

BITTER MAGAZINE



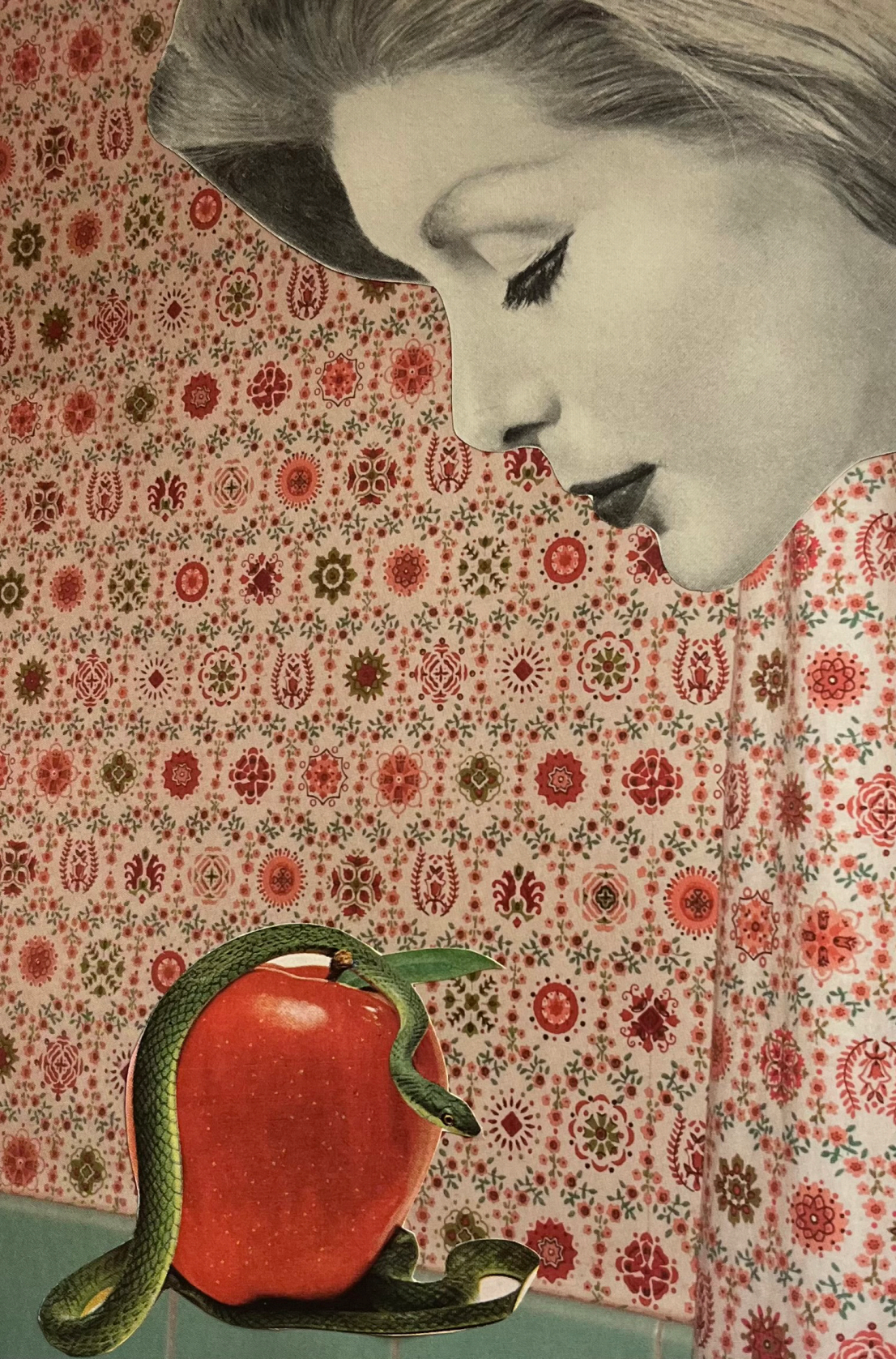
SPRING 2026

VOLUME I

FICTION

POETRY

ART





BITTER MAGAZINE IS AN INDIE LITERARY MAGAZINE, PUBLISHING
EXPERIMENTAL AND CUTTING FICTION, NON-FICTION, POETRY, AND
VISUAL ARTS.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

ERIN STALEY & OLIVIA MACDONALD

In June of 2025, I sat down with one of the professors from the SFU Master of Publishing program who had no idea why I was talking to him. I had, however, been directed to request a meeting with him because of my interest and history in literary publications which, to my surprise, did not exist within the program. I first approached my co-editor-in-chief, Olivia MacDonald, who happily agreed to undertake the project, along with the majority of our new cohort. We brought on two more editors with an exclusive interest in poetry, and thus, *Bitter Magazine* was born.

With the publication of our inaugural issue, we'd like to thank each person who made it possible. Our managing editor, Parker White; our team of prose and poetry editors, Julia Lopez Marmolejo, Ashley Pocrnich, Daly Quintal, Caroline Little, Anna McCausland, and Emilia Jaime; our web and print designer, Hailey Otten, and our social media manager, Madelin Ogilvie.

We'd also like to express our gratitude to Daniel Zomparelli for his generosity, enthusiasm, and encouragement, as well as Dina Del Bucchia and Trevor Battye for all of their advice and help in getting this publication off the ground. Thank you to Patricia Massy for creating and offering us a space to showcase and celebrate our work.

Bitter was founded on the assumption that every person has a story to tell. We asked for the weird, the experimental, the visceral—and we got it. In these pages you'll find disgust, grief, compassion, bitterness, and more. We hope you feel as shocked, unsettled, and moved as we were reading these pieces. Thank you for your art. Thank you for reading.

Editors-in-Chief

Erin Staley & Olivia MacDonald

OUR WHALE

ERIK NAYDIUK

— for Ryan

It must have died weeks ago, you said. Concern
for its life and curiosity about decay congealed

around your words, and fondness for your softness
congealed around me. We'd walked by the burst

and briny husk three or four times by then, wrinkled
our noses at the split gut and jerked intestines splaying

naked in the heat. Flies frenzied a jubilee around
cavernous jellied eyes. You wanted a backbone

for your doorstep so we came back with a hack
saw and you set about the dirty work, severing

sinews between the vast vertebrae, rusty teeth
exact and grinding, while admiration grotesqued

itself into my narrow heart. Then a damp pop
and the sickly spinal custard dropped, curdling

the afternoon with its eggrot cologne. A worried
surfer jogged over and warned us those bones

were beach-bound by law. I thanked her; you stopped.
We left the carcass to summer's wrack, relief

and reproach overlapping. Because you know
they delight me, you pointed with whale-fouled

fingers at a string of sandpipers chasing the foamy
tideline as gruesome day dissolved into star-salted night.

My strange and steel-stomached friend,
I will never stop loving you.

THIS DAM HOLDS WORSE THAN WATER

TIF ROBINETTE

When July came and the thomp and jolt of dynamite was as regular as morning prayers, I found Grammy duct taping all the faucets in the house. She hunched over the kitchen sink, screeching the end of the roll around the spigot, eyes dry and sharp. Not a drop could escape the wadded tap.

“All them went and poisoned the well now. This dam removal will be the death of us.”

ALL THEM was who she cursed with her first sour breath in the morning and with the last grit of her dentures at night. THEM was the ones bombing the dam up the Klamath River, holding back two billion gallons for half a century. THEM was the damn shell company, their trucks chewing our road like a dog’s bone, spitting potholes so deep they’d swallow a tire. THEM was the conservationists, out there with glass tubes and new rubber gaiters, giving more of a gee-damn for fish spawn than us folks scrabbling to make do. THEM was the Shasta tribe, reclaiming drowned land and the salmon running the river. THEM was the local government, spineless and silent. THEM was Biden, woke bullcrap, the left agenda, and the end of the world.

THEM was The Devil Hisself.

Only other person I ever heard her call The Devil Hisself was her second husband, who had a cherry red ‘87 Corvette and a mean streak a mile long. Grammy said he fell off the face of the earth, and we should count it a blessing.

I splashed the gallon of store-bought water over powdered milk and spooned til it turned into a white mucous in my bowl. Since the dam started dropping, the cow’s milk turned yellow and dribbled from their rashy teats. They sipped from the churning river and got sick. Sick

as the water all choked up by strangled trout, gills clogged with silt, eyes cloudy. A stench I could taste with every waking breath. I chomped down my cereal, all while a dead sour flavor worked under my tongue.

“Gonna head up there and check the t-post.”

Grammy pawed her wrinkled hands through a bucket of rusty nails for the ones wrenched into acute angles.

“Take these for the hard road. Straight ones do crap-all.”

The nails gouged through my pockets into my thighs as I wheeled my bike up to the road past the line of protests painted on wooden signs staked along the top of the property. Old ones, new ones, some with red paint still wet.

STOP THE DAM REMOVAL NOW!

YOU DONT KNOW WHATS DOWN THERE

ONCE ITS GONE IT WONT GO BACK

DO NOT UNCORK!

THIS DAM HOLDS WORSE THAN WATER

My legs barely burned anymore as I pedaled the bends winding up the mountain, calves' tough knobs from a month of trips to measure the water droppage. The nails drew speckles of blood through the cotton on my hips.

“Bloodletting is a fact of life,” Grammy said when she found my stained underwear wadded behind the toilet the morning the dynamite started booming. “nothing to bellyache about.”

Behind me, out of sight, the rumble of a diesel engine closed in. I scooted behind a juniper tree, digging a handful of nails out of my pocket. Just before the truck rounded the bend, I tossed them on the road. The tires ran right over them. I listened for the hiss of air and screech of brakes, but the truck kept growling out of ear shot. Better luck next time.

The reservoir had dropped overnight, red clay cliffs careening down to a swift mucky river, carrying broken

THIS DAM HOLDS WORSE THAN WATER

trees with roots flailing in the air, down toward our farm. I slid on my butt to where the metal t-post I lodged into the clay had met the water's edge the day before. I strained it back and forth til it squelched out of the sticky earth.

I had to pick my way real careful over slick rocks and clay mud that had already sucked the legs of deer who wandered down too far last night. Their necks lolled over, tongues hanging out and flies swarming their milky eyes. Vultures circled overhead like the old men at the church potlucks.

Something large rose out of the mud, the flash of mirror catching in the mid-morning sun. It hadn't been there yesterday.

I scooted on my hands and knees til I could touch it. It was a side view mirror on a red Corvette. I scraped the mud off the driver's side window. Murky water filled the car. Leaned back against the headrest was a grinning skull, a bullet hole smackdab in the center of his forehead.

LIBRARY DREAM

JACK SULLIVAN

A librarian screams when she sees me,
warning the books I've come.
Breaking the spine of one,
lights in the building flicker.
Isn't this so much fun?
After sucking words from each page,
I let the black juice dribble
down the corners of my mouth.
Teeth stained the colour of night,
I feast until I've created a pile,
then cut my wrists with a knife.
Morning comes quietly, light
snaking through the aisles.
But I've already gone. Only
traces of stories left for others
to try and recreate.

ON COOKING MUSHROOMS

JAD JOSEY

Blue oyster mushrooms into a hot, dry pan
until they give up their water—until I make them
give it up. Outside, the new hour is breaking,
light lingering longer than the day before. My children
have hung blankets against this trespass, late-
winter or early-spring sunlight drowning
the room. We are all drowning, but not in the bad
way. My daughter says that my cologne smells
good. I used to tuck her and her twin sister against
my neck for hours while they slept, the scent of
their soft heads forever in my nose. The mushrooms
have given up their water, waiting for the fat, the salt.
I am unbroken halite but cracked all over. I am
the one who decides when the pan is ready for
butter. I have only just begun. I step outside to
collect the gloaming. The mushrooms can cook un-
watched for a while, long enough for the lingering.
I have often wished for somebody, somebody with whom
to share them. I am that body now. That fruiting body
immaculate. My other twin asks, how do you know
when they've given up their water? Watch for the
weeping, I say, watch for the weeping and do
what you can to be there when it comes. We have known
each other for the always, and still the learning.
Everything is new when you love it most.
I shepherd the mushrooms into a shallow bowl,
tomorrow's breakfast half-prepared. There will be
quinoa, roasted beets, kale, hemp seeds. The earth
has turned past the sun, dark purple nearly done
blooming. You smell good, my other twin says,
like lamplight or something glowing in the
dark. I turn starward with my tears.

POTATO SKIN, CHICKEN SKIN, OTHER

AL M. WAKEMAN

You only get one shot at it: that's the problem with cooking yourself.

Stewing seems the easy route. Maybe I wouldn't even notice it, like what they say happens when you boil a frog.

If you boil a frog, not when you boil a frog.

I've never boiled a frog.

Though I wouldn't exactly boil myself. When I get my only chance at this, I'm going to take the time to simmer.

Or I could coat myself in fat and search for a nice wide pan. I should probably search for the pan first, then coat myself, or it might slip out of my hands. I'd love to use butter, of course. Real solid yellow stuff. Jersey ideally. Not cut with anything to make it more manageable. The idyllic stuff you keep out of the fridge, in its own little hut with a cliffside view of the kitchen island. But I'd also like a nice sear on me, and I don't know if I'd be able to turn the heat down in time to stop the butter from scorching.

So, it would have to be oil. Olive oil? Low hanging fruit, but an obvious choice for a reason. Maybe if I used it sparingly. A little olive oil on me, a fat square of butter in the pan, maybe a drool of groundnut to shore me up against burning.

Of course, if I could trust anyone, I know exactly how I'd want to be cooked.

回鍋肉

It's most commonly translated as 'twice-cooked pork', but I hate that name. It hits the ears with a dull thud. It's about as fair as describing fresh bread as 'baked flour paste'. The first time I had it in Chengdu it was the best

thing I'd ever eaten, and it's lived up every time since.

Pork belly simmered in spiced water, then sliced fine and fried with fermented chilli paste. And what emerges from that second trip to the pan is salty and it's fatty, what deep in our bellies we want all food to be. The meat is hot and the oil glazes your tongue. The spice is enough to make your mouth salivate, and the salt absorbs the saliva, creating a devouring infinity. As you eat twice-cooked pork, it consumes you right back.

Much to my mother's shame, I never learnt to read and write Hanzi. I just know those three shapes. Though I've always struggled with the middle one.

On the left, a gaping wide mouth, ready to devour.

On the right, a rack of flesh awaiting separation from the bone, or a trendy square plate piled with steaming meats.

But what is that in the middle? It changes every time I look at it. In that shape I've seen a house, I've seen butcher's knives, I've seen a prison yard. A slender pagoda, a wandering ghost. I've seen a...

"FRY ME!"

Oh, for goodness' sake.

"Fry me up please! OH GOD FRY ME UP ANYONE!"

He's naked, he's afraid, he's coated head to toe in vegetable oil.

A number of people suddenly realise there's something fascinating at the bottom of their shopping carts.

"You sir! Please, you fry me up. It'll only take a minute."

I believe him. He's lanky and meagre. He'd sizzle like a chicken's foot.

"Just a few minutes of your time and you could save me."

His grinding voice sounds dryly from a hollow gut. Perhaps it would boil and pop in the pan, until it spattered fat like a plate of gizzard.

"Please."

It's the first thing he says in my direction, stargazing straight through me.

"Save me."

I shrug him off and push away towards the entrance. Poor soul. I check my sleeve where he grabbed and sniff. Cheap sour grease. That's no way to go about getting yourself eaten.



A towering golden pyramid glows before me. It declares to all who come before it that wildflower honey is fresh in and 50% off. I extract a jar and drop it into my cart. Amah used to tell us about the mellified man to frighten us when we were little. An entire corpse cured in honey over decades, centuries even. Flesh turned to strips of sweet, dark fruit. If only I'd known in advance, I could have spent years fermenting in my amber sarcophagus. And months before that gorging only on sweet syrup to give my insides a head start. I was wasting my life all these years, not knowing I could be stewing my intestines in liquid gold, preparing them for a higher purpose.

A woman pushes past me. People have gotten used to daydreamers scattered about their daily lives. They'll go on ignoring us until we rise above them, to be skimmed off and removed.

She reaches for one of the jars and her julienned bangs fall to the side to show a similarly choppy face. Pitted eyes roll in my direction but only get as far as poaching me before she moves on. I can tell from those eyes that she isn't planning anything. She can tell that I am.

I pity her. She hates me. Not because she thinks I'm wrong. She hates me because I make it difficult for her to pretend she didn't hear what we all heard. I move on out of the way in search of salt.



What's the conversion ratio for salt to bone-in meat? I've got it written down somewhere. 1% by weight. Never good at math, I pull a pen from my breast pocket

and start scrawling on the cap of a big cardboard tub of 'fine salt'. Not the salt I'll buy. If I only get one shot, I'm not going to settle for fine. I'm getting the expensive stuff designed by cubists that comes in tiny diamond pyramids bristling with the hollow crystalline hit of what your body needs. I remember hearing that salt is important for a whole bunch of functions in the human body, and that's why it tastes so good. That's why we crave it. I hope whatever eats me has a body that craves salt too.

"Scuse me, sir. Can you please—"

I barely look at him. I've worked these sorts of supermarket jobs before. I'm not going to stop scrawling and he's not paid enough to stop me.

"You'll have to purchase that now, sir."

He walks off a moment later. I don't have time to feel sorry for him. Ok, so that's 700g I toss three large boxes of the expensive salt into my cart and simply let go of the cheap salt I've been doodling on, leaving a clean white pile of mess that I'll never see again.



Twenty minutes later I jam the groceries into my trunk. I hear the wet dense sound of an onion bounce off the scrubbed metal drum that takes up most of where the back seats were. I throw my cart off into the parking lot and scan around. They're everywhere. My neighbours, my fellow man, my competition. Any one of them could be plotting, preparing. But most aren't.

A cough sneaks up on me, and I openly clear my phlegm into the tarmac. The final retch pulls more than air out of me, and I leave behind a delicate splatter of neon red.



The stagnant buzz of gossipy silence rises like heat. Upon reaching the third floor I see where it has congealed. Around Mrs. Moltsayt's doorway the usual yolk of the corridor light is accompanied by the delightful scent of short nights defended against cold. Marjoram,

roast carrot, torn bread, sage leaves fried in butter. Sour cream and pickle brine. Melted cartilage. Gelatinised bone. Potato skin, chicken skin, other. The door is left casually gaping. It's never clear who you're supposed to call for this. Police? Ambulance? Maître d'? One of the mulling neighbours has taken the decision to move the pot of cucumber soup out of sight, but the smell lingers along the corridor. Everyone pretends they can't taste creamy vegetables, and aged meat at the back of their throats or see that the entire apartment is decorated with a precise filigree of bone white pierogi.

She must have made hundreds.

The sclerotic chicory roots she used as hands must have gnarled around soft dough for days in preparation. Smooth, precious turtle eggs spread along the beach of her faded decor. Atop the arms of the thinning sofa, the dinky side tables, the hunchbacked television. Not crowded but placed, as meticulously as one would iron the suit they planned to be buried in.

She used to bring me those pierogi and call me ketsl. If only I'd known what she was planning. We could have worked together.

You only get one shot to cook yourself, but between us we could produce a far greater offering than most manage alone. People don't really work like that anymore. You'd think everyone having the same thought at once would have brought people together. But it didn't. If only we still had those old religions. Perhaps with their love and kindness we could have cooked a lot more people in so many more ways.

Most want to pretend it was a thought and nothing more. The exact same thought in every human mind at the same time. They find it more plausible to believe in coincidence, than believe in whatever spoke to us.

God? Extraterrestrial life? An echo from another dimension? It matters little what it was. What mattered was that it was hungry.



I try to avoid the corridor's eyes and sink into the studio where I cook and sleep. It's not possible to lug a barrel filled with ingredients nonchalantly, but the mandala of dumplings proves sufficiently distracting. Inside, I fill both my pots with water and twist the gas to its highest setting.

Everyone thought that same thought. But it appears that most people don't take their thoughts very seriously. Quite simply, those who prepared themselves to be consumed in a pleasing way would rise, with the promise that they would not miss their bodies. It is unclear what 'rise' or 'body' might mean, but that's one of the reasons talking about this thought has been so futile.

Words fail to describe what we all know we thought. But in that moment, we all understood exactly what it wanted us to do.

The water takes its time to climb up to temperature, so I make my mix. In an old protein shaker goes big pours of soy sauce, cooking wine, oyster sauce, sugars, garlic, spices. The last two big scoops of honey from the old jar. And, of course, a few drops of bright red food dye. It doesn't taste the same if it's not bright red. I swirl everything fully then gulp it all down. Half a pint of painfully sweet char siu marinade.

Dicing carrots, I remind myself that I'm really quite fortunate. If it weren't for the denial, the arguing, the desire to pretend, everyone might try to cook themselves. The thought didn't specify a quantity for its order, but it was implicit that it was fortunately a thing of simple needs. Perhaps fasting. Perhaps to be satiated with a mere hundred thousand meals. If it weren't for the non-believers, or governments everywhere cracking down hard on attempts of auto-gastronomy, I might have been too late.

thudthudthud

The banging interrupts my daydreamy chopping.

THUDTHUDTHUD

"OPEN UP!"

Perhaps someone did notice me dragging a human sized barrel into my home. Or it could've been someone outside, or even someone at the store.

“Under suspicion of breaking Childs’ Law, we have the right to enter your home without a warrant. Please open the door, or we will be compelled to use force.”

I’m going to have to put up a bit of a fight. There’s enough evidence in my apartment to seem like proof that I was plotting. The only thing that could give me away now would be a lack of resistance.

I open the door and the thought is knocked from me along with my breath. A whole team throws me hard. I don’t know if the splitting sound is the cheap floorboards or the skin of my right ear. There’s an officer on each limb and one on my back. As if I’m dangerous. As if I’m interested in cooking any of them. The one on my right leg almost believes. Only someone in doubt would be that forceful with a heretic. I’m bound and dragged and not one of them can tell that I’m coughing up glaze as much as blood. After marinating my insides in the stuff for so long, I hope there’s little difference between the two. I hope I’m not too late. It took months to move out to a state that still executes using electric current.

FAMILY PROPERTY

KIMBERLY WOLF

Crow-cackles from the rafters
of a rust-eaten barn:

Girl-child

shivers between stacks

of weather-ruined machinery—
tools used to plow teenage fields.

Straw heart tornados itself apart
as knees buckle
under the weight
of an intrusive feather.

Girl-child

prays
to silent heaven

extra-large t-shirt swallowing
newly formed breasts and hips.

As wood-rotten refuge collapses around her,
she folds in on herself
like an embarrassed scarecrow—

choking on the woman
climbing out of her throat.

EXPOSED

ARUSHA BRUNS



MAMI USED TO SAY I HAD ELECTRIC HANDS

JON NEGRONI

Listen. The needle hums at 120 hertz when it's working right, cuando está cantando, you know, and that frequency, it lives in your bones after a while, becomes part of your pulse, part of the way you breathe between the lines you're burning into someone's skin. Mami used to say "Girl, you got electric hands, manos que hablan, hands that speak," but she never knew about the other voices, the ones that bark when the machine goes quiet and the shop smells like green soap and that antiseptic smell that reminds me of hospital-white rooms.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again. I always do that; jump forward, finding ground.

Let me tell you about Isabela first.



She came in on a Tuesday—no, miércoles, Wednesday because I remember the lunch crowd from the taquería next door spilling onto Mission Street and the smell of carnitas be making my stomach tight in that good way, that hungry way that means you're alive and not just surviving Isabela. Even her name carried static. Water over stones, prayers over dead.

I was working on this pendejo's sleeve, some tech bro who wanted a mandala but kept telling me how to shade it "can you make it more geometric, more clean" and I'm thinking, hermano, if you wanted clean you should have gone to a machine, not to me, because my hands they shake sometimes, especially when the voices get loud, and what comes out, well, it's never perfect, but it's always honest. Always charged.

But she walked in.

Isabela with that skin like café con leche and hair

catching solar light to throw it back like mercury, and she had this presence, this electrical field around her that made the shop's hum change pitch, made the needle in my hand stutter for just a second before I caught it.

"I need something for the pain," she said, and her accent was thick like mine gets when I'm tired, when I stop pretending I belong in this fog of money and people who think suffering is something you can sell.

The tech bro, he started to complain about me stopping, but one look from Isabela and he went quiet like someone flipped a switch.

"What kind of pain?" I asked, because there's physical pain and there's the other kind.

She rolled up her sleeve and showed me her arm—track marks, old ones, scars roadmapping places she'd been that she didn't want to visit again. But underneath, something else. Burns or maybe something like lightning had kissed her skin and left its signature note.

"I heard you can ink over anything," she said. "That you understand how to cover things in the beautiful ways."

And that's how I knew she'd heard about what happened to Elena.



Elena was my first real client, back when I was still apprenticing under Maco in his shop in the Mission, when I was still trying to prove that a girl from Bayamón could make it in San Francisco and could turn the electrical storm in her head into something beautiful instead of something that landed her in the psych ward again and again and again.

Elena wanted a tree on her back, un *Árbol de la Vida*, and every session she'd tell me stories about her daughter, the girl growing up in Stockton with Elena's mother while Elena tried to get clean. She had to get stable, had to become the mother who deserved to touch her own child's face.

The tree grew over six months, branch by branch,

and with each needle stroke Elena got stronger, more rooted, because the ink drew the poison out instead of putting pigment in. She'd talk about her daughter's laugh and how the girl liked to collect beetles and paint her nails verde like Christmas trees. She told me about her plans to bring her to the city once Elena got her shit together.

But here's the thing about the electrical current, it don't always follow the path you think it will or even should.

The last session, Elena came in different. I guess someone plugged her into the wrong amp. Her pupils were tiny pinpricks and she kept talking about how the tree was talking to her, how it was telling her secrets about the soil under the Tenderloin, about the bodies buried beneath the concrete, those vibrations running deeper than MUNI lines and water pipes.

I should have stopped right then. Tell her to come back sober, when the chemicals weren't drowning brains in ants.

But the tree was almost finished, just needed the roots. She was crying, begging me to complete it, saying she needed it to be whole before she could bring her daughter home.

So, I kept at it.

And the needle found something it shouldn't have.



Maco always said tattoo needles, they're like dowsing rods, they find water even when you're not looking for it. But that day with Elena, what the needle found wasn't water, not even close.

It touched a live wire nerve. The machine jumped in my hand, Elena's back arched like she'd been struck by lightning, and for just a second—just one—I swear I saw it. The volt running through her, this blue-white electricity that had nothing to do with the power grid and everything to do with her nervous system.

She went into convulsions.

They took her to UCSF and she died two days later, brain hemorrhage, the doctors said, probably unrelated to the tattoo, probably bad drugs, bad luck, bad timing. But I knew better. I felt what happened when the needle connected with whatever kick was running through her; felt the way it completed a circuit that should have stayed broken.

Her daughter never got to see the tree. And I never told anyone what I saw, what I felt, what my hands knew about the electricity that runs through broken people and how sometimes, if you're not careful, if you don't respect the ink, it can break people even more.



So, when Isabela showed me her scars and asked me to cover up the past, I understood why she'd come to me specifically. Word travels in certain circles, among certain kinds of damaged people. They say that girl in the Mission, she knows about working with skin that's already been marked and all the ways the body keeps score.

"What do you want?" I asked her.

"Something that moves," she said. "Something alive. Algo que respire."

I looked at her scars again, the way they branched across her forearm like a river delta with neural pathways, a pattern maze looking for its exit.

"Water," I said. "Waves."

She nodded. "Sí. Waves that never stop flowing."



Isabela would come in Thursday afternoons when the shop was at its most quiet and the light from the window turned all things gold. She would sit in my chair and let me trace over her scars with black ink and prussian blue and a titanium white that could foam at the sunlight.

She never talked much during the sessions, just

breathed deep and steady while the needle did its thing, but sometimes she'd hum—bajito, under her breath—these songs I recognized from abuela's kitchen, before I knew that the voices in my head weren't normal things everyone lived with.

The waves grew slowly, session by session, covering the track marks and the burn scars and whatever other damage her skin bore new. But as they grew, something else grew too—this connection between us, running deeper than needle and skin.

I started looking forward to Thursdays. I dreamt of blue water and Isabela's breathing and the way the afternoon light made her skin look like it was lit from inside.

But también I started having the other dreams where Elena's tree grew roots through my chest, and electricity crawled under my skin, and I could hear abuela praying for the dead and I didn't know if I was one of them.



The anxiety always hits when I'm working on something that matters deep, only this time the client buys a way to live with their skin again. My hands would shake between days, my chest would get tight like someone was wrapping wire around my ribs, and the voices—ay, Dios mío, the voices would get so loud I couldn't hear anything else.

Dr. Roma doubled my meds but it didn't help. Nothing helps when the electricity runs wrong, when your brain is a broken transformer.

I started making mistakes. Small ones, at first. Shaky lines, uneven shading. But then bigger ones. Left the machines on overnight, forgot to sterilize equipment, showed up late or not at all because I couldn't tell the difference between the voices and the alarm clock.

Maco pulled me aside after I fucked up someone's portrait; I made their dead grandmother look like a ghoul instead of an angel.

“Mija,” he said, “you need to take some time. Get your head right.”

But how do you explain that the work is the only thing keeping your head on? Without the needle in your hand, without the current running through the machine into someone else’s skin, you start to float away from yourself like so much smoke.

How do you explain that Isabela’s waves were the only thing keeping Elena’s tree from choking me dead.



The last session was supposed to be simple. Just touch-ups, maybe add some white highlights to make the waves sparkle como la bahía al atardecer, like the bay at sunset. Isabela came in early, before the shop officially opened, because she said she had somewhere to be, someone to meet.

“My kid,” she said while I set up the station. “She’s coming down from Portland. First time I’ve seen her in years.”

I almost dropped the ink caps. “You got a daughter?”

“Seven now. Probably doesn’t even remember me, but—” She shrugged. “Gotta try, ¿verdad?”

I started working on the highlights, tiny dots of white that would hold the light and bring the waves to life, make them move even when Isabela was standing still. But my hands, they were shaking worse than usual, and the voices were getting loud again, telling me about electricity and water and how the two don’t mix, and the current follows the path of least resistance and sometimes that path runs right through the heart.

“You okay?” Isabela asked.

“Yeah,” I lied, because what else do you say. That you’re afraid of the needle you’re about to put in their flesh?



When it was finished, Isabela stood in front of the mirror for a long time, turning her arm this way and

that, watching the waves flow through her sunset skin.

“It’s alive,” she whispered.

And it was. Somehow. They moved when she moved, breathed when she breathed. Without burning anything down.

She paid me and tipped extra and hugged me at the door, and I smelled her perfume, it was gardenias and rain, and I felt the warmth of her skin through her shirt, the wire between us clean and strong

“Gracias,” she said. “For all of it.”

I watched her walk down Mission Street until she disappeared into the crowd, carrying her prayer waves with her.

That was two years ago.



I never saw Isabela again, but sometimes I hear things from her neighbors. She got her daughter back, they’re living in Oakland now, the girl’s in a nice school. I don’t know for sure, but I want to believe she’ll study marine biology in college and want to understand how the ocean and its currents flow from one place to another without becoming something new.

Sometimes I wonder if the waves are still alive under Isabela’s skin, still moving. Sometimes I dream about them. Not nightmares like with Elena’s tree, but actual good dreams, nothing destroys the other.

The voices still whisper when the shop goes quiet. But I keep working, pushing ink into scars, trying to turn damage into its next purpose.

Because I learned something from Isabela’s waves. Like her, they were just looking for somewhere to go. Somewhere I could never go.

DRIVING A BATTERY-POWERED BARBIE CONVERTIBLE AT THE END OF THE WORLD ON THE WAY TO SEE THE JERSEY DEVIL

ALYSSA VELA^ZQUEZ

my brother texts me a screenshot of my Instagram account;
at this moment, I have 777 followers.
wonderful things are about to happen.
I'm up seven
seven
seven
and I want to ask him, will that be the cost of gas in the future?

tell me how it ends
and I'll tell you about a seven-year-old girl who wanted to drive her battery-
powered pink Barbie convertible down the Pine Barrens' back to ask the Jersey
Devil if he was lonely
in a place with so little potential.
his talons scratching against the plastic passenger seat at the sight of a highway.
how far shall we go, thirteenth child?
wrong number.
the car phone clicks and God's answering machine picks up:
you need to pray more.

on the phone with her mother; now twenty-seven,
she learns her faithful ride was put out to pavement, resulting from a failure to start.
the girl's last stroke of luck
scrubbed out with the blood by her uncle
who removed the stain left by a burst blister on her red Converse high tops—
a great speechless act of love.
but in her version of the story, the uncle circled the spot on her right heel seven
times over the course of seven hours for seven days.
she hasn't worn the shoes since.

what are the odds if I count back to seven, I'll see my convertible again?

JUDITH LYNES, IN MEMORIAM

DANIEL CARTWRIGHT-CHAOUKI

Judith Lynes, In memoriam

Our names sit alongside each other
on the webpage like strangers on a
bus you might not have been here
much before in this binary world I
don't know but I've been here a
few times now amidst the tacky
digital flowers made even more
insincere by their low-res rose pink
hue and distinct lack of scent I
ticked the box to show my name
and the amount that I donated so
that all the people that I don't like
know that I gave more than them
and then you appeared Coral and
Stan in your little box with words
like proud and precious in memory
of your dead daughter's life how
much is enough?
Twenty-five pounds each.

THE INFERNO

SAHIL MEHTA

Inside me, a prayer, but it's hollow; tattered piety floundering in a doubt-filled void. A stone-faced goddess awaits my daily contrition, her serpentine body frozen mid-slither. When the prayer comes out, it's an Inferno. The temple's tinder buckles. The goddess evaporates into incandescence.

The Inferno has eyes and feelings; it feeds on old memories.

Nine-years-old. Orbiting the sacred fire seven times, my fate tied by a gold thread to the man I was marrying, sight unseen; silent tears rushing to an anonymous end under a crimson veil.

Fate's irony is incendiary. Combustible.

I never saw my husband's face.

After the wedding, I remained at my natal home—as was the custom—awaiting the arrival of blood that would make me a woman. Two years later, and two days before the gods anointed me a woman, a bull gored my husband.

The flames dance. Fiery limbs reach for answers.

Death liberated my husband from mortal concerns. It saddled me with the blame. The village locusts stripped me of my wedding gold; vulture aunts feasted on my raven locks. The colony of tonsured widows grew by one.

The infernal dirge demands a keening chorus. The sky brims with the sorrowful sounds of wretched beasts.

Prayers and penury marked time in the widows' colony. We worshiped the serpent goddess, widow-maker, hoping our penitent prostrations would assuage her appetite for men.

Our appeasement yielded no results. The sorority of widows continued to expand, my belief in the goddess's

mercy shrinking until one day, my faith refused to be resuscitated by habit or hymns.

So, I birthed an Inferno.

Now, the flames refuse to be tamed by the rules of man.

The fire fears not the fury of implacable gods.

I embellish devotion's grave with glowing tangerine jewels.

PEACE & CONTAGION

NATTIE O'SHEGGZY

in the light that gently stirs
by the grated window that patiently waits.
If I were supposed to wriggle
shimmying like a worm to the sounds of songs,
something sensuous, sometimes crisp,
in the flickering shadow of the night.
What begins as a lulling moment,
instills calm in my hungry soul.

a steely glint in the silver-lined atmosphere
there lies harmony of the forested minds
Before the curtain of heaven is raised
the butterfly is in and out of her cocoon.
out of this dark strangeness I know
to spread the wings of my words in the winds
now there is a better way to blink at my scars
a clever way to scurry past the dripping pollens
something is hanging to the grips of my teeth
In the stubble of meadows green with tears
Painted Lady dances to the pounds of my feet
a tickling of antennae for the coming rain
a flipping of feathers to the hymns of joy

For how long, I yearn for more calm.

ALTSTADT, DE-RE- OVERCONSTRUCTED

ALINA STRELKOVSKAIA

Pencil, charcoal and pen on paper



VILLAGE PILLORY

WILL FALK

When my skull was still a head, it was a beach house in a blizzard.
Before I could decide whether to surf or ski, I thought it was me
at the guillotine. But that was just a bad French dream.

I woke in old New England, which is to say: the village pillory.
I could not swat the gnats that bit me or fold my hands in prayer:
My palms could not touch. So God could not hear me.

My crime? Watching. Bearing witness without bearing more.
I witnessed, hoping bears would bear me. But, the cubs were born
weak, quivering, and diabetic already. No honey. Just Montreal

maple syrup, as slow as molasses. Trees barely survived axes
to become limbless. Caves spoke in echoes, so they had to be stuffed
with concrete. Too many voices, too dangerous to let be. There

might have been mercury, starving mountain lions, or silence. All
obviously unbearable. A crow with no wings took pity on me. Brought me
string and shiny things. He knew neither of us could ride the wind away.

TRAIL OF THE DEATH DOG

JDG

“And life was being lived only by the dogs.”

-Ted Hughes, “Existential Song”

It's too cold to be alive. I repeat this to myself like a mantra, hoping to make it true, for I've been tasked with hunting the Death Dog. Cha'Daz isn't wrong when he calls me a degenerate and a coward. In the face of a god, it's bravery to admit cowardice; it's character to admit degeneracy. From the top of Spear Valley, watching the sky give birth to morning, you can tell we weren't born to hunt down gods. I am convinced the Death Dog is a god. What else do you call an animal that leaves red pawprints and whose howls summon blizzards that fail to sweep the red away?

The youngest hours are the worst. Nothing happens but sky, and to fill the sky you must whittle memories into stories. Spear Valley's name itself comes from Hormuth's father's fathermother who told of a great war that was fought on our land among a race of giants, long before any of us were born. The cleft in the earth was from a single Spear made from a single woody sprig larger than tens of tens of the sprigs that grow on the tundra now. We are the descendants of that giant race.

When the wind kicks up loose snow I crawl inside my sealskin tent. It's too cold to be alive. Even knowing the others are collecting roots and meats to last us through the coldest months, I'm spiteful. I should be among them, chattering that way instead of this way, alone, probably imagined and mocked in my shivering isolation. I know this is the case because it's what we did when Be'Cke the Younger drew the short lot and had to stand guard over the valley. It was during younger hours like these the Death Dog started beckoning the blizzard with howls.

Cha'Daz was the first to find her, having run off to prove himself by killing the Death Dog, only proving the Death Dog was beyond killing. Be'Cke the Older was inconsolable when he saw her carried back wrapped in Cha'Daz's pelt coat. Off Be'Cke the Older went into Spear Valley, wrathful god he had become, and we never saw him again. We told Be'Cke the Younger once she recovered after a few nights' rest and she handled it as well as a Younger could, alive with a snowball's fragility. We removed her from the lots pool.

The blizzard keens as if for the memory of Be'Cke the Older. Or is that a howl? I crawl out of the tent and look down into the valley, shading my eyes. My hand hurts from gripping my spear tight. I feel the muscles in my arm tense for throwing. If my muscles locking up like this is bravery, how is it different from cowardice? Thankfully the only thing I can tell is that the air is pebbled like a river with loose snow. If the Death Dog is down there, I won't see or hear it.

Perhaps that's my degeneracy. A child foolish for stories. I'd asked the fathermother why we were so small when we'd once been giants and they told me every living thing in the world had once been bigger – fish that spanned the length of the ocean, seals rising up like mountains in the sea, moss tall enough we could stand inside them as in a forest – but it's the way of life to become smaller over time. The other elders laughed at that, then the other children.

I took it as mockery then. The children grew up to prove it was mockery in their minds. But I suspect the elders had another meaning in mind which the others, half-formed as we all were, didn't get. When I asked the fathermother what they meant they smiled and said I'd understand when I got older. Older is coming. I feel in my chilling blood that this crater of our giant pasts is the entrance to my adulthood.

Before it gets even more too cold to be alive, the wind settles into a steady sigh. Embarrassed for me. I swipe

my foot over the renewed blankness to remind myself there is life up here and it is me. But when I step back to look, it looks like I'd walked forward several steps before being knocked off my feet. Cha'Daz tells me to leave prophecies for those who have the imagination to predict more than one outcome, but surely this is a prophesy. The Death Dog has killed tougher people than I, including Be'Cke the Older. I sit down in the snow, half-hoping to be taken up in the next wind.

As luck would have it, wind doesn't come for some time and I sit shivering up to the back of my neck listening for howls. There's a small avalanche clearing away some of the loose rocks Spear Valley is made of. It scares a nearby flock of albatross into flight. Only briefly, since this is their year and season of mating. If I threw my spear I might be able to pierce one and take its down back as a gift. I'm riled up to do it, hand tightening, but to who would I gift it? And what of the Death Dog? The corpse might lure it here.

Worse yet, it might think I killed it as an offering to it. The Death Dog might take me with it to its lair to be wedded or impregnated or eternally fed upon. Maybe for the Death Dog they are all three the same. I'm not sure what magick the Death Dog possesses but, if it is a god, as I suspect, there're no limits. As if reading my thoughts with their magick, the albatrosses from across the valley call out with heads thrown back bursting with laughter.

I could risk gifting one to Stasi. It would impress Hormuth. It would make a contest between Cha'Daz and I since he caught one last mating season to gift her. And if she doesn't accept it or her father doesn't approve, Be'Cke the Younger is pretty enough. Even the Death Dog showing up doesn't frighten me. My anger at these mating birds makes me hardy. Hatred gives you a survival instinct.

There's a low moan from the valley below which must be the wind picking back up. As soon as I notice it

the wind tosses the world around again. I hear more rocks falling and check to be sure I don't have to move the tent to a more stable spot. Then I crawl into the tent again. The sun is dripping on all the snow. It was the snow they say blinded my own father. Yet I stare at it because my father was not a giant and I see no reason why I can't become like my ancestors.

My eyes close on their own. They're cowards, trying to protect me. Against what? Bright air? I force them open until I hear a louder moan which shocks my hands onto my spear, shutting my eyes again. It must be the albatrosses. When I crawl out of my tent they seem to have scattered far down Spear Valley, away from my bad luck.

There's a four-footed figure at the bottom of the valley swaying in a matted grey coat. Behind it a trail of red prints. Was it the tail of fathermother's coat that caught fire during a drunken bonfire? Was it Be'Cke the Older, before he'd lumbered despairingly into disappearing? It was an elder. Someone who deserved respect for their age displaying the meaninglessness of hours. It's the brightest hour, a time for rest, and here is the Death Dog howling a storm into the valley.

If I crawl into my tent I might be able to escape. Yet that's no escape. Hormuth said Stasi's sister Ta'ouil tried it. That's how they discovered her with her toes frozen together in her tent. And Hormuth's father was the one who took a hunting party to track down the Death Dog only for my own father to come back alone, prostrating about the god's mercilessness. If they aren't strong enough together, what use am I?

The Death Dog turns its head to me. Despite having the high ground, I feel as if I'm being looked down on. No one wanted to listen to my coward father. They saw no god in the Death Dog's violence. It's exactly because of the violence I look at now, its night eyes boilingly hot, that leads me to confirm this is closer to a god than anyone living has ever been. Despite being the only one to

believe him all these months, I'd never realized what he'd meant.

My idiot father. My poor, idiot father. I feel my loathing fill my spear arm with an equal violence and hurl it. Halfway down the slope of Spear Valley, I imagine being as buffeted by praise and admiration as by the blizzard. So much hailing pride it leaves welts on my body. I'm aware of how dry my lips are. I lick them. I feel tears coming on from the exhilarating ache of staring the Death Dog in the face and standing in place, risking it bounding up the path of my spear towards my throat. Far worthier than an albatross.

The spear lands in the slope itself, a long distance from its target. I should have known my weak throw wouldn't reach it. The Death Dog turns back towards the mouth of the valley and keeps walking. I can tell from its saunter that it disdains me. I've been dismissed like a failed lover. I howl at it to get its attention but it just keeps walking, aware I am not one of its kind, not a god. I leave no red prints.

I won't have it and I howl and howl, seemingly scaring the albatrosses down the valley, until I see it's another small avalanche near their nesting ground. They've decided to roost at the narrowest point of the valley and between the loose rocks there's a boulder the size of all the bodies in the village. If I dislodge the rocks, I might be able to crush the Death Dog. Without my spear, I don't know what I could use to dislodge it. But Spear Valley is made of loose rocks. It undoes itself.

As I sprint to the nesting ground the freshly resettled albatrosses lift their wings up and eye me, a creature less threatening than a crumbling edifice. The Death Dog is going so calmly that I can afford to slow down when I near them. I feel myself observe it with equal dismissal. The Death Dog is no god. The Death Dog is nothing. I slowly lean down, reassuring the albatrosses with eye and voice that the rock isn't for them. When they let me pick it up I hurl it at the Death Dog so hard my shoulder dislocates.

This time it hits and the Death Dog winces, whines, and turns back up towards me. It howls and I howl back and I feel the world scream through me in a blistering, fiery cold. My body is as cold as my father's eyes. The ground under sounds like an ocean-sized ice sheet cracks and the wall of Spear Valley hurls me, a rock among rocks, down the slope at the horrible beast god. I remember now. It was fathermother whose coat caught on fire. It wasn't a dance. They'd been showing us children how giants moved across the earth, once upon a time.

When I wake up I hear the Death Dog howling from the other side of the boulders. Howling and howling, the air continues to flurry and scream across my eyes. My eyelids are frosting shut and I'm thankful that I can't see what's happening to me. That I can't try to determine what has killed me. I try to scream back at what I can't see to warm myself but I think my saliva has frozen my lips together. When I weakly lift my hands to my nose for the faintest warmth, I notice the air is cold coming out of my nostrils. I've become a Spear Valley myself, a funnel for cold winds. Cha'daz will delight.

I see it now. His giant's jawline, a skull that speaks strength. When I share how his skull ordained destiny with him he asks what does his skull matter. He does what we all need of each other. Exactly what I thought he'd say, softened by the failed hunt, the injured Be'Cke; then I think, feeling witnessed by Stasi, is it the mask of a Death Dog? When the flesh folds off, the snout. Only fathermother would understand. They'd see the Death Dog in me. I want to see them one last time, to see those hands that bestowed the giants onto me.

I can't hold my hands up anymore. I surrender. Perhaps I delight too, for they will find my grinning, grimacing, iced death mask admiring the violence its once-inhabitant wrought upon the Death Dog. They might build an icon of me where I sit and die. Cha'Daz and Stasi's children and their children's children will look at this spot that would be named The Foot of The Death

Killer and I will be a bigger figure in their lives than Cha'Daz, more revered than Cha'Daz himself. They might bring tribute, as if to a god of the hunt. Perhaps I will be a god of the hunt. N'Cil, god of the hunt.

And the blizzard hushes the howling. It's quiet again. Did it finally leave this world? Did it die? I try to push myself up to confirm the kill, but I can't stand. I'm barely breathing. That's right. I'm dying. What if the Death Dog found a way out? What if it didn't leave this world, but simply left Spear Valley? If it is a god, it would be easy. A god, not belonging, easily leaves. I push on the ground harder and my hand coated with frosted blood slides out from under me. I fall on my side hard enough that, as my eyes break open, I feel the last breath in me push out. I shrivel. The snow in front of me is a red hand.

A JUICEBOX-SIZED ACCUMULATION OF BLOOD

MABEL LEWIN

Like a pigeon confronted with string-foot, ignoring the swelling black abscess by padding splintered sticks with tangles of hair. It only quickens the inevitable.

Slip knots tighten onto claws instead onto a crumbly leaf's stem. The initial restriction is, at first, of negligible concern.

Until the swelling obstructs blood flow. The ligaments start upon themselves—twisting.

Yes, it's the twisting that is deadly:

NECROSIS (*a clawed pigeon foot on dirt. an ovary suspended in blood*)

It is a job for metal jaws, tugging and detangling fleshy filaments for a close-up of decay on a microscopic camera. Filming from count-down the drug-induced hallucination:
a rotted
apple clinging to its branch.
suspended then falling into
unconsciousness, into
dirt, a severed claw. abandoned.

Most do not imagine. Alone on hard ground, the cold never cold enough to cool the onset of infection. Found with the useful parts unsalvageable, infertile.

Such a likely fate for the domesticated
and abandoned.

Still, it is not the burning heat of
volatile pressure, or the phantom
knife slicing through fascia
and stabbing to no end. No, it remains
after the pain has subsided. After
all the OxyContin has been popped.

WORRYSTONE

JAD JOSEY

I don't believe in curses. I believe in
the cursed. The brick maker did not topple
that wall. Your variegated pothos has roots
rotting by your own hand. A voodoo doll
pricked by a needle that could be darning
a sock or the tattered knee of your jeans.
I once knew a girl who only carried
her dolls by the hair. When I asked why, she said
It's too hard to touch their bodies gently.
I had never met someone who knew
that hair is stronger than skin.
She kept a worry stone in her pocket,
hunk of honey onyx worn smooth as glass.
When an earthquake rumbled beneath our school,
she set down her doll and reached into
her pocket and handed me the stone.
You can worry for both of us, she said.
When the room stilled, she picked up her doll
by the hair—so gently—but
left me with the stone, left me
with the stone.

PLAY OF LAMBS

ARUSHA BRUNS



YOU ALMOST IDENTIFY WITH THE WOMAN

MELANIE GOULISH

The text in italics below is from an interview conducted between Tucker Carlson and Nick Fuentes in October 2025.

“When you watch pornography, you achieve an identity with the woman, in, like, a voyeuristic way. You almost identify with the woman.”

Yes, in case you were curious, Nick Fuentes does indeed go on to describe a Blanchardian theory of transsexuality, patiently explaining to a confused Tucker Carlson what “autogynephilia” is. This is the only instance in which Fuentes mentions identifying with women at any level. From here, Fuentes neatly segues into discussing marriage and gender roles.

This leaves me wondering if someone like Nick Fuentes would ever be capable of identifying in any real, meaningful capacity with any of the three girls in a photograph I keep on the altar in my bedroom. This photograph is a secret, something I stole from a family photo album. It is printed in black and white in a square format. On the back someone’s handwriting specifies it was taken in a roadside park just outside Dayton, Ohio in 1949.

This photograph happens to be of my grandmother Janice, age seventeen, and two other girls approximately the same age. It would have been only a couple months before she married my grandfather, Arthur. Janice’s curly bob looks blonde in these shots, though I know she was a redhead. She wears a striped t-shirt tucked into tight trousers decorated with buttons along the hips. The impression is of a fashionable young woman of her era.

The shot has Janice and one girl each kissing the neck of another girl between them. The image is shot from quite a distance; it is blurred, like cryptid shots of the loch ness monster. The energy is a little electric—you can feel a certain giddiness over something equal parts clandestine and fun.

I first encountered this image after my grandmother passed away. My mother was responsible for putting a photo slideshow together to be played on an infinite loop in the background of the Baptist funeral. We were at a Hampton Inn and our beds were piled high with albums and shoeboxes full of photographs to examine and evaluate.

When I saw this particular image, I was struck by it, and by two other photographs taken that same day: Janice and another girl spooning in the grass of a roadside park. Then, Janice on her own, smiling.

I had never seen her so young before, and I certainly had never seen her looking so gay, in any sense of the word.

Would Nick Fuentes look at any of these photographs and identify with the sapphic storylines I almost cannot help but project? Or does he only identify with women when men are fucking them?

“When you think about courting a woman, the juice isn’t worth the squeeze.”

Arthur was Janice’s driving instructor. It was during their lessons that he courted her. She was fifteen when she first started taking lessons with him. He was in his early twenties.

Later in life, Janice was not allowed to drive because her disposition had gotten to be too nervous overall. Once, a plastic bag blew in the wind toward Janice in the driver’s seat and her hands flew off the wheel. She could no longer tolerate the operation of the machinery Art had introduced her to.

“It seems like porn is making a lot of people gay.”

When my parents went through Janice’s belongings after her passing, my father noticed something odd: nail clippers. Nail clippers everywhere. Nail clippers in every purse she ever owned. Nail clippers in every room. Nail clippers stashed away in odd little corners where no one would think to look for them. I wouldn’t have been surprised if a pair had been hidden behind a loose brick.

When my father first told me about this, I struggled not to betray any emotion on my face and break into a manic giggling fit. I’m sorry, but really? This, coupled with the photographs I found? It was too much.

Janice, I apologize if against all odds you were actually a dyed-in-the-wool heterosexual. But come on. Give your gay granddaughter some slack.

“Why aren’t people married?”

“Well, I mean, honestly, it’s the women. They’re very feminist, like actually extremely feminist.”

“They don’t believe that, do they?”

“I think they do, really, absolutely.”

“Like, they believe that gender rules are a construct and that none of this is inborn?”

When I told a close friend of mine—a lesbian trans woman a couple decades older and wiser than I am, with more experience and perspective to lend—that the photographs I had found had been taken in 1949, she messaged me the following:

“I can’t help but think this is right before the heyday of Elvis pre-enlistment, when he was seen as a threat to social order and most particularly the sexual order, in part because enough of his female fans who cultivated an Elvis hairstyle and emulated his dress in ways that just freaked people out. Like, my god, butch women!

“I think about that frequently enough, this brief win-

dow before the Cold Warriors pushed so, so hard to squelch all that vibrancy. And I wonder what your grandmother might have seen.”



“Like, you have to be an idiot to think that.”

“But they like the idea of it.”

Sure, and I like the idea of Janice being gay. I know she might have been a dyed-in-the wool heterosexual. I know there’s every chance I’m reading into circumstances too much.

But I like that idea of her being gay for a couple of reasons. First, I like to think that my Nana Jan might have gotten some reprieve from Arthur’s abuse in the form of a neighbor’s wife. One of the worst memories my parents have of Arthur and Janice is when they visited our house, and Janice saw that my father had some weightlifting equipment in the basement. Her first reaction was, “careful, Anne, if he gets strong enough, he’s gonna beat you up.”

Second, it would mean I had a queer ancestor right in my own family tree. I’m a lesbian who never thought such a thing could ever be the case. Maybe it’s a selfish thing to want, but once you dangle the possibility in front of me? Well, I want it to be true.



“Women have a very high estimation of themselves.”

Janice grew up in poverty. She was part of the trans-Appalachian migration of post-war America, someone who grew up on the “hillbilly highway” that brought the poor whites of Kentucky and Tennessee northward to Midwestern states like Ohio and Indiana in search of factory jobs.

But Janice always looked expensive. As her grandchild, I often saw her in well-fitting denim and a lot of tailored sweaters in colors that looked vibrant and perfect against the clarity of her skin and would work on almost no one else—colors like Day-Glo orange and neon

lime green. As an all-black-wearer in recovery, I feel like her spiritual successor whenever I wear hot pink. She also wore delicate gold wristwatches and had an immaculate collection of clip-on earrings. By all accounts Janice was elegant and lovely even as a teenage girl, tall and auburn-haired and bright-eyed. She cultivated a beautiful wardrobe, the finest clothes a girl could barely afford to buy while working as an administrative assistant in her school principal's office.

Her biological father had abandoned the family when she was seven; he had gone off to Texas looking for work and instead found himself a whole new family. And Janice did not get along with the man who became her stepfather, a man with the improbable name of "Claude Angel."

I have to imagine the wardrobe of things she couldn't really afford was the first step she took to carving a life that was her own, a life that could be lived elsewhere.



"I think people call it 'hoeflation.'"

Perhaps the people around her thought she was pretentious for this, spending money she only barely had, to look the way she did.



"Yes, their sense of their own looks and sexual value is very inflated."

The only garment of hers I own is a denim jacket with a broad, triangular collar. A very 1970s take on a garment like this. I wonder all the time whether I have any right to put patches on it, to turn it into some kind of ancestral battle jacket. I haven't been brave enough to wear it out yet as it is.

"So, maybe the job when you're married is to make a girl happy, and then all this nonsense ends?"

"Yeah, I don't know. I think that could be a bottomless pit, too."

Marriage as a bottomless pit, maybe, maybe.

Janice is not always sympathetic. When my mother was six-years-old she nearly drowned in the family pool. She had been swimming unsupervised. I'm not sure how she survived. I know only that after she pulled herself out of the pool, she found Janice, deep within the labyrinth of their oversized house, and told her, "hey Mom, I almost drowned."

Janice's reaction was pretty much: "Oh, honey, are you alright?"

When my mother confirmed *I guess so?* then the matter was considered over and done with.

I relayed this anecdote to my therapist and her reaction was, "midcentury housewives were so out of it. All those drugs they were on, you know." I wondered if I should tell her Arthur was the only one with the confirmed prescription drug problem.



"The wife's role is hero worship. The guy is the hero."

Once upon a very 1970s dinner party, Janice had just placed a fondue pot beneath a crystal chandelier. Arthur was horrified. The smoke and steam would rise from the fondue pot and damage the light fixture. So he berated Janice for twenty minutes, in front of all their dinner party guests. The witnesses remember it being brutal.



"The guy is supposed to be the entrepreneur, the conqueror or whatever."

"Or whatever."

Arthur was the entrepreneur, the conqueror, and the "whatever" guy who worked for Dow Chemical company as a plastics engineer, including during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This was the era Dow was developing and selling Agent Orange. "Hippies picketed our house," my mother recalls. "Threw bottles at the yard."

Decades later my grandfather would organize

lunches with my mother at the local Big Boy to eat cheeseburgers while poring over the details of his estate planning and future funeral. He wanted several of his company awards, placards, and patents displayed at said funeral. “I want people to remember that I did something with my life.”



“And the woman is really supposed to support the man’s goals and be in his world.”

Was Arthur’s world the one you wanted to be in, Janice?

Janice was always “highly involved in the community.” What this meant was that her real life was lived in bridge clubs and church groups. You know what sort of life I hope against all hope that could be code for:

I feel naïve and silly and like I am making up a fairy-tale to believe in. My femme, elegant grandmother, abused by a man who met her when she was only a child, living some sort of a cliché story of a closeted queer housewife during the fifties, sixties, seventies, and beyond. Maybe even having some cute little gay affairs along the way. Having a secret life entirely her own.

I feel ridiculous, praying that any of this might have ever been true. Her stolen photographs remain on my altar anyway.

“I feel like women are very simple.”

“Have you ever lived with one?”

“No.”

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