



AFTER HAPPY HOUR

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND ART

ISSUE 15 | FALL 2021

AFTER
HAPPY
HOUR
ISSUE 15 | FALL 2021

FALL 2021 EDITORS AND READERS

ELIZABETH ABELING
NATHAN KUKULSKI
SHAWN MADDEY
DANIEL PARME
JASON PECK
JESS SIMMS
BRENDAN SULLIVAN

COVER ART BY LINO AZEVEDO

LAYOUT AND DESIGN BY JESS SIMMS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

To Break Open 10

by Mary Catherine Harper

Wolves 13

by Maggie Mumford

Lust Disrupts 24

by Martin Shapiro

Florida 26

by Serafina Bersonsage

**Your Grandpa's Gender Identity: A Letter to My Brother's
Child 29**

by Chris Shorne

Grass Fires 43

by Kelsey Erin Shipman

I'm Full Of It 44

by Kate Wylie

Echoes 46

by Brianna Pike

Honey 53

by Mercury-Marvin Sunderland

By 1912, Erik Satie had mostly stopped using barlines 57

by Daisy Bassen

From *My Own Little Talmud* 60

by James Gallant



BLOOM

MIRJANA MIRC

FOREWORD

We've never started a reading period with a theme in mind--and yet, as we pick works for the issue, commonalities always emerge. We started off the Issue 15 reading period with "Your Grandpa's Gender Identity" already in our inbox, and as the summer progressed we found the strongest works explored adjacent territory: the generational wisdom passed along in "Grass Fires"; the question of what traits children inherit from their parents in "Wolves"; the way family history reverberates in Echoes.

We always wonder, is this some collective consciousness at work? Or is it a product of perception, focusing on the things the works share, or subconsciously looking for work that communicates with those early pieces we accepted?

Maybe this is on my mind because we're about to try our hand at doing things a little differently. Issue 15 is being released in the middle of our first contest reading period, where we do have a theme, albeit one that's open to interpretation. We're very curious to see how this alters the way we put the issue together. Will the work submitted have even more of a connection? What unplanned themes are going to emerge as the next issue takes shape?

We'll have to wait until spring to get answers to those questions. For now, we're excited to present the unintentionally-cohesive Issue 15, with many thanks, as always, to the amazing contributors who entrusted us with their work.

Cheers,

The AHH Crew



KIHA AHN

To Break Open

BY MARY CATHERINE HARPER

I: Wanting

I want so badly to see
all the shades of white
and cream sand driven by water and wind
to its powdery fineness

and not to think
of the time I almost slid from a sandstone
mushroom, one of the high-squatting rocks
at Canyonlands.

II: Needing

I need to live—really live—on this seashore,
in this town with narrow foot paths along
too-narrow-for-cars-to-drive streets
whitened by crushed shells.

Are these exoskeletons of oysters? Clams?
Or the broken homes of the dead?
I know nothing
of what it takes to live here.

III: Forgetting

How to forget that the stripped-clean
skull of a rattlesnake in the desert is
a sister to the clamshell
just now crushed under my heel.

How not to notice that beach sand casts
no shadow, no depth
to the perception of time, which writhes
in the shaded face of The Needles.

IV: Breaking

If I could only tunnel into one of the dunes
here, settle in, if I had only brought
the bones of home for comfort, to break
them open, suck their marrow dry.



THE BREAKTHROUGH

DANIELLE SUNG

Wolves

BY MAGGIE MUMFORD

1.

Your Husband's Favorite: Rare Red Meatloaf (with notes)

2 lbs ground beef *preferably never frozen because he hates the way the meat turns brown after you freeze and thaw it.*

½ cup breadcrumbs.

1 green pepper, onion, carrot, celery *chopped and then processed. You are grinding all the vegetables to make them undetectable to a carnivorous palate.*

2 tbsp ketchup *for the mix, plus however much you want for the top.*

2 tbsp milk.

2 tbsp Worcestershire sauce.

Salt and pepper.

2 eggs *the big ones where the white ripples opaquer than the rest. Those globs of snotted orbs that remind you eggs are a bodily creation.*

Preheat oven to 350.

Line a sheet tray with foil.

Put all the ingredients into a bowl, roll your sleeves up to your elbows and combine the meat with the other ingredients using your hands. *Make sure to clench your teeth and furrow your brow so that, if your husband walks in, it looks like you're wrestling an animal to its death, an antelope under the jaws of your hands.*

Take the ball of meat and place onto the sheet tray. Mold into the shape of a loaf.

Pour ketchup on the top.

Put in the oven, *timing instructions to follow.*

Work on the potatoes but be ready to take the meatloaf out of the oven as soon as he can smell it. It's ready the second it hits his nose.

Only make this when he's home, but don't ask him to be anywhere that he didn't already plan to be. If he's playing video games in the living room in your open concept house, this is the optimal time for meatloaf. If you must make it when he isn't home, prep the potatoes beforehand and stand on the threshold between the kitchen and the living room—your nose isn't as good as his and you need to make sure you smell it right when the edges start to brown, but before the middle gets even remotely cooked.

Serve with mashed potatoes. Make sure that two thirds of the meatloaf goes onto his plate. You and your son can share the other third. At least, until your son becomes a man like his father, and then you will likely have to make two meatloaves.

You know what your husband is when you marry him. He does the right thing and tells you before things get too serious. The conversation happens over drinks one night when you are still dating. Sometimes you will wonder if the drinks were a key component of the conversation: to calm him down enough to tell, and to keep you in that blurry place between reality and wine. It is a red wine. Jammy, they call it. But underneath the jam, a coppery undertone that people refer to as wet stones but that to you tastes like blood.

He takes your hands in his. You like the way his hands make your hands look small.

He says, "I have to tell you something."

Though what he says is unbelievable, you don't need much convincing. Maybe it's the wine droplets staining both of your lips. Maybe it's that something about his face makes this information easy to take. His teeth announce themselves in his smile. His beard and hair curls thick around his ears. His eyes look at everything hungrily, in a way that you will come to think of as wolfish.

2.

Once a month, you lock him up in the bathroom of his apartment (later our apartment). Then when you're married, you lock him in the shed of the house you buy—an old house with uncharted territory at the edges of the property, dank and living under curled vines.

You are well suited. The full moon also falls on your period, so it allows mutually exclusive spheres of masculine and feminine existence. He rages, clawing at the metal siding that you've stapled to the door and walls, and you watch chick flicks and tear at pizza and chicken wings with your own kind of ferocity.

Before the house and the shed, you are afraid. Though you don't like to admit it, you stay up watching movies because you can hear him breathing through the walls. You feel him watching you, and you imagine your shoulders and neck barely visible through the crack in the door. You imagine (though it feels like a memory of something real) the light from the crack creating a line down his face, illuminating yellow eyes. He never lets you see him this way, so you can't help but imagine yellow eyes.

After the moon, you come back together like two rivulets of water joining along skin. You make a habit of pushing away those fears, like you push away all your fears. After all, aren't most fears irrational? He won't hurt you. He told you ahead of time what he is, and there is assurance in that.

Your routine is to barely speak about what he is, except on Halloween. Then he puts on a wolf mask at your annual party. Your friends, who by now have merged into one group, tease him about how he always wears the same costume. He says, "This isn't a costume!" and then howls, head back, hairs shading his neck like a thousand small marks in black ink.

Sometimes in bed there will be an occasional bite, nothing too extreme, but enough to remind you of what he really is. You had an ex that drew blood when he bit your neck. When you tell your husband about it, he says, "Maybe that guy was a vampire."

You look at him with wide eyes and say, "Vampires are real too?"

He laughs, shoving you playfully, “No, dummy!”

His laugh does that thing where it twists itself a little and you make a mental note to prepare meatloaf to appease the cruel sound.

You point out that it isn't so dumb to believe in vampires when your husband is a werewolf.

He responds with all the things that make vampires ridiculous: garlic, holy water, no reflection, sunlight, etc.

You say, “What about silver bullets?”

Apparently, silver bullets will kill anyone. And a regular bullet would kill a werewolf just as dead as a silver one.

Apparently, he doesn't fully transform into a wolf, which you decide is comforting.

He says, “The main thing is the intense bloodlust.”

You end up fooling around, and so you don't get to finish the conversation. You realize later that you were talking about how you would kill him, should you need to.

3.

Wolf-Man Steak (with notes)

2 Ribeyes do not do three, this is a date night meal and reserved only for when your son is at his grandparents' because after steak your husband wants to try to make more sons. Or at least that's the joke, though when he lifts you over his shoulder and runs you up the stairs, you are not entirely sure that he is joking.

Salt and pepper.

Bacon, for the top of the baked potatoes *you need a lot.*

Reserved bacon fat *to cook the greens in.*

Potatoes, 4 or 5 *one half of one for you and the rest for him.*

Greens.

Preheat the oven to 375.

Put potatoes in the oven when preheated.

When the potatoes are done, turn the oven off, but leave them in so that

they will be piping hot.

Salt and pepper both sides of the ribeyes.

Heat a cast iron skillet until searing hot.

Cook bacon in the skillet, set aside on a plate *without a paper towel! The grease is important to him.*

Cook the greens in the pan and then put in a bowl.

Sear the steak, no more than ten seconds on both sides.

Serve with bacon topped potatoes and greens, immediately.

Eat while not looking at him. Try not to listen to him make that almost moan sound through his nose. You must not be turned off by him in these animal moments. You cannot be disgusted by how his mouth and fingers are now slick and gleaming with animal fat. He will shift his focus from the meat to you at any moment. Be ready.

When you get pregnant, your husband buys a onesie with wolf ears on it. You laugh when you open it, but in the middle of the night, you crawl out of bed and rummage until you find it. You unfold the soft garment. It is very small.

You run your forefinger along the point of its ears. You wonder at what a wolf child would mean. When will you know? How will you handle it?

Your husband comes to find you, striding out of the dark of your bedroom. He puts his arms around your waist. He buries his muzzle into your neck. He says, “Don't be scared, baby.”

Sometimes, when he reaches out to you like this, you feel like you'll never be scared again. Other times, you feel more alone than you have ever felt before. You let yourself relax into his arms. He carries you to bed, like a woman on a 50s B movie horror poster, suppliant in the arms of a monster.

That night you make love, and after, when he's sleeping, you stare through the blinds at the half face of the moon, always becoming.

4.

Meat Sauce (with notes)

2 lbs ground beef.

1 onion, 3 cloves of garlic, 1 green bell pepper *minced*.

1 small jar of tomato paste.

1 large can of tomato sauce.

1 block of Parmigiana-Reggiano, grated finely *yes, the whole block*.

1 stick of butter.

Some bay leaves.

Take half the meat and brown it in butter with the onion, garlic, bell pepper.

Once browned, add the bay leaves.

Add the tomato and cheese and let simmer for 45 minutes, uncovered.

Stir in the rest of the raw ground beef right before serving over pasta or crusty bread. *Do not freeze. Reheating will cook the meat more than he likes.*

Your child is a boy. You've been told that boys are often wild. You name him Lucas. He likes to run and play in the mud, and plaster his dark hair into shapes on his forehead while trying to move it away from his eyes. He makes guns from his fingers. He smashes toys with other toys. One time you catch him sharpening some sticks, but you take them away.

5.

Notes on what to serve for Easter: *Crown roast is the only acceptable dinner—in the middle put a mixture of ground beef, bacon, and potatoes chopped fine. But don't neglect to get the real thing. What is the point of this circle of meat without a crown of bones? It is the moon itself. White and shadowed.*

You have an Easter egg hunt the year Lucas turns five. You invite over

neighborhood children and watch them roam through the grass. They amble on unsure feet, holding baskets bigger than themselves. Lucas is already taller than the rest, his hair a nest of curls. Like his father, his eyeteeth shine in the cavern of his smile.

You take pictures and drink the grown-up lemonade that one of the other mothers spiked with Prosecco while gossiping in the kitchen. You let the day grow fizzy, wondering how tightly you've held control that this feels so good. You find yourself sunburned on the hammock, waiting for everyone to leave, but smiling and laughing just the same.

Then one of the children screams. A parent plucks them up. The rest pull their nearest child away. Eyes look to you, so you go to the circle to see what is the matter.

In a scoop of grass there is a gory pile with wings.

You look at your husband. He rolls his eyes, turns his head away from you angrily. There have been a few moments like this, and each time you have them something breaks between you.

"A dog must have gotten it," someone says.

"I'll deal with it," your husband says. He disappears and reappears with kitchen gloves and a black bag.

A few of the children are still crying, their faces blotched red and shining with snot.

The bird looks as if it has been dissected. Its wings and legs bent back, its organs splayed, some spilling over the sides, attached by red strings. You almost laugh. Somehow, its insides look like popped balloons, which you were going to have to comb the yard for anyway. But then a seasick sway comes over you, and you run around to the front of the house, so that you won't throw up in front of your guests.

6.

Notes on what to serve for Thanksgiving: *Cook your turkey wrapped in bacon.*

Do not let anyone else get the legs and the dark meat but him.

Distract your guests from his feral tearing of mauve meat from bone by asking

if anyone wants coffee and serving the pie.

“I think we have a fox or something,” you say to your husband over dinner. You found a second bird body. This one smeared on the porch step, less clearly a bird.

“Cats do it too,” he says. “People are stupid about outdoor cats. I read an article about it.”

Lucas pipes up from behind his mac and cheese, “If I were a cat, I’d rip birds apart with my teeth.”

You look to your husband. The two of you have shared glances over words like this in the past, checking to see if you’re on the same page about your fear that this thing will repeat itself. But tonight, he stays looking down at his place, his face moving with chewing. His mouth quirked into a ghost of a smile.

The next thing you find is a large goose, too big to be taken down by the small cat to whom you had attributed the prior bodies. Your husband walks down the drive to the trash cans with the bag a foot away from his hip. You feel relief that he is clearly disgusted. Then you wonder if holding the bag away, and the slight turn of his head, is something he is doing because he knows that you are watching him through the kitchen window.

7.

Pork Tenderloin (with notes)

Coat with butter and herbs.

Bake at 325 for two and half hours.

Do not bake for a second longer than that. When you slice open the tenderloin, it must be so pink in the middle that you feel embarrassed.

Keep your husband busy with chores, the smell of the slow roasting meat will make him more apt to work on just about anything, so this is the best time to get the gutters cleaned and any wiring done.

Never cook this meal when he is in the shed. It makes him shake the metal, scream, howl. The smell makes him claw and tear until you are sure that he will get out. You fear he will run through the neighborhood, keening for the taste

of the meat that flies, and climbs, and hops, and runs through the forest and the trees, and all that dark around the home you’ve made with its warm yellow windows casting civilized squares onto the dark blue grass of your lawn.

You worry about the moon coming for the first time in a long time. You kiss your husband with locked eyes, checking that he is still yours. He winks. Then, together, you secure him in the shed. You’ve started to call it *his lair*.

Once you’ve checked the lock, you go back to the house, crossing the dark yard in the humid buzzing of twilight, sweater closed tight over your chest, under the casual cross of your arms. You are forcing yourself not to run. You go to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. You sit at the table and drink three cups. Then you take a blanket, a husband pillow, and a book. You place them outside of Lucas’ door. You read until dawn. All the while you’re bleeding, all the while you’re wondering if your husband can smell the blood.

In his sleep, around 2 or 3AM, Lucas growls. But he stays in bed all night.

8.

Whole Pig

This recipe is not recommended unless you are experienced with a smoker and have a strong stomach for being around all the parts of an animal. It is the best way to work a vegetarian meal into your week. The thought of pig bones in the fridge can placate your husband through a black bean burger or two.

But it’s up to you if a vegetarian meal is worth opening your fridge to the sight of the head on a plate, one ear flopped down, eyes just pits, putty-like but still expressionistic. It is this moment that most makes you feel afraid, like death is just a coating of fat that your fingerprints have traced along your home and the foreheads of your loved ones; death is a taste, the smell when you lick your wrist to check your breath; death is the scrape of your fork along a plate when you can’t finish your meal; death is the bones that have poked through the bag and sent the animals running, knocking over the bins in the middle of the night, dogs

barking at the sound, while you sit up and hear the animal scurry and know that they're only doing what is in their nature but that you're terrified all the same.

Outside, birds shriek, a crescendo, something different and frantic.

9.

When you are too tired to cook:

Take your husband to the butcher shop and let him pick out sausages or strange cuts that he can handle himself. Downside—you have to eat whatever he makes and like it. You have to smile when he puts his hand on your chin and says that you're better than all the other women because you eat this shit up.

Anyone would if their husband was like him; they would have to.

You turn the kitchen water off. The outside has grown quiet. The birds have stopped and the absence of them twittering is a sound by contrast. Through the window the trees turn in the wind like hair being tousled by a giant hand.

You creep, though you don't know why, to the back door. You open it out to the yard and the shock of sunlight. It is about noon.

On the other side of the great pine tree, you hear the rustle of brush and dried leaves. You step outside into your own backyard. You shut the door behind you as quietly as possible. You move closer to the tree, peering through the wind-shifting gaps between the branches.

Through the bristles your husband's back shudders.

He's crouched over something that you cannot see.

You imagine you are invisible so that you have the courage to wind a path around the tree.

"Baby?" Your voice is soft, and somehow not your own.

What does he have in his hands?

But of course, you already know. At the sound of your voice, his head jerks up.

Gore hangs from his mouth like shredded red paper, but it wiggles with the movement like the flesh that it is. From the side of his lips the stick-like elbow and talons of a bird twitch, all angles.

His eyes meet yours, recognition. He does not want to hurt you, but he will not let you take his meal. His jaw moves, the shreds moving in and out of his mouth. Bones crunch.

"Put that down," you say, hearing your voice turn maternal. Tears well up in your eyes.

He freezes, his hands over his knees, painting himself with blood. The wind pulls a feather from a splotch on his cheek and sends it your way. The white fluff of it rides the air towards you.

Birds settle on the telephone wire at the far end of the yard. They're wondering what you will do.

You take the feather from the air, and pinch it between two fingers.

"Wash up when you're through," you say to him.

He grunts in assent, dragging himself and the bird under the tree.

The birds on the wire disperse, perhaps disappointed.

Inside, you sit at the kitchen table and stare hard at the embroidered tablecloth. You rub your fingers against the red exes stitched by your mother's mother. You stand, the scrape of the chair breaking the silence.

You put the chicken that you had been thawing back in the freezer. He's already had poultry today. You take out the ribs of a cow instead. Imagine the latch of bones useful over her animal heart.

You hear the screen door and turn to see your husband wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. Now, standing erect, he looks more like the man you know. All that the blood on his face has done is show you the things that you no longer have to imagine. When you look at one another now, a stitch exes you together. Truth, acknowledgement, shame: sometimes, these are stronger bonds than what we have hoped about one another.

You both turn at the sound of Lucas bounding down the stairs.

Lucas says, "What's for dinner?"

Lust Disrupts

BY MARTIN SHAPIRO

You didn't need to reject best friends,
quit your Captain Beefheart cover band,
emboss the leather binding of your Bible
with rhinestone crosses in red and gold,
join the Church of the Holy Monstrosity
and camp out, rapture-ready, by its airstrip—
to lie with the most pious girl on campus.

You admit your two-week woo begat
scary clarity: you witnessed miracles.

Thunder, close by, surprises me as we crunch
through shin-deep snow to your Chevy.
I blink up: ice-bright sunshine. No clouds,
except from your breath as you tell me
this is *yet another sign of something*.

The car starts; its heater doesn't.



AS IT SO HAPPENS

LOUIS STABLE

Florida

BY SERAFINA BERSONSAGE

July is the month of dead childless aunts
whose number I would join one day
if I had any nieces.

Reckless decrepitude is a luxury
for we who have no daughters to fret
no sons to fix the wallpaper
that peels like dead skin from the walls
the faucet that drips for a decade
the ominous lump in the ceiling
that swells with every rainstorm, over
a couch as narrow as a coffin.

Their couches are unlike the stiff
striped sofas of grandparents, where as a child
I sat, behaving, nor are they like
my parents' nagging couch, too vast
for me— A sympathy exists
between those faded floral wrecks
and the women who slept there, a glass of gin
sweating in an autumn of crumpled tissues
heaped up by pumpkin-orange bottles of pills.

I wonder which of their afflictions will get me.
I hope, at least, that I am spared
the embarrassing passion for dolls.

And yet there was a strange late grace,
experimental, in the way
they brushed their artificial hair
kissed plastic cheeks
and looked at me—

I hope that they were quick to sleep
not like my grandmother, who died
amid hysterics, one last tantrum
to delay her.

They had quiet
broken only by the rain
and the drip of the faucet, and the snores of the husbands
who found them with the dawn.

Your Grandpa's Gender Identity: A Letter to My Brother's Child

BY CHRIS SHORNE



ISABELLA SUELL

Dear one,

It's your grandma—my mom—who calls me at home to tell me your mother's mother has died. I pull the chair out from the kitchen table and sit. "The memorial's on Saturday," she says, "at the old Mormon church up north." It takes me a moment to remember that your mother's family is Mormon. The line goes quiet and I hear a voice in the background. Then she adds, "Your dad says we can pick you up on the way."

When my parents arrive at my house on Saturday, your grandpa is in the driver's seat as usual, with your grandma beside him. On the car ride up, I ask the usual questions: what, for how long, which children flew in, have you talked to any of them? Your grandpa watches the road and stays quiet. His mother died when he was six. His dad came home, told him his mom was dead, and that was the last they talked about it. As you probably know, your grandpa loathes funerals. He's not sure they're necessary. I know he's dreading this service and know also, because here he is in his dress slacks and his best shirt, that for you and for your parents, he is willing to do things he'd rather not do.

Strong emotions, other than anger, have always made your grandpa shift in his seat, made him lower his voice before saying: "This is not the worst thing that will happen to you." While this observation is almost always true, it is also almost always unhelpful. When your grandma lost her father, she cried into the shoulders of other women. She sat right

down on the kitchen floor with me and sobbed. “Your father,” she told me, “just doesn’t understand.” Looking back now, I think she got it just right. When, as an adult, *his* father died, your grandpa did not crash onto the kitchen floor and sob. And he doesn’t get why someone else would.

Like you, I’ve always been a crier. I cry at commercials. I cried the first time the reclusive cat jumped onto my lap, let her claws retract and her weight fall into me. I cried driving the bridge, in the sun, across Lake Washington—more than once. If someone else starts crying, I usually cry too. So when, the day of the memorial, I walk into the old church and see you, with your streak of purple hair and your nose ring, sitting on a bench against the wall crying, I sit down, hold you, and start crying myself.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself” is a refrain that still plays in my head sometimes. It is the voice of your grandpa, his younger voice, from the time when he raised me, your dad, and the rest of his kids. Does your dad tell you that now? I’m sure there were times, as a teenager, when I was feeling sorry for myself, when I was being “overdramatic,” as your grandpa was fond of saying. I am also sure there were times when my display of emotion was roughly equivalent to how I felt, when I was neither drumming up nor playing down my emotions. But when I was a kid, your grandpa would have none of it.

In elementary school, we played “Capture the Flag” at recess. But we called it “Capture the Fag.” Another playground favorite was “Smear the Queer.” I played both. Have you even heard of these games? In middle school, your uncle and I were endlessly amused by the Ben Gay commercial. We used our mock announcer voices to proclaim: “Gay. Ben Gay...” and then we’d add our own: “for about twenty years now.” We thought we were hilarious. But even then I felt weird saying it, a guitar string out of tune.

All those years, before you came out, I was alone: queer. Not queer in the way that you and I use the term now, to describe the community and identity we share, but queer in the way that your grandpa used the

term growing up, the way he still hears it: wrong. When I came out, your grandma blamed herself. Our family comforted her by telling her that it—which is to say, *I*—was not her fault. That something was wrong was assumed. You don’t tell someone “It’s not your fault” when a rainbow appears over their house.

When I came out, my senior year of high school, you had not been long on this earth. Your father had moved back in with us, along with you and your mother. I remember the day, just after I’d come out to him, when he opened the door to my room and saw me sitting on the floor reading a book out loud with my legs in front of me and you in my lap. I felt caught.

I realize I may need to explain this to you because I’m not sure your generation has internalized this belief. When I was young, your grandpa explained to me how gay people were often child molesters. Of course, not everyone thought that, but most did. I didn’t meet an openly gay person until my senior year of high school. For years I felt self-conscious hugging you if other people were around.

Likely you were too young to remember those years in which your father couldn’t look me in the eye, too young to notice the tension or its manifestations: how infrequently your parents returned my calls, how I would come to your house but never you to mine. You were a toddler when I came out and your grandma stayed in her room and cried, when your grandpa sent me to a shrink, when pretty much everyone said—at least to themselves—that it was a phase and I just wanted attention.

A few years after coming out to your father, I began asking your grandma to invite you over to her house so that I could go there to see you. You and I colored and play-wrestled; you showed me all your drawings. Your favorite game involved me sitting in your grandparents’ living room with you standing in front of me, both of us looking at each other and moving our heads closer until, when we were almost touching noses and our eyes were crossing, I cocked my head and said in a parrot voice “Hell-oo-oo!” and you had a fit of laughter. We’d play for as long as you’d laugh.

When you came out, during *your* senior year in high school, my world flipped. I sat on my futon for a long time trying to believe my luck. For

nearly twenty years, I'd been the only out person in our extended family. Not only was I no longer the lone queer, but I was now with you: the crier, the reader, the artist. The quiet one never afraid to look me in the eye or put your face close to mine. A few weeks after you came out, I was in my friend's car on my way to meet you and your girlfriend at a queer spoken word show. "I can't explain it," I said to my friend. "How it feels, how different it feels. In my own family. All these years."

"It's like now you have family that's family," she said. And she got it just right.

You are the only person in our family who understands what that means.

When your grandma was a teenager, she had to wear a dress. And if your grandpa had worn one, he'd have been beaten, if not by the cops, then by his own father. "Damn right no son of mine's gonna cry," I can hear your grandpa say. And I wonder if it's his father's voice that I hear inside his. By the time your grandparents had their first girl-child, my sister, they compromised: she only had to wear a dress Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and could wear pants on weekends—except for church. I imagine them telling her, "Girls wear dresses," as if dresses just naturally fell out of the closet and draped themselves over the bodies of all little girls.

If grandparents were in the habit of listening to their grandkids, maybe you could talk to them. "Really? You thought only men had testosterone?" you might ask, explaining how we all have all the hormones in different amounts. And don't get me started, you might add, on social influences; look at all the countries, cultures, and times in history where men can hold hands or cry when they're sad.

These are things you grew up knowing or learned as a teenager, beliefs shared by your peers, by the time and place that you come from. What is important for you to understand is that, for your grandparents' generation, gender is a set, everything matches. There are men with testosterone and women without it. Women have breasts and babies. Men have prostates, etcetera. I know you know better, but how should they? And if grandchildren were in the habit of trying to understand

their grandparents, you might ask yourself: What do they have to go on, what do any of us have to go on, but our own experiences and what we learn from others? What mountains must they move inside themselves to understand?

At the service, your grandpa waits in the hall while your grandma and I go to the viewing room. The bereaved, your mother's father, greets me just inside the door. When we hug, he holds me more tightly and for longer than he ever has. Previously, we'd hugged superficially, out of obligation; I'd hardly noticed that another human was involved. Now, his body in my arms surprises me: how I feel his existence inside it, how it neither gives nor resists, how it puts the hurt of his into mine. I walk quickly to the open casket, look down, apologize, and as quickly walk back out to stand in the hall with your grandpa.

When it comes time to view the closed casket and hear words from the family and friends of your maternal grandmother, I sit next to my father and already he has pulled out his hanky and set it on his lap. You are sitting in front, your siblings at your side. We all look to the right as the side door opens and men who loved your grandmother walk in with a casket; the women—your mother and her sisters—walk behind it like a veil of grief. When your mother takes hold of the arm of one of her sisters, my own arm tenses. Next to me, I can feel your grandpa's muscles tensing as well, working, as I am, to keep the quiet crying from turning to inappropriate sobbing. He keeps the hanky in his hand and lowers his head to put it to his eyes. I look at him out of the corner of my eye and feel an unfamiliar sensation: that we share not only a physical space—a pew, a room—but an emotional space as well. And with that comes a comfort that not only am I not alone, but I am with my father.

Your grandpa slapped me only once. I'd been crying. Like an over-dramatic reading of a bad movie script, he said, "That'll give you something to cry about." I would've laughed if I hadn't been so stung by it. I do not remember why I was crying or why he was angry, only that after that slap

I spent all the muscle I had in my arms and fists and jaw to not let go any more tears in front of this man. But of course I did cry again, and in front of him, and rather often. Fifteen years after that slap he would start crying too. And twenty years later, according to your grandma, he cried at a commercial.

“He even cries at parts that aren’t that sad,” said your grandma recently, about your grandpa’s new thing of crying during movies. She whispered this as we sat together on the couch with him sitting in his matching recliner, watching TV at an unreasonably high volume, as is his custom. This emotional outpouring of his has snowballed the past few years. Puberty is not the only time our biology changes. Our hormones shift as we age, often significantly. For your grandpa, as for many men, this means a decrease in testosterone, which, for some, can lead to an increase in tears. A similar transition, but in the other direction, often happens for women. As your grandpa’s ability to feel with others increases, your grandma feels a bit more separate. As she puts it: “I just don’t really care so much what people think of me.”

I like to tell myself that, as we grow older, we move toward more balance within ourselves. We learn to embrace, we literally embody, the parts of ourselves that we so often thought of as...well, as not part of ourselves. As you and I stand in the gym that serves as the reception room, hovering over the table of finger-foods, I see this embodiment walking towards us. Your grandpa walks up and the first thing he does is complain about how much he’s crying nowadays.

“How are the crab cakes,” he asks as he grabs one. Clearly, he’s still feeling uncomfortable with feeling. I’m sure it’s hard for him, yet I can’t help but hope he doesn’t change. I can’t help but feel that we share something we never have before. As I tear up again, I do not have to explain to him that I am crying not so much in grief for a woman I did not know well, as in empathy for those who did. I don’t have to explain because he gets it; he feels it too. And perhaps, with this physical manifestation of our shared feelings, we share something with you also; maybe you know in a way we couldn’t say otherwise how we are sad for your sadness.

After the memorial, your grandpa and grandma and I hug everyone goodbye and climb back into the car. Not five minutes into our drive, your grandpa says again, “All this damn crying.” All this damn *complaining*, I think. Welcome to my whole life, dude. But I know it’s not fair. Your grandpa’s gender identity is not my own. Sometimes it seems nothing like my own. This is the man who, at age sixty-five, after his third trip in one year to the emergency room, bragged about the size of his enlarged prostate—of which the doctors had just removed a third. “You know how it is,” he said, leaning back in his recliner. “Men in our family, we just got everything big.” Sitting on the matching couch, your grandma and I looked at him, looked at each other, smirked and shook our heads.

I can’t claim, quite, to understand it. Why wouldn’t he want to cry? It’s such a relief. And people will hold you. But I am trying to understand. I am trying to remember that just because something feels natural to me doesn’t mean it feels natural to someone else. I remember your grandma telling me, a few days after I’d come out, that I wanted to be a man.

Your grandma could not yet pull apart the idea of sexuality from the idea of gender. To her, they always went together. They were a set. Men were people that were attracted to women; part of being a woman was being attracted to men. This is what I want you to understand. It is in this same way, I think, that your grandparents cannot separate someone being a woman from other people seeing her as a woman. For them, people say someone is a man because he was born a man.

Your grandparents can’t see that the gender someone actually is and the gender that other people say that person is are two separate pieces which sometimes match and sometimes don’t. As far as I can tell, your grandparents’ genders and the genders others assign them have always been a matching set. Of course, you and I know that this is not, and never has been, true for all of us.

When I came out, your grandpa said that he could understand my attraction to women. Women, he thought, were pretty much objectively

beautiful. “What I can’t understand,” he said, “is gay men.” How could you find men—who are pretty much objectively *not* sexy—attractive, he seemed to wonder. (I sometimes wonder that myself.) Yet, your grandpa never suggested that your grandma’s own perverse attraction to these objectively unattractive creatures (such as himself) was anything but natural. He did not have to feel what your grandma felt in order to believe that she felt it.

And so, perhaps it is too easy when we, especially the older generations, say that we don’t understand. Perhaps all we are really saying is “That is not how I feel.” I now believe that your grandpa, before his testosterone decreased, did not actually feel as sad as I did during those sad movies. Or, if he did feel as sad, he did not find his body responding by silently streaming tears. Or, he was able to stop the tears before they got away from him. Whatever the reasons for his lack of tears, the problem was not that he didn’t share my experience, but that he didn’t believe it. He seemed to think that if my expressions exceeded his own, it could only mean I was exaggerating. He didn’t get that I could feel sad when he didn’t and that both things, at the same time, could be natural and true.

Your grandpa did take testosterone for a few months. His doctor recommended it after he’d complained of feeling weak and tired. “It should help with your muscle tone and increase your libido, too,” the doctor said. So twice a month, your grandpa pulled the backside of his pants down and let your grandma shoot testosterone into his butt so he could feel more masculine. And it worked. He felt more at ease in his body, more like himself.

But shortly after he started taking testosterone, his doctor said it was thickening his blood. “This doesn’t happen often,” the doctor said, “but everyone’s body reacts to hormones differently.” For your grandpa, the testosterone was thickening his blood and, in doing so, increasing his already high risk for a heart attack. It wasn’t worth it. He stopped the injections. And so your grandpa lives with this tension between his gender identity and his body, creating a dissonance that comes out in awkward

moments, such as saying “I’m tired of crying,” instead of “I’m so sorry,” at a memorial.

Halfway into our drive home, your grandpa says, “Maybe hormones will help her.” He means you, of course. He still refers to you as “her.” He thinks hormones will help with this problem of your gender. Though your gender may not always be a rainbow over your house, it is certainly, as far as I can tell, not a problem. Unfortunately, your grandpa is not suggesting that the doctors help you in the same way that they helped him, by giving him the hormones he wanted to feel more like himself. Though he would probably say this is what he wants, you and I would say he wants the doctors to help *him* feel more comfortable by making you feel like the gender *he* thinks you should be. He wants to help you be the granddaughter he can hold and protect, the girl-child of his boy-child with whom he knows how to connect. And I can’t say I don’t understand the fear of losing connection. I do.

I’ve come to understand that we do not perceive the world—not as it is. We filter. We just can’t hold the vastness of the stimuli and knowledge and connection in our finite selves. To understand a new experience, to make meaning, we need something inside of us onto which this new experience can hitch itself. If a new idea comes into the wrong area, if it comes in, for instance, under the heading: *Transsexuals Take Hormones in order to Change Who They Are*, for people like your grandpa, it floats amorphous, along with concepts like *the finiteness/infinity of the universe*, *the emotional lives of bees*, and *kids these days*. It gets locked away in that quickly forgotten file labeled: *Things That Are Beyond Me*.

But what if this new idea comes in slowly, over time, hitched to ideas of his own gender identity? Hitched to the fact that he, too, wants to take testosterone to feel more like himself? What if it comes in hitched to his daughter’s desire for breast implants or his wife considering hormone replacement therapy? Both of which he said he supports if that’s what they want. Perhaps if a seemingly new idea about gender arrives in this way, surrounded by the familiar, he can make sense of it.

If, instead of unfamiliar words, underlying concepts are offered (for example, that we do not have to experience someone else's experience in order to believe it), perhaps other people's expression of their own feelings and genders will seem less mystifying. Perhaps he can come, in the time left to him, to an understanding not only of who we are—queers and gender-benders of a generation and two generations after him—but also of who he is. If we want to offer this understanding to your grandpa, we must first understand how he makes meaning of the world. We must find the things of his world that we can hitch onto, then pull ourselves in close.

The other day, your younger cousin, in the center of your grandparents' living room, was hamming it up as usual: spinning around and singing, flipping his blond bangs off to one side of his face, using the TV screen, the coffee table, and any moderately reflective surface as a mirror. His mom, my sister, said that they were looking into dance classes for him and your grandpa responded, like he does, like we all knew he would: "Well, as long as it's not ballet." And he laughed. He was trying, like we do, to tease as a way to connect. But no one else laughed. It's as if time is tugging him away from us.

I want you to know that when your dad, your aunts and uncles, and I were still your grandparents' children, in that time before we had you and your siblings and your cousins, we used to laugh with him. We are not so different, he and I, his generation and mine.

It is clear to everyone who knows him that he doesn't feel quite like himself with all this weepy business coming out of his face all the time. And it isn't fake, his feeling of discomfort. As he laughs less often at our jokes, and we laugh less often at his, I see someone just trying to maintain his sense of self—while his body, his children, his grandchildren, and the whole damn world keep twirling, through no fault of his own, on and on around him.

When I was a teenager and young adult, I said that your grandpa was

living in the Stone Age. I saw him as an oaf of a man swinging the club of his masculinity around the dining room. I confused being closed-minded with having beliefs from a time before me. I did not yet understand that discarding a belief one has held for half a century takes more work than coming to a new understanding as a teenager. I want you to know that your grandparents are working hard for you, as they worked hard for me. Not all families do that for each other.

For instance, when your grandpa first heard about gay marriage, he said "No." It wasn't natural. "Marriage is something between a man and a woman."

When I visited your grandparents two days after the Supreme Court ruling in favor of gay marriage, he said he was happy. That it was good for our country. That Domestic Partnership wasn't enough, wasn't really equal. "We know now," said your grandpa, "that some men love other men and some women love other women. Nothing else makes sense but to let them get married same as anyone else." Of course, we had always known that some women love women, but he hadn't. He'd had to learn that. I had to tell him. For sixteen years I told him. And it took me about as long to understand he'd been listening. They are not ignorant or mean, your grandparents. They are not stuck. Don't let anyone tell you they are.

Just before taking the left towards my house after the memorial, he says, still speaking of your gender, "I just don't get it." Perhaps he will never understand kids these days: top surgery, hormones, and laser hair removal; bisexuals, transsexuals, and non-binary people. Or perhaps he already does. I have seen this man, time and again, move to a place of understanding. He may not be able to tell you yet, but I want to tell you: I think he gets it.

He gets it enough to know that his crying, his body, and the way society views him do not change his gender. When his body isn't doing what he expects of a man's body, whether he loses a third of one of his "male" organs or can't "control" his emotions, he does not believe he is therefore less a man. No, he goes to great lengths to say, in effect: *Even though it*

appears to you that I am doing something womanly, I assure you, it's just my body. I can't help it. He believes—knows—that, no matter what, he is a man. Perhaps, understanding is not such mountain moving after all, but a stretching out of one's beliefs about oneself to include others as well.

We arrive at my house. Your grandpa pulls to the curb and puts the car in park. I want to tell him: “But you *do* get it, dad!” I want to explain to him everything I think I know. Instead, I open the door. I've learned that sometimes you've got to give it a little time, let things shake out in the mind. Sometimes movement rocks the earth beneath us and we fall to the kitchen floor. And sometimes it trembles silently while we chatter away. There is movement here. There is change. It's as easy to miss as your hand in the fog, the fog itself. It is quiet and elegant as you.

I walk around to the back door and enter the dark kitchen. Your grandparents, I know, are still outside, waiting. I walk to the front of the house, flash the lights, and open the front door. A tree blocks the streetlamp and I can't make out their faces. I wave anyway, hoping they'll glimpse enough of my movement through the dark to know they've brought me home safe and that now, they, too, can go on home.



Grass Fires

BY KELSEY ERIN SHIPMAN

My grandmother's grandmother taught her
to sweep the back porch twice—
once for the dust,
once more for the love of home and family.

My mother's mother taught her
to bury her grief deep—
beneath the zinnias in the front lawn
where the dog won't go.

My mother taught me
to douse grass fires one pasta pot at a time—
furious rush of women from
flame to door.

EMBRACE

VALERIA AMIRKHANYAN

I'm Full Of It

BY KATE WYLIE

So full of it there's hardly any room
for more. Pencil shavings, buttons, patches
from worn-out quilts and scraps of sight-reading music.
Flickering neon, geodes, knotted shoelaces.
The theme song from *Full House*
that's been stuck in my head for weeks.
Manholes, stop signs, green lights,
a squeaky wheel and the helpful grease.
Walt Whitman's beard hairs. Aesop's teeth.
Galway's garden and Levine's stick
shift. *Control. Alt. Delete* keys
that wipe out entire city blocks. Scrabble tiles.
A broken mouse and the cat chasing it.
A jar of moonlight on my bedside table.
An empty chair, a vase of ocean water,
and a pomegranate on the white carpet.



SUNDAY SOLITUDE

SARAH YUN

Echoes

BY BRIANNA PIKE

For my grandmother, my grandfather, my uncle, my aunt & my mother

Grief: pain, sorrow, despair & heartbreak.

1.

It is a small room right off my grandparent's kitchen.

A small room next to the guest room where I slept as a child. A small room next to the room where my aunt came home to die and where my grandfather kept his pills to keep from dying.

A small room off the kitchen with smooth pine floors the color of caramels, whorled with crisp black knots. A built-in bookcase painted cool white that holds my grandmother's beloved Wedgwood collection: soft blue velvet dishes with raised white glazes. Her china cabinet intricately carved and full of sparkling glass. Overstuffed furniture in pristine condition.

No one ever sat in this room.

The chandelier hangs in the center of a plaster ceiling. A soft globe of milky glass and dozens of crystal prisms shimmering against brass hardware.

Her fancy room.

Her treasure room.

Her beautiful room.

Her sacred room.

Her special room.

A room of her very own.

When my mother calls to tell me my father is taking down the chandelier in my grandmother's fancy room, I immediately picture it: the built-in bookcase empty; the china cabinet packed away in my parent's SUV; the smooth pine floors, always meticulously clean, dusted with fine plaster as my father cuts and saws and swears beneath the tinkling crystals, dull without the backdrop of warm light.

"Where will you hang it?" my mother asks, and I cannot answer her.

2.

My mother became an orphan in a less than a year.

She went home and emptied her childhood home of all possessions. She and my father loaded their car and my grandfather's car with pain and furniture and sorrow and dishes and grief and tools, and together they built a memorial inside of their house.

But while their house is brimming with the detritus of long lives once lived, there is an absence. My mother has next to nothing from her brother.

Her brother who died two months after their mother. Her brother who fell off a ladder on my sister's birthday and died on mine. Her brother whose flag sat between us in a crisp triangle on my grandmother's—soon to be mother's—table.

My mother had time with her parents. She knew what they wanted.

My grandfather didn't want my grandmother's clothes donated. He didn't want to see her jackets or pants or sweaters walking down the streets of their small town. He wanted my father to take his guns.

My grandmother wanted my sister to have the Wedgwood. She wanted me to have the Mary Gregory. She wanted my mother to have the grandfather clock.

But my uncle was fast, unexpected, and my aunt sold his things quickly. Cleaning out their home in Georgia with a speed that comes only with immense heartbreak. He was gone and his things were gone and my mother was left in despair with a living memorial to only part of her family. Empty spaces in the corners where he should be, filling them up.

Echo: repeat, reflect, replicate & reverberate.

3.

My mother shows me the Ethan Allen table that used to sit in my grandparent's kitchen. In their house, two Hitchcock chairs flanked either side and it stood just in front of the big picture window that looked out toward the pond.

We were in their house this summer for my grandmother's funeral. When we were there for my uncle's funeral—when we sat in that kitchen, the American flag from my uncle's graveside service sitting in a perfect triangle on that table between us—my mother said, “she put pieces of masking tape on everything, you know.”

“Why?”

“So we would know who got what,” she rests her elbows on the table.

I slide out of the slick, shiny Hitchcock chair to my knees and push the lace tablecloth to the side. There's a yellow curl of masking tape on the far corner of the table: *Janeane*: My mother's name.

My mother has to have the table refinished because my grandmother always put vases of fresh cut flowers: peonies, tulips, lilacs and daffodils on the center of the table.

My grandmother filled the vases with the cool, crisp water from their natural spring.

My grandmother never put anything under the flowers and the water wept through the white lace tablecloth.

Years and years and years of vases and vases and vases of flowers took the finish right off the top.

My mother has it refinished to a smooth, butterscotch gleam and now it sits in her hallway.

My mother repeats this story about the table and the flowers and the weeping water wetting lace as my husband walks up and laughs, “Bri does the same thing when she waters her plants at home. Water drips all over

the hardwood floors.”

“I always clean it up,” I laugh, but I can almost feel my grandmother patting my back, her voice echoing over my shoulder, “*That's right.*”

It is bittersweet to walk through my mother's house at Christmas time, a time of year that my grandfather loved. A time of year when we often went north to visit, especially when I was a child.

It is strange to walk around my mother's house and grieve all over again at the sight of items that have every right, and no right, to be here. Stranger still to walk through my mother's living room and catch my reflection in the glass of my grandmother's grandfather clock.

It is startling to walk around the corner upstairs, putting my son to bed, and stumble across pieces of my grandparents lingering in the hallway like ghosts.

I know my mother is not trying to replicate her childhood home, but each object brings fresh pain because what it truly means to find my grandmother's china cabinet in my mother's dining room, or my grandfather's birdhouse at the mouth of my parent's driveway, is that six hundred miles away, at the base of a mountain, my grandparents' house sits silent and empty and still and I can almost feel that deep silence reverberating off the mountain.

Memory: remind, memorial, memento & remember.

4.

Pine. Cedar. Maple. Oak. Dense. Green.

It comes on quickly, like the feeling of a stuffy room when someone finally decides to open the window. The miles and miles of ugly concrete thruway replaced with miles upon miles of forest.

I find it comforting to gaze out the window into nothing but green. When I was younger, I used to try and count the trees, but it was impossible. Instead, I took to imagining what lay beyond what I could see. Gnome

holes? Sprites hiding in the canopy? Trolls lurking behind rotting tree trunks? Despite the dark uncertainty of the forest, I was never afraid.

This is the North Country: vast, clear space full of green.

This is the place that makes me feel in love and lonely at the same time.

This is the other living memorial to my family.

This is the place where it is impossible to drive anywhere and not be surrounded by forest, yet even amidst all this cool, crisp clean air, sometimes, I can barely breathe.

This past summer, the last time I was in my grandparents' house, I took a few mementos. One was a vase I used to play with as a child. I'd pretend the sun porch was a store full of rare and precious objects, and this piece of glassware was a favorite of mine.

Its color is the darkest part of a peach: somewhere between rust and the color that comes when the sunset bleeds blue to mauve to pink to gold. The top is a ruffle encircling a sturdy neck that expands out into a smooth, round globe, translucent and shimmering.

Now the vase sits on my credenza capturing each day's sunset sunrise in its translucent belly, transforming my memory into a glimmering jewel.

A green canvas case holds the book. A thick, black zipper goes all the way around the outside, so every time you open the case, it's like you're opening a present.

The cover of the book is also green faux leather covered with a half sheet of shiny paper showing a wren perched on a tree branch.

I remember standing in my grandparent's family room, toes cold from the slate tile, staring out the sliding glass door, asking, *What's that bird?* And my grandfather would reply, *Let's look.*

My mother kept the same book and a pair of binoculars in a drawer in our kitchen. Always close at hand if we were ever to look out our windows wondering what we'd see.

Now I have my grandfather's bird book and his binoculars. I put them in a drawer in my kitchen near our window. Near my own back door.

Let's look.

Heal: recover, mend, remedy & cure.

5.

I frame the photographs I recovered from the large closet in my grandmother's fancy room. I'd found an entire album full of baby pictures and they were all of me.

The first photograph is of me and my grandfather when I am probably nine months old. He's on his stomach on the slate floor in their family room, and even in profile I can see he's smiling. I am on a quilt and we're both illuminated by sunlight.

The second photograph shows me clinging to my grandmother. I am three or four years old, and my arms are around her neck as she holds me high in the branches of the apple tree that grew in their backyard. The tree that held her bird feeder. The feeder my grandfather continued to paint and mend for the duration of his life, so it stayed pristine and upright. The feeder we looked at from the sliding glass door while naming the birds.

The tree is no longer there.

My grandmother is no longer there.

My grandfather is no longer there.

I frame the pictures and set them where I will see them often. I set them upright every time our cats knock them over trying to hunt birds through our dining room window.



A TEAR IN THE FABRIC OF THE NOW

EDWARD LEE

Honey

BY MERCURY-MARVIN SUNDERLAND

honey
lasts a thousand years
without rotting.

the immortal dessert
will never spoil

& this morning i
stir sweet golden syrup
into my black tea.

i drink with rush
at the bus stop

spill my beverage
& a thousand bees swarm
into my hands.

never
do they sting

only carefully walk
up the skin of my arms

nesting themselves
in my body hair.

& in my arms are found hexagons
that become beehives

on my shoulders rest
the great birthing queen bee.

& i ask why
these bees have come
to claim me

but how they cover
& burrow inside

my clothes are eaten
my skin is broken
& muscles are brought to
the public sight

i am naked.

& i wish for more
privacy

but there are bones
& then nothing more.

the bees can only burrow
in all that is left.

& as my body becomes honey
i will be drunk again

in someone's
morning tea.

spilled yet again
at another bus stop

spill my beverage
& a thousand bees swarm
into my hands.



LIVES INSIDE THE WALL

CRISTINA STANCU

By 1912, Erik Satie had mostly stopped using barlines

after Gnossiennes No.1-3

BY DAISY BASSEN

Two grand pianos, one stacked
On the other, one used as a letter-box,
Not the one on the bottom,
Because that would be easier to reach
And make something remotely like sense,
A commodity evidently in short supply,
And yet not more precious for its scarcity.
He'd only loved one woman and she left
After painting his portrait; that was enough
For her.

He published imaginary listings in the paper
For moated castles made of lead, for silver villas,
And a dentist office built from the gold fillings
The fearful rejected. They wanted the tooth pulled.



UNTITLED (PUZZLE TRIPTYCH)



NICOLINE FRANZISKA

From *My Own Little Talmud*

with a debt to Ellen Frankel's *The Classic Tales*

BY JAMES GALLANT

Frogs

"Everything was much larger in the beginning than now, of course," Rabbi Akiva said.

Rabbi the Holy nodded. "Giants in the earth, etcetera."

"Daniel estimated the width of an angel he saw as eight thousand miles."

"Good heavens, how *tall* was he?"

"I don't even want to think about it. Jacob dreamed four angels were ascending a ladder to the sky side-by-side. If they had eight-thousand-mile waists, the ladder would have to have been thirty-two thousand miles wide."

"Hard to avoid walking under it."

"I dare say."

"Rav Channa claims he once saw a frog as large as the village of Acra," Rabbi the Holy said.

"Was he drinking?"

"I don't know, but it crossed my mind that the plague of frogs in Exodus might actually just have been one immense frog sitting on Egypt."

"Nothing in the Torah would support such a notion," Akiva replied. "I suppose, though, one croaking bullfrog that size might have drawn female frogs from all over."

Abraham and the Angels

Rabbi Eliezar was presenting Rabbi Akiva his account of what happened when the three angels disguised as travelers appeared at the tent of Abraham. Abraham told Sarah to put cakes on the table.

"*Cakes?*" she replied, "We don't even have dough."

Abraham went in pursuit of a calf to butcher.

"Hope those angels weren't in any hurry for lunch," Akiva put in.

"The calf led him on a merry chase into the hills. He came to the mouth of a cave that emitted a fragrant odor. You know what he saw when he looked inside?"

"It's your story, not mine."

"Adam and Eve were lying side by side on silver couches in a soft golden light, looking fresh as teenagers."

"How did he know they *weren't* teenagers?" Akiva inquired.

"It was Adam and Eve... Abraham entertained a vision. If he could get possession of that cave, he'd put a big sign on the mountainside:

SEE ADAM AND EVE AS THEY WERE IN LIFE!

"People would come from all over and buy tickets. No more dirty stinking herds, no more hauling canvas and tent stakes around the countryside. He might even be able to build a desert resort."

"Did he close the deal?"

"There was no deal to close, because no one owned the cave."

"So he just took possession and became a wealthy man?"

"Trouble was, when he went looking for the cave again, he couldn't find it."

“Hmph,” Akiva mused. “What about the angels?”

“What about them?”

“Did they ever get fed?”

Eliezar scowled. “That’s irrelevant.”

“Wouldn’t be for me, if I were a hungry traveler.”

“Oh, all right. They got tired of waiting, and went down the road and ate pancakes at the inn.”

“So when they stopped at Abraham’s, they were just freeloading?”

Sarah’s Miraculous Breasts

Sarah was ninety when she gave birth to Isaac—so the story went; but women of ninety don’t bear children, wouldn’t live to tell of it if they had. It was obvious to the neighbors that Sarah and Abraham had adopted an orphan, though why they wanted to do that in their dotage was a mystery.

When the time came for the child to be weaned, Abraham invited all the great families to a celebration. There would be a lot of food and wine, and a klezmer band for dancing. People turned out for it.

Abraham told Sarah, “Pinch your cheeks and make them rosy.”

The guests, having congratulated the couple on their newborn, gathered in schmoozy clusters to sip wine and wink knowingly.

The Lord of Hosts had to admit that, as miracles go, Isaac’s birth had been a little over the top, and it hadn’t the effect of strengthening faith. Abraham’s party presented opportunities for achieving that end with less outrageous anomalies. Had the messenger angels not all been on other assignments, he would have had one make a splashy appearance. As an alternative, He made Isaac’s baby face to appear briefly like that of the mature Abraham, complete with black beard. (This induced a conniption in one female guest.) He also arranged that a pair of women who brought babies to the gathering would fail to make plans for nursing them. This allowed Sarah to bare her miraculous breasts and feed the happy slurping pair. This inspired speculations among male guests, one of which involved a pair of hollow melon stems siphoning milk from concealed jugs.

Sarah was portioning the honey-cakes when Leah approached her. “Who did your entertainment? I’m planning a bash for Passover, I want to hire them.”

The Angel and the Soul

An angel addressed a soul. “Soon you will be encased in the womb of a woman. Nine months later you will emerge in a body. The body is a flower that withers, a shadow that disappears with the sun, a cloud that goes *poof*. Therefore, the important business of bodies is propagation.”

“Therefore?” puzzled the soul.

“Of course, people can’t always be propagating,” the angel continued, “so they must be diverted, and that is why the world abounds in charming vanities. Would you like to make a preliminary visit to the world you will inhabit?”

“Not especially,” the soul confessed.

“Oh come on! Once you get into the swim of things, you’ll like it.”

The soul was thoughtful. “Why again are we doing this?”

The Rabbis and the Village of Floozies

Two aged white-beards with canes, Rabbis Yochanan and Yonathan, were making their way along a road when they came to the fork, and a directional sign. The letters were just a blur for Yochanan, and Yonathan had to close one eye and position himself inches from the sign to make sense of it; but he determined that one of the roads led to a town of known idol-worship and demons, the other to a village of floozies. When he turned to explain the choice they had, Yochanan had fallen asleep leaning against a tree. Yonathan nudged him, explained their options, and expressed his belief that it would be best if they took the road leading through the town of idol-worshippers. They would not be tempted there.

“How’s that?” Yochanan said, raising his ear trumpet into position.

Yonathan reiterated the choice, fortissimo.

“What you say is true,” Yochanan agreed. “On the other hand, if we go the other way, the floozies will smile at us and flash their boobies. That will provoke invigorating moral struggle in us. I, for one, could use a little of that.”

Yonathan saw Yochanan’s point, and they started toward the floozies’ village.

When the scantily-clad women perched on porch railings, and hanging out windows, saw the two rabbis coming down the road, they rolled their eyes, retreated into the houses, and shut the doors and windows.

The two men having passed through the village were back on the open road when Yonathan remarked, “The Lord moves in mysterious ways.”

Yochanan nodded. “They aren’t necessarily invigorating.”

The Last Words of Eliezar

All day Rabbi Eliezar, renowned for subtlety of distinctions and prophetic vision, had been silent and apparently unconscious on what was obviously to be his deathbed. His disciples had gathered around him all day hoping to hear his final words. Eliezar in his present state might well be privy to what lay beyond the veil of the material world.

Toward nightfall, his lips finally moved.

“One day,” he whispered hoarsely, “Rabbi Halachans and I were walking on a country road.”

The disciples bent close.

“We saw Egyptian cucumbers harvest themselves in a field beside the road, and stack themselves in neat rows of ten.”

And with these words, Rabbi Eliezar expired.



FAREWELL DANCE II

NICOLINE FRANZISKA

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Kiha Ahn is a tenth grader attending Walnut Hill School of the Arts in Natick, Massachusetts. He is currently putting together his art portfolio for university.

Valeria Amirkhanyan was born in a closed Siberian town where nuclear waste is still stored. Lifeless desert polygons, where there is not a single tree, created the dull look of her hometown. She believes that deepening the connection between our deeply rooted nature and the real world, makes people careful with nature. She runs the art studio - greenhouse, where teaches painting and grows over 50 types of plants. With her artworks, she wants to bring nature closer to the observer, to connect people with their roots and memories. The land is for plants, not for nuclear burial grounds.

Lino Azevedo was born to Portuguese immigrants near the city of San Francisco, California. Like most small children, Lino enjoyed creating from the soul with simple tools like pencil and crayon. Being a painter herself, his mother saw the potential and let him try his hand with her oils and brushes. These formative years set him up for a life-long career in the arts. Lino obtained a bachelor's degree from San Jose State University and his master's degree from Winthrop University. He is an award-winning artist whose work has been exhibited internationally and published in multiple magazines. Lino is a college art professor who lives in Savannah, Georgia.

Daisy Bassen is a poet and practicing physician who graduated from Princeton University's Creative Writing Program and completed her medical training at The University of Rochester and Brown. Her work has been published in *Oberon*, *McSweeney's*, and *[PANK]* among other journals. She was the winner of the So to Speak 2019 Poetry Contest, the 2019 ILDS White Mice Contest and the 2020 Beullah Rose Poetry Prize. She was doubly nominated for the 2019 Best of the Net Anthology and for a 2019 and 2020 Pushcart Prize. She lives in Rhode Island with her family.

Serafina Bersonsage is a writer based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Her poems have been featured in *Antiphon*, *Aji Magazine*, and *The Bookends Review Best of 2019*, and her poetry collection *A Witch's Education* was published by EMP in 2019.

Nicoline Franziska is a multi-disciplinary artist living and working in Brooklyn, New York. She graduated from Parsons, The New School for Design in 2019 with a BFA in Fine Arts. She grew up between Munich, Toronto, and Virginia, and is fluent in English and German. Her primary focus is in oil painting and pastel drawing, with a growing interest in stop motion animation. Drawing from the tradition of storytelling as an act of sharing and passing down information, Franziska's paintings investigate language. In our present world, information is transmitted instantly and constantly but rarely preserved outside of almost entirely intangible lines of codes

dictating the functions of information. Franziska's paintings and drawings are heavily process-based and study constantly evolving relationships between biomorphic forms which dance, float, and intertwine in often macabre spaces as they search for home. A procession of figures often behaves like a series of characters in a theatrical performance. Varying personalities enter and exit the frame as they seek their sense of place. Her paintings establish a sense of permanence and tangibility. As her work is heavily influenced by ballet, jazz, and theater, each of which exists in time and relies on sensitive collaborations between dancers, instruments, and actors, her work not only embodies movement and conversation but also indicates a passing of time within the two-dimensional space.

James Gallant's *La Leona, and Other Guitar Stories*, which won the 2019 Schaffner Press Prize for music-in-literature, is available from Amazon, Barnes and Noble, etc. A collection of his essays and short fiction, *Verisimilitudes: Essays and Approximations*, published by Fortnightly Review press (UK), appeared in 2018. Gallant has been an online columnist for FR since 2015 (<http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/category/verisimilitudes/>).

Mary Catherine Harper, a 2018 Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award winner, was selected as the 2019 Ohio Arts Council Poetry Resident at the Fine Arts Work Center, Cape Cod. She is the author of *Some Gods Don't Need Saints*, and her latest collection, *The Found Object Imagines a Life: New and Selected Poems*, is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press. A two-time winner of the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Prize, her poetry has appeared in numerous journals, and she co-organizes the yearly SwampFire Retreat (swampfire.org) for artists and writers at 4 Corners Gallery in Angola, Indiana. See marycatherineharper.org for more information.

Edward Lee is an artist and writer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited widely, while his poetry, short stories, non-fiction have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen* and *Smiths Knoll*. He is currently working on two photography collections: *Lying Down With The Dead* and *There Is A Beauty In Broken Things*. He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Orson Carroll, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy. His blog/website can be found at <https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>.

Mirjana Mirc is a 30y old self-taught digital artist from Belgrade, Serbia. The main inspiration behind her work is combining various forms of media to create emotional juxtapositions and inspire different creative thinking within different audiences.

Maggie Mumford is a writer/director from rural Virginia. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Memphis, where she worked as Creative Nonfiction Editor for *The Pinch*. Her story "Healers" appeared in the November 2020 issue of *Bodega*. Her essay "Ether" was published in *Crab Fat Magazine* and subsequently nominated for Best of the Net.

Ni Petrov was born in 1986 in Barnaul (Siberia, Russia). In 2010 graduated from The Altai State Technical University The Architecture and Design Institute. Since 2012 has been living and working in St.Petersburg (Russia).

Brianna Pike is a Professor of English at Ivy Tech Community College. Her poems and essays have appeared in *So to Speak*, *Connotation Press*, *Heron Tree*, *Memoirs & Mixtapes*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Utterance & Juxtapose*. She currently serves as an Editorial Assistant for the *Indianapolis Review* and lives in Indy with her husband & son.

Martin Shapiro is the Humanities Librarian at American University in Washington, D.C., working from a tiny apartment during the pandemic. His poems have been published in the *Potomac Review*, *the Cold Mountain Review*, *the Delmarva Review*, *Pilgrimage*, *District Lit*, and *Newtown Literary*.

Kelsey Erin Shipman is a writer, educator and performer. She earned her MFA at Texas State University and is the founder of The Freehand Arts Project, a non-profit that brings creative writing classes to Texas jails and prisons. Her work has been published in *The African American Review*, *The Dillydoun Review* and *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*. She served as the 2013-2014 Writer-In-Residence at the Katherine Anne Porter Literary Center, and was the recipient of the 2007 San Jacinto & Althean Literary Societies' Grand Prize in Poetry. A native Texan, she loves big dogs and breakfast tacos.

Chris Shorne holds an MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles and has work published or forthcoming in *Utne*, *Bennington Review*, *Duende*, and *The Fourth River*. Shorne spent a year as an international human rights accompanier with NISGUA, Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala and previously taught at Bent, a queer writing institute.

Louis Staebler, fine arts photographer and poet, lives in Bowling Green, Ohio. His work has been shown in The Black Swamp Arts Festival 2016, 2017 and 2018 as part of the Wood County Invitational. Web page: staeblerstudioa.weebly.com.

Cristina Stancu (b. 1990) is a Romanian poet and amateur photographer searching for ways to combine words with images. In 2017 she made her poetry debut with *teritorii*, a book published in Romanian by Tracus Arte Publishing. In 2021 she published her second poetry book, *apără pe cineva de tine* (CDPL). Through her *Lives Inside the Wall* series the artist tries to document her pandemic experience using a colourful and sometimes minimalist approach.

Isabella Suell is a student at Millsaps College studying English Literature and Anthropology. She has been published in numerous literary journals - most recently 'In Parenthesis'- and has been a feature in *Portico* magazine as a writer. She has won a national silver key from scholastic for her written work, as well as keys for her photography and a portfolio. Her photography is dedicated to rawness, and often features a live subject.

Mercury-Marvin Sunderland (he/him) is a transgender autistic gay man with Borderline Personality Disorder. He's from Seattle and currently attends the Evergreen State College. He's been published by University of Amsterdam's *Writer's Block*, UC Davis' *Open Ceilings*, UC Riverside's *Santa Ana River Review*, UC Santa Barbara's *Spectrum*, and The New School's *The Inquisitive Eater*. His lifelong dream is to become the most banned author in human history. He's @RomanGodMercury on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Danielle Sung is a junior at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. In her spare time, she enjoys creating art, visiting exhibits around the world, studying art history and anthropology. Sung has won recognitions in several art competitions, including winning Gold Medals in the National Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, being selected as the American Vision and Voices Nominee, and the winner of the 2019 Congressional Art Competition. Sung is currently preparing to major in art with a focus on portraiture and installations.

Kate Wylie (she/they) is a poet from St. Louis, Missouri. An MFA candidate at Pacific University and 2018 Webster University alum, Wylie serves as Head J.V. Softball Coach at Webster Groves High School, reads fiction for *The New Southern Fugitives*, and is a regular contributor to the Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome society magazine *Loose Connections*. Wylie has previously published or forthcoming work in *Canary*, *Sport Literate*, *The 2River View*, *Sublunary Review*, and *Visitant*.

Sarah Yun was born in January of 2003. She is currently attending an international high school in South Korea. Her hobbies are sewing, collecting small glass sculptures, and studying design. Her future aspiration is to become an industrial or product designer.

