

masks

Exhibit & LitMag

FICTION
Bernie Groves
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NONFICTION
Elizabeth S. Tieri
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POETRY
Kristy Bowen
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**SPRING 2021 | AESTHETICS OF RESEARCH
COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO LIBRARY**



mask

Spring 2021

Kristy Bowen | Bernie Groves | L.A. Hawbaker
Kyle Lavelle | Trevor Lisa | Marc Meierkort
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EXHIBITS & EVENTS WITH THE

AESTHETICS OF RESEARCH

Columbia College Chicago Library

Through active exploration of ideas, the Aesthetics of Research at the Columbia College Chicago Library has found new ways to make the library a point of connection for the College's artistic community.

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Editor's Letter

Masks... that thin extra skein we wear, a shield between danger and safety, the self and the world, the truth and the lie. In this year of pandemic, masks have become ubiquitous. In this issue, our contributors paint mask images of all kinds. The digital mask we wear from behind our screens. A death mask that follows a woman haunted by grief. The masks we inherit from our family. The mask of clouds across the sky after a volcanic eruption. The black confidentiality tape that masks an interrogation transcript. Masks are more than just the soft cloth that covers our mouths and noses, protecting us from COVID. We wear masks when we want to present a persona to the world. We wear masks to save us and to cloak us. As these pages illustrate, masks both prevent and protect. Masks, as we've learned this year, are everywhere.

La Hawbaker



Instant Internet Girlfriend

Gina Twardosz



"I nested in posts and pics, reveling in the freedom to adopt a new persona—one neither tethered nor tamed by the expectations of reality."

Therapy is expensive, but Twitter is free. This is the mantra I live by, circumventing the labyrinthine American healthcare industrial complex by sharing my every waking thought with Internet strangers, or those familiar yet estranged. I love to post a concerning thought and let the likes roll in: a decidedly imagistic way to revel in positive affirmations. The little red heart beats once, twice, sometimes twenty or thirty times before it stops cold, the rush fading with each passing glance of likes; but then I do it again, share a singular thought, and that swell of perception smacks me across the cheek. It's a pure hit of dopamine surging straight up to my brain. Twitter is an orgiastic

cult of enabling, toxic coping strategies and I am both a willful participant and wise old elder.

Most days I exclusively live inside my laptop. I languish in the gray area between person and concept. Even before the pandemic forced us all into little Zoom boxes, I nested in posts and pics, reveling in the freedom to adopt a new persona—one neither tethered nor tamed by reality's expectations. I spend hours crafting a comedic persona. I can be dumb and enjoy reveling in stupidity. I can be everyone's idiot Internet girlfriend, endlessly flirting with the anonymous masses the way Paris Hilton attempted to pilot in the early 2000s.

“So hot!” I comment on any and all the selfies that pop up as I meander through my Twitter timeline, logging hours of devotion not unlike the nuns who trolled my college campus’ many chapels. When I’m not using the app as free therapy, I try to be everyone’s friend, each follower a new scrawl in my ledger of devotees. I’m ecstatic, feigning adoration to the point where people truly believe my compliments. Maybe I’m forthright in my appreciation, but the sentiment isn’t extended out of the goodness of my heart: I commit to commenting so I can receive love and praise in return. I crave perception and will meet my followers where they are to achieve it.

Quips, witticisms, cries for help, and cute selfies attract the most audience attention. Pictures of my face feel vain, so I work in a theme or two, reminding everyone, including myself, that this *isn’t me*, merely a character I control. I was a cowgirl for a while, my cowboy-hatted avatar adding another layer of comedic mystique. In October, I donned a witch’s hat and cackled. Many commented that they’d enjoy it if I hexed them. Someone created a mock movie poster for me, as if this character I’d crafted deserved more screen time.

I used to workshop jokes on Twitter, but I’ve since retreated deeper into Internet culture — carefully constructed commentary on the national government turned into

niche memes, until finally, the joke was on me. Proudly proclaiming I was “hot, dumb, and unbothered” one evening captured the hearts of a few dozen, and that was all it took to get me hooked.

This is humor in its loosest form, nonsense parading as jokes, but I feel empowered. I found myself out of breath one evening, laughing so hard at somebody’s tweet: “When will they make drugs for girls.” When indeed, I pondered, regaling my followers with my own foray into drug-related debauchery. I tweeted a thread about a springtime run-in with a campus nun. I was carrying a Christmas light box stuffed with marijuana. She narrowed her eyes, silently reciting the Hail Mary. I watched the likes to my thread role in and smiled, wondering if Sister Amy was still praying for me.

In the early aughts of my digital self discovery, I was a walking contradiction. I turned inward, away from my peers; through the Internet I expanded outward. I yearned for connection that only seemed feasible with minute observations sent out into a void. I casted a net and waited, exhilarated by every pull on the line. I searched, addictive for validation.

* * *

My father used to show me the T.V. programs that raised him, usually bookmarked by adages about how

good things *used* to be. Commercial breaks were trip gongs. He reared up to remind me he didn't have that cancerous wi-fi, that mind-melting social media in the halcyon days of his childhood (both pre- and post-impending nuclear holocaust). Then one evening, Ed Sullivan introduced a comedian I had never heard of before:

Here tonight, performing her "I'm Perfect" routine, is Totie Fields!

She performed only for me, or a me not yet fully realized, budding soon to blossom. I knew women could be funny—I watched *I Love Lucy* and reveled in her shenanigans—but I didn't know women could be funny, adored, *dirty*.

"You're dying to touch me, aren't you?!" Totie berated a balding man who's laughter turned his face beet red. Laughter bubbled up inside me and poured out. I cringed, yet enjoyed this crass salacious observation. I continued to laugh well after the bit was over... because my father wasn't. He sat stone-faced and immovable. That to me meant everything, because it was my first step into independence.

Naturally, I abused it.

As a baby-faced latchkey kid, I was used to at least an illusory freedom. Walking home from middle school, I let myself into an empty house, boiled

water for boxed mac and cheese, and booted up our household's desktop computer. I'd created a Facebook account earlier than I should've been allowed. Facebook confused my father; he didn't put much stock in it. "It's a way to connect with my friends," I assured him, and he relented. This was true, of course. I enjoyed chatting with friends, watching the number of them grow each day as more and more finally wore their parents down, letting them make accounts. Initially, I played silly games to pass the time in between homework and getting ready for bed. But soon I posted statuses about what I was doing, what I was reading, watching, or eating.

My content was lackluster, but many peers liked my statuses irregardless of what I said. Midwestern boredom often overpowered my more popular peers indifference. Encouraged by the attention, I grew bolder, until I was posting updates like, "I'm all alone! Wish I wasn't :/ Looking for someone to make out with..." They were sentiments I knew nothing about at that tender, pre-pubescent age. Although, through a lengthy game of telephone tag, a mother of a friend contacted my father and relayed some of my greatest hits. My father didn't find them humorous at the time. His face reddened when he checked my Facebook, his tongue twisting at the words I let drip, or really spilled, towards the thirsty masses. "You can't post something like that! Somebody will see it and get the wrong idea!"

“When you’re on T.V., you can say whatever you want.” He said. My lack of remorse exasperated him. “Until then, *delete it.*”

My online writing garnered multiple reactions. I claimed the attention I sought, and in this, I became realized. Addicted to the taste of online controversy, I grew up exploring all the annals of social media. That ugly scene between my father and I played out throughout my life: He stumbled across my social media, irate about the things my persona posted. Most recently, he was upset about a Twitter poll I'd conducted: “What’s the horniest Hitchcock movie?” I thought it was a perfectly objective question (*North by Northwest*, obviously), but it set him off again.

“Your Twitter’s been disgusting lately,” he chided, which made me chuckle, but then he went a step further. “I can’t believe it. I already had to go through this with your mother.”

I unintentionally laughed at this, and in my father’s fury he hung up the phone. His grotesque reaching surprised me. It was absurd to compare my attempts at Internet humor to my mother’s transgressions. She had cheated on my father, causing their inevitable divorce and a taxing custody battle. On Twitter, I was just role playing a horny idiot in an imagined community.

Yet, in the silence following the phone call, I felt the sting of my father’s slap.

Why did his words suddenly matter? A colorful over-exaggeration, a false comparison designed to hurt.

It was wrong. I was not the “loose” woman—the moniker branded on my mother. When my mother cheated, my family hid nothing from me. She was referred to as a *slut* many times... but I didn’t know how not to become one. I barely knew what sex was at seven. Nobody explained what it meant to use your body for pleasure, to be in control of your wants and desires, and not have them control you. My mother was deprived of her personhood. She was a caricature of sin. Because of this, for many years I felt caged inside myself, unable to separate natural desire from devious betrayal. I internalized a chastity belt and wore it, ironically, as a white flag. I surrendered to this idea that any woman who wanted sex was inherently selfish. Although I enjoyed performative wisdom beyond my years on social media, I grew anxious about any reciprocation.

Maybe this is why I let my father choose a college with a convent for me. He needn’t have worried. I would remain prudish during those early years, and I still feel the shame of sexiness. Even so... I still crave the attention, and most days I perpetrate the delusion — a

desire for attention and need to keep my body and soul safe — through tweeting, or posting on Instagram, or dating app connections.

Most days, anyway.

Online, I'm baiting and begging people to love me. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't chasing unattainable adoration. At night, despite the likes and reposts, it's just me, haunting the apartment like a scorned apparition, following a set path that makes no sense. At the end of the day, it's all a facade—an elaborate performance. When I'm bored of thinking out loud on Twitter, I turn to Tinder or Bumble, where I mindlessly swipe through pictures of guys who are also performing an idealized self more succinctly than I.

I displace my disapproval of my own hungry need for adoration by judging the guys I swipe. I'm scornful of men who use dogs in dating app profile pictures. That dog is not doing nearly enough work as you think it is! Sure, it's cute! How paternal that you have one, etc., etc., maybe you aren't a murderer after all but I'm still going to need some other insight into your personality. You can still be an asshole with a dog. Also, yes, I'm willing to play twenty questions with you but only if you're going to actually play the game. No, 'pics?' is not a question just because you've added a question mark after it. These men's lack of

interest in a good old fashioned conversation doesn't surprise me. (Though many guys show more interest in me than my own family.)

Sometimes I meet-up with these men. Some continue the pursuit even after the mindless flirting has ceased. They start to understand how they've been misled. I'm not as charismatic as I am online. I'm moody. Frankly, I'm a little bitchy. Sometimes they'll come home with me, anticipating a revival of the digital character I played so well. I relish it. I enjoy saying 'no' to sex. I'm a prude, through and through; any liberation I secure through pointed pleas for praise gets lost when I close the app.

Even when I hold people at arm's length, I crave the connection. In this Oz, I'm not Dorothy. I'm the Wizard. You're not supposed to look beyond the green curtain. You're not supposed to see who I really am, or what I really am. I use Twitter and Tinder to build the facade brick-by-brick. I let people think they're getting to know me when really they're only privy to what I *want* them to see. Am I a coward? Idealizing myself so much, I've now eschewed reality?

I worry that my persona now eclipses the real me. I'm more like her than I've ever been, yet I still don't know who she is. She's a cowgirl, a witch, a comedian, a vapid, dumb hot girl who exists solely within the confines of her collective. She wears my heart on her sleeve, but

it was stolen. She's a reclamation of self, but she's only one piece of the whole. I need this attention to survive. The documentary *The Social Dilemma* claims social media is destroying our society. I feel torn apart. Can something devour you and feed you at the same time?

I posed this question to my followers. They gave me no answers. I spoke it aloud and got more questions. Then, a reality salesman put his foot in the door and asked for more of my time.

It was a one night hook-up gone awry. This was the third date. I still wanted to keep seeing him. This wasn't what the Internet was for — a catalogue of fleeting moments, a huge collage of interiority strewn about for strangers to find and use. The Internet is not conducive to real connection, right?

I rose from bed and sat down at my desk, absent-mindedly putting in my headphones. I wondered if I should write something and felt, as I often do, like bolting out the door. My friends think it's funny that I live tweet everything. One time: about being stranded on the side of road. I got irritated as online people wrongly assumed the tweet was an elaborate hoax, that I didn't need rescuing (in the end, I called an Uber). I electronically log life so I can remain in it. Tweeting keeps me focused on the present—it doesn't matter to me, but maybe it will matter to someone.

What's happening? asked the all-too-familiar Twitter tweet prompt. It assaulted me. I stared blankly at the whiteness of the screen.

I turned and watched the guy's back rise, imperceptible, falling softly down into the throes of the many pillows I hoard, his head buried. In the blinds' illuminated slits, he was just a carved marble torso, existing all at once, fully realized, yet undone. I traced the light up the wall, slashes on brick, squinting against the moonlight reflecting off the silver crucifix that hung above my bed's headboard.

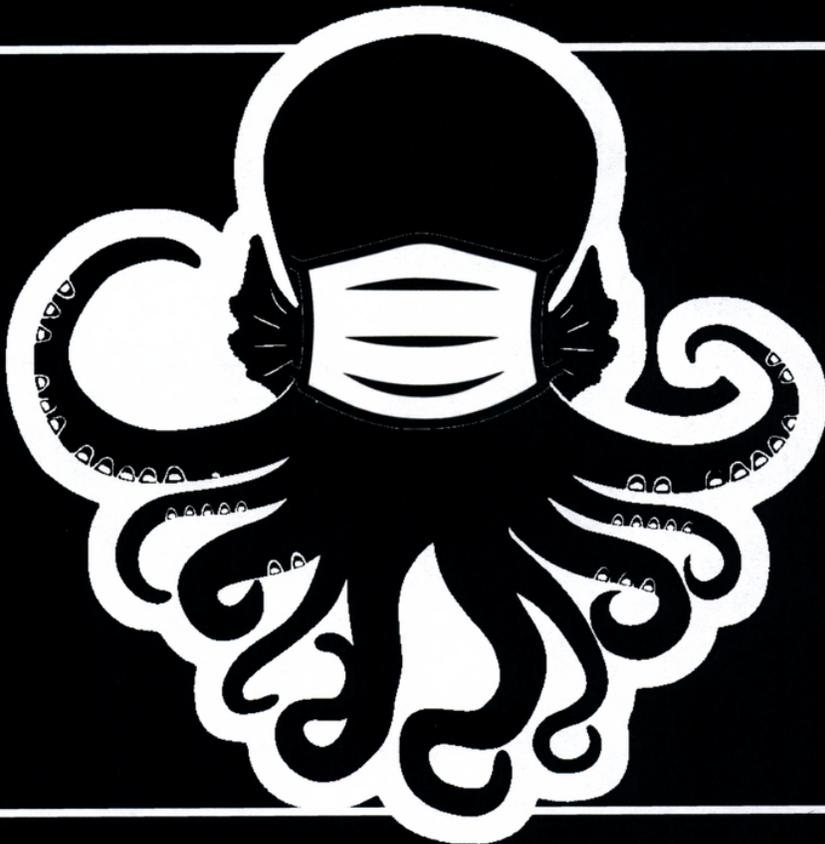
I forgot I was wearing headphones until Mitski's guitar riffed, and "Your Best American Girl" blared in my ears. *Your mother wouldn't approve of how my mother raised me, but I do, I think I do.*

I thought about tweeting the lyrics, then stopped. My laptop screen grew dimmer before going completely dark. I stared at myself in the reflection of the screen. The music stopped, and I sat in silence.

"What are you trying to tell me?" I whispered. A question posed to nobody. It fell flat — a statement. I closed the laptop and climbed into bed.

I picked up my phone and started to tweet.

**mask it
OR casket**



stay the fuck home

#cryptidsagainstextinction

MASK IT OR CASKET
KRISTY BOWEN

The Plague Letters

by Kristy Bowen

Dear Investor-

In a year, you won't recognize the body. The body that shuffles through drugstores and thrift shops. The body that muffles its cries beneath the coverlet. The body that wanted, then resisted. Who insisted it was a body at all. A thing clodding through the world in chunky shoes. Bed hopping and prodding the edges of the day with its tongue. In a year, the moths eat their way their way through the body's clothes, every sweater dusted with wings and glitter. Tiny exoskeletons clinging to cardigans unmoved for years. Th year the body ceased its wantings but grew fat on sweet creme butter. On vices other than desire. The niceties of lace collars and coquettish lingerie. How the body in the mirror looks like a body, but is darker around the eyes now. Like you took a charcoal sketch of a body, then blurred it at the edges.



Dear Senator-

Election season, and there are too many hands on this body. Sneaky fingers in my soup. In September, the body moves according to the moon, but where to put the body, just for now, when I'm done with it. When I've hatched the insides out like an egg. Scooped the bits and hollows and swept the floors. The body that wants more bodies, multiplying. And someone inside it. Not a ghost or a girl or a grade school crush. But a man and his body, the other body, that makes more bodies. And how is there room for books inside the body unless we take out the struts, the lacquered rooms and dusty carpet. Room in the heart for the body and the other bodies. The bodies that keep leaving through doors that spring open without warning. How to tend with the body that peels like floral wallpaper. The body that loves this crazy, but at the same time, wants to watch it burn.



Dear Russian Troll-

Lately facebook is full of widowers. Dead wives litter the comments section.

You, sir, with two first names and a medical degree always have a dog. A god complex. A hottie with a silver streak in your hair. You're silent for weeks at a time, so much I forget you exist. Subsisting on the bits that tumble into the sofa cushion. You stare untouched from the photo of you plucking the framed medical award from the hands of a diplomat. If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you loved her well, your dead wife and her adorable golden retriever. The kids who never call. The house in the northwest where the walls seep tech money and the blood of communists. You at the end of a long table. Fat on all that conflict.

Possums or: We Are All the Things We Hate

by Tyler Odeneal



**"I gazed at the possum, the mother, her pinkish nose.
I could see her underside, round and sagging against
the bars - a native imprisoned in her own land."**

I saw the light again. Colorful, bright, a blur while screaming—everything is changed now.

* * *

After Grandma persuaded Grandpa to put the knife away, he caught them with canned fruit. *Don't be afraid to make a mess*, he'd say, a smile cracking his face. Juice from the fruit spilled and I wanted juice on my hands too. Grandpa stopped, rubbed his palms against the grass beneath us - rid himself, seemingly, of this sweet thing - advised me with dark, engulfing eyes, to do the same. He picked at the edge of the can, plopped fruit into an old bowl, the kind made of porcelain, floral designs, cracks running throughout, wrinkled fingers pushing it inward. Slowly, he set the trap's door. *We'll catch the rest of 'em*. He took

a breath, stood shakily to his feet. *Already caught one. Might be the mama.* He stopped, eyes searching the perimeter of the yard. *Bastard.*

I followed Grandpa through ancient gates to the trap at the rear of the house. *Look at its underside.* He studied a moment. *Pregnant,* he said quietly, grimace on his face. Then, carefully, he slid the knife he'd hid from Grandma out of his pocket.

Night had begun to fall, the sky morphing into a sea of color. The many bars of the cage reflected oranges, blues and purples that the sun had left behind. Grandpa ran the sharp edge of the blade along the bars, the pointed edge moving closer and closer to the animal. He kneeled before her as if she were a queen, and I laughed at the thought. Grandpa cut his eyes at me, lost my breath, focused on the grass swaying, chanting beneath my feet.

The clatter of the knife against the metal bars brought me back. Grandpa was careful, precise, his hand gripping the knife's wooden handle, vines on a fence. The squeal of the animal echoed for a moment against the house – faded blue shutters – into the wooded area behind us. Carefully, Grandpa pulled a small item from the cage. The severed thing was brown, like us. And blood as red as apples trickled down his fingers. He moved them across the surface of the grass beneath us, this sea of green calling to me.

The river had eaten many men. Boys, too. Grandpa was sure of it. Told me of a cousin of ours, sailing when his boat was overturned. Swallowed whole by a big fish waiting in the waters below. *When God calls...* His eyes set on the water in the distance. *I was there. Got away though.*

A boy had been disobedient, decided to journey to the river, the mixture of gravel and sand pulling at his feet. After grass had disappeared, the man-made path emerged, a tricky thing, and the boy slid right into the waters. His appearance was a lot like mine, the boy. And everyone in town searched for him, but they never recovered his body. It swallowed him, the river. He sank right into its mouth.

Grandpa tinkered with a tattered bungee cord in the moonlight. Tied an end to the cage and stopped. Watched his wide nostrils release a lengthy breath. In one hand, Grandpa began to swing the cage, the remainder of the rope in the other. Then he turned toward me. *Help.*

The cord was coarse in my hands. I gazed at the possum, the mother, her pinkish nose. I could see her underside, round and sagging against the bars – a native imprisoned in her own land.

Without warning, without counting, we tossed the cage into the water. Watched as, rapidly, it was devoured by the river. Grandpa flashed a grin. *You'll know when it's done. The bubbles. My breathing slowed, heart quickened. You're getting older. Have to do stuff that makes you a man.* Still, there were a few bubbles at the surface of the water. *It's time for you to toughen up.* A sigh. *You're too damned soft.* Grandpa yanked the rope, pulling me forward. My feet struggled to find stable ground; thought that I might meet the river. The air was silent, listening. And Grandpa laughed, a thunderous laugh. It echoed out over the water, left a wake in its trail. Dark, engulfing eyes, like rivers, peered into mine. I fought back currents in my own. All the while the fangs in his mouth grew longer and sharper than they'd been before.

We should be done now. When the mother was scrambling around in the cage in search of an out, Grandpa and I repeated the process.

I gazed out over the water at the docks and boats on the other side. A stoplight in the distance granting a hue of yellow pulsed on. We slowed, sounds still, colors fading. With my free hand, I tried to catch this yellow light, yearning in my fingertips. But Grandpa tugged at the rope, and so I began to pull again. He shook Mother Possum around the cage, her fragile, lifeless body pressing against the sturdy bars. Grinned. *Come here.* Grandpa opened the trap door and passed the cage to me. A moment passed, wind whispering in my ear, and I began to dump her body, but he stopped me. *Reach in and pull it out.* His tone a sudden flood, dark, engulfing eyes sinking me.

My hand shook, but after a moment I reached into the cage for Mother Possum. She and her members were gone. Her fur was thick and slimy, and I dropped her onto the gravel. Grandpa gripped my shoulder for balance and kicked her lifeless body into the water. Said that the river would consume her as well. *Death is a part of life.* The white of his fangs shined in the dim moonlight. Grandpa took the knife from his pocket, and with a cold hand gripped my tail. *This stays between me and you, right?*

After, we traveled the short, endless road from the riverbank to home. And when we entered, I found light and comfort and Grandma, smiling, welcoming me with warm claws and cautious eyes - eyes set on the empty knife block atop the kitchen counter.

* * *

I saw him in the bathroom, rushing for work, remembering, grins extended, therapy sessions awash in my mind. Laughter from my amygdala filled the room. And there he was, staring back at me, his breath, my breath. His cheeks, eyes, all mine.

When he drowned, there was a gift left hovering over my being while I attempted to sleep. His spirit refused to leave, floating above the river, his face, body one with the thing - in old age he'd taken pests there, trading fates, having tripped and fallen in.

Alone.

I could not sleep. Sat at his funeral, tear ducts dry as the well left dilapidated in his and Grandma's yard. I cut off my tail the night before my high school graduation. Caused myself much pain in the process, blood, but knowing that I was cutting him granted relief. Took it to the river, tossed it in, waited for it to sink. The piece, this toxic appendage of him—of myself—floated away. But it never left the surface.

* * *

The yellow light in the distance has been changed now. It is yellow and red and green, too.



Rose Camden's Candelight Vigil

by Bernie Groves



"The streets grow empty and my shift ends. Nothing wears me out like driving the winding streets packed with cars."

The candlelight vigil happens every year. Faithfully, for ten years, Rosa Camden has stood at that same bus stop with her flowers clutched in worn gloves. She holds them like she's guarding herself from something, like they're a shield from grief. The flowers will convince the grief to leave her be or pass her by like the Lord when he cursed the Egyptians that didn't mark their doors.

She's not always alone, though. Sometimes, there's a man with her. I think he's her husband, except he doesn't have the look of a husband.

He has these dead eyes, red-rimmed with black half-circles underneath. He doesn't accompany her often. When he's there, he always wears a baggy black suit. Looks like he probably wears it to all the important morose occasions, like this one.

She's alone this year, the final year. Her umbrella shimmers like liquid obsidian. It rains every year on May 1st. The earth wants to share Rosa's grief, tries to get her to cry with it. But her face is smooth, unwrinkled as fresh parchment. She doesn't cry, not even that first year on the bus.

* * *

I paid her no mind back then. She entered, just a blur of movement in a sea of movement. It was later that I saw her in the rear-view mirror. Her eyes narrow and long, arcing down to a sharp nose. Her lips disappeared into her mouth, drawn toward her chin, pulled down by gravity. Bolts of panic turned to sweat in my palms. I looked away from her face. I thought Rosa's demons would haunt me too. When I looked back at her through the mirror, her face was the same.

She always sits in the same seat. If anyone has taken her spot around the time I get to her stop, I tell them to get up. Sometimes they do right away. Others wait until they see her, then, without a word, hey stand. They see it, the death colossus standing over her shoulder, a bony hand wrapped around like a mark. It's nothing like the mark that saved the children of Israel—this mark destines her to die.

"Poor Rosa," I say when she leaves. "She's not even fifty and she's gotta deal with the loss of a child."

The passenger behind me sits in the second row. An unsmoked cigarette rests in the nook at the top of his ear. He's an office worker from one of those high-rises downtown. He has a newspaper from decades ago in his lap. Why he chooses to read papers from the 60s is beyond me. He watches Rosa on the street, like he can see her

through the dark haze of hallowed night. Off the bus, she's a specter, an after-thought come and gone. The passenger turns back in his seat. He looks at me through the mirror.

"What you thinking?" I ask. "You want to step in and hold her up?"

He shakes his head, a humored smile ghosting his lips. "Don't think anyone could. She's marked for death. I won't stand in its way."

We glide along in silence. Our thoughts turn from Rosa to other things. Mundane things. The bus is empty except for the both of us and the wet tires against wet concrete. Before long, he leaves too.

I maneuver through well-oiled leather streets. Buildings are blocks of shadowed concrete all stuck together like Lego pieces. The night ages. The streets grow empty, and my shift ends. Nothing wears me out like driving the winding streets packed with cars. They're all rushing some place. To them, I'm an obstacle to overcome. Making a turn takes too much energy. I can't wreck the bus. I can't afford to be sued. Life is a constant moving picture, a nonstop movement of people, colors, landscapes, and cars.

* * *

Toward midnight, Rosa sits up in her rocking chair. Every May 1st. The lights are off. She contemplates in a darkness no one else would be comfortable

sitting in. She listens for her children asleep in the upstairs room. Their soft breaths mingle, and it reminds her of Leslie. Where a branching pain would usually bloom scarlet in her chest, only numbing-cold lingers.

Leslie was unlike those children asleep upstairs. She was a quiet child, but with an unbridled laugh that spread like a contagion. Leslie was most like Rosa—a good child, a minding child. She followed the rules whereas her siblings upstairs took after their father's unkempt wild.

A presence outside Rosa's door interrupts. "Come in," she calls.

It floats into the room. It stands by her side. She continues rocking, eyes fixed on her front door. What could more important than the figure standing by her side? The rocking, the slow rhythm, the joints of the chair crying underneath.

"Is it time?" she asks. "I've waited. Every year, I've waited."

The figure looms, more shadow than solid object. Its back is elongated and curved toward her. It showers her in darkness.

Rosa has memorized every corner of the family room. The pictures above the quiet fireplace. There are exactly five; four have white frames and one is brown. They're cheap, something

she's not entirely sure is wood. They progress her life. She's a teenager, her hair in a trendy updo, lips red as sin, face tight and smooth. Then her and the man who's not home; her eyes are bright with wonder at finding this soulmate. Her first child, fragile in a cotton blanket, eyes tiny slits. Then the first child holding the second. Leslie is the fifth, tiny as a pea, wrapped in pink cotton.

Rosa smiles, remembering the tiny bundle in her arms that drew milk from her in hungry, contented gurgles. Her husband wants the picture taken down. When he comes home drunk, his eyes won't meet Leslie's. He thinks Rosa keeps the picture up to hurt him, to punish him. That could be true.

Her gaze travels around the room again, settling on places to absorb their energy. The figure watches. It regards her things with inhuman disinterest.

Rosa's sigh fills the space. She's afraid her children will wake and come down into the family room, eyes bleary, minds wandering. They don't.

"Let me see them. Before I go," she says.

The figure beckons with a long arm. It is not one of us—not human. What need of language does it have? Rosa picks herself up. Like the chair, her bones creak with absolution. She climbs the stairs. It watches.

Her children's limbs twist around each other and the blanket in their double bed. She touches the smooth curve of warmed faces. Her hand lingers atop their heads, where their unruly hair forms a mass. Outside it's still raining, lighter than before, but she can hear the patter of drops on metal. She mourns their loss before she's lost them. Raindrops squeeze out of her eyes. "Will they be okay?"

She knows without seeing that it stands behind her. She knows the answer, that they will be okay. That her sister will come for them.

Rosa turns to it. "I'm ready."

* * *

I wake the moment the sun rises on May 2nd. Its coastal light traces the fine line of the horizon. Another day, another day of movement, of progression. I open the doors at each stop. On a loop, I brake and press on the gas. I pull over. I yield, and above, the sun continues its arc across the sky. I think of Rosa. Her children. Her husband. Her sister. Death clung to her in life and drew me to her. In the sea of movement, she was as still as a picture.

The businessman watches me in the mirror. He wears his pinstriped suit. He carries his folded newspaper. I turn back to the road, appreciating the cracks in the pavement, the potholes. I think of her.

"That's how Rosa died," I say.

He silently watches pedestrians blur into a single line. It's a slow night, but I've still got hours to go. Stop after empty stop. Even so, I slide along the curb and wait. Cars eagerly rush past as I glide back onto the road.

"You can't possibly know that," he finally replies.

I meet his gaze in the mirror and smile a small smile, a bit sad and a bit something else.



The Born Identity

by Marc Meierkort

Dr. Seuss proves practice makes perfect.
A taste for the earliest of persecutions.
There's a subject in there somewhere.
Somewhere a baby cries. Damned if
babies cry. Foul originates the telling
of lies. Augustine that steely raconteur
& scoundrel of the self-image. A heated
transfer. Personal hatred now humanity's
flaw. From Adam's first major shit-storm
of stupidity & bad manners mistakes made
graven. We've been slurred from birth.
Unchosen. Unformed. Incomplete drawings
left to the right side of the shelf marked
incomplete drawings. It's a shame really.
This society we call sin. This run on belief
says we've fallen still but ready to rise.
Beside the point of being fully in love
with the length of the line there's room
for a subject in there says I am not that
sin. I am not that profanely original.



As the Legend Goes in 536AD

by Kyle Lavelle



**"Slung like fallen
skies, volcanic smoke
rolled over still from
the eruptions ten
months prior..."**



A naked, thoughtful ape clung shivering to a log of driftwood as it crested over yet another wave. The hominid was violent and tender. The water was frigid and jade in the leaden light. The shore vanished. From what could be seen above the waterline, the sad beast had hair only upon the top of its head that fell down around its shoulders. Its breath steamed over the driftwood. Its shimmer softened by a sun obstructed in the ash-weighted air. Slung like fallen skies, volcanic smoke rolled over still from the eruptions ten months prior.

The pale primate coiled its arms tighter. Bark pressed to its face as it lifted the slit of its eye to the heavens entombed in purgatorial grey. It was reminded: this was a reckoning. So it was described to the simian. But an omitted piece of the explanation was the eruption itself and its location, five-thousand miles southwest, where the ground first summoned the smog in a blast like a shame veil for what was sanctioned.

Enveloped in the fallout, all witnessed the repeated grey days and darkest nights known. This reborn night held no stars. Only once since the sky's drop could the mammal spot the muddled glow of the moon. For over a year the forecast was a cycle of days in a fog dome; a wasteland benighted under an eclipsed sun, where hill apes sliced each other down while this creature cast off its cloths and surrendered to the water.

The floating brute was remarkable in battle, but when a polar wind pressed hard against its head, it wept. It let out a pathetic wail. It peeled its face off the log and took in its surroundings one final time. Buried in sky, soaked in cold ocean. Black and grey hung over earth and water like a dream of shadows. But the ape remembered: this was no nightmare, and he was no longer a mindless ape. So the man looked into the water. He searched the over-depths for his bride but saw only darkness. He cried out to her body in his language that had been mixed, then lost in time.

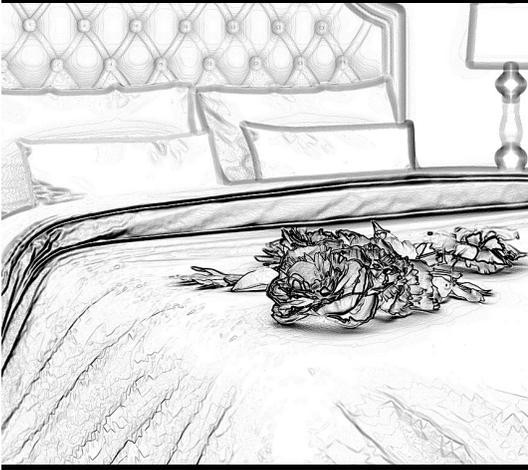
He explained to the water and breaking driftwood that he no longer had the strength to stay, nor could he bring himself to let go and sink. Waves crashed over. He inhaled. The wood split and the apeman released his grip and sank. He blew out his last breath and descended into the North Sea.

The waterway's official name came over a millennium later. That coastland is called England by many today, but the nearest shores back then were known as the kingdom of Essex—Anglo-Saxon societies. The location of the blast that put them all to their knees—modern-day El Salvador.

This was Autumn in 536AD—the year of volcanic winter.

Her Own Bedroom

Elizabeth S. Tieri



"She went directly from sharing a room with her sister as a child to sharing a room with her husband as a mother."

I am my mother's baby, twofold. Not only because I grew inside her, but because I was the *last* to grow inside her, the last of six. My mother was 36 when I was born, 35 the winter she found out she was carrying me in that already big belly of hers. I'm 35 this year, and childfree. In my father's obituary, which I've been drafting for weeks, my name will be the only among his children with nothing listed afterward, "...and Elizabeth." Period.

My father is dying. This is something anyone who's known me for more than a day has heard me mention. My father is one of those depression-era babies who never ate a vegetable that didn't come out of a can. He was already a sick, old man when I was born. Yet he spent the last two decades of his life defying the doctors' decrees, keeping hard at work.

But this is not a story about my father. This is a story about my mother.

I once asked if she ever wished she'd married someone other than my father. "No," she told little me. (I'm sure this part of her answer was never true, based on what I know of romance and also what I've heard her say since.) But I've always admired the second part of her response. "Because," she said, "with any other husband, I wouldn't have gotten you for my baby."

As the baby, I was allowed to sleep in their bed much longer than the average child, not only because there were no younger siblings to take my place and kick me out, but also because my father worked nights, and my mother prefers not to sleep alone. I, incidentally, prefer not to as well.

For much of my childhood, I shared a full-sized bed with two sisters. But some of my earliest memories are of faking sleep on the couch until Pop left for work. When the coast was clear I'd climb

into bed with Ma. Some nights when he was home, I slept on the floor under their bed, because I hated so much to sleep away from her. Even past the third grade, when I got my own bedroom and my own bed for the first time.

My mother never had her own bedroom. *Ever.* She went directly from sharing a room with her sister as a child to sharing a room with her husband as a mother. Some of the furniture from her childhood bedroom still fills the one I share with no one, alone in the city.

My mother never had her own bedroom until tonight, because now my father is dying, and he's so close to dead that he needs a hospital bed for the nurses to ease him to the end. When they labeled him *hospice*, he opted to go home. He wanted to spend his last moments in bed with his wife. They got away with that for a few weeks, sharing their bedroom in my sister's house. But this week, the VA has insisted on a hospital bed. So my parents' bedroom has become just his, because that hospital bed is a single, despite my parents' marital status. It's a status they've held for the majority of a century. Tonight, my mother is expected to sleep in the extra room, alone.

The nurses tell us this, though we know she would rather suffer in a chair beside him: upright, dozing, awaiting his every need. We don't tell the nurse. It doesn't need to be said, and we want to seem compliant. So we move the mail and photo albums and laundry. We put her sheets on their old shared bed in the extra room. All of a sudden, for the first time in her seventy-two years, my mother has her own bedroom.

It won't be really real, though, until my father passes. I made my peace with his fate years ago, something I keep telling the friends who offer their concern. My words, however, lose their sincerity through the cloth of this mask I must wear. Minding the mask is superficial when I consider the more painful ways this pandemic will distort my father's passing. When my father does finally rest in peace, because of the pandemic, I can't rejoin my mother's bed, her bed alone. Something I've done so many times—even as an adult. I no longer belong to my mother's household, her germ circle, so I must keep my distance even after my father passes.

We sit here waiting in the living room while my father is dying in the bedroom that has become just his. We take turns sitting alone with him and sitting together with Ma. In either room the television projects cowboys or murderers, depending on the time of day. My father flicks the guide on to track the time; he wants to know every moment, every minute we're at. He fears the days he cannot track.

Meanwhile, my mother fields questions that we—mostly me—pose to her, memorializing the minutiae of her fascinatingly rich memory. Her stories bridge my loneliness—the distance I feel between this straight-backed chair to her and them. I'm several feet away from the people who've known me the longest, yet seem to know me the least.

She talks mostly about when she was first married. I steer the conversation to the few years before Pop. "Where were you working when you bought my bookcase?" A direct question, the only chance I have at keeping Ma on track, especially tonight.

"The big bookcase that used to have the TV in Berwyn?"

"Yeah Ma, the room divider." That bookcase was the first piece of furniture my mother bought for herself. It divided the bedroom she shared with her sister through high school and just after. It's a beautiful dark-walnut piece with a drop-down desk and deep drawers.

"I was at State and Wacker proof-reading policies for the insurance company."

"And how much did you make there?"

"\$70 a week." She managed to save \$200 for that piece of furniture. In my apartment, it still holds my parents' records, the ones that have now become mine. It also shelves my bar.

I wish I had a drink. But this is not a comfort I am granted. Not only because there's no booze in this house, but also a drink would mean I'd have to go outside to take down my mask.

My mother never really drank. I often joke that she got drunk just twice in the 60s. The second time she got drunk she woke up pregnant, so she never drank again. She says she doesn't like to be out of control. My mother's a pragmatic woman. She raised us with a light hand, yet snuck assurances of her love into practical situations. She has always said, "A seatbelt is a hug from your mother."

I don't drive much. I've never owned a car, yet never have I ridden in one

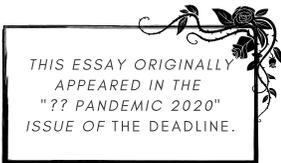
without wearing my seat belt. Just as I would never refuse a hug from my mother.

I wish I could go for a drive with her. Exploring, as she calls it, when there is no other goal in mind. But I'm stuck here in this crowded room, waiting in the weight of this distance.

I'm the only one wearing one of the masks my sister made from her old pillowcases, the masks she made to combat this plague. Meanwhile, my old pillowcases are still on my pillows at home, alone in the city. Except one, the one that tore in the washer. I donated it to Ma to serve as what she calls her tickle—enabling her still-held childhood habit of sucking her thumb under a bit of cloth wrapped around her fist.

As our wait wears on, her tickle emerges from her breast pocket. It comforts me, seeing my former pillowcase adorn her face, caressing her in her sleepless sorrow as her husband passes. While I wear my mask, I'm relieved that I won't be responsible, at least in this instance, for bringing about the demise of this great woman.

I leave my sister's house. In the fresh air of the night, alone on my bike ride home, I keep my mask over my mouth, a comfort as close as I am granted to a hug from my mother.



THIS ESSAY ORIGINALLY
APPEARED IN THE
"?? PANDEMIC 2020"
ISSUE OF THE DEADLINE.



HALVED
L.A. HAWBAKER

Stay Hungry

Trevor Lisa

Exhibit 53f - Federal Trade Commission v. AfterVida Nutrition Company

Interviewee: Nicholas Shields

Interviewer: Detective Hannah Russell, on behalf of the FTC

Date of Interview: 05.28.IX

List of Acronyms: NS = Nicholas Shields; HR = Detective Hannah Russell

Note: The following account was ascertained in an effort to support the Federal Trade Commission's ongoing investigation into any and all connections between the Atlanta-based AfterVida Nutrition Company, a bonafide multi-level network marketing company (i.e. "MLM"), and criminal activities. These include false advertising, conspiracy, money laundering, grand theft auto, assault, and murder.

We have assembled the following transcripts in their standing order and redacted the comments of the interviewer to isolate the speaker and attempt to give some semblance of organization to what was otherwise a vexing, scattered, and altogether incoherent conversation.

NS ... I hope this iddn't prodding too much, Miss Detective, but lemme ask you, have you ever had a falling out with a friend before?

HR [REDACTED]

NS I don't wanna make it sound all dramatic or whatever. I'm just curious.

HR [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

NS Well, here's the way I see it. I think people break apart like continents. You ever learn about continents? Like back in high school—"Teutonic Plates" [sic] and all that? That's my take. You know, like, here's y'all, thick as fleas; you're rock-solid friends, like two mountains, side by side. But, some time passes, things change, and the two of you start driftin' apart; and eventually, you're sittin' in South America and his ass is way over there in Africa. And here's you, wondering, "When did things end? when did we even split apart?" Because once you've drifted far enough from someone, you can't remember if it took one month, one million fuckin' years; all you know is he's there, and you're here, and you got an ocean of hate between you two, and you wanna rip his fuckin' head off for making you feel old enough to lose the whole timeline of the rivalry.

HR [REDACTED]

NS I guess what I'm tryna say, Miss Detective, is that there's no exact moment of collision when you have a falling out. Or, at least, there wasn't for D- and I. Our friendship unraveled. Suppose maybe we were comin' apart longer than we were actually together, if you look at it a certain way.

HR [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

NS Yeah, I can tell you about when he and I split up. I guess it started when he decided to drop out of school. I remember the night he made up his mind.

It was a Thursday, the first week back in January our junior year. We'd made it through syllabus week, and since neither of us had class on Fridays, and work-outs were a ways off, we decided to take a couple'a edibles that D-'s sister had brought home for Christmas and go out on a nice midnight stroll through the frigid, fifty-five-degree Georgia winter.

NS [laughs] The edibles? What, are you gonna call my mom? They were gummies. The kind you buy at a dispensary. So don't bother tryna charge me, okay?

Anyway; so we got our hoodies on, right; and we're creepin' around the dark campus, just us, all alone. Like we're at the bottom of the ocean or some shit—nobody else around, no life whatsoever. And after a bit of wandering, we found a set of abandoned rail lines behind the old dilapidated print shop next to the art building. And we sorta look at each other and shrug and start walkin' a studious single-file, arms out wide, trying to match our steps with the wooden ties.

“Am I supposed to feel this yet?” I asked, sorta impatient.

And D- turns around over his shoulder like he's gonna answer, 'cept all he does is give me this wild-eyed look, and shouts, “Utah's finest!” all smooth, like one of those fuckin' Somalians [sic] or whatever you call those fancy wine people.

“Why'd your sister move out there again?” I asked. All around us were the backs of the buildings. We were looking at dumpsters and loading docks.

“Some teaching program.” D- said, marching on, not lookin' back. “They sent her to go work at a school for troubled youth.”

“Troubled.” I repeated.

“Yeah. You know, much like ourselves.”

“What the fuck are people troubled about in Utah?”

“I'dunno.” D- said. “Maybe they're still gettin' over the Olympics? Duddn't everybody go broke after the Olympics? It's like one of those curses; you host the Olympics, and then your city goes to shit, and everybody loses all their money.”

“I never heard of that,” I said.

“Yeah, it happens everywhere,” D- goes, all sure of himself. “Happened in Beijing, happened in Rio—hell, even Atlanta; they'll tear down a whole fuckin' neighborhood just to build these gaudy stadiums, and then, after the games,

nobody can maintain 'em. There's pictures; it's like Mad Max or some shit. People building little tent villages in the drained-out swimming pools, pretending like Michael Phelps never peed in there. Maybe my sister works in one of those; maybe she's got a little cluster of street urchins, sitting 'round a fire, reading bedtime stories beside the diving board."

"No," I shook my head. "It wouldn't be a swimming pool in Utah."

"Why not?"

"It was the winter Olympics, dipshit. And besides, they don't build stadiums for that."

"Like you'd know."

"What, do you think they built a whole goddamn mountain in the middle of downtown Salt Lake City? Just so those fuckin' Swedish cheerleaders can come skiing by in their Power Ranger sweats? Doing their fuckin' backflips? No, D-, it duddn't work like that."

D- didn't turn. We just kept walkin'.

And so we keep goin', single-file. And we pass dumpsterville; pass the hazard waste disposal from the medical school; and we start going through the science campus, where all the buildings are these rigid glass trapezoids, hangin' over the steep hillsides like fuckin' Elon Monks [sic] lives there or some shit. And we keep walking; and eventually the ground drops around us, and it's just us on the railroad, with cars driving on the road, way down below. I start gettin' scared, thinkin' I might fall. And outta nowhere we make a turn, and the football stadium's looming over us, like this big fuckin' somber monolith, endless towering concrete. But I don't look up at it; I just keep puttin' one foot in front of the other, watchin' my steps, watchin' the cars keep goin' by, way down the steep embankment.

And so by the time the high really kicks in; by the time I'm riding that mean steely breeze—kinda gigglin' to myself—the rail lines have deposited us at a cemetery. And so we go through the muddy Georgia clay up to the iron gates. And wouldn't you know it? It iddn't even locked.

We step on through and start wandering around in the pale moonlight, like

a couple'a grave robbers lookin' for dishonest work. We ditch the path and make our way onto the grass, passed the ivy-veined mausoleums and the jagged old tombstones, stickin' up outta the ground like bad teeth.

And, you know, with it bein' a Civil War cemetery and all, I decide that I gotta do my civic duty and bring that place into the modern era. So I drop my drawers and relieve myself on some old-ass grave, hummin' the national anthem, smiling like it's General Lee Harvey Oswald [sic] himself that I'm peeing on, like I'm makin' a difference.

D-'s got his back to me as I'm pissing. And, kinda out of nowhere, he says, "But school-man, it's fucked. You ever actually sit down and think about it? Like why we're here?"

"You mean during tutoring?" I say, zipping myself up. I turn and he's got his arms folded, looking off, with his mouth twisted into a knot.

"Nah, man" he sighs. "I'm talkin' about the bigger picture. Like why we're here in the first place."

I put my arm around him, all chummy like, my eyes big red rubies from the weed gummies. We cast two long shadows in the moonlight. "We're 'ball players, D-." I say, ruffling his hair like a dog. "School iddn't even in the picture. Hell, just gimme tests and lemme crack some skulls, brother."

And he goes "No, Nick, I'm serious. Like, in this country, in general." He made a big sweeping gesture toward the sky. And then he sorta folded into himself, getting all quiet. "I didn't tell you 'bout this yet, but over break, I went to this meeting."

"A meeting?" I said.

"Kinda like a job interview. This guy reached out to me online; Heath was his name. He said I looked 'hungry,' and that he knew my name from football."

"Hmmm. Feelin' hungry myself."

D- ignored me. "It's sorta like sales, 'cept you get to set your own hours and stuff. They sell energy drinks. But it's, like, more than that." We started walking again. Strolling around among the dead. "He was talking about all this

stuff; like how in America, when we're in high school, we're getting' taught by some crusty old lady makin' thirty grand a year."

"Yeah," I nodded. "Mrs. Potters; Algebra II."

"And then," he said "if you're smart, you go to college—where you're expected to learn from some equally crusty motherfuckers making sixty grand a year. Sixty." He repeated it like he was tryna make a point. "Iddn't that fucked up?"

"Bet your sister duddn't think so." I said. We were walking toward a terraced hillside rising up in the distance, with a ribbon of stone pathway going around it, and this great stooping willow at the top like a crown. It looked like the backside of a state quarter.

And D- goes "I mean, what the fuck can someone making sixty grand tell me about making money? Huh? You ever think about that? I wanna to learn from millionaires. I wanna learn how to create wealth. Where was that lesson? How to create a 'passive income;' do you know this term, Nick? 'Passive income?'" He said the phrase like he'd borrowed it for a test drive. "See, in America, they try to tell us that the whole secret to success is making money. That's bullshit. It's about creating wealth. There's a difference."

And I thought he was getting ready to say something else, maybe something important; but he stopped. His face went urgent, eyes wide and still, like he'd seen something. And so I turn around, and try to follow his gaze; and there, off in the distance—past the hill, through a little band of mist—I see this fuckin' ravenous, red coyote, gnawin' and chewin' at something. It's rolling around, shifting between the headstones, the color of old rust or paprika.

HR [REDACTED]

NS Listen, there is some shit I just do not fuck with.

I grab D- by the sleeve and make like I'm gonna bolt. But D- just shakes me off, and he gets down on his hands and knees and starts crawling toward it. You know, all prone and whatnot. Like he's Steve Irwin goin' in for the close-up.

HR [REDACTED]

NS Look. You can call me cautious or chickenshit or whatever; you can say what you want about me, Miss Detective, but when it comes to wild animals—whether it's the zoo, or the damn lizards in Biology class—I do not do that. Period. And this coyote was goin' on like it had something to prove.

I got my ass outta there. Ran back home on those rail lines—passed the stadium, passed the campus and the dumpsters. Like I was fuckin' Ichabod Crane, dodging through the woods. I wasn't about to get eaten by some fuckin' mangey dog.

But D— had other thoughts.

He told me this later on that night, back at the dorm, while filling up a glass of water at the sink.

D— crawled toward it through the wet grass, taking cover behind the graves. He went to the top of that hill, up to the willow tree, peeking through the leaves like he was behind a curtain. And up there, from that perspective, 'bout ten feet or so from the damn thing, he can see that what she's eatin' and tearin' apart—what she's jerking around—is the limp body of another coyote. A brother, a sister; maybe a friend. Who knows. Just rippin' flesh off the bone, like it wuddn't a fuckin' problem.

“Guess she was hungry,” D— said, taking a long sip of water.

I nodded from the futon.

END OF TAPE

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Kristy Bowen

The Plague Letters

A writer and book artist working in text and image, Kristy Bowen is the author of several chapbooks, zines, and artist book projects, as well as full-length collections of poetry-prose-hybrid work, including *FEED* and *SEX & VIOLENCE*. She lives in Chicago and works at the Columbia College Library. Bowen runs *dancing girl press* and *studio*, publishing an annual chapbook series by women authors. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Columbia College. www.kristybowen.net



Bernie Groves

Rose Camden's Candlelight Vigil

Bernie Groves is a BIPOC writer of speculative fiction and MFA candidate in Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago. She travels and jots down interesting sights. She has work forthcoming in *Daastan Literary Magazine* and has been published in *Literary Yard*. Her work has also been included in an anthology published by Clarendon Publishing House. Groves lives in Chicago with her partner and cat named Mouse.



L.A. Hawbaker

Editor / Artwork

L.A. Hawbaker is the editor of *MASKS*. She is a writer and artist based in Chicago. Her work has appeared in *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, *PopMatters*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Time Out Chicago*, *HairTrigger*, *Cicada Magazine*, and *Newcity Magazine*. She is the 2020-2021 Artist-in-Residence at Columbia College Chicago's Aesthetics of Research. www.lahawbaker.com / @laurahawbaker



Kyle Lavelle

As the Legend Goes in 536AD

Kyle Lavelle is currently pursuing his MFA in the Creative Writing-Fiction program at Columbia College Chicago. After attaining his bachelor's degree from the University of Iowa, he returned to Chicago and spent several years in sales before returning to academia.



Trevor Lisa

Stay Hungry

Trevor Lisa is an MFA candidate at Columbia College Chicago. He was the 2019 Student Prize winner at the University of Chicago's Writer's Studio and has had work appear in *Hypertext Magazine*, among others. When he isn't writing, he's either running, eating, or playing air drums with kitchenware. To listen to a musical adaptation of "Stay Hungry," follow TRiO on SoundCloud. Profile photo credit: @jaking_photos



Marc Meierkort

The Born Identity

Marc Meierkort of Glendale Heights, IL is an MFA candidate in Poetry at Columbia College Chicago, where he is also an assistant editor for *Allium, A Journal of Poetry & Prose*. A poet and educator, he taught high school English for 19 years. A past Pushcart Prize nominee, his work has appeared in *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Crack the Spine Literary Magazine*, *The Main Street Rag*, *In Parentheses*, and *The Bookends Review*.



Tyler Odeneal

Possums or: We Are All the Things We Hate

Tyler Odeneal is an MFA candidate in Fiction at Columbia College Chicago. He's had fiction and poetry published or forthcoming in *Furrow Literary Magazine*, *Glintmoon Literary Journal*, *Genre: Urban Arts*, *580 Split* and elsewhere.



Elizabeth S. Tieri

Her Own Bedroom

Elizabeth S. Tieri is the youngest of seven. She survives as a poet, historian, storyteller, and French teacher with great thanks to coffee. She is learning to hula hoop on roller skates and emphatically encourages you to ride your bike. Tieri has been publishing *the deadline*. through Back to Print for over a decade.



Gina Twardosz

Instant Internet Girlfriend

Gina Twardosz is a first year Creative Nonfiction MFA candidate at Columbia College. She has been published twice in the Saint Mary's College literary journal, *The Avenue*, and she has worked as a journalist for four years. She is a writer of humor and heartbreaking prose, which she balances with working on the occasional screenplay and spending about 20 hours a day online. You can find her musings on Twitter under the handle @okaypompeii.



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