; that was too easy. It had to be

a consensual hookup that did not involve money, and it had to be with a member of the audience, or more than one, if you really got lucky. Beauty didn't officially matter.

As we took the stage that night in Watsonville, Iowa, our keyboard player, Brett Jones, stood in first place. I was one chick behind him, and Donnie McCabe, our lead guitarist, was two behind, in third. The bass player and drummer, after a promising start, hadn't gotten laid in a week.

We blasted into the opening song, "Funk Jockey." I gazed around at the eight hundred or so people, in a venue that held upwards of two thousand, and figured the odds of anything happening tonight were next to nil.

Then, four girls, definitely on the cute side, scampered down the aisle toward us; two blondes, one redhead, and a brunette. They stopped in front of the stage and began to boogie their butts off.

Within seconds, they were joined by dozens of others, male and female, but the original four were directly in front of us. And the brunette, her long hair moving as she danced, was staring straight at yours truly.

I dipped the end of my guitar at her and winked. Her face lit up in a beautiful smile.

She stayed in front of the stage for the whole concert. Every now and then I'd aim a lyric at her, a tactic that never failed to piss off Brett and Donnie. As lead singer, I did have that edge over them, despite their superiority in the hunk department.

But things like this happened all the time, and it didn't mean squat.

Girls could practically take their clothes off in front of us during a concert and then disappear afterward. The real test was whether she'd be there after the show.

She was. Right outside the dressing room.

Two of her friends, the blondes, were with her. This got Brett and Donnie to the doorway, crowding around me on both sides, Donnie minus his shirt. They worked on the girls, but the two of them were only there to giggle and observe what was going on between Lydia (a name I'll take to the grave) and myself. And there was plenty.

"I love watching you sing," she said in a soft, wispy voice.

I mentioned she was beautiful, right? Long, slender legs in tight jeans, a bare stomach that was absolutely flat, and a tiny halter top covering what appeared to be perfect breasts. All of it combined with big brown eyes, a turned-up nose, and lips I wanted to kiss.

"I love watching you dance," I told her.

She looked shyly at her toes, peeking out from her sandals. "You could still do that, if you'd like."

Her friends went into a chorus of "*Oooooooh!*"

She looked up and then straight at me. "And a lot more."

This got even louder *oooohs*.

Our eyes linked together. "Don't move," I said.

I ducked back into the dressing room and set a new world record for splashing water on myself, toweling off, and pulling on my street clothes.

Back when the band was riding high, we had individual hotel rooms, but that was long ago. Nowadays, I shared mine with Dave, our drummer. It was another rule of the game that we couldn't inconvenience roommates. Unless, of course, they wanted to be, but that didn't apply here.

I could have sprung for another room, but my annual income had been in steady decline, so I resisted it. The tour bus was always a possibility, but it's way more comfortable if a chick has her own place, and it turned out she did. Or so she claimed.

We jumped into a taxi, she gave her address, and it was complete heat in the backseat from then on. We couldn't keep our hands off each other the whole trip. I threw some money at the driver as we pulled up in front of her building, and we floated out of the cab.

We were still floating as we came out of that elevator and kissed our way down the hall. The dying moments of the life I once knew.

* * *

"What am I going to do with you, Lydia? How am I going to teach you to stop pulling this shit?"

He'd turned on the overhead light before closing the door behind him, and now it glinted off his shaved head. His big arms, bulging out of his black T-shirt, were heavily tattooed, and his belt buckle, in the shape of a death's-head, grinned mockingly at me.

"Maybe I should castrate your friend here in front of you. Would that make an impression?"

That did it. The bolt of terror that ran through me galvanized me to speak.

“Look, man,” I told him, “I don’t know you, and I don’t know her, OK? Whatever is going on between you started way before this, and it’s got nothing to do with me. Just let me leave, and you can both work it out after...”

“Nothing to do with you?” He took a menacing step at me. “You’re here, aren’t you? Why is that, pray tell? Because you thought you were going to fuck her.”

People use the term “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll” to describe a rock musician’s life, and it’s mostly true. But the drugs part of it had been gone for me for over a year since the last rehab, and the rock ’n’ roll component was fading along with our record sales. That left only the sex part, and it had never felt so pathetic.

He took another step closer, and I sank further into the cushions.

“You say you don’t know her, and you don’t know me? Well, you got that right. You don’t know if she has a boyfriend or a husband, or kids, or what her situation is, and you never wanted to know. You don’t care about her or anyone else, do you? You just want to have your little party.”

I couldn’t speak, because everything he said was absolutely true.

“Yeah, there’s a lot you don’t know, isn’t there, asshole?” He held the knife out at me. “Maybe you should get to know some of this.”

That’s when Lydia made her move.

She’d been standing next to the end table, and Ray had taken his eyes off

her. So had I. She grabbed the lamp off of it and brought it down hard on his outstretched arm.

The knife fell to the floor, as he turned toward her with a snarl. I saw it lying there. I had to keep him away from that knife; that was all I knew.

I launched myself off the couch and rammed my shoulder into the small of his back. It knocked him, staggering, into the wall. As he turned, Lydia charged at him.

I never saw her pick up the knife, but there it was, in her hand. I watched in shock as she plunged it into his stomach.

He slid down the wall with a groan, and she was on him, stabbing him again and again.

“You bastard!” she screamed. “You bastard!”

I stood there, horrified. Blood was everywhere. It was all over her, as her thrusts gradually grew less and less. Finally, she stopped stabbing him.

Then she dropped the knife and stood up. I saw that her top was partially off, revealing one bloodstained breast.

I couldn't help staring at it.

“We did it, Jimmy,” she said.

We?

“God, I want you so bad!” she moaned.

She reached back and undid her top the rest of the way. It fell to the floor. She slid out of her jeans and stood naked in front of me. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

“Let’s do it,” she said in a husky voice. “Right now.”

“But...we have to call the police.” It was like someone else was speaking, from far away.

“No, we don’t, not yet.” She took my hand and led me toward the bedroom. “It won’t matter. Please?”

Incredulously, I followed her. I’d never been so aroused in my life.

I was out of my clothes before we’d even reached the bedroom. She threw herself onto the bed, and I threw myself onto her. We clung to each other as we moved to a steady, sensual rhythm, building to that final crescendo.

“Oh, Jimmy,” she said over and over. “Oh, Jimmy.”

Just on the edge of orgasm, I heard Ray’s voice.

“A corpse in the next room and he’s still hot to trot. I guess some people never learn, do they?”

I thought it was my conscience. Then I realized I was actually hearing it.

With a gasp, I rolled off Lydia and looked toward the bedroom doorway. There he was, holding the knife again.

“Realistic, huh?” he said, smiling and pretending to stab himself in the hand. The blade retracted and reformed as he did. “The fake blood was pretty good too, don’t you think?” He cracked up laughing.

“But this knife is real,” said Lydia from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder, and she was holding another knife, an even bigger one. She must have had it under her pillow.

“All yours, Ray,” she said, getting up off the bed.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Ray was grinning and starting to undo his pants.

She went over to him, gave him a little kiss on the cheek, and handed him the knife.

"Indulge me, baby," she said. "Make him sing 'Itchin' to Scratch' while you're doing him."

And as my mind recoiled from the full, hideous reality of what was about to happen, she leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"I told you, didn't I? I love watching you sing."

Then the gates of Hell officially opened for business.

BIO: Lenny Levine attended Brooklyn College, graduating in 1962 with a BA in Speech and Theater. Immediately thereafter, he forgot about all of that and became a folk singer, then a folk-rock singer and songwriter, and finally a studio singer and composer of many successful jingles, including McDonald's, Lipton Tea, and Jeep. He has composed songs and sung backup for Billy Joel, Neil Diamond, Peggy Lee, Diana Ross, Barry Manilow, the Pointer Sisters, Carly Simon, and others. In addition, he performed for a number of years with the improvisational comedy group War Babies.

Lenny's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Amarillo Bay*, *Bitter Oleander*, *Cairn*, *The Dirty Goat*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Forge*, *The Griffin*, *Hobo Pancakes*, *The Jabberwock Review*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Penmen Review*, *Rio Grande Review*, *RiverSedge*, *Rougarou*, *Verdad*, *Westview*, and *Wild Violet*. He received a 2011 Pushcart Prize nomination for short fiction.

GRIEF

by Gary Floyd

Slightly used tombstone. Near mint condition. Perfect for someone named Robert Fuller. \$1000 dollars or best offer.

Everyone makes mistakes. Fuller or Fulton, what's the difference? One slip-up, and I'm out a thousand bucks. I can only imagine my boss's anger. Thank God, I own the company. I can only imagine my wife's anger. Thank God, she doesn't know. A thousand dollars, out of pocket. My company is almost bankrupt. I can't afford such mistakes.

I have an idea. The phonebook: Fuller, Chris...; Fuller, Paul...; Fuller R (possibly)...; Fuller, Robert (OK)...; another Fuller, Robert (better). I recognize an address. Better yet. Not the second one. It's second Robert Fuller's lucky day. First Robert Fuller isn't so fortunate. His wife will soon find my business card. I know it'll work out for everyone involved: first Robert Fuller being the exception.

I chuckle. Imagine Wile E. Coyote receiving a package from the ACME Company, unwrapping it, and finding an anvil inside: designed to drop from high places. I go to plan B as Mr. Coyote's plans rarely work. A high powered rifle, a scope, and me at a distance. With my ingenuity, the roadrunner would soon be roadkill. That's all folks.

I spend time scoping out the first Mr. Fuller's neighborhood. It's lovely: big houses, large yards, and tree line drives. There are ample opportunities for a man to leave his vehicle, slip into the woods, kill someone, and casually drive

home. I can't delay. Mr. Fulton's rush order is overdue and I try to be conscientious.

Tuesday: I perspire while assembling my rifle. As I do so, I calmly track a man who walks between the Fuller residence and a car, several times. I spent hours planning. What if I miss? I'll have to start over. I'm out of the car, hiding in a patch of trees. A car slowly drives around the bend. I hold my breath until it passes. Did he notice the truck parked there? Thank God, I'm driving my brother-in-law's truck. A moment passes. Nothing but birds and wind rustling the leaves. The man is outside again. I raise my rifle, squeeze my trigger, there's a pop, and the man buckles in the driveway. I quietly leave.

I wait all day by my phone, and then the next day, and soon another. Nobody calls. Two weeks pass: soon television crews, yellow tape, and the police pack up and leave. I return to the street mindful that the police are still following leads. I ask a boy on a bicycle, where the Fullers live. He says they moved six months ago. I pretend I'm not shocked. I think how I'll have to look up second Robert Fuller's address on Mapquest. I maintain my composure subtly asking, "Any idea where they went?"

Later that night, I'll slip a business card onto the grieving family's porch. It's never too late to try to drum up business.

BIO: Gary Floyd is a Massachusetts writer who has worked as both a journalist and teacher for at-risk youth. He has attended the Wildacres Writers Conference in North Carolina annually for the past twenty-two years. He has worked on novels and only recently has learned the art of flash fiction. So far the experiment is going well.

TIME

We all know that nothing lasts.
Our sun will eventually burn itself out.

Glaciers melt like ice cubes in a glass
Sieves of wind sift the soil

to fine powder following droughts.
Sea storms gouge off chunks of coasts.

No lesson taken by Albert Pinkham Ryder.
who laid on gobs of wet paint over globs

of pure moist pigment with a palette knife,
then glazed with rags sopping with varnish.

These sagging ruins are virtually sliding off
the canvas. Air and light have faded early cave

and pyramid drawings. And now I read
that Van Gogh's yellows have muddied.

My mother's memory flakes away daily.
Time paints with a wide brush.

—Sarah Brown Weitzman

BIO: Sarah Brown Weitzman has been published in hundreds of journals and anthologies including *Miramar*, *The New Ohio Review*, *Poet & Critic*, *The North American Review*, *Rattle*, *Mid-American Review*, *Ekphrasis*, *Poet Lore*, *Spillway*, etc. Sarah received a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. A departure from poetry, her fourth book, *Herman and The Ice Witch*, is a children's novel published by Main Street Rag.

WHY IS THERE A QUEUE?

by Robert A. Bak

We are now living in an age of instant gratification. The idea of waiting for anything is so alien to so many people. We have to wait in line for so many events, at the bank, especially at the airport, or just getting a cup of coffee. Time or the lack of time for most people is a daily challenge, and waiting is not for them. New Yorkers are not recognized as being very patient, but if there were a time, it would be now.

The last month had been dark, cold, and overcast, with on-and-off rain and showers. The general public had been getting cabin fever, excessively early for their well-being. Finally, there was a break in the weather, and the weekend forecast was for a sunny and warm period. A perfect time to get out and about, take a walk, and enjoy the warm sun. It seemed that everyone in the city has decided to do that.

And of course, that was the weekend that I would go to New York to visit friends. To my West Coast eyes, the area around the West Village and Chelsea have undergone a total transformation. Over the last many years, once beautiful areas had become ultra-gentrified. Many of the old buildings were being transformed back to their original beauty. With new buildings going up as condos, apartments, and chic businesses. A lot of the old meatpacking plants, some not used for years, have gone through substantial changes. Only the beautiful old facades have been kept, to maintain the illusion of times vanished.

I came upon the new addition to the area, the High Line, New York City's "Park in the Sky," an abandoned elevated railroad line that had served the area for decades. The last trains ran in 1970. The city was going to tear it down, but a group of developers thought it would serve well as a strolling elevated green park. The High Line starts at Gansevoort Street, below West Twelfth, and then twists and turns its way up to Twenty-Third Street. Park benches and trees and grassy areas have been added in sections the original train tracks have been kept as a reminder of its history. Now it has become a major new attraction for the city.

There is an old saying: "It isn't a good neighborhood if there isn't a Starbucks." Well, in fact, within five blocks, I discovered there were three. I went into one on Greenwich Avenue, along with the blocks of old brick and brownstone buildings. The side streets were tree-lined and beautiful, just the way I remembered that area being many years ago. Of course, there was a line to place your order, nothing new here about waiting in line. I found a small table near the back and took my seat. It turned out, my seat was near the only bathroom, and, of course, there was another line of people waiting to use the facilities.

As I was enjoying my Grande Latte, it became increasingly clear that the idea of a queue for the bathroom wasn't going over well. As more and more guests were coming in, some went straight to the back. By the looks on their faces, seeing such a line wasn't what they had expected. As they were waiting, the baristas were calling out the orders for a Triple Grande Latte, a tall French

roast, a double-shot Americano, a mocha soy light foam, and one Tazo Earl Grey tea. Others were ordering bagels with cream cheese, or a crumb cake and one patron ordered a cinnamon twist. But the strangest order was for a Grande decaf espresso with extra foam.

The orders were coming out fast and furious. There was a constant flow of people coming and going. It was nonstop—with so many different languages being spoken by those waiting in line, from those of the locals, and the many tourists visiting New York!

Some even tried to go to the bathroom door to see if it was open but were quickly reminded there was a line, and they'd have to wait their turn. You did not have to ask for the bathroom key. Oh no! All you had to do was to follow the line of people waiting to go.

Some of the visitors in the line took the whole situation in stride. Others got on their electronic devices and either e-mailed or twitted their opinions to their friend. I finished my latte and decided to join the queue. I asked one of the employees just ahead of me, "Is it always like this?"

She replied, "It's been like this all day."

So we waited in the queue, and finally my turn came. What a sense of accomplishment! I had survived the wait.

As I exited the communal bathroom, I noticed that the queue hadn't grown any smaller. In fact, it had just gotten longer. All of these poor souls, having to wait in line. You could see the looks on their faces that they were not happy. But when you have to go, you have to go.

The one bright side: You never know who you might meet in one of these thought-provoking queues. Being patient is not a strong suit for most people. Some of us have learned the art, and we take all of this in stride; others are confronted every day with this challenge. Time is what you make of it.

And what is extraordinary is that all of these people will come back again tomorrow, and the next day, and go through the whole waiting process all over again.

BIO: Robert A. Bak has been involved with the entertainment business for many years. First starting as a stage manager Off-Off Broadway in NYC, and then working in Los Angeles and Albuquerque. He has been a director and producer of plays with national award-winning playwright William Derringer. Robert's short story "The Magic Room" was a 2016 finalist with Fiction Week Literary Review. His other creative works are forthcoming or have appeared in *Work Literary Magazine* and *Agave Magazine*.