Anthony Borruso

Edith Lidia Clare

Kiley Dalrymple

Luiza Flynn-Goodlett

Jonathan Gleason

Melissa Darcey Hall

Tennessee Hill

Amanda Larson

Emily Lawson

Alice Maglio

Mathilde Merouani

Matthew Morris

Rebecca Pyle

Hanne Steen

Mika Taylor

Natalie Louise Tombasco

Matthew Tuckner

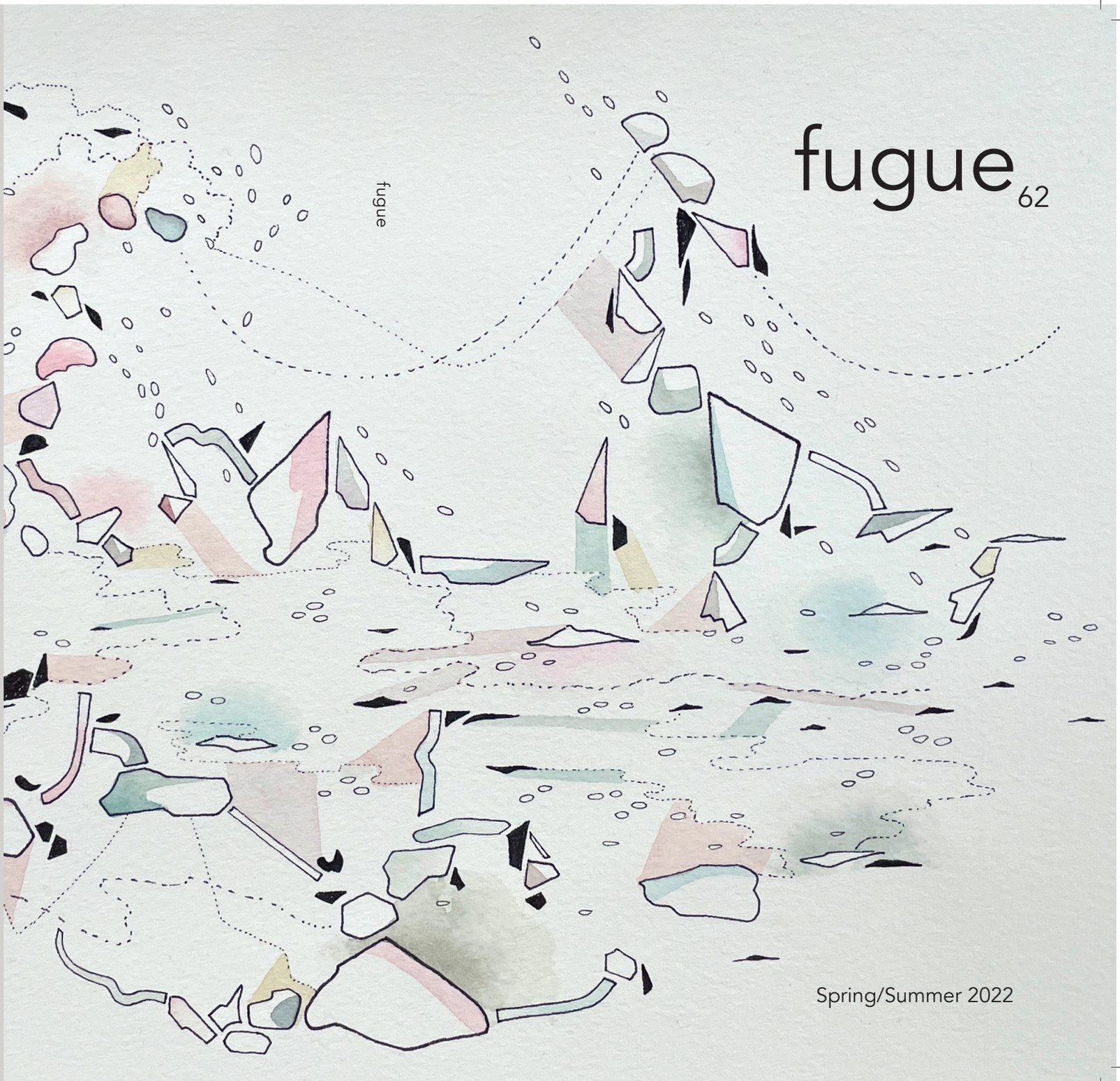
Adam D. Weeks

Kami Westhoff

Corey Zeller

Maria Zoccola

$10
Poetry/Fiction/Essays



fugue 62

Spring/Summer 2022

fugue

Issue 62

Spring/Summer 2022

Fugue (ISSN 1054-6014) is a journal of new literature edited by graduate and undergraduate students in the University of Idaho's English and Creative Writing programs. Fugue is made possible by funding from the University of Idaho Student Arts-Fee Grant and publishes an annual print issue as well as online content.

To subscribe or order back issues, visit www.fuguejournal.com.

Please see our website at www.fuguejournal.com for current submission guidelines. Submissions are accepted via our Submittable portal, and will be read during the academic year. We welcome simultaneous submissions, with the condition that you withdraw your work immediately upon acceptance elsewhere.

Cover: *Rescue,* Kiley Dalrymple
Watercolor and ink on paper, 2019

fugue

Spring/Summer 2022
Issue 62

Contents

POETRY

FICTION

NONFICTION

Luiza Flynn-Goodlett

A Poem in Which the Family is Not a Tragedy, Union City, TN

There are no beige-carpeted bathrooms here.
No frozen lasagna from the salvage grocery.
Not a single pill organizer. The gameshow
network has been canceled. You won't break
the light fixture by opening a closet door too
wide. No one has lived so long under a thumb
that what its nail collects seems feast. Instead,
the apple orchard is crowned with bees. Leave
windows open, and you'll wake to a doe and
her fawn stepping through dew to wrap fruit
in long tongues. To quiet breath and crunch.

In the Produce Section of Super Walmart, Union City, TN

No parsley, broccolini, or scallions,
but a plethora of camo—*woodland,*
real tree, mossy oak, the rare *desert*—
so I fill my cart with anything fresh,
head to a checkout where they sell
Marlboro Lights for your mom. And
you wait in the car—between a van
emblazed with *a country that wages*
war on its police must make peace
with its criminals and a motorcycle
flying the Betsy Ross—as I unload
a wilted garden onto the belt behind
jerky and cartons, and, beyond glass

doors, see the child you were—curls
crushed under a cap, slumped down
in the seat. Barely here. Almost gone.

Natalie Louise Tombasco

Dream Vision of Elizabeth Bishop

I journey upon an ancient bus into wet-warped sleep, into *you are an 'I', you are an 'Elizabeth'*—from the windshield I register my flora, my geography, my plainspoken diet of poached eggs and toast and ocean, where under the road's rhythm I drift on and on through soft syllables spoken by S-shaped birds stuck in mangrove roots, through travelogues that deepen like rivulets or brainfolds. night's heavy drapes close out the crestfallen cliffs and pinewood dumbstruck in self-pity, but the dark has runs in it like afterparty pantyhose. I wear it well. boundaries are my territory, where it is impossible to differentiate between land and sea, blue and green, edges and ledges—one body from the next, shadows ajar. all at once comes the celestial jolt: high beams shine on all 5 foot 4 inches of her, Lady Precision. with her needlepoint stare I know I do not belong here. *goddammit*, I rummage through my suitcase like *there's gotta be a villanelle around somewhere.* she looms. sniffing out something, something, something. a nocturne that is velveteen. I retreat into the feminine, the Elizabeth wilderness: *why didn't I know enough of something?* why had the cartographer of my solitude colored my country green, separated anapests

from gasoline? who limited the nature of tides? could *I* be a *house*? white brick, blue shingles. I must've drunk on an empty stomach again, arguing on the snowy interstate like *baby, baby get in the car*. my master, with woolly bouffant and steely whisper, dilates, raps the knuckles with (*Write* it!) and I spill gestures, goodbyes, whole continents on the asphalt like *how do you hold yourself together?* that's when everything went ice slick, rainbowrainbowrainbow and she let me go

Matthew Morris

Apple Orchard

Dark red in the center, like the heart's lineal blood, and a shining red above; beneath, a wispy-edged rectangle of white. The lineal red and shining red are rectangular in dimension, too, and along the borders melt fuzzily into the same black background. *Untitled, 1960 / oil on canvas*, the print of a Rothko from San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art. Mounted on a white canvas inside a black frame hanging, like orchard fruit, from the (exposed) red brick encased in the white plaster walls of this white Tucson home, this terracotta-roofed three-bedroom which I move into, with friends, during the pandemic, when I return from Virginia. So much of life is balance, no? We do not leave Tucson for months, until we drive to the apple orchard in Willcox, where the red fruit is rotted all around: ants crawling into the meat, aftermath of a big freeze.

The Rothko's dark red interjects itself between the bright red on top and the bottom white, and from a distance, the reds blend, mixing like earth clay and earth mud; they begin to look brownish, a magician's (or beige body's) trick of the light. Covering most of the canvas like skin and leaving scant room for the white, which floats above the print's description (*Untitled, oil on canvas*), the red overtakes the painterly space, bodily invasion or crossing, such that the Rothko might be said to be red, as might be called *white* the passing woman, passing man. But I don't paint; this characterization seems

to me a glossing over, an oversimplification—the nightly news headline wiping out all nuance, the siren blaring over your living room soft talk.

Yet the Rothko is something I notice when I move into this house along a park, for it is *artful, in good taste,* as my gone grandmother (she, a painter, as of the portrait above my desk, *Woman in Thought,* whose meditating subject sits beside blooming flowers in the shape of the human heart, one brown hand cupping her cheek and forehead, the other resting in her lap, and her eyes cast into space like a fisherwoman's line into sloshing lake-water) might say, have said. Only when I try to write about it do I notice what I hadn't: the rectangles' melting borders, so that the white and bright red seem closer to cloud shapes—stationary, yet with the potential to glide, beveled edges of skates over Zamboni-smooth ice. They are not solidly defined shapes on this solidly defined canvas, a sharp-cornered rectangle easy to pin down, to name—as when, in class, your rookie teacher calls on the student whose name is most easily recollected, security blanket.

Closer: the white is not only white but contains, there to be seen, footprints of pink. In the shining red are faint dashes of black, ash of kindling—or maybe this, too, is a trick of the light, the face? It is difficult to angle the light so as to see, properly, this painting: if I turn the bulbs off, the color becomes indiscernible, whirlpooling grey, especially on this morning when rain comes down steady and quiet, a heart murmur, the roof and windows of this stucco rambler just right for listening in (*auscultation* might be the word, faintly classical, ancient as color); if I turn them up, they *pass into* the painting, unwanted guests: the bulb of the ceiling fan not turning but still, the light above the sink, for work with (lightest) beige hands.

I keep the light up to see, despite hazy reflection.

Is the Rothko red? Is the Rothko white? Is the Rothko color neutral? Does the Rothko (*Untitled, 1960*) have a color, a coat, a skin like a fleshly body (mine, white as my white friends', or close, but my father's, brown, and my sister's, just like mine: too white to see brownness, too white to see past whiteness, but for those times when you—or you, you—might call me Latino, address me in Spanish, this city an hour north of Nogales, city itself spanning the border, twenty thousand residents in the States, two hundred thousand in Mexico; never, however, to be *black*, but for in language, proclamation made behind this screen, where you—or you, you—can't look and say *no*), a skin like a brown-bruised, white-fleshed apple, tiny and teeming ants chasing tart, corroded sweetness?

The Rothko is *Untitled, acquired through a gift of Peggy Guggenheim, 69 x 50 1/8 in*, says the description. In the lower left corner, frame's chipped, a light-grained wood revealed, soft clay (yes) beneath topsoil, frame black only on the surface. The longer I look, the more I see, as when my housemate EJ and I looked at stars, pointing here, there. (*My favorite,* she said, *is the Little Dipper,* and showed me where, pointing up, up, with palish white hands). In the reflection of the Rothko: varicolored mugs lining white shelves above silver sink, silver-notched cabinets so tall we require a stepping stool to open them, and I stand a solid six feet; this mixed, biracial face, mine: beige nose, beige forehead; brown eyes, brown hair.

(EJ did not know I was mixed until a friend told her, saying also of my mixedness words I won't repeat here: they may fade into the canvas of this colored life, invisible like the blackness of a Nella Larsen character before the *tragic* fall, blondish Clare Kendry plummeting six stories through Harlem winter night, dead on impact, cold whiteness blanketing hard ground).

I turn off the lights and the red disappears into black background, chameleon color; the white is hard to see and seems bluish, *faintly.* No longer do I see a triptych of soft-edged rectangles, just one at the bottom and, almost imperceptibly, one in the middle. Bright red hovering at image's top: gone, evaporated, July heat. (Both my housemates, EJ and blond, white Anne, are away. We won't go to the orchard in Willcox until October, fall. We won't pick apples for a while, I mean, or even then, the fruit inedible, far gone, life-color drained. No, now it is me and the two cats in this stucco rambler and my mind hums, quite quiet. I walk in the heat, hit yellow tennis balls at night. Copy/paste sections of prose into far-off sections of prose, stitch my own frayed tapestry).

I am obsessed (need I tell you?) with color: the fall colors of fall fruits, my grandmother's pensive still-life canvases, all the bodies on the streets; the color-tones, meld-mixed, in every blood-sheathing skin.

Adam D. Weeks

Lately, I've seen so much

roadkill, so many bent bodies beaten and brushed
to the sides of these Baltimore highways—
lately I've been remembering Colorado,
the raccoon we named once she started visiting
our nightly smoke circles, those headlight-eyes
peering at us from her perch on the bird-feeder,
the way we'd leave her hard-boiled eggs to take
back to her babies and whisper to coax her closer,
how you'd say *baby, it's a bong not a microphone*
because I'd been going on about the day
her litter may leave, how tomorrow we may
not see her, how she may wander into the road—
and I think of my first time drinking, stumbling
through the gravel street and the sounds of crickets
and foraging raccoons, staying the night in
my best friends' camper—both of them out early
on the bed, my body a weighted blanket draped
across the tiny recliner, bathed in the soft light
of *The Great Holiday Bake Off* and breathing
in the bite of the pine-laden air from the open
window, telling the TV *there's no time*
for a goddamn ganache, just garnish

it and get on while the baker keeps
stirring like I'm not even there.

Jonathan Gleason

The Pharmakon

I am in Chicago, at the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives, sitting at a desk, a stack of sixteen Bankers Boxes on a cart next to me. The archives were for a long time only an idea to me. Now, all at once, they have become a place with a smell, a texture, and a dimension. A man with a dolly hauls the boxes I've sorted through away and returns with a fresh column. I'm here looking for the story of a drug I have been thinking about for years. I am here because I have already exhausted the limits of the internet. I have already read everything my university has to offer about AZT.

In 1964, Jerome P. Horwitz first synthesized AZT, although that wasn't its name, not yet. His job was to test the effectiveness of different chemicals as treatments for cancer. One day, tired of trial and error, he decided to start creating his own compounds. He called one of the many medicines he created "Compound S." It was supposed to interfere with the replication of cancer cells in humans. But when it failed in animal trials, it was shelved, unpatented, for two decades.

A drug's usefulness is situational. It rises to meet a need.

In the early 80s, there was no corporate will to cure AIDS. The virus had been identified in 1983, but pharmaceutical companies believed that even if a cure existed, it would be too expensive to produce. By this time, the world had eliminated smallpox and

discovered antibiotics. Polio had recently been eliminated from the United States. We had landed on the moon. But no one could imagine a retrovirus unwound from its host's DNA.

In an attempt to incentivize the discovery of new drugs, the federal government solicited any compound that might be effective in treating AIDS, including Horowitz' compound S. They allowed companies to apply for full patents on their formulas and the government conducted or supported many of the clinical tests. In the case of AZT, they ran the human trials and provided some expensive and critical ingredients.

AZT was the first drug approved to treat HIV infections. "It's a wonderful example of how science works," said Robert Gallo—one of the researchers who co-discovered HIV. The Burroughs Wellcome Company found the drug in a ranging search for new medicine and demonstrated that it could stop the replication of HIV in individual cells. AZT may not have been effective against cancer, but that did not mean it needed to be useless. The drug was sent for human trials at the National Cancer Institute.

Fear was my first lesson, and my first religion. When I was young, I became inconsolable after my mother told me the story of the ten plagues of Egypt. It was not the fire, or the locust, or the darkness that I was most afraid of. It was death. I was the first-born son, and there were no lambs whose blood we could paint over our door frame.

"Eat of my flesh and drink of my blood so that you might live forever," the preacher recited at my cousin's first communion. It was not our church, and we were not Catholic, so these words were unfamiliar to me. They had not transformed into the comforting drone of ritual. Normally, I attended these family gatherings sullenly.

The incense incited my allergies, and the rituals were full of songs I'd never sung. But that day, I was startled by what I heard; "That you might live forever," was a powerful promise, even tempered and qualified with the word *might*.

Perhaps AZT is best understood by what it wasn't.

In the archives, in an abandoned manila folder, I found a trove of documents about experimental treatments. "Victims Grasp at Home Remedies," read one heading. "Unusual Treatment and Word of Mouth," reads another. Among the more mundane pamphlets about yoga, meditation, and positive thinking, there were also instruction manuals for homemade AL-721, an experimental drug made from egg lecithin; reports of patients painting the chemical DNCB, used to develop color photographs, onto their skin; and discussions about the efficacy of aerosolized Pentamine.

AZT was not a folk remedy or a word-of-mouth cure. It was a clinically proven medicine: one that did, at least in the short term, what it promised. It was a first hope—proof of concept that AIDS could be, if not cured, at least stalled, maybe indefinitely. For the most part, that hope is recorded in the words of physicians, researchers, and politicians, not by those who were sick. But all of the strange, desperate remedies carve the hope of the dying into negative space. I don't really care what AL-721 or DNCB or aerosolized Pentamine are because I know what they mean: people were afraid, people were willing to try anything.

One of my favorite photographs hangs in a museum in Minneapolis where I have never been. Robert Mapplethorpe's "Two Men Dancing." My roommate once tried to buy a print that we could hang on the wall, but the museum didn't sell any. In the photograph, the men wear plastic crowns and waltz together. One rests his head on the shoulder of the other, eyes gently closed. The

other stands upright, a pillar of body, and stares into the middle distance, shirtless, unafraid.

I tried to track down the names of the men photographed by Mapplethorpe. I visited the art library next to my apartment because their glossy photo books can't be checked out. It was hard enough to figure out where the print had come from, let alone names, birth dates, feelings of the men in it. I gave up after a while. Some information is irretrievably lost.

The first clinical trials for AZT were conducted in July 1985 and halted in September when, according to a 1987 *New York Times* article titled "An AIDS Drug, at a Cost," "the first clear evidence of effectiveness became apparent." By the spring of 1987, the medication had been approved by the FDA. "On the one hand," said Calvin Kunin, a doctor on the FDA board overseeing the approval of the drug, "to deny a drug which decreases mortality in a population such as this would be inappropriate. On the other hand, to use this drug widely, for areas where efficacy has not been demonstrated, with a potentially toxic agent, might be disastrous."

There were two-hundred-eighty-two people spread across twelve testing centers for the original trial. History, as far as I can tell, has not recorded their thoughts on any of this. I can't even figure out where the test centers were.

How does one write an absence? The sound of music unplayed, photographs untaken, paint unstirred, lives unlived. When I heard of John Cage's famous piece, 4'33, a song composed entirely of silence, I pictured pages of sheet music filled with quarter, eighth, and sixteenth rests—an intricate filigree of silence. I was disappointed to find out the whole song was nothing but whole rests sitting dumbly on the page.

The trials for AZT were rushed, troubled by a small sample size, and further complicated by the fact that doctors were not given

standardized procedures to deal with the pneumonia, diarrhea, and opportunistic infections that accompany AIDS. Some patients received blood transfusions to alleviate their symptoms, while others did not. And, according to an FDA review, adverse reactions to the drug "were sometimes crossed out months after initially recorded." More *human* problems emerged as well. Because AZT was bitter tasting. And because it came in blue and white capsules that could easily be pried open. And because side effects of the medication were often severe. It was easy to tell who had been given the real drug and who had been given sugar pills. There were reports that those with the real medication were sharing their doses—pooling their pills or giving half to those without—so that everyone could have a chance to live. The participants did not know if the drugs would work, but they wanted even the slim possibility of success to be shared.

The sharing of medicine was recorded only as a rumor, unconfirmed and buried at the heart of several articles. It was tucked in the back pages of letters to the editor, next to advertisements for pawned jewelry, used auto parts, and in one case a place called "Crazy Joe's Discount Office Furniture." But the rumors were more interesting than much of what the papers of record had to say, and even unconfirmed they felt more honest.

This sharing is now a commonly cited issue with the original AZT trial, but it was ultimately inconsequential. The medicine wouldn't help any of the patients. HIV has to be disrupted at more than one point along its reproduction cycle; otherwise, it adapts and continues to spread. The obsession with sharing was a way of glossing over all of the failures that came before and after this one.

I am bad at faith, religious or otherwise. It is an act that values trust over control, and uncertainty over knowing. As a child I muscled through my religious education, memorizing names, dates, and

relationships, but retaining little of its message. As a teenager, I abandoned it all together. Now, the language of faith leaves a strange taste in my mouth, the taste of incense and cloves. But hearing the story of medicine-sharing, I am reminded of Jesus' first miracle, in which he healed the sick and fed a crowd, breaking and rebreaking loaves into bounty.

Queer art in the 1980s and 90s was full of religious imagery. There were Keith Haring's pop art crosses, Barton Lidice Beneš' "Crown of Thorns," David Wojnarowicz's plastic figurine of Saint Lucia, and of course Andres Serrano's infamous "Piss Christ," in which a plastic crucifix was submerged in a jar of the artist's urine. In these images, artists found a trove of readymade iconography for pain, suffering, martyrdom, evil, and redemption. Sometimes the work degraded these images, sometimes the work parodied them, sometimes the work took them deadly seriously. But no matter how iconography was used, it haunted the art—it was the wall against which the artist raged, questioned, died.

The imagery wasn't always so readily discernible. Sometimes it wasn't imagery at all. In Félix González-Torres' sculpture "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 175 pounds of cellophane-wrapped candies sit piled in the corner of a museum. I saw the sculpture once at the Art Institute in Chicago. I knew nothing about the artist or his work then, but I noticed the pile of candy heaped in the corner, pieces spilling out onto the floor, glittering like a bounty under the even museum light. I took a piece, as the plaque instructed, and watched other visitors do the same. In doing so we slowly consumed Ross. Without knowing it, we carried him away, crinkling in our pockets, dissolving in our mouths. He became, like a eucharist, like a virus, part of our bodies.

The beauty of old languages is how they pry back the floor-

boards and reveal the metaphors our language is built on. In ancient Greek, the word *pharmakon* can mean poison or cure. In the original language, it contains both meanings at once; only in translation do we have to choose. Now, we have many words for these concepts, but the distinction between a cure and a poison remains ambiguous. Most medicines, taken incorrectly or at high enough dosages, can also be strong poisons, and a poison, deployed correctly, can be curative.

The fight over AZT was at least in part a fight over conflicting definitions.

"AZT is not a poison," reads the title of a 1989 *New York Times* letter to the editor. "We were gratified by your article on our case report of an AIDS patient who developed liver damage on AZT. However, this is an extremely rare side effect of a useful drug [...] we are concerned that some will seize upon this as a reason to avoid potentially useful therapy."

But AZT was a poison, in the way all medicine is also poison. This one just had especially bad consequences for patients. Early side effects included nausea, vomiting, headache, dizziness, fatigue, weakness and muscle pain, but more severe and long-term side effects were common as well. AZT could, ironically, damage the immune systems. It could cause intestinal problems, kidney disorders, and anemia so severe it required blood transfusions. It could lead to blistering and rashes, irregular heartbeat, and yellowing of the skin. Because AZT was first developed as a chemotherapy, meant to scorch the cells of the body and the cancer along with it, it destroyed cells indiscriminately and affected nearly every part of the body.

"The ambivalent quality of *pharmakon* is more than purely a matter of 'wrong drug, wrong dose, wrong route of administration, wrong patient,'" writes the social anthropologist Asha Persson. "Drugs, as is the case with antiretroviral therapy, have the capacity

to be *beneficial and detrimental to the same person at the same time*."

A drug's toxicity is relative, depending on what greater suffering it prevents. All the side effects of AZT combined were still better than dying, or at least less uncertain.

The problem was that AZT didn't work, or at least it did not work in the way clinicians had hoped. While it caused patients' T-cell counts to rise in the short term, the virus—infinitely protean—adapted, found new pathways around a single obstruction, rendering the medicine useless. Whether or not the temporary increase in T-cells extended life expectancy was, and still is, debated. The side effects were not.

My parents are no longer religious. Now each Sunday, my mother arranges a collection of bottles on the kitchen island and fills a pill case for the week. She counts out flesh-colored tablets, golden fish oil capsules, and pink B-12 vitamins with the patience of a reverent. I have my own rituals too: collecting 90 pills in three bottles from the pharmacy, taking one at the same time each day like prayer; three-month checkup for kidney function, throat swab, blood draw, a purple thumbprint cupped in my elbow joint.

I am reading through a cache of scanned documents about AZT's production—its costs and profits—when I realize I have no idea how the drug actually works or what its "mechanism of action" is. AZT is in a class of medication known as analogues: meaning it behaves like something else. It replaces or substitutes. It lies. It deceives. In this case, what AZT replaces is thymidine. When enzymes attempt to take up thymidine to create a new strand of viral DNA they mistakenly absorb AZT instead, disrupting the process and destroying the entire chain of genetic material. Of course, viruses can't feel, or think, or taste, but I imagine this event to be bitter and startling. Like biting into a poisoned fruit. Like thinking you can

trust something only to discover it hollow.

Because I cannot visit the ACT UP archives at the University of Chicago, I order dossiers as if from a restaurant menu. I pay the scanning and processing fees for each folder. The documents arrive as pdfs full of news clippings and case studies, most of which I've already read. They never contain what I'm looking for.

"It would be helpful," one librarian patiently explains, "if you could give us a better sense of what you're looking for." What am I looking for? First-hand accounts? Surprises? Experience is one way of knowing; the experiences of others is another. If there is an answer to the questions—what was this drug? was it good or bad? medicine or poison?—it is in the experiences of those who took it. I want to know if medicine will save or forsake us, how much faith we can put in it. There is no folder for this. "Diaries might be helpful," I say to the librarian, instead.

Losing a religion does not come all at once, and it is not as simple as failing to believe in something you once believed in. It is instead a slow grieving process accompanied by a singular kind of disorientation: a suspicion that even the bedrock isn't solid, that the ground can betray you. I once believed in medicine, in its single-minded ability to do good. I once wanted to be a doctor. I thought it was the greatest thing a person could be. Then I began to see the ways it had failed people. Of course, medicine isn't special in this way; like all things it can harm or help. The disappointment was realizing that medicine is not uniquely good.

When AZT was first released, it cost patients $10,000 a year and was the most expensive drug ever sold. Burroughs Wellcome justified the price by claiming that the drug was costly to produce, that cheaper alternatives would eventually cut into the company's profits, and that they needed to recoup the $800 million they'd

invested in its development. But projections estimated that Wellcome made $130 million off the drug in its first year, and cheaper, more effective alternatives took years to materialize.

While the dying scavenged pills off the newly dead, AZT became one of the highest revenue generating drugs of its time.

"An Orphan Drug," my friend, a doctor, once explained to me, "is a classification of medicines that are so expensive to produce, so impossible to patent, or that treat a disease so rare pharmaceutical companies will not manufacture them without public assistance." That night, online, I looked at a list of orphaned drugs from one year alone. Its endlessness felt first like governmental apathy does, then like its cruelty.

For a short period, federal grants covered some of the expense of AZT, but when those grants ran out patients who were not independently wealthy had to either forgo the medicine or allow the costs to eat their savings down to $3,100—the level at which they could apply for Medicaid.

The third definition of *pharmakon* means scapegoat and comes from the ancient Greek ritual of human sacrifice or banishment, used to purify a city or a body of plagues. I find this deep historical relationship between pharmacy and religion comforting. I had worried the connection was all in my head.

Although Burroughs Wellcome provided the raw material for clinical trials, it took on very little risk in the drug's production. "Indeed, one of the obstacles to the development of AZT," wrote Samuel Broder, head of the National Cancer Institute (the institute that discovered the effectiveness of AZT), "was that Burroughs Wellcome did not work with live AIDS virus, nor wish to receive samples from AIDS patients." That Burroughs Wellcome would not touch the patients they supposedly wanted to help seems, in hindsight,

especially cruel.

The government could have challenged Wellcome's patents on the drugs but did not. Drug trials conducted via private and public cooperation could have loosened restrictions on intravenous drug users wishing to enter clinical trials for new AIDS medications but did not. The government could have increased financial support for those who needed AZT, and it did for a while, but eventually those policies lapsed.

In the 80s and early 90s, artists and activists began using the "useful corpse" as a common feature of their AIDS demonstrations. These corpses were not so much objects or bodies as they were a strategy of theatrically staging the rituals of death and suffering to attract attention to the AIDS crisis. A useful corpse could be a portrait of an AIDS victim in the process of dying, their head haloed in hospital light; or a march in which protestors painted cardboard boxes black and carried them down the street like coffins; or a "die-in," where participants would lay in front of government buildings and refuse to move. "A bitterly ironic figure, the useful corpse stages its own disappearance in order to command the attention necessary to sustain life," art historian Lauren DeLand writes. These strategies, she continues, conjure the ghoulish and macabre. They unsettle by exploiting the very bodies they seek to protect, and, in the process, they refashion the vilified bodies of AIDS victims into political weapons. In one especially visible protest, activists mimed the helplessness of the dying and the apathy of the living by going limp on the floor of St. Patrick's Cathedral during mass, and that was how the police had to drag all 53 of them out of the church, as dead weight.

Protests were often aimed at the government or pharmaceutical companies. They had concrete policy goals and demanded certain, practical outcomes. But the die-in at St. Patrick's was different. Of

course, there were logical reasons for staging these events at a cathedral: the strength of the Catholic church in New York at the time, the visibility of the spectacle during mass. There was also Cardinal John O'Connor's active refusal to endorse the use of condoms to stem the epidemic, and the Church's opposition to sex education, condom distribution, and needle exchange programs. But beyond these practical features, this protest was about a fundamental frustration. Protesters not only took over the cathedral, they stole, if only briefly, its iconography and transformed the church into a stage to demonstrate their grief, and pain, and questioning.

A friend reminds me that the sharing of medication would have been labeled "noncompliance" by the doctors and review boards assessing the trials: its own small form of resistance, a private protest. Noncompliance is a cruel word, apathetic and clinical. It contains the brutality that defined the AIDS epidemic: the neglect and indifference to suffering. But there is also something deeply hopeful in the word. I am surprised to realize that I find these stories affirming. That people found ways to make a life even in the face of unimaginable tragedy and near certain death; that people took care of one another even in the fact of institutional apathy and governmental neglect—these are ideas to have faith in. Even if a record of their experiences are lost, even if the rumors can't be confirmed, it is enough to know that somewhere someone surely split the plastic seams of a capsule, divided its content in two, offered it to a friend, a lover, a stranger, saying, "here, so that you might live."

Anthony Borruso

Thoreau in Williamsburg

So I was never quite Crusoe. I had three roommates in my flat, two
who did PR for tech startups, one who brewed and bottled
kombucha.
I lived off my own industry: selling hand-carved pipes on Etsy.
Dispensing Orchids beneath the Brooklyn Bridge, twelve bucks a
bloom. Three blocks
from the nearest bodega, I subsisted on strict rations of ramen
noodles whose salt stirred in me the burgeoning of an eastern
philosophy.
There's something savory in asceticism. I kept a compost
of neem leaves and eggshells, the breaking down of organic matter
mirroring my own mental deliberations. I went there to get clear-
headed, to grow my beard and ride my Schwinn alongside the East
River.
I wanted to unlatch myself from gold fetters and protest the taxing
8-hour days one lugs across the calendar. It is a coarse labor
with a forlorn budget, I'd think, departing the Wilco concert,
watching the old ways dissipate like smoke from my e-cig.

Alice Maglio

God Man Girl

The freshness of ending has begun to wear off. The sheen that comes with extracting yourself from a couple. Something post-war and instantly recognizable. At its height, people sense it and respect it, treat it tentatively and with kindness. I find this stage strangely comforting. It makes me feel less like a weirdgirl and more like a girlgirl. So many girlgirls have been through it, and the sameness makes me a little high. I tremble at a new frequency and shove my sadness into a metal drum. It makes me highly sensate. It makes me thin, light enough for the wind to carry me away on a gust of something heady and vanilla-smelling.

Eventually, I drift down. I am all too matte and solid.

And I find myself sitting across the table from a Rabbi in a coffee shop. I'm not here for advice but for a date, the first one post breakup. We'd messaged back and forth on Bumble for a while, and he told me about his research into mysticism, so I bit. I'm not Jewish, but seeing a Rabbi materialize beneath my impatient thumb amidst a sea of fintech bros felt like some sort of sign that I'd be stupid to ignore.

He's all energy. Glowing toward me and the four corners of the room. Something's propelling him forward, and I wonder if it's god. I'm afraid to ask this, so instead I ask him about his studies.

It's rare that I feel insecure talking about books, authors, abstractions, but I sense myself wavering in the wake of him. I've

drifted away from a self who was up on theory and theology. And it's been a while since I've talked toward the sublime, reached a finger in its direction, letting it know I'm still here.

I brush the hair from my face, and his eyes linger for a moment on my tattoo. I say some things about Chris Kraus and affect theory. Throw in some Simone Weil.

The pictures on his profile are clearly a few years old. His hairline's receding a bit more and his form is stockier, but I forgive it. A sliver of vanity endears him to me, pins him down closer to earth. I decide I could kiss him, letting him enfold me in brawny arms.

I wonder if he's attracted to me, if he's into it. He suggests we walk to a bookstore and starts asking me about what I'm writing. So I think maybe the answer is yes.

I run my hand over dusty spines and try to explain what I'm aiming at. Something about processing. Something about grazing truth through a perfectly constructed sentence.

I can tell he's skeptical. He asks, *why not just journal?*

Why not is a good question. Why push out, perseverate? Is it just ego-rearing? A plea for recognition, a mirror. But, also, way to slice me down, Rabbi. We can't all communicate with the divine.

And, of course, I'm still on the fence about all of this. So I reply with doubt, with openness.

Hmm, he muses.

Maybe I did come for advice after all. Answers about what to do next, where to direct my attention. Or to steal some of his light.

He smiles like he has more answers. But he says he has to go home and finish writing an article. We walk to the subway and he hugs me like he means it. I wonder if there are rabbinical guidelines about sex that he observes.

I reach out to him a couple of days later, but I receive only

silence. I wonder if I was too much of a blank for him. A half-open door, a leaf deciding whether it wants to fall.

Amanda Larson

The Lamb

Maybe it's not salvation that you seek,
or pure oblivion, the white light splayed over the eyes

so that you achieve nothing
and must be no one. Maybe it's not the expulsion

but the immersion in the parts. Next to each other,
crammed in the dank room, people are speaking

or mouthing the words to the new song.
You don't know how they come across these things.

You don't know your mother, or how anyone feels
about what you did with your body last weekend,

in the old ditch, awaking with your skin
thick with the indent of a cement wall. *I care if I am guilty,*

Bidart writes, and God counters with silence.
So what. You will never not be in this room,

waiting for understanding to descend upon you.
Do you understand? The butcher takes a knife to the lamb's head

and removes its eyeballs for the sake of taste.
Like such. I said you have to cleave it out yourself.

Jeffrey

Those days you subbed for a band called *Funkadelic Astronaut,*
and played songs without words at the Mexican Restaurant
on Route-22, where you worked, and where I'd come visit you

and learn how a bar ran, how the multicolored cards
were used to open the tabs, how thin strings of tequila
trapped the fluorescent light in small clear glasses

before you played for a crowd that danced and swooned
and I was proud, then, to be with you;
I stood like a girl at the edge of the room,

and did not think of what would become of your body,
years from now, of you convulsing
at an anonymous meeting in a basement on the Sound—

I did not think of anything. A space as blank as light.
The restaurant is closed. And we never finished that argument
about the way you loved the songs purely for their rhythm,

the thick of the bass and the hit of the cymbal,
and you didn't understand why anyone would ever need to speak.

Hanne Steen

Before the Rapture

Before the rapture I was always cold.

You called me back as I was folding up my apron and heading to my car and you were smoking outside and you said *come back and have a drink with us* and I said *I might* and you said *what?* I said *I might!* And you said *what?!* And I waved my hand at you like oh stop it and I ran to my car to get a sweater from the trunk and put some lipstick on and when I came back you were laughing at your table with your friends and you stood up when you saw me and I thought yeah I will. I will come back.

Before the rapture I drove the car with my eyes closed and smashed into things, maybe on purpose. Before the rapture I had bad dreams, cracked sleep. Before the rapture I was dry and my tears were dry.

I was walking to my car in the dark aloneness of the empty street and you called from behind me where you were smoking a cigarette and you said come back. I said I might and I did.

Later we laughed and said it was because of the rapture.

Before the rapture I was walking with my eyes shut, falling into holes. Maybe by accident. Before the rapture I hid from spiders. I was afraid there was nothing left to want. Before the rapture I was really afraid.

We sat in my car in the night and you told me about your

hometown and you meant it. You brought me into your house. I saw the tidy rows of everything but saw through their tidiness too. We got high off the glass table and sat together in a pool of silence. I licked your lips in the kitchen. You pulled my dress up and I led you to your bed. We slept mostly and I was warm beside your warm body.

The rapture never came.

Maybe it was because I never had a hometown. Maybe it was the tidy rows or the silence. But after a while I started falling into holes again. I started hiding from spiders, got tangled in their webs. You drove with your eyes closed and smashed into me and you meant it. I cracked your sleep and dried your tears. We pulled each other's dresses up and gave each other bad dreams. I forgot there was anything left to want. I wanted everything. I waited for you in the bar and you forgot to say come back. I came back anyway but you were already gone.

Tennessee Hill

My Boy, My Boy

God gave me a brother
I hadn't asked for—my boy, busy
digging for crawdads in a neighbor's ditch
after the big storm, mud-sleeved.

He said, *come play*, which I took to mean,
I will carry you. For miles, the sound
of Mother ringing a steel dinner bell.

My boy was ridiculous as sunshine.
We chased each other through treeless
fields yelling, *I got you I got you.*

I am one of those weak people
with an empty sky inside them.

Or, I am helpless and afraid
that I've given my twin face, my worth,
to a boy taken
by drinking and pain meds and
lying about it; limit tempting.

I don't mean to keep bringing him up.

I am one of those weak people who knows
the death of my other will render
me useless. I've even begun praying
in my dreams: *Please God, can you save him?*
Your will your will.

He has not died yet but I can feel it
like an omen, like a torture dream,
and when it happens, I will hate
myself, having written him in poems.

But how else to say
I am already sad, mourning, and of course
it was both the steely sound of a bell
and our laughter, echoed.

For now, and for our mother, we breathe.

This is only fear. He is somewhere in Texas
polishing masterfully deconstructed guns
with bluing oil and a shop rag.

The dog by his feet runs in its sleep.

Rebecca Pyle

Beatrice, and the Glory of the Colors

I only help organize the ballet. I arrange the dancers. I make sure they turn up.

How nice, the director said once, after overhearing me describing my job this way to someone who wondered who I was. The director sounded admiring, as if he liked my brevity, and my humbleness. How workwoman-like I was, how practical, how quick: a good assistant.

You cannot work for a ballet and not have a fondness for certain dancers. My heart's prize is that after crossing our London street, I see a favorite, the sharp-eyed three-years-with-us-now lead dancer from Ireland. Sometimes he watches me through glass, seeing I am not heading where I usually do; he knows if I am crossing the street and heading up the escalator I am almost surely going up the escalator toward the director, instead of into the downstairs café full of gelato with rosemary sprigs, or into the practice rooms. The dancer might even imagine me coming back down the escalator with the director in his long fringed scarves, always a color men are not allowed to wear, but this man—the director—likes breaking the rules, wearing whatever color this year is particularly breaking the rules, and when he walks out onto the street he is like a husky, his eyes blue and pointing, the fineness and bristly alertness of those eyes making a light-path in the dark, childish, sorry indifference of a

typical street. (From this, can you tell that I am fond of him?)

So why was it I always hoped when I came down the escalator with the director, we would stumble upon the lead dancer from Ireland? These were two men who would not ever be able to like each other. Was it an English versus Irish thing? Was it an older man versus younger man thing? A Gallic thing? That they were two men in the arts who believed only one of them understood how the arts should be?

Gallic, I thought, because I didn't dare to think, to really think, that in some ways they resented each other's being with me. I hoped they didn't, but, then again, I knew better than to believe it wasn't possible. If they saw themselves in competition, they could turn on me and injure me, mark me even to myself an over-hoping female fool.

So I had to forget one, almost, to converse with the other, to avoid taking sides. I couldn't effectively separate them in my head, but I almost always saw them, spoke with them, separately, and I was accustomed to it, always going *up and up, up* the escalator, which carried me through dark and then light beams and then dark again until the top. The light beams were my favorite: they surely striped me like a zebra, gave me the beauty of the zebra.

The door opened when I knocked. There he was, the director, three times divorced, they said, a man one of the dancers called *our great tree in our ballet forest*, yes. His office: high up as if in a tree-house. Even in London, in the three rooms meant to be offices but fitted for him—for his comfort, isolation, oddness—he was like a strange tree god. In London, who would have thick, shaggy white carpet in an office? But he would have any carpet he wanted, thick as new snow, no need to care what anyone thought, whether it was preposterous or ridiculous. He could set his feet any way he liked.

Newspapers were all over his space, laying open (he hated

computers). The magazines, however, also all over his tables, were always closed (he only liked the promise, he said, of their covers; he hated opening them). His silky tie was loosened and his hair, messy, was tilted all ways like waves that never follow the other waves they're supposed to follow.

His shoes were off, which meant he had meant to be alone, hadn't thought anyone would be coming up. Usually, I warned him, by phoning.

I can extend his contract again, if that's what he wants to know, he said, in a slightly offended voice.

Good, I said.

So have I satisfied you both, he said.

What do you mean by that, I said.

You'll leave me alone about it, he said. *Please tell him I hope he recuperates well from his surgery.*

I did not know the lead dancer had had surgery; I wasn't even aware he'd been gone. I decided to nod. Much of my job was nodding, in a soothing way. But who soothed me? All I had was my job.

Send flowers, he said. *Ortho. Charing Cross.*

I can, I said. *What color? Not red?*

The last ballet had a purely red set; the dancer wore black; the women danced in frost-white tulle, black twigs and small branches in their pinned-up hair. *A threat of spring*, a reviewer called it.

That was our last ballet, said the director. *That would make him feel retired from a red ballet. Do you care what color flowers, really? I am going to sleep now, Beatrice.*

My name is not Beatrice. But he told me it should be my name because he'd been through them all, and no ballet dancer who'd ever joined this company or any other had been named Beatrice: no parents would ever send a daughter named Beatrice to

ballet school. Sometimes, he said, he was very tired of ballet.

Not red flowers, I said. Was about to nod but did not. I said goodbye and returned to the other side of the London street, to the complex where all the dancers argued and labored and completed things and then had to perform them much harder than they had practiced them. Sometimes it all seemed straight tape for ankles and round or oval pills or tablets for aches and piles of dirty-looking pink sateen shoes with wooden blocks in their toes.

The next rehearsal performance, Thursday, everyone looked fresh on stage, as always. The singers, the dancers *en pointe*, the extra singers, the arrogant but intently listening musicians. The stage was dimmed to velvetiness; it made you long for death, almost, so gentle was the color of everything and the depth of the background colors. He who had told me not to send red flowers to the missing principal dancer was wearing a dull ochre-yellow scarf so long it draped to the floor on one side of him. No one had yet stepped on it yet. His eyes looked very sleepy.

In the hospital was the company's young, dark-eyed Irishman, recovering. I'd sent yellow tulips. *We would all wait for him,* the flowers said. I hadn't added a message, only the company's name, though I'd felt my fingers twitch as if they were beginning a signature, mine. *Stop it,* I told myself.

I did not know if the young Irishman has gardens near wherever he lives. Possibly he does. Or, possibly, more pigeons than flowers. He certainly must not have rich gardens to look at from a hospital window. There, perhaps, the body's organs are a garden; perhaps the surgeons had entered them, pruning, rearranging, setting them up to bloom again, or at least to thrive, to keep on working and living. Perhaps they'd tried to shore up parterre gardens in his Irish heart.

The next night I went back up to the director's place high up at

the top of the escalators to try to see if he, the man of long scarves, was asleep as he could sometimes be in the afternoon, or, if awake, he could sign papers. Because he hated computers, there were always many papers. Papers were a good reason to ride up the escalator beneath its flashing, alternating warm light beams on a winter day.

When I knocked, there was no answer. It was a private office, so I knew I should not go in. He might be like a sleeping owl. In my head, he had firmly become like the owl at one end of the gondola of my life—I, the pleased, spoiled, but insignificant cat, with dotage all over its face, who's probably only really there for decoration, for the owl to look at. (Owls and cats are too much like each other to like each other. They only give people ridiculous things to imagine when you see them painted together in Edward Lear's gondola.)

I was only the cat. I had no key. It was a private office and sometimes, for him, even a living space, so I would never go in unless the door was answered. I was a *hired* Beatrice who stood outside a door and hoped it opened.

I heard arguing. I knew both voices, as if favorite wines. He of the scarf and he of the recuperation from operation unspecified. *They couldn't be fighting about me,* I was startled to hear myself, as if in an outburst in my own head. *I'm just a hanger-on.*

You won't, one said.

I already have, and there's nothing you can do about it, said the other. They sounded like brothers bickering, brothers who'd worked too hard at something that didn't work out well, after all. (*Their work all for naught,* as my Irish mother often said, *and now they'll be trying to blame each other.*)

Try that again, said one. *Try saying that one more time. To me.*

I would if I needed to, the other said. I really could not guess whose voice was whose. They sounded almost alike, angry brothers

only a year apart, though there was actually a great difference in their ages. (I was as young as the dancer.) I couldn't guess who was who or what they were talking about. They had not even heard me knock, or did not care, in the heat of their argument, which, to me, sounded senseless.

Unless they loved me, which they didn't. *It's I who loves them*, I thought. I could feel a coldness in my forearms; I felt the taste of rosemary in my mouth. I stood and listened in a few seconds more.

I can quit, said one. (This must, I thought, be the dancer; but I might be wrong.)

You know as well as I do you can't, said the other. *You've got a contract if that means anything*. (Yes, this, the director.)

Not really, said the other, but I could hear quaver in his voice, the part of him that was admitting that what the other was saying to him was true.

Yet all I knew is they were never, would *never*, be fighting about me. They would never fight about me. They were fighting about things they thought I would never understand. I, only an attendant.

It was end of day. Down the escalator I went, the sunlight painting me with fading zebra stripes at sharp slants. Back in my apartment, to which neither of them had ever been—I'd never even had a party there—I lay down on my bright blue bed and curled like a shellfish. No one I could imagine would ever want to know my dreams.

It did not matter, thus, that in this not altogether unpleasant dream, I was almost completely buried in an eternal sand with special qualities of hopelessness, jaggedly bad sand, and when both of them found me in the heavy, heavy dream-sand, one was laughing and one began to cry, but I had no emotions at all. To them I was like the colors for a team, like Manchester United's red and white. You had to be a real person there, of Manchester, to feel the glory of the colors.

As visitor, you were required to admire and support those colors, the colors and the team, but you numbly knew you would never feel the colors' glory as they did.

Yet, I felt all the glories of the colors of both dancer and director. *The glory of the colors*, I kept repeating in this dream, and they looked at me with their mouths open, waiting for me to finish that unfinishable sonata about my endless exclusion. I couldn't. *It was the sand's fault*, I began to think, and was irritated they didn't understand that, though I did. I could feel how cold the sand was and how hot the sun was and how unfair it was I liked both the cold and the heat, and could not have chosen one as my favorite, and thus I would never be free from either. My trap eternal, the terrible sand.

Matthew Tuckner

Xanax, with Figurative Language

I didn't believe I loved drugs until I loved what drugs did to my
belief.
A fistful of footballs down the hatch and out of nowhere, God
in the elderflower patch. God in the tomato I pull from the vine
and squeeze over the slope of my chin. God in the squashed skin
I leave fly-buzzing in the midday sun. I love belief
and I love forgetting my days, but I hate the way you read me
the record of the unbelievable damage I've done.
How, watching our garter snake unlatch its jaw for a mouse
nowhere near God-fearing enough, I tossed him a shakier one.
How, pouring my mug of rum on the rug, I pulled out my lighter
to see what beauty I could make of sugar and spittle. God in the
mouse-
heavy hump ballooning the belly of our reptile. God in the
coconut-white
fire I made of our room, how I fed it until it grew a mouth, until it grew
so tired of my meals I had to toss myself between its teeth to put it out.

Devotion, with Figurative Language

One can do many things with one's hands.
Is this grace? One can have many packets of
pinecones delivered to one's front door.
Is this grace? When I was a child, I pictured
your ear pushed up against the seashell
of my mouth, the sound of the ocean swilling
inside of me, the seagulls chopped to pieces
by the whirling fans of my prayer. Don't you
remember? There goes the silly human in me again,
getting all teary, smelling your name on the tongue
of a lily, tearing a strawberry in two, a strawberry
that doesn't want to touch me. You are everywhere
I am not: an etching titled *Untitled* by Barnett Newman,
the drone strike I fail to register beyond a few numbers
on a page. I wrap my head around it and it slips
away from the grasp. Does it matter
that I chew the nail of my left pinkie
more than my right, that I once made a star
with the flat of my palm on my brother's bare back,
that I know what shower water tastes like when it gathers
in the drain, that I know some of what I know against my will?
Do you understand my human tongue? Does it please you

when I hold it, when I draw its blood between bites
of stale bread? Everything I have to say to you sounds
empty of vowels, slathered in gray paint, abstract like time.
Every word I've ever spoken is shouting *save me, save me, save me*, but nothing ever does, does it? Not the pencil shavings
on my table, not the clouds that lodge themselves
in the sky every morning like a pair of human faces,
faces that sometimes resemble my father,
faces that sometimes resemble your faces.
The clouds are the yoyos of the Gods,
every human knows this, the thumbless clouds
who could never really fathom the form
of nothing I think I'm talking to.

Corey Zeller

Everything Shimmering, Cracked in Two

Everything was shimmery: the building's windows, the outdated cars, even the slow-paced puttering of the common birds. Wings beat like blood through a heart. They shimmered. Downtown, we tagged the trashcans and busted-up street signs. Everything still shimmered. That was the last time I'd see you drink rum and cokes for 20 years. That was the last time our hearts would be so empty. We stopped a kid on the road who was a grade or two below us in school. He always wore hand-me-down clothes, smelled like wet dog, and smiled at everyone. He looked a lot like what my son looks like now: shaggy hair, shaved on the sides, a torso like a wishbone. We stood on either side of him till he broke. Tears came and you know what his eyes did. I know what his eyes did. Like a streetlight on a lake. We stole his bike just so we didn't have to walk home. And here he is now, twenty years later, on my living room floor. He's trying to hold on to the pillow I'm ripping from his arms. *Stop*, he says, *stop*. And there's some shimmer of light from the front windows and I stop and he's looking

up at me. I shimmer. *Dad*, he says, *what's wrong*. And the pillow, unclamped, glows on the floor between us like something that moves.

Mathilde Merouani

Sciaticas Are Really Bad

On my first day of secondary school I go in early with Mum. We're all dressed up. Mum bought me a new pair of jeans with a chain belt and ripped knees and she even took me to the hairdresser and said I could get highlights in my hair. She's let me put on lip gloss. Her dress matches my top. At the gates she asks Dad to take lots of photos.

The school is empty. Mum and I say hello to the teachers and the headmaster and they're very nice. They all say I look so much like my mum and that they've heard I was really clever. I blush and smile. Another thing they say is that I'm very tall the same way everybody always says I'm very tall. A teacher asks me how old I am. I say I'm ten but I'll be eleven next month. I look at Mum while I speak. The teacher says Ten! The teacher says I look like I'm fourteen. Mum says one day I'll be a tall woman a very tall woman and she squeezes my hand.

I have lunch with Mum and all the teachers and they talk about school trips abroad. There's one in March to France and one in May to Spain and I ask Mum if she's going on the trip to Madrid and she whispers a yes and she smiles.

All the other people arrive at two in the afternoon. We get sorted into forms and I wave Mum goodbye and I find Juliet and Mallory and I tell them my mum arranged for us to be in the same form and they say it's so cool because we don't know anyone else. In

the corridors the teachers say hello to me and people ask me how I know everyone and I say I know a lot of people. Mallory and Juliet and I talk about how it's going to be a great year.

At some point in the middle of the school year Mum doesn't go to school anymore. She starts sleeping in the office downstairs and I wonder if my parents will get a divorce because Mallory said her parents slept in separate rooms before they got divorced. When Mallory talks about her parents' divorce she always says it's all because of that bitch. And Juliet and I agree it's all because of that bitch. At home I'm really nice I only say nice things so that my parents feel good so that my parents don't need to divorce maybe. Although if there's a bitch I don't think there's much I can do apart from finding out who the bitch is.

Mum spends a lot of time on the sofa in the living room and Dad brings her dinner on a tray and she's picky. She wants her food cut for her and wants everything to be easy to eat. We watch *The X Factor* together like we do every Saturday night but when I bring her a Mars bar like I always do on Saturday nights she says no she says it'll make her feel sick and she looks annoyed. And then on other Saturday nights she doesn't watch she just sleeps. And when I sing along she sighs and turns so I stop singing. And once I kiss her goodnight and it wakes her up and she tells me off for waking her up. What it means is Dad has to drive me to school now and we can't use the teachers' car park now and we have to wait in line with all the other people now.

At school everyone asks me where my mum is and how my mum is. Her pupils find me in the playground they say You're Mrs. Hale's daughter aren't you? Can you tell her we say hello? Also tell her the supply teacher is so bad and that we miss her! Can you tell her? From Aviva Cleo and Abigail. Will you tell her? Aviva Cleo and

Abigail. I repeat their names in my head all day. The teachers speak in quiet voices at the end of class and ask me if she's coming back and if she's okay. I say what I've been told to say. I say she has sciatica. The teachers nod and say Ah yes sciaticas are really bad and I say Yes sciaticas are really bad.

One evening I show Mum my Spanish homework and she shows me two burnt holes on her scalp where there's no hair. She shows me headscarves. A wig arrives in the post and it's pretty much prettier than her real hair because it's blond. She has lost weight and I tell her she looks good. She says I can have as many Mars bars as I want. I eat four.

The Mars bars they always go on the brown plates. And when I drink orange juice I always have to drink it in the glass with the orange stripes and if someone gives me orange juice in the glass with the blue stripes I pour it in the sink when they're not watching. Blue is for water I can't have orange juice in the glass for water. I always give Mum the yellow cutlery because the science teacher said the sun with the water is good the sun with the water is good and yellow is the colour of the sun.

I watch all three episodes of *Charmed* every day after school and no one tells me to turn off the TV.

Dad tells me to stop asking Mum about my Spanish homework but I don't mind because I'm good at it I just wanted to make sure. And anyway I wasn't going to ask anymore because now when she tries to say things she's not always very clear. For example the other day she wanted me to fetch her a glass of water but she asked me to hoover the road-signs and I only understood because she made a gesture of drinking. She says there's a pocket of water in her brain. I wonder where the water comes from.

Mum leaves home and goes to a hospital and in the hospital

there are lots of plugs above the bed and tubes too and wires too and Mum tells me to stop pulling my eyelashes. Your beautiful eyelashes she says Your beautiful eyelashes. There's also a balcony very high up and you can see the river down below. The river it glitters the river it's soft.

I can watch even more TV. I can go on the computer all the time. I tell Juliet and Mallory everything I've been watching and eating and they're jealous and they say I'm so lucky. They say maybe I can ask for more stuff since my parents don't say no anymore so I ask for a pair of sneakers and Dad buys me the most expensive ones the purple ones and then I ask for a Sims game and he buys me two.

On a Friday afternoon I'm eating ice-cream in front of the TV and my aunt Virginia calls and asks how I'm doing and I say I'm fine. And she says Darling you're not fine and I laugh. I say I have to go do my homework because I want to keep watching *Charmed*. I'm really worried when it looks like Piper is going to die but then her sisters cast a spell and Piper is fine and I put chocolate chips in my ice cream.

My uncle Peter comes round and gives me twenty pounds and he and Dad remove the carpet from the office and they take away all the furniture and lay down linoleum on the floor. It's like wood except it's not like wood at all. I wonder where the furniture has gone. There were bookcases and two desks and three chairs and a bed and it was always so messy. Now it's all clean and they install a hospital bed and then Mum's in the hospital bed. I'd like to know where the computer is because I'd just started a new family on The Sims with Luke Glass as my husband. I don't ask where it is for now.

When Grandma comes she puts up a picture of the Pope on the bedside table. And when Grandpa visits he takes it down and he gives me an MP3 player.

At school during breaks I let Mallory and Juliet listen to the song on my MP3 player. They have to take it in turns because there are two earphones and three of us. There's only one song on my MP3 player and it's a sad song but Mallory and Juliet they say it's not a sad song but maybe that's because they haven't listened to it in their beds when it's all quiet and dark.

Now we always have to spend our breaks in the playground. Before we could go around the school and if someone saw us in the corridors I could just say I'm going to see my mum I could say My mum's Mrs. Hale.

I get As on all my tests and the teachers congratulate me but Mr. Benson the Maths teacher he asks if my mum still has sciatica when he gives me my exam back and I say yes. I say sciaticas are really bad. He says he put a note for her inside my test and I tell him I'll give it to her. At first I think maybe he's her secret lover and if I don't give it to her my parents won't get a divorce. But then I read the note and it just says he hopes she's feeling better and to call him if she needs anything and he wrote down his address and phone number. Which means he's not her lover because she would already know where he lives if they were having an affair. So I tell Mallory my parents are going to stay together.

Mum dies on a Thursday. Dad comes into my room to tell me and he cries on my bed and he gives me tissues and he doesn't actually say she is dead he just says it's over it's over it's over.

I don't go to school on the Friday and Monday is a bank holiday. It's very convenient for the funeral because it means everybody can come. The priest says something about teachers bringing in crowds and it's true the church is full very full. Aviva Cleo and Abigail wrote a poem for her and they recite it and everybody says what a lovely poem it was. At home afterwards there's all my favourite food like

mini pizzas and sausage rolls and Monster Munch. Some people give me gifts. A woman gives me glittery pens.

The computer is in the living room now and I play The Sims all Tuesday. I make my couple have sex a lot. I make them have lots of babies. Babies babies babies. I make them eat too much so they'll get fat. I buy twelve swimming-pool ladders so they can always get out.

I go back to school on Wednesday. Everyone says they're sorry and they're all kind to me. Even the people I don't know even the beautiful girls even the handsome boys in the years above. Everybody wants to talk to me. Even Luke Glass. Luke Glass gives me a hug and my heart beats really fast and I tell Juliet and Mallory that Luke Glass gave me a hug and we get all excited. The English teacher starts her lesson by telling the class I'm so brave to come back to school so soon and she tells everyone to clap for me and they all clap which is very nice.

These days people send lots of flowers to the house. Always flowers in the house.

The rooms they smell good.

And everything is pretty.

Maria Zoccola

house on the bluff

the funeral bouquets withered soon after, gassing
the kitchen with rot. liquifying brown carnations,
lilies draped over their vases like wet tongues.
minutes crawled from the clock and then fell out
in great torrents, spewed out, like a cap knocked off
a hydrant. i burrowed among the dust motes
in the attic and thought about intentionality,
which meant that some things were really about
other things. this ragged pressure yanking
the joints in my ribs had branches, had roots.
it could be killed, the way my neighbor was killing
her sago palm with a drip-feed of bleach,
green tines leeched to yellow, corruption climbing
the woody trunk. poison for a poison tree.
i wanted to sleep but i didn't, but then i did.
out in the yard, the sun pressed its hand against
the backs of the oak leaves and drowned me
in an underwater light, and in my dream
the sago died and the lilies sprang up again
like monuments to love and the wind changed
and there you were, wholly yourself, carrying

in your hands a soup pot that rattled and shook
as the dark things inside jumped for the lid.

Melissa Darcey Hall

Girl, Revisited

after Jamaica Kincaid

Wash your face every night no matter how tired you are; use a hair mask on Sundays and let the cream repair your heat-ravaged locks; layer anti-aging creams and acne serums on your imperfect skin; when buying makeup, make sure it's waterproof, so it holds up well in the face of disappointment and self-doubt; this is how to conceal a pimple or a bruise or a cut; this is how to lose three pounds in a week; this is how to edit an unflattering photo so no one asks if you're pregnant or tired or sad; is it true that you have sex on a first date?; on Friday nights, act playful and available and not like the frigid bitch everyone thinks you're so bent on becoming; you mustn't speak to men after dark, not even to say hello; don't walk home alone—men will follow and rape you; *but I don't have sex on the first date, that's just what Bryan told his friends*; this is how to check that your drink wasn't roofied when you went to the bathroom and to avoid everyone portraying you as the slut men are so bent on you becoming; this is how you get the right kind of attention for being pretty and smart and nice; this is how you get the wrong kind of attention for being too pretty and too smart and too nice; this is how you smile at a man you don't like in that way but fear hurting; this is how you smile at a man you don't like at all, but fear will hurt you; this is how you smile at someone you like enough to risk getting hurt; this is how you handle heartbreak and loneliness

and embarrassment (alone in your bedroom, because no one likes an emotional woman); if you're crying in a public bathroom because you couldn't wait until you were home, fix your makeup or everyone will think you're on your period or the brink of a breakdown; this is how you dress to be taken seriously; this is how you dress to be desired; this is how you dress when the appointment at the clinic is with a male doctor; this is how to behave in the presence of drunk men so they won't recognize a girl who's asking for it, which your mother and the media warned you against becoming; this is how you bite your tongue; this is how to apologize for occupying too much space; don't show your anger or annoyance—you're not a man, you know; don't throw insults at men because they might have a knife or a gun or a reactive fist; this is how to hurt a man: with laughter; this is how a man hurts you: with violence; this is how to love a man, and if ripping out your heart doesn't work, there are other ways that involve your body, and if that doesn't work, accept that you aren't desirable enough; this is how to scream and shout to save your life, and this is how to stay silent to save your life; this is how you make it through each day: obey every rule and smile and say *thank you; but what if I don't want to?*; you mean to say that after all this you're really going to be the kind of woman who doesn't know how to survive?

Mika Taylor

Ace of Wands

In a dark room at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, a woman is projected on the wall in black and white. She's in her early twenties, beautifully lit, pale and glowing like a 40s-era Hollywood star—with dark lipstick, an updo, and a slash of black bangs. She sits at a table, reading aloud from a paperback copy of Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*. She's a poor reader, stumbling over words, pausing at odd times, reading too quickly and without emotion. I sit on a wooden bench and watch her push through.

"When I was a child, my father swung me up on to his knees, and I broke both his legs. He never touched me again except with the point of the whip he used for the dogs." There's a smile in her voice as she tries to remain serious.

A bad actress, I think.

"But my mother, who lived only a while and was so light that she dared not to go in the wind, could swing me on her back and walk for miles. There was talk of witchcraft, but what is stronger than love?" The woman stops and gasps as if the words are somehow erotic. She continues for a line or two and is overtaken.

A porn star, I think, much better at faking orgasm than literary depth. I feel I understand the project: this woman is pretending to be aroused by literature—embodying the power of the written word. I consider leaving for the next exhibit but give this one another minute.

The woman begins squirming again. She breaks to gasp, then refocuses on the book. She forces another sentence and loses herself, eyes closed in the throes of this more and more believable orgasm. She hyperventilates, grabs the table, bringing sound up from the bottom of her throat. The book goes limp and she looks down at the table, so I see only the top of her head, the curve and arch of her empty hand, the tightening of muscles along her collarbone.

A very good actress, I think.

She goes back to reading, not well, but diligently, as if fighting her bodily response. Just give in, I think. Finish. Why read? You are so much better at this other thing. I am unconvinced by the book, yet so compelled by the body.

And then, mid-sentence, she lets go completely, closing her eyes, bowing her head so all I can see of her face is her lower lip, dark and shining. She climaxes, laughs, settles back into her chair and, instead of reading on, closes the book and looks directly into the camera with a softened gaze.

"Hi, I'm Theresa," she says, "and I was reading *Sexing the Cherry* by Jeanette Winterson." She gulps, breaths, looks down then up. She giggles and shakes her head.

The screen goes white and text appears: "directed by clayton cubitt."

A man's voice says, "Good work, ladies," and Theresa laughs.

The texts shifts: "hysterical literature session six," then the screen is black.

When I read *Sexing the Cherry* in college, I didn't love it the way I wanted to. Winterson's semi-autobiographical novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, had moved me. Her tormented childhood worked a circle around my wrists and emptied into the palms of my hands in

a quiet buzz of yearning.

I wanted to like *Sexing the Cherry* as much as I enjoyed walking around with it, cover out. Its provocative title was as close as I came to sexual interaction on campus. Which is to say: through my college years, I was barely versed in my own sexuality, scared of men and women both, full of undefined desire and lacking the ability to satisfy myself. I didn't hook up. I didn't masturbate. I read books. This book, though, was a little distant for me, a bit too wordy. The concept of the fierce and gargantuan female lead was appealing, but it did not move me the way I wanted. (No book has ever moved me the way it moved Theresa.)

I have never in my life had a book-dropping, word-stopping orgasm while reading.

My first real orgasm came at age twenty-three with my first real boyfriend. My bed was a double mattress on the floor, no box spring, and we were sprawled in a tangle of blankets. I believe we'd already had sex, or maybe we were on our way there, but for the moment we were making out—kissing and touching and halfway dressed. He rubbed me through cotton underwear, which brought on a feeling at first pleasant and then kind of shocking. I jumped a little and laughed when the sensation got too intense. I attempted to squirm away. He continued even as I resisted. He was not menacing or mean—more teasing, as if he were tickling or playing a game of tag. I don't like being tickled or chased. He read my resistance as playful (it was) and pursued me more doggedly around the mattress, unrelenting as it became clear I was uncomfortable with these new and growing sensations. I know now what this says about consent, and I wonder at my signaling, what words I used and what made him

continue when I half wanted him to stop. My tension kept building, as if I were climbing a mountain in the exposed area above the tree line. It felt uncomfortable and unsafe and pleasurable all at once and the peak brought a release and euphoria I hadn't known myself capable of. I hadn't brought myself to that point because the path up to it felt so treacherous—intense enough to flutter my chest still.

Immediately, I wanted more.

In the dark room at the Mass MoCA, another woman introduces herself on the screen. "My name is Solé, and I will be reading *Beloved* by Toni Morrison," she says, opening to the middle.

I'm put off by the choice. It is one of the greatest books of the twentieth century, but it is a story of death and slavery and a mother haunted.

Solé reads, "I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves. She puts them in a round basket. The leaves are not for her." The words are perfect, and this voice compels. There is a tone and timbre of eroticism in the language. "I am not separate from her. There is no place where I stop. Her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too, a hot thing." Solé is focused on the book. Her eye shadow gleams. "All of it is now. It is always now. There will never be a time when I am not crouching and not watching others who are crouching too. I am always crouching."

This book is better. Worth it. And I am ready this time for the orgasm, if not the context.

"The man on my face is dead. His face is not mine." Solé blinks rapidly, cocks her head. Her lips turn up. It's an odd passage to sexualize this way, but I am slowly coming around to the idea of

this project. The words are so powerful—so moving.

Solé's voice vibrates, more like crying than crying out. "At night I cannot see the dead man on my face," she says, and takes a tremulous breath. She's a better reader than the last actress, but I'm less convinced by her orgasm. She resists it, scrunching her brow and shaking her head to fight it off. It's a battle I recognize—the force of feeling as it overcomes composure.

I'm embarrassed by the books that lit romantic and sexual sparks in me as a teenager—because of their quality, but more because of what their stories reveal about my romantic expectations. Among the most erotic of my early years: *Gone with the Wind, Jane Eyre, Pride and Prejudice,* and (squirm) *Atlas Shrugged*. These are narratives of longing and thwarted desire, of miscommunication, strict social structures, and traditional gender roles in what were meant to be strong female characters. The obvious flaws in the first and last—romanticized racism and classism—echo through sex scenes centered on dominating men who are overcome with lust dragging resistant women into depths of passion, scenes I now easily read as rape. And the Janes, Austen and Eyre, feature mannered misunderstandings and polite secrecy that pile up to hundreds of pages of frustration. In their stories, sex was forbidden and unreachable, the heroines' yearnings formed in the vacuum of deprivation. As such, they were perfectly aligned with my confused and burgeoning sexuality: I did not know how to talk to guys. I would freeze up and go quiet, observing rather than interacting. I owned a tarot deck, and, in the privacy of my dorm room, I asked it regularly when love would come for me. The answer was: no time soon.

I stand by my early identification with Jane Eyre. She was a

watcher, a female center of desire who never expected fulfillment. But I have to admit, I first read Brontë's book as straightforward and romantic. When a professor told me the last line was ironic, meant to signal clearly that a marriage to Mr. Rochester after he was bashed and blinded in the fire set by his secret first wife was a *terrible* idea, I blushed in confusion. I'm sure I had longed for the day when an extremely powerful and handsome man would be injured enough to take me as a wife. In *Jane Eyre* there is struggle, there is desire, and eventually a shift in power that makes possible the impossible. I did not know to want more.

After my first orgasm, I became quickly dependent on my boyfriend for more. In other words, I fell in love. We were not particularly compatible, but the chemical effect of that physical release was, for me, undeniable. I learned about oxytocin firsthand. He had other releases: video games, masturbation, alcohol. I resented those habits, especially his masturbation. I wanted every bit of him.

"It's different," he said, "simple, private." I wished I had access to that range of sexuality. I wished I could go into a room alone and make myself come. Somehow though, I could not. When we split up and he moved on easily, I stayed wrecked and obsessed. I did not start dating again for a couple of years, and then started again right before I met my now ex-spouse.

"I'm Margaret and I'm reading out of *Sleeping Beauty* [sic] by A. N. Roquelaure." The third reader is a person I recognize: comedienne, Margaret Cho. She holds a tablet (no cover showing, no turning of pages) and reads quickly and awkwardly, speeding through the words

as if she's being chased. It is an odd comedy routine, discordant from the others. She laughs at the end of the first sentence, squirms and then bounces in her seat. She reaches her arm under the table, drawing attention to a place off screen that had seemed inconsequential.

This text is the first overtly sexual one, with bulging muscles and boot kissing and leather; and yet, read at this pace, with odd intonation, it is strikingly unerotic. Cho hunches forward on her elbows, lifted slightly out of her chair, and shrieks with laughter. She writhes as if trying to get away. She squeals, drops the tablet, and peeks under the table before reading again. I find it hard to follow the narrative and notice only a couple of images while distracted by Cho's reactions. There is a line of naked princes and princesses bent over with red behinds and exposed genitalia. Sleeping Beauty crawls on her hands and knees before the prince. She remembers the pain and pleasure of being whipped the day before.

What I notice when I re-watch *Hysterical Literature* online is the faint buzzing that becomes audible when the reader's voice goes silent. I only hear it now because I know what's going on beneath the flat expanse of table. There is an assistant underneath with a "personal massager." It is a piece of knowledge that, once revealed, fundamentally changed my understanding. These orgasms are all real. Where the words are flat or rushed, it's because the reader is responding bodily to that unseen force. When words break, it is because the book has lost and the body has taken over. I only learned about the physical "assist" after watching Cho bounce and shriek and laugh through her reading. She does not perform the story or the orgasm in an expected way.

When she reaches climax, Cho shouts "Ow!" drops the tablet, makes a stop motion with her hands, and says, "Ok," with finality, asking for this to end. Still, she picks the tablet back up and reads

on, increasing in speed and volume until she shouts "Ok!" drops the tablet again, closes her eyes, and gives in. The wand buzzes under the table. Her face moves through involuntary and unreadable expressions. With an inhale and a series of rapid blinks, she addresses the camera.

"Um, I'm Margaret Cho. And uh, I was reading *Sleeping Beauty* by A. N. Roquelaure." In two long blinks, she composes herself and suppresses her smile. She maintains her direct gaze, waits, then looks below the table. She exhales, laughs, looks off at the person behind the camera then back at the person under the table.

"Oh my god," she says, laughing more openly. "That was great."

The screen goes white, and we hear the male laughter and a hearty "Wooh!"

After we saw this exhibit together, my then-spouse got me my first Hitachi Wand. It is apparently the tool of choice for many women. I was in my mid-thirties, and though I am an enthusiastic partner, I'd never developed my ability to masturbate. They ordered it online along with a dial you plug in to change the amplitude of the vibrations. It was cumbersome—one hand holding the wand and the other adjusting the dial, and since I had only experienced manual stimulation before, the vibration felt too intense at first. Its highest setting made me want to jump away like I'd wanted to flee my first orgasm—it felt akin to an electric shock. The bottoms of my feet and the palms of my hands itched and tingled and buzzed, and I had to pause often. There was a pleasure in the stopping and starting, the blood pulsing back as numbness subsided. But even when I'd gotten the hang of it, I used it on its lowest setting, preferring the thrumming bass frequency to the buzzing treble. And I continued to need partnered

sex, skin on skin, bodily contact, and tactile closeness to climax. I used the wand as foreplay, exciting myself and calling my spouse in to help me finish. I played with it after sex to extend my orgasms, but I did not master its use, or find complete satisfaction unpartnered: just me and the wand. I did not achieve anything close to what the women in Clay Cubitt's videos did.

When my marriage ended a year and a half ago, I was devastated. My spouse attempted kindness on their way out, but I was stricken; none of their vague explanations made sense to me. We had so much in common, I thought. We loved each other, I thought. I fixated on my flaws (emotional and physical) and tried to figure out what I'd done wrong. It didn't help that they had met someone new and were experiencing that first rush of intimacy that makes everything else pale. I tried not to compare myself to her. I understood the draw of newness, but I was shocked to hear our sex life wasn't what I'd thought it was.

"We're like great friends who have sex sometimes," my spouse said. After twelve years, a couple times a week had been enough for me. Apparently, it was not for them.

Honestly, great friends who have sex is my relationship ideal.

"When we first got together," they said, "we did it every day." They were right. In fact, every day had been a compromise on my part; I would have preferred more but hadn't wanted to pressure them. I was embarrassed to be dependent on them for orgasms.

When we broke up, I tried to defend myself, to claim I loved sex with them, to counter the accusations they threw at me. I pushed them to tell me things I wish I hadn't heard, things they may wish they hadn't said. I dragged out details neither of us needed aired.

"How's it going with the masturbation?" they asked, a cutting edge in their voice.

After splitting from my first boyfriend, my libido, which had been insatiable, disappeared completely. The same happened after the break-up with my spouse. I missed human contact and intimate touch. I missed the companionship, daily conversation, and care. I missed the confidence I'd had in our marriage and our love, but I was so broken by the separation, so exhausted by grief, I did not miss sex. I wasn't hungry for food either. I had to remember to stay hydrated. I was emptied, gutted, no longer beholden to bodily needs. I tried to indulge myself where I could. I bought piles of books I didn't read. I cried and slept and walked with friends. I had no desire to date. It felt like my spouse must have been right about our sex life. If I could turn off this completely, maybe I had always been like this. Maybe they saw in me something I hadn't known about myself.

In some ways, my deadened libido was a relief. With all I'd lost and all I wanted but could not have, not needing sex was a blessing. My body shut down and I was safe: I didn't have to deal with physical urges and emotional ruin at the same time.

As it was with my first heartbreak, this loss of desire turned out to be a temporary state, a reaction to stress. It was a break my body gave me—a healing place. After a year of grief, my sex drive came back. It was an annoying companion, a near constant irritation. And I felt incapable of dealing with it. I wasn't ready to date or expose myself to another round of misplaced love, and I could not fully satisfy my needs alone.

The return of my desire was a burden. By the time it came back, I'd become effective in areas I'd been practicing—art, friendship, adulting. I started reading the books I'd bought. But I was still a bumbling novice to masturbation. I gave up easily and angrily, more frustrated than when I'd begun. I overthought it, analyzing my physical responses, trying to push toward sensations I hadn't achieved on my own, blaming myself when I failed. I wished I'd learned young, finding techniques for pleasure before my brain had developed enough to question or criticize. Intellectualizing went directly counter to my goals. And yet, thought and effort were the only tools I had.

I bought a new Hitachi so my orgasms would be gifts from me to myself. The new one had no cords, no dials. With it, I was untethered in the best of ways. It had four automatic settings that oscillated and pulsed. Even alone, I could give over to a rhythm not my own. I also bought a Lelo Sona, a palm-shaped device that emits sonic pulses instead of making direct contact with the clitoris. It was both more powerful and stranger than anything I'd used before. The reviews warned of a learning curve.

Often when I tried to masturbate, the result was not one of satisfaction, but of heightened craving. I could find myself climbing higher and higher toward the edge without completion. Some orgasms weren't an end, but a priming—an opening to want and need and desire. Nothing felt more upsetting post-divorce than sensation that led to increased need—an emphasis on lack that mirrored my emotional loss. As with that loss though, after months of blaming myself for a break-up I didn't cause but hadn't been able to prevent, I started allowing myself whatever feelings came, good, bad, and other.

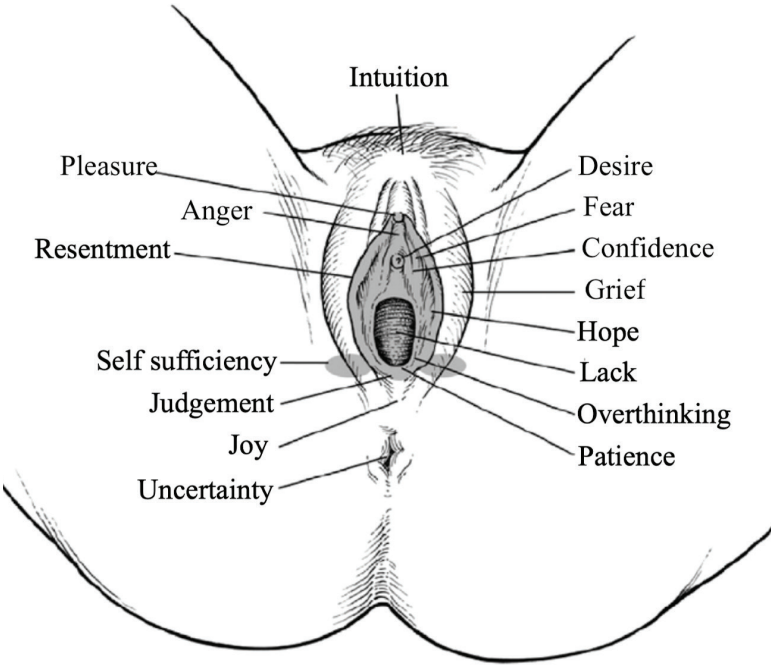


Figure 1. In which the essayist over-analyzes her pleasure dilemma by mapping emotions onto a medical diagram.

In the tarot, the Ace of Wands is a card of new beginnings, of creative and emotional energy. The ace in my deck shows a hand emerging from a cloud holding a large stick with a knob on the end (a shape not unlike the shape of my Hitachi wand). The cloud is confusion, murkiness, or stagnation. The wand symbolizes power and change. This card is "indicative of our ability to take hold of our desires and allow passion to fuel us up to reach our goals." Underneath the wand,

a river flows. It symbolizes the motion and direction of thoughts and energy, of passion. Beyond that is a mountain: challenge and aspiration. "The mountain is unbending, inflexible."

I practiced. Most of what I read and heard was about "taking yourself on a date" and "setting the mood with candles and lotions." Those aren't erotic to me. I don't like scented candles. I'm a utilitarian user of lotion. I don't own lingerie. Whenever I've tried to "act sexy" I've gone somewhere comic or intellectual. That's not a cop out. Comic and intellectual are sexy to me. As are conversation, touch, the smell of a partner's skin—not things I could recreate alone.

Instead, I tried what had worked in the past that I could manage by myself. I'd enjoyed being pushed to orgasm, had fantasized about force, so I found techniques to mimic that. Sensory deprivation was best, a pillow over my face, headphones in my ears, a dildo shoved in my mouth—smothering and filling myself. I found vintage German pornography with realistic body hair and dialogue I could only partially understand. The sheer absurdity of the plots kept my mind distracted in the right ways.

I read what I could find. I started this essay. I'm not sure if masturbation is the opposite of books or if reading and writing just stroke different pleasure spots. Books take me out of my body, away from my life. They were my main outlet in childhood. They allowed me the relief of being wholly in my head. The few that brought on sexual urges or pleasure when I was young left me wanting, not satisfied. And yet, they were also my favorites. I allowed myself that. If I needed to disconnect, I did.

After the divorce, I ventured closer to the needs and desires I feared. I risked the excruciating frustration of excitement without climax. If masturbation put me in danger of feeling limitless and ever-growing desire, then I was a person full of desire. I let myself be

insatiable. All the compassion and forgiveness I had given so easily to a partner, I now aimed back at myself.

I masturbated often while writing this. I achieved orgasm many times over. I squirted. I wept. I released in ways as powerful and profound as I have in partnered sex. Yet I still got frustrated. Sometimes I felt little.

I catalogued the things I gained by being on my own. I have far less stress now. No real obligations. In bed, I no longer have to express myself or react to another's needs. It can happen all inside of me or it can spill out. I can scream or cry or remain silent and shut in. I was not on camera like the women in *Hysterical Literature*. I was alone and beholden only to myself.

I am of several minds.

I am overthinking this.

I cannot solve bodily needs with thinking and logic.

Writing is masturbatory.

My thought processes are often a source of pleasure.

Writing is a form of self-exploration and discovery.

My concept of orgasm is too linear, too based on male models.

Trying to recreate the pleasures of partnered
sex with specific climax and release is both
derivative and ultimately unsatisfying.

I have always been alone.

Alone is the only way for me to find myself.

There is power in certain frustrations.

How can I possibly self-satisfy
if I am moved by dissatisfaction?

Have I eroticized sexual frustration so much
that my desire can only spring from
deprivation?

What is true about me
and what is just a temporary
state?

What would it mean to "finish"?

Is anything ever finished?

Kami Westhoff

How to Praise the Periphery

I.

Start with your mother's last breath. You'll want to stay there, suspended in those seconds when your gut unclenched, the fascia in your lower back paused its tantrum, the capillaries in your sclera settled their quiver. It's called relief, and though you won't call it that in the moment, your body will know better. You'll want to be near her body, so be near her. Tell her it's okay to rest. Tell her you'll all be fine. Hold her hand. Notice the fingers, how much longer each is when unclenched. Let her hand's cool unravel in your palm as her body exchanges one kind of energy for another.

II.

Tick your gaze just to left of your mother's body. See your sister brushing her hair, let the zip of the hairbrush's teeth on her scalp tingle your own. The nightstand is full of things the hospice nurse suggested. Follow the smokey rope of the diffuser's lavender until you destroy it with your inhale. Music plays on the caregiver's phone from a playlist for the dying; swallow the vibration of its *OM*, the subtle stringed instrument never meant for first chair. Someone squirts lotion into their palms, spreads it over the cloudy skin of your

mother's feet. That someone is you, but you don't know that until someone says so later. You chart a path from the sacrum point near her heel, coursing the arch of the organs of sustenance and breath, resting at the center of the twice-broken hallux, where you were once told to press to preserve her memories.

III.

You can't stop thinking about orbit. So think it. Think about how for hours after, she was the center of the universe, and you were all insignificant planets, sometimes collapsing into one other's atmosphere, sometimes repelled by it. Your father shivers near the cracked window where he sits on the ledge, his face a dark blotch against the day's bright. Go to him. He's now the center of nothing. He knows he probably never was. But that's the thing about a galaxy, there's room for everything all at once. You can constellate, and you can black hole. You can descend into the dark matter of loss, and you can trust that gravity will lift you. You can hate him for what he was never able to give her, and you can love him for never giving up.

IV.

Because this is about the periphery, when they lift her onto the gurney and the body bag's yawn receives her, don't pay attention to how each tick of the zipper's teeth blooms a tiny disaster in your heart. Ask for her face to be left uncovered, but don't linger on the last looking. Yes, you were once a pinprick of life in the dark core of her body, but don't think about that now. Instead listen to the gurney's legs clank against the hearse's bumper. Focus only on writing

your name when they show you the cremation contract. See how your hand knows how to hold a pen even when your brain can't tell it to, how the ink veins blue the white of the paper, how each spine and curve of one letter slips easily into the next.

Emily Lawson

Quiet Car

Cities hold their shape as they recede. Into mist or distance—I lose them looking from the train. What is enclosed in each house glimpsed through the halls of trees? Where are the families, if not in the junked yards, the woods by the tracks? Suddenly, the clear horn sounding. I sit, watch my passage over a country of stolen children. A policy of family separation is considered an effective deterrent to entry. From here the damaged world looks half abandoned, or abandoned whole. *Please don't go, don't leave me*. Or, *Don't take her*. The system is coordinated; each person in the line does his part. From the tracks, it's easy not to see the shacks or clumps of tents. *We are not responsible for what happens once we hand them off to ICE*, said the spokesperson on the radio. Ghost towns rise and vanish. The woman across the aisle rubs noses with her baby, who sways, burbling, on her lap. She blows raspberries. The late sun shifts. Train conductors, I learned, are advised to look away from suicides. The train's momentum cannot be overcome in time, even if you pull every lever. One conductor recalled watching a man walk toward him, down the very center of the track, staring into his face

through the glass. Now the sun flares against the window, and briefly the woods are translucent, breaking. Passing through a town, a young boy tries to keep up on his bicycle. We watch each other as his mouth makes the shape of laughing, and he waves madly, standing up, pumping hard on the pedals, before falling away again.

Edith Lidia Clare

I am writing to tell you

after C.D. Wright

that house will be gone soon. For now,
against the fall-colored damask sofa's fuzz
of smoke-filth, reckless girls still wrap tight,
bitten peach to the clingstone, I see them.
Although the floor of time falls steeply
behind the shoulders as a continental shelf,
with a couple blow-up armbands, you can
wade it. I cross it with my invoice in my teeth
to keep it dry. Here, it is dry. And itemized—
each vertebral bead strung along spine's arch.
Each cloud of allergens billowing out of
the prickly bud you shut your startling
self into. The couple nacre-chips my upper
right front tooth let fly into that one
extravagant tropical flowered comforter
I still can't find. Even here in the house,
these new floorboards in place of the soot.
Let the white doorsteps enjoy their globe
amaranths; I potter at my own varietals
of touch, my laundry list of sensitives, of
shrinking wool. The child who dug into
our shoulders across bloody seventeen—

go, light a candle for me to that living life
and set it down. Our outcome was once rose
and sandalwood. Our eyes a crimson church.
Where you can't sleep, a marshland opens
up in lieu of dream. I go out gathering
serrated leaves. I cradle tight. Repeating:
on behalf of the storm, I am sorry.
On behalf of myself, I am up to the knee-
caps, and flooding. On behalf of the cart
of bulky grievances—what, what am I,
a kitchen herb, fragrant when crushed?
At last, you. When I find you.
I don't even know what word
to open my mouth to you with.

Contributors

Anthony Borruso is pursuing his Ph.D. in Creative Writing at Florida State University where he is a Poetry Editor for *Southeast Review.* He has been a Pushcart Prize nominee and was selected as a finalist for Beloit Poetry Journal's Adrienne Rich Award by Natasha Trethewey. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in *The American Journal of Poetry, Beloit Poetry Journal, Pleiades, Spillway, The Journal, THRUSH, Moon City Review, decomP, Frontier,* and elsewhere.

Edith Lidia Clare (she/hers) is a poet, translator, and second-year MFA candidate at the Michener Center for Writers in Austin. Her work has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore,* and elsewhere.

Kiley Dalrymple is a New York City based artist working primarily in water-based media. She has a background in the natural sciences, and draws inspiration from patterns found in the natural world.

Luiza Flynn-Goodlett is the author of *Look Alive*—a finalist for numerous prizes, including The National Poetry Series, and winner of the 2019 Cowles Poetry Book Prize from Southeast Missouri State University Press—along with seven chapbooks, most recently *The Undead*, winner of Sixth Finch Books' 2020 Chapbook Contest, and *Shadow Box*, winner of the 2019 Madhouse Press Editor's Prize. Her poetry can be found in *Poetry Northwest, Five Points, TriQuarterly,* and elsewhere. She also serves as Managing Editor of the Whiting Award–winning LGBTQ+ literary journal and press *Foglifter*.

Jonathan Gleason is an essayist, medical interpreter, and MFA candidate at the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program. He is currently working on a collection of essays about medicine, ill-

ness, and the pharmaceutical industry. You can read essays from this collection in the *New England Review*, the *Kenyon Review, Denver Quarterly, Redivider Journal* and others.

Melissa Darcey Hall is a writer and high school English teacher in San Diego, California. Her work has appeared in *Five South*, The *Florida Review*, The *Louisville Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Pigeon Pages*, *Epiphany*, and elsewhere.

Tennessee Hill is a 2022 Gregory Djanikian scholar and holds an MFA from North Carolina State University. She has been featured in *Best New Poets, POETRY, Beloit Poetry Journal, THRUSH,* and elsewhere. She has work forthcoming from *Nimrod*, *Southern Humanities Review,* and *Arkansas International*. She won the 2020 Porter House Review Editor's Poetry Prize and serves as Poetry editor for Gingerbread House Literary Magazine. She lives and teaches in Houston.

Amanda Larson is a writer from New Jersey, and an MFA candidate in Poetry at New York University. Her manuscript, *Gut*, was selected by Jericho Brown as the winner of the Omnidawn First/Second Book Prize, and is forthcoming in October of 2021. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Washington Square Review*, and other publications. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Emily Lawson is a 28-year-old poet and cancer survivor. A PhD student in philosophy at the University of British Columbia, she is a former Poe/Faulkner Fellow in poetry at the University of Virginia, where she taught poetry and served as editor for Meridian. Her poems and lyric essays appear or are forthcoming in *Sixth Finch, Adroit, Indiana Review, Waxwing, THRUSH, Muzzle, DIAGRAM, BOAAT*, and elsewhere. Her pushcart-nominated fiction appears in *BOOTH*.

Alice Maglio's fiction has appeared in *DIAGRAM*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Wigleaf*, *Pithead Chapel*, and others. Her work has also been

included in *Best Microfiction 2020*. She is the book review editor of *The Rupture*, and she holds an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. Find her on Twitter @AliceMaglio.

Mathilde Merouani's writing has appeared in *Joyland*. She won the 2021 Open Border Fiction Prize and was shortlisted for the 2022 Galley Beggar Press Short Story Prize. Her translations of Michel Butor's essays are forthcoming from Vanguard Editions. She lives in Paris.

Matthew Morris, son of a white mother and African American father, writes through questions of race, family history, and identity. His nonfiction has appeared in *apt*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, and *Seneca Review*; new essays are on the way from *Mid-American Review*, *Fourth Genre*, and *Grist*. A recent graduate of the MFA program at the University of Arizona, he is developing a manuscript about the literary trope of the tragic mulatto.

Rebecca Pyle's fiction is findable in *Guesthouse, Lindenwood Review, Map Literary, Litro, Eclectica, Posit,* and *Hong Kong Review* (forthcoming), and her poetry and book reviews and artwork are in journals as varying as *Grist, Penn Review, Permafrost, Kelp Journal's 'The Wave,' Honest Ulsterman, New England Review, West Trestle Review* (forthcoming), and *Blood Orange Review*. Rebecca is living now in the very mountainous West (Utah). See rebeccapyleartist.com.

Hanne Steen is a writer, therapist, and mother based in Los Angeles. She is a PEN Emerging Voices Fiction Fellow, and her work has been published in *PANK* and *Corium*, among others.

Mika Taylor was a Carol Houck Smith Fiction Fellow at the University of Wisconsin and holds an MFA from the University of Arizona. Her work has been supported by numerous grants and residency awards including the Ucross Foundation, Atlantic Center for the Arts, Catwalk, and the State of Connecticut Commission of the Arts. She's received scholarships to the Sewanee Writers Conference,

Wesleyan Writers Conference, and Vermont Studio Center. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Granta*, *Tin House*, *Ninth Letter*, the *Kenyon Review*, the *Southern Review*, *Guernica*, *Diagram*, and others.

Natalie Louise Tombasco was selected by Kaveh Akbar for the *Best New Poets* anthology 2021, Copper Nickel's Editor's Prize, and as a published finalist for Cutbank Books chapbook contest with her manuscript titled *Collective Inventions* (2021). She is a PhD candidate at Florida State University and serves as the Interviews Editor of the Southeast Review. Her work can be found in *Gulf Coast, Plume, Hobart Pulp, Fairy Tale Review, Peach Mag, The Rupture, Puerto del Sol,* among others.

Matthew Tuckner is a writer from New York. He is currently an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at NYU where he is Poetry Editor of *Washington Square Review* and teaches in the Undergraduate Writing Program. He is the recipient of a University Prize from the Academy of American Poets, and was a finalist for the inaugural Prufer Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *32 Poems, Colorado Review, Pleiades, Nashville Review, The Missouri Review, Bennington Review, Bat City Review, Image, New Ohio Review, Poetry Northwest,* and *The Massachusetts Review,* among others.

Adam D. Weeks has a BA in Creative Writing from Salisbury University and is currently an elementary literacy tutor in Baltimore. He is the social media manager for *The Shore,* a poetry reader for *Quarterly West,* and a founding editor of *Beaver Magazine*. He won the 2022 Third Wednesday Poetry Contest, has been a Pushcart Prize nominee, and has poetry published or forthcoming in *Fugue, Poet Lore, Sugar House Review, Sweet: A Literary Confection, Sycamore Review, Thrush,* and elsewhere.

Kami Westhoff is the author of story collection *The Criteria*, (May 2022), and three poetry chapbooks, including *Sleepwalker*, winner of

Minerva Rising's Dare to Be Contest. Her prose has appeared in various journals including *Booth*, *Carve*, *Hippocampus*, *Passages North*, *Waxwing*, and *West Branch*. She teaches creative writing at Western Washington University in Bellingham, WA.

Corey Zeller is the author of *MAN VS. SKY* (YesYes Books, 2013) and *YOU AND OTHER PIECES* (Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2015). His work has appeared in *The Kenyon Review, The Colorado Review, Indiana Review, Gulf Coast, Puerto del Sol, Mid-American Review, BOMB Magazine, The Missouri Review, Ninth Letter, The Rumpus, PEN America, Academy of American Poets, Denver Quarterly, The Southeast Review, Alaska Quarterly Review, Verse Daily, Copper Nickel, North American Review, Washington Square Review, Sonora Review, Fugue, McSweeney's, Diagram, Salt Hill, West Branch, Third Coast, Bat City Review, The Offing,* among others. He recently received his MFA from Syracuse University.

Maria Zoccola is a queer Southern writer with deep roots in the Mississippi Delta. She has writing degrees from Emory University and Falmouth University. Her work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Ploughshares, Kenyon Review, The Iowa Review, The Cincinnati Review,* and elsewhere. Learn more about her work at mariazoccola.com.