

THE 2020 FLASH FICTION ISSUE

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Anita Goveas — “Plot Points On The Risk Reward Matrix”



Candy floss

I find out I’m allergic to bumblebees the day I’m stung. Eight years old, ambling home from school, leaning over to smell the pink roses that look like candy floss in our neighbour’s garden. Ours is paved over, front and back, one of the less noticeable ways we’re different from the other people who live in the cul-de-sac. I don’t feel the sting.

“Don’t be a baby,” Mum says, as I struggle to roll my white pink cotton sock down over swollen flesh. She smells like burnt cumin seeds. My tongue has dried in my mouth, a thin spun string, a fragile stem.

Burn

I wake up on the floor with carpet burn after the first night we meet. Reaching for something, I've fallen out of the unfamiliar bed. It's a dense wiry carpet, more like a scrubbing brush than something made to sink your toes into. The burn lasts for days and I can't stop touching it.

I spilled some tea, I tell my flatmate. It's some kind of allergy, I tell my mum. It's nothing, I tell you that morning, when you return with coffee and toast, a trick of the light.

Depths

I end up in the wrong swimming class in my second lesson. I cling to the side, bobbing haphazardly as we practice widths of breaststroke. Last week I spluttered when we put our faces in the water, feet firmly on the bottom. In the break, ears ringing, I tell my father I'm out of my depth. He says I get my courage from my mother, the one who didn't travel 5000 miles from Mumbai to start again.

“Didn’t you do well,” says the lady in a pink swim cap as I follow my father out, too out of breath to smile back. The fire has spread to my throat, is creeping through my aching limbs.

Scenery

I realise after you’ve moved away that you took my ant farm with you. It’s not far to go, an hour out of London, beautiful scenery, perfect for long bike rides, you’ve said it won’t change anything. We’ve never discussed how I feel about bicycles.

The pros and cons of visiting seem simple but are difficult to weigh. You’re better at looking after things, you learnt to make masala tea, you never ask for anything. Nothing fits in the gap the ant farm left.

I practice explaining about bicycles.

Path

I wait for a turn on the shiny silver bicycle our uncle gave us. My sister goes first, the oldest. My brother goes next, as the boy. I lean on the handlebars

—someone has trodden on a snail at the start of the path at the edge of the dew-spangled grass. It's a glistening wreck of shell and slime. I can't tell if it was emerging or retreating, and which is worse.

I put my feet on the pedals, but can't push down on them as ants troop past with fragments of leaf, and spiders scuttle on their way back home.

Platform

I stand at the schedule board on the day I'm travelling to see you to tell you this is not what I want anymore, I'm bringing all the half-finished letters and a box big enough for an ant farm. I can run for the delayed train that's on the platform now, or wait an hour for the next on-time train. There's no one to ask why the train was delayed. I decide to wait.

Chelsea Stickle — “Medusa Wasn’t Born A Monster”



SHE didn't always have snakes for hair. She was in Athena's temple praying for the wisdom to know what to do with her life when Poseidon raped her. Right there on the temple floor. The cool marble an empty comfort. When gods decide what to do with you, there's not much you can do. They crush humans like you for breakfast.

After he left her there, she assumed the worst was over, and she'd survived.

As punishment for getting raped in her temple, Athena gave Medusa snakes for hair—snakes that turned people to stone—and changed her

beautiful face into something monstrous. Suddenly Medusa didn't need a plan for her life. She had to go into hiding in a remote cave. Save as many people as possible from the horror of what had been done to her. Round and round, she wrapped her snake heads in a turban. No one needed to be afraid of her.

One afternoon in a blistering heat that made the air vibrate, a snake shook loose as a teenager walked past her home. She'd been about to collect pomegranates. The snake's eyes found the boy immediately. He froze in place.

"Fuck," Medusa said. The snake hissed in agreement.

The boy was how they found out she was there. Word spread that a heinous woman was scaring the countryside to death. Medusa almost left then. But the snakes understood the danger and refused to stay smothered by fabric. The turban was useless, and a trail of dead would only tell the world where she'd gone. So Medusa planted herself in the earth. She let the slick snakes slip loose. Their heads rose and kept watch, even when she slept. Protecting her was their only job.

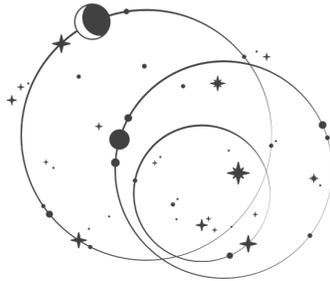
Medusa understood what would happen next. The men would come for her. When men decide what to do with you, there's not much you can

do. They crush women like you for breakfast. And come they did. One by one, the boldest man from every village appeared in her home and tried to run her through with a sword. She'd be sweeping or cooking and there they'd be. Shield and sword. Looking for the man-killing monster.

It wasn't a coincidence that only men sought to challenge her. They wanted to conquer her. Cut off her head and hang it over their hearth as proof of their power. They all fell with a glance. Their stone bodies littered her cave. No one ever came for them. With a single finger Medusa tipped them over, then used the pieces to narrow the entrance of her cave. When it was fortified, she lined the remaining men against the walls. Examined their arrogant faces—their death masks—and bulging muscles. “Why couldn't you just leave me alone?” she asked.

They never answered.

Chloe N. Clark — “Even The Night Sky Can Learn To Be A Fist”



I HAD seen twelve different doctors and had twenty-seven different appointments over the course of a few months. They had stopped looking at the notes I'd carefully written up, the symptoms I'd underlined twice with the felt tip pens I normally saved for grading and now used to grade the severity of my own symptoms—this one doesn't need to be mentioned as much, it only keeps me up sometimes, this one could be phrased stronger, I have to be more clear here. The doctors told me to try something for my anxiety. The only thing I'm anxious about is my health and the state of the world, I said. And they smiled politely and typed notes into my chart.



Sometimes I went out at night when I couldn't sleep and watched the dark unfold itself around me, becoming less fearsome as the stars crystallized themselves into pinpoints of light, the insects hummed their songs until the sound overcame the buzzing of my pain. I'd sit under the sky until I felt closer to myself.



See, the doctors said, it's just your nerves. Have you always been a nervous person? But when I was young, I used to be able to play dead so effectively that I never lost a game of hide-and-seek. I'd still my body into my surroundings. Calm was my gift. No, I said, I just can't keep it all contained in me anymore. Yes, your nerves, the doctor said and nodded.



It had started with the world, how I'd been watching it creep under my skin. A news story and then a new pain, a sharp burning under the veins in my arm one day, a headache that pulsed in one eye and never the other. Eventually I didn't know which had come first—the symptoms or the stories.



Maybe you shouldn't watch the news, one doctor said. As if it was easy to push away, as if we all should just look away. I'm sick, I said, not complacent. Some people are just more sensitive, the doctor said.



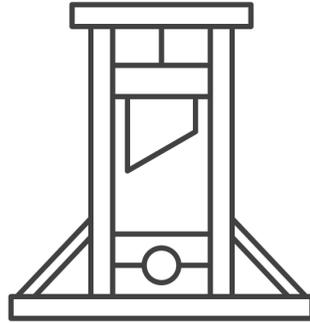
The sun will expand before it collapses, I told a doctor. It'll engulf everything and then fall back into itself. Don't you think we might be like the sun? The doctor frowned and added another note. I imagined being crushed under the weight of everything the world contained. Somedays I

couldn't take deep breaths, they sunk into my lungs so deep that I couldn't pull them up. Imagine that weight, I thought.



The doctor tells me to open my mouth, say ah. He holds a light but I'm not sure he can see, all the way into my throat, deep down where the night sky has bled its hope into me, all the galaxies I am starting to swallow. They go on and on and on until I'm just light.

Claire Polders — “The Guillotine Reimagined”



- | -

Geert offers her his fantasy as a gift, an early Christmas present.

“There’s no need for you to be so timid,” he says, squeezing her left breast.

Her objections to his “gift” go unheard. Perhaps they aren’t loud enough. Or he disregards them as modesty. Evening muteness takes over and they watch TV in an atmosphere of forced tolerance.

A week later, he gives her a time and place, and she is annoyed. Unwilling.

“But we talked about this,” he says. His annoyance is stronger.

Before long, she gives up, gives in, gives. Because he has already paid the guy—of course it’s a guy. Because she doesn’t want to be a spoilsport and supply Geert with ammunition. Their life together is degenerating—one thing they agree on—and as long as their one-year lease lasts and her moving out equals financial disaster, she might as well make an effort.

- || -

The atelier on Prinsengracht is impressive. Designer furniture, antique ladders, a stash of theatrical costumes, masks, and props.

She has arrived unprepared, physically, mentally. The photographer tells her to brush her wind-blown hair and hide her clothes behind the paper screen.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, I’m shooting you naked,” he says, as though it’s the most natural thing in the world.

She considers walking out. You forgot to mention the details, she would tell Geert. And he would reply that she must have misunderstood.

As always, there would be no recording to play back. His word against hers. The fight would win.

While she undresses, she talks herself into the idea, like she talked herself into cohabitation. She hates to admit that she's in this Geert-mess because of a pathetic infatuation. She was impulsive, hopeful, blind.

Her socks and underwear leave her with seam-indented flesh. She appears embarrassed before the photographer.

“Don't worry,” he says, setting up his camera. “There's post-production.”

He doesn't seem to notice her much during the shoot, which is reassuring. He must have done this a million times. Because his directions are reasonable, tasteful, she leans this way and that, complying as best as she can, until he tells her that she's free to go.

His last words echo on her way back to that place she can no longer call home.

- III -

A selection of twenty digital photographs arrives in Geert's inbox. *Her*

body in *his* inbox, because *he* paid for the session. Their favorite shot will be blown-up, printed, and framed. It's included in the price.

The idea of her naked self as a life-size image on the wall depresses her. But complaining about the arrangement now seems silly. She should have asked the right questions in advance. Her mistake.

Together they sit on the sofa, laptop on his lap. The photos are attractive, which doesn't surprise her. Her body is young, well made, and the photographer was professional. But will any of these pictures improve their sex life? She assumes this was Geert's goal—as though sex would fix them.

“Fantastic,” he says, clicking through the results. “You must be thrilled.”

He doesn't realize that she's done him a favor.

They compare how her breast hang or poke on each shot.

She thinks of rental rates in Amsterdam and their unaffordable heights.

“But my smile is so lame,” she says, commenting on the photo he calls his favorite.

“Who cares?”

She gets up, wondering if they've ever spoken the same language.
“You choose.”

When she sees his grin of dark pleasure, she regrets her surrender. He loves winning. With each sick victory, he's gnawing away at her autonomy.

- IV -

On a dead December day, she returns from work and finds a large framed photograph hanging on their living room wall. He stands beside it, proud, a bandage on his finger where he must have hammered himself instead of the nail.

She feels strangled. The lighting and composition is flattering in this shot. The photographer has matched her curves to the background curtains. Even the airbrushing is smart, leaving her cute moles and dimples intact. But she doesn't recognize herself. She sees an anonymous body. Not even a woman. A body.

“Why's my head missing?”

He reacts as though her question is an offense. “I asked for it.”

“Asked for what?”

“To have the picture cropped.”

A surge of humiliation is followed by a rage so strong, it makes her calm as ice.

“Why?”

“Because... you’re naked. And we have friends coming over all the time. I thought it would make you uncomfortable. Hanging there. Naked.”

“So why *do* I hang there naked?”

She might as well have suggested they’d fuck—he couldn’t be more baffled. “But nobody will suspect it’s you! I made you unrecognizable.”

“You chopped off my head.”

He throws up his arms as if warding away an evil spirit. “Give me a break. You always make me into a monster. Why give it such an awful spin? You’re gorgeous. I made you look gorgeous.”

Silence drifts into the room like poisonous gas. She checks the horizon for the arrival of dawn, but his face remains dark.

“Why did you want this photo of me?” she asks.

“You don’t like it?”

“That’s not the point.”

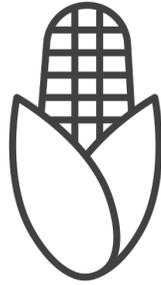
“I wanted you to know how beautiful you are,” he says, softening, perhaps thinking he’s getting a chance to make things right. “Look. Will you please look? This is how I see you.”

She looks. She sees a body. No head. “I feared as much.”

- V -

Outside, the streets are wet and slick as though it has been raining for years. She walks without aim into an uncertain future. She should have plotted her exit better, but the victory in her homelessness fires her steps.

Emily Turner — “Contributor Notes”



EMILY Turner was born in Indianapolis, Indiana and grew up there, frolicking in cornfields and developing a love for agriculture that led to her obsession, er, passion for farm life. Turner spent long, drawling afternoons on her ranch in Corn Country, Indiana. She raised cows, sheep, llamas, alpacas, the occasional unicorn, goats, and chickens, while her sheepadoodle, Winston, grazed and herded them for her. The sun blossomed in the sky, always keeping Turner and her farm animals company.

Besides animals, Turner grew corn, corn, corn, sweet corn, corn, and soybeans. Rows and rows of corn stretched beyond the unending horizon, covering the earth like a crochet blanket. Turner ran through her fields,

sprinkling her crops with a small, green watering pot—sprinkles of water glinted like diamonds in the sun's rays and fell onto the crop's waiting stems and leaves, and the soil guzzled the water. Turner knew she needed rain to finish her job, so she would pray to the harvest gods and offer golden eggs to appease them. Rain always came the next day. The corn thrived.

She made cornbread with her harvest, using $\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter ($\frac{1}{2}$ stick), 1 cup milk, 1 large egg, $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups yellow cornmeal, 1 cup all-purpose flour, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar, 1 tablespoon baking powder (very different from baking soda), and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt. At the local farmer's market, Turner sold her cornbread for \$12 for a dozen or 50¢ a piece.

Along with her cornbread, she sold homemade preserves, jams, and jellies made with frozen, industrialized store fruits. No one could tell the difference.

Turner's world-famous baked goods won first place in every county fair in Indiana as well as a Pulitzer Peace Prize. Tourists from Ohio, Kentucky, Michigan, and Illinois visited her farm in hopes of discovering her secret recipe, but Turner never solicited it, proclaiming it was far too dear to her to give out (until she started to sell the *Turner Family: Cook It in 30 or Less* cookbook for \$39.99 plus shipping and handling).

Although her cooking made her a B-list celebrity, Turner stuck mostly to tending her ranch in Kentucky. Her favorite activities on the ranch were chasing butterflies, swimming in the creek, finding a needle in a haystack, and milking strawberry and chocolate milk from her respective pink and brown cows. Why, it made her happier than a pig bathing in mud on a hot day in July. At night, Turner would lie in her fields to stargaze; counting the twinkling blips one by one and creating constellations—connecting the dots to form her own Orion and Cygnus. In fact, she often worshipped the stars and prayed to them, much like the harvest gods, asking for plentiful crops and fruitful weather. If she saw a shooting star, she knew her prayers would be answered.

The farm animals were her best friends, but the scarecrows kept her company as well. For how many acres Turner owned, she must have had hundreds upon hundreds of scarecrows, each sporting a different flannel jacket, straw hat, and overalls. Their beady eyes followed her. And their hand-stitched mouths were sewn shut so they couldn't share Turner's secrets. No matter how far she wandered in her corn fields, she always found a friend in the scarecrows. Sometimes Turner would lose herself in the corn, but she never felt fear, for her scarecrows would always point her in the direction of her farmhouse. She would whisper thank you back

to them out of gratitude and fear that if she didn't, they would stop guiding her.

Turner went on to live happily at her ranch in Ohio. She lived for her corn. She lived to take care of her animals. She lived to make cornbread. She lived to count the stars that expanded over the horizon of cornfields that reached into oblivion.

**After Michael Martone's contributor notes*

© 2020 Emily Turner

Erin Calabria — “Anemochory”



WELL, your mother was right that this town never let you go, but you don't mind as much as you used to. You can drive past the old cemeteries and bowed out barns and fields dancing to the weather, and you can tell which places the trout lilies and jack-in-the-pulpit like, which pasture used to have a gnarled apple tree that bloomed each spring till a storm cracked it right through the center. And maybe it doesn't matter to know these things. But you know them. You do.

And you know the words in the book your daughter always wants to take out of the library—a collection of botanical illustrations she stacks on top

of guides about the rainforest and coral reefs, places you'll probably never see but maybe she will.

Barochory: The way a seed finds a place to grow by gravity. An apple falling with a deep, round thump.

Your mother had shaken her head when you told her, but she didn't cry. She didn't crush you with what you were already bound to learn. How hard it is to have a child so young. How hard it must have been for her to have you. You didn't know it yet, but by then the sickness had already taken root, spreading to her lymph nodes like it had for her mother around the same age. Growing like a tree.

Hydrochory: The way a seed travels by sea, ice, and rivers, making itself both water-resistant and light, able to survive what it needs.

Sometimes you'll say your daughter's name, ask her what she's doing, but she won't answer until she's done. You're glad she hasn't learned to hide the desire to know something completely. You try to remember that when she

pulls apart milkweed pods while they're still green or snaps dandelion stalks to watch the sap run.

You're glad she was too young to remember the day you drove to the city, to the doctors who talked about letters misplaced before they drew your blood. A few weeks later they called you back, and you waited all evening till the moonflowers winked bright faces into the dark. Then you cried on the porch while your daughter slept.

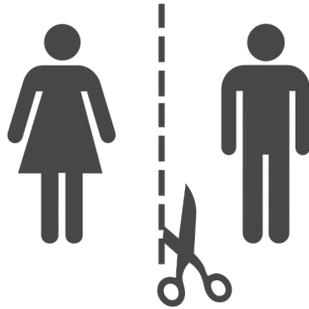
Anemochory: The way a seed sails on wings or parachutes, tracing invisible corridors of air.

Sometimes when you watch the wind turn the unmown fields into oceans, you wish your mother could tell your daughter what she always told you: that the wind has a shape, almost everything does, even if we can't see it. She'd say the shape is only part of each thing, and your daughter would say, *of course*, so earnestly you would laugh and ruffle her hair and wonder if she knew what it meant, if it might mean something else to her someday.

But right now, you just watch those fields roll and shiver. You just think about how much keeps growing everywhere, between all there is and is not to choose.

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Jacqueline Doyle — “Sooner Or Later”



YOU know that sooner or later he’s going to tell her. She’s back with him again and of course they’re going to have a fight, because they fight a lot, and during the fight he’s going to tell her that you slept together once. And even though she’s your best friend, she’s going to be furious at you—not at him—and that will be the end of your ten-year friendship, even though it was years ago that it happened. Precisely how many you can’t calculate, but more than five. It was before your marriage and divorce, before her marriage and divorce.

You can't remember why it seemed worth it at the time. He was off limits, your best friend's ex-boyfriend, and that was probably a turn-on. Probably you were a little drunk, feeling sexy and irresponsible. Probably he was a little drunk. You seem to recall him saying he'd always wanted you, that your best friend was uptight. She was prettier than you, at least you thought so, but you liked to think that you were more adventurous in bed than she was. Okay, you were jealous, but not so jealous that you didn't love her too.

You can't remember for sure whether they were breaking up, or had already broken up. You can hardly remember what it was like either, this forgettable event that will seem momentous to her. You remember a dark beach house, a pile of damp towels under your naked ass, your nipples puckered from the cold, the goose bumps on your arms, the weight of his body on top of you, the smell of salt air and the mildewy smell of the towels, the sound of the surf outside, the thrill of knowing you might be interrupted by someone else at the party. Actually you remember quite a lot, just not him. She wasn't at the party, you're fairly sure of that, so probably they had broken up. The encounter was short, and you didn't come.

You're pretty sure *he* remembers. He's one of those self-satisfied assholes who thinks he's more important to the women he's fucked than he actually is. He winked at you when you ran into him at a New Year's Eve bash a few years ago. You both had dates and you didn't talk to each other. *Winked.* Under different circumstances you and your best friend would have a good laugh about that. Who would have guessed she'd get back together with a jerk like him? Should you head him off, tell her yourself? Wait until he tells her and deny it? Maybe he's not going to tell her.

Maybe the guy in the beach house was someone else. You hope your fuzzy memory of her boyfriend is just some fantasy you had. Like the ones you used to tell each other about. She liked being mastered, but not in real life. You liked breaking rules, but not in real life. The two of you picked up a beautiful boy at a casino in Last Vegas for a threesome, but in the hotel room you were giggling so hard you couldn't go through with it, and he stormed out, flushed and angry. Surely that counts for more than this old boyfriend who's getting a little bald, a little soft around the middle, and was always sort of a jerk?

After you both got divorced you Skyped every weekend to describe your bad dates and once you laughed so hard you both peed in your pants.

You'll remind her of those days, if she finds out. You'll ask her: "Did he ever make you laugh that hard?"

© 2020 Jacqueline Doyle

Kate Finegan — “The Smallest Sound”



WHEN the baby is born, I'm watching birds.

Hummingbirds. I want to hear their wings, steady and quick,
like small hearts seen through such-thin skin.

Like the skin of onions,
the part you throw away

The baby has a hat, a wristband.

A number, not a name.

She
looks
like
you.

But I could never tell you that.

I shouldn't even write it.

This city is all glass and light. Makes birds lose their way,
go mad before this great big lake.

In the parkette on the corner, a baby bird fell from a tree.

Your father told me not to touch it.

Said the mother would reject it if it smelled like human hands.

I know you said you'd give her up—that's always been the plan—
but all week on my midnight breaks, I've gone down to the NICU.

Her tiny hands
reach for me.

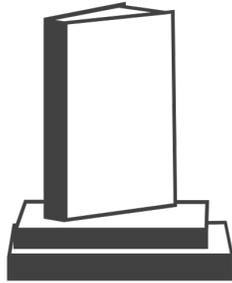
Your father was right,
but I can't forget how many feet stomped
around its whisper-small bones.

In the NICU after visiting hours, when the machines hum like frantic
wings, I press both hands to the glass.

That
baby
bird

What I remember is its beak. How it opened so wide, I could see straight
down its throat. Even with its beak so wide, that bird was still too small to
make a sound, the smallest sound my ears could hear.

K.B. Carle — “Notes for My Latest Bookkeeper Regarding the Maintenance of My Library While I’m Touring 50 Indie Bookstores in 50 Days”



1. Verbally acknowledge that you will treat my books with the utmost respect.
2. Send me a voice recording of you verbally acknowledging that you will treat my books with the utmost respect.
3. Do not harass my books in any way. This includes:
 - a. Leaving them out in the sun unless instructed to
 - b. Caressing their spines
 - c. Grabbing the paperbacks by their cover flaps
 - d. Stripping the hardbacks of their cover flaps

- e. Bending their pages
 - i. See point #10 for clarification
 - f. Licking any of your fingers, including your thumbs, to turn the page
4. You may read any of the *Best American*, *Best Small Fictions*, *PEN American*, *O. Henry Prize*, and *Pushcart Prize* anthologies as long as your return them to their proper shelves, organized by year of publication.
 5. Do not ready anything by Roxane Gay.
 - a. We both know you aren't ready.
 6. Organize my collection of literature by Frederick Douglass, including his biographies, first by year of publication, then by alphabetical order, then by the angle of his face on the cover, and then favorite to okay as noted by colored-coded post-it notes.
 - a. The darker the blue, the more I liked the book
 7. At 1pm, place *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen by the window to dry.
 - a. There was an unfortunate accident with the previous bookkeeper who, after knocking over their glass of water, believed the rational decision was to find something to soak up

their mess instead of rescuing the several books that proceeded to drown.

8. Mourn, reciting the provided printed eulogies, the loss of Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Collected Schizophrenias* by Esme Wang to the devastating aforementioned incident before ordering substitute copies from IndieBound.
9. Needless to say: DO NOT EAT OR DRINK ANYWHERE NEAR MY BOOKS.
10. ALL pages are to remain un-dogearred. No triangles will crease any page of any book. Do not fold any pages in half, break the spines, write notes, highlight, or kiss any of the pages. Should you need to borrow a bookmark, you may find them in the second drawer on the right hand side of my desk, bound with a rubber band. Take one from the top of the stack.
 - a. DO NOT browse through my bookmarks.
11. You are not allowed to touch the following:
 - a. *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, 1st Edition
 - i. This is the first book my mother ever borrowed, and eventually stole, from the library. The spine is broken and

the pages are dangling by threads of duct tape so it's best to let this book enjoy retirement.

b. *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, 1st Edition

i. Help yourself to the three other editions nestled on the shelves containing the works of Toni Morrison, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Edward P. Jones.

c. *Anything* by Charles Dickens

i. A Black Widow has decided to make her home within these books and prefers not to be disturbed.

12. Graphic Novels and Graphic Memoirs are literature and should be treated with the same respect as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, *The Collected Poems by Langston Hughes*, and *Between the World and Me*.

a. If you don't know the author of the last title listed, get out.

13. Organize my poetry books in alphabetical order and provide a list of any titles I'm missing from Lang Leav, Kwame Alexander, and Chen Chen.

14. Ensure ALL books by Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison are placed, covers facing out, in literary salute.

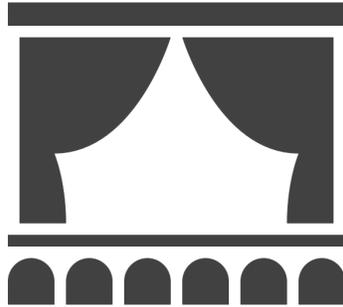
15. Place all collected works by Virginia Woolf in the basement by sundown and be sure to lock the door behind you.
16. Donate *The Awakening*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Dubliners*, and anything by Shakespeare to Second Reading
 - a. Don't judge me.
17. Order the following titles:
 - a. *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado
 - b. *Deathless Divide* by Justina Ireland
 - c. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters, Vol. 2* by Emil Ferris
 - d. *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* by Tomi Adeyemi
 - e. *Lakewood* by Megan Giddings
18. *This Life* by Sidney Poitier enjoys spending long periods of time on the center couch cushion, undisturbed. Between setting *The Sympathizer* out to dry and locking the works of Virginia Woolf in the basement, return Sidney Poitier's book to its proper place on the shelf.
19. Organize all YA titles in alphabetical order by genre, EXCEPT the YA graphic novels which, obviously, belong with the other graphic novels.

20. The blue bin underneath my desk contains the fifth and sixth copies of some of my favorite books. Don't tell me what happens to them, just make it quick.
21. To the left of my desk you'll see a cabinet. On the shelf beneath *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the collection of Dr. Seuss books, and other titles from my childhood, is a manuscript covered in red stains and lime green post-it notes. Don't touch it. Don't read it.
22. Read anything by Poe after sunset.
23. Find my copy of *Baby Teeth* by Zoe Stage. I won't spoil the plot for you but I started having nightmares after finishing the book and eventually gained the courage to hide my copy from myself. After some time away, I think I'm ready to read it again.
 - a. If the Black Widow has it, it's for the best.
24. Dust off *The Odyssey* and *Moby Dick* before placing them beside a photo of my father in junior high crying in front of his English classroom, the same copy of each book forming tents at his feet.
25. Should anything happen to one of my beloved books, feel free to seek advice from the previous bookkeeper.

- a. Should you find that you are unable to reach them, that's all the advice you need.

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Liz Matthews — “The Dumb Show”



AS the curtain rose, the scenario began to play itself out. In between acts of *Macbeth*, two or three ninth graders came out to mime a short skit that set forth the themes for the next act. These parts had been created for students like me—too anxious, or Ian—too indifferent, to act in the actual play. Our themes were Fear, Guilt, and Violence.

I was supposed to pretend to sit on a bench reading, and appear startled, then frightened, when Ian snuck up behind me and tapped my shoulder. I'd practiced the scene at home in our kitchen while my mother

sautéed onions in a pan. I shook my hands up and down and ran in place, with my mouth wide, my eyebrows raised.

Ian used to be my neighbor and could read at a really young age. We used to play “would you rather” on the bus ride home to pass the time. His parents thought he was going to be gifted, but he’d averaged out like the rest of us.

While we waited in the wings of the stage for the second act to end, Ian snuck up behind me and snapped my bra strap. Usually, I ignored him, but this time I told him to leave me alone. He always did these things when no one was looking.

Next, he held two fingers in front of his mouth and stuck his tongue through them.

My face got hot. I looked around. Had anyone seen? “Stop it. What’s wrong with you?”

Again, he ignored me. Instead, he leaned in closer. “Would you rather,” he whispered, “dip your hand in my blood or my cum?”

The voices on the stage shrunk; I heard a mother clear her throat, a father change positions.

I pushed him away and he held up his hands. “What? Too much?”

Our English teacher motioned for us to go on stage. It was time for our dumb show. I sat on the bench and didn't even lift the book to pretend to read. I looked over my shoulder. When Ian tapped me, I would have known he was coming. Instead of showing fear, I'd pantomimed anxiety.

One of the other students shined the spotlight on my face, so I couldn't see any of the parents' reactions when I messed up. I did hear a mother sneeze three times in a row.

With one hand in my pocket, I thumbed the fingernails I'd bitten off. Even though I knew he wouldn't dare do or say anything gross in front of a crowd of people, I still didn't want to feel those fingers on my shoulder.

He tapped me, then stood to the side, and pretended to flinch while I flailed around. I was supposed to stand so he could take my seat, the way Banquo takes Macbeth's seat during the dinner party scene, but I didn't get up. He laughed, like we were both in on the same joke. A few parents laughed along with him. One father with a deep voice let out an awkward: Ha!

Ian held out his hand to prompt me to stand, to remember. I stayed still. Instead, he sat in the empty chair beside me, held up an imaginary glass and cheered the audience. A few more laughs.

Maybe he thought he had the audience on his side. He probably wanted them to think I'd gone crazy. Next, he leaned in close to me, poked my shoulder, then licked my cheek with his long pale tongue. His breath smelled like garlic and burnt ash.

I looked out to the audience for help. The student had swiveled the spotlight on to them. I saw all of the parents' faces clearly. Their eyes, wide open. Their mouths, closed. Nobody moved. No one shouted out for Ian to stop. They were frozen, muted, like I had been. No one had reminded them to turn off their cellphones so I at least expected a ring or a vibrate, but the room was silent. Did they assume this was part of the skit? Even if it was, wouldn't some of the adults object? Gasp? I willed tears not to spill down my burning face. Why did I feel shame when I hadn't done anything wrong?

I looked into the wings. Elliot, who played Banquo's ghost, and had fake blood painted on his face and neck, was also frozen in place. Was this a sick joke? Was everyone in on it but me?

Ian stood, took a bow.

I stood and we exited the stage together.

The play began again, and the parents and all of their belongings came back to life. When Elliot appeared as Banquo's ghost to taunt Macbeth at the dinner table, a few flashes went off. The mom with the sneezes began to cough.

I watched the rest of the play in a haze, in the wings, barely remembering the events—how many people kill each other, themselves.

After, I waved to my parents in the hallway. My dad held up his keys and pointed to the parking lot. My mom typed something on her phone.

Marcelle Heath — “But Do They See You?”



EVEN now when I put it on, I think of my mother. I’ve had it for nearly two decades, purchased with a friend who complained about the store having nothing in her size—this was after the fashion for boxy oversized everything came back, the clothes of our youth. My eye landing on the sheer navy tunic underlaid with a black sleeveless buttoned shirt, while my friend’s complaints seemed to be directed at me, though I did not own this store. The garment cost seven hundred and sixty-five dollars. I hid the tag so that my friend wouldn’t see, and slipped into the dressing room. I disrobed, careful not to catch my reflection. Once on, I saw myself. I do

not remember my initial impression, only that I quickly calculated my expenses, subtracting each thing I could think of, all my unnecessary wants. I found my friend by the jewelry case, and hurried to the register. We left. My friend did not ask what I purchased and I did not offer. It was a breach in our friendship that seemed to grow and grow, until we rarely spoke.

In those days my husband and I liked to try every place making a splash, my eyes roving roving roving, sipping my gin, trussed up in finery. I entered middle-age having accomplished nothing, but half-in-love with a co-worker named Rhett. We worked in the then-new division of Portland Process Improvement Program, lunched at the food carts near our offices at Metro. I was lead trainer for the Innovators' Program; Rhett was a program specialist. He was younger than me by too many years I'm willing to admit here. Presidents, music, natural disasters, films, mass shootings, wars, lunar eclipses, all that had happened before he was born. Rhett would never know a world without the internet or with the erstwhile coastline. He would never know a world before Kepler-22d, before alien life. I pored over Rhett's social media accounts, which were largely devoted to his cat—a Maine Coon that was a college graduation gift from his mother—and to his banjo. I forced myself to listen to the

Appalachian music he loved while I rode my bike to work, but I could not appreciate its jingly-jangly sound.

Around this time my mother moved in with us after being diagnosed with a rare type of colon cancer. My husband and I joked that this singular strain needed an immaculate habitat, as her colon, due to a lifetime of anorexia, hadn't gotten much use over the years. A former German translator, my mother came of age when women dressed up for the public, and for her that meant panty hose and pumps. She traded in her Working-girls attire for long, voluminous blouses and blue jeans upon retirement, and disliked anything restrictive or form-fitting. She often commented on the leggings and hoodie I wore to work, even though I told her I changed when I got there.

“But do they see you?”

I knew what she meant. She thought that they wouldn't respect me if they saw me in my workout clothes (the unspoken assumption being I did not have the body to show off). I reminded her that most people rode their bikes to work, especially since the earthquake, but she argued I should wear my work clothes to ride. I didn't tell her that I was one of the few who did change, not only because I liked to dress up (I was truly my mother's daughter), but because of my ignominious crush.

My efforts were made more pathetic by the fact that Rhett was obviously attracted to his eighteen-year-old stepsister. He seemed quite unaware of his feelings, but I recognized the signs. He couldn't stop talking about her ("Who's this Rhett person again?" asked my confused husband), and I listened to him, miserable, as we stood in line for tacos or fried chicken, gently suggesting that we should try one of the sit-down places nearby, or get a drink after work? Rhett demurred. Before long he declined to join me for lunch altogether. I sent him notes and voice messages instead, trying to sound upbeat and interesting, but these were rightly ignored.

For our twenty-fifth anniversary, I wore my tunic paired with black bioMesh™ pants. "Wow," my husband said, giving me a kiss. "Schon," my mother concurred, gently extracting my hair from the collar. I smiled, happy to please her. "Have you eaten?" I asked. When I was young, my mother's diet consisted of coffee and cigarettes for breakfast and lunch, and one half of a Stouffer's Chicken Divan for dinner (the rest went to our terrier, Fritz). She first started losing weight in her late teens, the result of long hours cleaning houses and little money for food. One day she caught her reflection and saw the way her clothes hung off her. It was like a calling, she said. Given her body's alimental privations, I'm

surprised she lasted as long as she did, and thankful that it was not long enough to see the formal complaint Rhett eventually filed against me and my subsequent firing. Before we left my husband helped her upload her monoclonal antibody levels. “Have you eaten?” I asked on our way out to our anniversary, to my roving, to my hunger. Of course, she told me. She was full.

**After Sonic Youth’s “Tunic (Song for Karen)”*

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Namrata Singh — “Monocots”



TODAY, I will tell you a story about plant biology and little children who learned to hide broken lives behind their backs. To differentiate a monocotyledonous plant from a dicotyledonous plant, you watch studiously for which shoot carries its seed above soil. But first, you must cut the bottoms off two plastic bottles, fill them with soil and bog them down with water. Then, sticking your index finger deep into the soil, make a hole small enough for the lonesome corn seed to fit. In your second pot, do the same, but nestle one black-eyed bean instead.

Wait. Hour after hour. With the patience of a child who has nothing

better to do, wait for the shoot to break the surface.

Run to your mummy after several long hours and question her as to why the corn has not grown. And what of the beans? Mummy should I add more water? Mummy should I plant more seeds? Mummy what if it doesn't grow? Mummy will I fail the experiment? Mummy, maybe I should add more water...

Under the rain of her reassuring words, go to sleep.

Day 1.

Day 2.

Day 3.

Go to sleep with no hope now.

Week 1.

Find the blade of green peeking from beneath the soil. Jump with rapturous delight as days push the green—the corn with two lithe blades splitting from the stalk; the bean, a single leaf tilted to the left. Clap your hands with glee and egg the stalks on. Grow profound respect for the bean that carries its buried seed above ground. Grow disdain for the cowardly corn.

Listen to your mother. Water your saplings.

Store this memory and savour the simplicity of its joy:

Draw it out. Replant the seeds. Rewatch the blades.

When the pain resurfaces, relearn your lessons.

© 2020 Namrata Singh

Nathan Willis — “For The Children Of Strangers”



GO to the park in the middle of the night. Take three envelopes and a pen and sit on a bench along the lighted walking path.

On the back of the first envelope, draw an uneven circle with zig-zags on either side. This is the rock in the yard that marks where the dog is buried. The dog you were supposed to watch the first time you were left alone. You got distracted and he ate a chocolate egg off of the counter. It was your egg. A gift from your mother. A gesture to compensate for future egg-shaped sleights and jabs. You buried him by yourself so his death could still feel like a secret.

On the second envelope, make a copy of the water bill. List the past due charges and compounding interest that gets added no matter how

careful you are about what you say. The current balance is two of your best memories. You have three, but they all involve being saved. According to customer service, those only count as one. Write DISCONNECT across the top.

On the last envelope, draw a telephone keypad. Touch the numbers that will reach you. Wait. When nothing rings, wait longer. Wait as long as you want. It's the middle of the night. Everything belongs to you until you give up. Until you give it up. Until the morning.

Bury each envelope under playground equipment. The slide. The swings. The plastic alligator on a giant spring. Not deep. Just under the mulch. Where the children of strangers can find them.

Volunteer to teach swimming lessons to seniors at the YMCA. Take them to the deep-end. Tell them to imagine their ankles are tied together. At the other end of the rope there is a heavy rock. The rocks are the same size and shape. Tell them not to look so surprised. They've been practicing for this their whole lives. The only thing missing was the water.

Ask them about your mother. Is she ever going to get better? Will this get easier? Why did things have to be so hard for her in the first place?

The rocks float to the surface. The seniors know they've been found out. They swim away like mermaids. Get smaller the further they go. When they reach the edge, they're so small no one can see them anymore. Take a breath and sink underwater to hear their replies. They say they don't want to pry but they understand. And they feel bad. So bad. These things are always tough. They hope it all works out for the best but there's nothing they can do. They need to focus on themselves now, on their children, and their children's children. They clap in unison. It causes a tiny wave and they are gone, swimming back to their homes through the pipes.

Look down. There is a senior at the bottom of the pool. The rope is still tied to her ankle. The other end is frayed. She is not dead, but she's not coming back up. A lifeguard blows their whistle. It's time for the next class. This one for teenagers. They line up at the edge of the pool. Each of them is holding a hammer. They are waiting for you to leave.



Everything in the dining room was a gift from your mother. She made sacrifices to do this. She wants to always be associated with place settings and food.

Take the table and chairs and the painting on the wall and drag all of it to the front yard. Arrange it in a circle. For a short time, this is where everything in the universe will line up. This is where the realtor will put the sign when you leave. This is how your mother will find out you're gone.

Get a shovel from the garage. Go to the circle and dig. Don't stop until the hole is big enough to bury everything. Not even if it starts raining. Not even if the earth around you groans and caves in, bringing the table and chairs and the painting down on top of you.

You feel blood running down your face. You know it is not water because it tastes like chocolate. Pull out your phone and dial the number by feel. It doesn't ring.

Use your elbows and hips. Try to create space among the arms and legs. It's no use. You're pinned. You are looking at the painting and for the first time, you see your mother's signature on the side of the canvas. You've seen this painting in restaurants and offices your whole life. It is a ubiquitous and vague mystery. Your mother made the original.

You call again. Off in the distance, an ambulance turns on its siren.



The Doctor hasn't changed his office since you were a child. He examines the wound and asks what happened. You explain about the dog and the seniors who turned into mermaids and the dining room furniture. He grunts. Either he isn't listening, or this is something he always expected.

It takes twenty-two stitches to seal the cut, but this is only temporary. He says it won't heal if we don't remove a few bones. Two or three should do the trick. It's up to you which ones. If it isn't better in a couple of weeks, he'll need to take more.

On the wall, over his shoulder, there is a faded copy of your mother's painting. You always thought this meant one thing. It means so much more.

He asks if you are going to schedule a follow-up. If you are actually going to come back this time. You say you will, and you will, and before then you'll decide which bones you can do without.

Ruth Joffre — “A Girl Survives A Nuclear War”



A newspaper drifted by yesterday with the headline:

NUCLEAR WEAPON MISFIRES, DROPS ON UNSUSPECTING
FARMLAND IN IOWA

THAT explained some things: the wreckage of the farmhouses strewn across the cornfields, the flatness of my fingers where they pressed against the stone walls of the barn, and my inability to peel myself away from this building. I'm dead, and my shadow was burnt into the stone by the superheated flames of the explosion. It was a fission bomb, the newspaper

said. A North Korean-made and plutonium-powered behemoth that discharged from a submarine in the Pacific and was likely meant to target Portland or Seattle. How it ended up in Iowa remains a state secret that will never be revealed, because shortly after I died the United States retaliated, and nearly 95% of the North Korean population was obliterated mere hours after the first bomb dropped.

Who knows how many people have died since then.



My mother came to visit me this afternoon—not me in particular but the house, the fields, the stump of the grain silo where once we stood, allowing the feed to rain down on us like golden beaches, until my father shuttered the narrow slit we had opened at the top and yelled at us to run for the shower lest the pulverized kernels cloud our lungs with dust. My father wasn't the kind of landowner who tolerated whimsy. When the bomb hit, no doubt he was at work in the corn. I like to think of him sitting on his tractor, the seams of his hat being atomized as the explosion swept a burning hand across the plains, flattening all that he had accomplished.

Had I been given a choice during the divorce proceedings, I would've elected to live with my mother, who left us one morning at the crack of dawn then returned years later wearing black jeans, a bloody tank top, and a pair of weathered combat boots that looked a few sizes too big. She clomped awkwardly through the disaster area—hair pulled into a fierce ponytail, arms raised to accommodate a semi-automatic rifle too large to carry at her side without dragging the muzzle through the blackened soil. She kept pausing here and there to inspect something: the skeleton of a stray dog, perhaps; the burned husk of the tractor where I imagine thin ribbons of my father are still seared on the metal. I wonder if enough of him has survived to coalesce into a consciousness like mine. If he's thinking of me, as I'm thinking of him.

But my mother didn't linger over that tractor—not like she did when I gathered the disparate elements of my self and arranged them once again into the shape of a nine-year-old girl with pigtails and a cowlick. She pressed her hand to the shadow of my hand and wept an apology for abandoning me. I tried to tell her it wasn't her fault. I heard what she told me the night before she left: she was sixteen when she got pregnant, a child in her own right; her parents had sent her to Cedar Rapids to visit relatives that summer and because she was bored—and often alone while her aunt

and uncle worked—she took up with a boy in town (my father) who worshipped her and treated her to ice cream daily. My father was fun then; he had dreams. On their first date, he took her to see the Devonian Fossil Gorge in Coralville, Iowa and laid his hand over hers as she traced the outlines of the prehistoric creatures. She swore the kiss was innocent at first—their affair one she never expected to last—but there she was, a wife and mother looking up out of herself for the first time in ages, thinking, *This isn't my life; this can't be my life.* So she did something about it. I understood, even back then. When she brushed a finger over the blackened stone of my cheek, I knew: she had to go.



The war was coming—the war and the rain. Now I can feel the radioactive waters rushing into the crevices that were once the insides of my elbows, the backs of my knees, the small of my back. I can feel rivulets prying pieces of me loose. One atom here, another there. If given enough time, the elements would wear this stone barn down; return the walls of this building to dust; and redistribute my atoms until I became one with the

soil, the grass, the bones buried deep under the burnt fields. But time is a luxury even the dead don't have. In the distance, I hear gunshots biting the air, engines cutting in and out. Voices, I think, muffled by the endless drumbeat of the rains. I prepare myself for the battle to come. I foresee bullet holes, shrapnel.

I wonder what else I can survive.

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Tommy Dean — “The Desire For Predictable Solitude”



SHE holds the jagged, pulpy tooth in her palm; the splash of blood and spit contaminating the bathroom sink. She should rush to clean it up, but she’s often frightened by the violent transition of inside things brought to the outside of her body. As her tongue works the groove left in the tooth’s absence, she can already imagine her mother screaming. The taste of blood like sucking on pennies, each flick toward the hole a dare. She swallows and her stomach squirms as the thick glob of blood-infested spit slides down her throat. A second of breathlessness, and she almost forgets not to cry.

Below, her mother is throwing glasses at the wall. The sharp static of breaking glass followed by her father's calm voice hovers outside her closed bedroom door. Noise, like the wind or rain or the chill in the air, hunts her, threatens to devour every last particle until even the memories of her are scattered like the best of her parent's intentions. She's old enough to know when to avoid her parents, but young enough that she doesn't understand the source of her mother's rage. At school, screams erupt from her mouth before she has time to think, and she wonders if maybe it's a disease, something passed down from her mother, a jolt of particle passed on at birth.

This is her third dislodged tooth, so she's not as scared, knows now that she won't be dying today. *Not yet*, is a swell of hope, a bird with yawning wings stretching in her chest. Adulthood, she reasons, equals escape, and already she's more grown than she was the day before. Her tongue, too, finds the spiky evidence of budding teeth. At night, shadowed by the blue glow of her iPad, she often looks at mountains, revolving their three-dimensional shapes until she falls asleep—body braced for the first shatter of glass, the second sharp words slashing through her inky dreams.

She has special permission to stay in at recess and use the clunky microscope. Her teacher grades papers silently, the swish of photocopies, marking the efficiency of her pen. The girl loves her teacher, loves her silences, the way she sighs at the lower than expected scores, the way she never fusses over the girl, never prods or jokes. They share a symbiosis, a desire for predictable solitude. The girl squints—the light flooding one eye, while the other is closed to the world—the edges blackening like paper burnt by fire, but she knows that there are answers here.

Author Bios

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Marcelle Heath's short story collection, *IS THAT ALL THERE IS?*, is forthcoming from Awst Press in 2022. She curates *Apparel for Authors*, an interview series on writers, fashion, and the public sphere.

Namrata Singh grew up in Nigeria, moved to Milan, and currently lives in India. She is a writer masquerading as a public health professional. She has published an essay with The Kalahari Review, and has some stories in Klorofyl. You can find her pseudo-ekphrastic writings on Instagram, @3frenchens. She can also be found on Twitter and Medium with the same handle.

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THE 2020 FLASH ISSUE

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Editors: Troy Palmer, Beth Gilstrap, and Alvin Park.

Cover design by Troy Palmer, with images from [The Noun Project](#).

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