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ISSUE

THREE

FRINGE

FEATURING WORK FROM:

OLIVE BURNS

ZOE ADRIEN LAPA

JOSIE LEVIN

DARBY MYR

SHANTELL POWELL

ANGEL ROSEN

JON STEINHAGEN

AND AN INTERVIEW WITH:

GRACE KRILANOVICH



ISSUE 003

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"All That Came From Our Lips Were Lilies" by Shantell Powell first appeared in "Silk and Foxglove: A BIPOC Erotic Eco-Horror Anthology" edited by Z. K. Abraham. Hedone Books, 2025.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The fringe has always been a quintessential component of horror: the uncanny, the remote, the barren, the shrouded, the liminal. Fear is born from uncertainty, after all, so to find fear is to eschew a comfortable foundation in pursuit of an edge. It is exactly the ethos that guides horror and makes it so irresistible and so human.

I could not have asked for a more solid cohort for our first themed issue. These stories and poems represent a true cross section of the paths we can explore along the edges:

Myr's "To Be Alone" and Steinhagen's "The Map of Vanished Friends" give us literal, if not still fantastical, places that sit on the outer rim, inviting us toward them.

Lapa's "Hatchlings" and Levin's "Genteel" display characters who exist within emotional liminal spaces, caught painfully between the allure of belonging and the allure of freedom. Meanwhile, Burns' "Perfume Woman" shows us the isolating power of monomania, with a character who pulls herself out to the edge in pursuit of an obsession.

Lastly, Rosen's "Birthright" and Powell's "All That Came From Our Lips Were Lilies" blend a literal fringe with a stylistic one, pushing toward the edge through voice, image, and surrealism.

Ironic as it may be to have a central core to the issue, our interview with Grace Krilanovich is just that. Krilanovich gives the "Fringe" theme a beating heart, unpacking and deconstructing the myriad ways in which horror can use this concept to its great advantage.

I do hope you enjoy the issue, and thank you as always for your readership and support.

JOHN HANLEY, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

PERFUME

WOMAN



OLIVE

B U R N S

In the week before my funeral, I go on a shopping spree. Take a ten-minute cab ride uptown to save energy: pay in cash. The driver's head is bald and smells of the pine tree air freshener swinging from his rearview mirror. I smile, pick at my manicure, feel my teeth hum. Answer questions and ask questions back. In the back of the cab I feel incubated. Wrapped up in cotton fibers, warm to the touch. When we arrive, I float my way out. The department store opens for me. White lights, faint muzak. In the fragrance

section, I find purpose. I come alive. I linger by the counter, feign casual, strain to catch the eye of an attendant. It's a different girl from last time. No black eyes, smooth brown skin. This one has forehead pimples and spidery lashes. A dirty-blonde braid I ache to take scissors to. She receives me, eagerly—jumps to attention, sourcing samples, five milliliter vials, pre-cut strips of paper. In this dress I look far richer than I am. I savor the feeling of cool glass, sloshing liquid. Scratch my nail across a matte finish label.

The bottle I'm holding now is worth more than my weekly rent. I feel feverish. Burning hot. I say: *I don't like that one much*, when I do. She brings more. Spreads them out on the flat top as if she's reading my fortune. My story changes every time. *Well, my sister's finally getting married—my best friend's graduating law school soon—I need something special for my thirtieth.* I can never tell whether they're onto me. If they know what I'm doing. I try hard to look them in the eye.

It's times like these I feel least like myself. I glide over polished marble, gleaming wood, checkered tile. Check my reflection in a pocket mirror while the charges go through. Over the register, the pimple girl hands me my bag with a snaggle tooth smile. Do I want a receipt? In my purse, in the pink plastic wallet, there's a credit card under my mother's name. Few more ordered and signed for, arrived last week. It's alright—I know she'll forgive me. Once I'm dead everything will make sense. Not like I couldn't afford this last splurge on a drugstore clerk's salary—ha ha, good one, sir, hemorrhoid cream's on aisle six, you know what, I'll just show you. Looking into the CCTV screen fixed over the doorway like a desert mirage

while some old woman fumbles for coins. 24/7 service, for *your* convenience. I've been stealing from work for some time now. Just the necessities: tampons, sleeping pills. You know. The evening shift keeps me until one, half-one, two. I clock off in the morning and watch the oilspill sky ooze color. I duck under streetlamps, try to not get raped. On long drives home from the pharmacy, before I lost my license, I used to fantasize about witnessing a fatal car crash. That, or precipitating one. Thump of body on bumper to send me to sleep. In bed I cover my face with a yellowed pillow at the first hint of American daylight stealing in through the blinds. I leave the A/C running all night long. My apartment's top floor, facing east. It gets hot up there quick. Some people would pay extra for that, but all it gives me is night sweats. Sweet-smelling damp patch in the shape of a girl.

—

I was in grade school when the world first revealed itself to me. The new kid held the secret on her clothes. Her neck, her boy's chest. She sat in front of me, so I poked her spine with a note: 'I love how you smell.' *Let's be friends.* At recess we hid behind the jungle gym and passed the

bottle between us, taking communion. It was her babysitter's, she'd whispered, eyes shining. Neither parent would buy her any for fear she'd drink it, so this, she had taken for herself. *Wait—here.* Her wrist pushed under my nose, warm white and glowing in the sun. *It's meant to smell different on different people's skin.* Before the week was out, I would have the bottle, too. I would take it twice over and enjoy, privately, the fact that she couldn't even tell on me—that it wasn't hers to begin with. I knew this. Knew it would hasten the end of our cute little friendship, and knew that I'd do it anyway. But that night, with the vial in my hands, I stripped off and sprayed it all over myself. Closed my bedroom door and propped a chair under the handle. Our apartment building overlooked another: with the lights off, I could see right into people's rooms. Here was a living room with the curtains open, lit up from the inside. There, a woman feeding dirty laundry into a machine. College students on the balcony. Dog asleep on the couch. Family sat down for dinner. Young man touching himself. I slowed my breath and listened to the thrum of my body in the dark. Heart beating, blood pumping. I braced my hands on the windowsill and felt my cells

warming from a decade of stasis. Saw my future like a bolt of crimson fabric, unspooling. I was a year away from my first period. The next month, I would start sprouting tits.

It didn't take long for the need to grow. With the earnings of an ice-cream scooping Saturday job, I ordered all the high end samples I could afford and kept them in a cheetah print jewellery box I bought at a flea market, stashed under my bed. Stockpiling came easy: it pleased me to see the boxes grow. On weekend trips to the city, I stopped scarf-laden women on the street and asked, playing shy, what they were wearing. Scrawled a to-buy list across the flat of my palm. I was methodical. If I ever came upon a fragrance section unawares, a tank top provided more room for sampling than my Macy's tees ever could. Paper testing strips were for amateurs: scent on skin was the only way to go. I didn't believe in vision boards, but stuck printouts of Audrey and Marilyn to my walls all the same. In the early morning, when no one was awake, I would sneak a cigarette from the pack hidden in my winter coat to smoke at the bus stop. Cultivate a tone I could bear. In my teens I sought to out-

smart my own biology. The pouch of my stomach, my kitten mew voice. On rice cakes and sour apple hard candy, I shed girlishness. Grew sharp lines. Rather than shitting each day, like an animal, my bowels moved only once a week. Little by little, I stopped menstruating. I studied bug-eyed girls online and learned to speak with a flat inflection—took hour-long baths and soaked myself to sleep. Underwater, everything seemed to make sense. I liked the feeling of my brain jostling around in the bathwater, gently dislocated from my skull. It hadn't seemed right to waste good scent on the girl that I had been before, but now, I felt deserving. I felt good and clean and lighter than light.

—

Back in the real world and I can feel my pulse in my cunt. From the store I spill onto the street, heels clacking, a grid of outdoor fluorescents buzzing overhead. The night is sharp, loud, cold. People dodging back and forth, stepping in gutters, calling out for friends. I jolt into myself from a happy place. On the corner a gay guy—blonde mullet, septum ring—waves me closer, asks if I have a light. I've been smoking longer than I haven't been smoking: I flick it open for him, wishing I'd got another cab. The trip back is

always more populated than the trip to. More bodies to skirt around. I'm in a hurry now. At home I buzz into the building, clatter up the stairs, open the door. My pom-pom keychain like a soft little animal against my fingers. In the hallway I dump my bags and get naked, catching my breath. There's a lock and key to the linen closet, where my collection lies. Before I grew a brain I kept my best bottles on my bedroom windowsill, in line of the morning sun. I liked to run my hands along their lines, nudge them back into place. The glinting sound of glass brushing glass: a dull hypnosis. One morning, deep in my adolescence, I picked up Miss Dior and bared my wrist. Pressed the atomizer, tasted acid. In the heat, that delicate scent—my first glimpse of designer—had boiled into fragrant dog piss. Now, I treat my bottles how you would fine meat. Inside the closet I fold up my clothes and kneel on the bundle. My robe puffs out around me, billowing in the slight breeze coming in from under the door. It's cold in here, but I'm sweating. Gleaming. A roll of drums begins to beat in my eyelids. I've been thinking about this all day.

—

By the time I got to college, my nose had

sharpened to a point. I couldn't indulge in little girl glitter scents from the mall anymore—I had risen above them. Coconut and vanilla bean made my eyes water, but oakmoss and frankincense soothed me. I needed soothing. I spent the night after my first day of classes upside down in bed, sucking ice to kill a migraine. A few years in, and running out of money, I started working at a pet store. Spent days stacking squeaky toys, ten pound bags of feed, aquariums stitched into the stomach of a teddy bear. I looked at the goldfish floating around behind their glass every day. Wore bulky men's sweaters over t-shirts and felt my chest tightening.

Even though I always did the dishes on time, my roommate still hated me. On good nights we would lie on opposite ends of the long, long couch, our feet not quite touching, the laptop glare of her blue-light blocking glasses glowing softly in my periphery. Occasionally I would wake up with a blanket draped over me, my phone placed delicately on the coffee table, just out of reach. This was the best of what we did to each other. She couldn't have realized that I would wait until she left for work to masturbate in her bed, but



I felt that she knew it instinctively, and treated me as such. It was clear she thought of me as a dumb blonde—clear that, had we gone to high school together, it would've been a game to pick her apart. Sometimes, when the tone in my ears grew too high, I would take one of her \$50 textbooks to the bathroom with me and tear pages out by the dozen. Let the paper dampen to a sludge in the tub. She had a boyfriend when I did not. At night, when he drove over and they made quiet, shuffling love, I would sit up in bed and listen to the campus foxes screamfuck each other. Tense my ears to hear her come.

At twenty-three, I hadn't yet had sex. I knew that my virginity had only a few years worth of intrigue left in it, before the stink of inexperience would begin to hang on me. I knew it was time to get things over with. It was nice to get ready, to click through my closet, put things together. Practice my giggle in the hand-me-down vanity as I put my face on, straighteners sizzling, armpits stinging and smooth. Occasionally, when I was all dolled up, I would open my roommate's door to ask her something: the dishes and the garbage disposal and have you *heard*

the noises it's been making? Adjust my skirt, my bralette, and feast on the flicker in her eye. I slept with no one in this way. I kissed handsome men and drew away from their lingering touch—gave half-hearted handjob in the dorms of younger men and left feeling embarrassed for them, for myself. Always, a sense of nausea rose up in my belly at the thought of some man grunting and puffing above me. Inside me. I cleansed these thoughts with notes of sea salt and fresh laundry. By this point, my collection had reached seismic proportions. If I could have afforded a storage unit, I would have snatched one up: my bottles surrounded everything, clanking together if I dared move too heavily. I didn't wear my favorites as much as I used to. Left the house, most days, wearing nothing at all. A week after my 25th birthday—still pure, still unpenetrated—I received notice that my pet store was going out of business. I spent my meager severance pay on Tom Ford and Yves Saint Laurent. Tied back my hair, lowered a nostril, and let it go straight to my brain.

—

It wasn't hard to source what I needed. Alcohol wipes, fresh needles. Duck behind the counter and tuck the goods

into your waistband, pretend you're tying a lace. I set out my tools. Months ago I fixed a reading lamp onto the bookshelf above my head to act as a spotlight. Empty wine bottle set aside for a sharps bin. You have to do this properly. The department store bag—paper, not plastic, for that *environmental* look—crackles as I delve inside, feel for the bottle. ScentPresario dot com dubs this one a nine out of ten. Top notes of lilac, star anise, cedarwood: base notes of musk, wet soil, vetiver. The studded belt tightens around my bicep as I mouth the words. Off comes the cap, the plastic topper. That odd sucking sound of fluid being drawn. Easy, now. Transfer to the saline, medical grade, that makes up the bulk of it. I'm not looking to load up on this. The syringe grows full, and the added weight steadies me. It falls easily into the space between my fingers. I use up a travel size bottle of hand sanitizer each time, cleaning myself. Think of surgery, sterility. Implant slipping into place. Right, here it is. Crook in the arm where you get blood taken. Last time, feeling around my elbow for a place to stab, the nurse said: why ask for the moon when you have the stars? There's a fat blue thread near the surface, staring up at me. I know just what he

meant.

I watch as the silver sinks into the white. Red dewdrop blooming from underneath, a little twisting pain. Tomorrow morning I'm to turn up for a shift at the pharmacy. Maybe I will. For now, I'm fine where I am. TV voices swimming in from far away. I see myself as a flower bud, swelling up and up, about to split. Rosewater in my veins to make me sweet. I let my eyes lose their focus as my back meets the seat of the couch. Watch a fly skitter across the ceiling and wish it would rain.

—

It took my grandmother the week between Christmas and New Year's to die. Soon after, the money came in. As if fearing I would wake up from the spell, I moved quickly. Within a month I had thrown out half my possessions and found a new apartment overlooking the city. Light floors, high ceilings. No dicks on the mirror in the elevator, no puddles of piss in the stairwell. I let my things spread through all the rooms of the place. Burned sandalwood incense and hung dresses around the walls so my body could greet me when I came in. Once, I paid a visit to the second-rate spa that had

previously housed my place of work, and luxuriated in the steam and the pleasing knowledge that I could afford better. I had no urgent need to work anymore, and the notion made me giddy. It seemed to me that God was on my side again. Granting permission to do what I wanted. And more, too. The question of sex without revulsion had answered itself.

For a year I lived like a glass of alkaseltzer, plotting, purchasing. Working up the nerve. Online, I ordered sanitizing wipes and latex gloves: considered buying in bulk, setting up a subscription, but thought better of it. Condoms, I already had. I visited Bloomingdale's and bought a purse in full-grain leather to carry along with me. Bought high heeled boots and red gemstone studs. For a fee, the used Beetle I'd settled on was scrubbed and scoured before delivery. New car, new clothes. New dresser to keep it all contained. Some separation was needed here. Thursday afternoons saw me at an out of town gas station, withdrawing a few hundred emergency dollars to be kept in the coin purse in my bra. I knew it was good to have cash on me. Would've been nice to shoot on film, but a digital camera would do. Then: Friday. Take it easy. Drive

out for a while, dodging roadkill on the highway as you go, far enough out to be back by morning. College towns worked best for my purposes. I could slip in, there. One low cut blonde in a sea of them, swaying in the breeze. I liked to duck in close so they could nose at the space behind my ear—breathe in the gift I left for them. Don't forget to check your purse before you leave with someone. It wouldn't do to leave it behind. My helping hand held itself in half-size ziplocks, a twist of saran wrap, pre-crushed and begging to be poured. More gin than tonic to mask the taste. I thought: if they ever catch sight of it, I'll tell them it's coke. But no one ever did.

When it comes to culpability, I maintain that I did nothing to them. Nothing that they weren't already offering me. I was thoughtful: considerate of their lives, their bodies. I was careful to never leave a mark. And, besides—there's a certain kind of beauty to a man when he's asleep. A sort of fragility, previously unknown to him. That loose far-away look on the slack of his face. Even in this, there was scent to be found. All the nasty pheromones of the body pouring out of their skin. In the dark I passed my hands over soft muscle,

downy thigh. Licked at the sweat salt gathered on their collarbones and smelled the shampoo in their hair. Laid out like that, there was nothing I couldn't have. Nothing that wasn't for me. There was always some sharpness waiting to be found. Some satisfying bit of resistance. When I leaned in to bite at their throats, an Adam's apple got in the way.

—

I wake up a little before I go. Legs splayed out on the living room rug, head knocked back on the floor. I listen dazedly through the open window as a girl on the street starts sneezing explosive little rabbit sneezes, again and again, like she's allergic to something. Like she's got it stuck up her nose. I listen as her friend laughs at her, as she says: oh, bless you! Bless you, bless you! *Gesundheit!*



DARBY MYR

TO BE

ALONE

the wolf tree
the wicked glance
couldn't have let you stay
had to plant myself
remnant of affection
astringent and low-lying
mouth puckered, orchard gone
gnarled burls devouring empty field
gone meadow, creeps forest
saplings return
do you need to wash your glasses?
I can hold you in my hollows
I'd pull down the others
provide shade for grazing
drain the dappled earth, turn it to treen ripples
don't accuse me of eating the cake by myself
I wanted you to have a slice
can you smell the moss?





THE [REDACTED] MAP OF [REDACTED] [REDACTED] VANISHED [REDACTED] FRIENDS [REDACTED]

JON STEINHAGEN

With so many of us out there, somewhere, gone, alive or (most likely) not, one of us decided to plot where we were last seen by using green pushpins on an overwhelming paper map affixed to a corkboard.

Someone else, later, got the idea to drop a transparent overlay of caves throughout the country signified by black dots, and there they (us) were, aligned perfectly with black dots, although we had to take the pushpins out first so the overlay would sit



flat and we could push the pins back in.

Then someone else thought we should properly tag the pins with our names. Which one of us did. And it didn't make any difference whatsoever.

Someone who was not familiar with us or only knew cursorily looked at this display and suggested that maybe we stay away from caves or at least not head out to such remote, dark, engulfing places on our own.

This person did not understand.

We are extremely responsible and careful and stay hydrated and eat all the things we should eat. We stay physically attractive and consider bravado to be one of life's duties.

If the Earth swallows us up, there is no reason why we should be mourned, because we may not have been consumed by the hidden mouths of this planet, we may have found somewhere else to be that cannot be articulated but can offer personal completion.

We look fantastic in our layers of

polypropylene, false skins hugging true skins. We avoid cotton. You can see how toned we are.

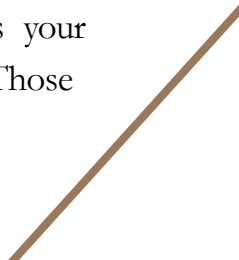
We have yet to see all that we want to see and to see all the things we never knew we wanted to see.

Others "miss" us; yes. But what does that mean? All of us were never wholly, entirely intimate, never all-enveloping with our families and lovers.

One of us, just yesterday, observed that the pushpins do not necessarily define us, because we could be somewhere else entirely. The pushpins approximate us. There should be something physical to remind others of us other than, say, memories.

We have been known to leave evidence of ourselves, here and there, but it's anyone's guess if anyone else will ever see the evidence. Perhaps in a few months, a few years. Perhaps several centuries from now.

Go, we say. We won't stop you, we won't discourage you, we love you and think whatever you need to discover is your utmost priority. You look fantastic. Those

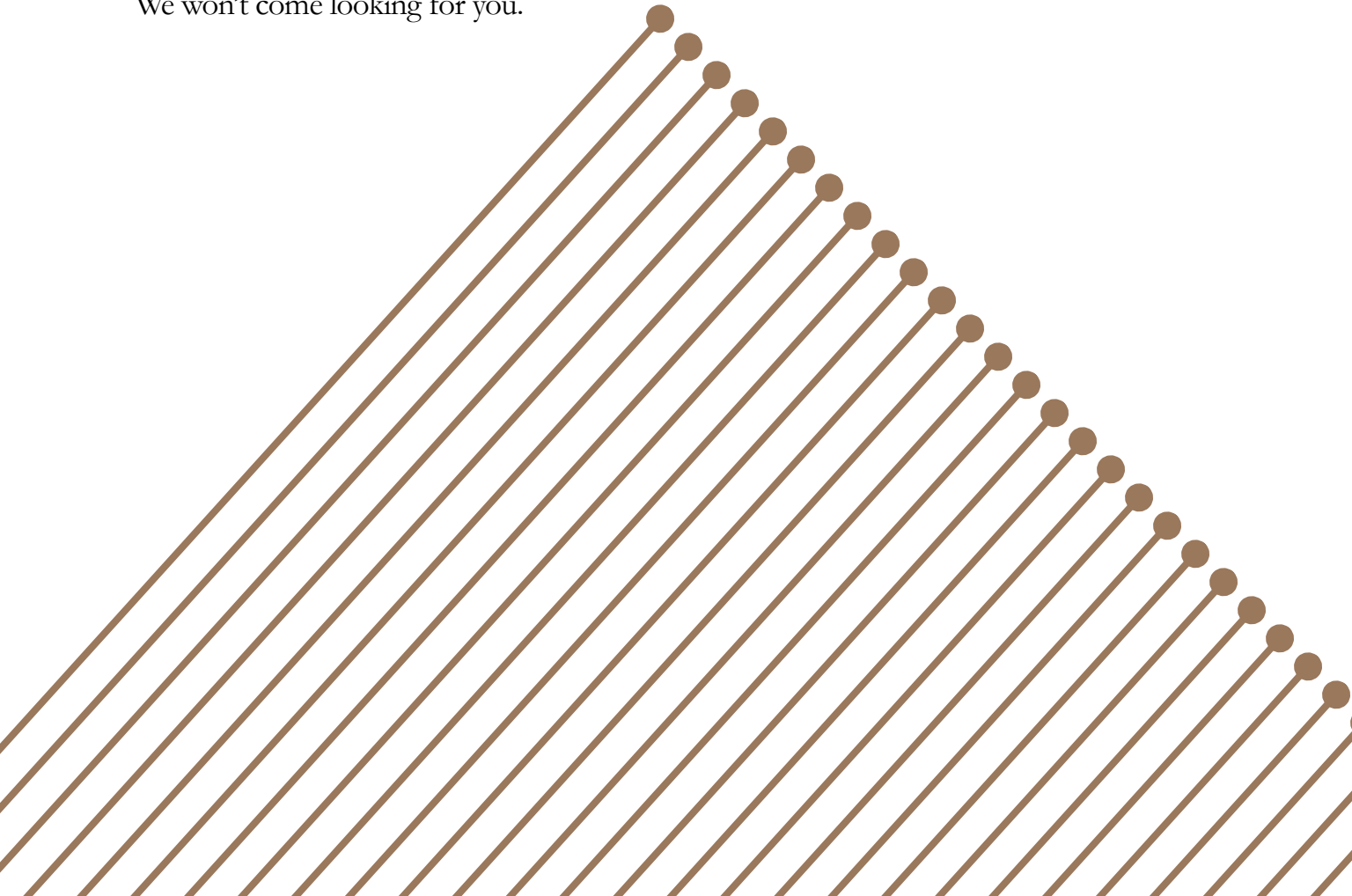


boots are the shit; that helmet rocks.

If we never see you again, that's fine.
What's more, we may never see you again
if you stay, if you never venture out. Yes,
we might know where you are or where
you should be, but that won't save us.
That won't mean anything. So go.

Now you are pushpins, tiny, green-tipped,
affixed to this moderately accurate world
we've put up in your honor, and we think
of you whenever we think of you.

We won't come looking for you.





**“VICTORIAN KITSCH,”
“HOBOHEMIA,” AND THE
FRINGE: A CONVERSATION
WITH GRACE KRILANOVICH**

OUR EDITOR-IN-CHIEF JOHN HANLEY DISCUSSES VAGRANCY, VIOLENCE, AND THE “FRINGE” WITH GRACE KRILANOVICH, AUTHOR OF THE CULT CLASSIC *THE ORANGE EATS CREEPS* AND THE FORTHCOMING NOVEL *ACID GREEN VELVET*.

THIS INTERVIEW IS REPRINTED HERE FROM OUR ORIGINAL ONLINE FEATURE, WHICH CAN BE FOUND ON NECKSNAPMAG.COM.

Between your cult classic *The Orange Eats Creeps* and my peek at your upcoming novel *Acid Green Velvet*, I noticed that there are elements of both that feel very reminiscent of “hangout” movies – the violent-vagrant youth theme in particular certainly recalls films like Harmony Korine’s *Gummo/Kids* and other similar offshoots. Characters hang around, wreak havoc, mollify themselves with sex and/or substances, and so forth.

But that group dynamic is also intercut (and undercut) with a feeling of profound, melancholic loneliness, as our protagonists try to find a place in the world in the absence of love or support. Can you talk a little bit about this interplay between loneliness, selfhood, and belonging in your work?



Grace Krilanovich, author of *Acid Green Velvet*

I don't necessarily see it as loneliness in my own characters. Maybe it's my blind spot, but I just don't think of them as lonely. It's something else, a supercharged aloneness perhaps. More a vocation, than a circumstance that happens to them. These characters persist in peeling away the layers of societal constructs, questioning every given, at great personal risk. They might find other like-minded people, but these alliances are fragile, and in the end aloneness is this final frontier they're all barreling toward, a grim kind of existential purity.

For me, the “hangout” element is mood. I'm trying to create mood within the defined surroundings, where you could envision going off the official narrative and poking around in other characters' houses, walk around the bend of a particular road or whatever. Part of it is making sure there's stuff to look at. The stuff does a lot of work, narratively. The characters do their thing in this space you've filled with stuff, trash included, and it adds up to a certain feel.

Maybe because there's this push to limit or smooth out the experience of being in public places, these days I'm more

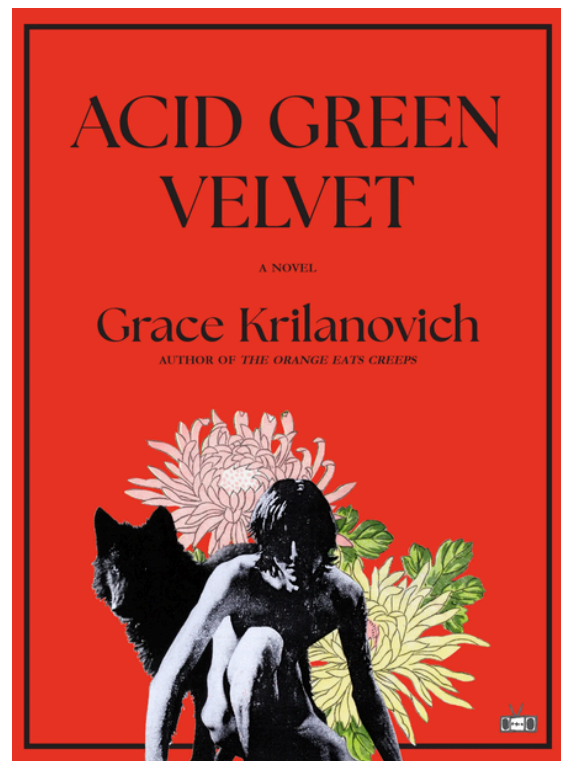
conscious of observing ordinary surroundings, and being present and connected through looking. No pleasantries or detail is too trivial, whether I'm sitting in a doctor's office, the supermarket checkout line, the school auditorium... There's torn, smudgy Xerox signage all over the Post Office; there's bales of Costco "Marathon" toilet paper piled up in a corner of a coffee place, etc. I feel it's my duty to simply look around.

Based on the excerpt I read, the stakes and conflicts of the new novel feel very concrete, as compared to *The Orange Eats Creeps*' Lynchian surrealist nightmare following the transient wanderings of the protagonist. I'm wondering to what degree this new novel will follow a formal plot structure, or whether it, too, will transform into atmospheric surrealism. As a writer who clearly values and prioritizes style/voice, can you talk a bit about how you balanced abstraction, style, and plot when approaching this new novel?

Acid Green Velvet is twice as long as *The Orange Eats Creeps*, so it needed more structure. With *AGV* I wanted to play

with different genres and motifs, and then let that give way to more impressionistic surreal passages, similar to *OEC*. You'll find the new book dipping into a variety of modes: what I would call "Victorian kitsch" and melodrama, haunted house, labor revolt, succubae, killer dog.

I started writing it in 2007 using Elvis Presley as a template for the main guy. I focused on Presley's washed-up early sixties years, when he'd installed Priscilla at Graceland under somewhat depraved pretenses. After a while the story morphed into an alternate universe Cali-



Krilanovich's upcoming novel, *Acid Green Velvet* (2026, *Two Dollar Radio*)

ifornia. I was always intrigued by the hippies' embrace of Art Nouveau/Victorian style, trippifying the old SF Victorians and cavorting in bedazzled frock coats and feathered capes. Of course the 19th century had a proto-hippie thing going—communes, fringe societies and health cults. I thought it'd be interesting to knit together the two eras. Gilded Age meets the Age of Aquarius. In general, I enjoy taking the hippies and flower children down a peg. Or just playing around with them. Growing up in the 80s it was always shoved down our throats how they were the fucking best and every subsequent generation was just a failed approximation of this pinnacle of youth culture.

My supreme wish was to write something propulsive and readable. I was jealous of the crime novels I was reading; I wanted whatever they had that allowed them to achieve that momentum. But could it also be weird? Would the reader tolerate that? I know if I was reading it, *I'd* want that hallucinatory sick feeling, that out of control feeling to balance out the other elements.

AGV is putting societal and class

tension right at the forefront. While the novel is set in the late 1800s, there are elements here that still ring as relevant today – immigration, homelessness, class disparities. What was on your mind, whether personally or politically, as you were writing this novel? What did you find yourself stewing on the most?

I guess you could say I'm stewing on misogyny and the denigration of the feminine. That is the major current, and it shows up in *Acid Green Velvet* in the conflict between the corseted, fussy, trinket-laden woman's sphere; the stuffy dark rooms constantly needing upkeep; and the wilderness, Industry, the "real stakes" Authentic world of men.

The stupidity of tradwifery and some high fashions I've seen recently of a super stylized, confined and exaggerated female form makes me feel like, yeah, get the 19th century up here to point some things out. They're easy targets, but the Victorians (or maybe I should qualify them as "Pop Victorians" in our current imaginings) are so deliciously excessive and obvious in their hang-ups. Very rich in iconography, drama.

I'd hoped that even though it's set in the 1880s that the novel conveys something about now in a way that you don't get if you write about it directly. The displacement helps us see what we're in the midst of. I'm thinking of an example, Oakley Hall's *Warlock*, a western set in the 1880's but emerging out of the McCarthy era to comment on those times.

I also wanted to pay tribute to the "hobohemia" so lovingly chronicled in *Boxcar Bertha*. Not the movie, but the fake autobiography of a woman hobo written by the anarchist-abortionist Benjamin Reitman. He clearly felt the need to provide a record of a lost or thwarted movement, centered in Chicago and places like the Dill Pickle Club and Bughouse Square in the 1910s through the 1930s. Incidentally, after reading his biography, Reitman struck me as an irredeemable buffoon and Lothario in real life, but his milieu was legendary.

Another theme present in both novels, and in the case of *Acid Green Velvet*, right out the gate: youth, parenthood, parent-child relationships. *AGV* challenges and subverts these ideas immediately, and with violence. And

in both novels, we feel a profound sense of absence, or failure, or lacking, from parental figures. Can you expound a bit on the role of parents (and parental/familial absence) in your writing?

The parent-child thing keeps figuring into my work. These are foundational relationships, obviously. But part of what I'm trying to do is make it bigger, as family structures, as they exist now, relate to state power and the way social hierarchies work.

Family histories and intergenerational dynamics are forever intriguing. In *Acid Green Velvet* there's an elderly woman character, Johnny's grandmother, who is partly based on my own great grandmother. I was privileged to know her growing up. She lived across the street from my family, and just struck me as this extremely ancient person. She was born in 1902, so in her late 80s then, and to a kid that is unfathomably old. Not that she's a sympathetic character necessarily in *AGV*—and she was a frightening and complex figure in my childhood—but I wanted to pay tribute to her. She really was my living link with the 19th century, with the stories

she told about her dad who was a jockey from the West Indies and about our town Santa Cruz in the teens and twenties. And I cherish those early sense memories of her dark, musty house cluttered with hundreds of elephant tchotchkes, and how she would sip water from a little spring in her backyard, just dip her hand into it like a caveperson.

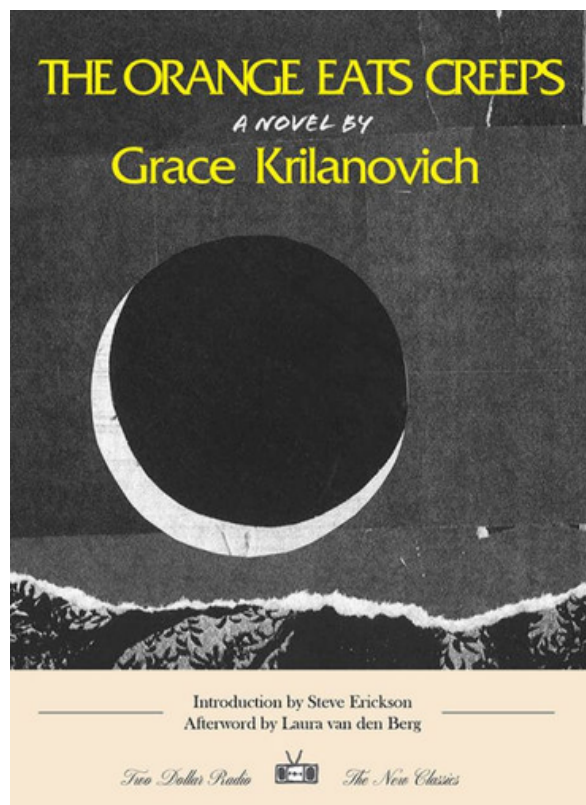
A question I must ask: it's been 15 years since your last novel-length fiction release. How long have you been working on *AGV*—has it been many years in the making, or is it a relatively recent re-entry? If it's the latter, how did it feel to be writing a novel again?

I started writing *Acid Green Velvet* in 2007, right after I completed *The Orange Eats Creeps*. *AGV* went through a few drafts, then I started having children (kind of a lot, three), which ground the book to a halt for ten years. I worked on it very little, a couple hours per week, till my youngest went to school in 2022. Once I got my time back I churned out the last few drafts and was done in a year and a half.

Now that I look back, it's clear that if I'd

somehow managed to finish this book in 2014 or 2015 like I was trying desperately to bring it to a close then, it wouldn't be half of what this book is now, the *AGV* that's being published in September. As hard as it is to look back over these 15-plus years, I ended up with the novel assuming its true and proper form.

That said, if I'd somehow known in 2015 that it would take another decade to finish, I would have dropped it immediately! I couldn't write knowing that—who could?



Krilanovich's first novel, *The Orange Eats Creeps* (2010, *Two Dollar Radio*)

Back to the topic of themes, I'd love to talk a bit more about the "fringe." There is a feeling of liminality that permeates in your work: characters living on the fringes of society/lucidity, periodically coming into contact and clashing with the "real" world. We slide between dream and reality; Paulette, the protagonist of *Acid Green Velvet*, quite literally lives in a sleepless fugue state with her lover-roommate-benefactor-client-patient (did I get that right?) Johnny. What do you see as some of the thematic and creative joys (or dangers) of exploring the "fringe," both within the story and as a part of the writing process?

Acid Green Velvet engages with different kinds of dreams—there's collective fantasies about place, fantasies of how the characters see themselves, warped recollections of their pasts, there's "problem solving" dreams, and transmissions from other realms, hallucinations of ghosts and invading spirits. The two main characters see themselves as living on the fringes of society because they're wealthy shut-ins and if they're mingling with the "common

people" it's from almost an anthropological position. The girl, Paulette, comes from the street, though, so that complicates it. She goes from one fringe to another.

In *Acid Green Velvet* there's repeated talk of "shadows" as liberatory places, a liberatory state of being. The idea that the revolutionary can live free and operate within a shadow realm. That's a core tenet of the fictional "Nascent Freedom Movement" in the novel.

Fringe implies a conditional relationship, a shadow belonging to the "real" object. It is peripheral to the main thing. But there's also the idea that the existence of fringe means that the centered "stable" object has an end, an edge. It is not all and may not always even be. It's not a boundless inescapable constant, or an inevitability. There is a Something Besides.

Fringe implies dynamism, a prompt to action. Fringe also implies "multiple," like there's not just this main thing and one alternate. It's going to be a collection of alternatives. The idea of Fringe in horror can point toward an unsettled place where ambiguity and possibility live. Maybe that's

all gathered under the Uncanny (like, “this thing is disturbingly close to the thing, but is so *not* the thing”).

FRINGE MEANS THAT THE CENTERED “STABLE” OBJECT HAS AN END, AN EDGE. IT IS NOT ALL AND MAY NOT ALWAYS EVEN BE ... THERE IS A SOMETHING BESIDES.

On the same note: there seems to be a conversation happening within your writing about the inherent violence of the fringe, but also the humanity of those that must navigate it. Characters must assert their dignity and autonomy, must find ways to maintain a sense of self amidst a wash of turmoil, violence, betrayal, assault. On the flip side of that coin, mainstream institutions perpetrate just as much violence and are clearly not a safe space for these characters, either. What insights do these edge spaces give us about navigating a harsh world?

There might be punishment for those who pursue alternatives. Yes. Navigating the fringe, living in rejection of

mainstream institutions, means you’re their mark.

But there’s far-right fascist cranks there too, in these edge spaces, and they’re also pledging violence on whoever’s out of step with the mainstream institutions.

I’ve been talking about Fringe as a liberatory space, but hey, liberatory for whom? Neo-Nazis run rampant on the fringes of society. I guess you could call them liberated for evil. The fringe is not progressive by default, of course.

Coming of age in the 90s, I remember a lot of focus on “extremes” and alternative-seeking in culture, amid ideas that mainstream meant lame, boring, and lacking all credibility. The fringe was where the freshness was. Counterculture publishers RE/Search, AMOK, and Feral House came in like clearinghouses for remnants of lost or maligned histories, and those figures on the contemporary fringes as well. I’m thinking specifically of the “chaos bible” of Fringe championed by disgusting Adam Parfrey: *Apocalypse Culture I & II*. Now we know one of Parfrey’s goals was to introduce fascist ideology into the counterculture, and spur

the growth of neo-Nazi movements in the US. This goal was achieved. He slipped it in there with the outsider art, esoteric philosophy and underground music as just more “fringe content.” Talk about betrayal. This is all presented at length in Spencer Sunshine’s book *Neo-Nazi Terrorism and Countercultural Fascism*.

With all that violence, everything and everyone feels like a *threat* in the worlds of your novels—even the atmosphere itself. (Your synopsis of *Acid Green Velvet* specifically notes “filth and pollution” as a theme.) Can you tell me more about the atmosphere—dread, fatalism, gloom, cruelty—that seems to permeate in these worlds?

I wanted to find something transcendent in filth and pollution—a necessary rejection of purity as an ideal, at any rate. A society angling toward “purity” is the biggest threat of all.

I wanted to explore that through a particularly Victorian lens. In the book we’ve got industrialized cities, itinerants, leisurely tramps and the leisurely well-off. Class parasites and confidence tricks. Bad

air. Toxins, contagion—the racism of that in fascist discourse. And also the misogynist ones, that women cloud and pollute men’s minds, they are at once filthy, *and* overly scrubbed and altered. I thought it would be interesting to blow up some of these themes—like you mention, dread, fatalism, gloom—to camp proportions. That’s what I meant by Victorian kitsch.

For writers who want to explore the societal fringes—things like homelessness and extreme poverty, for example—it can feel like a struggle to avoid what might colloquially be labelled as “poverty tourism” and/or “trauma porn,” particularly if the writer has not themselves experienced it. How do you ride that line, and what advice might you give to writers wanting to explore similar topics?

Exploitation as a genre in movies or pulp paperbacks is like “Give the people what they want!” which is why they are fun and beloved. But Exploitation has this line. There’s no fun in *prurience*. Sleazy: cool. Raunchy: not cool. I would draw a distinction there. Raunch is sleaze stripped of joy.

Linking “tourism” to subject matter implies that you’re either offering readers a chance to “visit” another’s experience while keeping that distance, denying that identification in favor of satisfying disingenuous curiosity about human experience as an object on display, making it so the reader’s enjoyment of the text is based on this distance.

What I don’t want to do is stylize or aestheticize human misery. In writing characters who are acted on violently by society and are forced onto the fringes, it’s not a matter of just having good intentions. Something needs to be offered to the reader on the page when they’re presented with a homeless character, for instance, that denies them the refuge of that distance.

Do you consider yourself a horror writer? What is horror to you—as a genre, label, and/or classification—and where do you think it fits into your own writing?

I don’t consider myself a horror writer, but I incorporate horror elements in my writing and I love it when *The Orange Eats Creeps* gets shelved there or talked about in

this community. I don’t feel very well versed in contemporary horror, though, but that’s because I’ve been in research mode while working on the second book.

Acid Green Velvet is definitely engaging with some genres—Western, most prominently. You could define it further as Acid Western, Gothic Western. And to me, if it’s either of those, that’s because Horror is involved. The book isn’t scary, but I was hoping for a pervading sense of unease in the house and wilderness surrounding the town. A pack of doglike monsters is going around killing members of an activist group. The mansion has anomalies. I would consider these the book’s horror tropes.

In a larger sense, horror is a tool I use to create dynamism in the text (“Crime fiction, but make it Horror”). What horror helps do is express some third thing that’s just out of reach, not supernatural per se, but an emotional truth that’s been suppressed. It’s cathartic as a reader to encounter this unearthing of a buried thing. And I love the stylized, delirious or even camp element to horror and the gothic. The use of artifice that invites the reader to fill in blanks, guess at

what's under the mask. I'm sure there's some psychoanalytic theory for what I'm trying to articulate.

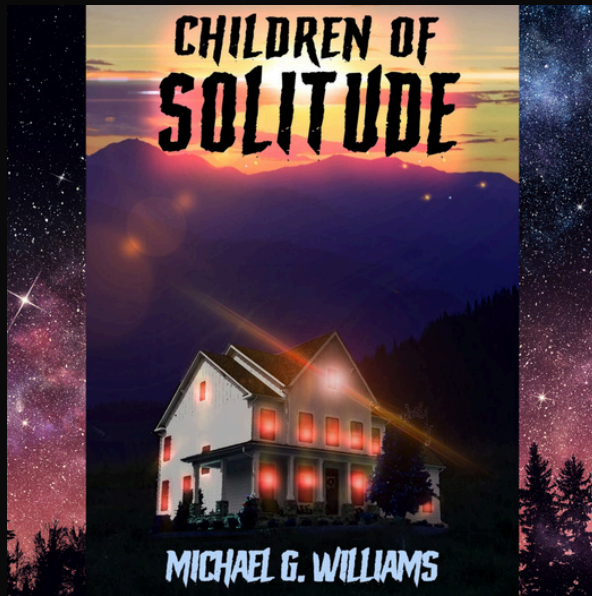
Another obligatory question, although I'll give it a bit of a twist: what or who were your creative inspirations when writing *Acid Green Velvet*, and in general? Feel free to list books, films, art, and music, but also foods, textures, animals, moods, sounds, spaces, and the like. Be as literal or as metaphorical as you'd like.

Dollhouses, migraines, silent film, clowns, figure drawing, nightgowns, cave art, Reitman's *Boxcar Bertha*, Jack Black's *You Can't Win*, Occupy Wall Street, when bikers took over Hollister, when the Manson Family took over Dennis Wilson's house, the Human Be-In, the Durst Ranch hop riot, *Lucifer Rising*, Morticia Addams, Anne of Green Gables, Elvis & Priscilla Presley, Arthur Lee, Mary Pickford, Ken Russell, Wanda Gág, Tasha Tudor, the Winchester Mystery House, hyenas, buzzards, coyotes, mules, Bram Dijkstra's *Evil Sisters* and *Idols of Perversity*, Scott Treleven's art, the Victorian interiors book *The Tasteful Interlude*, *Wisconsin Death Trip*, Shirley Jackson's *We*

Have Always Lived in the Castle, *Queen Margot*, *Withnail & I*, Joe Coleman's art, *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, *The Little Fur Family*, Barry Lyndon, Charles Portis' *Masters of Atlantis*, OWL Farm, San Benito County landscapes, the forest of Nisene Marks, *The Eating in Bed Cookbook*, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, James M. Cain's *Past All Dishonor*.

Grace Krilanovich is the author of 'The Orange Eats Creeps, a finalist for the Believer Book Award and the Indie Bookseller's Choice Award in 2010, and reissued in 2025 for Two Dollar Radio's New Classics series. Her work has appeared in Black Clock, The Rumpus, The Comics Journal, Los Angeles Review of Books, and elsewhere. She was a National Book Foundation "5 Under 35" honoree in 2010. Her second novel, Acid Green Velvet, is forthcoming from Two Dollar Radio in September 2026. You can pre-order it at twodollarradio.com/products/acid-green-velvet.

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Reginald Voth is a mean queen whose (horrible) mother is (finally) dead. When he returns to the ancestral Appalachian homestead where she raised him, he finds her house is haunted--or worse--and his favorite gay adult content creator living inexplicably next door. As he confronts the effects of a childhood spent isolated and alienated and entertains the possibility of romance, he must also contend with the possibility the place he twenty years earlier fought to escape, and the strange powers holding sway over it, have managed to trap him a second time.



“Chilling, funny, enthralling, and intense... one of the finest horror novels I have read in ages.”

- Richard Dansky, author of *Firefly Rain*

“Heartfelt, sometimes funny, startlingly poignant, and overwhelmingly frightening.”

- L. Marie Wood, author of *The Realm Trilogy*

“Evocative, compelling, and as thought-provoking as it is entertaining... highly recommended.”

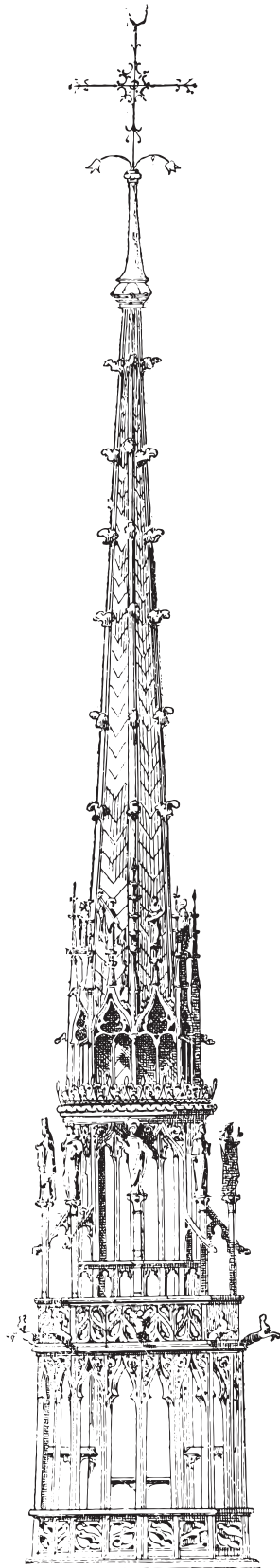
- D. Donovan, *Midwest Book Review*



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GENTEEL

JOSIE
LEVIN



Used to act like
it hurt to be
in church
Got stuck in
the doorway
Had this whole
limp left leg gag
that killed
Made it look like
crosses burned me
Hatched the form
into my chest
after pressing on
Karina's gold one
Got her good
Drank a boys blood
on a dare at lunch
It barely had taste
watery like it had
been thinned
nothing like mine
in my mouth
never cared to know
the names of any saints
And all this was me,
wanting something
ugly to surface
And the angel
who made me
dumb
(with the philtrum)
must have known

**ALL THAT
CAME FROM
OUR LIPS
WERE LILIES**

SHANTELL POWELL

The meadows around the hollow hills are strewn with trash, but only of the natural sort. The kind which will replenish the soil. The secret folks within the hills do not deal in recyclables. No tin cans or beer bottles will ever be found here. No pig iron, and no single-use plastics with their chasing arrows glyphs. Beneath the silver light of the waxing moon, wayward flowers, toads, and serpents are carried out by fae folk. The quickening moon makes things grow. Makes them swell. It's the ideal time to slaughter because the meat won't shrink. It's the ideal time to impregnate for the same reason. Just look



at those cavorting coney. They know what's up. This is the best time to make aphrodisiacs. It's also the best time to create curses, to pierce poppets with pins, and to break hearts and hymens.

I take a bite from my apple, and its juice runs down my chin to dribble between my breasts. I toss away the seeds: my gift for those to come. My other juices slide down my thighs to wet the soil. The apple tree which will grow here will be full of wisdom, both *malus* and *maleficarum*.

All the while, the fae folk sort flowers, toads, and serpents into heaps. Snakes and toads rarely cooperate. It's tricky to keep serpents from eating toads, one another, or even themselves, but this is part of the plan. Snakes aren't the only creatures with venom. Toads respond to their attacks by growing toxic. By tasting foul. They ooze potent hallucinogens, and we can use that.

Most snakes will change their mind, but any serpent who swallows a psychedelic toad will perish or go mad. The snakes who survive foam at the mouth like rabid dogs. From swallowing toads they move on to swallowing their own tails, each one a writhing *ouroboros*. Snakes which hold

themselves in their own mouths are potent magic.

In these meadows, the flowers are madness incarnate. They bloom in an eye-searing variety of colours. Stamens and pistils strain to reproduce, beckoning with pollen and the sweetest nectar, vegetal genitals in *flagrante delicto*. Peppery *nasturtiums* vine around deadly foxglove, and thorny thistles with their lavender blossoms sprawl and prick atop sweet-smelling clovers buzzing with bees. Each of these things are components. Ingredients for curses and blessings alike, though sometimes even I am hard-pressed to tell the difference between the two.

The season demands I send the flowers off, two by two, like the beasts were loaded onto the antediluvian ark. These flowers will be gifted to a young maiden besotted with a haunted prince. When she spoke to her brother, flowers left her lips. Rosemary for remembrance, pansies for thoughts. She gifted her intended with the last flowers of her youth. Fennel and columbine, rue and daisies. She'd already given away her violets, which withered when her mercurial lover murdered her

father. An accident, mayhap, but what came next was intentional.

In the end, she is flowered and deflowered. Covered in lilies like a casket, and feverish she babbles on, speaking in the language of flowers. She wades out into the deepest part of the river. Sweet words. Sweet scents. Rosewater. A flood of bluebells and baby's breath and goldenrod issue from all of her openings. This is supposed to be a blessing, but it is the most beautiful of curses. The flowers only stop coming when she does.

*

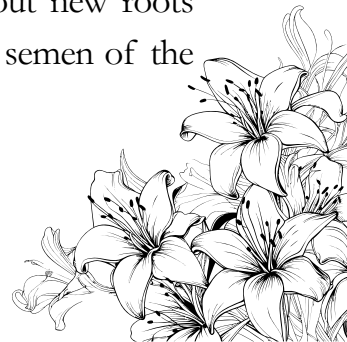
For a hundred years, we grow around the palace, we the regnant rose ruler of the sleeping queendom within, a clone of ourself and our royal predecessor. Our swelling hips are full of seed, and many a treasure-hunter finds himself impaled upon our thorns, writhing until spent as though shamefully caught in the act of love. It is known that hanged men ejaculate, and so too do the men caught up in our bush. It patters down like white rain. And when the men have been wrung dry of all their juices, their dead skins rattle like autumn leaves in the breeze. It

is a pleasant song.

Their blood and bones are a meal for our roots, and our blossoms seethe sweet heady scents to hide the carrion stink of putrid flesh and the bleachy sting of semen. Flies and bees alike make their homes in our moist dark nethers. But when the curse lifts like morning wood, we fall away, our petals, leaves, and thorny thickets blighted by what the troubadours call true love's kiss.

Love, of course, has nothing to do with it, and if there was a kiss, it was only an afterthought. Our sleeping beauty heir quickens like the waxing moon. Her belly bulges with seed. With what grows within. He that pricked her shall pay, but now we must wake her for the coronation.

We prune from ourself a long stem with sharp thorns, the bud at the tip as red as blood but unable to bloom without the right touch. Our angiosperms are sterile. This slip of ourself is taken away by one of our fae ladies in waiting and thrust into moist earth. We try to sprout new roots but are held in stasis by the semen of the dead.



One day, we receive our reprieve. No longer will we stagnate within the realm of men. Neither will we again grow around a castle's ramparts. No one presses our blossoms to their lips. No one presses our flowers between pages. No one fills our flesh garden with weeds. Our fae graft us into a girl, embed us within her vocal cords. Whenever she screams with birth pangs, we bloom. We vine through her trachea, our petals light upon her tongue, and when her mouth opens, so too does our rosebud. We choke her with glorious double blossoms in our quest to reach the sunlight. No princes shall ever intrude upon her again, and no low-born, either. The queen is dead. Long live the queen. Her womb is her own. Her saliva has become rosewater.

*

I heard it first at the monastery where I am employed. Someone, it is whispered, has been stealing penises. When I tell the other women, we laugh at this, of course. We laugh until we cry. Make jokes about what has really happened.

Someone thought they saw a cat sneak off with a rat, but the thing in puss's

mouth was the magistrate's pulling prick and now the next town over is in an uproar. We cackle until we find out the cat was caught—they tortured and tried the poor thing as a witch. The missing penis was not recovered. It isn't funny anymore. His daughters came to us for shelter. They came to warn us. Rumour has it there is a tree full of missing pillicocks.

There is no such tree, of course, but the witchfinder will come to our village next. All us women and girls huddle together in fear. We were all afflicted with a curious ailment in the springtime. We vomited up strange things. We still do. Bent needles, roses, pearls, cherry pits, and even serpents. People come from all over to view the spectacle. They ogle at our stripped bodies. Jeer at our shaking misery. And now the witchfinder will soon be upon us, pricking us with needles and naming our barn cats devils. I worry about my poor puss Graymalkin who spent so much time purring on my lap. I hope she found somewhere safe where the mice are fat and the cream is plentiful.

The witchfinder will say that the toads who squeeze through the burrows of our throats, these bumpy little animals bathed

in bile, are proof of our connection to the devil. They name it perversion, and even the virgins among us will be called whores. Fair is foul. And what of you? What will you call us?

We beg the village to keep the witchfinder away. We've seen his work before. Heard the rumours brought in by whispering wise women and shouting town criers. Heard the exhortations from the pulpit: *Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.*

Our curse is awful enough without the witchfinder's tortures. He should not profit from our misery. No one should profit from anyone's misery. It is the Golden Rule, is it not? To do unto others as you would have them do unto you? But the holy book of the witchfinder is not the bible but the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Not the word of God but the word of men who fear and hate women. Ever since the advent of the printing press, it has popped up all over Europe like poisonous mushrooms. Its death-dealing words propagate from country to country, village to village, spreading like the Plague.

My boy Jack did his best to chase off our gawkers, but then he puked up bezoars.

The more that came out, the more ours thinned until our heads looked like freshly-hatched squabs.

To forestall the witchfinder and to alleviate our torments, we ask for the medicine woman. The brewer. The midwife. The spinster with her distaff, sacred symbol of feminine power. They spin. They spell. They cast. They weave. They know.

Doctors come instead. University-educated and knowing nothing relevant. These so-called learned men come with leeches, cups, and straight razors. With their consultation of stars and bibles alike. With their ideas of humours and wandering wombs. They set hot cups upon bare breasts and the cups fill with blood instead of milk. Our circular bruises are like love bites without the love.

The witchfinder comes. He will mine us for gold. There's money to be had. Admiration. Fear. Power. The bruises made by the physicians are named as witch marks. He plunges his long needle deep into them. I can see he imagines he plunges something else into me. Though I'm old and my womb has dried up, his

eyes are full of lust. What he desires can never be sated by the willing. He rips our tongues with tongs. When we open our mouths, all manner of things fall out, but not one thing which can save us. Instead of blood, we bleed rosewater.

He presses upon me like a stone. His breath is hot in my ear. He wants to know where we have hidden all the stolen penises. I cannot help myself. I laugh. He strikes me with a mailed fist, and toothsome gems tumble from between my lips. He pockets them as his due.

The scales are brought out, and on one end is placed a stack of bibles. Anyone heavier than these is deemed a consort to the Devil. Anyone lighter is the Devil's consort, too. Salvation rides a thin line. I am not afraid for myself. I've grown stout in my old age. But the daughters of the magistrate, ah, for these young slips I am deathly afraid. They can't be much older than ten or eleven years, yet their red eyes are much too old. There is nothing to them but skin and bones like parched reeds and the frayed wild rose petals of autumn. They have wept themselves dry.

The Proverbs say our hair is our glory,

but under the curse our glory is diminished. Our glory is shorn, and shackled we are dragged to the town square to become an attraction. When I was a young bride they threw flowers. Now onlookers laugh and throw rotten cabbages. Pelt us with stinking eggs. One by one we are led from the pillories. Led to the scales to sit upon the chair where hope flies away on an owl's wings.

While no one else can see, the witchfinder furnishes the scale operator with a sack of coins. He stole them from us. Wages for all his hard work. He will steal more in the next village over. I see the balance being nudged away from our favour and there is nothing I can do. The bibles look light, but each of us is lighter. All the better to fly upon our brooms to the mountain of Venus. All the better to join the Wild Hunt. I would call for Perchta, Frau Holda, Blodeuwedd, Mother Holle, Eve, and the Dark Grandmother, but my voice is gone. My mouth is juiceless.

When the confession is demanded, all that comes from our lips are white lilies. We will burn, but only in this season. They will burn forevermore.



*

Every day I patrol the biodome perimeter. It rises from the concrete like a hollow glass hill. I don't know what's inside. The translucent surface is covered with grime on the convex side, and condensation on the concave. I pause every now and then to wipe the surface clean, but I've never seen anything within. At least, not beyond the wild and disheveled wood hidden behind the mist. It's like a giant snow globe that cannot be shaken. But today, as I clean the glass with my kevlar sleeve, a shadowy figure approaches. From inside the dome, a gnarled hand smears away the silver mist, revealing a wrinkled woman clad in nothing but soil and blossoms. She wears the soil like body paint: dark swirls upon her limbs and torso. Her slack leathery breasts hang low upon her ribs. Her owl-like eyes are the colour of motor oil lubricant and shine out from her wrinkled face. Her soft belly sags, and bees creep out from her navel. I think those are bees.

She is made of flowers, and I see now her skin is made of dried, layered petals. Her hair is the colour of lead solder and blossoms adorn those pewter locs. I have

never seen someone so old outside of historical archives. How has she lived so long when the rest of us out here die in the bloom of youth?

This banshee woman of the glass mound opens her mouth to scream, and instead of sound, a tongue-like cable slithers from between her lips. It falls glistening onto the ground, covered all over with strange scales. Is it actually a cable? No, it's a snake.

It coils; I recoil; she doubles over and unfamiliar flowers bubble from her gullet. Petals flutter down onto an efflorescent earth covered with green loam and fallen leaves. How can the earth look so alive in there and so dead out here? Then the bees begin to swarm and she stands up straight, shoulders rolled back and set down. Bees extrude from her navel. Her eyes. Her nose. Her ears. Her nipples. The tangled grey thatch between her legs. Bees spiral out from her into the trees, a black and yellow fractal static humming so I can hear it through the dome. They sound like electrical transformers. Her thighs drip with lubricant, or is that honey? I think that's what bees make. It's sticky and golden. She slides a finger through it

before popping it into her mouth. She sucks on her finger, then her tongue flicks out to lick her upper lip. She paces along the arc of the dome, her swaying hips tracing a sine wave in the condensation. Figure eights and infinity live within the bowl of that pelvis.

Despite myself, I raise my rifle. Common sense makes me bring it back down. It does not shoot blanks. The biodome must remain intact. It might not be bulletproof. Who knows what hazards lurk within? My duty is to ensure no one gets too close.

I am too close.

I want to get closer.

The woman's thigh swipes away the vapour. Reveals what's hidden within. I keep pace with her, wiping away the dirt from the dome. Behind the strange beauty of this elder rises the jungle of flowers, trees, and thorns. Boughs hang low with the weight of phallic fruit. Spiky pink florets burst from frosted green columnar leaves in the wet crotches of the trees. Bushes heavy with half-bloomed roses scratch at the glass. They're the only flowers I recognize, though I've never

smelled one. Before I was stationed here, I'd never seen such wild vegetation. I'd only seen the hydroponics towers with their neat arrays of green. The softly bioluminescent modular algae tank stacks. The chasing arrows glyphs. Brutalist concrete. Sabotaged seed banks. The stink of petrochemicals and rainbow-smear puddles. Sand made from microplastics. Craters and space junk from fallen satellite arrays. Archived files with their lists of long-extinct flora and fauna.

I am staring at another age. The time capsule of another world. What's within this hollow dome is something seen only in ancient video clips and other degraded digital documentation. There's not much of our history left. It's all corrupted, like stars viewed through the gauze of light pollution.

The woman looks up at me with an apple in her hand and bees orbiting her head. Her mouth is still, but the snake writhes around the flowers at her feet. Its hood fans wide. Its forked tongue flickers. It rears up and sways. It leans back then spits. I jump back reflexively. She does not crush its head, and in return, it does not strike her heel.

She presses against the dome. Breasts, belly, and thighs wipe the dome clean. She gestures for me to come closer, but I back away, instead. Her lips make a circle on the glass. Dim shapes coalesce from the wild wood. Girls and women, like me, but not like me. Where are their clothes? Why is their hair unshorn? With skin of brown, white, and black, they are shameless and naked and covered in occult designs. Each carries fruit. Flowers. Strange animals. Each wears a snake around their neck like a necklace, but instead of clasps, each serpent bites its own tail.

I have no necklace. I wear a 3D-printed collar. My burgeoning shame is a heavy yoke. My heart lurches like an engine that refuses to turn over. It beats loud in my ears. It pulses in my groin.

The women and girls smile and their tongues flash like titanium alloy. I want to join them but I cannot stay. I return to headquarters to file my report.

I leave things out.

That night in my pod I dream of rosewater. Of a white tree of life and a red tree of knowledge. Of snakes and toads

and the quickening moon.

I will go back. I will leave all this behind. Under the cover of night, I will dodge the security cameras to seek out those who live within those hollow hills. I will not free them. They will free me.



ANGEL ROSEN

BIRTHRIGHT



Whoever said that the teeth chattering
was a masterpiece
has never seen the teeth
lying on the desktop.
They don't feel the shiver
of the mouthless noise,
the chewing bones staring at me
from alongside the night stand.
Nine o'clock smells like sulfur and ache,
my attic mimics each minute.

I exist in a haze
of everything I've lost up there.

Digging other people's hope out
of the small cough in the corners,
it tastes bad on my tongue,
then tests my temperature.

I am not sure I have ever been born.



HATCHLINGS

ZOE ADRIEN LAPA

My hair is now a quarter of a centimeter long. Fuzzy fuzz, fuzzy dog, each strand sharp but pleasing when I smooth my palm over my scalp. And now my palm is itchy. What a joy. I remember my smile in the mirror, just two bare weeks ago, my head shining with potential, clean. Can anyone believe it? Hair grows back so fast. It feels like borders have been drawn between all the little versions of me.

Grandmother calls me a dyke very matter-of-factly. I showed up on her doorstep two bare weeks ago and she said, *best if you come in. The neighbors might see you.* I said,

do we care? She said *look at the state of you, little dyke. Of course we do.*

My mother hasn't called. I won't call first.

The birds in the garden are too loud. I haven't gotten used to it yet. Birds love my grandmother, love all her flowers and tall trees and her produce scraps and her soft, well-churned dirt. They sing incessantly until night falls. I can hear them outside of my window, in my grandmother's spare bedroom. All tweet tweet and chirp. I am going crazy very very slowly, and no one's gonna stop a thing.

I keep reaching behind me, to put my hair up in a ponytail. Or to tuck flyaway strands behind my ears. Or to muss the top of my head—only for my hands to encounter the roughness of my new look. Red palms.

Do I feel like myself? The mirror says *this is what you look like, this is what you always look like*. My grandmother says *no, and God willing you'll soon turn back to normal*. The rash on my palms says *something's coming soon, just wait*. Something's been coming for a long time now.

My hair is half a centimeter long and I'm getting restless. It's been a month since I've seen my little sister. A bare month, with no grooves to it. Straight lines. My little sister's hair went all the way down to the small of her back. I used to brush it a thousand times a day, like she was a little princess.

Her birthday's a while away. I wonder idly if I'll see her by then, and then I choose to wonder about something else.

Grandmother makes me work for her garden. *Makes* is a strong word; she asked me to, and I do so gracefully, but also we

both know I don't really have a choice in the matter. Resentment can't get to the heart of me. Something like a dense layer of fog over my whole body is blocking it. I dig my fingers into the soil. I weed out carrot flowers. No sweat drips from my ponytail because I don't have a ponytail. My head is always light and I always feel the wind tickling my scalp. It's easy to get used to the way things are now if I'm not thinking too hard. Like settling into my natural state of being, almost.

A neighbor looked at me over the low fence once, and we made eye contact, and then he quickly walked away. No words. Like a primal fear had overtaken him, for whatever reason. I didn't tell Grandmother. I'd never been in the habit of proving other people right.

I look in the mirror and say, *you are a weed*, and I don't think I'm talking to myself.

The birds are friendly. There's always about a dozen perched all over the garden. Sometimes they're watching me, I think, but sometimes they're just pecking at something or other. Very occasionally they circle around my head like vultures, these tiny sparrows, tiny finches. Today I snuck

a handful of sunflower seeds out from Grandmother's pantry and threw it like confetti into the air. I watched how the birds swoop, glide, descend, dive. They are graceful of their own volition. Their wings cut through the air. I grow used to their noise.

My hair explodes out of my head like fireworks, an inch in every direction. It looks unseemly. It looks like the tips should be frosted. Bleaching it would at least make it look intentionally bad. As it is, I look a mess. When I first wake up, at least.

Grandmother has dug up dozens of scarves from who knows where. Silk florals, as smooth as water running through my fingers. She puts one by the edge of my bed every morning when I'm in the shower and then she leaves the room, as if I'm to think it got put there by magic. We know it's really just a command subtle enough to let both of us keep our dignity. Every day I tie a scarf around my atrocious haircut and head outside, to the garden, deemed worthy of humanity's many eyes by the skin of my teeth. I keep the thing on until I have to go to bed.

The birds don't like the silk. They had taken to trying to land on my head, and the slippery fabric gives them trouble. I keep the peace with sunflower seeds. I think about my sister.

The neighbors seem more comfortable with me in the scarf. Senior citizens out on their morning walks nod at me now. Some of them I've known forever. One said, *aren't you a dear, helping your grandmother.* Grandmother is trying Pavlovian shit on me. Ever since I started wearing the scarves she's been giving me compliments, letting me go on errands, baking little treats, like she's learned positive reinforcement and thought to use it to reinforce my femininity. Through an inordinate amount of florals. Of my prizes I like the errands the best. The market makes me feel normal, makes the fog thin out a little bit, my own hand picking out tomatoes for optimal ripeness, my own mouth asking how much the mangoes are.

I am no better than a dog. I am a dog in a scarf and a buzzcut. Hear me woof.

The birds liked Grandmother, but they really like me. There's always a smattering

around the garden, hopping around, flying around, sparrows landing on my outstretched palm like I'm a princess. I wonder if my sister's hair is still smooth and silky. I hurriedly wonder about something else.

Life is a certain kind of peaceful. At night I rub my palm over my hair and it feels like blades of soft grass, no longer stinging nettles. Sometimes I miss the pain, but the birds leave their own, deeper gouges.

When my hair starts curling past my ears, a number of months into my stay with Grandmother, she starts laying off the scarves.

The first time I walk out of the shower and there isn't one waiting for me, I feel almost bereft. There is no sense of freedom. Freedom is about four bare months gone, blocked from my body by a dense layer of fog, freedom can't get to the heart of me. When I look in the mirror I ask *do I feel like myself?* and everything but the mirror answers.

The scarves in the hamper say *it's time to go home*. My unbroken palms say *there's a*

mirage in the desert. The chorus of birds says *wouldn't you like to see? Wouldn't you like to know what happens?*

Nowadays I barely feel monitored. I take walks. Sometimes, at night, there's a couple dozen stars. Not nearly enough to feel less alone. One daring night, I walk past my old street. My house, my mother's house, my little sister's house. I look at the blue glow from my little sister's nightlight, the white glow from my mother's office window. And then I keep walking.

My gardening is starting to pay off. Grandmother's front yard has never looked better, at least not since she was much younger. She is delighted by it. She sits on the porch with a cup of tea, often, just watching the birds hop and the leaves sway. She once told me *I'm proud of you, little dyke. I see so much of myself in you* then smoothed my hair back, grasped the back of my neck. She said *your mother misses you, your sister misses you. So, so much*.

I called my mother one bare afternoon, kneeling in the dirt next to a pile of uprooted carrot flowers. She told me a lot of things. Like *I missed you, I was botheaded, we missed you, I'm sorry, your sister missed you, I*

just couldn't believe it. My pride and joy. We talked. I said things, I'm sure. The call lasted for hours. At the very end, she said I always knew you'd call me.

I hadn't thought I was in the habit of proving people right.

The birds make a mess of things. They chirp and chirp and circle overhead, swooping in now and then to peck my head. They snap their beaks at me, they stomp their tiny feet at me, they hop threateningly at me. One snatches a strand of hair on my head, a sharp needleprick pain, and the others say *hey, that's a good idea*, and begin to swoop, glide, descend, dive.

When I stand in the doorway, ready to tell Grandmother I'm coming home, there is almost a blanket of birds in the garden behind me. Grandmother doesn't notice; she is too busy holding me by my shoulders, tears in her eyes. Just then—6 PM—the church bells start to toll from far away, as if from a dream.

I am coming home.

—————

In the old house, they call it my episode.

How was your little episode, that was back during your episode, is your episode over? Is it? And on and on. My mother is graceless. She clutches things tight.

There was no episode, mother. *I just cut my hair*, I try to say, but the words get trapped in bubbles that blow out of my mouth and into the wind—harmless, iridescent. There is a pang in my chest. But then again, there has always been a pang in my chest.

My hair is almost to my shoulders now. My mother took me for one more haircut and pulled up pictures on her phone to show to the salon stylist. We took a circuitous route; to avoid the barber, I guess. Like seeing the barber again will make me a *real* dyke. It's all very silly. The stylists barely cut anything. But now my hair curls becomingly, my mother says with satisfaction, especially when I tuck it behind my ears.

My sister is very very happy. She is always screaming and giggling. She just turned six. I was there. *She was sad while you were gone*, my mother says. There is a blankness in her voice when she says this. A willful sort of non-accusation. But I am a good

sister. I brush the baby's hair, stroke by stroke, until it is gleaming. My mother does not like to watch this ritual. It reminds her of gouges that have not yet healed.

I brush my hair now, too. I keep it tidy. It is the rainy season, and the humidity is getting to us all.

The birds seem to have followed me. They carpet my mother's front garden, much more bare than Grandmother's, with no fruit or flower even to incentivize them. Just an old dead tree in the corner. They do not care. They chirp and caw at me through my window, my mother's window. They flock to me when I go outside, on my way to school or market.

I begin buying my own sunflower seeds. My mother looks at me and my birds from inside a closed window and then later says, *you're just like a princess*. My sister laughs and claps in glee. I toss the seeds like confetti, out and over, over and over.

It doesn't stop at seeds. The birds also want more of my hair. In order to stop them from yanking strands out of my scalp through their own power, I begin

saving my hairfall, picking some up from the floor, out from my hairbrush. I leave the strands on my windowsill and some bird or other always collects, always chirps at me. This satisfies them, and they do not hurt me. I have begun to consider them my friends, and this the price for their friendship.

Despite the whimsical birds, the happiness cannot get to me. Not the camaraderie, the delight, the doubt. The fog is solid around me. Nothing, really, can touch me anymore.

My grandmother calls. She always has, but now instead of having long talks with just my mother, she asks for me specifically. *Where is my granddaughter*, she says when my mother puts her on speakerphone. *Where is my granddaughter?* I talk to her. We have become fond of each other, in a way.

I go through phases. Sometimes I avoid looking in the mirror completely, sometimes I am glued to it. *Where is her granddaughter*, I ask it. *Where is she?* The mirror has taken a vow of silence. It reflects a stranger, a weed.

I tend to my mother's garden now. I

follow orders. Flowers and bushes and sprouts. The birds are all over me almost all of the time, weirdly placid, perched on my shoulders and head. I go about my business as they chirp, as they sing, as they try to communicate. I say nothing back.

A handful of seeds in the air. Swoop, glide, descend, dive.

I am always pulling at my hair now. Not roughly, but still, sometimes strands are broken and left on my fingers. I also give these to the birds. I do not see where they take it to; they disappear into the trees. Curiosity cannot get to the heart of me. I let it go.

The market has stopped feeling like a haven. No longer my hands on the red-ripe tomatoes, no longer my mouth talking, asking prices. A stranger operates my body. She has very nice hair.

Grandmother says, *her hair is still a little lezzy, but it is growing out well.* My mother says *mmm-hmm, and thank God for that.* I wonder if they know I can hear them. Very quickly, I stop wondering. I think instead about the odd chest pains I'd been having lately. The world keeps spinning,

spinning.

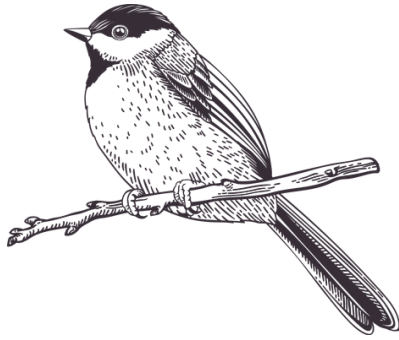
The birds are trying to lure me somewhere, but I can't go. I am busy. I'm in a no-mirrors phase, and my bedroom is a torture chamber, but it is also the safest place in the world.

I am sick. I skip school. I don't garden.

My mom checks on me in the mornings, smooths my hair, tucks me in. I am like a baby. My little sister hovers from the doorway and yells, checking if I am okay. My voice is hoarse but I say *yes*, I say *I'm here*. I wonder idly if my mother brushes her littlest daughter's hair while I'm gone, if it makes her think of things, remember other daughters. I abruptly stop wondering.

I stand up sometimes, to use the bathroom, and when I do, my hair just brushes my shoulders. I don't have a ponytail holder so I let it hang loose. It falls in greasy strands all over my face, over my eyes, so I tuck it behind my ears. Like a fucking lady. My chest hurts and hurts and hurts.

The birds chirp on my windowsill. They



peck at the glass. My mother opens the window while I'm asleep, to freshen up the place and let loose the smell of sweat and vomit. The birds hop inside, carpet my floor, the edges of my bed. They chirp, and they chirp.

I ask myself, *is this who I really am? Is this really who I am?* And the birds say *please, we have something to show you.* Over and over.

By the third day I'd had enough. I wait until my mother disappears into her office, sinks there for hours. I say, *fine, where is it?* Incredulousness cannot get to the heart of me. I think, *I am talking to the birds.* I think, *this might as well happen.*

The birds get excited when I say it, and fly towards the dead tree in the corner. They blanket every branch. I walk forward. I am not stressed or worried, but I still feel sick.

At just chest-level, a forked branch

droops, the only branch bare of birds in the whole tree. Lying perfectly between the forks is a nest. A bird's nest. When I examine it closely, I realize: it is made at least partially of human hair. Mine. Interwoven with branches so delicately, so artfully. All around the tree are carrot flowers. They are stubborn, willful. They cling to life.

Inside the nest are three eggs. Baby blue. They are beautiful and speckled and delicate and painfully small. I pick one up, hold it in the palm of my hand. It's warm.

I say, *whose eggs are these?* and all the birds chirp, *they're yours, little dyke.*

The pain in my chest gets sharper, more defined. Numbly, I put the egg back down all gentle and then I walk inside. None of the birds follow. I get all the way to my room, and then I close the door. I think for a second and then close the window, and the curtains, too.

I lift my shirt up. Somehow I know. From my breasts, my nipples, swollen, painful, heavy—there drips a substance as white as an eggshell.

—————

My life is cracked open in half, and wind rushes to fill the spaces where a solid wall once was. The fog dissipates and leaves me shivering, bare in the sun. An emotion so vast as to be unnameable looms over the horizon. I am drowning. I am drowning. I am in my dry room, drenched in sweat and milk and I am crying. I am drowning.

My mother's footsteps echo throughout the house. I don't know where she's going and can't find it in myself to care. The phone, distantly, rings.

More footsteps. My mother comes in, phone to her ear. She looks at me. *Where is my granddaughter?* Tears all down my cheeks. She tells her mother, my Grandmother, *she's sleeping. Let's not disturb her.* And then she walks away.

Where has all the love gone? She used to brush my hair for me. One thousand strokes per day. She braided it and loved it and tended to it like a plant in the garden. She yelled when I asked to cut my hair, back when I was young. I never asked again.

I wonder if the love will return once my

hair reaches the small of my back. *What is done can be undone*, I say it, I say it again and again. *Undo it.* The birds chirp chirp chirp from far away, and the chirps, at least, cannot get to the heart of me.

I stand up, stagger to the bathroom. I look in the mirror. A long bob, a messy face. Wet, swollen breasts. I ask it, *is this who I really am?*

The mirror says, *you can't keep living like this, little dyke.*

Eventually, I get better. Not even by my own will. Just the passage of time. I stop throwing up, stop sweating so much. When the sun crests over the horizon of the next day, I am ready to go back to school, my hair just grazing my shoulders and rustling in the wind. It's rainy season and I get caught in the rain. There is a desperate sort of joy rising up from the pavement, from the drowning grass.

The birds are gone now, but not entirely. There are some but they are no longer a huge faceless flock; instead, a dozen or so finches and sparrows rest all around the garden. They hop away from me when I come near. They gather when I throw

sunflower seeds, fighting over every last bit.

The eggs stay in the nest. I worry about their viability, but they always seem warm and full of life. Vital, somehow.

My sister discovers them on her own, grabs my hand to show me excitedly while I pretend I'd never seen them before. I say, *we shouldn't touch bird's eggs, because the mother bird will get angry*. She says *yes* and she gazes at the eggs with solemn reverence, clutching my hand so tightly. Something in me shakes loose, and I am compelled to continue—*if you touch them, your scent will get on them, and once their scent changes the mother bird won't ever recognize them, not ever again. They'll be alone, and then who will teach them how to grow?*

My sister says, *is that real?* She says, *we can teach them. Can't we? Will it be so bad?*

The days pass like normal days do. I miss the birds. I tap a blunt fingernail against my window to simulate the pecks. I scatter birdseed and hair over my windowsill. They do not come. The next day, I see my mother with a paper towel picking the mess up with a look of distaste.

I don't talk to my mother. Most days I have nothing to say.

I look in the mirror a normal amount of times, or at least I try. During one of these appointed normal times I say, *is this it? Is this the right direction?* And my mirror says *I am a weed*.

Aren't we all.

The eggs are about to hatch. I come back from school to see them rocking back and forth, almost imperceptibly. There are tiny pips, tiny cracks, tiny holes in the surface, one on each. They formed yesterday, but they seem more urgent today, more real.

I don't move the nest, but I want to see, so I drag a kitchen chair outside to kneel on. My sister watches this from her perch in the living room, surrounded by dolls and toy kitchen equipment. My mother doesn't watch anything. She's in her office.

My sister asks, *what are you doing?* I say, *the birds are about to hatch*. Then, *do you want to watch?*

We have been sitting for an hour or so outside when the rocking gets urgent, the

chicks starting to make noise from inside the egg. Slowly, the tiny pip gets larger, the cracks starting to go all around the surface, the things inside clamoring to get out.

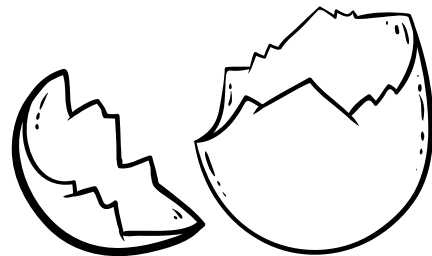
Birds, once again, start gathering in my garden. The great silence is over. I'm guessing they want to see how their gift is received.

I can just see the babies on the inside, flashes of painfully tiny beaks. Sometimes there are long, slow moments between movement, moments where my heart hangs and aches, hung on the balance between this life and these tiny, little lives. My eggs, my little birds. Little dykelings.

My sister, at first, is enthralled, but the process takes more hours and she gets bored. She starts playing with the other birds in the garden, but they are not patient with her loud noises and grabbing wrists. I hurriedly take a break from my watching, grab my thing of sunflower seeds and show her how to throw them around, like confetti. Up and over. The birds soften towards her, hopping and pecking at her treats.

It takes multiple hours for the little dykelings to finish chipping at the egg in a circle, creating an opening wide enough to meet the world with. One egg, worryingly, is lagging behind.

When one of the eggs hatches it is all I can do not to cry. It starts running around its nest almost immediately, making a mess of the other eggs as it chirps a high, trilling cry. Almost at its heels is the second one, wet and quivering, running into the sun and screaming, screaming, screaming.



The third stops moving, and so does my heart. I don't stop watching. Evening has fallen.

Finally, after a long hour that sinks like a brick in a pool, a long hour with no thoughts and no emotions inside it, an hour as dense as a fog—a chirp. And a widening crack.

The third egg hatches and I burst into tears. I am always bursting into tears. I know for certain that this moment is starting to echo backwards and forwards in my life, affecting every moment that isn't this, that could never be this, every experience now colored by this one. I am reverent.

They don't look like sparrows or finches, nothing that I know of. They look like me. They look like little dykelings.

The little dykelings toddle around, ungainly. They screech. They must be hungry. I know just what will do the trick.

I realize my sister is next to me, looking at them, paying no notice to my tears. She has a look on her face of wonder. And one of confusion.

How can we tell if they're girls or boys? she asks me. My heart, strung along for too long and quivering, too, breaks neatly in half.

Does it matter, I say.

I suppose it does not.

—————
Night has fallen by the time my mother

emerges from her office, and she is once again on the phone.

My granddaughter, my granddaughter, I imagine Grandmother crying from the other side. *Where is she, my granddaughter?*

Mother knocks at my door, a sharp rap, two sharp raps, and then she is opening it. I am on the floor in a mess of blankets, pillows, and hair, minding two chicks running around chirp, chirp, chirping, holding the third chick close to my heart. There is dry grass and mattress fluff and bedding and carrot flowers and sunflower seeds everywhere. My shirt is pushed up, and I have no bra, and my nipples are bleeding from nips from tiny, tiny beaks. But they must be nourished, so I hold one up to my chest, still, encouraging it to feed, to grow strong.

My hair, brunette, silky, strong—it once reached my shoulders, once even the small of my back—lies in shreds all over my nest. I didn't have clippers so there are awkward tufts all over my scalp, but it doesn't matter. The birds had the right idea of it. Something must break for something to grow, something must be cut for something new to form. I think of

pruning, of shearing, of kitchen knives. Anyways, I can always get my hair fixed at the barber's.

I think of how my family shows love, affection, disdain. Then I think of me, my love, my family, my little dykelings.

My mother has no emotion in her eyes. She takes everything in, still holding the phone to her ear. Then she says, *she's sleeping. Your granddaughter's sleeping. But don't worry; she'll be right there.*

My hair is now a quarter of a centimeter long. It's a good length; my palms are red again from rubbing it, but the sensation is still satisfying. In a month I'll shave it back down. I have a sling fashioned around my neck and side, holding a less-tiny but still quite small dykeling. They are growing imperceptibly, day-by-day, but they are growing fast. This third one is still lagging behind; its siblings are flying 'round my head, like vultures, sparrows, finches, but something new and different and mine. Soon the third will join them, and they will be their own flock, their own song and dance.

The wind caresses my scalp as I throw

sunflower seeds every which way. My dykelings are starting to like the taste of seeds, but mother's milk is still their favorite. In every way I'm grateful. Their flock of godparents still loves to fuss, flying all around, to and fro, carpeting every inch of Grandmother's house, and they appreciate the seeds even more.

Windchimes tinkling. Grandmother says from the doorway, very matter-of-factly, *we need more tomatoes, little dyke. Can you fetch some for me, dear?*

The garden and the fog and the mirror all say, *good job. We knew you could do it.*

I say, *yes. I can.*



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