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art

BLAIR HOBBS is a Senior Lecturer of Creative Writing at the University of Mississippi. Visual art was always a necessary form of communication, and her interest in storytelling led her to graduate with a BA in English literature from Auburn University. From there, she earned an MA in Creative Writing from Hollins University and an MFA in Creative Writing, with an emphasis in poetry, at the University of Michigan. Blair's collages are linked to language and often include bits of hand-written texts. Typically, her bodies of work are narrative-driven and range from the mundane to the sublime. Her collages are mixed media on cotton canvases. Blair's materials include pencils, acrylic paint, pens, ink, linoleum prints, handmade mulberry papers from Thailand and Japan, foil candy wrappers, gold leaf, duct (Duck) tape, oil pastels, sequins, embroidery thread, doilies, flea-market fabric, micro glitter, pressed flowers, feathers, and shattered Christmas tree balls. A variety of journals and magazines have published Blair's poetry, most recently in The Oxford American's 2020 "Place" issue. Her visual art has shown across the Southeast, most recently at Southside Gallery in Oxford, Mississippi; Fischer Gallery in Jackson, Mississippi; and Spalding Nix Fine Art in Atlanta, GA.

SUGAR LAND

A Conversation with Tamara Al-Qaisi-Coleman

Tamara Al-Qaisi-Coleman (she/her) is a bi-racial Muslim writer, historian, poet, and artist. Her first book of poetry “[The Raven, The Bayou, & The Willow](#)” is available through FlowerSong Press. She is a Brooklyn Poets Fellow (2020), a Rad(ical) Poetry Fellow (2020), and a poet for the Houston Grand Opera & MFAH’s event “The Art of Intimacy.” (2019) She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net anthology (2021). Her work can be found in (Art) *WORDPEACE* and *Mixed Magazine*, (Fiction) *Crack the Spine Literary Magazine*, (Poetry) *Mizna*, and others.

Conor Hultman lives in Oxford, Mississippi.

CH: In your collection, *The Raven, The Bayou, And The Willow*, there is a kind of dual-tension between traditions and mythology on the one side, and contemporary politics and cultural narratives on the other. How do you approach writing about the present, and how has looking to the past helped?

TC: I’ve always had a passion for history and the past, and in many ways, I feel like there’s a boulder on my chest pushing me down, pushing me to live in that bubble of trauma and survival. Countless events, large and small, had to take place for me or this book to exist. To me, there is no talking about the present, no writing about it, without the past, that goes for both the good and the bad. I’ve always been taken with the intertwining of history and memory, and how the past is shaped through both of those lenses. I write about the present/politics by writing about the history and the decisions that brought us to this point. I use poetry as a way to process big emotions or things I don’t understand. Looking at the past and analyzing situations or historical moments that I didn’t fully grasp at the time, is what drives me to write about politics and injustice.

CH: Many of the poems have the speaker addressing in the second person, creating an interrogative feeling. How important was perspective to the composition of these poems?

TC: Perspective is something that I consider constantly when I’m writing, I love playing with perspective and vantage points. How would the message be taken if the reader was the subject? Especially with my poems that are in the second-person perspective, it’s more like I’m writing a letter to an old friend. I can let out my frustrations as if I’m screaming into the void, an invisible person on the other side who has to weather the trauma masked in stories.

Different perspectives let me be as close or as far from the narrative as I want to be. The poems that I write in the third-person tend to be very close to home, that perspective allows me to take a step back. For me poetry is a confession, it’s a witness and the perspective it takes informs the subject just as much as the rhythm or the verse.

CH: “Ode to White Whales” is an example of how much mileage you get out of references. It expands the symbolic range on the sperm whale that Melville limited with his novel, and the poem takes this expansion as an opportunity for comment on colonialism, anthropomorphization, and natural history. How do you approach references in your poetry, literary, religious, and otherwise?

TC: I really love this question, because I am a reference nerd. I grew up being the “fun-fact” child, my parents blamed it on my ADHD and Anxiety. My larger understanding of the world and universe is that everything is connected, I’ve always been

fascinated by connecting the dots of two points that seem too far apart to have a direct path. This poem, in particular, was an exercise in understanding myself and my people through an animal. I tend to get fixated on random things and at the time it was whales. I grew up with Melville and understood that Ahab's fixation and obsession with Moby Dick was the undercurrent of a bigger commentary on race, fate, free will, etc. It felt so easy to use that reference and expand on the themes Melville was already commenting on. I approach references as the language in which I can be understood, I don't need to code-switch or translate what I'm trying to say.

CH: I have to say something about the illustrations– not only are they gorgeous, but they inform the poetry as well. They really are inseparable from the words. What was the relationship in making this book between the poems and the drawings?

TC: The art in the book is inseparable from the poetry because I draw to work through my writer's block. Drawing started as a way for me to work through my anxiety, and to understand the lens through which I saw the world. Often, when I'm stuck I will draw the poem until it feels right until I've moved through the block. In so many ways the poems would be incomplete without the art that goes with them, it would be like I half-published this collection if they weren't there.

CH: Many of the poems have a natural but striking form. Your use of enjambment and space are especially engaging (like in a poem such as "Velasco"; the forward slashes dictate the rhythm in a way I found interesting). How do you find the form for your poems?

TC: Enjambment and space to me are part of the melody, the cadence, and the overall movement of the poems. My poems always follow their own flow, music was such a large part of my upbringing and who I am that it creeps its way into everything I do. It's hard to describe how I find the 'form' of my poems. Usually, my poems start with a cadence or a melody I can't get out of my head. The form comes from that melody, and I obsess over how that melody would play out visually on the page.

CH: As a fellow Houstonian, I am interested in the use of place in your book. Where did you find yourself writing about first?

TC: It's always amazing to talk to a fellow Houstonian/Texan! I would say Sugar Land is the first place I found myself drawing from to write about. A lot of my poems deal with family and tension and childhood. Sugar Land is where I remember feeling at home for the first time, it's also a place that holds a lot of history and trauma, both for me and Houston as a whole. I was always fascinated by the shift in population in Houston and its suburbs as I grew up. As I got older I spent the majority of my time in Houston proper—in the 610 loop. My perspective and understanding of Houston changed once again, with a new perspective and understanding of this amazing city, and so did my fascination and fixation on its varied neighborhoods.

CH: Which poem was the most difficult to write? Also, which poem was the easiest?

TC: Ooofff, there are many that could fit into these categories. The hardest poem to write would be "Mythos." That poem is in the third person and very much drenched in mythology and story to mask the deep emotions I felt when writing it. It's about loss, fractured memories, loneliness, chronic illness (masked as decomposing fungus), and anxiety. This poem is one of the first that I've written that really talks about the chronic pain I carry with me every day and it almost didn't come together. I'm still unsure of how to write about/approach chronic illness and pain in my writing.

The easiest poem to write would be "Portal" it came from a workshop with Michelle Burk and Cait Weiss Orcutt. Our prompt was to take a memory and change it and make it fantastical. I always loved and relished the trips I would take to Galveston Beach with my friends or family. I had my first kiss in Galveston and the poem explores the memory of that first kiss but through the perspective of the history of the Gulf Coast. It was fun, which is what made it so easy.

CH: Do you believe poetry has the potential to affect political change?

TC: Absolutely. I say that for all forms of art. Music, visual art, performance art, poetry, fiction, comedy, anything that demands the attention of the audience.

Poetry is the expression of a lived experience, it is the manifestation of emotion and memory wrapped in the politics of its time. Even if a poem isn't meant to be political it's informed by the status quo of society at the moment it's written, which in itself has the potential to change someone's perspective of that same time period. To me, political change comes from understanding and revolution, poetry provides clarity and incites rebellion. For my people, poetry has been the way we tell stories, the way we gather as a community, and the way we manifest and create new realities.

CH: What are you working on now?

TC: Many things! I'm working on the second poetry book, currently untitled, centering more on pain and its different forms. How it can be killer and savior, how it is salvation, hope, and destruction all in one. I'm also working on a fiction project that focuses on ancient Mesopotamian Mythology.



Art by Tamara Al-Qaisi-Coleman and is featured in her collection The Raven, The Bayou, & The Willow

SECOND STORY

Matt Kessler

Deesha Philyaw selected "Second Story" as the winner of the 2022 Barry Hannah Prize in Fiction. Of the story, Philyaw writes: "The author writes with such immediacy and raw detail, I think I got high just reading this story. A string of languid, almost-hallucinatory vignettes shape this deeply intimate, deeply strange narrative. There are layers upon layers of provocation and entanglement here. Ultimately, despite being part of a rotating squad of regulars and extras, Kip and his wasted crew of friends, frenemies, and hook-ups exude such loneliness, I can't help but still think about them."



The Second Story is our favorite bar. It reminds us of a small-town gay bar, the type that would be called Chances, or Drifters, or Missed Connections. It's downtown, off the loop, by Navy Pier, and, as everyone always emphasizes, the—second—oldest gay bar in Chicago. It still has that feel, covert, discreet, secretive. Everyone is welcome. It's not hip, it doesn't cater to types like leather daddies or muscle queens or butch dykes or fashion gays. It's just a smelly, old one-room bar with a TV connected to a laserdisc player, a dartboard, and a bartender that pours free shots when the mood is right. I'm four years sober and I don't go there anymore.

Preston watches Ciara's "Work" video on the television. Ciara and Missy Elliot dance in hard hats, suspenders and baggy yellow track suits atop an oil rig. Preston and I gossip about a late-night party in Bridgeport, he looks away and mouths the chorus, "Work work work... Bitch you better work."

Gary and I lean against the window ledge overlooking Ohio Street, sipping tequila sodas. At his bar stool sit three glossy Marc Jacobs bags—one extra-large, one medium, and one small. Our friend, the salesclerk, gave Gary these bags so he could post a silly video on Instagram, and we've carried them around the Mag Mile all afternoon. We wait for Dora, who'll be cut from her job at the Howard Brown thrift store at six, and we compare pictures of English fashion designers Henry Holland and Richard Nicoll on my iPhone, trying to decide who's hotter. I review the plan again for our prank: when Dora arrives, Gary will go to the bathroom and I'll convince her that he just spent \$16,000 at Marc Jacobs. He says, No, surely, she's not that gullible. I say, Watch, she'll believe anything, you just have to say it to her with a straight face. Dora walks through the door wearing a red backpack and I slap his arm and say, Shut up, shut up, shut up. She looks at us suspiciously and drops her backpack next to the Marc Jacobs bags. Wow, she says, what's gotten into you?

A man in a trench coat sits at the bar, asleep, with his head resting on his forearms. It's Friday, just after dinner, and a roomful of strangers stand and sing "Hollaback Girl." He doesn't wake up.

Zach, the bartender in the American Eagle hat, lights a match and spits a stream of fire above the till. A thrill from childhood runs through my body.

The Blackhawks play Game 7 of the Stanley Cup. The bar is packed and silent. Everyone stares at the TV. I wait for Rowan to get cut from Nightwood and try to figure out the rules to ice hockey. No music plays. The only sound is blades cutting into ice.

Coming down off mushrooms, by myself, in the middle of summer, on a late afternoon. Whitney Houston's "Queen of the Night" video is on the television. I try to write a poem about celebrity and pop stardom, and how Whitney the person is imitating the ideal of Whitney, the icon. The handwritten ink letters on my notebook paper look insignificant, frail, full of cracks. Whitney looks strong, monumental.

Zach, the bartender, pulls me by the collar of my Sisters of Mercy t-shirt and kisses me. You're cute, he says, write your number on the receipt. He texts me the next day while I'm at brunch with Rowan and writes, Sorry, I was blackout drunk last night, and I found this number in my wallet. I don't remember who you are. Face pic please?

Dora and I sit alone at the bar drinking bottles of Miller Lite. The bartender puts in a new DVD and skips ahead to the Pet Shop Boys' video "Heart." Dora hops off her stool, slaps the counter, points at the television and cheers. She says, Best Pet Shop Boys song ever. She cocks back her neck and shoulders, as if she's about to limbo, closes her eyes and, for a second, transports herself to a dance floor on a crowded night across town, as if she were surrounded by all of our friends.

Tank and I sneak out and jack each other off in the alley, by the dumpster behind the Burrito Beach.

Billy, Rowan and I sit in the back corner, stir our Jack and Cokes, and wait. It's just past noon on a Sunday and the place is empty. Last night, Billy slept with his friend's fiancé in Rowan's apartment. Billy's in town from San Francisco to shoot a music video and, today, he's bored. He stirs his drink again. He says, This place sucks, let's go to the W, Bear, buy me some lunch. He calls Rowan "Bear" but neither of them will explain what the nickname means or where it came from. Rowan tells him to finish his drink, and then we'll decide. Billy stands and paces the bar. He wears a San Francisco 49ers bomber jacket and faded Levi's, he's tall and handsome, and brings a distinctly straight vibe to this small bar that's pretty much a turn-on to everyone there. He sits next to the one woman at the bar and introduces himself. She's a short middle-aged woman with bleached blonde hair and highlighted tips. She's seated next to an older gay man with spiky hair and a puka necklace. They both dress like they're teenagers. Rowan and I don't talk; we watch Billy who is, somehow, always the center of attention.

Rowan, Preston, Tank, Dora the bartender and I stand in a semi-circle on the roof around Frances, who arrived from San Francisco to perform a drag show at the Berlin night club. He's young, blonde and wispy, with bunny rabbit teeth and a disarming way of standing near you and grabbing your forearm and laughing freely when you talk. All of us follow him on Twitter. He's the first person we know to post every intimate detail about his life non-stop. And now we're meeting him. He seems like a sane, sweet, charming, down-to-earth person despite his large online following and the crazy life of sex and

partying he tweets about. The bartender points towards Lake Michigan. Concrete skyscrapers block the view. It's May and the wind picks up and the sky turns dark with a threatening rain. I wear cut-off jean shorts, a red t-shirt and an unbuttoned flannel. Everyone moves closer to Frances, laughing, but I can't follow the conversation, my mind is buzzing from the line of coke we just snorted in the bathroom. The baggie is in my pocket, bait to lure Frances closer to me. A bag of heroin is in a tin container in my apartment. More bait for later on, an aggressive play I'll mention if the cards fall just right.

Rowan is typing into the keypad of his Blackberry with both thumbs. He laughs and smiles at the palm-sized silver device like they're on a date together. The clock says quarter past six. The bar is empty and the movie, *The Piano Teacher*, doesn't start until seven. Rowan texted throughout the cab ride and dinner too. I want to slap that phone out of his hands and crack the screen. He has no qualms about letting me know if I bore him, if I say something gauche or obvious, if I should just shut up. He'll change conversations while I'm mid-sentence, stare into the distance and not respond, or take out his phone and chat with other friends on Blackberry Messenger. I stand and say, Rowan, I'm going to go. He looks up, lifts an eyebrow, puts his hand on my wrist, squeezes. He says, What are you talking about? We already bought our tickets. I look at the dinged-up silver device in his hands and nod. I say, Put it away. He looks down and says, Hold on, one more thing. I say, No, now. Fine, he says, and flings it across the bar toward the wall. What do you want to talk about, he asks. What?

Gaspar's new Levi's are unzipped, his eyes are closed and his head is craning towards the window. A man he just met is pawing at his sweater and digging between his legs. It's the first time I've seen his cock, which looks like his bald head, only redder, less charming. Their kisses are slobbery, juvenile, sweet. Both men are in their late 50s. I sit on a plumber's lap and chat with Guillaume, Gaspar's husband, about the rest of the itinerary for their visit; they'll rent a car and drive to Louisiana to visit a much older American that Guillaume had an affair with when he was thirteen. The plumber is twice my size. He is from the Southside and wears a grey t-shirt that shows the flag of Chicago. He says, Look, I like you, I don't play around, we should go get dinner. Why do you want to see a schmoie like me? He has dark olive skin and colorless eyes that look like they're trying to find the con that everybody is playing. When he learns that Gaspar is Guillaume's husband, he becomes so upset on Guillaume's behalf that he loses his cool. He says, Look, I can't tell you how to live your life but that's not right. That's your husband. If I'm you, I beat that guy's ass. This makes Guillaume angry. Guillaume is Parisian and doesn't mince words. He's a bald bank executive with a commanding nose and taut cheeks that quickly show displeasure. He looks at the man like he's hired help and says, I'm not heterosexual. I'm not American. I don't care if he has some fun. It's okay. Why not? The plumber tosses me off his lap, tells me my friend is crazy and leaves.

Preston sits by the window in a tweed parka bent over an issue of *Cabinet* magazine. I set a saltshaker and a napkin with lime wedges next to him. I return with two shots of tequila and apologize for arriving a half-hour late. Sorry, I say, I was snorting Adderall. I lick the spot between my thumb and index finger, sprinkle salt on it, hold up my shot glass and wait for Preston. He hasn't turned to face me yet. He's tall, deliberate, imposing. He holds his emotions within his chest. He has a tight fade and custom-designed gold rimmed glasses. He closes his magazine, tucks it in his canvas tote bag, glances at the drink and stares at me. He says, Girl, get it together. It's Wednesday afternoon. He waves at the empty bar. His voice is angry and loud. He says, We're in our thirties now. You're either the type of person who has a problem or you aren't. Figure it out.

Rowan rubs my thighs through my jeans and nestles his beard into my neck. I'm seated on a barstool, propped against the counter, with my ankles around his heels. He whispers, Let's get in a cab and go back to Pilsen. It's been months since I've seen him. I'm there with Dora. He's there with Preston, James, Jun and Janice. Janice stares at us involuntarily like the sight of two men kissing makes her uncomfortable. Her look reminds me that a night with Rowan can spiral into three or four, cocaine, pills. I say, Not tonight. I'm here with Dora. I promised I'd take a cab up north with her. I can't ditch her. He says, I can pay for Dora's cab. I push Rowan away and glance back at Janice and feel ashamed for my erection.

Out on the sidewalk we hear car brakes, high heels, the crinkling of Cheetos bags; upstairs the sound is warm, yellow, contained, firelit.

Bored, waiting for Rowan, watching the excited faces of twenty-year-olds rush up the stairs on the black-and-white CCTV. A girl wears a glittery silver headband with a dangly star. Is this because it's Saturday or because she's going to a gay bar? Her outfit is a patronizing nod towards festivity, a camouflage. I text Rowan, tell him I'm leaving, anywhere is better than here.

The bar smells like New Orleans motel carpet; it's the saddest place in the world.

Look, I say, and kick Rowan's suede derbies. Zach's about to spit fire again. I cruelly lift my lips in the outline of a smile. Rowan stares across the bar. His expression says, Look at how pathetic and childish they all are. Fire? What is this? A talent show?

Gay marriage. This is a debate. Rowan is against it. Kenneth Anger is against it.

Rowan wears a Swedish black winter coat with a fanning grey collar like a tiger's mane. It smells like the cardboard sleeves from 70s records, ramen noodle packets, cigarette ash, the vintage velvet gold couch in his Pilsen apartment and red wine. I hold his ribs an extra moment as I greet him and scratch his dirty brown hair behind his ear. He smiles the smile of a boy, a rat. I'll come in that mouth soon, I think.

For all Rowan's big talk, he's a prude. He doesn't do apps, he won't let me fuck him in the ass, he still believes in love. He just wants to be treated like shit. He wants to be ignored. By a straight-acting guy.

The men are sad sacks: husbands hoping to solicit before dinner, office workers in corduroy pants and brown derbies, over-the-hill alcoholics trying to latch onto a free drink by saying a funny word or two. They're warnings, all of them. I just don't see it that way because I'm thirty-two and still have options.

Tank and Rowan dislike each other. Tank's screen name is Pigwar, Rowan's is WideToReceive, mine is XoxoGossipGirl.

The night that Kenneth visits from London, we meet a ballet dancer from the Chicago ballet. He says Rowan looks like Jesus and teaches him how to do a jeté. We go back to his high-rise apartment and Rowan calls me his boyfriend. Dora and Kenneth sit on the ballet dancer's clam-shell white leather couch and laugh when Rowan says this, but I'm touched. The ballet dancer says he didn't know Jesus had a boyfriend. He thinks Jesus is lying.

Rowan says, Girl, we should do heroin together. You would love it. When he finds out that Frances and I snorted H, listened to trip hop, and held each other all weekend, Rowan is so angry that he deactivates his Twitter account and begins to see a therapist.

Tequila soda and MDMA, the tingle.

Prince's Super Bowl Halftime show plays on the TV. His purple guitar is shaped like the symbol that he uses as a stage name. The symbol is a combination of the male and female gender glyphs, and Prince calls it the love symbol. As he plays his solo, his silhouette is projected onto a large white backdrop. The love symbol looks like an enormous cock that he strokes in front of the Super Bowl crowd and, together, the male and female symbols on the guitar form the hermaphroditic glyph. This performance is for everyone and no one, we are all perverts and lovers, we all want to be stroked.

Rowan teaches me a trick. Buy the bartender a shot. Why? Just do it.

Gary goes to the bathroom. Next to the barstool sit three Marc Jacobs bags, and I hold his new pink rose Marc Jacobs watch, which I show to Dora. Girl, I say, Gary just spent \$16,000 at Marc Jacobs. Dora's eyes widen and she repeats the sum in long, stretched-out syllables. I say, Either Gary's really good with money, or he's really bad with money. Dora shakes her head and says, Gary's something. Then she looks around the bar to make sure he isn't within earshot and asks, Do you think his mom is helping him out?

Gaspar and Guillaume tell me that they're sure Rowan is in love with me. They're sure, they just know. How? His eyes stay glued to me when I'm not looking—that is the best and only proof.

Cocaine in the bathroom. Rowan snorts a line without making a sound. He tells me that the snorting noise is gauche. I ask him how he learned to do that. He says, practice, lots of practice. I bend my head over the line of cocaine and sound like a greedy little piglet. I try again and again, but never get it down, I'm always in the troth.

Tank won't come if Rowan is there. Tank hates Rowan because Rowan always starts fights. Last time I was at Rowan's apartment, we watched a movie on Netflix after we fucked and, in the upper right-hand corner, I noticed that Rowan was signed into Tank's account. I'm sure, now, that there's more to the story but I'm too upset to ask in a way that sounds

nonchalant. Rule number one, you always have to be nonchalant about sex, no one belongs to anybody.

Tequila soda—the drink of summer. Whiskey ginger—the drink of winter. Gin and tonic— the drink of spring.

The bathroom at the Second story is unexpectedly homely and spacious. It is a single-use bathroom with a lock, a sink, a mirror, and a toilet that's clean. It reminds me of my grandmother's bathroom in New Jersey. The only thing missing is the water pick. Adderall is more enjoyable than coke. Coke is glamorous. Adderall leads to sex. Coke leads to spaced-out stereo sessions on the couch. Rowan and I don't choose. We like both.

Rowan steals his roommate's Game Boy and trades it for an eightball at 3 am. We go uptown to find the dealer nodding out over a plate of pancakes at a diner in the Ukrainian Village, and we wake him up and take a cab to his storage unit where he keeps his bicycles and video games. The dealer agrees to hold the Game Boy as collateral until Rowan pays him back. We stay up all night watching Robert Altman's *Pret-A-Porter* and lie next to each other on the couch. We haven't had sex yet, ever. I slip my hand beneath Rowan's t-shirt and rub his chest. He pushes my hand away and says he really doesn't think we should do that, that he's been trying really hard to make sure that I'm the friend he doesn't do that with. I'm disappointed, but I'm also relieved, because I agree with him. We go to sleep and, in the morning, there's still so much coke in the bag on the desk. I do another line. Rowan tells me that I'm acting really unattractive, that it's ten a.m. I tell him that it's ok, I can be unattractive, we're bros.

I host an after-hours at my apartment after the Second Story closes. Roo is in town from New York and everyone wants to hang out late into the night because it's so nice to see him again. Dora comes, Lay comes, and a few other friends come too. We dance to "Womanizer," "Spin Spin Sugar," and "Never Let Me Down." Everyone kisses. The lights are out, a lamp is knocked over, a record is stepped-on and broken. Rowan and I dance. Our lips meet, I feel his beard, his tongue. That night we blow each other on the floor next to a girl who watches us as she pretends to be asleep. Rowan says, Weird, I thought your dick would be bigger, and passes out on my chest.

We do it again the next night. We're supposed to meet up with everyone for brunch in the morning, and Rowan texts the thread, Guess what? Kip just came in my mouth! See you at ten. It's supposed to be a joke, an intentionally bad spin on the overly friendly and formal language of text message threads. But everyone acts really put off and tells us that we have problems, which embarrasses me. Later, Rowan asks, Is this our first fight? a phrase from a reality TV dating show that he likes to repeat ironically. I don't see him again for two weeks.

A Sisters of Mercy t-shirt, a green army parka, a black baseball cap and combat boots. This is what I wear when I go to the Second Story alone.

MATT KESSLER'S writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *MTV News*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Pitchfork* and *Vice*. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Literature & Creative Writing at the University of Southern California.

WHAT GIRLS DO ONLINE

Mialise Carney



We're only fifteen but we've all lived full lives. Not full lives like working nine-to-five through a hangover or crying after breakup sex in the back of our high school sweethearts Honda. Big lives like Becky505 who's had cancer three times, or so she says. She posts her old pictures to the forum, and we all log in after school and ooh and aww. *Your hair used to be sooo pretty*, we write, tracing our sticky fingers over her movie-star curls. We don't mean to hurt her, we don't know what else to say. *All gone :/*, she types, but she never posts any pictures to prove it. It's a good way to explain why she's not in school during the day like the rest of us, but we don't know the real reason yet. Still, we girls mourn, imagine her blood coursing warm with invasion. We kneel by our beds and pray for the cure every night.

xEowyn's mom doesn't know she still goes online. She got her laptop taken away after she tried to meet up with a guy from Germany who said he was a hundred and twelve in elvish years but looked more like forty-five. Eowyn shared all the PMs with us, and we coached her on what to say and how to take the right kinds of mirror pics to look young enough to be loved and old enough to be worth the risk. She never got good at makeup, her lipstick a waxy, drugstore red spilling over the delicate edges of her lips, her eyes a bit too wide and fox hungry. She has the longest hair we've ever seen, and she says it's

because she wants to be the German guy's elven queen, but we think her family's kind of Amish. Either way, she got found out and now can only log on to the forum at her school's library computer during lunch.

FoxyFernanda999 spends most of her time in the subforum where we trade tips on how not to eat. We created subforums, subdivision, places to get a little more seen, but most of us end up back in justttt chattttinggg anyway where we're teaching daizzee03 how to catfish men on omegle. Fernanda being alone and hungry makes us a little sad so we flip between two tabs on our screens. She's posting about all the food she ate out of the vending machine at lunch, crisp and cheesy, turning her insides to thick sour goo. *im soooo weak*); she types. *It's ok, just try harder tmr*, we remind her, because we love her and want her to be happy. We'd want to hear the same. She thanks us by posting a grainy cellphone picture of her pinching her sides and we tell her she's beautiful even though we don't believe it.

Morgann<33 says she started cutting herself six months ago. She talks about it like our parents talk about nicotine cravings, like going a day without a drag will turn her rabid. *Omg bb, that must be sooo painful D: we say, be safe!! ur beautifull!* and *ugh, I wish I could but my mom would killlll me*. When she posts a picture, only two of us see it before a mod takes it down. She gets a seven day ban for graphic imagery, but the girls tell us they looked like cat scratches, like pen marks. Still, we celebrate her return, post balloon gifs and kitten pictures, sigh with relief when she tells us the pain of being away from our ecosystem. She was so lonely and bored like we're all lonely and bored. We're the only friends we have—we'd comfort each other to the end of the world.

On Halloween, Olucky0 says she hurt her stepbrother but we don't believe her. We're all into Creepypastas now and Horselvr8's mom made her see a therapist because she kept seeing a tall, thin man following her on the walk back from grandparent's home at night. Lucky logs on around when most of our parents are shutting off the internet and posts a yellowed, blurry picture of her short fingers stained rust, nails caked brown like she'd been digging for earthworms.

Eowyn says, *omg dont scare me! U know i don't like horror movies ;_;*

Lucky tells us everything, how she planned it, hid a kitchen knife up her sleeve but she didn't think she'd actually really do it until she did. *He's not moving, wat do I do??* she ends and sends another picture, a grainy outline of a face and a brown puddle on the carpet.

Morgan PMs us—*you think she's for real? Should we tell someone??*

We don't respond right away. What would we say if we told? We don't know her real name, or where she lives, or if her stepbrother was really actually touching her like she said he was, and if we don't believe her, why would anybody else? It was never meant to be real.

So we don't tell, we do what we always do when one of us girls spins up a crisis. We stay up as late as our parents allow us, we comfort Lucky through the night. *Its ok!!! u didn't mean it. he deserved it, right? So its not ur fault. when ur mom comes home just tell her ur really sorry and it was an accident.. she can't be mad right? If she is, shes crazy.. u didn't do anything wrong.*

When we see her picture, later, on TV, in our mothers' kitchens and grandmothers' living rooms, we say nothing, not to ourselves or to each other. We continue posting, comparing, and comforting. We don't mention her absence, but we craft ourselves softer, more mundane lives. Lucky is just on hiatus, afk, she'll be back. We girls always find our way back.

MIALISE CARNEY is a writer and MFA candidate at California State University, Fresno. She is the senior fiction editor at *The Normal School*, and her writing has appeared in *Barren Magazine*, *Okay Donkey*, and *The Boiler*, among others. Read more of her work at mialisecarney.com.

SICKO

Grace Shuyi Liew

Runner-up for the 2022 Barry Hannah Prize in Fiction, judged by Deesha Philyaw



At the time, we lived above an ice cream shop. It was a Baskin Robbins franchise, the first of its kind in our town.

One day, the Baskin Robbins sign fell and crushed an innocent customer to death.

I was not home when it happened. I was out bowling with Jenny. For weeks, I'd put it off. Jenny wanted me to meet her new

girlfriend. I didn't care. I even pulled the poverty card, which I should have known would only complicate things. Then I had to turn down her offer to pay for me. I made a great fool of myself, citing this and that reason. Jenny looked at me with amusement, saying nothing, she waited until I finally ran out of excuses. The new girlfriend was a random user on Taobao who commented on Jenny's product review. Jenny had bought a pair of nude stockings and was obsessed with how it totally matched her leg color. Or maybe it was some eyeliner with infinite staying power. I lost track. Jenny was always buying fake Chanel jackets or beauty shit and then sharing elaborate reviews on the internet with strangers. She liked the attention. She'd tell me all about her latest hauls too, but maybe she always knew, I was faking my interest. Her excitement went out my other ear. Besides, I seldom bought things.

Then, out of nowhere, a whole girlfriend. The idea that people could fall in love over their shared opinions about what they bought felt as far-fetched as flying to the moon.

I couldn't believe it.

That same day, right before the sign fell, we were supposed to receive a piano.

Only Ah Ma was home. Bobo was at school. Mama had work as usual.

But after Ah Ma let the delivery people in, she pretended to be a hired cleaner who didn't live there. She retreated to the kitchen.

Ah Ma at age seventy was still a bull. She wanted nothing to do with the piano, sent to us by Mama's Big Boss. She thought Big Boss smelled like death.

You can't pay me a million dollars to touch his things!

That's the thing about Ah Ma, she believes in her feelings. If she was pleased to be proven right, she never showed it, not even when a local reporter came around to interview her after the accident.

"I was cooking yellow coconut stew, the kind you cannot find here. Suddenly the walls started shaking. Even the TV jumped!" The English translation crawled in a ribbon under her stunned face. "This sort of tragedy is fated."

Big Boss owned the chili sauce factory – our town's pride and biggest employer. We all had a sort of reverence toward him, but I think secretly we all felt he was beneath us. This was because his birth parents were first cousins.

Everyone knew the story: He came out of the womb completely yellow, with a head full of curly hair and a pair of quiet lungs. In their panic, the nurses dropped him. No one could say if his mental impediments were the result of an incestuous union or falling on his head. He never cried. His parents held out until his fourth birthday. Then they gave him up to his infertile aunt, who raised him as her own. Maybe it was her love that healed him – he spoke his first word just shy of his sixth birthday and appeared normal ever since. Eventually, he inherited the aunt's chili sauce factory. Not long after he took over, he put his product on the internet. People from overseas started eating his chili sauce. It made us even prouder. We laughed about the angmohs sweating and getting all red-faced from our small town's chili sauce.

But we were also shrewd. Mama's shift partner, Xiao Ting, had a son who went to America on the Rotary Club's scholarship. On a visit home, he told his mother to fight. She laughed at him at first. But when she told other people in the factory, with some self-effacing pride, ha ha ha, America has filled him with some crazy ideas, some of us said we saw his point. We debated for a few months. Eventually we took a risk. We surmised Big Boss was a reasonable person. So we complained in unison. The spicy fumes. The long work hours. The low wages. The sudden increase in production. Even the unreliable A/C in the bus that took us to the factory.

He soothed every demand until we were convinced of his sincerity. So it was true. One's character in this life could erase one's sins from the previous life.

We forgave him for being born in incest.

I only met Big Boss that one time.

He'd invited himself over for dinner. Our cramped apartment never saw a single guest, but Mama could not turn him down.

We had to lift Bobo's mattress from the living room and stack it on the bed I shared with Ah Ma and Mama. The apartment only had one bedroom for all four of us. Then we unfolded a table in the bright vacant rectangle where Bobo's mattress used to lie.

Ah Ma muttered under her breath the whole time about bad luck. She believed in karma. Big Boss's birth meant he was destined to be a dark star in this life.

But Mama said, everyone has a past, no?

I was surprised when I finally saw Big Boss. He was a small man. He had the kind of face that appeared eager to be happy, but somehow fell short. His throat gurgled when he spoke. His words came out murky, as if greased with spit. It made you brace for impact. I locked up my knees so hard during dinner that they almost buckled when I finally stood up.

Mama cooked for five hours.

Roast duck, pig's blood, chicken heart, pig's kidney, the kind of food that repairs, which told us either Big Boss was broken somewhere, or Mama was already loving him in secret.

Ah Ma said, with some bitterness, she was born clever, better than any of us, when Big Boss asked Mama who taught you how to cook like this.

Ah Ma continued dismissing his compliments until even Mama looked sad. After we cleared the table, Ah Ma disappeared immediately to the kitchen to soak in the warbling sounds of her little TV.

Big Boss had no choice but to turn to me.

Eh, I said, my day was fine. I was just at Jenny's house, as usual. Did my homework in her room while she took her piano lessons downstairs.

Big Boss's eyes grew big.

He had a well-traveled great aunt. The kind who enjoyed music and parties, went abroad to study. Oxford? He thought I had her spirit. *Doesn't she?* He asked my mother, as if she knew this great aunt too. *Too bad she died without marrying.*

She left behind a piano, which he had no use for.

At this point we grew a little blue in the face.

I waited for Mama's voice of reason, no way a piano could fit in here. But she kept smiling, newly eager to be happy. I started to say, piano is more Jenny's thing, I don't care, but Mama sent me a message with her eyes, so I stopped talking.

Later, I asked Ah Ma how she detected that this man brought bad luck. *That's easy, he had yellow energy, like a light bulb waiting to be switched off.*

**

It took five men and two hours to move the piano up the flight of narrow stairs, before finally scraping it through our front door.

Then, someone must have let go without warning.

The piano crashed to our floor with so much force that the Baskin Robbins sign downstairs shook loose. When it fell, a swooshing sound was heard. Then, a thud. The victim, a man in his thirties, was licking a mint chocolate chip ice cream cone. He didn't even have time to scream.

Ah Ma said out loud what we were all thinking. *It should have been the landlord!*

That would have been nice. But evil people lived longer. Our landlord was a slick man from Shenzhen who hated our guts. He owned our apartment and the Baskin Robbins downstairs. Every day, he ran upstairs to bang on our door like a reliable little alarm.

Your feet! So heavy! Are you humans or elephants?

Turn down the TV!

Did someone die? Who is crying so loudly?

We endured his humiliation without once complaining back about him. Did he think we wanted to live above his shop? The smell of ice cream coated the insides of our noses. I can still smell the rancid-sweet dairy if I just close my eyes. The worst part was the roaches. We plugged everything – the tub drain, kitchen sink, bathroom sink – and still the roaches flitted around as if we were the intruders to their rightful lair. It was normal to wake up and find a flattened roach pressed under your calf, behind your neck. Once, when I got up to change into my school uniform, a dead roach fell out of my pants. I shrieked and shrieked just to wake the landlord. Ah Ma had to slap me in the face to get me to shut up.

**

The death changed everything; it made me realize how emotionally unstable adults could be. Mama grew stony. Ah Ma told her, every morning, for a whole month, that this was the sort of thing that happened when you shot above your station. Big Boss took the piano back. We stopped talking about him. I never saw him again. I wanted to ask Mama when did she meet Big Boss's great aunt. I was curious about the sort of woman who didn't marry and spent her days listening to music. But the way Mama's shoulders bunched up permanently led me to believe she had no straight answer to my question. Her shoulders stayed that way for a whole year. The dead man's widow pursued a settlement with the landlord, but it's not clear if anything ever came of it. Ah Ma often said, with excitement, that she deserved every cent she could squeeze out of the landlord, but Mama just left the room whenever this discussion came up. The landlord stopped knocking on our door, no matter how loud we got. He was probably afraid of our bad luck. But I knew not to say that out loud too.

**

Before all that, Jenny laughed until she cried when I told her the story.

Did it smooch his head like a watermelon?

That made me start laughing with her, both of us vibrating as if a motor buzzed up our insides, uncontrollable *ha ha ha ha ha* shaking something loose between us, until her new girlfriend called her *sicko*.

That broke the spell.

Jenny's chest puffed out. *I can be sicker.*

She took off running. I knew what she was looking for, but Jenny's new girlfriend just followed along. She was like a sheep.

We ran until we were out of breath. We stopped downstairs of my apartment.

The sign was already reinstalled. Awash in the perkiest blue and pink, it was lit up like a homing beacon. Inside the store, our landlord was flitting around in his bright pink polo uniform. I looked at Jenny, who was lit up in her own way. Her face looked ready to wash out with the tide.

I felt called to the moment, but for what, I had no clue.

I didn't care if we didn't find bloody brain mush on the sign. Death was cool enough as a concept; I didn't need further evidence. But Jenny was buoyant on a quest.

The sign was too high for us to get a good look in.

I followed Jenny's lead and, on tiptoes, craned my neck and squinted hard. The bottom of the sign was so clean you could be convinced it never killed anyone. I felt Jenny's disappointment. Her new girlfriend just stood to the side, not even trying to look.

When the store doors swung open, we all jumped back.

The landlord handed us free cups of butter pecan ice cream.

Then he shooed us. He told us we looked like homeless ghosts. He told us to stop haunting his shop.

Jenny's new girlfriend immediately started apologizing.

But the way he said *homeless ghosts* activated our motors again. It made us crazy. Jenny cracked first. Then I exploded. The sound that came out of me felt ambitious, like it was waiting to be released this whole time. It made me believe in the sort of things you had no words for. Jenny was laughing so hard she looked pained. I started to believe my feelings were all true, even the unspeakable ones. I felt wise, I finally understood a deep truth: everything was only a matter of intention. If I tried hard enough, I had the power to mentally command the sign to come unhinged once more. I could, I really could. This time it wouldn't miss. It would flatten the landlord's head. Split it open like watermelon. Show Jenny everything she wanted to see. Jenny, who was still cackling, Jenny, who got everything she ever wanted. I felt her like a distant happiness. I felt finally capable. I could make her craziest dreams come true. I could laugh like this forever.

Born and raised in Malaysia, **GRACE SHUYI LIEW** is a lesbian poet and fiction writer currently living in Brooklyn, New York. Her awards include the MacDowell Fellowship, Tin House Writer in Residence, Stella Kupferberg Memorial Short Story Prize (judged by Min Jin Lee), Center for Fiction in New York, and more. She is the author of the poetry collection *Careen* (Noemi Press, 2019), which has been named Electric Literature's "14 Unmissable Poetry Books of 2019."

WILDERNESS AS MANUFACTURED HOME

Kara Dorris

The secret-non-secret is to live someplace you hate, like the body. Or a trailer house with trapdoors & bunnies rather than a brick Tudor. *Neither the honey nor the bee.* It's why we never escaped. Spent money on fast cars, Precious Moments, clothes rather than mortgages. *For better days*, we said when we meant *instant gratification*. When I needed to forget every goddamn minute, I forgot to hate the rats nesting in my bed, the cockroaches clinging to the ceiling. *It was what it was.* But I wouldn't invite friends for sleepovers; I wouldn't invite boys into my body either. We wear these vardos—nothing but the ambition to move on & restlessness when we can't. The non-secret is trailer houses don't even have wheels, can only be moved with the right equipment. Another way language fails us. Another way hunger lies.

some wheels are not ours
 to keep, are removed
 upon delivery

*

[REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] trapdoor [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] *instant* [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] goddamn [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] *what it was* [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] language [REDACTED] hunger [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
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 upon delivery

*

either honey or bee

we

wear

nothing but

restlessness

ours

to keep

Kara Dorris is the author of two poetry collections: *Have Ruin, Will Travel* (Finishing Line Press, 2019) and *When the Body is a Guardrail* (2020). She has also published five chapbooks: *Elective Affinities* (dancing girl press, 2011), *Night Ride Home* (Finishing Line Press, 2012), *Sonnets from Vada's Beauty Parlor & Chainsaw Repair* (dancing girl press, 2018), *Untitled Film Still Museum* (CW Books, 2019), and *Carnival Bound [or, please unwrap me]* (The Cupboard Pamphlet, 2020). Her poetry has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *DIAGRAM*, *I-70 Review*, *Southword*, *Rising Phoenix*, *Harpur Palate*, *Cutbank*, *Hayden Ferry Review*, *Tinderbox*, *Puerto del Sol*, *The Tulane Review*, and *Crazyhorse*, among others literary journals, as well as the anthology *Beauty is a Verb* (Cinco Puntos Press, 2011). Her prose has appeared in *Wordgathering*, *Breath and Shadow*, *Waxwing*, and the anthology *The Right Way to be Crippled and Naked* (Cinco Puntos Press, 2016). She earned a MFA in creative writing at New Mexico State University and a PhD in literature and poetry at the University of North Texas. Currently, she is a visiting assistant professor of English at Illinois College. For more information, please visit karadorris.com.



2 POEMS

John-Michael Bloomquist

The Parable of St. Francis and Félicette

St. Francis can talk to animals, but he believes they can read his mind. Sparrows sing his silent psalms, monkeys dance his holy joy, but cats purr the rough waters of his distressed mind, calming him with each caress, dreaming away his worries in their naps.

When French astronomers found Félicette, a stray tuxedo cat, on the streets of Paris, they took her home to their lab and inserted electrodes into her brain, installed a phone socket that protruded from her marble forehead. A cord running from her skull was hooked up to a computer that recorded and amplified her brainwaves as squiggly lines, little white fish swimming and scattering on a black screen.

Félicette was sealed in a snug white plastic box with her head sticking out, a cat carrier bag designed for a long, hard journey. She was inserted into a dark metal tube and secured in the cone of a rocket. The astronomers launched her 100 miles into the air so they could record what five minutes of weightlessness did to a brain similar to ours. Félicette wasn't surprised. She knew we've been sending cats to the heavens since the Egyptians placed their prayers in the paws of their mummified pets, even breaking kitten necks when the call was urgent. After she came back from space, the men who studied the heavens killed her, cutting open her brain to examine the electrodes.

St. Francis wants to know if Félicette felt the same change he did when he went from being the vessel of prayer to the message itself. *It is just as painful to ferry prayers, she says, as it is to be the prayer disseminated and dissected.*

The Parable of St. Francis and Tetra, the First Cloned Monkey

After his crusade against his neighbors in Perugia, his capture and imprisonment, St. Francis became two men. One terrified of what he had done, another taken up in the raptures of who he was becoming close to. Both lived within him and like nuclear fusion mushrooming a miniature sun; this tension radiated his love for nature and sanctified him.

Half the saint has always thought himself unworthy, while the other half had gone beyond, permeating the world like hot water around a tea bag, seeping out the flavor and color that revives as it enters another body.

Tetra was split in half when she was eight cells old to become two genetically identical sacks of embryos.

St. Francis wants to be like Christ, two natures in one, but he cannot talk to Christ, the echo within the silence living within. So he asks the monkey, Tetra: do you feel the gap of being half of another? Or do you feel as if the two you became is better off with each other in this double life?

Tetra, looking like every other rhesus macaque to those who do not have eyes to see, says, *I am a simian among simians; there is no truer self than that for us, cousin sapien.*

John-Michael Bloomquist lives in DC with his wife, son, and his needy black cat, Zbigniew Herbert the IX. He is the author of the forthcoming collection, *Rocket Celestial (White Stag, 2023)*. He was an editor of *Poems from the Jail Dorm*, a collection of incarcerated men's poetry. His poetry has been published in *Heavy Feather Review*, *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Third Coast*, among others, and he has been anthologized in *And Blue Will Rise Over Yellow: An International Poetry Anthology for Ukraine* (Kallisto Gaia Press, 2023) He can be found at www.john-michaelbloomquist.com.



AN ANIMAL LEARNING

Nisha Atalie

Nature wavers in between the divine and the material. Far from being something “natural” itself, nature hovers over things like a ghost.

–Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature*

A boy is dead: people everywhere
gathered to pull his body from
the water when the waves
wouldn't let him go.

Let me tell you about the dead cicadas
everywhere I walk, not the husks
but the brown-grey bodies, thick
parts facing up, eyes closed.

I went in and out of “nature” and
cracked my body in half. Out
of me burst hundreds of sprouts,
some fragile green

and others already starting to rot.
I started treating the
sea like a god and now animals
everywhere make eye contact.

I am going to slice this nectarine
from Michigan and lick the juice
off my fingers. I am going to let
the world harvest me limb

from limb, hair and honey
and bone. I come back
from nature into flesh. Nothing surges
like the water inside.

Nisha Atalie is a poet, editor, and doctoral student in literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She loves reading and writing about animals, ecology, and how our relationships to the nonhuman are shaped by colonialism. Her work has been published in *Poem-A-Day*, *Blood Orange Review*, *Indianapolis Review*, and elsewhere. Her work has received the Eileen Lannan Poetry prize and placed third for the 2022 Treehouse Climate Action Poem Prize from the *Academy of American Poets*.



QUIZ ON FREUD'S INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS EXPANDED FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Paige Welsh

1. Doorknobs melt as you try to escape
a hallway made of cake.
All you have is a palm full of icing. ____
2. You make love
to your high school history teacher
in a life raft. He chokes you
as he climaxes. ____
3. You're peeing in the bathroom
of your childhood home
when the walls fall down.
You're in the middle of COP22.
Greta Thunberg
is so ashamed of you. ____
4. You get an emergency alert on your phone
because Godzilla is coming.
You sit in a hot tub
and watch as she stomps your house. ____
5. Jesus, Buddha, and Rama
sit on the porch in plastic chairs
drinking hard lemonades
as the muddy water rises.
You can't sit with them
because you're on your period. ____
6. You walk through the desert.
A white man in a suit waits at the oasis.
You open his briefcase.
It's full of scrabble tiles,
so you beat him to death
with a participation trophy. ____
7. You chew on blue marbles
and catch your teeth
as they fall out. You glue them
back together with gold filigree

and offer them to an elder
shark who needs them more. _____

Answer key:

1. You want to have sex with your father.
2. You want to have sex with your father.
3. You want to have sex with your father.
4. You want to have sex with your father.
5. You want to have sex with your father.
6. You want to have sex with your father.
7. You want to have sex with your father.

Born in Edmonton, Alberta, Paige Welsh's creative work has been published in *Narrative Magazine*, *Bear Review*, and *Gigantic Sequins*. You can find her book reviews in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*. When she's not writing, she likes to garden with her partner Chris, and their cat, Biscuits.



EMERSON SYNECDOCHE

Anthony Borruso

An earlobe climbed the lectern to tell us of our collective value.
 Wake, he said, your sluggard intellect, lift those iron lids, cut
 that transatlantic umbilical cord that siphons all sustenance back
 to the motherland. Don't you feel it, dormant inside you, an American
 consciousness? Isn't there a great man we can cobble from our piecemeal
 anatomy? Eyebrows sat up in their seats, toenails shouted amen, a fist
 liberated its fingers in an act of unabashed praise. So long had we suspected
 there was something exceptional in this chunk of land we'd cultivated,
 the eardrums heard it coming like the reverberations of a far-off steam engine.
 In tophats and tailcoats, eyeballs sprouted up and down the coast, ready
 to confront every refractory fact and translate the breaking sigh of each wave.
 Take it all in, he said, the warblings of robins, the twisted syntax
 of the Mississippi. Be the centipede, the milkweed, the bog and its
 army of cattails, the tongue that laps up every last fragment.

Anthony Borruso is pursuing his Ph.D. in Creative Writing at Florida State University where he is a poetry editor for *Southeast Review*. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Pleiades*, *Spillway*, *The Journal*, *THRUSH*, *Moon City Review*, *decomp*, *Frontier*, and elsewhere.



2 POEMS

Erik Carlsen

Snap

God, in her gown
At the banquet
Eats by the fire.

When they drilled
My tooth I was hoping
They would save
What came out.

Nobody fights
Against the stall
And wins, not sheep,
Not goats.

Tonight I'm making a mold
Out of you while you sleep,
And then I will start to translate.

The important part of the mill
Snapped and the stones touched,
Everyone went home early.

The bulbs are coming up, and soon
Everyone will know I meant to plant tulips.

In the middle of the night

What I recall most, definitely
Is doubting the rabbit's entry.

It was just there, then gone.
When I'm driving, and I see one just disappear
I fear that I've hit it.

Wounds appear on me like guests,
And overstay. I know well how
To beg the dark to come, and even more
How to beg the dark to stay.

In the dark, ribbon and rope are without length,
And all my wounds are healed. This scratch
Behind my ear is gone, and blood has not gone through the pillowcase,

The rabbits are not run over,
But asleep in their burrows,
And the rain won't come
To wash them out like lost gloves
Into the street.

Erik Carlsen resides in Washington with the ghost of a dog named
Duke.



BLADE OF LAMB

Megan Hall

I roused to watch you
fling fat into a bucket
of my day's shorn body
wet with animal
in your meat room
perched my tender focus
when you lured
a cologne of decay
from that cooler vault
I crushed too close
while you slid your boning
knife over blazing muscle
into some helpless beast
pierced the barrier
joked yourself godly
I rushed to worship
learned to package
myself playing adult
under you
a girl's challenge
to collect small altars
ticket stubs until
you felt I was prime
to feed my rare flesh
bleed out my youth
on your cutting board

Megan Lynn Hall is a poet, writing teacher, and cultural enthusiast who is currently pursuing a master's degree in creative writing at The University of Southern Mississippi. In her endeavors to convey human experience through language, she considers ideas of womanhood as they relate to environment, empowerment, and generational progression.



BOSTON COMMON

C. Francis Fisher

A man goes by my bench on a bike. He veers towards
a pigeon and hits it. The guts cover me — refuse,
rat feces. I flail through the park dripping intestine.
My young, hot body inspires horror, disgust!
That did not happen. At the last second the bird
remembered to fly. Suddenly, it is too vague to live.
I've picked up the bad habit of mentioning the weather.
A breeze goes quietly by. Children play
in inches of water. If given the ocean, I'd only
know to swim laps by the shore. There is a duck boat,
brightly pink. There are sparrows. I heard something
about Shakespeare once — people loved him so much they
brought those birds to America? — was that it? I only
remember waking without you again. Not at home. Not here.

C. Francis Fisher is a writer and translator based in Brooklyn. She received her MFA from Columbia University where she now teaches writing. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Raleigh Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books* among others. Her poem, "Self-Portrait at 25" was selected as the winner for the 2021 Academy of American Poets Prize for Columbia University. A book of her translations, "In the Glittering Maw: Selected Poems of Joyce Mansour," is forthcoming with *World Poetry Books* in 2024.

