



“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’ You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

—Eleanor Roosevelt

The Lit Night Anthology

“May you live in interesting times.” I’ve heard that framed as something of a curse, and invoked as the opposite of well-wishing. The implication, of course, is that “interesting times” is another way of saying the worst of times.

These are certainly interesting times, now. For the past year or more, we have seen a pandemic the likes of which was last seen a century ago, and society has felt more divided and closer to disaster than it has in decades—for many of us, more than it ever has in our lifetimes. These are not only interesting times, these are the most interesting times of our lives.

So far. There’s always next week, and next year.

It is a unique and turbulent time to collect an anthology. For so long, Lit Night at Ocean Ale House has been a source of community and camaraderie for audiences and the artistically-inclined alike, and Monday nights became over time a ritual: anxiety, performance, applause. Hearing other writers is as valuable to artists as being heard, and the regularity of the ritual keeps one in the creative habit.

This ritual has created a community, and that community has created this anthology. Many of these works will feel familiar to our regular audience and to our contributors: either from the golden glow at Ocean Ale or, perhaps, the more fluorescent glow of the screen as our community grapples with these interesting times.

With luck, and no small amount of perseverance, we hope the second Lit Night anthology will be celebrated in person, back where it all began.



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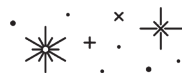
Introduction

This anthology was conceived as a celebration of the literary crossroads that is Lit Night and as a homage to the brave, creative, community-minded readers at the Ocean Ale House who met each third Monday of the month with writing on a theme, and courageously shared it with other writers and lovers of literature. What was initially a collaboration between two neighborhood writers and a neighborhood pub owner now serves as a meeting-place for writers all over the Bay Area.

Since April 2020, Lit Night has turned into something more than a monthly reading. It has turned in to an opportunity to see a friendly face, to connect at a time when we have never needed it more, and to reprioritize our community, our art, and each other. We all exist in the pressure cooker of our own homes, of a divided nation, of a world fielding climate disasters, of a pandemic. Some of us venture out each day as essential workers; some of us have lost our jobs and our health insurance; some of us live on top of too many other people; some of us are suffering from too little contact with other human beings. Whatever our situations, we need each other more than ever. This anthology is a testament to that community, that need, and that love for the written word and the hope and grounding it brings us.

Lit night is now here for some of us in a new, dynamic way through zoom and through our website. In the Spring we launched QuaranLit on the website, as a space to share our work with one another in the early days of the pandemic and lockdown with weekly writing prompts. The writing contained in these pages is drawn from QuaranLit and from our themed reading nights.

We might think of the work on these pages as work created in a pressure cooker. With pressure, we create diamonds. Some of those diamonds are here.





Part One:



Love

Pan in the Bodies

Chante McCormick writes poetry and teaches in the English Department at CCSF. When not engaged in these pursuits, she likes to explore San Francisco with her young son.

We are all suddenly lovers on sidewalks
gazing at each other in side glances

lowering ourselves, breaking our steps
courting sickness like doves

we seem to have never wanted touch as much
as now we want to fill the world with our bodies
our desires now contracted, a hollow husk we

rub our sandpaper backs against the
days that sit like fat jewels
at our throat the paperweight

a pornography of movement

where we climb into days like beasts
our flesh suddenly too soft for a sieve

these small grunts the only hollow
to rest the words we do not say at all



Mementos

Dael Olba wants to get the word out as they attempt to make sense of the world.

Reminiscent of what the world was like before you came. You don't remember, and you wish you knew. Here are the photographs

taken out of the depths of the vacated cabinets. Empty nests. Once adventurers. They didn't miss you, because you weren't there yet.

Volumes of faces. Some that resembled you. Smiling—and that makes you smile, too. Flipping through pages of mementos. They don't mean anything, except they mean everything to you. So you kiss them

and put them away. You keep them until they slowly fade. And at that point, grey is the shade that will fill your own

photographs—those awaiting to be your mementos. Time never really passes, only people who come and go. It's funny how people want Time back, when all it ever

did was ask them to take it slow. Time stays, as we pursue it every day. People don't. But they leave us with mementos until we, or our memories, let them fade.



If the Moon Is a Woman

Scooter Fein observes: As a child, my mother used to let me eat chocolate chip cookies for breakfast, and now I write poetry—There must be some connection..

n octurnal
light
guiding a
mans
hand

always try
to see
with heart
too

moon magic
woman
nightly
movement
across night

sky & mind &
dream magic
moon woman
let us receive
you

man
hidden in

shadow
needs
light of
moon of
magic &
woman
to light
pathway
too long
in
shadow
light
shadow
magic

sliver of moon

woman
with candle
sometimes
that is all
the light
that we
need



Dissection

Kati Spitz is a poet, painter, parent, and pastry chef in San Francisco who might overindulge in alliteration.

I love you, I said
When I met your eyes for the first time.
I didn't, but
maybe I did.

You looked better covered in my fiction and metaphors than in your own khakis

I came back to watch you
Thin on a small stage
because I missed you even though I didn't know you.
Finally, I followed you home.

Didn't know you kept a bone saw in your guitar case.
I slept, and my chest plate sounded like a slide over strings while it cracked in your hands.
You read Anna Karenina, and Tolstoy told you all about my inner workings

I split my own skin to save you the trouble.
Using my red finger nails like a scalpel.
Smoke and long pins stuck my skin to your white sheets.

Sprawled out in front of you.
Heart beating out in the open.

I watched my lungs exhale smoke and in the mirror, I saw
Your long fingers move inside my open cavities.
You didn't know what to do with me. I didn't know what to ask for

So, I handed you my spleen.

I don't think I need this

You put it in a jar. It was filled with yellow liquid that smelled terrible.
Still you didn't seem satisfied, so I started rooting around for spare parts to offer

This is shaped like a bean. You can have it.

You put in on the shelf in another jar

Have a tonsil so you can hear my voice when I am gone.

*Blood is messy, but I swear I not using mine have it
all over your sheets,*

I rub the red from my hands on your face and it sticks to the stubble
I'm not sure you're happy but you say,
"I think its art" So
I keep going.

*This lung is turning black. I don't think it likes me, but it'll look nice with your col-
lection*

and have an ear drum because I only need the one.

I'm all singles now so I stitch myself up.
Not well but it's the best I've got

Crawl out of your bed and watch chamomile spill all over the floor
when I try to swallow it
The hot tea burns

But love always hurts like this

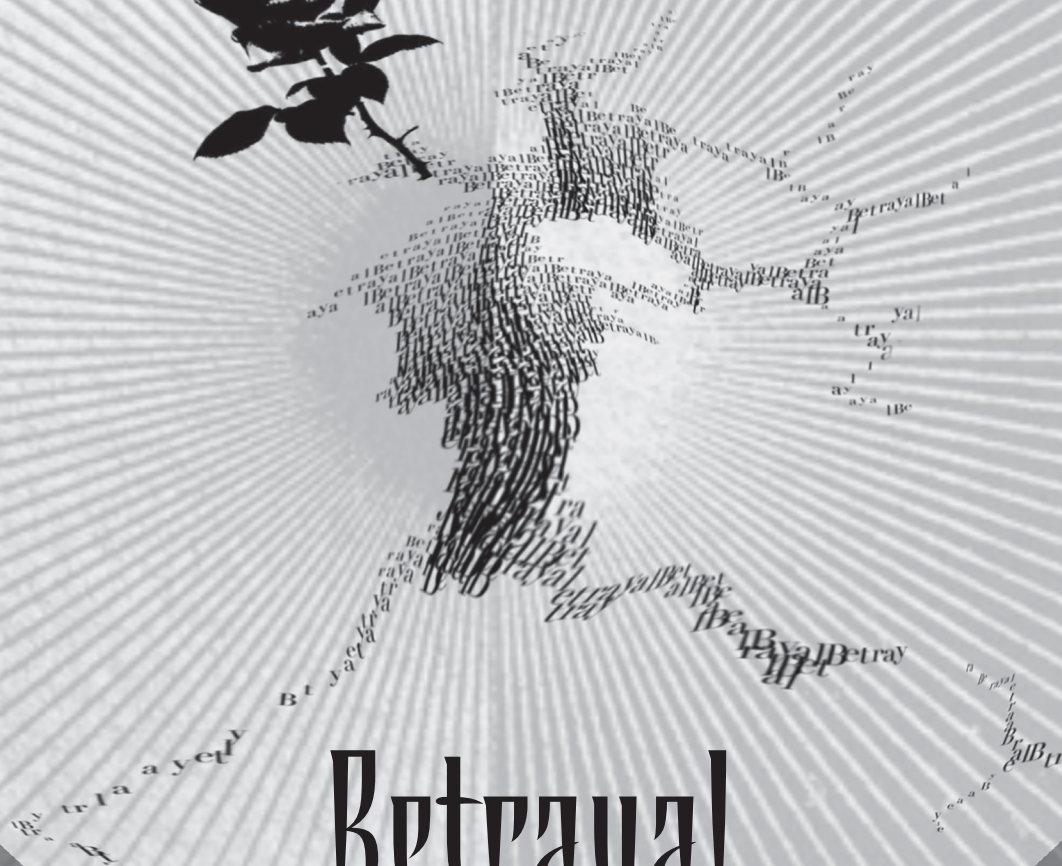
I think.



Part Two:



Betrayal



Escape Artist

Saramanda Swigart has an MFA from Columbia University, with a supplementary degree in literary translation. Her short work has appeared in *Oxford Magazine*, *Superstition Review*, *The Alembic*, *Fogged Clarity*, *Ghost Town*, *The Saranac Review*, and *Euphony*. She lives in San Francisco and teaches at City College of San Francisco. This story originally appeared in *Reed Magazine*.

The moon was an escape and a trap. My life is this way; frying pans to fires to frying pans.

I shook a frying pan full of eggs over the burner. Rick, who lit his cigarettes from the stove, pushed me aside, leaned down, blond hair hanging over the flame. He singed a few hairs up front but didn't catch fire. It was hard to tell what was lighting what, the flame or the man.

Rick and I lived together. He was a heat-seeking missile, and I tried to stay out of his aim. The house sweltered when he was in it. He rarely wore a shirt. I used to love the scar that ran over his pectoral muscle, passing close to the nipple. "A shiv made from a *toothbrush*," he'd said proudly. The bullet he wore around his neck on a chain swung near the blue-yellow flame. It was a live bullet. "It's for a certain someone," he often said. "I'm saving it." Longingly, I watched it swing. *Swing-swing*. But it didn't go off.

I went to the moon to escape Rick. It wasn't a prison yet.

The moon was just a couch in the mudroom that had nothing else in it but a dart board. No darts, bullseye worn almost to invisibility, but still

there. Still there. Flame and cotton and needle were involved by this time. After injecting myself I curled into my own mind on the couch. And *swing-swing* went the bullet of my mind over the flame that was Rick. Someday it would go off, straight into him and out the other side.

He stood talking. *You burn the toothbrush bristles so they melt into one, rub the sides against a rock until you get a blade that cuts*. He touched his scar. When he spoke he spat out great raspberries of flame, or so it seemed to me. They curved, those flame-words, beautiful, solar flares through the skylight's night sky, not so much meaning anything as embodying meaning itself.

"Look at the state of you," he said into my face. "This is some disgraceful shit." Smoke billowed, dragonlike, from his nose. I smiled. He'd been cremating me, a little each day, and soon I would be nothing but ash. But on the moon-couch, ice crystals formed on my body, and for the duration I was protected from the heat.

I got a taste for the cool at work. I worked at a construction site, often just a grinning hole in the

earth, where I sometimes showed prospective buyers the shapes made by construction tape and explained their potential. The foreman thought I had the right blend of street smarts and refinement because I came from education but I'd been living rough for years. I could talk to the crew in clipped, slangy patois out of one side of my mouth and I could talk serious of the building's integrity and practicality out the other.

Things started to slip long before I was fired. At the market I thumbed the embossed numbers on my credit card before handing it over. My father sometimes paid it off, sometimes not, and I wouldn't know until I tried. I began to forget the names of people I was talking to, and to break off mid-sentence and stare, and to sidle in with dirty, wrinkled shirts. I styled my hair in cornrows, but I had white teeth that were straight like tombstones and that counted for something out at the site, where I existed between two things. I was an ambassador between creation and consumption, and the politics of each.

Before things started slipping I sat on some sandbags. Right and left foot swinging in the August heat. *Swing-swing*. Star came by. Star handled heavy machinery like the rest of the men. She said "What the fuck" about my bruised eye and mouth. I shrugged, too lazy and sad to make up a story. No mistaking the provenance of that kind of injury.

I was an ambassador between creation and consumption, and the politics of each.

"Ever been to the moon?" she said. She tossed me something, a bag with a little trapezoidal pill that was strangely cold to the touch. In an alley behind the site I crushed it and inhaled it. There was a gift shop across the way full of figurines. A terrible pain shot down my throat and into my brain, but then, all at once, I traded places with myself, and where my feelings had been I now had the power of freeze. The figurines in the gift shop began to move. There was a sea lion, and a bear, and a stag. They turned toward me as one,

then changed places while I stared. They were either glass or wax or maybe ice, like my hands and feet. When I opened my mouth, I swear icicles fell to the ground with the angel sound of breaking glass.

"What is this stuff?" I asked Star back at the site.

"Ice-nine," she said. "You like it?"

"Like in the book?" I said.

"What book?" Star eyed me in a way that could have been wry or angry or covetous. I traversed the rest of the workday in delirium.

I was out of the frying pan. I didn't need Rick, *der freischütz*, his bullet staring at me like a third eye from his chest like it had special plans for me.

After work Star took me to a building with other people in it. Star said, "What's up," and it wasn't a question, and the black man with the one blue milky eye said "What isn't," and it wasn't a question either. We sat in a little Bermuda

triangle and watched our thoughts eddy around the drain and disappear. Star had huge arms with big muscles and each had a tree tattoo that was really a woman. Across the street was a travel agency with a sign in neon that read, What is Jesus doing today? Just a question, no answer.

The walls and windows rimed over with ice while we sat like chessmen.

I could fuck Rick when I was on the moon. *Fate is chiasmic and has its own bilateral symmetry*, is what I was thinking while Rick's cheeks pinked.

I made an X behind his back with my arms. *Fate is the good curve on the axis that has an equal and opposite bad*. The thought was the kind I had while we were fucking; abstract to the point of meaningless, but I could kill time looking for

meaning in my sentence-mazes. Rick couldn't follow me here, so I was alone. I was empty on a cosmic scale, but dark matter hunkered, humming, in the crevasses, watching, intelligent and dangerous, seething with potential energy.

Why stay with him wasn't even a question. He was the parasite I lived with. His inane violence—his general inanity—was a chronic condition. He was a sad and fragile man who was made strong by fear, and I found this impulse useful. Sometimes my anger was the engine that

kept my life moving, and kept catastrophe idling.

"I'd die without you," he whispered into my neck. Head on his chest, I imagined my hair burned into a toothbrush shiv, honed and entering his flesh, cutting deep and permanent.

"Welcome to the moon," said Star every time I met her in that apartment, which I realized was where she lived. She moved the beaded curtain aside for me. The beads in her hand were music. I felt the beads shuddering through my skull.

"The moon and Mister," said Milk-Eye Man, and his eye was a moon that looked everywhere and nowhere. One eye vicious, the other eye frozen in benign surprise.

"That's his name?" I said.

Mister and Star and I mainlining

ice-nine in the dull hours of the day. Blankets and beads strung between doorways. Each shot was a brick in my palace of ice and quartz. My mind was the Fortress of Solitude. The center of the palace had a dead lake. It was liquid mercury, trapezoidal in shape, and disappearing into it meant complete invisibility. An ordinary tree grew on the roof garden above the travel agency, but while on the moon it became a great portentous flame tree. The flowers fell orange around its base, and strange, pendulous fruit like testicles

Why stay with him wasn't even a question. He was the parasite I lived with. His inane violence—his general inanity—was a chronic condition.

dangled, swinging. *Swing-swing*. Little acrobats did a ladder act down my spine in rhythm with the swinging testicles and the thoughts in my head were the bubbles in a glass of champagne; sometimes they dislodged and I watched them rise and surface and pop, and then I no longer remembered them.

“Why don’t you move out?” Star indicated the finger bruises like a necklace stretching ear to ear and behind the ears.

“Moth, flame?” I guessed.

“Naw,” she said.

I thought. The thought slid around the ice in my brain. “He’s my punishment,” I said finally. She didn’t ask for what. We all have that unforgivable thing. She reached across and caressed me. “Let me be your punishment,” she said. She pulled me next to her. She had hard and soft parts on her body. I liked the difference. Being with her was a terrible thing, and darkly pleasing.

Mister coughed once, a sound that seemed to come from far away.

“He’s going to kill you.” She whispered. She sounded more excited than sad.

“Or I’ll kill him,” I said.

“I’ll back that,” she said. “Tell me how to help.”
Out of the fire.

In the cool I could stow my rotten-lemon memories or look at them head-on and it made almost no difference. My mother’s first suicide attempt became the size of a suitcase that fit neatly into the overhead bin. Or I could pull it out, examine the contents, rummage and rearrange, check items off the list. I found her. I was seven. The bathroom, all white, with a Jackson Pollock of

blood sprayed on the wall. It was beautiful. Sick, I looked at the bloody artwork. Mom held her arms to quell or hasten the bleeding and looked, imploring, into my eyes. I dropped my Powerpuff backpack and we looked at each other for an ice age before I started screaming. The event split my life in two. To this day I toggle between the halves.

The second time I was called out of school. Before my father sent a car, a nurse talked to me. *Your family needs you right now*, and I nodded and swung my legs beneath the office seat, *swing-swing*. I couldn’t stop wondering what my mother’s eyes had been imploring, that first time. *Please help me or please let me die*—which one? *Your mother needs you to be a big girl*, said the nurse. How? *SWING-SWING* until a loose leg of the seat broke and I fell to the ground. The nurse wiped my cut, placed a Band-Aid over it.

The third time I had almost finished my dissertation, entitled *By Tooth and Talon: Unimodal Narrativity in the Spatial Replacement of Colonized Bodies*.

My father’s text message: *It’s happened. Come home.*

I still don’t know what he meant. I never went home. She’s still a Schrödinger’s mother, alive and dead simultaneously. *Mom... mom*, says my sobbing heart. *Forgive me, mom*. But I feel nothing, I just know “mom” is the shape my feelings would take if I had them.

Pack the suitcase. Put it away. Light the lighter, boil the pill. Another brick in the palace of ice.

Star and I were fired at the same time. The only surprise was how long it took management.

In the office, a melancholy man missing almost all of his hair wanted to teach us a lesson.

"How many days has it been since you've been to work?"

He waited. Star made a show of counting off on her fingers.

When it became clear he expected an answer, I said, "Thirteen?"

"That's right. Is that acceptable employee behavior?"

This time we remained silent.

Mr. Melancholy cleared his throat. "OK. I'm letting you go of course. I'd offer back pay but you frankly haven't earned it."

Star and I left the site in a strange glee. We got immediately cool in her apartment.

"You ever 'jump the moon?'" she said. Her tree trunk arms loose behind her head in our makeshift hammock—blanket tied to girders.

"What's that?"

"That's when you mix ice-nine with firefly. It's hardcore. It's off the hook."

Mister said, "Don't do it, girl," and his non-milky eye had real concern in it.

I sighed a long sigh. I was happy with the current arrangement. But I wasn't.

We jumped the moon. Star mixed it up and I felt it flow through my queered veins, and I said, "Today's the day."

"What day?" she said.

"Chekhov's bullet," I said.

"You mean—"

"It goes off *today*," I said.

While I watched the flame tree became something else. A gale force shook its fruit and leaves. The air turned violent in my throat. A

strong wind could topple all of this, all of us, the whole fucking city, the grinning construction site that never became a building, this House of Fecklessness, exploding all the figurines in the gift shop, until all that was left was myself and Rick, his screaming jack-o-lantern face and endless consuming need and the freshness of his fire. The dead lake within me became a churning ocean, sweeping me up on my feet.

The tree out the window swung its pendulous fruit until the wind stripped the leaves and fruit and sent them hurtling through space. My heart was the wind, a wind that screamed, destroying and purifying as it went.

"Let's go then," said Star, her face going malevolent with love.

We went to my house.

Rick was watching *Complete Blackout* on TV.

"That's him?" Star said, incredulous.

"Who's this," said Rick.

Star fainted at him and he recoiled.

I pushed her aside, got up into his face. I breathed on him, and he stepped back.

"Come on," I said. "Put your hands here." I indicated my throat. "See what happens."

Rick whimpered. He shook his head.

"Do it," I ordered, and he stepped forward, pressing his thumbs into my Adam's apple, rest of the fingers behind my neck. Squeezed. Before my eyes went dark I saw him start to cry.

My head tipped up. I was close to unconsciousness. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to kill me or Star to kill him before *she* killed me. I let my hands fall to my sides. Clouds began to fill my ocular cavities. Sounds pulsed. I felt confusion. I felt relief. I felt, strongly, that a change was

cresting very nearby.

"Mom," I tried to time when my body gave up.

And then Star was beside us. I fell to the ground with a slap. My breath was ragged. The ice-nine and firefly zinged in confusion around my body, into my hands and toes and brain, through my spleen. My body was a city. The arteries were clogged with traffic. The city of my body was about to explode. Sewage, building pressure, was about to erupt through all the city manholes over the buildings and cars and foliage and people. *I don't know what she meant, I thought crazily, I don't know what she was trying to say.*

Star punched and punched. She was wearing brass knuckles. I didn't know when that happened. She punched Rick into a rag doll. *Stop*, I said, but didn't because no noise came out.

"Motherfucker," said Star. She was kicking now with steel toes. It wasn't Rick she was kicking. It was someone else.

I grabbed the not-kicking ankle and she stopped, breathing hard. I shook my head. I think I shook my head.

She got the message. She sat. She started to cry. I didn't know if Rick would survive but he wasn't dead yet. His ribs heaved. His lifeless bullet had broken from his neck and lay inert between us. All three of us were sad and small. Rick with his bullet, Star with her brass knuckles, me with my smug masochism. We all enact our revenge on a weaker one. We were a rock-paper-scissors of deferred misery.

"She's dead," I wheezed. "I know she's dead."

"She's dead," Star said through her sobs. "He killed her."

"She killed herself," I said.

Star nodded. "Maybe," she said.

We weren't talking about the same person. It didn't matter.

"Don't leave," Rick said in the tiniest voice. "Please don't leave me."

He wasn't talking to me.

Above us all, the real moon swept through the frame of the skylight. It pinned us to our lives like insects pinned to felt.



To Kill a D.J.

Matthew Carney is a LatinX human type in San Francisco. His work has appeared in *A Capella Zoo*, *Inkwell*, *Red Light Lit*, *sPARKLE & BLINK*, *Entropy*, and *Anti-Heroin Chic*. His story "On Becoming" was a finalist in the 2017 Omnidawn Fabulist Fiction Contest.
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To kill a DJ was not a matter of necessity, nor a matter of preference: to kill a DJ has wound up a matter of happenstance, a matter of privilege, and a moment of profound resignation to the diligence of instinct. In other words, probably a blasé fuck up. And I'm sorry for it. Make no mistake: Right now, I am drunk. I have been drinking since five or six thirty like any number of suckers here. Please bear witness to the fundamental truth that none of this could be possible without alcohol. I had hoped that by 33 years, that with a modest amount of respect behind my work, with notable quantities of vices behind me, I would be above an admission as base as, 'yes, friends: I am drunk. I did it because alcohol.' But I will assure you it is one hundred percent authentic. There is no aesthetic, only anesthetic and vim. And three shots of decadent outrage which I aged, which I fermented in a closed fist for years and years. Sobriety has been a chalice oft fantasized and rarely executed for me, but outrage is my old bedmate and friend. Here's the thing. This is 2017. My story means nothing. Only my identity, the identities of folks, and the identity of that

false demigod, that fuckblind nincompoop, mean a thing in a world where truths are forever more severe than fiction. Paisley Fucking Smith. Paisley Fucking Smith. To arrive promptly at the point: Paisley was in this city, in this neighborhood, in this same bar drinking at arms and arms distance less than an hour ago, and now he is not. I decided six days ago that I should make good on our rage against fragile masculinity, to stop writing and, with an invisible gun, to just slug Paisley Fucking Smith in the gut.

Now, but, listen: I had reasons! I had known like everyone else the long and well-worn trail of misogynistic fragments, the again and again moments of fuckery, following this person who called himself a poet, and called himself a man, and also called himself Paisley Smith. I rewore a common sneer. I retold the sordid stories. Not his birth name; A pen name and a stage name; Paisely Fucking Smith was a fake fucking name. He built into this ridiculous name an unyielding brand of abrasive performance. He slathered away time at his poetry readings telling bad jokes about the KKK, tearing into audience members for their ages and their faces, made fat jokes

and fecal jokes—people reacting uncomfortably—people reacting uncomfortably. That was a high art for this person, you understand. His mark on the world was a dig into the collective gut of his community as if to offend was to upend, and the means meant nothing. That to feel anything was his art, and the stink of offence was his grail. But what were we going to do about it except write? But what was I going to do about it except write?

Three days ago, my good friend and psycho, Army John, asked me to stay at his ranch in SLO. I went to SLO, we drank porter, I went to sleep, and he produced a 'ghost gun' from an eighty percent complete lower on a 3d printer in less than three hours.

Just like that. An untraceable tool. Something of total devastation. I was shocked, amazed. I had been sound asleep and dreaming of music, and woke up with this thing beside me. That's how easy it was to get one. That's how easy it was to get one.

And today, I stalked Paisley to this bar — he may have known it — I had made it public on fucking Tumblr that he was my fucking enemy. I sat in front rows at his own literary events, I laughed too loud, I dropped my whiskey bottle with hands up. I slow clapped all the time. He always sweat and he avoided eye contact, the beads one millimeter and one half millimeter passing down the bald head and face, removing his black glasses and chuckling as if the memory

of his hideous jokes through the bile sponge of his mind would be enough to save his life.

But yes, friends, yes, I am aware, I am aware that bad taste alone was not enough to destroy someone's stomach and life. There was more. I retold the story more than once that he'd coerced someone we admire into a sex cassette tape for the sake of art, then refused to retract it; I retold the story more than once that he'd robbed blind someones we admire of their dignity in bedrooms and in backseats with alcohol and browbeatings,

that he used sob stories on rejection, that 'new in town' bullshit, that 'zone of friends' swamprot, the 'nice guy' tripping over his tongue at the finish line. You

I knew I'd slug Paisley in the gut tonight with a bullet from the ghost gun

already know it all: there is a lot of this. There is a lot more. Everywhere. Like everyone else, I called him out. So fragile, so manipulative. I'd been angry for years. I called him the fuck out. I wrote about it, and tonight he was sitting there just the same, among us, always, wondering, Jesus, could it be me? Could I really be the bro? Is it my turn to play the bro? I trained my eyes like razordiscs before all this outrage, and Paisley just sat at the bar with his sweat beads and chuckles and removing his glasses to the bartender, ignoring me again. Always ignoring me.

I knew I'd slug Paisley in the gut tonight with a bullet from the ghost gun, but I knew not when. The anti-hero of alt, the monger of awkward chic. I enjoyed hating this person from afar for years;

everyone hated him for his misogynistic banter and his provocateur aesthetic. I gripped the handle of the gun stuffed deep within my jacket pocket. But this fucker wouldn't even stand up. He was there at the bar drinking his gin. Very slowly. Just one gin. The hours passed away at pace as if he were skinning them with drum sticks of beeswax. Blunt, but so slowly, so carefully, not to spill a single drop even by breathing aside in my direction.

For four fucking hours—no, not fucking four, for fucking seven—for seven fucking hours I watched Paisely Fucking Smith, age unknown — age timeless—a common man, a common bro—drink one gin and tonic, froth and forth, fuck with quarters and dimes, fight to sweat away my presence without even noticing my silent judging. I would wait him out for the first moment I had a chance—slowly, stepping, in the backside of the bar in the dark—slowly, press the ghost gun into his gut or chest or scrotum—bang, the soft bang, bang him away softly, then walking away, washing my hands, wipe myself away. Who knows? But I wouldn't stay. A beautiful bridge, a pristine railroad track. My task would be complete to close this shite duct forever, and then go. As kids might say one day: when one door closes another door closes.

I'm not there yet.

So I waited him out four fucking hours, or seven. The bar had changed completely after seven hours of waiting. The lifers, afternoon people who'd committed to drowning loneliness with one high ball after another after another after another, were as alien as I was for a while, and then as drunk as I was, and then inundated by new waves of fresher faces which drowned them in an excited and hungry sort of banter. These Slacking techies, these slithering hipsters, the

*I was completely astonished,
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terrible way*

frat boys barking bro!, bro! bro! bro!, bro!. Mansplaining cretins, proving things, explaining things. The lifers sank away from this terrible banter as the bar became young again.

And then, finally, the DJ arrived.

The DJ arrived in a V-neck. The DJ arrived in another pair of black specs. The DJ arrived as another bald head—or a recently shaved away bun—or a recently shaved away Hitler youth haircut—or a recently shaved away beard with the wax on—another bald head, another tribal tat and a corgi tat and a BMW tat cross his heart, yeah, and wearing an incredible smirk all the while. And because I four or seven or fucking eleven drinks in, I was completely astonished, painfully flabbergasted, that stereotypes still roamed the Earth to fuck with us in this terrible way.

The DJ placed his egg crate of vinyl on a gleaming white pedestal, unraveled cables and cables, prepared lines and lines for his set. Third and fourth bros with remarkable pinched faces and, in fact, gnar-gnar Dwemer beards, dark beanies, helped him wind the lines around the pedestal and PA. A young woman in a beige jacket stood beside them with arms crossed.

The DJ continued his story as they prepared. He gestured back to the woman. "...and she was like, so wasted that she yaked like—like the yak was like this," he gagged, rubbing his face. The DJ and his roadies laughed, and the young woman smiled at her feet. The DJ continued, "And oh my god, bruh, and her Gucci bag was in the toilet all covered in yak. And I'm like, hey, I do not even love anyone enough to touch that. Maybe not even my mom." They laugh again, and she is still embarrassed.

This was the moment I set the eleventh drink down, rested my head on the bar, and closed my eyes. I fantasized about mitigating the blasé callousness of the overheard conversation with violence. I imagined asking with a grin, which frat you in, my bruh? Fuck boy of the hour, my bruh? Then shoving and holding his face red hot into a bowl of fresh pho, or a cream of mushroom soup—my bruh, I can't hear you anymore, my bruh. can't hear you anymore. To punish the weak-lipped aristocracy of this society's finest institutions of bravado in broad day light. But would I ever have the gravitas? Probably never.

But then. Oh my god. Paisley Fucking Smith! I remembered—Paisley Fucking Smith! And I raise my head, and of course, of course, he had left the bar.

I rushed through, pushed through, searching the bar, out into the darkened hallway. Two doors to men's bathrooms, and I was waiting in line for no one, man. Two doors one foot a part. But I knew Paisley was there. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. Door number one, door number two. I stood beside the doors, pulled the ghost gun, raised to shoot. And I waited. And there I heard this sound. So quietly. A rasping... a weeping. Someone weeping, a gentle bumping, as if this—in the men's room—someone weeping and a gentle and rhythmic bump, bump, bump, bump. Hitting his soft head against the wall of door number one.

And door number two. The stench of musk and excrement, the water washing behind. And the DJ walked forward from door number two.

"What's that sound?" He asked.

We both looked down at the gun stuck into his belly like an unfortunate pipe in some hardly worn house. I was the one to chuckle, then, at last, and to remove my glasses, push the sweat beads from my eyes, and move into the blind again.

So. The bottom line, friends, concerns mankind. Concerns man. I could never stop him from existing while also claiming to be non-violent. But it was a lack. A letting go. That hate fermenting in my fist— I let it go. To kill a DJ was an exercise only as focused as a clap in the wind, or dropping a bucket. I mean to say that there was nothing to it, really. I mean to say that it's more a matter of being there in the right moment with the right people in the wrong music. To kill a DJ was as instinctual as contracting the common cold.



OY: An Essay on Theft

Myles Cai is a hardware engineer by day, aspiring writer by night. He is a born-and-raised Bay Area native, and hopes to one day make a human being laugh with his words.

It took a break-in of my childhood home to make me doubt common sense gun laws. You know what, I thought with my head cocked and index finger wagging, these Republicans really are onto something. A pistol simply isn't enough. I want to be able to down the next man who dares to rob my family with two fully automatic rifles while fiery explosions behind me rock the street as if I were in a Michael Bay movie.

When my parents told me about the burglary, it was in our family group chat, a quick 'hey we've been robbed' followed by some blurry photos of our quiet suburban home disheveled. It wasn't my first brush with theft. Last year I'd had the rear window of my white Forester smashed, and my backpack stolen out of it. Before that, I was in Barcelona with a friend and we'd watched a grainy video of two thieves making off with his iPad and passport, almost ruining our vacation plans. A BMX bike here, a wallet there—it happens enough that I'm aware of its existence, but not to the point that I'm emotionally prepared to deal with it.

I told myself as calmly as possible that they

came from bad homes, that they didn't choose this life, that they have less than I do. Then I watched the video from our home security system, and the robbers drove a shiny silver Infiniti sedan, a car that cost more than my net worth. I shut my eyes at this, calling forth all of my Vipassana training: 'Oh boy, Buddha, your teachings are going to have a rough go at this one. A mi tuo fo, om shakti ommm...'

The video starts with the car backing up into our driveway at 1:30 PM on a sunny Tuesday. No one was home; my parents were at work. Two men slithered out of the car and knocked on the front door to make sure no one answered. Then they went around the house, opened the side door, and headed into the backyard. They were wearing dark hoodies and those light blue hygiene face masks, handy for hiding from the novel coronavirus, and criminal justice. When their faces got closer to the camera on the rear porch, I paused. I couldn't tell what race they were.

If they were white I would've had license to spout the foulest trash about them up and down Van Ness without fearing potential repercussions

of accusations of racism. In San Francisco, a city that hated itself and its country so much that it elected a mayor named London, the zeitgeist was to bag on white people as much as possible. At work one day, Chad had looked at our catered lunch, frowned, and asked, 'Is that potato salad?'

'Dude, it's tofu.'

It was in San Francisco that my Forester was broken into last year. I was livid. There was nothing of any significant monetary value in there, just some clothes I'd packed since I was on my way to a wedding, as well as a backpack I'd designed and been gifted from my last company.

What pushed me from angry to apoplectic was the apathetic attitude from the police. They dealt with such a high volume of car theft that they no longer appeared to feel any responsibility toward administering justice for it. They asked me if 1) a police uniform was stolen. No. 2) a gun was stolen. No. 3) a passport was stolen. No. They informed me that

my situation didn't qualify for an incident report. Then they hung up. In that moment I was more disgusted with the police than the thief. I vowed to keep a loaded vehicle in the car at all times, to either shoot the next robber, or to have stolen so the crime actually becomes a police concern. I imagine the next call I make of this nature to sound closer to: 'Yes, officer, that's right.

Three Glocks and a Remington, seven passports, and—wait, did I mention the grenades?'

When something like this happens to someone else, I extend my sympathy, say all the right things, and keep a level head. When something bad happens to me, I want the entire police force summoned, SWAT at the ready, helicopters whap-whapping overhead. 'It's not a

murder, Myles,' my friend reminded me. Tell that to my innocence!! Which is bleeding out all over the carpet, Akshay!! Did these robbers steal your empathy as well?! Get the cast of Criminal Minds!

What about that guy in Mindhunter?! Why is NCIS in every city except for SF?!

My parents called me to give me more details later that night. The criminals had tossed the house, but missed the majority of my mom's jewelry. They'd gotten her MacBook, some brooches, and \$400 in cash, but that was about it. Mom went on, 'They looked through everything, pulled out your drawers, your underwear is all over the floor.'

'My underwear?!' 'Yes.' 'My boxers, all that stuff?' 'Yes.' I was dumbstruck. Not only had these men violated our security, but through the transitive property, they had also touched my penis.

They hadn't bothered with the 2012 Opus One that my father had given me as a graduation

San Francisco, a city that hated itself and its country so much that it elected a mayor named London

present, a bottle of wine worth more than all the cash they'd snatched, but they had taken a cheap knock-off pair of noise-cancelling headphones valued at \$40. They had rifled through a box that held letters I'd received over the years, ranging from love notes to birthday cards. It included one I held especially dear to my heart, handwritten from the first girl I'd fallen in love with; I was both infuriated they had touched it and relieved they were not psychotic enough to steal it.

My next thought was: what is it like to be a stranger looking at my room? The overflowing shelves of books, the Ikea bed

frame... nothing really stood out. And then, with a disappointment redolent of forgetting to bring my homework to school, I remembered the Fleshlight that my college roommate Cordelia had given to me.

Back when we were at UCLA, she had ordered a bunch of sex toys at the behest of her new boyfriend a couple months into dating. When the nondescript package arrived, she dragged me into her room so we could open it together, both of us rolling with laughter on the hardwood floor as she unveiled the contents one by one like a magician: flavored lube, collectible finger vibrators, and a foxtail butt plug

that drove my eyebrows into my hairline. She had ordered so much that the company threw in a complimentary Fleshlight. It was pink and doughy, and she had wobbled it in her fist like a cocktail shaker, 'What am I supposed to do with this, Myles? Take it.'

And so I did. After graduation, it followed me back to my childhood home and sat on the top

shelf of my desk in a cup, unused and undiscovered for years. I realized the robbers' image of me must be coming into focus and I didn't like it: a desperately lonely nerd who masturbated into a pathetic rubber sleeve while reading old

love letters from his high school sweetheart. I imagined them laughing at this version of myself while making off with my cash. Maybe they had even pitied me, 'Leave the letters, man, this guy's sad enough as it is. Wait, pass me that pen, I'll write him one too.'

About a month after the incident, Mom decided she wanted a baseball bat for self-defense, despite never having touched one in her life.

'It has to be wooden,' she said as I opened up Amazon on my laptop. 'Wooden? Why does it have to be wood?' 'I don't trust plastic.' 'What are you talking about? We have enough plastic

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bags saved in that drawer in the kitchen to make a damn baseball bat.'

'It has to be wooden.' 'All right,' I edited the search and scrolled. 'How long? 28, 30, or 32 inches?' She pulled out her tape measure to each of these lengths, grasped one end, and mimed swinging it. '30.' 'Okay. Anything else?' 'Let me see which one you picked,' she said, and I turned the screen toward her. She studied it for a moment and asked, 'Do you think it will break when I hit them?'

'What? Good God, Mom, no. No, it will not break.' 'But it says "youth" on it.' 'Mom, you're five feet tall. You're smaller than most white kids in elementary school.'

She waved her hand in defeat, 'Fine, then

My father's response was to install more cameras surrounding the house, despite the fact that a lot of good it had done the first time around. He wasn't subtle about it either, all of them as hideous and obvious as those 'Vote for Measure A' signs that WASPs pock their lawns with. He placed two above the garage, one at each side door, and one more firmly up my asshole.

Mom called me again maybe two weeks later, claiming to know who did it. My parents' gardener José had been working for them for a decade, literally. Every other Wednesday around noon, he'd drive over in his weathered Toyota pick-up and with his cousin in tow to help mow the lawn, trim the hedges, garden the garden. However, there was one afternoon a while back when José wasn't able to make it, and so the entirety of the labor fell squarely onto his cousin's shoulders—which couldn't support the weight alone. So he drove over to The Home Depot and hired a random man for assistance.

José told my mother all of this, his head bowed in shame. He couldn't say for certain that it was this random man, but he did have a strong suspicion—especially because he had since vanished. My mother believed her gardener of 10 years, and brushed the mistake off with a forgiveness she had never touched my academic history with.

This theory was never confirmed by the cops who, after trailing the Infiniti's license plate to a dead end (stolen off a Camry, no less!), never bothered to follow up with my parents. But that's okay. Because now I know my parents are vigilant and prepared, Louisville Slugger at the ready to deliver three strikes in the name of justice.



The Trip

Jane Bernstein was born, a long time ago, in sad Central Asia... and here she is living a good San Francisco life, writing in English! Her advice is: Life is meaningless and playful, enjoy it while you can.

It is September 16th and they are doing it. Jemma picks up Brian from his house in the avenues. He comes out, forgets something, runs back inside and comes out again with two sandwiches. "For after," he says as he puts them in the back seat of Jemma's Prius. He is wearing jeans and a white T-shirt that fit perfectly on his lanky body. Brian moves with ease and grace of a twenty-year-old dancer but she knows he has grandchildren. He is a good friend, one of her first dance teachers. His dances so musically, he would surely be Jemma's favorite partner if he was not so tall. Brian types the address into google maps and their destination is two hours up north, the town of Cazadero.

They have to be at the location at exactly 2pm, not earlier. They are both nervous. She keeps asking him what he knows, realizing she should have looked into it more for her comfort. He says no one can adequately describe their experience because there are no words for it in this world. "I am ready to meet him," He says. "I am ready to go to the source."

Jemma cringes when he speaks in those terms, it is too out there.

The road curves as they drive among magnificent redwoods. Last time she drove here was a couple of years ago, with her twelve-year-old son, two of his friends and their violins.

She was chaperoning an overnight field trip for the Golden Gate Philharmonic Children's orchestra. Bach's Air never sounded as tender as played by these children in muddy boots on the outdoor stage. The tune is playing in her mind now.

Brian drives up to the house at the top of the hill, the last one on dead end street.

There is no number on the house and he goes inside to check if it is the right address. Jemma sits in the car and thinks that she can still change her mind but Brian is already motioning for her to join. They go inside.

They are met by a man and a woman. The man is Latino in his early 40s. The woman is in her mid-twenties, a freckled redhead with European accent. The airy cabin has a loft ceiling and a deck off the living room with a view of redwoods. A small wood burning stove is on and the room smells of copal incense. There is a queen size mattress with pillows in the middle

of the floor of the living room, covered with two layers of overlapping towels. Next to the mattress is a table with something that looks like light bulbs laid out, at least ten of them.

The man asks them to wait outside while they prepare. They go out through the living room onto the sunny deck and sit down on beach chairs. The man comes out, sits down with them and finally introduces himself.

"Gerry", he says and lights up a cigarette. "It is beautiful here," Brian says.

"Yes, we used to be in Palo Alto when we come to California and it was not ideal. The room was too small. We found this house on Airbnb and it is perfect." Gerry then tells them deer sometimes come and graze in the yard. He also tells them they will be in Europe after California, and back again next year. They all sit in awkward silence while Gerry smokes.

"Brian, you go first, okay?", Jemma finally says. He nods yes. She ask Gerry: "Should I wait here or be inside and watch?". Gerry replies: "It is better to wait here." They go inside and she sits alone. A family of deer show up and stand on the sunlit path between the trees, curious. In twenty minutes she hears Brian cry out as if he is startled by seeing

something scary. Jemma's heart skips a beat and her hands get cold. Gerry comes out and sits by her. "Is there anything I should know before?" She asks him, still unsure she will go through with it.

He takes time to respond: "Just stay open and let medicine do the work, allow your ego to dissolve."

"Where does the medicine come from?"

"My toads live on a farm in Mexico," He says, then chuckles and adds, "with armed guards."

They sit some more, listening to the rustling of dry grasses in the slight breeze. The redhead comes out and motions him inside. Jemma sits alone again. It has been 45 minutes. Finally Brian comes out onto the deck. He

looks as if he is in physical discomfort. He makes eye contact with her but does not say anything coherent. "Are you ok? Should I do it or not?" He sort of nods but she can't tell if it is a yes or a no. Last chance to change her mind. Redhead comes out and says everything is ready for her. Jemma takes a last look at Brian, who is still writhing in the chair but is clearly nodding yes now, and she steps into the house.

Gerry invites her to lie down on the mattress

*The whole universe gets
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No light. No darkness. No
past. No future.*

and get comfortable. Then he asks her to sit up without changing the position. He explains the process. She has to take a long steady inhale from the pipe and count to ten. Then she will lie down. Gerry is on the left of her, redhead on the right. They each take her hand, join their other hands so they are in a circle and start chanting a prayer. It sounds like a blessing for a preschool classroom to calm the children down for snack time. She is annoyed with their phony blessing and serious faces, she wants to get up and leave but while she contemplates her escape, they are done with the chant. Gerry turns around and gets one of the light bulbs, which turn out to be glass pipes, with tiny yellowish crystals inside. He brings the pipe to her face and flips the cigarette lighter.

The crystals inside start smoking and she begins to inhale. She counts to six and suddenly time and space warp and everything melts around her. The whole universe gets sucked in through the pipe and explodes inside her. She ruptures from inside into millions of pieces of nothing. No light. No darkness. No past. No future. No sounds. No objects. No breath. She doesn't exist. She is everything and everywhere. The only feeling is of explosive expansion, accelerating at unimaginable speed. There are no objects and no time and she doesn't have a body so this speed is not relative. Accelerating through nothingness is absolute and eternal.

As suddenly as she exploded, she finds herself back in her body and it feels like a glove that has been put on wrong, it does not fit well. She tastes blood. She runs her tongue on the inside of her mouth and realize she bit the inside of her cheek.

Her face feels tired and tense as if she screamed for hours. The base of her skull hurts. She gets up and walks out onto the deck on wobbly legs. Brian is standing there, stretching and smiling at her as if she just joined his secret club. He asks her if she is ok and she nods at him, not sure herself if it is a yes or a no. She sits down and twitches and squirms in the struggle to re-inhabit her body. Within one hour she recovers physically but inwardly she gets progressively more stunned at what she had just experienced.

They drive for a while in silence. She is astounded at having tasted eternity and delighted to come back into her human, speck of dust existence.

"Brian, I get it now..." She starts to recite unpunctuated lines of the Buddhist text Heart Sutra mantra that didn't make sense to her before, "...no body no mind form is exactly emptiness emptiness exactly form sensation conception consciousness are also like this..."

"Our thoughts don't even matter, Jemma." Brian says, "Nothing really matters."





Part Three: Family/Comfort

A Lesson on Jim Crow

Don Collier is a lifelong resident of Jim Crow America. Coming of age in the turbulent 1960's, he lived the common experience of black life, and he writes about the life he saw, misery, and death.

I have often wondered if young people, both black and white, today know anything about Jim Crow. Jim Crow wasn't just custom it was the law. Many of my own generation, both black and white, are knowledgeable of Jim Crow from direct experience with it or from stories told to them by parents and grandparents. Both my parents came from the rural environ of Clarksville Tennessee, Montgomery County. At least a dozen or more black families are rooted here since Emancipation. They are all related through marriages and births.

Modern conveniences were absent here; there was no indoor plumbing, water was pulled up by hand from wells of tasty cold spring water; bathing was a chore with water heated on wood burning stoves, then poured into tin tubs, dirty tub water was then pulled outside with much effort by the boys to be dumped in the yard, outhouses were built a short distance from the home which all the children were afraid to use at night, the surrounding woods had feral dogs and poisonous snakes; wood used for fuel to heat homes and cook meals came from these same surrounding woods. This was an area of small

black farmers and sharecroppers. The only whites seen here were officials inspecting the Round Pond School for Negro Children, big landowners checking on their sharecroppers, there was an old white couple that ran a country store up the road from my grandfather's small farm. I spent an exciting year here exploring the woods and becoming acquainted with Southern life.

My sisters, Doris (9 years old), Didda (14 years old) and I (10 years old) were on a road trip with my Uncle Roy driving from San Pedro California to Clarksville Tennessee. It was a common practice during this period of the 50's and 60's for black migrants to urban centers to send their children South to be looked after by rural family when life for them as a family in the city became difficult. The parents could get themselves sorted out without worry about the kids. My rural family resided in an area with the name Round Pond. The only paved road was the one connecting it with Clarksville; all other roads were simply gravel. The sound of gravel being crunched under rubber tires and happily barking dogs chasing cars down the road told of visitors coming. There were no road signs of any kind;

you simply had to be familiar with landmarks, forks in the road, churches and roadside establishments.

This is one story of many could tell you. Nina Simone, the diva of old blues song, had a song called "Old Jim Crow." Here are a few lyrics that just true today as they were yesterday

*Old Jim Crow
I thought I had you beat
Now I see you walkin'
And talkin' up and down my street
Old Jim Crow don't you know
It's all over now*

"I got the feeling there's a roadblock down this road. I'm going take the back roads," declared my Uncle Roy. The local sheriff's roadblock was just as much a custom in these parts as driving around with open cans of beer and firearms.

I saw nothing up ahead, but at that time my head was only slightly higher than the dashboard. I heard my two sisters stirring in the back seat. But what they saw, what they thought, what they were stirring about was no concern of mine. They were just there, two sisters in the back seat. What I want was the hamburgers Uncle Roy had promised to treat us to. In my head I rehearsed a plea for vanilla malt and, just maybe, french fries. These were my favorite three foods. They were not so easily come by; the chain of Golden Arches was still far from reaching this part of the country. I had tasted one of those over one million sold and was unimpressed. Old fashion drive-up roadside burger stand was the very best right off the grill burger patties and buns, just the right amount of lettuce, tomato and onion. A touch of mayonnaise on the

bun, not the patty – a piece of lettuce should be between the two -- and ketchup to smother the fries.

So, with these great concerns I asked "Why?"

"Because this is something they just do to mess with people. And I don't what to be bothered with them. I know all these back roads. We'll just go 'round them."

"OK", I said. I knew that white police were mean people not to be trusted. I had not a notion of why, but I figured it was best to avoid them. Avoiding was different than running. My mom had told me never to run from the police because they would shoot a black boy. It didn't matter what you did or didn't do. "Don't run!" she said, "Tell 'em you need your mother and keep your mouth shut after that. Don't give 'em any lip and make 'em mad." Uncle Roy was not running; he was avoiding. That's OK.

Uncle Roy was a sophisticated man of the world. He knew when to avoid and when to not run. He was the only black man that we knew in the U.S. Air Force. And top of all that he did paperwork, not sweat work. He traveled the world from Germany to Merced, California. Whenever he came to visit, he had a new car, such as the Impala with fins. The new car was always accompanied with new a woman friend --- sometimes introduced as his wife, meaning we had to call her aunt.

He smoked a pipe with fragrant tobacco. He cared for his pipes with a most interesting assortment of tools to "keep the pipe fresh." The pocketknife size stainless steel tool was a three-in-one; a tamper to pack tobacco in the bowl; a small pick and knife to remove encrusted ash. There

was an old silver lighter shaped like a large tube of lipstick; pulled apart the connected halves opened a fire chamber in the center. Most intriguing was the slender white bristle wire stems that traveled up the shank; when withdrawn the white was gradations of brownest reaching towards a gooey black tar tip. He was the only man who did such a thing—cigarette smoking had little refinement in comparison to Uncle Roy's pipe.

He wore dress pants, dress shirts, polished shoes with silk socks and a wisp of Old Spice cologne. All this dressed a frame of muscle, dark brown skin, clean shiny nails and a fresh haircut. How did he keep his clothes so clean and press at all times. Uncle Roy's women came and went with regularity. I had an older sister who did this work until wash-and-wear clothes came along. After this I always wore my clothes a little wrinkled. Nobody, but me, seemed to notice.

All other family adults—uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents and my parents too, showed their country roots. If they lived in a city, they had a look, a sign of sorts, which said, "I Just Got Here From the Country." If they lived in the northeast, north, or like us, California, this sign would have a kicker, "I'm From the South." Their lives were

more accustomed to outhouses, wood-burning stoves, pulling up well water. Indoor plumbing and gas heat were new in their lives. But Uncle Roy seemed he had lived all his life knowing nothing of outhouse stink, heating water on the stove for the tin bathtub, snakes and mice everywhere. He seemed to be quite different and he was.

He had my full trust as far as the roadblock went. Uncle Roy was not the type to cross the law. He was a military man extremely patriotic. His hatred of the Jim Crow South was that it was un-American. As the car turned off the blacktop main road on to the back road kicking up gravel and dust, I had my misgivings. There would be no burger stands down this way that much I knew. If anything

appeared it would be juke joint with cold drinks and barbecue. I preferred a hamburger with the works to such fare any day. But I did not complain. Uncle Roy always kept his promise --- especially treats for us kids. I kept a diligent eye out for any prospect.

We rode up and down the gentle rolling hills of Middle Tennessee, around curves thick with trees. The road appeared to end at these curves only to present itself again after the turn. The sound of rubber meeting gravel rock was soothing. The woods were impenetrable with green and

Uncle Roy seemed he had lived all his life knowing nothing of outhouse stink, heating water on the stove for the tin bathtub, snakes and mice everywhere.

shadow overlapping. Then I spy an open space just ahead. Promise. Sniff the air for the inviting aroma of burger. What came instead was another inviting wonderful smell, tobacco leaves drying. The tobacco barn stood off to the right in the clearing; front and back fully open, the sides half open. To smell air-cured tobacco fragrant and sweet; to see the rich brown broad leaf is a delight. However, it was no substitute for burgers. We drove on and on. Then finally gravel gave way to black top, a main road, a sure sign of a promise fulfilled. Confident that the road block was behind us we drove on.

More woods thick with green and shadow. An expanse of lawn this time with a single story red brick house. The red brick meant that the family were doing well. The same size wooden house painted white was a notch down. The family must be white as this rural area surely was. Black homes were smaller, and unpainted wood. The more prosperous black family home was a little bigger, still wood, but painted white. Red brick for blacks was definitely middle class; they were counted in ones and twos. We drove on under the green and shadow of woods. Black asphalt stretching forward for us to catch up to only stretched out more, even curving this way and that.

"There's one," I spotted a roadside stand, a semicircular painted red, several service windows facing a small harden dirt parking lot. Adjacent to it was a gas station which by its red paint seemed to be part of the business.

"We can't stop here," Uncle Roy said.

"Why?"

"Because colored folks are not allowed in this town."

But my mind and body were on the little red burger stand.

For emphasis Uncle Roy added, "We can't even stop here for gas."

He continued to drive on as I looked out for the last glimpse of the stand.

"What if we run out of gas?," I asked.

"We're not going to run of gas."

I was silent. Uncle Roy had the last word. I pondered for years after on this question, what if we ran out of gas in a town that did not allow colored folks? I had no sense of violence; all I knew was schoolyard fights of children.

I imagine walking with Uncle Roy, gas can in hand to the pump. A grisly white man comes out of the gas station store, "I ain't gonna sell y'all gas, colored ain't allowed in this town." I smell the aroma of cooking burger patties, but there is no hope now. The car is slowly moving, pushed by Uncle Roy, toward a sign marking the town boundary. I'm in the driver's seat steering it straight; pretending to drive was my next favorite thing to hamburgers.



Failure

Tehmina Khan has taught science to preschoolers and citizenship to octogenarians; along the way, she's learned some new words. She teaches English and creative writing at CCSF and loves our Ocean Ale House readings.

Failure is another word for mother,
To have all the answers
in the warmth of your lap, until
you have none, and
your every speck of wisdom
is disputed with sarcasm.

To offer ultimate comfort
in the harbor of your arms, until
the world grows so big,
you cannot possibly
contain the heartbreak
of generations.

Failure is the memory
of cutting words
you cannot take back
of late pickups
and forgotten meals
of accidents you could not prevent
of every "if only" spoken in your head.

And then there is the gentle
human being that is your son,
the grown man who towers over
you and throws his arm over your shoulder
and smiles.

And then there is your own mother,
who once knew everything
until she didn't,
and you answered her wisdom
with eye rolls and whatever.

And you see how she had dreams for you
and how daughter too
is a word for failure:
sharp words and slammed doors
secrets kept deep within you
forgotten phone calls

When the world became too big, too
beautiful and terrifying
to seek solace in the harbor
of your own mother's being.

Her ambitions for you are
long abandoned,
along with her ambitions for herself,
a vacant warehouse that once contained multitudes.

You are only yourself.
She is only herself.
Your child is only himself.

And failure becomes another word for compassion.



Once

Francisco Delgadillo is his mother's son.

I love you is a phrase we exchanged only once. Not when I'd leave home or come back from school, bullied for being a teacher's pet. Not when you left for the United States to take on seasonal work or returned home early because I had a toothache and was crying inconsolably for you. Not when your mother died fairly young of cancer during my elementary school years, and I saw you crying inconsolably her burial. Not when we said goodbye at the steps of the bus that would take me in my mid-teens from Mexico toward the United States on my own. You would only bless me.

You, the oldest of 13 siblings, resigned yourself to leave school after second grade in a rural municipality in Mexico to help raise the growing number of siblings as if they were your own. You often recounted with pride, even into old age, how you cooked, washed, and cleaned

at home, and how you also worked the family's parcel of land, tended to horses, and milked cows. I, the youngest of six siblings, complained when I had too much homework or had to help with chores around the house. I graduated from college and have traveled around the world for business and pleasure.

I love you is a phrase we exchanged only once. Not when I graduated with honors from high school or college in California. Not when I got my first professional job right after college. Not when you had

to be strong for your siblings at your father's wake after his long platonic relationship with a dialysis machine. Not when I bought my first—our family—home in San Jose. You blessed me every time.

You married my father when you were 21 and he was 25, both of you surprisingly old for the times. I don't know why you waited that long. I don't know if you were in love before or during

*You must have known I was
gay, but I could never tell.
You never asked.*

your marriage. I could never tell, and you never said so. You had my oldest brother when you were 22. You gave birth to my four older sisters and myself every two to three years. I'm 48 and haven't been in a long-term relationship. While I fell in love once, I wasn't loved back.

I love you is a phrase we exchanged only once. Not when you asked me with nervous vanity which dress you should wear after I was paged that a liver donor had been found for you, and we had to go the hospital for your transplant surgery right away. Not when we drove in silence later that evening after you were sent home still with your ailing liver because the donor was not a match after all. Not when you finally received a liver transplant years later at Stanford Hospital. Not when I got a job promotion or opened my own business. Not when you would brag about me with family and friends or even strangers. You blessed me time after time.

You wanted me to have children. But you stopped asking me when I was going to get married once my youngest sister got married 17 years ago. At the time, I told you to make sure you enjoyed the wedding, for it would be the last one in the family, unless someone remarried. To add an exclamation mark to my declaration, I colored my hair platinum blond the night before the wedding, inadvertently out-staging the bride and the mother of the bride. No body looked happy in the wedding pictures. You must have known I was gay, but I could never tell. You never asked. My sister ended up divorcing and remarrying years later, after all.

I love you is a phrase we exchanged only once. Not when we celebrated your and my father's 50th wedding anniversary with a big bash, guests joining

from all over California

and Mexico. Not when I frantically rinsed dusty blond coloring off your hair in the shower after you came home from the hairdresser the night before the celebration with a new look that

my father rejected, making you feel like an inadequate teenager—that's when you blessed me again.

You and I shared the same temperament. Like you, I can't tolerate incompetence or weakness in people, but I'm often shy about speaking up my mind. You too liked to tell others what to do, but didn't tell them how you felt. I have your facial features and similar hair. My aunts now cry when they see me.

I love you is a phrase we exchanged only once, at your death bed more than six years ago. I think of you often. I talk to you sometimes. I ask you for guidance. I tell you I miss you. But I haven't told you I love you since you died.

You blessed me often, but *I love you* is a phrase we exchanged only once.



In Play

Jeff Kaliss holds an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State and much affection for being able to continue his craft among the friendly and talented at CCSF, where he's hosted the Poetry for the People Podcast. He's also a longtime music journalist, author, and annotator.

Dedicated to Kati Spitz

A sport of spheres.
Fifty years ago, this day,
three good-looking close-cut
American guys

took it all the way
from our Earth
to the Moon
(whosever that is).

I watched that on our tv,
with my first wife.

I don't think you were around
to watch it yet,
though maybe, maybe
something which would
become your words
was moving murmuring
out there in space,
waiting on what I would be saying,
what I was caring about.

Here you are, now,
on this anniversary,
in the game,
parrying phrases with me.

And here I am, now,
in terrestrial exchange,
the pair of us making
our own rules,
for as long as we can make
things.

And look at you:
warming up,
positioning body and mind
between all the things
that want you,
among all the things you want.

You look like
you want to roll away the rules
and play it
where and when it lays.

And whatever you put on or

take off,
you wear your uniform of playfulness,
you fasten on that smile and giggle
to follow your volleys
of wistful words.

Suited up so,
are you playing for us?
Are you playing to us?
Are you playing to play?

You don't have to choose,
and you knew that
I knew that
I didn't have to ask.

I'm just passing to you
something you can play with.



It May Concern

Darzelle Oliveros, about a decade ago, picked up a poem written by one of planet earth's most influential people. From then on, she became so intrigued by poetry that it eventually turned into a passion. Darzelle wishes to pay tribute to the individual that she has looked up to for as long as she can remember. Her older sister is one of the reasons why Darzelle is the person and poet that people know now.

To whom it may concern,
I could write a thousand lines
But those will not suffice to ever
Comfort you

Draft a million letters, then throw
each one in the dumpster
Because none will ever seem to ring true

But if there's anything in this world
that is ever true and certain

Certain as can be that, undeniably,
Comfort only exists when there's something on the other hand

Thus, one thing shall remain, despite any sort of disdain, as I pull back the curtain
and hope you understand

That I wish you all the discomfort that life can ever give.

With love,
A life well-lived



Part Four:



#COVIDLife

Epiphanizing

Emma Arnesty-Good is a writer and counselor, recently returned to her hometown of San Francisco, CA. She has written for *Street Spirit*, the homelessness advocacy newspaper based in Oakland, CA, and hopes to continue publishing locally. When she's not writing, she enjoys getting outside and making sloppy art projects.

We have been sheltering in place for 16 days, when I download Hinge, and fall into a rabbit hole of swiping. Consumed, I spend most of the day absorbed in my phone, switching delinquently between the simultaneous conversations with new, shiny men and COVID-19 news updates. “UCSF doctor says California’s early action against COVID-19 saved thousands of lives,” reads one headline. The one below is: “Difference between COVID-19 Cases in CA vs. NY Likely Sheer Luck.” I read both, then check to see if Patrick, Jesse, or Ben have responded. They haven’t.

I am supposed to be completing assignments for a nonfiction writing class, which I have been ignoring. My teacher assigns a reading by Adair Lara that sets out a formula for writing a good essay. Essentially: start with a desire, describe the obstacles you faced in trying to satisfy this desire, describe the epiphany you had during this process, and finish with an explanation of how your behavior changed after this epiphany. I recoil when I read this. What if you haven’t lived long enough to have epiphanies? What if you haven’t changed any of your behaviors even

though you’ve had plenty of epiphanies?

Some of my favorite stories are about people who don’t change, can’t figure it out, can’t epiphanize or learn from their mistakes, or maybe they do learn but still can’t change their behavior. I think of Sally Rooney’s novel, “Conversations with Friends,” where a young woman falls in love with an older, married man and despite learning the devastating realities of this relationship, chooses it until the very end. Or, the film *Manchester by the Sea*, where Casey Affleck’s character cannot move past his own personal tragedy to care for his orphaned nephew.

What if things haven’t changed? What if you haven’t learned? What if you have refused to grow out of some allegiance to despair and its familiarity? Perhaps, not a happy story, but certainly a relatable one. There must be room in the land of good essays for this kind of universal tragedy. I call my best friend Alison to discuss.

“She says that young people sometimes have a hard time writing good essays because they don’t have ‘perspective yet,’” I tell her, waving my hands around even though we are on the phone.

“Oh, I don’t like that,” she says, and I am relieved.

“And, she quotes Noah Lukeman, who says that ‘a realization is not a true realization if it is not followed by action,’” I say, expecting her to agree with me again.

“Oh,” she says, and pauses, “That’s true. I’m much less excited when a character hasn’t changed their behavior.”

I sigh. I know that she is right. In both Rooney’s novel and Affleck’s film, I had desperately hoped the stories would end differently. I don’t want being a good writer to hinge on having made good choices for myself, because that last part can be so hard. It’s much easier to keep waiting for a response from Patrick or Ben or Jeremy, and let the feelings of loneliness and stagnation lie beneath this distraction.

My dreams remind me of what I am avoiding. All night, my brain replays memories of the boy I recently broke up with. My subconscious holds on tight, telling me to chase after him and beg for reprieve. I awake disoriented and unrested, tired from so much running and begging.

Most of the men I have dated have been like my father, and this latest boy was no exception —

deeply intelligent and a bit removed from the world, privately goofy and thoughtful, and boyish in social settings. Most of these men have been motivated by mastery and the accumulation of knowledge. Both stubborn and isolated. They have been men who want to go outside no matter what the weather, men who need space and time and don’t call unless they are prompted. They have been men who are

deeply involved in their own minds and ideas and don’t pay as much attention to their hearts. I have learned to pay attention to their hearts. Sometimes, at the expense of my own.

When I was a child and learning about the civil rights movement in school, I had a recurring nightmare where my father and I rode on a bus. The bus of Rosa Parks and

racism and protest. In my dream, the bus is old-fashioned and clean, and I sit on my father’s lap in the second to front row. In reality, my father is as white as the Pennsylvania corn in his hometown. However, in the dream, I know that his tan skin is considered black. I know that he does not belong in the front of the bus. At every stop, I imagine the police officer stepping onto the vehicle and questioning us. I rehearse my speech, about how

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we are together, that I am his daughter, and that is why we can sit in the front of the bus. I am terrified and hyper-vigilant. After every stop, the doors close without a probing officer. I look up at my handsome father, who seems unaware of this crushing reality. I do not tell him. Instead, I sit huddled on his lap -- with my blue eyes, blonde hair – spreading my pale arms over his as if to hide him from view. I will protect him, and he won't need to be afraid.

It has been decades since I had this dream, but I still feel irrationally protective of my father. And, I have played out this narrative with other men in my life. If I protect your heart, you must love me unconditionally. It doesn't usually work, but until now, this has not stopped me from trying again. To learn from this epiphany would require something larger.

What Lara doesn't address in her book, is that learning from epiphany—realization followed by action—can be terrifying. It is scary to learn, to let a lesson stick. It doesn't usually mean changing your behavior once, but many times over. And having a realization without changing one's behavior can trigger a deep kind of shame, the result of learning what is good for you and choosing something else. Inaction is the rejection of your own realizations, and reflects a lack of trust in your own changed thinking.

There is something about this idea of not learning from our realizations that strikes me as a kind of refusal, a dragging of the heels against the merry-go-round of time and change. The world continues, the plot thickens, we grow up, even if our habits do not. The reality is that change is constant, even during a shelter-in-place order.

My writing teacher confesses that during this

stagnant time, she has reflected on the recent death of her husband. Sheltering-in-place, though lonely without him, has been one of the first experiences she has had to weather alone, and such, has made her realize that her life will indeed go on, if only with a new and different trajectory.

One of the biggest tricks we are sold about grief is the idea that we will ever stop missing the thing we have lost. Instead, passing through grief seems to me more like a reorientation towards other places where we might place our attention, a return to the world and its delights. Getting over someone is not then a forgetting or minimizing of the relationship, or even the retrospective conclusion that this person was horribly wrong for us. Moving on is a genuine turning towards something else, which could be as benign as your own life.

While I was recovering from a particularly sticky heartbreak, I read “The Thing Around Your Neck,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's excellent collection of short stories. Upon reflection in my notebook, I wrote that reading short stories felt like the practice of falling in love and moving on. Each story required immense focus and attention from the start, captured my imagination and engagement throughout and then –if it was good –left me before I was ready, in front of the next story in the collection.

One could reread the story, of course. But eventually, the reader would need to begin the next chapter, paying close attention to a new set of characters, hopeful that the author could create another brief world as bright and absorbing as the last.

Reading my teacher's reflection on the class's

online forum, I realize that I have not allowed myself the space for any reflection of my own. My dreams are stuffed with my own desperation and loneliness, aimed at a boy who reminds me of my father. And my waking hours are a blur of media outrage and frenetic Tinder talk. I have refused to pay attention to a reality beyond my cellphone screen. What can change when you've stopped paying attention to reality? A reality, which has already shifted below you, onto the next story.

It is not entirely our own fault. Our attention is, in many ways, for sale. In her book "How to Do Nothing," Jenny Odell writes that, under the guise of connection and self-expression, we participate in a social media machine by sharing, liking, and posting, which, "are hugely lucrative for advertisers and social media companies, since what drives the machine is not the content of information but the race of engagement...Media companies trying to keep up with each other create a kind of 'arms race' of urgency that abuses our attention and leaves us no time to think."

Odell urges her reader to thoughtfully and occasionally disconnect from this engine, not by "dropping out" from the world, but by imagining a hopeful view of the future. She offers this imaginative exercise as a means to create space for our own thinking. My only addendum is that we might need help in achieving this.

I think of my friendship with Alison — whose willingness to let things progress and change has shaped the way I approach friendship, generally. Together, we have the capacity to both look at the ugliness of stuckness and refusal, and remind the other they are holding on when they don't need to be. We remind the other to stay in the current,

even when it looks deep and scary.

Alison once told me that she felt we could weather any storm because, "we could just talk about it." To extend the metaphor — in our friendship, the other person always has a life raft or a boat, or knows where to find one. Sometimes, simply knowing that a boat exists is enough to harbor our safety. Most of the time, we each show up with a boat, and we practice swimming and rescuing, swimming and rescuing until we can learn the mechanics of how to get back in on our own. Even when we learn, it is still nice to have a companion when swimming and getting back into a boat.

When I think about epiphanies, I think about Alison, without whom, none of my realizations could possibly be followed by action. Do other people have this kind of friendship? I hope so. My own epiphany—about wanting out of a dynamic—feels firmer. Slowly, the dreams dissipate, and I stop reading the news. I go on a date and notice that paying attention to someone's heart for them makes it hard to pay attention to my own. I quietly delete the dating apps from my phone. Without all the noise, there is space to think, space to pay attention, and perhaps, space to jump back into the current and let the next story grab my attention.



Three Quarantine Haiku from Australia

Stephanie Johnson is a City College student who has been stranded in Australia for 6 weeks at the time of this writing; the first two of which were government mandated quarantine. She looks forward to returning to San Francisco soon and restarting on her very new creative writing path. She is surprised at how little she is able to write without human interaction, there must be a lesson there somewhere.

Rainy day lockdown
Raindrops dripping from branches
Like forbidden fruits



Can you see the end
Of the fourteen day sidewalk?
No touching the grass

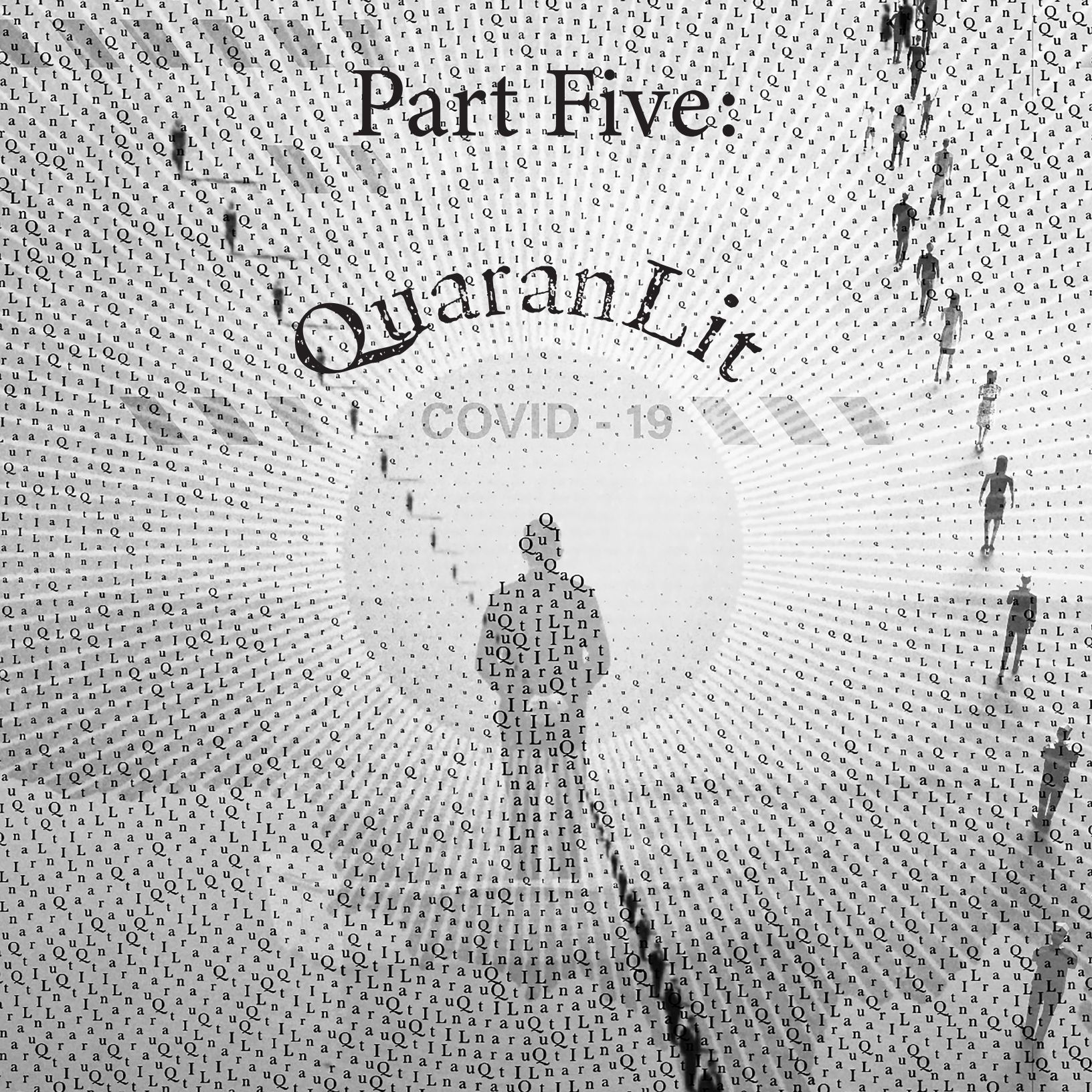


Ennui beckons
Listless, I lie here staring
Can't fill the hours

Part Five:

Quaran Lit

COVID - 19



Slow-Cooking the Laundry

Athena Kashyap received her MFA in Poetry from San Francisco State University. She currently lives in San Francisco where she teaches English at City College of San Francisco. Athena has written two collections of poetry, *Sita's Choice* (2019) and *Crossing Black Waters* (2012), both published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press in Texas. Her poems have appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *All Roads Lead You Home*, *The Missing Slate*, *Forum*, *The Fourth River* among other journals. Her work has also been anthologized both in the U.S. and India and has been translated into other languages.

With the dryer mal-functioning,
No technician to come by in these times of Covid-19,
I've taken to slow-cooking the laundry
Outside in the sun, wind and air.
I spread each shirt, pant on the line,
Smoothering out the sleeves,
Bending backs so that they might dance
But not so hard that they take off and fly away!
In the evening, I check each one to see
If the sun has cooked them just right
Or if they are still damp
Needing another day to frolic and play
Till they are dry, fresh and warm to the touch,
Ready to bring the sunshine indoors.



Title-Less Sestina

Joëlle Chartier Joëlle moved to the US from France in 1980, in search of a new life, which she found here in SF, a city she now calls home. Joëlle's connection with writing is not new. She has been writing on and off her all life, but her dilemma once living in the states was to write or not to write in English. One September day two years back, Joëlle got the courage to take a short story class with an inspiring teacher at CCSF. This was the beginning of her new engagement with writing—in English.

Icy trails reflect the livid Winter.
The village has resisted the Virus
Yet the parade of Loneliness
Has sparked through Alcohol
Pretending to wear a safe Coat
While crushing a Petal.

A child blowing on the petal
A rare event in the freezing winter
When bodies reclaim their coats
Attempting to hide from a virulent virus
Unwilling to surrender to alcohol
And condemning humans to loneliness.

To avoid the pain of loneliness
One must preserve the petal
Best in a jar of alcohol
Distilled during the last winter
Before the invasion of the virus
Taking refuge in the child's coat.

A shabby woolen coat
Filtering loneliness
From a deadly virus
Proud like an infant petal
Which has survived the winter
Avoiding the fratricide of alcohol.
His name was Al Kohol.

He gave to the orphan his coat
In the deepest dread of winter
While the world generated a permanent loneliness
Designed on an icy petal
And wedded in haste to the triumphant virus.

But to destroy the mercenary Virus
Drowning it in alcohol
A new brigade of rose petals
Adopt the delicate coat
Of loneliness
In braving the winter.

No more virus sprawling on the coat.
Alcohol has become the sweet appendage of loneliness
As the vigorous winter approaches the dying petal.



Forward into the Universe

Tu Lam is a CCSF student, academic tutor, and aspiring writer. Tu enjoys poetry, science fiction, and hoping to be inspired by more traveling. To contact her email tulam_@hotmail.com.

You were born a child of the world
Petite in palm, size of a pup
Growing into adulthood you branched out like leaves on a tree
Transformed as human you've evolved
And now death sings the song of the eternity
It's time to go back into the universe
And intertwine with the stars once again
May your souls rest in peace
I hope that you've lived out everything you could have
I hope that you have loved and tasted joy enough for a lifetime
To those who passed so suddenly
I wish you a new journey.



Generations

Andy Crockett is losing track of the days. But he can remember the Hong Kong flu of '68-69, which he avoided, and the Russian flu of '78-79, which he did not. He hopes people are staying well or getting the care they need if they aren't.

In the pale ale light of late afternoon,
stuffed with figs, walnuts, and cinnabar mushrooms,
wine-braised and barbequed, we are prone

as Romans, mansions in a fire zone, minds
picked clean of solution, waiting for the boat
to Byzantium, waving to the train that takes us home.

Oh, where are the barbarians—break dancing
in the cedar chips? Tapping out anthems on the castors
of their scooters, the metal plates mending their hips?

Let's invite them in to share a flightless bird. We'll kneel
around the Joshua tree and learn gyration of thumbs. And when
messiah comes, we'll cover his pet songs. And when the doctor comes,

say ah in unison. And when queen mother comes, we'll melt
her frosty wand. And when the reaper comes,
it says we're all long gone.



Acknowledgements

We could not have launched Lit Night without Miles Escobedo agreeing to give us one night per month at the Ocean Ale House. Thank you, Neil Ballard, for agreeing to partner in this reading series with me and to emcee, luring people in every month with your charm and humor!

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The heart of the Lit Night community is in our regular readers: Matt Carney, Don Collier, Faith Hanna, Jeff Kaliss, Jeff Liss, Ariella Pinedo, Saramanda Swigart, Kati Spitz, and Simon Timony. We are grateful for your support, for the support of our regular listeners Johnny and Leigh Escobedo, and to all of the readers who have shared their work at Lit Night!

We hope to see you in person soon! You all are a light in these interesting times. Stay healthy. Stay home until further notice. And stay connected to your communities. Much love to you all!

—Michelle Simotas,
Lit Night co-founder and CCSF Faculty



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