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Cover Page Footnote
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Erratum
In the original, Gabriel Awuah Mainoo's full name was incomplete in publication. This has been corrected.

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Gabriel Awuah Mainoo

A twosome blaq beak sonnet

Look at me! look at my arm! i have
ploughed & planted & gathered into barns
& no man could head me! & ain't i a woman?
— Sojourner Truth

my mother is a tribe of raccoons in my portmanteau. my sons, suns, sonnets & grandsons wear all my tennis shorts. sons, suns, sonnets & grandsons wear all my tennis shorts which means my mother's hair is a toothache ingrown on their spirits; a civil war to remember in their mouths because of her. my mother is a coal-welded tennis racket in my backpack of divorced women. my mother is a coal-welded tennis racket in my backpack of divorced women. my mother is an umpire i carry to my games. an umpire i carry to my games. my mother was at the US Open & every grand slam & people named her after things which cannot be repelled. mother was at the US Open & every grand slam & people named her after things which cannot be repelled so they accepted her like a second serve & decided to make her a memory. but tomorrow or blaq or twilight are failed adjectives for memory. tomorrow or blaq or twilight are failed adjectives for memory. in a minute i tell you what she doesn't want you to know. tell you what she doesn't want you to know. lie to you about all her sensitive parts, arts & acts. about all her sensitive parts, arts & acts. anger is good dessert when you're the hunger. is good dessert when you're the hunger. my mother calls her white darling nigger digger or lazy landlord when foamed in liquor.

men like her who like her panic to make her a lover, a second wife, a side chica, chick or chicken. a lover, a second wife, a side chica, chick or chicken. her resentment is that of rain licking the smudge of danger from a penknife. rain licking the smudge of danger from a penknife. in a minute i'll lie to you about the ingredients of anger. lie to you about the ingredients of anger. it is made of 7 ladles of contrition, clean sludge, 3 true cubes of blaq oppression & adrenaline. 7 ladles of contrition, clean sludge, 3 true cubes of blaq oppression & adrenaline. most of my defeats are victories because my double faults are metamorphosed into aces because mother is magnetic wind because she calls me good ball or good child despite the bureaucracy of lines men who settle the score before the game behind casino cold rooms. defeats are victories because my double faults are metamorphosed into aces because mother is magnetic wind because she calls me good ball or good child despite the bureaucracy of lines men who settle the score before the game behind casino cold rooms. i hear a doorbell in the newspaper. a doorbell in the newspaper. i walk out of the place; Serena W, Venus & Osaka taking selfies on a yacht, gold all in their anklets, gold all in their beads, the gold of night spattered in their laugh.
Bryce Baron-Sips

*The Black Box of Community Ecology*

Written after the Eldorado/Gender Reveal Fire

Wildlife is stochastic community ecology is stochastic wildfires are stochastic stability is stochastic

Community ecology is a black box the motions of fire are a black box god is a black box god is a series of predictable invisible factors Tolstoy was a series of predictable invisible factors

The bouncing god of stochastic motion the bouncing god of particles god is a metamorphic rock god is the chance that your house will be the one in the neighborhood overlooked by the fire god is fleeing god is slipping like a family of rats on a tile floor

The shadow passes over and god chose you motion chose you you were stochastically formulated to be chosen your motivations are a black box community ecology is a black box you know what decision you will make as you burn through everything else available you know what choice you will make before you even decide to make it
Panting heavily, a polar bear shifts her weight onto her hind legs. She is emaciated. She waits as a stream of bubbles circles the slice of ice upon which she balances. And then it happens—the bubbles dissolve. The bear stifles her breathing lest she draw attention to herself. She is so close. Slowly, like Botticelli’s Venus birthed from sea foam, the seal emerges from the depths, head erect. The bear grinds her teeth. This is her one chance. With her last energy, she lunges forward and swipes at the blubbery animal, gripping it with her claws. She locks her jaws around the seal’s neck and drags it away from the ice’s edge, one leg wrapped around her catch. For a moment, she lies down on the ice, body pressed down on the seal luxuriously. Before feasting, she must catch her breath. She closes her eyes, letting the slippery wet of the seal’s body seep into her brittle hair. The seal is fighting against her—thrashing, writhing. But it, too, is weak. The weak can recognize their own kind.

When the polar bear feels strong enough to lift her torso up again, the seal has suffocated. And so, she begins to eat, tearing through the blubber. She paws and chews ravenously, stuffing her body with as much as she can handle, and then more. She is eating for two.

~

“Hush. And listen.”
As if the body is tender,

my mother’s stories rouse me in the belly of dawn.

Her voice, the sound of red sand blistering chapped feet.

We crave water, the triumph of cold over burn, the whetting of thirst.

I lie in a sleep that is too warm and womb-like for dreaming.

Body curdling like bad milk, I encase my hips in a chrysalis.

Her stories come to me before my throat is ready to gulp,

like unripe wine, like early menstruation.

~

It is 1970. Summer in Prato, Italy. The textile factories are in full swing, churning out yards of patterned cloth like butter. At dusk, my mother’s mother leaves the factory, her feet swollen from standing all day, her stomach rumbling. She turns left after leaving the back door, taking the long route to avoid the swarm of Socialists engulfing pedestrians in pamphlets. She must make another inconvenient turn before reaching the city center to avoid the town hall meeting that all the locals know is being chaired by Communist. The heat and humidity, she decides, make for fertile ground for political sciocchezze. She misses Sicily: her birthplace, the birthplace of her children. She misses not just her family, but also the predictable routine of farm life. Life was harder in the South—food scarcer, pockets emptier, the labor more physical, the Mafia stronger—but the radius of life was smaller, tighter, closer. Now her circle has expanded, and with it, the need for more. Only the day before did she finally realize that she no longer works to live—she lives to work.
But she consoles herself with the reminder that she works for her children, for the daughter and son who will have more on their plates than she ever could dream of wanting. Her purpose is to make her children grow, to ripen them. Ever since she lost her first babies during the stillbirth two years before her daughter was born—she crosses herself now, as her stomach drops—she has made her purpose to keep her children alive.

She reaches the market a quarter of an hour before it closes for the night. She quickly gathers her necessities: flour, sugar, eggs, meat. She counts her coins for the fourth time that day. Yes, she does have enough money this week to buy an extra portion of steak for herself. As she arranges the items on the counter to pay, she notices a well-dressed little boy holding his mother’s hand at the next counter over, sipping a carton of juice. The saleswoman follows her gaze. “Ah yes, we finally have those cartons of fruit juice in stock. They are excellent for young kids. Lots of vitamins to make them grow big and strong.” The woman meets the saleswoman’s keen gaze. “We keep them right over there.” The woman glides left, following the angle of the pointed finger. She lifts one of the rectangular cartons, turning it over. She sees text. Some description of benefits, she assumes. She never learned how to read. Her father made her leave school in second grade so that she could help look after her newborn sister and take care of the farm.

The woman decides to buy two cartons, one for each of her children. But when the saleswoman adds the prices of all the items together, the woman gasps quietly. With a knowing look at the lady, she slips back to the butcher station, parcel of meat in hand. She returns it to the butcher, asking him to remove a piece and retie the string. The man gives the woman a hard look and sighs as if he’s been asked to perform this task many
times before. But the woman doesn’t feel ashamed. In fact, she feels a kind of pride bubbling in her chest. The woman might not be eating tonight, but her children will feast.

Amidst the streaked light of snowfall, one can make out the gyrating rumps of two creatures—one quadruple the size of the other. The mother nudges her infant’s nose, licking snowflakes off his rumpled forehead. The flowers of frost are cold in her mouth, colder than usual. When she had been with child, the mother believed that the scope of winter would shrink when another life entered hers; when there was another with whom to share the endless nights. But winter just expanded, lengthened, deepened. Now, there is a constant need to find food, more and more as her son grows. And she sleeps less and less fitfully as the cub gains energy and learns how to play with snow, sink into the powdery surface and slide across ice. He begins leaving her side spontaneously, silently, stealthily sneaking off. She knows wolves roam these parts, that her little son is no match for them. She knows, only too well, that her baby might be gambling his life away without even realizing. And so, she begins to feed him her portions of fish and seal meat, trying to make his body grow as fast as it can so that if he ever needs to, he can be a match for ravenous wolves and adult polar bears alike. Perhaps her presence is intimidating enough to a wolf, but the mother knows that she is no match for a hungry polar bear bachelor. Not confident that she can protect her son from all potential attackers, she commits to equipping him with the tools necessary to fend for himself. At night, the boy cuddles against her breast, sucking hard on her teats. But her body no longer produces milk. In
fact, she stopped producing milk long ago, even when she was still living with her son in the little den she had built to bear the infant. Her baby, however, is ruthless. Nourishment from the sea is not enough. He wants his mother to give herself to him, too. But there is only so much she can give away. He is hurting her now, biting her nipples, breathing desperately. She moans, trying to pull her sleepy body up from the ice. He doesn’t let go. She growls, baring her teeth. The boy’s eyes are closed, his mouth clinging tightly to his mother’s chest, legs tucked between hers. She claws at him, first at his hips, and then at his chest. He lets out a cry, the sound tainting the starless sky like a flash of lightning. Instinctively, he curls into himself, shuddering. When he finally unravels his body, the mother sees a dark line zipped across the soft pink of his hairless stomach. She has cut her cub. With a slight shiver, she puts her right claw into her mouth, tasting the steel of his blood, once a gift from her own body.

~

“Sometimes in the body, there is quiet.”

My mother’s voice is soft, like abalone, too soft.

I remember the taste of her rage, the biting sting of blood

inside my cheek, steel. There was a time I tried to paint the violence
to therapists, hands and words violating a body I quickly learned to unpossess.

But memory became an unnecessary burden, a sour aftertaste.

The muscularity of forgetfulness put its palms on my lips.
And pressed.

~

It is 1961. Autumn in Caltanissetta, Sicily. The crumbling stone outhouse is nearly a thousand meters from the main farmhouse, set behind the pigsty. Amidst the sounds of oinking and splattering of diseased dung, my teenage grandmother wails between the tight walls. Her chest heaves, neck straining as she tries to lift her head. She is too tired, and her scalp collapses heavily onto the earthen floor. The midwife, whose arrival was nearly two hours too late, tells the girl she must not exert herself. “Non alzarti, Signorina.” The old woman realizes her mistake only after, as she tries to soak up the pooling blood with a dirty rag. The young girl is, in fact, married—even if only just. She is a Signora. Even if her husband is in Catania, looking for work. Even if the girl eloped with her husband because her father refused to give his blessing to a man who had no land to his name. Even if the girl is living in the outhouse-turned-shed of her great-aunt, she is still a Signora because she has a gold band on her left ring finger and because her husband has already entered her body and has evidently made himself at home in there.

When the girl gives birth, she doesn’t have a baby. She has two. The old woman doesn’t tell her this. Instead, she commands the girl to keep her eyes shut. Between screeches and howls, the girl clenches her teeth and nods painfully, a rivulet of sweat infested with tears dribbling down her dirty chin. The midwife takes the bloodied rag and, with practiced hands, tightly rolls the two silent infant forms into the cloth. She tries not to look too closely, but she can make out that one of the forms is female and the other
male. The babies are four months too early. They may be breathing—just barely—for the
time being, yet they are too weak to survive for more than a few days at most. The woman
knows this, or at least she tells herself she does. And so, she carries the dripping parcel of
premature twins out to the pigsty and tosses it into the trough. Then she goes to the well
and rinses her hands of any sin. She stoically crosses herself. Then she returns to the girl.
She is sorry for the child, lying weak and anemic on the earth. The child who is now
childless. She lifts the girl gently and lays her in a patch of clean straw strewn across the
earthen floor. With clean rags, the midwife cleanses the girl’s body of any evidence of
birth. After some minutes, her wailing dissolves into the occasional gulp. She understands,
from the delicacy with which the rough woman is tending to her, that something has gone
wrong. But she still whispers, almost incoherently, “Dov’è il mio bambino?” The midwife
cracks her knuckles for a few moments, playing with the question. How many times, she
wonders, have women asked that question? How many times did the Virgin Mother
herself wonder where is my child? And then the midwife knows how to answer.
“Loro…eh…lui è con Dio.” They…be is with God. The old woman inhales sharply, clucking
at herself for slipping. She clenches her eyelids shut, trying to ground herself. She doesn’t
see how the girl’s body shudders.

As the midwife leaves the haggard girl, now resting in her cot in a clean
nightdress, she tucks her rosary between her breasts like the secret she is keeping. Before
slipping out through the doorless exit, the old woman wonders if she is really protecting
the young lady from any additional hurt by hiding the fact that she lost two babies instead
of just one. A loss is a loss. She considers correcting the story, but the young woman is
sleeping, and so she takes her leave, wordlessly. When the air feels calm and slow and
uninterrupted by the *anziana’s* breathing, the girl blinks her swollen eyes open, uncried tears still caught between her thick eyelashes. She curls into herself, her middle still soft and warm and full. She feels so empty, so alone. She wishes now that she had asked the midwife to let her hold them, to press them against her chest, even if they were already dead or about to die. She doesn’t even know what they smelled like, if they shared her husband’s soft chin and rolling forehead, if they had inherited her delicate fingers. She has no memory to roll around in her mouth, to keep her satiated when she is hungry for motherhood. All she has is the knowing that she birthed two babies, and she lost both—she had a double shot at life, at *giving* life, and still she failed. All she has is the fractured memory of her body convulsing, twice, into two splattered, bloody, excruciatingly silent lives.

And she has the taste of her own body between her lips. Her body had shuddered a third time, about a quarter of an hour after she birthed her twins. The midwife had taken the placenta, boiled it in the main house, and brought the steaming flesh back to the girl on a little plate. She hand-fed the girl her own insides, against her will, forcing the organ her body had expelled back inside her. The only reason the young woman chewed the tough meat and swallowed it was because the old woman promised that these nutrients would grant her the ability to birth a healthy child the next time. The only reason she listened is because of her faith in “the next time.” *La prossima volta.* But still, she wonders how consuming the very organ that failed to provide her infants with sufficient nutrients to make them strong enough to live is any sort of promise for future motherhood. She wishes, for a moment, that her mother was with her now, to hold her and pray into her neck with gentle kisses. But the woman disowned her once she married her husband at
sixteen years of age, even though she returned to the door of her childhood home the next day, just with a ring on her finger and her insides deflowered. She sobs into the straw, both motherless and childless.

~

In her sleep, the polar bear’s nose twitches maniacally. She is inhaling the scent of her cub, memorizing his presence. Mother and son sleep braided together—limbs twisted and insulated. He has doubled in size now, and so has his appetite. Now, as the season of blizzards approaches, the mother worries about how she will continue to seek out enough to eat. She knows she is not alone in her hunt, that there are other mothers and other bachelors looking to feed themselves and their children.

In the morning, the cub slithers out from beneath his mother’s heavy paw and waddles out into the sunshine. He is entranced by the light, by the texture of ice against the raw pads of his paws, against his soft lips. He burrows, creating a little nest of snow where he can make himself at home, away from his mother.

The sun is drooping, flailing its rays against the horizon when the polar bear forces herself upright. She is ravenous to the point where her stomach has numbed itself. It is time to scavenge, to feed her son. She stretches out her limbs, her nose tingling as she inhales the air in search of the musky flavors of his fur. Pausing, mid-stretch, she turns behind her, then ahead, then to each of her sides. Chuffing wildly, she rears her head.

*Where is her son?*
“How will you begin again?”

The morning I woke with fear of the art
your mothering had mastered,
I realized there is only one genesis.

“Let there be light,” God said, and light appeared.

There is no undoing, no redoing.

God was pleased; the light remained lit.

My beginning cannot be begun, again.

I am a consequence of love, decontextualized.

A diapason, the dismemberment
of daughterhood. I am the inhaling
of the aftermath, yours.

I am about to implode.

Every morning, my mother’s mother lays out two plates of light brown bread, each coated heavily in sugar. Beside each plate she plants a carton of fruit juice. As she waits for her children to sit at the table, she ties the apron strings tighter around her waist. She pats down her sides, her fingers drumming alongside her rib cage. She has lost a good
deal of weight. Her lips pucker into a small, pleased smile. As if in response, her stomach growls angrily. She sips only at the black coffee she brewed earlier that morning. That is all she will allow herself today.

“Non lo voglio, mamma,” her daughter whines as soon as she approaches the table. “I don’t want the juice.” Every morning, her daughter complains, and, every morning, her mother reaches for her husband’s belt hanging from the hook by the main door. She has never belted her children—it’s her husband’s duty—but now that he is away in Germany, working for Volkswagen, she must be responsible for punishing her children into obedience. Mustn’t she?

Her son begins to eat, hungrily, desperately. He eats with his hands, tearing chunks of bread off the crust, sucking on the pillowy flesh, and dipping the moist pieces into the mini pools of sugar on his plate. Between slurps of fruit juice, he requests another slice, and then another. Each time, his mother dusts an extra layer of sugar onto the crusty bread, trying to satiate her son. And then he asks for water, for more juice, anything to conquer his unquenchable thirst. My son is growing, the woman tells herself. It’s my duty to nourish him.

Her daughter is still sitting at the table in silence, her ankles tucked around each other as she stares angrily at the table, the plastic straw still attached to the back of the fruit juice carton. She is refusing her mother’s food, her mother’s demands, her mother’s love. The woman locks her gaze with her daughter’s. Eyeing the untouched slice of sugared bread, she warns her child with a reproachful glare in her eyes. And then her daughter does the unthinkable—she lifts the ceramic plate of her breakfast and shatters it to the ground. “Non lo voglio.” Her daughter’s hoarse voice slithers out of her body like the
tarry fumes through the smokestacks at the factory. And then, her voice caged within barred teeth, “Ti odio!” I hate you.

Without flinching, her mother wraps the belt around her wrist, the buckles at the other end, as she approaches my mother. She teaches her daughter a mother’s love, responsibility, duty. These lessons cannot be unlearned.

~

The polar bear’s cub has been gone for a full moon cycle. The mother no longer sleeps, no longer scavenges. She has no one to feed but herself, and no need to feed herself if her body has become useless—she has no child to warm, to nestle, to mother. She spends her days shrugging off the falling snow, her weak shoulders drooping and rising painfully as she searches for the silhouette of her cub, the too-large ears set against his tiny head, the too-short, waddling limbs. He is too young to live without her, without her milk, without her protection.

And then it strikes her. Instinctively, primally, she burrows her nose into the ground and begins following the scent. There is something meaty in the air, a richness exuded. She salivates, her eyes growing wide and wild. Her eyes narrow, beady and red. Her body suddenly full of energy, she bounds into the wind, the patterns of her paws disrupting the sleek overcoat of a snowed-in winter.

In the distance, an off-white lump, stained by dirty water and blood, gyrates. Something is rolling on the ground. No, it’s running towards her. Huffing now, the polar bear growls. She is out of breath, overwhelmed by the deepening pit of her stomach. For
a moment, she pauses on a shard of ice, lifting herself off the ground to stand on her rear legs. Her ears twitch in the wind as makes out the sound of moaning. Something is hurt.

“Where did you come from?”

_I am of your hands, from your hands, in your hands._

_We have the same hands, pianist’s fingers, ballerina’s knuckles._

_The shape of my body is the shape of yours._

_I came from you—me, the consequence of silence,_

_my origin story itself a consequence of silence._

_I came from the source whence you sprung._

My grandmother sits in the waiting room of the hospital in Pisa. Her husband’s second cousin is a doctor here, and he has access to the insulin therapy her little boy needs. She had sat with him as the doctors hooked him up to an IV, her satchel full of homemade food, a loaf of fresh bread, juice cartons. _He is hungry. He needs to eat. He needs to drink._ When the nurses left the room, the mother quickly pulled out a carton of juice, stuck the sharp end of the straw through the foil on the top, and shoved the straw between
her son’s waiting lips. He slurped down the juice within seconds, sobbing, begging for another.

“Signora, no!” The nurse quickly snatched away the just-emptied carton and quickly herded the mother out of the room, slamming the door of her son’s room shut. The nurse pushed her into a seat in the waiting room, told her to stay put.

Boiling with fury, steaming with concern, she now shivers in the air-conditioned space, wishing her husband were with her. He has had to stay home with their daughter, to make sure she eats, to make sure she does not empty her stomach into the toilet after each meal. They can no longer leave her alone at home, even though their daughter is now only a few years younger than her mother was when she birthed her.

The woman slumps over in the chair, her face in her hands. Through her satchel, the loaf of bread pokes at her bony side. Salivating, the woman feels her fingers reaching for the bread. The nurses won’t let her son have any of her food, anything she tries to feed him, and so she is free to eat it. Isn’t she? Her fingers tremble as they grasp the thick crust. But she is so close—almost the whole day without eating. A deep murmur emerges from her stomach, followed by a hiccup sound, as her body wars with her mind. But then the nurse rushes in—her son. He has fallen into a coma. The woman drops everything: satchel, bread, her hunger.

~

With a roar, the polar bear swipes blindly at the creature before her, the falling snow blurring her vision. The steely scent of blood is still fresh on the creature’s hair, on
its skin. It, too, is weak. The weak can recognize their own kind. The bear’s tongue lolls out as she fights, consumed by a raging hunger.

As gusts of wind heave through her body, chilling her to the bone, she paws at the ground, at her neck, at her eyes, at the creature before her that has stopped fighting. With a deep sigh, she throws herself onto its rumpled body, breathing heavily. When the polar bear feels strong enough to lift her torso up again, the creature has suffocated. The snow has died down. She slithers off its body and examines her catch. It is a small polar bear, a male, perhaps a year old. The blubber will be rich, fresh, young.

And so, she begins to eat, tearing through the blubber, her actions hallucinatory. She paws and chews ravenously, stuffing her body with as much as she can handle, and then more. Attempting to fill an unconquerable hunger, an unconquerable loss, she nearly forgets she has lost her son.

When she wakes up from a trance-like sleep, her ribs sore and her stomach aching from having stretched itself out so far, she unfurls her tight limbs. There is life in her body, again. Warmth seeps through her bones as her heart pumps blood through her organs. Her left claw knocks against something soft. She turns around—it is the head of last night’s meal. There is something familiar about the too-large ears that makes her tremble. With a shiver, she grinds her jaw, the taste of her own body’s gift between her lips. She is childless.

~
“And what would you say if you could?”

Mama, I cleft you.

My childhood was a concerto in D Minor,
    like yours.

I am still learning how to pulp my loneliness,
    how to sip at amnesia like ambrosia.
    how do I forgive you: our inheritance—
        il nostro retaggio—
            shared, maybe, but devoid of purity,
                a sentence abandoned—

    “Please.”

—in midair. I would tell you I am your home,

    I am my own home, that I would hibernate
        in the space between our legs
            as if I were at home in my origin story.

    If you could.
Maggie Kennedy

*A Sculptor to the Sculpted*

Giacometti to his Walking Man

You have to be cut down a peg,whittled by circumstance,a shaving here, a slice there

until the slights, jeers, fumbles,even my duplicity,this paring of your heart

a bargained gale, more promisethan disillusion; you must want
to go home then realize

this is your home now; I must cutfrom you the girth of all you expectedwas yours unconditionally until

you are pin-thin, slight enough
to settle with the other scrapes,elbow to elbow, yet never quite touch

until you are the rhythm of the dimtrain churning to and from the deskwhere you are a bent head

among countless bent heads until I tugyour chin up to witness the chantof geese echoing down the skyscrapers

because you must be a fabricator,a prevaricator to draw a certain splendorfrom the steam rising off the sewer ducts,

to keep walking despite your lodged feet;I must take you to the edge of tears bythe unexpected kindness of pigeons;

you will not know then but this is what saves you, gives you audacity, impudence
to love another stick figure for
how she sees you seeing her and for
a time this is all there will be,
astonishment at your luck,

how your outlines fit together as if
carved for each other; you must mistake
this charity for the rest of your life

until I release you to the fire, sparks
catching, for you cannot escape
the times you live in,

smoke will creep through windows,
infiltrate sheets; you will cough over
convictions, choke on burning hypocrisy,

compliment the fire one ideal at a time
until you are baseless, brittle;
you will see those you love dragged,

go wild and embrace the flames until
you are alone inside your frame,
bronzed and scabbed but underneath

you are soft as clay and you can’t stop
saying sorry, your shadow crossing
another’s as you cross the square

until you notice the play of light between
shadows and pigeons daring for a crumb
and you yourself look up.
Jeffrey Doka

The Builder

I first saw the Builder while waiting for my bus at its Southgate stop. My eyes ached from coding ‘til two in the morning, so I slid down the bench and pulled up my hoodie for shade. How late would the 120 be today? Fifteen minutes? Twenty? Luckily, I was working a trash temp job and didn’t have to care much about Daly City Transit’s flexible commute times.

A flicker of movement registered through my half-closed eyes, and I shifted to make room for someone else on the bench. No one was there.

On the elementary school playground across from my stop, a tubby kid in a white polo and slacks, donning glasses thicker than my thumbs, ran toward a patch of pine trees and mud just beyond the rubber turf that blanketed the playground. He kept sprinting until he reached the border fence, hunkered down, and started digging through the rough soil. He worked his way through the top-layer of dirt and started piling lumps of reddish clay to his side.

Welp, kids were weird. I settled back into my slouch and dozed until the bus came. It arrived twenty five minutes late, exceeding even my low expectations.

When the recess bell echoed across the street the next day, the same kid was back in the mud. Now, he started harvesting some pine twigs and organizing them in neat rows beside his clay pile. A minute later, he was propping up a rough triangle with one hand and searching for a well-sized stick with the other to form a pyramid.

A few cars drifted past, and when I looked back, the kid was constructing another pyramid next to the first. Didn’t every kid have toys and LEGO’s and stuff? Maybe his
dad was an avid do-it-yourselfer or something. Well, rolling up your own sleeves and
doing things yourself was sometimes the safest bet.

My bus ran late, and another bell rang across the street. Their recess over, kids
filtered back inside their school’s gray walls, but the Builder was still at it. He added a final
stick to connect the two pyramids before sprinting for the doors.

A minute passed, and fog softened the little clay spheres binding the pyramids
together. Then, the morning winds rushed in from the bay as scheduled. Those feeble
pyramids didn’t stand a chance, and in moments, all his work lay in a scattered mess. I
couldn’t help but bark out an angry laugh.

It only took a few more days of watching the same thing for me to realize that
this kid wasn’t just goofing around. The Builder started every recess setting up his two
support pyramids, and as he got faster at those, he was able to set up a third allowing him
to balance some scaffolding a tier higher. After that, he’d use some spit and clay to form
a lattice of tiny twigs threading between the main pillars of his construction.

He never got close to finishing before the bell rang, and he’d always have to start
from scratch on the next day. Whether it was careless kids playing tag, a ham-fisted bully
kicking it over, or just the late-morning gales, the creation never survived.

Well, that was how the world dealt with innovators. I should know. My name
should have been pasted all over TechCrunch. I should have been in the tech hall of fame
next to Marc Benioff and good ol’ Zuck, but it turned out the petty kids that knocked over
the Builder’s work all grew up to be VCs and NDA-infringing engineers.

A few weeks into the Builder’s gauntlet, a freckled kid with orange hair flopped
down across from him and started idly chatting. Occasionally, the new kid would help the
Builder clean up a pine twig or two and maybe hold a few sticks upright while the Builder laid in support. Sometimes other kids would pop up and the freckled kid would get distracted and knock over the portion of the construction they’d been working on. The Builder never complained; he just seemed thankful for the company. I could have told him it wouldn’t be long before he lost that too.

All it took for the Freckles to leave was a pair of older kids playing keep-away with a tennis ball. After they laughed at the freckled kid for missing the first few tosses, he ran back to the Builder only to steal one of the Builder’s pine support pillars. Freckles sprinted back to the older kids’ game, swinging wildly at the ball soaring over his head with the Builder’s stick. Typical.

I’d had big name people lining up at my door to work on my new language and assembly interpreter, but the second they got bigger paychecks and a chance to get their own names on patents I deserved… they disappeared. Did their conscience tug at them? Did it matter that their new bosses were psychopaths, and rarely made good on their promises? Nope. As long as they could guest lecture YCombinator’s classes, chalk their names and extravagant job titles on the blackboard, and brag about how brilliant they were, they’d put up with anything.

When a dark-haired girl started helping the Builder, I knew she was the same type as the freckled kid. She was more proactive, sure, but the fact that other kids followed her into the pine enclosure where the Builder was working told me she was popular. The popular ones were always the first to turn on you.

The Builder took it all in stride. He only cast one surprised look at her and the pack of kids that had ducked through the branches behind her and resumed packing
handfuls of clay against the bases of all his support pillars. As the girl’s friends realized that there wasn’t going to be any entertainment from the Builder, they left. Only the dark-haired girl remained. She sat beside him to help pick bark off of a heap of pine branches.

To my and apparently the Builder’s surprise, she showed up at the beginning of recess on the next day. He shyly pointed to another set of sticks that needed cleaning and she set to work beside him. She probably didn’t realize that she’d just painted a target on the kid’s back.

She’d left to find some bigger twigs for the construction supports when the first bully came. He stumbled through the trees feigning interest in the kids’ work, but even from my bench I noticed him glance over his shoulder to ensure the girl was far enough away not to see.

The coast must have been clear because he smashed his foot into the center of the kid’s construction. The Builder didn’t shout or scream, he just lunged forward trying to catch some of the more precise twig work he’d just finished on the second tier.

He never saw the bully’s second foot move to kick dust into his eyes.

The Builder yelped and jerked away, clapping his fingers over his eyes. The structure crumbled, and he crouched forward to shield any unbroken pieces.

I stood up at my bench, fists clenched, but the bully had already run back into the playground. The Builder calmly blinked the dirt out of his eyes and started repairing the damaged foundation. The bell was minutes away from ringing. What was the point?

The girl returned with a few thumb-thick branches in hand. She faltered when she met the Builder’s red eyes. Saying nothing, she sat beside him and helped rebuild. The
Builder kept focusing on his work as if there’d been no interruption at all, but I still wondered if that little life lesson had sunk in. The world starts teaching us early.

The girl helped the Builder for the rest of the week, and I couldn’t figure it out. What was in it for her? Was she making some sort of statement against the other kids? Could this be some sort of other popularity play? She always looked concerned or sad when someone picked on the Builder (usually when she wasn’t in view), but after, she’d just continue helping him with his construction. The Builder didn’t talk much as far as I could tell. He only seemed to murmur a few functional words to the girl when they huddled over a tricky balance between a few sticks or when they deliberated over an angle on some pine-needle lattice work.

The next Monday, she even ignored a pack of her friends chiding her and shouting her name to duck beneath some yellow tape fencing off a new addition being built into the school. She returned a few minutes later covered in mud and holding fistfuls of rich gray clay from the construction site. She marched past her goggling friends and thumped the glossy new clay in front of the Builder. His eyes lit up and they set to work with the new materials. I shook my head, impressed. Well, maybe she was just as curious as I was about the Builder’s project.

That day, the lattice of twigs and needles lasted through the first few minutes of the morning winds. By the time I climbed on the bus, the structure had only half tipped over more from a structural imbalance than any weakness in the new clay.

As the weather started warming, the kids’ efforts redoubled. They worked at a breakneck pace, and each day they progressed farther in the construction. At certain
angles, I could see curved lines and the makings of a form. I leaned forward on my bench, all thoughts of my temp job forgotten.

It was only a day later when it occurred to me. They were rushing because the summer holidays were close. The morning fog burned off by noon these days, and streaks of sunlight regularly pierced Daly City’s morning gray haze. I didn’t know what schedule the district here was on; they could only have weeks or even days left.

I frowned. There was nothing like deadlines to turn a team sour. Markus had left weeks before our prototype had been due, and he’d taken a bunch of my code with him. I’d shouted a bit too much and two more engineers left that month. It had been the beginning of the end. Would the Builder’s little alliance fall apart as thoroughly as mine or as close to the finish line?

The kids still worked shoulder to shoulder, but real worry began to darken the Builder’s eyes. Between phases of rebuilding today’s construction from the remains of yesterday’s, he’d glance over at the girl with concern. Could she be leaving school? Her parent’s moving? Or was he just nervous that after a summer apart his friend wouldn’t help him rebuild in the fall?

Whatever the worry, the looming future only pushed them to work faster. Their nimble hands flew over the structure, and their eyes never left their work. I remembered getting into flows like that, before all the people and backstabbing and drama. Just building for the sake of the project, the joy of the new thing I’d will into existence.

All the flaky kids and bullies now played elsewhere, ignoring the two kids like an old game that had lost its luster. More sharp lines grew discernable among the blend of sticks and needles. They were getting close.
A blast of stinking smoke blurred my view and made my mouth taste like diesel and soot. I coughed and looked up. My bus was pulling away. Temp job it was, but I needed the money.

I cursed and sprinted after the bus catching up to it on the next block. Covered in sweat I slumped into my seat and scolded myself. I knew better than to get caught up in a build again, especially one that wasn’t my own. I was being an idiot to let my curiosity get the better of me. I knew how life worked, I knew the agony of watching something beautiful and new fade back into the old meaningless cruelties. I had learned one hard truth among all the lost projects, broken friendships, and tarnished joys. Nothing good ever remained.

I resolved to not visit that bus stop again. Yes. I would start walking to the 120 stop a few blocks further up the street. It would be easier that way.

I tried the next morning, I really did, but muscle memory kicked in once I left my apartment and I’d already walked halfway to my normal bus stop before catching my mistake. I almost turned around and walked all the way back anyways, but something kept my feet planted. If I left now, I’d never know what the Builder was constructing. I’d never figure out why he’d pushed through all that bullying and work. Cursing, I jogged the rest of the way to my stop.

The icy fog crept beneath my collar, and I shivered even as I reached my familiar bench. The lot was empty. Wait… was it Saturday? Or worse, had the school finally shut down for summer? The bell rang a moment later, and I laughed as I realized my mistake. I’d arrived twenty minutes early for the slowest bus on the Daly City route.
The kids set to work with staggering efficiency. They also must have somehow refined the girl’s clay between classes because it now held up perfectly in the humid weather. The build looked like a practiced dance. Without looking up, the Builder held out a cleaned pine branch, and the girl seamlessly attached it to the supports. Their hands blurred over the construction and the little structure seemed to grow out of the earth itself, another tree in the grove.

Then, an advertisement for Facebook Messenger blocked my view. I jumped back reflexively before realizing that this was the 120—my ride. Impossibly, it had arrived on time. The driver jerked his chin at me, apparently trying to save me the effort of chasing him again, but I sat for a moment, uncertain.

A breath later, I waved the driver off. I’d compose an apology to my manager later.

The bus rumbled past, and when I waved the diesel smoke out of my eyes, the kids were standing. The structure had risen to almost match the Builder’s height and they were both attaching pieces with the improved clay in a blur. They only had moments before the recess bell would ring.

They were both so engrossed, so focused on the build, that I saw it coalesce into a complete creation a moment before she did.

The trees, all the twigs, and the mid-morning light and the shadows of the pines—all of them combined to form lines that looked like they were suspended in mid-air over the dusty ground. The lines formed an ornate Chinese character. A name.

The Builder attached the last piece and stepped back.
The girl’s hands clapped over her mouth, and she finally understood. Her name, wrought from hand-polished pine, hung in front of her, seemingly suspended midair. All that work, all those hours, all to say the simplest thing.

The Builder glanced up from his dust-caked hands and finally met her eyes. His fingers shook and his mouth twitched nervously, and he blushed from ear to ear.

I held my breath. Nothing moved. Only the faint hum of distant traffic stirred the silence.

The girl’s shoulder shook. A sob.

Then, she pulled the Builder into a bone-crunching hug. Her shoulders shook again, and tears dotted the Builder’s polo. They held each other for a full minute.

The recess bell rang.

They stepped away, and both studied their shoes. Still, as they hurried back to class, timely as always, they held hands the whole way.

Head bent in thought, I leaned against my resin bench. The next bus was at least forty minutes away. I studied the Builder’s creation, and an icy knowledge settled in my stomach. I’d seen time and cruelty and pettiness erode my builds into nothing, and now I’d have to watch the edifice the Builder had constructed for her crumble as well. Even artifices made for the right reasons crumbled eventually. With the winds and fog like they were, I would witness everything from the first branch breaking off to the last sigh as the structure collapsed into a meaningless heap long before my next bus arrived.

Ten minutes passed. The fog congealed into a heavy drizzle, but the structure held. Minutes later the 29 bus blasted past in a swirl of wind and smoke, but the ornately wrought character remained hovering in midair, supported by the girl’s pristine white clay
and the Builder’s invisible lattice of sticks. Muddy water flowed in rivulets around the artifice’s base, but her name remained immovable above it all.

When my bus finally arrived, I hopped to my feet, buoyed by an elation I couldn’t explain.

Grinning like a moron, I hurried past the shuffling passengers to the back of my bus’s window to get a final view of the structure. Still standing. I laughed aloud, drawing a few worried looks from my fellow commuters.

I didn’t care.

The bus pulled away from the stop, and I pressed my nose against the back window’s cold glass, not letting the structure out of my sight. I watched it until we turned a corner and the school disappeared from view.

From that day on, I walked the few extra blocks to the 120’s next stop. Even on jogs or strolls around my neighborhood, I never passed that school or my old resin bench again. It was a build of my own, you see, formed out of the spit and clay and mud of my own memories, so that in my mind, at least, the artifice those two built would never fall.
Emilee Kinney

*Self-Portrait*

I’ve crashed into a snowbank outside
the church I only attended for funerals
and birthday parties slept with shadows
of cornstalks rustling the blanket thumbtacked
across my window picked at the insulation foam
exposed and bubbling along the unfinished sill,
collected the bugs that died in it for made-up spells

I’ve ridden in beds of pickups with wind pulling my hair
and tears like Fall whisking leaves and late bloomers
from branches I’ve loved men who spit black
from their lips and wear steel-toed boots
to the grocery store I’ve kissed women
who button their flannels to the nape of their ribs,
skin glowing and dewy from lakes and bonfires

I’ve worked under sun and rain horseback
and wagon-bound I’ve had a lot of trouble believing
in God why is he a father and also a son?
Why is Mary nothing more than an unsuspecting womb?
They say leaves are for healing but we collect them like ashes,
pull them away from gardens and homes hope
they decay without clogging the creek I’ve fallen into
a pile of raked leaves used my body to soak
their damp into my clothes I know the Great Lakes
are most beautiful when they lap at tree roots teeth
at a muddy bank scatter sheaves of ice and colored glass
in places we can reach I’ve sat on a bucket in the woods
for hours with snow falling in slow heavy breaths
and a gun across my lap I’ve held a doe’s legs open
while they gutted her insides pulled organs clean out of a buck
without gloves I’ve learned the difference
between pulling a bowstring taut as the veins
in men’s necks and how you do not pull a trigger
just as you do not pull your fingers into a fist
untuck that thumb raise your pitchfork point down
only point at what you want to kill or mark or love.
“Untitled” by David Boyle
Karen Regen-Tuero

Belongings

Once it was decided, everything was fairly straightforward. The lady on the phone (impatient, with a thick Indian accent) had said, “Nothing to eat or drink after midnight, ay! Not even water or candy. Do you understand, Virginia?” as if she were a child, not a middle-aged mother of a kindergartner. Her appointment was for 7:45am, so she thought that if she went to bed early without reading, there would be just a few hours in the morning—while she laid out Laura’s clothes, made Laura pancakes and Pete a buttered raisin bun and left the house in the dark—when she would have nothing in her stomach to pad the nausea.

When she got to Main Street in Flushing, to the bus stop for the Express into the city (walking slowly, her hood up against the cold, past the shops, all shuttered, except Sweety’s, the bakery where she worked, the odor of yeast making her nausea thicken), a young man dressed like a lawyer smiled at her. He always took the 6:10; he liked to get a jump on the day, he said with some satisfaction. He had an appointment in Tribeca. But he worked in midtown. He stopped speaking, wafting of musk that made her sicker, and waited for her to respond with her destination. “I have a doctor’s appointment. Downtown,” she said and smiled quickly.

She lowered her gaze, pushed back her drooping glasses, conscious of how bad she looked (not realizing that it was still too dark out for anyone to notice). The woman on the phone had given further instructions in that scolding voice: “No makeup, no jewelry, no contact lenses. Understand, Virginia?” She was dressed now in loose-fitting
clothes—old tan corduroys and a long-sleeved cotton T-shirt that hung out, covered by a flannel shirt and a parka.

On the bus (a sudden rush of warm air that smelled of cloves, mint, a headache-inducing upholstery cleaner; her tilted head tapping against the window), she tried to remember the last time she’d been into Manhattan. There was less and less of a reason to go in now that Laura’s weekends were spent with school friends in Flushing. They used to go often when Laura was a toddler, taking her to the lake with the boats in Central Park, Virginia’s favorite spot when she was single and lived close enough to walk there with a book. After, she would take Laura for a stroll along Madison Avenue, past the boutiques with the elegantly hung dresses in the windows that showed no prices. She would point out where Pete had once worked, the bookstore now turned into a jeweler. Then she would take Laura into La Chatelaine, the bakery where Virginia once worked. Mrs. G., cooing at Laura’s fair eyes, would feed her a raisin bun, the row of diamonds on her fingers flashing, telling her the story of Laura’s start: that one day a young man came in and, looking past all the _petit fours_ and _gateau_ cakes, ordered the plainest confection they had: a raisin bun. He came back for one every day since.

“There’s the raisin bun boy,” Mrs. G. used to tease Virginia until Virginia learned his name and correcting her, said, “There’s Pete.”

Virginia, proud to show off this fancy, pre-borough-of Queens life, always returned to Flushing feeling diminished, remembering a time when she had plans to open her own shop; all she needed was to save some money. She never would have imagined
that years later, she would still be counter help, only now the confections would all be plain—scones and pound cake—and the boutiques flanking the shop would be a Korean fishing supply house and a karaoke bar.

From time to time, as the bus rode on (now passing a cemetery with monuments that rose like gray spikes) she was conscious of the lawyer beside her occasionally smiling at her. She glanced back at him, pleased by the attention but confounded, then turned to the window until her head was again tapping against the glass.

After an hour or so she saw the familiar jagged skyline lit by a touch of sun. Commuters hurried on the sidewalk, clutching cups of take-out coffee, moving past the windows of an office supply store decorated with cutouts of goblins. The bus pulled to a stop, letting her, the lawyer and a half dozen others off. “Have a good day,” the lawyer called, turning to her as she climbed down off the bus after him. “Maybe I'll see you again. Do you come in often?”

“Not really.”

“Oh.” Disappointment spread over his face. He stood there a moment on the sidewalk.

“Your appointment. In Tribeca,” she said. “You’ll be late.”

He nodded and trudged away.

She found her way to the subway, and onto the #6 train, as the woman on the phone had said. Bleecker Street was the stop she needed. Each time the train doors opened she strained to see the stop until eventually she saw what looked like BLEAK, formed on the dark tiles on the wall.
After some confusion—walking in the wrong direction, toward Broadway—she turned herself around. Light was in the day. She looked for a brown brick building, as the woman had said. Outside a group of women were smoking. “Oh, there you are! Where you been, girl?” one said, waving in Virginia’s direction. Virginia pointed to herself, thinking for a moment that the woman was talking to her.

Inside, was the kind of metal detector used at airports. A guard, with the face of a bulldog, was seated behind an open plexi-glass window. She barked at Virginia for her to hand over her book bag. “You have keys? Jewelry?” she said in an accusing way.

“No. They told me not to bring anything.” All that she had with her in the bag was a book that Pete had just given her for her fortieth birthday. *A Woman’s Guide to Success in Small Business.* The book was inscribed, “It’s never too late! Love, Your Greatest Admirer.” She was hoping that reading it would distract her.

The guard held onto the navy straps of the canvas bag with her big hands and stared at her, waiting. “Can’t I keep the book?” Virginia said. “I may have to wait.”

“Don’t you see a gate there? In front of you?” the guard yelled. “Walk through the gate! Then you’ll get your bag.”

Virginia stepped through. The alarm rang. She emptied her parka of change and tried again.

She had expected to be first; that was what the lady on the phone had said, that she was the first appointment. It was important for her to start early so that she could leave by one o’clock, in time to pick up Laura at school and continue on with the day, Halloween, dressing Laura as a princess, herself as a ghost, accompanying her through the neighborhood, as if nothing had happened to Virginia earlier in the day. But the waiting
room was already occupied, three other women ahead of her. One, in a red turtleneck with her hair up, had her head in her hand. Another, in a skirt and black tights and matching gum-soled shoes, reached for a magazine on the table then put it back down again, curling her legs toward her stomach in the seat. An Ethiopian-looking woman had her head lowered and was sobbing. Adding herself to the group—her face drawn with no make-up, her eyes clouded behind her round glasses, her hand over her stomach—Virginia thought she had never seen such openly sad-looking women in a public place.

She was told to sign in, which she did, then she sat down on one of the blue-gray leather-backed couches. The other three women each made eye contact with her and, to various degrees, returned her quick sympathetic smile. She tried to settle into the wait, remembered the book in her bag but didn’t feel up to it. One by one, more women filed in, many younger than Virginia but some her age, until the room became warmer from so many people and she had to move her book bag from the seat beside her to make room.

After a while, her name was called and she was asked what she was there for. She answered, but the word was hard to get out and when it did, it came out too softly for the receptionist to hear, so she was made to repeat it, louder, so that it seemed to reverberate through the room.

Registration papers were handed to her and she was instructed to find an elevator at the back of the room and take it to the second floor. She passed another desk fitted with another office worker who was making a phone call, snapping gum, and entering data into a computer, like a worker at any other office might do, apparently oblivious to being surrounded by quietly sobbing strangers. Virginia was acutely aware of an absence of light—of air—and realized now there were no windows. Not one.
On the second floor, was another waiting room. Filled. Despite all the people, it was colder here than on the first floor, necessitating Virginia’s parka, which bore down, making her steps slower. She gave the registration papers to another receptionist, who handed her a pile of forms. By now, Virginia’s mouth was so dry she had stopped speaking to conserve saliva, her stomach so empty she took baby steps to the nearest seat to prevent unnecessary jolts.

Across from her, was the Ethiopian, the woman with the red turtleneck, and the one with the gum-soled shoes, each of them filling out forms. Virginia followed suit, stopping at the question, “Has anyone forced you against your will to make this decision?”

She lay the pen down and clasped her hands on the clipboard, rubbing her thumb over her knuckles of one hand, which were red from the cold. It had been Pete’s decision. But she had agreed. She’d thought that if he was against another child, what was the point? A few years ago, when Laura was just two, she had told him that she wanted one more. But he had said no, there was not enough money. “That’s no reason,” she said. “There are people with more kids who get by on less.” But Pete had wanted nothing to do with it. “Besides,” he added. “What about work? The bakery you used to talk about? You’ll never get that off the ground with another baby.”

“You can’t have everything,” she had said. “I’d take another baby over a bakery. I can always do the bakery later.”

But Pete had just slung his arm around her shoulder and laughed. “You’re not getting any younger, sweetheart. Now’s the time to do it. Not later.”

He’d brought home book after book for her, from the bookstore he’d switched to in Woodside, closer to home, after the one on Madison closed down. Every self-esteem
building, pro-woman book there was about running a business, he brought her and she read. But then, last month, she found herself pregnant.

“Right this way,” a woman with red hair and a nice smile was saying, in a thick Russian accent. Virginia was given a sonogram. “Right this way,” a man with curly hair piled at the top of his head was saying, having her sit down in a lab room and give him a vein. “Right this way,” a younger woman (was she old enough to be working? Virginia wondered), leading her to a small office room, where Virginia was asked questions about her medical history and then if she had any questions.

“No, I don’t think so,” Virginia said. Then she looked at the woman and asked if she had ever had one.

“Me?” the woman said, her face, all innocence, looking embarrassed. “No.”

Virginia felt bad; she hadn’t meant the question that way. She had just thought that most of the women who worked there had themselves been through it. How else could they feel comfortable working there?

She was led to a dressing room where she was handed too large plastic bags and instructed to take off everything and put it in the bags. She was to put on a thin faded cotton robe and brown paper shoes.

“It’s cold in here,” Virginia said.

“You can put your jacket on over the robe,” the woman said.

Door closed, she watched herself in the mirror that seemed unnecessarily large, as if one would really want to contemplate one’s entire body under the circumstances. What an idea, Virginia thought. Then her thoughts returned to an earlier one, which had troubled her yesterday, holding Laura while she read to her in bed. Laura was heavy against
her stomach and breasts, which hurt the way they once did before milk for Laura started to come in. Virginia had to keep telling her to move off of her; it hurt. “It always hurts,” Laura complained and Virginia was reminded that two weeks of a mother’s complaints had to feel like forever to a child. “I’ll feel better soon,” she had reassured her, as if it were just a flu, something that—Kleenex gone, bottles of Pepto-Bismol tossed out—she would get over. She came to that awful, sticking thought again: what would Laura think if she knew? How many times had Laura said that she wanted a brother or sister? And Virginia had agreed it would be nice, sometimes imagining out loud how much fun Laura would have holding and feeding the baby, ever-practical Laura completing the details with the arrowroot biscuits Virginia would need to bring home in quantity from Sweety’s, making sure they were packed in a box, not a bag, so they wouldn’t crumble. Yes, Virginia knew, you were not supposed to be bothered by the wants of a five-year old. But still.

When she came out of the waiting room, the weight of the bags in her arms was too much for her and a nurse helped her. She was shown to another waiting area surrounded by banks of yellow lockers that reached over her head. At eye level was a sign in black marker: “We are not responsible for stolen belongings!”

She sat down but the phrase kept tossing around in her head as if she were aboard a ship. To steady herself, she tried to focus on the woman seated across from her. The woman, whom she recognized, had been wearing a red turtleneck but now was dressed in the same faded robe that Virginia had on, thick tan legs sticking out from under the hem. She had her hair up with a clip behind her head. Most of her teeth seemed to be missing, except for the front two, like Mrs. Sweety from the bakery, as if life had been hard on her, but she smiled easily at Virginia.
“The African lady. She’s gone now. They just took her,” the woman said. “She was taking it hard.”

*The Ethiopian*, Virginia thought, nodding in response as she placed the other patient’s face, smooth and round, in her mind.

“Before that, they took the girl in the skirt.”

*The one with the gum-soled shoes*, Virginia thought.

“She was very matter-of-fact. No crying there.”

The woman smiled at Virginia again, making Virginia want to talk. “I have one child already. One’s really enough.”

“Oh sure. It’s not easy,” the woman said gently. “I have three. The last one’s just eighteen months.”

“Three,” Virginia said. Then she began to cry.

“Aw. There, there.” She gave her a tissue from the box on the table.

“I’ve already decided. I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” Virginia said, wiping away. “I’m just trying to decide between the general and the local,” she added, wanting to see which this patient was choosing.

“Go for the general. The Sodium Benadryl. I’m used to it. From work they’re doing on my teeth. They put you out, next thing, you wake up. It’s over. I’m a scardy-cat. I don’t like pain.”

“Me neither.” But on the other hand, she didn’t like the idea of being knocked out. Maybe, after the pain of childbirth, this wouldn’t be so bad. Local should be enough.

The doctor was a heavy-set man with a light brown mustache and the friendly manner of Mr. Dolton, the dentist who used to let her rinse her mouth with strawberry
flavored wash as a child. The doctor was joined by a nurse with cornrows and long black square-tipped acrylic fingernails. The radio was playing, which could have been a nice touch, but it was a rap song with a beat that hit Virginia’s heart under her gown like bullets.

“You’ll have to scoot all the way down,” the nurse said. “All the way.”

Virginia did her best, holding the dressing gown up while she lay back on the table, the air cold between her legs. One more child, she thought. What was wrong with one more child?

She handed her folded glasses to the nurse and the cornrows went blurry.

“Now let your legs relax,” the doctor said, snapping on gloves, the smell of latex rising to Virginia’s nostrils.

She tried but the music made her feel as if she was standing in the middle of Harlem.

“Do you think we could listen to something a little more soothing,” she tried, not wanting to offend them for their taste in music.

The nurse shut the radio off. This was no help at all, Virginia thought, because now there was just the sound of her screaming.

The doctor stopped doing what he was doing, sat up and looked at her as if she were out of her mind.

“It hurts,” she explained.

“I haven’t done anything yet.”

“Oh.” She thought back on the lady in the waiting room with the bad teeth. Maybe general wasn’t such a bad idea.
The anesthesiologist was called in; he came fast. He spoke with a thick Jamaican accent. She tried not to be concerned by this. She told herself that, as an immigrant, he was probably more qualified than anyone born here because he’d had to fight harder to get to where he was. The argument didn’t work.

She felt him take her arm as she lay back on the table. He seemed to be looking for a vein in the crook of the arm, lifting the bandage from the blood test, and, not finding one there, pricking the top of her hand. She turned away, telling herself not to think of the burning sensation. “You’re going to feel some burning,” he said now.

“Burning,” she repeated.

She thought of the lawyer on the bus that morning. The way he had looked at her with his heavy-lidded eyes. She saw him in her narrow kitchen, savoring a cream puff, the finest confection Mrs. Sweety sold in the shop. Laura was walking up to him, her arms begging for a lift, and he was holding her, with an ease Pete had never managed. He turned to face Virginia. One more? Sure I’d love to have one more, he was saying. And then, watching him lick the cream from his lips, she was out.

Hours might have passed. Days. She found herself on a stretcher. She heard others talking. “How are you feeling?” someone was saying—to her, it seemed. She tried to answer but her voice seemed beyond her control, as if it were at the end of her fingertips. She heard, as if from a distance, “I’m okay.”

She was asked if she could sit up. She fell back.

She could not believe the nurse’s words, that just five minutes had passed.
“Can I eat now? Crackers?” she asked. The nausea was worse.

The nurse went to get her some but before she returned, Virginia was vomiting into a mustard-colored basin.

When she was strong enough, she dressed and made her way to the recovery room. Through the open door, she had a view of the long hallway that led to the reception room where she had first filled out forms. Women were standing; some sitting on the floor. “Tuesdays are a light day,” the woman on the phone had said. “You should see Saturdays.”

In the recovery room, a table was stocked with already-opened cans of ginger ale and packs of Saltines, a half-empty coffee maker surrounded by torn pink packets, as if for a church reception that was already underway. She poured ginger ale into a paper cup and sat down in one of only two empty seats.

Eleven. It was only eleven. Two hours to spare. To rest so she could make it to the #6 train, then to the bus to Flushing. To Laura’s school. The pick-up in the schoolyard, where the other mothers—holding babies or pushing strollers—would be waiting, talking about arrangements for trick-or-treating. Mrs. Connelly, in her high, musical voice, asking Virginia, in her usual way, How’s everything?

“How are you managing?” came a different voice now, a smoker’s voice. It was the woman in the red turtleneck, taking the seat beside Virginia’s, her face shiny and whiter than any ghost. She took Virginia’s hand on the arm rest and held it with both hands, the way Virginia had once done for Laura when she had been side-swiped by a car.

It’s over, she told herself. But she was keenly aware of the lie. Next year, and each year on this day, when she lit a candle in the Jack-o-lantern, dressed Laura in her
costume, donning the usual sheet of a ghost for herself, she would remember, keeping track of the years, wondering what the child’s face would have looked like. Round with fair eyes like Laura’s and Virginia’s? Or a deep oval with gypsy eyes like Pete’s? The thickening of the hair, the growing acuteness of vision and steadiness of the steps, all the changes that would have come at each stage.
Jadyn DeWald

*Evening Sketch: After Marvin Bell (5)*

Lovers sleeping. Stranger’s shudder. Curtains

Rustle. Candles gutter. Mourning silent. Eyelids

Closer. Madness enters. Body’s glowing. Vocals


Lake Michigan is a clamorous collector, accumulating sailors beneath
ten gulps, garlanding them in coral and barnacles, replenishing
inflict catastrophic misfortune on the warm meat and
of shipwrecks past; a history of abnormal
of ancient herding stones must
leviathan's vicious,
its trenchant freshwaters; a lepidopterist, pruning planes by their wings to the benthic zone; a dioramist.

be kept secret from a crude or fussy public
talespinning sparkle...

metal peregrinating overhead. Small surface creatures, resisting submersion,
metal peregrinating overhead. Small surface creatures, resisting submersion,
“Bike Woman” by David Boyle
Carolyn Oliver

Dear Data Miner

absorbing this poem \( x \) seconds after I hit send (because even the most inconsequential missives from sub-minor poets to themselves are meat for reading), let me tell you about this dream I had, since bored is not a mode in which you experience your reality:

In the middle of a story about his executioner father and the queen his mother, the church organist\(^3\) brayed into a trumpet. A gift shop sinks below ground level. The only objects for sale: obelisks\(^4\) and NASCAR\(^5\) lanyards. But it’s lovely, actually, with Romanesque arches of gray stone tinged peach and impossible window embankments flooding the space with cool light. Outside, luminescent deer on leashes\(^6\) browse beneath black apple trees. A warning in a woman’s voice wavers over the common because an airship constructed entirely of rotors and parachutes is about to crush a birdwing house. The park swells, greenly.

Given these inputs and your acumen,
I look forward to my targeted ads.

Sincerely\(^7\),

C

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1 Please know that \( x \) was meant in the spirit of insouciance, and furthermore that I am assuredly lying on this score.
2 In both senses.
3 Identified by the look on the choristers’ faces.
4 Of course.
5 See: my promotions folder.
6 No, I haven’t been reading Wyatt lately.
7 Unable to regard you.
Amtrak offers a ten percent discount if you have a disability\(^1\). I had settled on the idea of this discount by the time I read about the attached requirement to “provide written documentation of your disability at the ticket counter and when boarding the train.” My written documentation is a blurry dark photocopy of a neurologist’s diagnosis,\(^2\) and I didn’t have enough time to see my current doctor for more documentation\(^3\). The Amtrak website says that “acceptable documentation” also includes accessible parking tags. Making a photocopy would require parking somewhere that wasn’t a handicapped\(^4\) spot, and so the entire blue tag was stuffed into my briefcase along with notebooks and copies of what I was presenting. It worked better anyway, I reasoned, because they would be less likely to think it’s fake\(^5\) if it’s the whole tag and not just a copy. I was accepted onto two panels—one creative\(^6\), one scholarly. No one ended up asking me for any

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\(^1\) I discovered this in March 2020, as I was coming up on the four-year anniversary of my fibromyalgia diagnosis (March 2016).

\(^2\) People are already skeptical enough of my young appearance combined with the presence of a cane. They want to know—demand to know, sometimes—what “happened,” and the answer that they’re looking for is more along the lines of “twisted my ankle while out jogging” than “trauma and fibromyalgia.”

\(^3\) My General Practitioner had filled out paperwork before, paperwork that was passed along to my graduate program, but no amount of paperwork seemed sufficient as more and more were demanded, goalposts moving like some kind of nightmare where a hall is endless and every time the EXIT door seems near, it’s some kind of sick and twisted illusion.

\(^4\) Parking spots and parking tags are the only context that I can think of where I still use any version of “handicap” rather than “disabled” or “accessible.”

\(^5\) Think, here, about the windshield notes people leave for drivers with disabled tags who don’t fit the profile that the note-writers have in their head. Or folks who think disability is a choice, or result of poor choice—not enough yoga, that kind of thing.

\(^6\) Amtrak allows as proof of disability a “membership card from a disability organization.” My creative presentation for the conference is an essay called “Accommodation,” a satirical how-to that, among other things, pokes fun at the idea that disabled people carry a “Cripple Card,” which a person might think you carry when that person thinks that the ADA is an organization with a staff that can be called about matters such as restaurant seating issues.
documentation on the train, and so the several days’ worth of worry that I might be kicked off of the train somewhere in northern Rhode Island or southern Massachusetts were ill-spent hours of anxiety, though I thought little about this on the train itself. As I wrote some short fiction in my notebook about a woman in a pandemic, I hoped and wished that no one would end up sitting next to me. It was a mostly empty car early in the morning, the whole train jittery on the old tracks. The seat next to me was space for my cane and my briefcase, and it meant a greater likelihood that the mysterious illness we were starting to hear about would not be in my immediate vicinity for an entire train ride.

I was grateful for the solitude of Boston in the early days of the pandemic. When I tried to head up the stairs from the train station, I tripped to the point of having to put my hand on the dirty concrete that I had been (trying) to walk on. It was only as I started writing these last few sentences in the first draft of this essay that it occurred to me what might have happened in a pre-pandemic world, one where people would have likely been bustling all over even so early in the day. From a young age, from as young an age as I could possibly remember, my cheeks would burn red when tripping up and down stairs. Shame was ingrained in me early, and so from the age of five I learned it was safer not to

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7 I was presenting both panels on March 7th, 2020. Covid 19 was still being downplayed, as was mask-wearing. Mostly, the advice seemed to come down to “wash hands, use sanitizer.” By this point, hand sanitizer was sold out of stores, and it was being listed for exploitative prices on Amazon.

8 The hand that was, at that particular moment, without a cane

9 My imagination, something at the nexus of experience and anxiety: people would have looked at me like I should be an invalid, not attempting to be a person around them; someone might have tried to help without asking, touching my body or my cane as though they had the consent to do so; perhaps I would have been injured more, if I went unnoticed and was stepped on or pushed further down the stairs. There are so many iterations of this that I could, quite frankly, spend an entire essay speculating the possibilities alone.
make myself big or loud; such a lesson is how my great-grandmother’s watch caught on the netting of a fellow middle-schooler’s backpack one day, splitting the antique into pieces because I could not force words out to stop what I was witnessing in the moment. And so I found myself glad to be spilt onto those dirty city steps all by my lonesome; the shame was lesser in the moment, though my cheeks still burned from instinct.

It did not stop there: I walked out onto mostly empty Boston streets, the stuff of Left 4 Dead 2 and its ilk of zombie apocalypse games, though blood had not been programmed to stain the world around me, of course. I have never been gifted with directions; even though I grew up in Queens, navigating the very easily numbered streets of Manhattan still remains an impossibility for me, a mystery that I can’t crack no matter how many times it’s explained, rationalized, or reasoned with. This inherent foible, piled on top of cognitive symptoms—confusion, memory issues—made finding the hotel where the convention was being held a near unreachable goal. I imagined this was an easy task for most of my colleagues, a brief dedication of mental energy, but I became dizzy, tripping along the way, turning ways that were right and wrong, trying to pretend to the rare passerby that I knew exactly where I was going and every move that I made was actually intentional. The closer I got to my destination, the more groups of people I saw, the more pressure there was not to embarrass myself in front of witnesses. Eventually I managed to stumble inside of the right hotel.
In the course of trying to get up to registration, I made a fun discovery: escalators had become an issue for me. It didn’t occur to me that I hadn’t used escalators in the nearly five years since I started showing symptoms of fibromyalgia. It did not occur to me that I would have to lift my cane to keep it from wobbling with the motion of whatever jaggedly-rotating conveyor belt spun beneath the surface, or that the lights on the escalator steps would set off my light sensitivity; it feels like it should have occurred to me that the motion itself would make me dizzy, since so very much of movement writ large does. I wonder if the movement tricked my body into thinking that the motion signaled dizziness before it actually did. Despite all of this, I reached the appropriate level, I registered, and I picked up my tote full of conference paraphernalia. I made a trip to the restroom to try and fix my windblown hair at some point before or after registration. I went out of my way to find the panels I was on in the huge paperback book with all of the conference’s scheduling, and then sought those rooms out so that I wouldn’t get too dizzy, lost, or flustered later on.

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10 It feels like the footnote on this use of “fun” is likely self-evident. Finish the sentence and I trust that you’ll figure it out.
11 In the interest of full disclosure, I tried using the elevators first, but they were confusing and I got lost in different wings on different levels. Given my track record of getting stuck in elevators—including once on my birthday—and my decades of nightmares about falling, I thought that escalators were the wiser bet.
12 There was nothing to do for my windburned cheeks except hope that they eased up before the presentations.
13 Even while taking notes during the conference about what happened when, events get mixed up. Memories can be a jumble that way, and fibromyalgia especially likes to scramble them.
14 And here we have the pre-existing condition to the pre-existing condition actually doing some good: anxiety would have made me look for the rooms either way, but now it works in service of the cognitive manifestations of my disability.
During this pursuit, I even saw a fellow scholar with a cane who was not, by the surface-detail assumed looks of things, much older than I was.\textsuperscript{15} There was a strange comfort in seeing someone like me, a sense of belonging, a hope (however realistic or unrealistic) that someone else perhaps understands the kinds of things I experienced just to get to this point. The moment was not undercut, exactly—perhaps it would be more accurate to say “layered with humor”—as a man looked between me\textsuperscript{16} and another woman with a cane, both of us coming from the same direction. He did a cartoonish kind of double-take, the sort of thing that you’d expect out of Daffy Duck, and I didn’t have to ask him to take a good guess at the questions and connections that he was trying to make: \textit{Are these women with canes together? If they aren’t, how can such a coincidence exist, two such women coming from the same place who don’t even know each other’s names?}\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1}
\caption{A cartoonish double-take scene.}
\end{figure}

My first panel was a creative one. There was a podium, but it was off to the side in this shadowy little corner. The panel chair, a colleague from my graduate school, set a chair in the middle of the “staging area” and informed me that I’d be reading first. I asked if I should take a seat in the chair for the reading, and after her nod as confirmation, that’s what I do\textsuperscript{18}. I read a sarcastic short essay about disability called “Accommodation.” It’s a facetious how-to, which involves the pearls of wisdom “\textit{Don’t be young}\textsuperscript{19},” “\textit{Make sure that}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[15] Some comments on my disability have been the enthusiastic insistence at, say, the grocery store that I’m “not old” (ergo, the implication goes, I should not need a cane).
\item[16] A woman with a cane
\item[17] The likelihood is that this is not the \textit{exact} wording in his head, of course. However, it was the sentiment conveyed by his gestures, by his demeanor. To be fair, I could hardly believe we were both there myself, and I’m one of the aforementioned women with a cane.
\item[18] I am, it turns out, the only one who reads her creative work this way, which makes me feel strange odd-duck-out feelings that I can’t quite articulate. Note: As one of the most stereotypical Virgos out there, feelings aren’t exactly my forte anyway.
\item[19] Refer to footnote 15
\end{footnotes}
“your disability is super obvious” and “Don’t forget your cripple card.” After I read, and after the other three panelists read, we all sat together for a Q-and-A.

I thought I was prepared. I’d just had an anthology pitch picked up about how marginalized identities intersect with how fiction is written. I’d had a craft essay about characterization and verisimilitude and disability picked up a few months earlier. I had just started a position as one of the Diversity & Inclusion Editors with the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*. While I tended to focus my research on queerness and bisexuality, I thought that I was very prepared for this Q-and-A, to discuss disability and literature and all their complicated little intersections.

It did not take long for me to feel completely unmoored.

The questions started straightforwardly enough, so much so that I don’t remember them exactly, but they were questions of memory, humor, form, that kind of mostly technical craft-based thing. There were basic assumptions that audience members made, even seeing the cane as evidence of my illness/disability. Their questions assumed my mental illness, as well as a vague learning disability that I didn’t have.

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20 This “rule” is based around an alleged Good Samaritan, a visit to the post office, and my cane almost being stolen from next to me as I tried to pay for postage because “Certainly this isn’t yours!”
21 I genuinely did not know there was a requirement like this from actual companies like Amtrak before attending this conference. It boils down to a funny kind of coincidence, for a given definition of funny, I suppose.
22 *Musing the Margins: Essays on Craft*, Human/Kind Press, 2020
23 “Authenticating Detail and Disability Narratives,” *So to Speak*, 2019
24 This is tricky. While fibromyalgia can impair my learning, especially with the cognitive mess of fatigue and fibro fog and memory issues and confusion and all of that, the questions seemed to assume that I also had conditions akin to ADHD, which I never claimed and tried to correct as politely as possible so as not to claim identities or experiences that weren’t mine.
But then the questions became much more difficult, veering in the direction of who gets to write a story. One person even asked about who gets to be “a voice for the voiceless.” And, it being the early days of March 2020, *American Dirt* inevitably came up, though somehow I hadn’t expected it; I suppose it didn’t occur to me in terms of my specific essay, since my essay’s focus is disability and not Latinx and/or immigrant experience. “Who gets to write what stories?” seemed to echo in the room again and again, in various iterations. The conversation even turned to fact vs. emotion.

I was overwhelmed. Others on the panel had written about a relationship with a friend, a fellow teacher harming a student of theirs, and issues revolving around pregnancy and miscarriage. None of these essays felt like they approached questions of marginalized identity quite as directly as my own did. I love discussing issues of diversity and inclusion and marginalization and equity; this was not an issue. But I felt uncomfortable trying to field questions about what was “wrong” with *American Dirt*. It felt as though I were meant to be a representative of The Marginalized™, and as such give permission for

25 While posed as a question, it had big “more of a comment” energy. I got the sense that they wanted me to say that it was okay to write X story from a perspective that was not their own.

26 This sort of assumption, perhaps obviously, undermines exactly what I was doing with “Accommodation.” I have a voice; I used my voice, and more directly I used my voice to highlight the way that people who assume my voicelessness are outlandish. This idea comes from a place of paternalistic savior-hood, the idea that unfortunate marginalized folks are not capable of telling their own stories, that someone abled, for instance, needs to come in to tell the disabled person’s story, or else how will anyone know?

27 Published January 21, 2020

28 I am neither Latina nor an immigrant, and thus cannot speak to the myriad experiences of people in these groups.


30 Most of the assumptions of this conversation felt uncomfortable to me, like the idea of “fact” in the essay, which is the realm of personal truth and particular experiences of the world.

31 I decided to cite the problems with it that I’d heard from Latinx writers online—especially the stereotypes and the commodification of such experiences. But, I was careful to reiterate that it’s better to listen to the people who are affected by a particular representation.
people to write the stories that they wanted to about disabled folks, etc.32 My argument—letting the marginalized speak for themselves, always acknowledging your position in a narrative—never seemed to quite suffice for this audience.

It felt like the questions were an academic exercise, something theoretical and hypothetical, the kind of conversation that one might call “invigorating.” But how could I explain that they would never fully understand the lived experience of moving through the world with a cane until/unless they did so themselves? How could I explain that people measure a person’s appearance against cultural narratives, that my age and my womanhood invited challenges to parts of myself that fellow grocery store patrons have no business challenging? How could I explain that you can experience invisible pain and have people doubt your illness and make participation in your own life more inaccessible than it should ever have to be? How could I explain the caution that ethically representing marginalized peoples of many varied intersectional identities required moving beyond thinking of such people as “voiceless” or, perhaps as incapable?

How could I explain any of this—aside from the essay which I had just read to them?

Even without my laptop inside of it, carrying around a briefcase full of paper and notebooks and a blue handicap parking tag caused overwhelming pain. My body cannot handle too much at once, and what might qualify as simply a slightly busy day for someone

32 The “etc.” here stands in for literally millions of people whose life experiences I couldn’t speak to; I couldn’t even speak to everybody’s experience with fibromyalgia, not with both accuracy and specificity. So, really, the “etc.” is doing a lot of work here.
else (a train ride and presenting at a panel) proved Herculean for me.\textsuperscript{33} To make matters worse, I was late taking my afternoon dose of fibromyalgia medication—the stuff that keeps me from even worser pain and brain fog and related unpleasantness. Even though I thought I was running late\textsuperscript{34}, I had to stop to take my medication, just another inconvenience on the ongoing list of frustrations that I have with my body, but don’t actually keep track of\textsuperscript{35}.

Once the doors opened to my next panel’s room, I randomly sat next to the man in the middle of our panel table. I didn’t know anyone in the room until a professor from my alma mater appeared in the audience, much to my surprise. The professor came up to us and said hello, and then informed me and the man sitting next to me that we actually shared an alma mater. All three panelists were presenting on genre fiction in the creative writing classroom, and we all seemed to be of like mind that genre fiction should be included. The panelist from my alma mater and I even used the same quote from Thrill Me: Essays on Fiction by Benjamin Percy.

I was out of breath when I presented my paper, my body showing its wear from the day’s over-activity.\textsuperscript{36} I stood at a podium this time. And as I struggled to read my

\textsuperscript{33} You might wonder why I’d bother with all of this hassle if it makes my chronic conditions act up, if it literally hurts to do this. I liken it to one of the reasons that it’s important for me to be in front of a classroom teaching: I want to establish disabled presence, to take up the space that we are told in ways overt and insidious that we do not belong in—with words, with legislation, with structures physical and otherwise.

\textsuperscript{34} Spoiler alert: I actually wasn’t.

\textsuperscript{35} In a generous reading, this is an active choice to keep myself from becoming bitter. In a reading that is perhaps more realistic, I don’t have the brain energy to dedicate to holding on to that kind of information.

\textsuperscript{36} This had happened to me on the first day of classes for the semester, too. I had scheduled a flu shot across campus and raced back to the building where I had to teach. A student stopped me as I was reading through syllabus policies to draw attention to my breathlessness. I thought about this while presenting my paper, how unpleasant it had made me feel. I had no choice to continue reading my paper, cooperative lungs or no.
paper, I felt the weight of the sacrifice that I needed to make in ways that so many other conference attendees do not, what it means for me to do these expected professional things in a physical space like a conference where I could potentially network or find publication opportunities, where I could increase my chances of finding a place in academia.

I learned at some point during the panel—before the panel started, I think, or maybe it was during the Q-and-A session—that the man presenting with me was partially deaf. That strange comradery returned, a deeper and more realized version of what I experienced with the woman I passed by who also had a cane. The comfort of not being the only one in the room, of not being the only person who can speak to inclusion and access, of not being the only person who wants to speak to inclusion and access37, was invaluable. Even with the physical difficulties actually presenting my paper, everything about the atmosphere relaxed me. The questions from our audience focused on asking for reading recommendations and suggestions for pedagogical structuring in the classroom. It felt like, despite what had led up to that panel throughout the day, academia could be carved into the kind of place where people like me were more than a mere inconvenient footnote38, rarely thought of except for39 accommodation40.

Maybe academia could be carved into the kind of place where people like me had a seat, cane and all.

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37 Especially in a nuanced and experientially informed way
38 Where we could be our own voice rather than letting some other voice call us the voiceless
39 The legal minimum
40 And sometimes not even that
Contributors


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Divya Mehrish is a student at Stanford University and Content Editor at The Adroit Journal. A writer from New York City, she has received nominations for The Pushcart Prize, The Best of the Net Anthology, and The Sonder Press’ Best Small Fictions as well as recognition from the National Poetry Competition and the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award. Her work appears in PANK, Arc Poetry Magazine, The Adroit Journal, Sojourners, and Amtrak’s magazine The National, among others.

Maggie Kennedy’s poems have appeared in Epiphan, Meat for Tea, Cloudbank, Atticus Review, and other publications. Her first book The Unraveling Script is slated to be published by Pine Row Press in late 2023. She lives in a Chicago suburb with her family and works as a writer for The Nature Conservancy.

Jeffrey Doka has written everything from short stories to screenplays to radio dramas. He designed narrative structure and wrote the “The Lost Library,” a choice based narrative game. His short story “The Conference” has been published in the Wild Musette Journal, his short story “The Last Fare of M1S-3” was published in The Future Looms Magazine, and his novella "Departures" was published in the "Running Wild Novella Anthology." You can find Jeff at finalbossediting.com, and he streams his writing at twitch.tv/final_boss_editing if you ever want to stop in to say hi (or share feedback).

Emilee Kinney hails from the small farm-town of Kenockee, Michigan, near one of the Great Lakes: Lake Huron. She is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Southern Mississippi. Her work has been published in West Trestle Review, Cider Press Review, Passages North, SWWIM and elsewhere. (https://www.emileekinneypoetry.com/)
Karen Regen-Tuero’s short fiction is Pushcart Prize-nominated and has appeared in national journals such as Glimmer Train Stories, North American Review, and Slice. Lately, it can be found online at Lunch Ticket and New World Writing Quarterly. She has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and an MA from the University of Michigan. She lives just outside of New York and works in long-form TV.

Jadyn DeWald (he/they) is the author of The Rosebud Variations and Sheets of Sound, both from Broken Sleep Books. They are Assistant Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Piedmont University in Demorest, Georgia, and serve as managing editor for COMP: an interdisciplinary journal.

MA|DE (est. 2018) is a collaborative writing entity co-founded by artist/writer/designer Mark Laliberte and writer/editor Jade Wallace. MA|DE’s forthcoming works include poems in Rabbit, CV2 and Book XI, a fourth chapbook, Expression Follows Grim Harmony (Jackpine Press, 2023) and a debut full-length collection, ZZOO (Palimpsest Press, 2025). More: ma-de.ca

Carolyn Oliver is the author of The Alcestis Machine (Acre Books, forthcoming 2024), Inside the Storm I Want to Touch the Tremble (University of Utah Press, 2022; Agha Shahid Ali Prize for Poetry), and three chapbooks. Born in Buffalo and raised in Ohio, she now lives in Massachusetts. (Online: carolynoliver.net.)

Audrey Carroll Audrey T. Carroll is a Best of the Net nominee, the editor of Musing the Margins: Essays on Craft (Human/Kind Press, 2020), and the author of Queen of Pentacles (Choose the Sword Press, 2016). Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Bending Genres, Hawaii Pacific Review, CRAFT, Jet Fuel Review, So to Speak, and others. She is a bi/queer and disabled/chronically ill writer who serves as a Diversity & Inclusion Editor for the Journal of Creative Writing Studies. She can be found at http://audreytcarrollwrites.weebly.com and @AudreyTCarroll on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.