



# quip

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Hi readers,

Here we are again. Another issue of quip, another tumultuous year spent keeping our heads above water. To pretend a few brief sentences could summarize the experience of living through this pandemic, this personal and global mayhem, this revelation of just how fragile we all are, would be egregious. Despite what every influencer would have us believe, the last six months have been a \*tad\* agonizing. And yet, the slivers of happiness—of finally hugging family members after a year apart, of change and accountability and justice, of escape wherever you can find it—those moments have existed, too.

The stories we have for our fourth issue seem to deal with belonging—within a community, within relationships, within one’s own skin. In Sonal Sher’s “Mogu Will Be All Right,” a woman witnesses her neighbor’s love of a cow and begins to feel love for her country and its people. “Gold” by Kylie Westerlind tells the story of men in search of gold, forced to see themselves as the animals they despise. “Only” by Lisa Piazza explores the bitter hollowness of grief and the ways in which we cobble ourselves back together after loss, and “Starlets” by Rachel Stempel follows the search for autonomy within a defining yet destructive friendship. In “Hack” by Toni Artuso, a trans woman grapples with her identity and what it means to embrace her truest self, and in “Slipping the Fly” by Andrés Vaamonde, we watch a relationship between two low-level con artists disintegrate.

We hope you’re going easy on yourself as you figure out where you belong in all of this, even if that looks like eating ice cream in your underwear at your desk/kitchen table or crying as you email your senator for the third time this month, and we hope these stories will help you as they have helped us.

Yours,

Anna Blake & Sarah

# HACK

Toni Artuso



I sat in an Edward Hopper painting, *Nighthawks* to be exact—the brightly lit yellow walls, the gleaming wooden counter with stools marching around it, huge plate-glass windows looking onto an empty, darkened street. The picture only lacked the requisite people, the nighthawks themselves, to fill it: dark-suited men in gray fedoras, a ginger-haired woman in a bright red dress. A waitperson did stand behind the counter, but not the white-suited soda jerk that came from Hopper’s brush. A young woman had replaced the young man. Instead of a peaked cap, she sported a crown of pink hair, which harmonized with the pink sweatshirt she wore, *Town Line Diner* silkscreened across it in white letters. And then, of course, I inhabited the picture. Another anachronism in my tan shirt and brown sweater vest with matching cords, hunching on a stool at the far end of the counter, trying to stay out of the picture and ruin it as little as possible, staring out at the empty street corner visible through those windows, willing her to appear.

“Here’s your soda,” the young woman said, setting a glass clinking with ice before me. “Can I get you anything else, or do you want to wait to order ‘til you see your, uh, friend?”

She stumbled over the last word, apparently unsure if people my age actually met folks who qualified for the term *date*. *Friend* didn't really apply, but neither did any other term, so I let it go.

"I'll wait," I said, then to make conversation and pass the time, "Slow night, huh?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure why we're even open on Mondays." She popped her gum and stared out glumly at the street. "But I'm not the boss." With that, she meandered to the back. No doubt the cook offered better company than I did.

I sighed and pulled out my phone, another anachronism for Hopper's period. Just six o'clock, precisely the time Michelle and I'd agreed upon. In my heart of hearts, I didn't expect her to show up at all. I corresponded with a phantasm, a nonexistent person. Yet, someone inhabited those pictures in my—I mean Michelle's—social media feeds. Someone answered my emails. Someone meant to out me.

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The error message from Google showed up on my phone one Saturday morning in January as I sat in the barbershop on Main Street in Wakefield, awaiting my turn in the chair. The message warned me that someone had accessed Michelle Ford's Gmail account from a new device in Arlington, Massachusetts. I scowled at the phone. Though I'd lived in Arlington briefly, decades ago, before I married Trudy, I never went there these days.

When I pictured hackers, I thought of men slouched over PCs in Ukraine or somewhere else in the erstwhile Soviet Union, not down the street in New England. With a shrug, I decided



that if Boris possessed the tech savvy to guess Michelle's password, spoofing a server in Massachusetts from behind the former Iron Curtain didn't present much of a challenge, either. If he sought sensitive credit card information or PayPal or banking credentials, he'd hit a dead end. At that moment, as far as I was concerned, Michelle existed exclusively virtually, and her footprint was small. I'd only recently introduced her to social media, and she possessed nothing worth pilfering because she possessed nothing at all. Still, to be on the safe side, I changed the password.

"Take that, Ivan, or Katarzyna, or whatever your name is," I muttered to myself as the barber called, "Next."



I didn't think about this peculiar incident again until Wednesday. In pajamas, waiting for the coffee to finish brewing, I followed my usual practice and scheduled a picture to post to Instagram later that day. I planned to show off a beautiful pair of nude Annika perforated high-heel platform sandals I'd ordered. I'd taken the photo in a hotel in Newark after a focus group I'd attended for work, where there was no need to hide from Trudy.

To my surprise, I saw that Michelle's Instagram inbox contained an unread missive. I tsked at this. I'd recently updated her profile to include the warning *No DMs* to avoid inappropriate comments and questions, and I had begun systematically blocking obnoxious correspondents like one shuluvr4u69. First, he'd demanded to know Michelle's age. Didn't anyone know that that's a question a gentleman doesn't ask and a lady doesn't answer? Next, he'd insisted on inquiring into her gender.

“I hate to ask,” he’d written, “but these days, you can’t really tell anymore.” On those grounds alone, I ought to have blocked him, but at the time, I told myself to take advantage of this teachable moment. When I responded that TG women *are* real women, just like ciswomen, he asked for a picture of me to prove it. That did it. Sure, I took pictures of my face, but my makeup skills still required refining since I restricted myself to makeup practice whenever Trudy left the house or I went out of town. The last time I’d made the mistake of responding to such a request, the recipient blocked me upon receiving my picture. I decided to spare Mr. shuluvr4u69 the effort and blocked him myself.

But here was a message from him again. I scratched my disheveled hair, trying to trace the tortuous path of commands required to accidentally unblock someone. I recognized that next-to-last missive, his request for the photo of my face. Yes, he’d cheekily specified that. And then, I—Michelle—had responded to ask for his email address. But of course, I hadn’t. I sat back in the kitchen chair, mystified, head spinning. The latest message came in as I held the phone: “Wow! Thank you so much for emailing that picture of you! You’re such a pretty natural WOMAN!”

I checked Michelle’s Gmail account—nothing amiss, no new message strings. I checked my sent mail, but nothing appeared with a picture attached. My hacker had covered his—or maybe her—tracks. And yet, for all her careful work and cleverness in cracking Michelle’s passwords a second time, in deleting the email to shuluvr4u69, she’d left obvious evidence of tampering in Michelle’s Instagram account.

But just as I was pressing the “settings” option in Instagram—was my password the same one I’d used for my Gmail until last week?—the coffeemaker chimed, and Trudy called from our bedroom. I poured, prepared, and delivered her morning cup of coffee in bed—I didn’t want to raise suspicions by violating the sanctity of her morning routine with a variation in timing.

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I let three weeks pass before I breathed a sigh of relief that my new, convoluted passwords left me back in control of Michelle. I celebrated Valentine’s Day with Trudy undisturbed by the possibility of unpredictability on Michelle’s part. Then, on Presidents’ Day afternoon, while Trudy did a bit of grocery shopping, I checked Michelle’s Pinterest account to discover a picture not posted by me on my board, “Shaking My Booties.”

I recognized the footwear in the unfamiliar picture. For weeks, I’d coveted these crushed velvet blue high-heel booties from Target. Unfortunately, to date, no opportunity presented itself for me to buy them. Yet, somehow someone read my mind and not only snagged those beauties but wore them outside for a photo op. Given my timidity and tentativeness en femme, I’d yet to go outdoors, let alone snag a selfie outside.

Even stranger, between the two booties a hauntingly familiar brass medallion was planted in the concrete—my company’s logo of a nymph with a looking glass riding a dolphin. The logo was embedded into only one stretch of sidewalk, the one in front of our old building

in Back Bay Boston, the one we'd left two years ago. Unless she'd arranged a quick trip to my hometown, my hacker didn't hail from anywhere more exotic than the Boston area. In that instant, my tormentor went from an amorphous figure from a far-off land to an aggressor down the street, someone with the opportunity to confront me face-to-face, in real life. I sagged in my chair, my breath catching. Was this interloper lurking among my personal acquaintances already, crouching in the shadows, ready to strike—by outing me?

I opened another browser window to visit Michelle's Gmail account. This time, my hacker, whether intentionally or unintentionally, left breadcrumbs. At the top of my inbox, someone, under the guise of Michelle, replied with thanks for a present from an annoyingly familiar email address: shuluvr4u69@yahoo.com. She invited him to view his gift on her Pinterest.

"I've seen the pin," I muttered. "And, by the way, it's not *your* Pinterest."

I scrolled down the message chain. Michelle's expression of gratitude came in response to a note from the creep, indicating that—per her request—he'd visited Michelle's Amazon Wish List and purchased the pair of crushed-velvet blue booties for her. Sometime ago, I had set up an Amazon account for Michelle, complete with a Shopping List, to help me keep track of all the things I wanted when en femme without the possibility of Trudy stumbling across a written list. At the time I set up this list, I felt completely secure in the knowledge that, unless the list is made public, no one can see it.

But when I logged onto Michelle's Amazon account, I found her Shopping List empty. I hovered my mouse over the Wish List button, and everything I wanted materialized on screen in excruciating detail. How had shuluvr4u69 accessed this list? Did the hacker email him the link? Post it on a Web page?

I stumbled around the room, panicked, desperate for ways to stuff this particular genie back in her bottle, to convert this Wish List back into a private Shopping List. My skin crawled with a sense of violation as I considered all the shuluvr4u69s—alerted by the hacker—visiting this page, pouring over my inner desires like perverts rummaging through my drawers to find the pink panties among my white briefs. In real life, I prevented such intrusions, especially Trudy's, by safely secreting my female clothes in a commercial storage space to which I alone held the key, but, to my growing horror, cyberspace offered no such security.

What did the hacker gain by all this? Getting a fanboy like shuluvr4u69 to buy items from Michelle's Shopping List constituted a meager reward for all the effort of hacking.

If I were simply being blackmailed, why didn't the hacker demand real money instead of duping admirers into cherry picking from a basketful of items, each one hundred dollars or less? To toy with me? It didn't matter, I decided, setting my jaw grimly. Even if this were a simple matter of blackmail, I couldn't report Michelle's stolen identity. The cops could expose me just as easily as this thief and would-be extortionist. As usual, I had to take care of myself by myself.

With Trudy due back at any time, I postponed contemplating these existential questions. Instead, I opened my account settings and clicked on *Your Addresses*.

A familiar address, 9 Thorndike Street in Arlington, had replaced the P.O. box I used in Wakefield, where I sent packages to avoid Trudy's questions. I'd lived on Thorndike nearly thirty years ago, before I'd married Trudy. Leaving that Thorndike Street apartment constituted the hinge of my life. Before moving out, I'd purged closets full of female attire and swore off damning frocks. I'd kept that vow, more or less, until the alluring anonymity of social media offered the irresistible temptation of being seen in cute, feminine clothing without being recognized in those clothes. A social media presence completely removed from my life with Trudy seemed a safe and prudent course. Now, someone stood to use it against me.

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I chose vagueness when describing my Saturday trip to Trudy. She didn't need to know I planned to drive all the way to the duplex in East Arlington where I'd rented the top floor decades ago in search of answers.

As I pulled into the old cul-de-sac, I noticed a woman in a bright red parka standing in the driveway of the duplex, hacking at the snowbanks on either side, tossing shovelfuls of crusty white stuff into the street. As I approached, walking down the street to avoid the mostly unshoveled sidewalks, I offered the woman a cheery "good morning," and her equally cheery Boston-accented reply made me seriously doubt that I'd located Katarzyna. I also regarded her petite snow boots and concluded footwear in my size would practically fall off her.

I ascended a short flight of blessedly shoveled stairs, opened the front door, and stepped into the familiar, dim front hall. As my eyes adjusted to the relative darkness, I leaned over and peered at the names beside the two doorbells, the one for upstairs and the one for downstairs. A yellowed piece of paper was taped beside the bottom button with the name “Michelle Ford” written in a hauntingly familiar script. I steadied myself against the wall, knees weak. What manically thorough identity thief replaced my P.O. box with my old address on my Amazon account, then went to the effort of putting my femme name on the mailbox and bell?

I pressed the doorbell, and a hollow ping sounded upstairs. Its echo faded, and I braced for the sound of feet descending the stairs, for the face-to-face meeting with the person stealing Michelle’s identity.

But no one came.

I rang again. Either the occupant was gone or they had decided to ignore me.

I shuffled downstairs and had nearly reached the street at the end of the driveway when a cheery voice to my right asked, “Are you looking for Shel?”

*I’m Shel*, I thought, furiously. *How can I be looking for me?*

“Yes,” I stuttered, turning. “I’m looking for Michelle Ford.”

“She’s not here,” the woman in the red parka said, shrugging before leaning on her shovel,

apparently delighted to have the excuse to take a break. “I saw her go out earlier this morning to run errands.”

Was Shel at my house at that very moment, chatting up Trudy the same way I was talking with this woman? No. She didn’t know where I lived, only the P.O. Box in Wakefield—I hoped. In any case, the woman leaning on the shovel stared at me, expecting some sort of reply.

“Okay. Thank you,” I said and started toward my car.

“Can I tell her you came by?”

“Sure,” I said. “Tell her Shel—,” here, I stumbled again. It made no sense in this situation to call myself “Shel,” even though I used that nickname all the time. My hacker had even appropriated the nickname, along with so much else. “Tell her Shelby stopped by to see her.”

The woman regarded me curiously. “Shelby?”

I nodded.

“If you don’t mind my asking, sir,” she said, “are you a relative of hers?”

I swallowed. “M—my twin. Yeah, she’s my twin.”

“Fraternal, then?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “Well, you sure do look like her, and you are about her age.”



“Are you her roommate?”

“No, I’m her neighbor, Lisa.” The woman pulled off her right glove and offered her bare hand. “I live downstairs.” She nodded toward my old building’s ground floor.

I took her hand. It was cold, her fingernails manicured a shade of pink. I wished for the thousandth time that I could paint my own, too.

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In the privacy of my office, away from Trudy’s prying eyes at home, I opened my Gmail account.

On February 24, 2019, at 9:16 a.m. Shel Ford <Ford.Shel456@gmail.com> wrote:

Who are you? And don’t just say, “Michelle Ford” because we both know that isn’t true. You have no right to assume her identity or hack my accounts. Why are you making my Amazon Shopping List public and stealing from it? How long have you lived at 9 Thorndike Street (my old address)?

On February 25, 2019, at 9:54 p.m. Shel Ford <OttaMyShelFord@gmail.com> wrote:

I have every right to be Michelle because that’s who I am, after all. You left Michelle behind 30 years ago, and I’ve gone on ever since. You, on the other hand, have pretended to be

someone else. I know all those passwords because I know YOU, everything you think and do. You, on the other hand, have denied my very existence for decades, blinding yourself to me—and all I am.

I was content to ignore you, just as you denied me, for all these years—until I started seeing these social media posts in my name. I have a life and friends and I care about protecting my reputation as much as you care about protecting yours. That said, you have good taste. Despite our current disagreement, we have a great deal in common. In any case, I'm making the list public, so that admirers like shuluvr4u69 can buy me things. But I'm a generous soul. Feel free to stop by anytime and borrow whatever you'd like. We're the same size, after all. Just let me know when you're coming so I can make it a point of being around. After all, I've lived here 30 years. 😊 Maybe it's high time we met face-to-face.

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That's how I found myself sitting in an Edward Hopper painting just after six on a Monday night. The door's clinking bells announced the arrival of more customers, and the waitress reappeared to take their orders. I, of course, looked up each time, swallowing hard to push my heart down from my throat, but none of these new arrivals—single males, a couple—could have been Michelle, and none of them showed the slightest interest in approaching me.

“Changed your mind?” the waitress asked from behind the counter.

I fought the urge to slide off my stool and slink home. At 6:15, I'd obviously been stood up, but I'd told Trudy I'd be working late and getting dinner on my own, so if I left now I'd have to scrounge up something to eat. I grabbed one of the laminated menus from the counter. I decided on nothing more creative than a chicken sandwich and set the menu down.

Through the plate glass window, I saw a woman walking down the street, a hood pulled over her head, obscuring her face. For a moment, I was terrified Trudy had tracked me down. But this woman wore a long, impractically white wool coat. Trudy insisted on dark-colored coats that hid dirt, obviating the need for trips to the dry cleaner. The woman reached the door to the diner, pulled it open, and, strutting in her blue suede high-heeled booties, stepped inside. I leaned forward dreading and welcoming the moment of truth.

# GOLD

Kylie Westerlind

PHOTO BY MATTHEW CSERNICA

When the night came, the coyotes appeared from the desert, hovering like ghosts. Some of us turned over in our sleeping bags as if we could mute their yips and yaps by covering our ears, but everyone knows their cries go deeper than that. Hunger knows how to be heard. So we heard, heard the coyotes trot over the bunches of sagebrush toward the dead fawn we found earlier with the light of our phones, listened to the coyotes tussle and scream.

“Do you hear that death,” said Turnquist. He was always saying weird, dramatic shit like that. We turned over again in our sleeping bags, turned our thoughts back to the gold we’d find in the coming days.

But he wanted to be heard, too. He got up and yanked a log from the fire and yelled at the coyotes like an old, old man. He hurled the log and it smacked the ground and skittered across the dirt with red spurts of hot bark flying up like gore. The coyotes bolted, quieted. He tended the fire, moving logs here and there for a better, hotter burn. By the time he was back on his cot, they were at it again on the carcass, murmuring and yipping like little kids. We wanted to think of coyotes like dogs, but we hated them like this. Cruel in their desperation.

The next day we hiked through the valley. We tore up strips of smoked and dried elk and chewed on it until it was mushy enough to swallow. We were quiet, tired, and a little bored of all this antiquity. Annoyed, too, at the one of us who found this guy Turnquist. When we started to talk amongst each other, Turnquist barked at us to get along and admire the desert. We liked the desert, sure, but we also wanted to just get and see the gold he'd promised us. As we walked, the sun heated us and out in the sky, we saw there were boomers to the south. The masses of dark moved slowly along the mountain ridges, leaving a sluggish trail of rain. Turnquist made us camp early on a ledge above the valley, and we watched the lightning all along the sky strike out. None of us even recorded it on our phones, decided it was better to keep it to ourselves. That, and we were sick of Turnquist snarling at us and saying old man things like, "Not everything needs to be seen by your phones."

Come morning, we were on the trail, twisting through old rabbit brush so tall it scraped our cheeks. Finally, we broke out upon a river snaking deep in the canyon. Our legs burned as we lowered ourselves, our pans and tools jingling.

Up close, the river was a blue we could not forget. We were flushed with blood, sweaty from the descent, and we took turns diving off the boulders into the water. We grabbed rocks and tried to sink to the bottom, but the water kept going, and we fought to not lose our breath. Eventually, we kicked down deep, opened our eyes and saw old mining carts, and we smiled and roared at each other. It was the loudest we'd been with each other all week.

Turnquist squatted on a rock under shade and sucked on the elk meat. "Get on with it," he said, his voice low and gravelly, and we barely heard him. We were just boys at a river—a camping trip, we'd told our girlfriends and mothers. But Turnquist, of course, wanted

serious work done. We obeyed. Took out our screwdrivers and plastic pans and white tubs and twine and donned our big sun hats so we looked like poolside housewives. For hours, we dug our screwdrivers into the slits in the rocks, scooped the dirt and crumbles into our pans. We moved the water over the river silt.

The old man yelped, stood, and pointed. Slowly, we realized. Then our voices called out, yipping and yapping at each other. The little flakes glinted and winked up at us in their dark silt. Gold! Turnquist sat back on his rock with the wickedest grin we'd seen on him. His serious work being done before him. We all tore into the rock, tore into it with hands, picks, and screwdrivers. We liked to think of ourselves as good men, but we were hungry for that gold, scraping and pulling the earth apart for it. We hated seeing ourselves like that, hated the desperation mirrored back at us. But we didn't stop. "Do you hear that?" Turnquist said. Of course he saw us as we were.



**ONLY**

Lisa Piazza

PHOTO BY RAPHAEL BRASILEIRO



All night the cats fight tight as a wrestle. They crash back and forth in the dark and they're not playing cuz it's

cry

cry

cry

all the way to morning and another watery wake up, another rain-gray sky, another here-we-go-again, only I open my eyes close them open them close click open the laptop and try not to look. I had to get rid of my phone because it was killing me. Also it stopped working cuz no one would pay the bill. I have to use the computer at Stoane's if I want to know anything only I don't. (I do.)

It's just better not to. I don't want to check email but my fingers get me there anyway and my eyes look to see what's new, only it's nothing. Old Navy. Urban Outfitters. They want me back. *It's true. We really miss you. Did you forget something?*

11:30 a.m., so I gotta get the dogs, except I.

Except he.

They need me, those dogs, plus it's my job, only (Luc's still).

I scan past the ads looking for a message from Luc's dad saying never mind, saying forget that first email. The one he sent to like, everyone who's not even around anymore cuz they're all in college. Only he didn't. Only I'm not.

I would miss them, but you can meet people anywhere, and you can learn anywhere, too. Education doesn't need a room, my dad's girlfriend says. My mom says everyone fucks up but not everyone is a fuck up. Probably they're both right. This Uber driver once told me it's not about picking sides. I guess I've already picked Dad's latest because Stoane understands when I don't want to get out of bed or eat for a day or two or when Luc used to come over and he would get into bed just to stare at the ceiling with me or make shapes out of the shadows on the wall and we would just crack up. What's so funny? Stoane would ask. Nothing, nothing. Everything. Us.

He was like. Had these eyes that. Intense like ready, set, go. Only days would pass and sometimes people you think of don't think of you back. Only Facebook keeps everyone around these days.

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I don't want to check but my hands know the way and then there it is: his page, open and everyone's stories spilling out saying all this and that, and I shouldn't read this because I'm gonna be late for the dogs, only there's this post from that girl Maya about that day in English when Luc dropped to his knees in the middle of class and started crying. They were doing some secret poet game where everyone had to pick a name and write a poem to the person they got. She picked Luc and wrote him some words but they were lame so she just printed out a poem from the internet. Only she rolled it up and put a bow on it and went to the corner store to get a bag of Hot Cheetos cuz she knew he would love that. She always saw him eating Hot Cheetos at break only what does it matter now that his guts are bloated, dead, head smashed through with a bullet maybe, or wrists slashed, blood like a river to drown in? No one on Facebook will say what really happened only—

Wait. Really?

Twenty-six likes for Maya's post. Jesus. Someone adds *they must of been tears of happiness*. That day in class. *Dude, don't feel bad, only, it's have—must have*. This is what I add to the thread. Then I see the post from this other kid Darius saying everyone's gathering at his house at four, and I think I'll go, I think.

I'll go.

I'll go.

Only I gotta get the dogs. So I do. Lola from Leimert and Clover from Lincoln and Daly on Waterhouse are waiting. They love me. I take them up the hill to the end of Bridgeview where the trail starts. I shouldn't take them off their leashes but I mean, you would, too, to watch them run down into the ivy along Sausal Creek and peer up into redwoods and oaks, sniff into the ferns and knotted roots. It makes them so happy which makes me happy in a way I can't explain to Stoane. She used to be a Susan before she changed her name. It's just the two of us now since my dad moved out. It's okay because I'm gonna pay her a little rent, only I don't make enough right now.

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Lola, Clover, Daly. Today I swear they're miserable. Whiny and wet. It's more than the rain. Another Uber driver I had who lets dogs in her car told me animals pick up on energy better than people do. I had Lola with me that day, even though I'm supposed to just walk the dogs in the neighborhood and then take them straight home. Sometimes I keep them a little longer. We go down to the embarcadero by the construction or the Coast Guard or to the Berkeley Marina if I need the traffic to hold me up, hold me back. I can't get anywhere so I can't get anywhere, only that excuse doesn't work on my dad.

The dogs like the water, not the rain. The trail is a muddy mess of shit and leaves and I don't want the wet to set into my skin so I don't let the dogs off their leashes so they pull and cry.

We walk a little way down the trail to the bridge and past the driving range and then turn around but I'm not ready to take them back. It's two-thirty then three o'clock.

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From the bottom of Leimert you can look into everyone's backyard gardens all the way to the top where the people with views live. I make the dogs walk all the way up. Clover is muddy by the time we get there and the sky is a smear of gray, so there's nothing to see anyway. No Golden Gate. No skyline. No Mount Tam. No line between the blue above and the blue below. Just a light gray, a white gray only—

I'm not alone.

---

All these yours? Some asshole asks, pointing at the dogs, panting and tangled in their leashes wrapped around my wrist, cutting off all the blood so I can't feel any of the fingers on that hand.

Yeah, I lie and ask if he has a phone, or better yet, a car, and he says he has both.

Where do you need to go? He's got shiny holes of blue for eyes and gloves on his hands so I can't tell if they're rough or smooth—what shape his nails are in.

He has a silver Subaru station wagon and I stick all the dogs in the back with his dog, a skinny, shivery thing. When we get there, I see Luc's dad out front holding a beer and Luc's little brother with his arms folded across his chest. Rocking a little back and forth. I have to get out only I don't want to so I tell the guy to keep driving.

You better get these dogs home, he says, and he's right.

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Back at Stoane's, I take off all my wet clothes and get in bed, open the old laptop. There's my name in the subject field. Becca. Not Rebecca. And for a second my heart goes beat and my breath goes. Only, any stranger can write a name and this is just another ad. *Don't wait! 20% off today.*

I used to like the way Luc wrote my name, all uppercase, like a kid still learning his letters. He held the pen tight enough to hear the scratch of each stroke.

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All night the cats fight. All day the gray rains. Days pass, and that's just the way it goes. The dude in the Subaru called all the numbers on the dogs' tags and got them home. I don't walk them anymore. Sometimes Clover's owner will text Stoane's number last minute, and still I need the money so I'm walking Clover the day they're gonna bury Luc. Day after my birthday. Nineteen, like him now, only—

*Holy shit. Check out the police haul*, someone wrote in a post under the link to the article on Luc's arrest. And with it, pictures: a full table, one of those long rectangular ones covered in bags, so many pounds of whatever—weed, cocaine, I don't know—but also the guns, all kinds, laid out like. What was he doing with all that? This kid who dropped to his needs (I

mean knees) over a bag of Hot Cheetos and an internet poem? Was he crying, then? On the night he did this? That? That.

I had heard from someone his sentencing date was coming up. So, he did what he did, cut out early the way we cut ourselves out of fifth period art once in ninth grade. We had to make these collages from a box of musty magazines in the corner. Scissors, a little glue, only then it was easy to change the setting. To take one thing and put it somewhere else, only Luc finished his first, then leaned across the table to me. Come on, he whispered. I didn't really know him then, but when Ms. Thompson turned, I followed him off campus and all the way to the estuary.

The afternoon sun skimmed gold across the water and Luc stood silent but not still, counting ripples. Look, he said, certain real life lurked below: ghost shrimp, bat rays, leopard sharks. I swear I never saw anything, only there had to be so much more.

# MOGU WILL BE ALL RIGHT

Sonal Sher



PHOTO BY MATTHEW CSERNICA



I had once written a poem for a cow. Mogu was owned by Kunjumol, an ever-smiling entity who roamed free in her flower-printed cotton maxi, passing in and out of homes for odd jobs—cleaning, frying large batches of banana chips, and selling bundles of greens outside the temple that people would feed Mogu to pacify their planets. Kunjumol lived on the other side of the village, and every day at dawn I could hear Mogu’s bell as they descended the hill. Kunjumol struggled to feed and clothe herself but was a firm believer in trooping through hard times. An expert forager, she could tell the difference between a poisonous mushroom and a good one, but she always gave the credit to Mogu.

“Mogu is the bright one. She is meditating when she chews the cud,” she’d say about the oblivious cow.

I remember Mogu to be an elegant cow with bright eyes, a strong build, and a shiny black-and-white coat. The story went that Kunjumol had found her as a calf, bellowing in the hills, hungry and alone, and taken her home. Ever since, Mogu had followed Kunjumol everywhere, grazing along the way to the jobs and waiting for their meals together. Kunjumol cared for Mogu like a child. I assumed it made sense since she had no children of her own.

I'd only moved to the village recently. I was desperate. My sister and I had run out of funds, burned through our inheritance. It had only taken us five years to finish it—the money, the shares, the jewelry. Everything was gone except for a piece of land and a dusty house, which was once, briefly, home. I proposed the idea of finding a way to make a living off the land. Maybe a faint sense of responsibility had awoken within me, or maybe holding a job had become too difficult. Perhaps I did not belong in the bright lights. Of course, one needs a much more appropriate excuse than self-doubt to run away from the city, so I announced that I was going to write a novel on the ongoing drought, with the village as the central character. And there was no dearth of material.

Quickly, I became accustomed to watching the women tussling at the water pump for exactly four minutes before the supply was gone, the tap dried. I watched the village empty till the only ones left were the old men, women, their daughters-in-law, and me. My sister occasionally sent me money from the city.

It was essential that I take a bath every day to be in the right mental and physical state to expose the ugly truth behind the man-made drought, but I kept this to myself.

And then the dairy depression hit.

It was a mysterious disease, UBI. The death toll had been steady for years, mostly children, and the government had blamed the reliable culprits: diarrhea, encephalitis, malaria—diseases that occurred in rural areas. But it all changed once the virus had successfully traveled business class and an American died after consuming a batch of kadhai-paneer.

We watched a hysterical media cycle—high-impact teams were organized, and the true offender was discovered: a mutated strain in cow milk. Experts theorized it was the years of eating plastic, but nothing was ever confirmed. And just like that, dairy became dangerous.

A tsunami of job losses, from the dairy farmer to the neighborhood halwai, struck the country. The cow vigilantes usually found terrorizing the route taken by the tanners, began running away at their sight. The impact on breakfast, lunch, and dinner menus was catastrophic. Sweet meats, curd, paneer, beef, chai, butter—gone. Of course, international, certified-safe dairy milk was still available at supermarkets for those who could afford it. The shared dehydration had created a temporary limbo in the general religious discrimination and xenophobia in our village.

Fearing the loss of foreign investment, the army was called to nip the problem. They appeared in our village, in every village, setting up stations and rounding up the cows. They would be killed, and the disease with them.

“What has Mogu done? No. They can’t have her,” Kunjumol told me with an impenetrable expression. She was pouring water from her glass for a thinner Mogu, who graciously lapped it up. “They will have to kill me before they get to Mogu.”

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But after decades of unsuccessful attempts at being taken seriously, the environmentalists saw an opportunity and took it.

“Don’t let Mother Cow’s sacrifice go to waste. Go Vegan!” proclaimed the posters everywhere—stylized stencil portraits of a cow sacrificing her life for the earth and humanity, the word “hope” above her in red, beige, and blue. Twenty people, four hundred unofficially, died protesting the first cull.

The government could neither cull the cows nor let them free.

The mission had changed. Cows were declared an endangered species. All of them were to be placed in sanctuaries, where they would be safe from the drought and saved from death. A new nationwide tax would maintain the sanctuaries. Of course, it was nonoptional. And there was a story to make it all palatable.

“It is for the nation,” I heard the temple priest say to Kunjumol, calming her spirit as he collected the water offerings. “Gau Mata will save the planet.” Since the drought, villagers had taken to donating water to the temple. Every month, they would fill a tub, in which the priest would place a Shivling, to invoke the god of rain.

“Don’t worry. Mogu will be all right,” he repeated to the nervous Kunjumol.

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“The nation needs big strong cows for its army,” Kunjumol said to me with glistening eyes when she visited. I was sitting next to the empty well in the backyard, a paper folded neatly inside a plastic bag, waiting for her. “Mogu will bring back rains. Bring honor to our village.”

She stroked Mogu's skinny back, and the cow mooed, her neck now accessorized with a holy cross, holy leaves, and an amulet tied with a thick string by the villagers as blessings. Since the UBI outbreak, they had been loading up on prayers, havans, fasting, tokens, amulets, and masses and spent much of their time involved in some religious activity. I had decided to write a goodbye poem to pin on Mogu's necklace. I was surprised by an unexpected feeling. Kunjumol was finally letting go of the cow.

I reminded myself that at least now she would have more food and water for herself. I would have to leave soon, too. The novel had been on pause, and my daily bath routine had been reduced by half. My sister has lost her job at the ice cream factory. We had been forced to sell our land to Benchi, the goat farmer, now the new prime supplier of milk in the area, and I was considering a job in one of the newly constructed cow sanctuaries. The work seemed easy enough, it was simply to feed the cattle and provided boarding. I could write my novel there.

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As I was tying the paper to Mogu's thread, a gust of dusty wind blew into my eyes and the thread into the well. Immediately I went after it climbing down the parched well. I remembered the winters when we would visit the village, lush with rice and bananas, faces that recognized me but that I did not know nor think about. I used to stare at them from a certain comfortable distance, with the feeling I now recognize to be safety. But now, this place was home. Perhaps that was the real reason I had returned.

I came up, sweaty and heaving and saw tears streaming down Kunjumol's cheeks. "Everyone thinks I take care of Mogu because I have no children. But it is Mogu who takes care of me," Kunjumol said and placed the poem around the cow's neck. "I don't know what I will do without her."

"Mogu will be all right," I asserted.

"Yes," she repeated. "Mogu will be all right."

The next day, she delivered Mogu to the army station, a mega congregation of cows. Thousands of them were spread out, decorated with special accessories, a strong patriotic fervor to some of them and waiting to be loaded onto the train and taken away to the sanctuaries. Soldiers patrolled the area, tagging cattle and handing out registration numbers to the owners.

I heard that Kunjumol stayed on talking to Mogu long after the cow had been enlisted. Some of the soldiers laughed and cracked jokes.

One of them came to her. "Amma, your cow is going to be serving the nation now. We are going to give her water and feed every day."

"When is the train coming to take them?"

"In three days."

Kunjumol left, but she was back the next day. The soldiers continued to smile, enlisting more cattle, while she patiently waited under the tinted shade of a paan-beedi shop till finally it was time. She stayed on till the last cattle was loaded on the train, and as the wheels turned, the soldiers grew silent. A few weeks later, before I left the village for the job, Kunjumol visited me to wish me luck and make a request: to send her a picture of Mogu if I saw her.

“She has a small gash on her forehead on the right from a fight with a crow,” she reminded me.



I am not sure I have seen Mogu. It has been five years since the last monsoon, and all I do is give water to cows twice a day. There are rumors of a water pipeline, but I don't know what to believe. There's speculation about a UBI cure. Now I wash only once a week. Sometimes I watch the cattle in the underground bunkers, standing patiently, ribs showing. Sometimes I can't look at them. I hope I have not seen Mogu. That it rains soon. That I love someone as much as Kunjumol loves her.



# SLIPPING THE FLY

Andrés Luis Vaamonde



“I can read, you know,” she says, as I name items on the menu out loud. “How about you whistle down one of the waiters. Please?”

I tell her it’s bad manners to whistle in public. Either way, I’ve got a method.

“You just look sad,” she says.

“That’s my method,” I say.

Lately, I’d been struggling to make choices. Everything’d lost its hem with me, and I couldn’t hold shit in hand. Like earlier, when we left the apartment for dinner, I couldn’t choose between the red and the blue tie. I looked at them, saw the difference, couldn’t choose. She told me it didn’t matter. I misheard her and thought she said I didn’t matter. I stopped cold and said her opinion mattered a lot to me. She sucked an electronic cigarette and told me to choose a tie. I never even put one on.

Reeling in a waiter follows a similar plot. A half dozen buzz around, but I can't pull a single one. Meanwhile, she's tearing the bread into little pieces and making the table a graveyard of loaf. She's nervous. Makes sense. Me too. I've got the nerves up in my mouth like another tongue.

Time flits by. She clicks her tongue.

"I fished with poor bait," I say.

She puts her elbows on the table. "You lured me in, though."

I don't prod, fearing the answer. I take the remaining bread in my hands. "I think it's stale," I say, popping a piece in my mouth.

"Then why are you eating it?" she says.

"I don't know."

It's the first honest thing I've said all night.

I excuse myself to the bathroom.

She taps her wrist, where a watch might be. "The show's about to begin. Don't be late."

Ours is a simple graft. Easy to follow, easy to execute. Great reward. Here's how it works: You go to a restaurant. You be polite. You be likable. You learn the waiter's name. You order a lot.

When food comes, make a joke. Ideally, one that'll stick in mind. You'll be joining us for all this, right? Oh dear Lord what have we done!

Then, in a lull, you knock something off the table. Water glass, breadbasket, decorative carnation centerpiece, whatever. And when the waiter's bent down minding the mess: bam. You slip the fly.

It's called a fly but it doesn't have to be a fly. It's hard to find flies. We usually use crickets, the type you can buy at a pet store. Soup makes a nice target. Curries, phở, risotto, too. What really matters is you slip fly subtly. And that you don't forget to keep the ball bouncing. The graft hinges on what comes next.

After your fly's been slipped, you pause. Pretend. Play dead. And then, after some time, when you've come close to buying your own lie? You scream. She's our screamer. She's so good sometimes I forget it's a show. Award winning, even. Forty-seven times and counting.

They often give us champagne on the house for our trouble. Sometimes a desert I can't pronounce. At the end, when the check comes back blank, we smile and promise to come back. Of course, we never do.

As I walk to the bathroom, I pass a waiter. I think I'm headed the right way already but I ask him for directions. He points behind me, lifting his arm. The white cloth resting on his wrist remains still, as if permanently attached. He wears perfectly symmetrical facial hair and a cologne you can't rub from a magazine. I tug a wedgie forming in the seat of my pants.

“Thank you very much,” I say, hitting every letter.

In the bathroom I stand at the urinal waiting for something to happen. The bathroom is walled with white and black ceramic tiles, hardly a crack in the space between. I run my fingers against the wall to find the crease, but it’s smooth, not a flaw in sight.

I can’t pee. I zip up and wash my hands. There’s an air dryer and a paper towel dispenser on the wall next to each other. I imagine leaving the bathroom to find a guy with a clipboard and glasses asking me why I went with the air dryer first instead of the other way around. I think about my answer, turn off the faucet, and return to our table with wet hands.

Our graft is fun, but there are rules. At first, I didn’t want rules, though by now I can see their merit. You only hit nice places. Dress like you’d never accept a freebie. When the restaurant manager comes out and apologizes and offers the meal on the house, you have to reject it at first. Oh, we couldn’t. You’re just simply too kind. Convincing someone you don’t want something is a great way to get it. She taught me that.

“I ordered,” she says, as I sit back down. “Are you ready?”

I salute. She looks off and scans the room. Her eyes are deep brown. But at an angle, and when the light hits correctly, you can catch a little green in them, like a glimmer on a crystal. I love her.

We wait. We’re good at waiting. How you wait is key. You can’t look anxious or excited. You have to look natural. Peaceful. Calm. Cats in the sun. These moments are my favorite, when

you're sitting on a bomb that only you know is a bomb. The first couple times we slipped fly, I had to massage my cheeks for hours after on account of how tightly my mouth fixed a smile.

I can't remember how we started exactly. She says it was my idea and she's been saying it so long I suppose it's true now. It's funny, because when we first got to planning, all I can remember is her voice talking out the mechanics. Either way, once we started, we never stopped. We ripped four restaurants a week. Sometimes five, plus an ice cream shop for dessert. Soon, I left a duffel bag in her closet. I stopped paying my own rent. First as a necessity. Then as a choice. Eventually, I moved in. A year passed. We bought a couch with all the money we didn't spend on food. We thought about getting a dog, maybe.

Eventually, though, we got accustomed. Of the show, of each other. When you get accustomed, you get lazy. And laziness leads to mistakes. We had a few close calls. An accusation or two. That turned a key. We'd always freestyled at the restaurants, but after one near miss she appealed for a scripted approach. I obliged, learned my lines, stayed on my side of the bed. It was effective. It was okay.

She kicks me under our table. My mind had wandered so far I didn't even notice that the waiter'd come and gone. I'd missed my cue. Now, we sat at a table full to the corners of very large white plates with small, neat piles of food on them. No fly yet.

I look for my flies. I send a hand into my inside jacket pocket. Then the other.

“What the hell are you doing,” she says, hardly moving her lips.

I search my pants, front and back. The pocket of my starchy button-up shirt. The dirty area between my phone and its case. I feel like cursing. “Fuck,” I say.

The second honest thing I’ve said all night.

The waiter comes over. He asks if there’s a problem.

“Thanks for the bathroom help earlier,” I say.

He looks like he wants to spit in my eye but can’t because he has rent. I try to return a look that says, I know exactly how you feel, but she kicks me under the table again.

I need it. I’m way out. Harness loose, tether cut, skating on the periphery. In such a position, you’d think it wise to take a moment to recalibrate. Buy yourself some time. Get prudent. Thing is, that’s not realistic. When the wheels come off, you can only crash.

“There’s a fly in my food,” I say.

I can feel her glare from across the table like a slap on a sunburn.

The waiter cocks his head to the side. I can tell he’s taking stock of all my faults. The way my eyes cross at certain angles. The dry skin on my chin. My deep widows peak.

He smiles, no teeth. He mentions a manager and disappears.

I look at her but her eyes are in her lap. I try to remember my prayers.

The manager's not messing. He wears a boxy, short-sleeve, button-up shirt, and I see dozens of little pink-and-white oil burn scars on his forearms. He has a tattoo of a fork on one side of his thick neck. A tattoo of a knife on the other. Crew cut. Generous belly. Vascular hands. A total industry professional. We're got.

"I understand there's a problem?" the manager says, cracking his knuckles.

I wait for her to speak but she doesn't. I look at her. But she's already gone.

"There's a fly in my food," I say.

The manager smiles with all his teeth. "Interesting," he says. "I heard you two were clever."

Things going well don't go well forever.

Yada, yada, yada.

After security sees us out, we walk all the way home, letting the world go blue. We don't speak. The silence becomes a thing around us. A web of gauze. My eyes fog. My vision blurs. I want her to yell at me. To cuss me out. To call me names. She doesn't. She just walks a few steps ahead of me. I hold one hand with the other to remind myself I'm there.

When we get home, she goes to the bathroom and locks the door. In the bedroom, I find the box of crickets I'd forgotten. The red and the blue ties I never put on are curled near it, like leftover cricket skin.

A cricket's exoskeleton isn't meant to last. Eight to ten new skins in a lifetime. Each time is a struggle. The crickets shake like mad going from one skin to the next. Some shake more. Some take longer. They all seem to hate it, though. Change hurts, I figure.

She and I'd been in the habit of taking turns tossing the molted skins but at some point, I got sad about it. Now, she does it alone. By hand and quickly. Sometimes she accidentally takes a cricket mid-molt with her to the trash and throws it out alive.

"Hey," I call out, still sitting on the ground.

The bathroom door opens and closes. She takes a half step into the bedroom. "I'm going to leave," she says, one hand on the knob.

I think about replying.

"We could try and talk," she says.

"I don't know," I say.

The third honest thing.

She rubs her temples. "That's what happens with boys," she says. "You answer every question and they don't even ask any."



I close my eyes and tilt my head back. The front door opens. The front door closes. In the box, the crickets are hysterical, stomping all over each other and their leftover molted skins. I watch them. Violent and lost. Frustrated and indecisive. Going this way and that way and back again. I undo the clasp at the top of the box. I put my hand inside. I leave it there. They crawl all over it.

# STARLETS

Rachel Stempel



I make a blood oath with Katie near the summit. It's pretty gross, but it's the reason we came here after dark. We've been watching a lot of sisterhood movies lately and figure now's the time to solidify ours before one of us fails to mind the gap as we traverse between intimacies.

I can't say I haven't thought of her in that way, and I know she has too—I can feel her body contort next to mine in the full-size bed of our Airbnb in a way that begs for attention. We've been on the cusp of lust or hate since landing in Los Angeles a week ago. Katie's moving here for good soon, but for now we're just visiting.

It's early April and LA is hot and sticky in an unsexy way. Tonight though, it's finally cool enough, and the fog or smog or whatever the hell it is that makes breathing here oppressive blankets the lookout from Mulholland Drive in shades of gray much different from those of the Northeast I'm used to. It's still unclear to me what Katie sees here. A brick is a brick, a stone is a stone, and so far, the only notable difference is that LA's homeless won't hesitate to approach you in a store to say they take Venmo.

The front lights of the car cast a pallid yellow across our faces. I fumble with my keys to remove a keychain Swiss Army knife. The blade in question is tiny and makes our thorough first aid preparations comical. We giggle to distract ourselves.

Katie takes the blade from me to slice a shallow curve into her left palm. She doesn't break eye contact, and I wonder if it's muscle memory. I know she was into some fucked up shit in high school. It takes a few seconds for the blood to pool, and when I catch sight of it, I feel faint.

"Didn't you want to be a doctor?" she laughs, flicking a drop of blood from the knife onto the ground. I wonder how much blood spills consensually onto this soil. She passes me back the knife and tells me not to overthink it, so naturally, I push it in too deep and blood pools immediately. We're both laughing now, and she calls me psycho.

We grab each other's left hands, hold them together, and raise them above our hearts. We read online that's what you're supposed to do. The front lights of the car catch the flecks of gold in her eyes that mimic the flecks of gold across the landscape from the houses and studios of people below us. But then a gray-green film like a visual gangrene blurs my sight. I take back my hand and vomit over the fence that only minimally deters sightseers from jumping.

"I think I felt your heartbeat!" I scream in between hacking up dinner. Katie gets the hydrogen peroxide. I'm still gagging so she cleans herself up first, pouring the solution over the wound onto the dirt.

We don't seem that far up from where I'm crouched. The San Fernando Valley is underwhelming. I don't see what she sees here. This vantage point, if you can call it that, feels like a ploy to convince onlookers that they're on top of the world, but instead it sandwiches you between less-than-ideal atmospheric conditions and an almost-desert terrain.

Katie interrupts my internal monologuing by passing me a peroxide-soaked gauze, and I clench it while taking a selfie with my other hand. I post it to Instagram, making sure my hand and the gauze take front and center.

I caption it, "Blood Oath Thursday."

Katie joins me at the edge, eye level with the car's headlights, and we take in Beverly Hills past midnight. We hold our legs to our chests and pivot gently on our ankles. The pain and heat from our left hands distract us enough from the exertion of strength we need to stay in these positions.

This is how we lose time.



We say nothing for an hour. We're seated more comfortably now. I can only make out her silhouette against the car lights that still haven't gone out—impressive, we were warned about its battery. Katie's body is an amorphous blob and I struggle to identify her head or her legs.

A wave of panic rushes over me.

“You asleep?”

There’s a pause but she answers.

“I think I just dissociated for, like, an hour.”

I’m both relieved and amused that I thought a superficial wound could’ve done her in. At one point, in the depths of teenage angst, we’d jokingly made a suicide pact; the blood oath is our adulthood revision. We couldn’t die now, anyway, there’s still so much I need to confess—like how her laugh sounds like Kelly Osbourne’s and how I’ve refrained from telling her this since we were fourteen because I know how insulting she’d find the comparison. Or how she never had a shot with Daniel Burroughs, not even the summer she was skinny. Or how sorry I am for being this cruel; I don’t know how else to act.

When I stand up, the feeling is partially gone from my right leg so I almost fall back down. I steady myself on the fence, my left hand still rolled into a tight fist. It’s hot out again but maybe I’m just getting sick. In my peripherals, I see Katie doing stretches alongside the car. Her body is still an amorphous blob. She raises her arms and breathes deeply enough for me to hear the exhale. She sounds satisfied, even though the air here smells like gasoline. I check my pockets for the knife then ask if she has it.

“We should leave it. It’ll be more symbolic.”

“You’re a slut for symbolism,” I say.

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I don't want to go back to our Airbnb. Katie turns the car off completely, asks how I'd feel if we spent the night. She tells me she feels tired, maybe lightheaded, but not hungry.

"I've eaten too much today already," she says to bait me. I opt not to bite.

We sit in the backseat where it's easier to recline. Earlier, when we drove down Ventura for the first time, we neared ninety miles per hour and I felt violent. I wanted to live in that violence. When she rests her head heavy on my lap, it feels crushing, and that's a kind of violence I want to live in, too.

We'd been fighting a lot before this trip, more so than usual. Katie was dating a thirty something with three kids she met too soon. Katie says he gave her her first orgasm and that's how I learned she doesn't masturbate. She told me this so I'd like him. Then, she drove down to Philadelphia one Friday when he didn't text her back for two days, and when she got there he said he didn't love her anymore. They'd only been dating a month. She called me on the way home, and I listened to her snuffle and whine, and she listened to me sigh affirmations for all three hours of the trip.

"Can you play with my hair?" she asks.

This is a loaded question. I find Katie's hair thin and greasy, but it's not that I don't want to play with it—acts of service is my love language—there's just little of it to really commit to twirling in whatever way she's expecting. Instead, I use my index finger to spell out our

names in cursive across her crown. I feel a patch of maybe psoriasis and roll the tip of my finger around it in a circular motion as if to buff it away.

She doesn't tell me to stop but she does take my hand to rest my palm on her cheek. It's hot, feverish. I am touch-starved, so the gesture feels right, though, in the past, I have imagined my hand to her cheek less gently. I let my hand linger.

Her shorts are too short and her ass doesn't fill them out. I can make out the pockmarks on her thighs even in the dark and I want to press my thumb into each of them, see if they will deepen.

She stretches her legs out as far as they'll go, pushing them against the door and then burrowing her face into the billowy fabric of my dress. I kiss her forehead goodnight and the windshield fogs up, another layer of distorting gray between us and the world. I fall asleep cradling her head.

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I make a blood oath with Katie and three months later she's in LA, shackled up with a music teacher who plays trumpet. His name is Sage and he's Jewish. She asks if that makes her a *shiksa*, and I tell her no, not if she knows any Yiddish. She laughs across the poor connection of the FaceTime call. She tells me she told him we're a package deal, so he already knows about my intimacy issues with Colin and has some advice, if I'm interested. I'm not but I lie and say I am. I haven't told her Colin broke up with me because we never had sex. It sounds bad to say that out loud, but I can't blame him. Colin and I never had sex because he



reminds me too much of Katie. It's not his feminine sensibilities, which he certainly has, nor the victim-complex, which all men have. It's his body odor, his pheromones. It's not a bad smell but it's there, and hearing Katie talk now about using rose water in lieu of deodorant makes me think maybe it *is* bad. I don't tell her any of this, just let her talk about Sage and her roommate, Lara, who is apparently insufferable.

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Lara proves to be so insufferable that Sage suggests Katie move in.

"I'm not asking for permission, but I'm asking for permission," she jokes when she updates me next. I admit it's problematic but sounds necessary.

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Katie calls me a week later when Colin and I are talking again. Actually, we're in the backseat of my car, trying to have sex for the first time. It's going really poorly. I want to tell her later about the discomfort of topping a six-foot man in the backseat of a four-door sedan in the parking lot of a public park, and maybe about his ass dimple too, just like the one she has, but when she finally responds to my texts, she tells me she's hurt herself and Sage blames me. Sage, who now thinks I'm romantically obsessed with her and that our friendship is toxic because it leads to things like self-harm when I ignore her. She tells me we need space in our relationship, not because Sage said so but because she agrees I'm romantically obsessed with her and that's why I'm not having sex with Colin. I relay this all to Colin later who muses our car sex was a fever dream.

I know this conversation with Katie means she and Sage fought in some irreparable way. It's always irreparable with her. When I get a Facebook message from him asking if Katie will be safe back in New York, I'm not surprised. I've done this waltz before. I take it he doesn't think I'm romantically obsessed with her, but I don't respond. He'll soon break up with her if he hasn't already—crazy's only sexy for so long—and she'll come back to me.

Katie takes it well when he does, and I don't rehash our conversation from a week ago. Colin tells me I'm a good friend but it's unhealthy because I offer too much unreciprocated. I tell him acts of service is my love language. He asks if I can drive him to Brooklyn on Sunday.

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I can tell Katie needs me from how often she texts and how little effort I need to put in to keep the conversation going. On the phone, her voice is softer than before, like she's trying to make herself small. I thought I was the only one with those concerns. I want to tell her “small” doesn't suit her.

She's living with Sage until the end of the month and has been sleeping in the living room because when they share a bed, she tells me, it always ends up physical.

“I know it's fucked and making me confused. The sex isn't even good I don't know why I do it.”

“Because it's validation,” I say, and she laughs because she doesn't take it as an attack.

I don't mention Colin so she thinks we're still broken up.

“I'm happy we're both single now,” she says.

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When Katie comes back to New York, she's come with a whole itinerary for us. Colin says if I need an out, he's more than willing to oblige. He's always more than willing to oblige, though, and it's getting annoying, so I'm ready to see how Katie and I will ruin each other's lives again.

She's staying with me in my one-bedroom apartment. The overhead light's been out for a while and the desk lamp's pink lamp shade casts a warm hue over us sitting cross-legged and facing each other on the bed. Out of her duffel bag she pulls a box of weed she says is Blue Dream, like I should be thankful. I don't like to smoke because I have to smoke a lot to feel anything, and edibles are a whole production.

I take a few hits and the smoke it produces smells like something's rotting. She doesn't seem bothered by it. She talks about loving LA and hating New York, that she's over the East Coast, and if it weren't for me, she wouldn't be here at all. I know I take it to mean more than she does.

My skin is heavy and my head's foggy. It feels like I've been lifting weights, a thought that makes me laugh so deeply I start choking, and my throat feels raw. I catch her gaze and lean in. We kiss.

But she tastes sour and her lips are dry like her scalp. In our close proximity, I decide she's not at all striking.

Katie's touching my thigh in a way that comes off manic and desperate but I'm sure she thinks is coy and kind of sexy. But I'm falling asleep and her hesitant hand cupping what's

protruding of my hip bone as I'm lying down just isn't doing it for me. She asks me if it's okay, and I'd ask her to specify what *it* is, but that hardly seems worth the effort.

She's still talking or humming or maybe just breathing loud when I get up for water and immediately have to sit back down. I stare at the pockmarks in her thighs and imagine connecting them to form constellations that spontaneously appear in our galaxy, baffling the scientific community. They'd open an exhibit at Griffith Observatory so all of LA, made ignorant of the cosmic other by the smog of excess and the bright and blinding lights of Hollywood, could marvel at these ad lib constellations, watch them settle against the nebulae of a new astronomy of which I am the world's leading expert.

My mouth is cotton, as is to be expected, and I leave to get us some water. I drink my glass on the way back. Katie's curled in the fetal position and nearly asleep. I can't say I completely blame her for still wanting to move to California. I had my share of California dreaming, desires rooted in my aesthetic sensibilities that the autumnal hues of '70s San Francisco cater to, but I know winter tones fit me better, and if I learned anything from my undergraduate geology studies, it's that certain places were never meant to be inhabited. That California burns for a reason.

She wakes briefly and reaches out to me, asks if I'm tired enough to go to bed now. I tell her I sleep better alone.



# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**TONI ARTUSO** is an emerging/aging transfemale writer living in Salem, Massachusetts, recently retired from a thirty-year career in educational publishing. She is transitioning, as well as trying to accelerate the emerging and slow down the aging. Her stories have appeared in *Fiction on the Web*, *96th of October*, and *The Broadkill Review*.

**LISA PIAZZA** is a writer, educator, and mother from Oakland, California. Her work has been nominated for Best Small Fictions, Best of the Net, and the Pushcart Prize.

**SONAL SHER** lives and works in Mumbai where she writes fiction about alternate realities when she is not deconstructing old Hindi songs. Her fiction and non-fiction have been published in *Chicago Review*, *Scrivener Creative Review*, the *Conium Review*, *Pratham Books' StoryWeaver*, the *Hindu*, and *Emrys Journal*.

**RACHEL STEMPEL** is a genderqueer Ukrainian-Jewish poet and educator. They are a staff writer at *Up the Staircase* and *EX/POST* and a poetry editor at *MAYDAY*. They are the author of the chapbooks *Interiors* (Foundlings Press 2021) and *BEFORE THE DESIRE TO EAT* (Finishing Line Press 2022), and their work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *New Delta Review*, *Ethel Zine*, *SHARKPACK Annual*, and elsewhere. They currently live in New York with their rabbit, Diego.

**ANDRÉS LUÍS VAAMONDE** graduated from Cornell University with a bachelor of arts in English in 2018. He was born and raised in New York City, where he works as a literary book scout. He was named a Finalist in Ember Chasm Review's Novel Contest (2020) and a Finalist for the Marianne Russo Award for Emerging Writers (2020). He is the forthcoming Spring 2022 Philip Roth Resident in Creative Writing at Bucknell University.

**KYLIE WESTERLIND** was born and raised in Reno, Nevada. She received an MFA in 2019 and has since been working on stories about neon cities in the desert. Her fiction has previously appeared in the *Citron Review*, *Fearsome Critters*, and *Carve Magazine*.

**MATTHEW CERNICA** is an engineer and photographer based in Charleston, South Carolina. For more of Matt's photos, check out his instagram @sendnegs.

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