

An aerial photograph of a city street intersection, likely in New York City, showing crosswalks, traffic lights, and street signs. The image is framed by a series of overlapping yellow lines that create a geometric, abstract border. A large blue rectangular box is centered over the image, containing the title text.

# BROADWAY STILLS

*THE BEST FICTION, NONFICTION & POETRY BY  
SENIOR CREATIVE WRITING MAJORS*

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
UNDERGRADUATE CREATIVE WRITING  
CLASS OF 2022



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## “The Verb Game: Round 1”

by Joan Tate

*From a Communal Lexicon*

Elongate, spew of Summer and we're sitting in the clay  
triangulate in our playing of the verb game as we watch

them, swarm like fly  
and june bug cracking oily frizzes in a mason jar, nice and plugged up  
bumping plumb against the glass's skin, the tired things as gnats are up abreast before it opens and you

reach for the first verb, *blister*, like lightning got slimy cradle, grip of cast-iron, caterwaul, tentative  
sober undershirt and red red red, baby-soft head like a crying, the thumb-head heat out of lip you

reach for the next verb, *wade*, push the weight up, fluently flail against flood *Boy*, **be** the lunar *Scyphozoa*, o  
ambulatory of the planes, pumping steady gallop, umbrella breath parade, the flex of flesh in soup just

reach for the next verb, *cross*, slough through streetways, slouching past cars, or over devil's dirt,  
wood warring at your back, warning kindred to crinkle and dance for days for they got saved, you can only

reach for the next verb: *drop*, a sudden absence of a plinth, defeat of mystics or the ecstasy of soul, gravity,  
common converse lifting God allows so we'll accrue like a film, greasy, iridescent and so very very you

reach for the next verb, *tusk* the underbelly, right in the naked,  
like a talon but a narwhal tooth, *glug, glug, glugged* insides to out so

reach for the next verb: *lace* the bluewire shoe strings  
the evasive flit of hand for toe you

step to the next verb *trumpet* packets of sound, vibration,  
vellum-surpassing communion with the word, or yellow fire

*verify* the meadow, dirt run through by stream and fibrous bottlenecks absent of velvet  
teeth of law, architecture of searching through the sleep of ants we

reach for the next verb: *toast!*

reach for the next verb: *salt* a field of permutations cut with purple shells, skin like

burnt ceramic, carpets dreary with the weight of Carthage never  
reaching for her next of verbs, *sleep* like a drunk in a tank





like dew on woven grass,  
*screw* till we've got rutabaga bruises

we'll reach for the next verb: *howl*, forsooth, in wooden chains, something to  
prick the popcorn ceiling, spin out zephyrous from my soul and signal by the end

we swung from spider's webs like tongues and crumbs of dancing,  
and what let up sticky shaking were our cradles driven sweet  
with chorus from the ocean





A series of haikus in response to *Kobayashi Issa*  
by Venice Ohleyer

For “Walking” with Jon Cotner

Fast eyes, sweating hair  
Red alert. Do you think they know  
I clogged the toilet?

Muffled cry — am I invisible?  
Am I nothing? Oh, the pain of being  
A woman at Guitar Center

Plato says we were once one person,  
Now constantly seeking our other half.  
I just know I’m horny

I like your pants, she says.  
Thank you, I say, with eyes cast down  
“They’re from Zara.” Defeat.

He gave me a cookie.  
He made it from scratch, just for me.  
I have celiac disease.





When God first put us on this  
Green Earth. Did he know that there'd be  
Furries in Times Square?

Carefully, tenderly, brick by brick  
Mother Earth's dirt is transformed into  
A WeWork space on the LES





## “The Accordionist’s Only Fan”

by Vero Montanez

In his accordion case, Camilo carried home two expired MetroCards, various bills amounting to \$26.47, and a dirty, broken lollipop. And his accordion, of course. Every Monday through Saturday, he performed at the Canal St subway station from 12:30pm to 7:00pm. Sometimes, when traffic was slow, he would get on the 1 towards South Ferry, play his tunes on the train, and transfer to make his way back up. He never saw the same person twice. Every day, the crowd was full of fresh faces that never looked his way. When he arrived at his cramped apartment at the end of the day, Camilo took everything out of his case. He counted the bills, threw away the crumpled MetroCards and receipts, but he took the dirty, broken lollipop and gingerly placed it onto his growing pile of tokens from his only fan.

Camilo’s long history with the accordion began during one of his many trips to Colombia to visit family. His grandfather, the original Camilo, could always be found in the backyard with his accordion between his palms. Surrounded by the mango and coconut trees, Camilo and his grandfather sat on wooden stools all day as they practiced the pasos of vallenato music over and over. He watched his grandfather’s hands move of their own volition across the accordion’s buttons. The song traveled through the branches of the fruit trees, into their family’s casita, drawing his grandmother out with her signature bright smile. For the rest of that trip, Camilo spent his time learning the sounds each button made, the pressure needed to squeeze the sound out, and how to





combine them into something beautiful. All he wanted to do was make the kind of music his grandfather did, the kind that made others light up, too.

Back in the States, Camilo quickly learned that the people here had other attitudes toward the accordion. He felt as though it was one of the least popular instruments. Trying to find an instructor who played the accordion on its own was difficult, let alone finding one who was familiar with Colombian vallenato music. While he appreciated the Turkish instructors he encountered, their hand movements weren't so free-spirited in the way his grandfather's was. Camilo even asked his grandfather to move to the US with him and his parents, but his grandfather only smiled, pushed Camilo's hair out of his face, and told him he already found where he was meant to be. As he got older, Camilo joined any vallenato band he encountered, but their crowds didn't want to hear the songs he'd written. They'd only ask for the classics. After playing the same Diomedes Diaz song for the fourth time one night, Camilo left the vallenato group and decided he'd get someone to listen to his music, one way or another.

After two weeks of going to the Canal St station, Camilo stopped going to play for the people. They hardly looked his way. Sometimes they threw change towards him, sometimes they didn't. He sincerely appreciated the tip when it came, but it didn't matter so much to him. He already began to seek another kind of reward.

Camilo met his only fan during a slow traffic time of the day while he was waiting on the platform to catch the southbound 1 train. He looked above his head and saw that the next one would





be arriving in 10 minutes. Camilo sighed, sat on the low, wooden bench and put his accordion case down. He opened it, pulled out his beloved instrument, and began to warm up. That way, he could begin playing as soon as he stepped onto the train. His fingers traveled along the raised, round buttons as he gently compressed and then stretched his accordion. The platform was filled with his long, low notes which soon turned into quick, upbeat notes and melodies. There were two other people on the platform, one with noise-canceling headphones on, the other using their own mental fortitude to shut Camilo's music out.

Whenever Camilo made the jump from merely warming up into fully-fledged songs, his eyes would slowly shut as the music washes over him. He began playing a tender tune, getting so engrossed in the forward movement of the song that he didn't notice the full, oil-slicked subway rat watching him from the tracks. As the song continued, she slowly made her way towards Camilo. Using her hind legs, she launched herself up onto the platform. In her mouth, she held half of a dirty Snickers wrapper. His eyes still closed, Camilo never noticed the rat making her way to his accordion case that lay open on the ground. She dropped the wrapper into his case and stayed still near it while Camilo brought the piece to a close.

When Camilo's song ended, he looked up to check on the status of the train. 4 minutes away. He looked away and noticed the rat before she made her leap back down into the tracks. He looked to his side, wondering if the other two people on the platform didn't mind his song infiltrating their





space, but he realized he shouldn't have been concerned about that at all. Camilo knew he could follow the rat onto the tracks and they wouldn't blink.

Over the next couple of days, Camilo would go down onto the subway platform and play something new each time. He learned what times he was more likely to see her. She never appeared when it was busy, the platform full of occupied commuters who were mentally already at their next location. But during the slow times, the rat would appear. He could recognize her by the chunk missing from her ear. Sometimes, she would have something in her mouth, sometimes she didn't. Sometimes she would drop them into his case, other times she would make her way back, still holding onto what she had. Whenever he played the song from their first encounter, though, she always made sure to drop something into his case.

Camilo stopped riding the 1 train down and back when the subway station was empty. He began to understand the rat's gifts as feedback for his music. If she didn't drop him a hard piece of bread or a chunk of broken concrete after a song, he never played the song again. Camilo would sometimes alter it and try again if he felt attached to it, but if she still withheld her donations, he got rid of the piece in its entirety.

Camilo was particularly excited one Tuesday. A melody came to him in his sleep and on his way to the station, he played it over and over in his head. He made his way back down to the South Ferry platform and sat on his regular bench. He pulled out his accordion, propped his case up, and began to play. The song started with a long, slow note, leading into the gradual rise in pitch and speed.





With his eyes closed, he envisioned the moment he first encountered an accordion and the way his love for the instrument and its sound grew. After the subway rat's visits and gifts became a regular occurrence, he always opened his eyes at the midpoint of his performance, no matter how concentrated he was, just to see if she'd appeared.

She came with nothing in her mouth. She sat a couple of inches away from his accordion case. Camilo was disappointed to see she didn't carry anything. He began to play with even more enthusiasm, hoping the subway rat would be so moved that she would scavenge for something to drop in his case. Camilo's eyes closed as he became more absorbed into his performance. The song rose to its climax, his fingers cramping from the intensity of their movements from a certain group of buttons to the next. When his song finally came to a close, he opened his eyes and looked straight into his accordion case. The subway rat was lying right in the middle of it. Camilo took the strap of his instrument and pulled it around his head until it laid in a curve against his chest. He rested the accordion against his thighs, wrapped his arms around it, and listened to the sound of the incoming train.





## “3 Girls Having Lemonade”

by Sophie Lee

What are the odds that all three craved the same drink at once? I thought hard about it. It was hot that afternoon but they found seats in a crowded subway car. They sat in a line and crossed their legs the same way: the two on the right angled inward and the one on the left with her other leg on top. For reasons I couldn't decipher, they each had the same drink with the same wet napkin plastered to a clear cup. The same right hand round the curve of the plastic, a low grip with fingertips barely touching. It was peak heat for the day but they had beautiful hair. Something effortless about them—their lemonades half-finished all around. The ice melted down to droplets, which bounced on their legs like passengers. I watched them curiously and forgot to look at my book. Yes, I tried to judge them. Maybe the drinks were complimentary, or maybe they simply didn't care what they drank. Maybe they met years ago as children living in the same cul-de-sac and had been feeling nostalgic. Did they need it? Perhaps they did. I thought I knew all about them, but so much was still uncertain. Suddenly felt guilt. Suddenly wanted to have a lemonade too. I wanted to know why they finished only half and held the rest in their beautiful palms. I wanted to know what offended them, why they talked in low voices with a sympathy that verged on concern. I wanted to taste that lemonade so bad. I was thinking then to give them a smile—a glance that would thereafter call a truce—but I looked down and then up and the train stopped and they left.





## “Going South” by Sophie Lee

*After Bernadette Mayer*

Nothing is new.  
Stubborn in its promise of tragedy,  
a siren blares and then dies, little by little  
in every apartment. Winter's edge  
means a lack of iron  
as blood moves through our bodies,  
with possession. You catch  
my hand on busy streets  
and prod at my back when we walk.  
You make me notice the landscape:  
there's a woman on the street eating a pear  
so slowly, and now I'm thinking about the small capacity  
of my lungs, vitamins with dinner,  
forgetting to drink water, and the curve  
in your back, again. The way home is cold  
and blue so we take shelter in idioms  
and argue over phrasing, though  
I am sure I am right. We both have our strengths,  
mine with words and yours, direction,  
your great gut for suffering.  
This time next year we might be swimming  
so buckle down, baby;  
tune your possessions north and become ruthless  
for me. Pull the city out of the ocean  
if that's what it takes.





## “midwest cancer town, c. 3am”

by Destiny Glover

laugh on checkered linoleum floors thick  
with grease sweat. careful not to slip  
as we fall into red booth. still laugh  
in that tight space between table. don't  
mention that you fit and i don't. instead  
you say: there was a movie about a girl  
and a monster and they also laughed  
and shared a booth. for a minute  
we looked like them. i polish the mirror,  
hold it up to you again. correction, you say  
we look like them, but better.  
then you laugh with all your little bones  
that aren't breaking or killing  
or dying and the food is here, wet  
under rain that we brought out of night  
now under white light, you are swimming in it  
wrapped in peach fuzz halo: i eat  
in silence with an angel. this is worse  
than my own death, to watch limp fries slide  
down your throat, crumb stuck in corner.  
tongue on salt flat, cheek  
hollowed out. you have vomited  
twice tonight and are going for a third.  
this time it happens as i reach for a fry  
that hides from you under porcelain plate.  
my hand is covered in most of you—  
everything that your body rejected  
in fear of becoming now soaks  
into my skin and fingernails.  
stomach acid stains sweaty booth. i battle  
a waitress' dirty look. your body is defiant  
and so is mine so i do what i can & laugh  
& you laugh & i laugh & you laugh & laugh  
& laugh





## “I Am They & They Are Me” by Monica Victoria

The days are getting longer, the sun stronger, and the darkness of night loses its grip. These are the days she looks forward to, like a snake plant yearning for the sun’s rays, she can feel her body release tension it held in during the colder seasons. She takes a deep breath in, counting 1,2,3,4, she holds her breath, counts 1,2,3,4,5,6,7, then exhales, counting 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8, and repeats a few more times.

In the present moment she feels strong enough to look back on her life fully understanding that now is now and then was a long time ago. Lately these moments occur in the silence of her car, the only time she gets to be alone, and can find peace. Life had been cruel and unkind for so long, but not anymore. She had been fighting to come to life after so many years of living in the dark.

She came out in her late twenties. She wasn’t in the closet, her deepest darkest secrets were, it was a different kind of “coming out”. Been severely beaten down by life experiences up until then, as a new mother, she was feeling hopeful. Perhaps the oxytocin produced and coursing through her body influenced this emotional response. But she felt this burning desire to heal the broken parts within her soul. She didn’t want to be a defective mother. So in love with the tiny human in her care, she was determined to be the parent she never had.

She was in the “self-care” section at Barnes&Nobles perusing the books. Her bundle of joy asleep in the stroller. She saw a book that caught her eye. Part of the title read, “The True Story of one





Woman's Triumph over Sexual Abuse<sup>[1]</sup>." How could anyone triumph over that?, she thought to herself. She had to read it. And it would be Shelton's book that set her free, like the words "it was not your fault" all those years ago. The last time she told another human the horrific truth. The last time she felt safe enough to utter the painful words. But that was a long time ago when she was a little girl. A broken version of herself.

A little girl who felt all alone. Felt unworthy. Unloved. Unwanted. In her pain. Confused. Lost. I became the downward spiral.

She never felt secure again after that. I became angry. Furious. At people. Adults. Men. Schools. Systems. Institutions. They didn't protect her. Failed me. Abandoned her. Hurt me.

She pushed. Everyone. Away. Didn't trust. Anyone. Except the drugs. The alcohol. They were reliable. They always came through.

Until the day she found out about the life inside her and couldn't rely on them anymore. That's when the wave of emotions she had suppressed for so long came crashing into her. Knocking her down onto her knees. She fought back, it was futile, they overpowered her. Her head bowed, she prayed for relief.

Her prayers were answered in Angela's story and others like hers. Their harrowing experiences mirroring many of her own. She was not alone. The immense shame and guilt she felt about what she experienced contrasted the courageous transparency of the words reflected in the pages of all the other





Angela Shelton's and their stories. That's what she wanted. To be empowered. She needed to tell her story. To finally be heard. Seen. The Universe knew. It needed to come out. No more hiding, no more shame.

~

Her mother, a woman with her own deeply buried story of survival, advised her long ago, "Olvídalo." (Forget it) Like it was simple, easy. 1,2,3. She was faultless, never having processed her own childhood trauma. Thus they were caught in the well-oiled spinning machine of the never-ending cycles that began long ago, called intergenerational trauma.

She couldn't forget it. Not without the aid of accouterments that came in a pill, powder, or liquid form. That's when she would succeed. But she became someone else. A stranger to herself. She didn't care anymore. Was this survival mode? Could one call impulsivity living? Tried to end it. Failed. Got a one way ride into the special place for exclusive folks. It didn't help. A dead end to a real life in the real world, leading to other rooms. Opportunities to network. Expand her tribe of the broken, damaged, and hurting. Creating precarious situations, adding more memorable anguish. But then the one way to ticket to paradise.

A place of healing. Of sunlight and warmth. Palm trees. Pale blue waters. Folks with brown skin and beautiful smiles. The antithesis of New York. Of her inner darkness. She was a dying plant in a dark and dusty corner relocated to a sunny spot on a window sill. She felt something stir inside her. A desire for life. An awakening.





Her inner child. She was curled up on the floor of her bedroom in her closet. She was hiding. Had cried herself to sleep. It was dark and cold. There was an ominous presence in her home. She didn't want to be found. She was alone. She was always alone. A little girl of eight-years-old. Wanting to tell her parents. But was scared. Confused. It seems she always felt this way. But something was different.

There was a small sliver of light. It was resting on her hand. It felt warm and inviting. Where was it coming from?, she wondered. Wanting more of this light, she stretched her arm into the warm and inviting brightness.

~

As soon as my toes feel the warmth of the rough sand fill the spaces between them, I know I am where I belong. It's where I like to go when life becomes too much. Sand, sun, waves. They make everything okay. Bearable. The sound of the crashing waves soothing me into a calmness I can't find on the mainland. The trade winds off the ocean fills my lungs. They remind me to breathe. That I am alive. I imagine the salt in the air cleansing me from the inside out and the heat from the sun taking care of the rest. I slowly step into the cool salty ocean water, allowing my body to adjust to the temperature.

I learned how to swim at a really young age. My parents sent me and my brother to camp one summer. Before the dreaded move and all the ugliness awaiting us. I guess it was the one time they





could afford it, but it's one of the earliest memories I'm really fond of. Probably because I was pure and innocent, untainted, untouched. She's the inner child I don't have to reparent.

Happily swimming in the pool, imagining she was a beautiful mermaid like her doll with the pretty blue/green sparkly tail, whose hair changed color when it got wet. Blissfully lost in her fantasy world, she dove underneath the water, kicking with both legs as one, as if she had a mermaid's tail. Completely oblivious of dangerous people or the hurt they can cause.

"I close my eyes and go back in time / I can see you smiling, you're so alive / We were so young, we had no fear / We were so young, we had no idea / That life was just happening / Here's to your bright eyes / Shining like fireflies / These are my souvenirs / The memory of a lifetime<sup>[2]</sup>."

This is the memory I hold onto as the tide pulls me in. The sea is my priest. Baptizing me with new life every time my head dips below the surface. When I see a wave getting close I dive underneath the waters. Surfers use a similar technique called the "duck dive" to sink their surf boards underwater, they dive under waves so they don't get knocked off.

Channeling the happy and innocent little girl I once was, placing my legs together, I imagine I am a mermaid once more. I duck dive under my past, not into it. I'm ready now. I embrace, forgive, and accept myself for who I am.





“I’ve made my mistakes / I’ve seen my heart cave in / I’ve got my scars / I’ve been to hell and back again / Born for the blue skies / We’ll survive the rain / Born for the sunrise / We’ll survive the pain<sup>[3]</sup>.”

Yeah, I am a sexual abuse survivor. But that’s not all I am. It’s not what defines us. We want to thrive, not just survive. We’re not giving up. We’re not waiting until we die to come alive.

“We’re singing / Hey, you can’t count us out / We’ve been running up against the crowd / Yeah, we are the dark horses / We’re singing / Wait! It’s not over now / We’ve been down, but we’ve never been out / Yeah, we are the dark horses<sup>[4]</sup>.”

Yeah, we’re survivors, but we’re more than that. I reject that narrative and I’m writing a new one. The once smoothly running instrument of generational destruction is rusty and its motor is dying. It’s fresh supply of souls is running dry. And my child is growing up without knowing the horrific pain of a childhood interrupted or innocence ripped from their soul. For all the dark horses out there, I hope you find your voice, as I found mine. Join me in singing this chorus.

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[1] Shelton, Angela. “Finding Angela Shelton: The True Story of One Women’s Triumph over Sexual Abuse.” Meredith Books. 2008

[2] See Switchfoot lyrics “Souvenirs”

[3] See Switchfoot lyrics “Dark Horses”

[4] See Switchfoot lyrics “Dark Horses”





## “The Exhibitionist” by Seowon (Angela) Lee

She contemplated the oranges seriously and picked the four ugliest. They sat cut and bruised, but they were the sweetest. Her mother had taught her so, while handing a sweaty handful of coins to the man at the fruit stand. Heady citrus and metallic tins — the scents were always in her mind linked with summer.

However, the grocery store on the corner of 59th and Broadway was freezing and Vivian was wearing nothing but a trench coat and a pair of red heels. She was what some people called an exhibitionist and others called a pervert, but even flashers needed groceries. In hindsight, she would’ve worn some socks or maybe even a bra before shopping for oranges. Her therapist would say this was self-harm. Vivian disagreed but saw her point. Unlike male flashers, her exhibitionism wasn’t for sexual gratification. And if flashing people wasn’t a way to get horny, the only logical alternative was that you hated yourself.

Vivian only flashed women who looked like they might need it. They would start a conversation in an empty subway car, a park bench, or the waiting room of the gynecologist; and then, she would ask.

“Would you like to see something?”

Some would shake their head slightly no, but most gave a tentative nod and then whoosh. The quiet opening and closing of her coat was like the flutter of butterfly wings, lasting not more than a few





seconds. The movement created the smallest breeze that ruffled the hair of the woman she stood in front of like an exhalation.

Vivian placed four oranges in a slippery plastic bag. Then, she turned to head toward the register and body-checked a kid who was standing too close to her elbows. The kid fell hard. Vivian leaned down to help her up.

“Are you okay?” Vivian asked.

The girl refused her hand and got up on her own.

“Can I borrow your phone?” She asked.

Vivian looked around. There was no one else in the produce section.

Vivian unlocked the phone and handed it to her. The kid dialed a number, slowly, with her index finger, and held the phone up to her ear. Vivian heard it ring and then go to voicemail.

“Hi Mommy, it's Lilly... I'm by the apples,” Lilly glanced at Vivian. “I borrowed a nice lady's phone...Mhm...I'll wait right here...Bye.”

Vivian understood this one sided conversation.

“My mom's coming soon,” Lilly said, handing back the phone. “Have a nice day.”

Vivian glanced past the pineapples, the kale, and the broccoli but there was no one around. How soon was soon? Three minutes? Ten minutes? An hour? The produce section was the Siberia of grocery stores. Not to say Siberia wasn't a nice home to some, but there were more forgiving places to wait. The stubborn child, Lilly, sat down on an upside down apple crate and made herself comfortable.





The warmth of a summer night beckoned just a few hundred meters away past the self-checkout counters, but Vivian couldn't leave the child by herself. She'd called her 'nice'.

"How old are you, Lilly?"

"I'm eight and a half."

Vivian sighed and sat down on a prickly apple crate. "I'll wait with you."

"What's your name?" Lilly asked.

"I'm Vivian."

"Bibi-ahn," the child said in the same way Vivian's parents said her name. Never *Vivian*, but Bibi-ahn. She wondered why they chose a name for her that was impossible for they themselves to pronounce. She hated the sound of her name in their mouths — soft, and too similar to "baby"-ahn. But maybe she just hated how it made *them* sound infantile.

"Why do you have a naked lady as your lock screen, Bibi-Ahn?"

Vivian glanced down at Boticelli's Venus. She remembered debating the fine line between art and pornography in her university classes, sitting in front of a powerpoint on nude portraits, only of women. *Is this art or is this porn?* The question followed each painting of a female body without a stitch of clothing. Instead she wanted to ask, isn't it twisted that this question needs to be asked in the first place? No one seemed to stare at Michaelangelo's David and wonder if he was pornographic.

"Why not?" Vivian replied.

"She looks cold," Lilly said with a shiver.

"Earlier, did you mistake me for your mother?"





“No.” Lilly kicked her heels into the crate sending her light-up Sketchers flashing. “I was looking for sugar peas.”

Vivian stood up. “Let’s go find some.” If they did something, maybe they would feel less cold.

They searched from crate to crate and found an abandoned shopping cart by the peaches. It sat off to the side with nothing in it meaning it was fair game. If there was even a small bottle of ketchup or one peach inside it, it meant someone was coming back for it. Lilly kicked off on the metal shopping cart with an ease that told Vivian she’d done it many times before. The big cart felt extravagant for just four oranges and one child, but at least it was no longer empty.

“Peaches look like butts,” Lilly said.

“They do,” Vivian found herself agreeing.

On Tumblr, a girl sent a picture of her knees with a bra over them to a boy who asked for nudes. The boy had jacked-off to the photo. To her knees. Vivian sometimes glanced down at her own chest and chanted, *they’re just knees, they’re just knees*. But she supposed if not breasts, there would be something else they would take and use. As kids they did something similar. On the playground, boys would fold their arms and take a photo of the crevice and run around chasing girls saying it was a photo of their butt. She considered asking Lilly but it was hard to explain. Do boys still make butts out of elbows? Or was it all different now?

“Our teachers don’t let us say ‘butts’ in class,” Lilly said.

“What do they say instead?”





“Bottoms.”

“That’s silly and oppressive.”

“We also can’t say ‘fart’.” Then Lilly giggled.

They jogged and slid to the cucumbers, and then to the peppers, but there were no sugar peas to be found and the temperature around them kept dropping. The thermometers showed that it was 40 degrees in the produce aisle, but the air conditioning kept blasting harder and harder.

Eight and a half was right before things went sour. Vivian blamed boobs for her troubles. It was the reason she couldn’t run at a reasonable pace in PE; why she had to safety pin every blouse; why men began staring at her when she was barely nine. The church aunties told her to wear a training bra after a game of jump rope when she was ten. If only she could hack them off or detach them, like water balloons, to hang up for the day and to put back on at night in the privacy of her room. She would miss their silent weight, but a boob job was tempting to consider with every wayward comment. Lilly’s body was smooth without markers; it was still harmless. Vivian couldn’t remember what it was like to be eight and a half.

An employee in a store vest came over and apologized. The central preservation system had gone off the rails. Little ice crystals began to form on the produce, and the ground was becoming slippery. For the first time, Vivian really regretted not wearing more clothes.

“What’s your best friend’s name?” Lilly asked through chattering teeth.





“Wallace.” Vivian replied quickly, without thinking.

Lilly laughed as if it was the funniest thing she’d ever heard.

“You can’t be friends with a boy.”

Vivian met Wallace on the subway. The moment they laid eyes on each other they knew they were similar. His getup was much more elaborate. Perhaps because he had more to lose. He always wore a fedora that was pushed down hard to cover most of his face. And his uniform of choice made it seem as though he was wearing pants until the very last moment when he revealed that he wasn’t.

“It’s harder for men these days.” He groaned into his drink. “A woman can get away with wearing a coat and nothing more. Show a little leg. It’s kosher. No one wants to see my hairy legs. It’s so obvious what I’m trying to do.”

They began to get drinks weekly to discuss their exploits, as though they were work friends, comparing numbers and reactions with their bare asses on the rough barstool, their arms pressed on the cold counter.

He wasn’t the typical flasher either like other Burberry Men, the perverted boogie monsters of her childhood. Every all girls school from elementary to high school to college had their own Burberry Man who would either jack off in his car parked along a school route, or jump out from behind a bush to expose himself to the shrieks of unsuspecting girls.

During the day, the girls discussed Burberry Men while laughing, comparing their dicks to the eraser tops of pencils. But in their beds at night, these men would come to haunt their dreams. An unsettling cloud of anxiety that breathed heavily in the dark: your eyes are not safe, your mind is not





safe, and you are not safe. And yet, usually no one held these men responsible. When the police bothered to catch them, they were usually let go with just a slap on the wrist. Even though everyone knew, if a man is undressed, there's an implied threat of rape. If a woman is undressed, it's an open invitation. Wallace only flashed men.

"I don't know why I do it." He admitted after one too many Shirley Temples. He was a man of many talents, one of them being he could knot a maraschino cherry stem with his tongue. "My guy," he gestured, "isn't even that big. I think I'm just fucking lonely, and I worked hard for this bod, you know?"

Vivian nodded, even though she didn't know. In fact, she sometimes felt repulsed by the image of her body, and ran into the shower with her eyes closed. But she supposed, both their impulses stemmed from love.

"Lilly, why did you pretend your mom picked up?" Vivian asked between the asparagus and onions.

Lilly missed a step and rammed the shopping car into a crate with a loud bang. A couple shoppers, blue-lipped but valiantly perusing some dragonfruit, looked up at the noise.

"You knew."

"Do you want to call your dad instead?"

Lilly shook her head. "I don't know his number."





A little rainstorm sound played as it was time for the produce to be watered. The sprinklers turned on but the water froze to sleet before it hit the fruits and veggies.

One psychiatric treatment for male flashers was lining up a bunch of female volunteers and letting the flasher flash them all as they stared with blank expressions, unimpressed and the “poor bloke” never wanted to do it again. She wondered who would sign up for such a trial, how much they would be paid for staring, stone-faced. What the men craved was a negative reaction for their transgression. Vivian craved the opposite.

The employee came over again to apologize for the inconvenience. This time he wore a parka and passed out cardboard boxes which Vivian and Lilly wrapped around their shoulders. At this point, the girls found it was colder to move so they huddled together for warmth back on the crates.

“It’s so cold here.” Lilly said quietly. “What if we have to wait here forever?”

Lilly’s limbs had found the warmest parts of Vivian’s body, and Vivian had let them wrap around her. She wished sometimes that she could still fit perfectly into her mother’s torso like this: face in her neck, both legs over her waist, the world only an arms’ circumference. They saw their breath puff in unison.

“We could move to the cereal section. It looks warmer.”

Lilly laughed. But then, it sounded like crying.

“My mom said people who don’t wear clothes are perverts.” Lilly said between snuffles.

Vivian felt her toes and fingers go numb as blood rushed to her heart. She remembered learning that this was called a fight or flight response. What if she could do neither? What then?





“Do you even know what that means?”

“It means someone dangerous.”

“I want to be a little dangerous,” Vivian admitted. “But not to you.”

Lilly thought about this, then nodded slowly. “I don’t really like clothes either.”

The other customers stared at them curiously. They had been sitting there a while. Vivian’s ankles were about to fall off but Lilly, on her lap, was like a fireplace.

As a child, Vivian’s grandmother would take her to the communal bathhouse. Women undressing next to women undressing next to women in a hazy pearlescent steam. She’d stopped going after she heard a joke on Disney channel about Jerrie who was scared of saltine crackers because he had seen his grandmother naked while eating one. Vivian had asked her parents about this joke for days after she’d heard the punchline. She had seen her grandmother naked more times than she could count. She had unbraced against the cathedral of her body; their skin still warm from the bath. Maybe that was what she was trying to do in the wing beat of her perverse actions. She tried to return to that place. She tried to say, here was a kingdom of their own; welcome all who are weary.

Another employee came over and started unloading several boxes of fruit. He hummed in his parka as he carefully piled apples into a pyramid formation that would hold even if you took an apple out. Vivian wanted to slap the tower down and run for the exit. Or at least steal his parka. But before drastic





action could be taken, Vivian's phone began to ring. It was a number she didn't recognize. Lilly glared at the number through tear soaked eyes.

"Don't pick it up."

Vivian let it ring all the way through. And then, called the number back.

"Lilly?" The voice on the other end immediately answered. "I got your voicemail."

Vivian passed the phone to Lilly.

"I'm on my way. Stay right where you are. Don't talk to any strangers—" The phone instructed.

Too late, Vivian thought.

"Okay, Mommy," Lilly said and hung up the phone.

They both stared at the screen at the call that had lasted fifteen seconds. Vivian heard music playing in the store: the music that you didn't notice then couldn't stop noticing once you did. It was a trendy pop song whose name she didn't know but whose chorus she could sing in her sleep.

Lilly pushed herself out of Vivian's lap and smoothed out her clothes. Vivian wrapped her arms around herself and stared longingly at the carbohydrate safety of the baking aisle, or even the plastic haven of the sauce aisle. Hugging a child was probably more perverse than flashing an adult woman. How would Lilly remember this day? Would it haunt her?

An employee came around and passed out complementary hot chocolate in sample cups. He proclaimed that the store was applying a fifty percent discount to all items to compensate for potential frostbites suffered in the shopping process. The customers cheered.





Vivian turned to Lilly to say goodbye. It was time for her to leave. Maybe watch her from afar to make sure she met her mom, and make the silent walk back home. But Lilly grabbed Vivian's hand and pulled her out of the produce section. Vivian tried not to fall as her red heels echoed behind Lilly's light-up sketchers on the icy floor. They made it to the pasta aisle; it was instantly warmer by the boxed mac and cheese.

A study on implanted memory found that all subjects can have the memory of being lost in a shopping mall. However, the study had one major flaw. Being lost in a shopping mall was too common of an occurrence: making it impossible to distinguish between an implanted memory and a recovered trauma.

After losing her mother while shopping for swimming suits, Vivian spent weeks mapping the way home from every place she went to. She placed the bodega with its bright yellow sign in the front pocket of her overalls, and the large sycamore tree by the train tracks in her back pocket. She knew it would take her longer to walk the freeway than when she rode through it in a car, but she believed that if she walked long enough she would make it home no matter where she was. But that was it. She never imagined beyond that; if the face that opened the door would be smiling or crying, or if it would even be familiar.

It was a problem now that Vivian never wore any overalls, but instead she had Google Maps and lived in a city with excellent public transportation. All mothers lost their children, just to different





things. Some, like Lilly's mother, didn't realize they were gone for a while. Vivian's mother would weep at her indecency. She considered telling this to Lilly but decided against it.

Instead, she reached into the plastic bag and took out an orange. Her nails turned yellow as she peeled off the rind.

"Should we call your mom and let her know we moved?" Vivian asked.

"Don't you have to pay for that?" Lilly replied.

Neither of them answered. They shared half a piece each.





## “Lunacy” by Seowon (Angela) Lee

Here she speaks broken and bracken:  
sit in the chicken with me,  
hang these tomatoes over the roof,  
welcome to the seas of Ohio, or is it Iowa?  
Her tongue will tango with your pictionary.

Phone symphonies and vocal banks are terrified  
of her voice through the electric distance:  
You pear! You snare! You dare!  
Go and take your dirt with you!

She is uncowed and unzbraed.  
Even though it's not a question of volume but space  
dance more, chance more, once more louder.  
She is speaking; it's this land that fails her.

Here she says we should sue Google for translating my poetry badly  
but sometimes she says:  
read me this, my isle,  
take the phone, my wild,  
I skinned some apples for you, my child.  
Her tongue is tired of charades.

I walk with her in leavening through the woulds,  
to insect her would be lunacy.





## “Paper Thin Hearts” by Veronique Manfredini

She never had a heartbeat. She had a heart, it just never moved. She was born without a rhythm. The doctors didn’t know why it had no movement, but her blood still flowed in her veins and her body still worked the same way as everyone else’s around her.

When she was born, screaming unnaturally loud as if the lack of a heartbeat made every emotion that much more painful, her mother held her close to her chest.

*Ba-dum ba-dum.*

The rhythm soothed the newborn leading her to fall fast asleep. She was named Asgre—Welsh for “heart.”

As a child, she discovered that her condition was evil. She didn’t think it was a big deal at first, her whole family knew, even her brother’s friends knew, so when she met new people she’d just say it. She was brutally honest, just like any other child. But when other kids would find out that she didn’t have a heartbeat they would tease her mercilessly and refuse to be her friend. They came up with reasons why she was beat-less. She was the devil, she was cursed, nobody loved her when she was in her mom’s belly. It made her upset.

“Why don’t I have a heartbeat?” She asked her mother.





“I don’t know darling.” The mother held her tenderly and Asgre listened to her heart beat steadily in her chest.

*Ba-dum ba-dum.*

“I got you something,” Her mother pulled a wrapped box out of her bag and handed it to her.

“What is it?”

“Open it.”

She ripped the paper to shreds to discover a lacquered wooden box which held a key and a single paper-thin heart with a name on it. She looked up at her mother with questioning eyes.

“To hold your heartbeats.”

“My heartbeats?”

“Every person, animal, or thing that you love, in normal cases, would make your heart flutter or skip a beat. Since you can’t do that, you can cut a heart out for each one of them and put it in this, so you never forget the people you’ve loved. This will hold your very own heartbeats even if they don’t move.”

Asgre pulled it close to her chest and hugged her mother. They cut hearts out of different materials, all paper-thin, based on Asgre’s feel for the person or thing they were making it for. Some





were thin wood, some were paper, thin cardstock, transfer-paper. Some had sparkles, ruffles, writing all around, only in the middle.

“One day you’ll find someone you’ll want to give all your heartbeats to—”

“Just like you and daddy?”

“Yes, and then you’ll get to make a big big one for them, and show them what your box holds, and it will hold all the memories you made with the people you loved.”

She kept the box under her bed at first, but as she became older and the more hearts she added to her collection, the more work it was to pull it out and push it back in, so she moved it into the attic. Dusty and poorly insulated, it was the last place people would look for her heartbeats. She put it in a shoebox and would return to it periodically to update its contents. She never thought of locking the box, she never thought anyone would try to touch her hearts.

The morning she found her teenage brother sifting through her hearts, was the morning she locked the box and hid the key in her dresser between her socks. She carried the little golden key with her everywhere and the next Christmas her mother gifted her a simple golden chain where she hung it from.

In middle grade, she slowly was able to make friends, and she began wanting to share her box with others. Wanting to show them its contents, trusting them not to hurt them, not to hurt her. She





cautiously let her best friend see the box first, then she slowly opened it to her and walked her through the delicate paper-thin hearts.

With time Asgre let her sort through the heartbeats more freely, allowing her to touch them, sort through them, ask questions about each person, animal, or object and why they had a heart dedicated to them. She would answer as honestly as she could. Patiently sharing her hearts with her. But she became more rough, insisting to see the box every time she'd come over, wrinkling the hearts by accident, as she put them back into the box.

Every wrinkled and torn heart cut into Asgre.

Slowly she began avoiding inviting her friend over, trying to keep her away from her box, not knowing how to say no. But her friend wouldn't let it go, barging into her house, demanding to know where it was. Fights ensued. Many fights. And Asgre drifted away from her in an attempt to protect herself.

Her other friends criticized her for not wanting to still be friends with someone who she felt had torn her to shreds. They said that she really hadn't done anything wrong, they were just paper hearts, she could make new ones. But Asgre couldn't fathom remaining friends with someone who tore each and every one of the parts that made her who she was.

She became wary of others when they showed an interest.





In her early 20's, Asgre's mother got sick, a sickness that nobody could name and nobody could fix. Her time dripped away, like the tears Asgre cried every night for her, and she deteriorated quickly.

In her early twenties, out on an errand run one day, she met a man who struck her fancy. He approached her with an easy smile. They'd known each other in high school but had never interacted much. He was polite, funny, and charming. He liked a lot of the same things she did.

He was patient and tore down each and every one of the walls she'd put up to protect herself while letting her open up at her own pace. She was grateful for that. She began to feel like she could love him and decided to tell him about her box.

She showed it to him one night, after he'd taken her out on a romantic date. They sat on her front porch and she ran inside and brought it out. Hands shaking, she told him how much the box meant to her and promised that she'd show him what it contained one day soon. He reached out to take it with a gleam in his eye, but she wouldn't let him hold it, she wanted to make sure he was serious first.

He did everything right. He went out of his way to walk her home at night even if he wasn't in the area, to bring her food at work when she forgot her lunch, and to take her out on dates that would make her feel special. She did feel special.





One day, she went to add a heart to the box. A heart that she'd made special for him. A heart that had taken months of careful deliberation and energy to put together. But the box wasn't in its hiding place anymore.

She searched high and low. She asked her family, she asked her friends, but nobody had seen it. Then she went over to his house and asked him. He denied, and argued, and lied, but she didn't believe him. He finally admitted to stealing it, but refused to give it back to her. He demanded that she give him the key so he could see what was inside, to make sure that his name was in there.

They fought for hours, for days, for weeks. He became angry, resentful, and judgemental. She didn't want to be with him anymore but she needed her box back. One night, fed up, tired of dealing with his sudden angry outbursts, she built up the courage to go to his home and confront him to get the box back once and for all.

She sat in her car for thirty minutes trying to build up the nerve. Then she counted down from five, got out and barged in with the spare key he'd given her. She demanded to know where her box was and, caught by surprise, he told her. She rushed to get it before he realized what he'd done but he was already following her, yelling. They argued. She told him how horrible he'd been to her and how she never wanted to see him again. He reached out for her but she ran out of the apartment.

Once home, Asgre climbed into bed with her dying mother, clutching the box to her chest, crying. Her mother ran her hand through her hair to help soothe her, speaking gentle words in her ear until she passed. Asgre didn't move, lying against her mother's now cold body.





She pulled the box to her chest, closer and closer, as hiccups tore through her. The more she brought it to herself the more she felt and the more she cried. She continued crying until she'd pulled the box so close to herself that it buried itself deep into her chest so that it couldn't be pried back out again. It continued to sink into her until it was gone and all she was left with was a heartbeat.

*Ba-dum ba-dum.*





## “Degas’ Dancers (1878)”

by Veronique Manfredini

Ivory, alabaster, white,  
On the stage the lights shine bright.  
Dark wood below the feet,  
fitted slippers and smiles sweet,  
Steps taken on the floor,  
One, two, three, four.

Battement, pas de bourrée, arabesque,  
The body bends so beautifully, yet so grotesque.  
One behind the other they flow,  
Presenting to all a hand, a flower, a bow.  
Arms high, smiles bright, legs straight,  
Five, six, seven, and eight.

Tulle, satin, brocade,  
It’s a flouncing brigade.  
A nutcracker, a swan, or a lake,  
Each step, hop, or jump is a dull ache.  
Foreground, background, they keep advancing  
Here are his dancers, entrancing.





## “palindrome” by Chloë Gottlieb

after Lisel Mueller

There’s nothing yet.  
Thousands of pale blue graduation caps land perfectly on our heads,  
descending from the sky with immaculate precision.  
We cross the tassels from left to right.  
I unsend a text message asking for more time.

My dress floats up my body from a pool of cloth on the floor,  
zips from the bottom up.  
I think of the last year in the present tense.  
The lines of a T.S. Elliot poem reverse into my mouth, and I swallow them whole.  
We waltz around a parlor. Dancing looks the same in reverse,  
until we let go. We detach, fall through gravity to a drink at the bar.  
The lights on the trees turn on.

I make a list of things to forget.  
We picnic in Central Park. Corks fly into bottles of sparkling wine, slices in a cake evaporate.  
Postage for voting ballots unstick from the envelope.  
They land on our tongues.

In San Francisco, I miss everyone I haven’t yet met.

Everything freezes. Everything looks the way it does  
from the underside of a glass of water, half-knowable.  
Life is more of a love story than a ghost town.  
A security guard gifts me a fake I.D.  
Laughing erases wrinkles.  
I wake up from a drunken slumber on a subway car and into a party.  
I hand out drinks. I am sobering up more and more.  
Moving north, far away  
from wet clothes in Rockaway.

I learn to stop looking for him in the people I meet here.  
On the bus from Boston to New York, my birthday undoes,





and I turn one year younger.  
I walk across the Brooklyn Bridge, east to west.  
I take off my orientation shirt.  
I unwrap my arms around my mother. I have never said goodbye before.  
We walk backwards onto an airplane at JFK together.  
We untape boxes. We take all my earthly belongings out of those boxes,  
fold them neatly back in my drawers.  
I have always lived next to the sound of someone breathing.

A physics professor talks of the asymmetrical experience of time,  
how a lifetime can move both forward and backward,  
he tells me this in a classroom  
four years from right now.  
I consider moving to New York.  
The world  
has not even started.

Here there is paper.  
Write it all down for me, tell me  
what it will feel like.





## “Sperm Donor” by Krystle Rose DiCristofalo

So you don’t know who your daddy is. So the cryobank closed down. So what?

The string of numbers stares back at you from the computer screen, flaccid. *No ID found.* The air let out of a balloon.

•

You are eight years old and you have a dog. It’s stuffed, not like a taxidermy but a children’s toy. When you go outside, you bring this dog with you, your fist clutched too tightly around its middle. It used to have long fur, prehensile synthetic fibers that wound their way into your cereal and your mouth, before you cut it all off playing hairdresser. Your mothers told you it wouldn’t grow back. Did you listen?

In your other hand you’re holding a shallow dish leaking water. It slops onto the grass of your front lawn and wets the buttercups there. A few more inches and they’ll drown.

Onto the dampening grass you set the bowl; a few inches to the left you set the dog. You forgot a ball. You fist a handful of onion grass and tear it from the ground, trailing bits of earth, and throw that instead. The dog can’t run, so you bounce it over to the grass and use its paws to pick it up.





Pretending to be the dog, you throw the grass again for yourself to chase this time (this is how playing catch works, right?), dropping the dog behind you. Now, you're pretending to be yourself.

You repeat.

•

By now you're already enrolled in dance. People get weird about it. You have two moms and lesbians aren't feminine so why would they put a kid in something girly like dance? But you like it. Your sister hates it, but you're not your sister. You like dancing slow and controlled. You like the tutus.

Most of all, you like being in *The Nutcracker*.

You're Lead Angel this year, which means maybe your moms'll shell out for an extra feature in the playbill. All the girls who've danced at the studio before you started get big, shiny, two-page spreads, with a black-and-white picture of them dressed as Clara or one of the gingerbread, with big poofy skirts that they hold out to either side. Underneath, their parents fork over triple digits to say *Good luck in the show, Ariana! We're so proud of you! Love, Mom, Dad, Jason, and Riley*, or *Congratulations to our ballerina princess, McKaylee, from Mom, Dad, and the new puppy!* It's always *Love, Mom and Dad*. Mom first, dad second. Always both of them, always in English. There are no single parents or foreigners at your ballet studio.





In the wings during dress rehearsal, one of the other Little Angels asks you, “What’s your dad do for a living?” Her name is Kendall. She’s one of the ones who only come on the weekends, bussed in from another studio. There’s only a few of you who attend your studio regularly, with your tall, squashy teacher who smells of marshmallow perfume. You’ve never felt like part of a core group, though.

“I don’t have a dad. Don’t say sorry,” you add before Kendall’s eyes get big. “He’s not dead or whatever. I just never had one.”

“How’s that work?” asks another Angel. Elliana.

“I have two moms,” you say, and pick at a thread that’s coming loose from the hem of your long white dress. Under your arm is tucked a big plastic cherry. You’re supposed to present it to the Sugar Plum Fairy after she does her solo.

“How’s *that* work?” Kamri.

You shift from foot to foot and crane your neck to check if you can see beyond the curtain. You’ve had *if you can see the audience, they can see you* drilled into your head your whole life, but the curtain’s up even though it’s intermission, and the only people in the audience are your teacher, Ms. Claudee, and Ms. Jones, her grown-up daughter who always gets the best roles. The opening strains of your music should be starting to waft backstage, but you can see Ms. Claudee’s assistant, Mr. Wang,





dressed in black and bent over the stereo, since the people at your studio have the kind of money to take out spreads in the playbills but not to hire a live orchestra. You scratch the back of one calf with your other, ballet-slipped foot and launch into your spiel: Mommy was too old to have her own babies anymore, but she and Μητέρα really, really wanted your sister and you, so Mommy's friend from work donated her own eggs to Mommy, and then they got a sperm donor. The doctors combined you in a Petri dish and then funneled you into Mommy's womb using *in vitro* insemination. You use the right vocabulary. You sound very mature.

"Do you call them Mom One and Mom Two?" asks Kendall. The other girls titter.

"No. We call them Mommy and Μητέρα."

"Mommy and *what*?"

"Μητέρα. Me-terr-ah. Me as in me, terr as in terror, ah as in ahh."

When Mr. Wang finally gets the music working and the stage fills with dry ice and Ms. Jones, who's playing the Sugar Plum Fairy, beckons you out on stage single file, it's a disaster. You stop too far away from her, and the Little Angel behind you bumps into your back and steps on the hem of your skirt. You end up having to throw your plastic cherry at the Sugar Plum Fairy, and it arcs through the air and nearly hits her on the shoulder. Ms. Claudee's giving you the stink eye from the audience. You





imagine: that eye spilling from its socket, running down her frown lines like yolk. Dirt underneath her nails.

•

Once, when you are nine, a girl from 4-H says her mother told her she can't be friends with you anymore. She says she thinks it's because you're Middle Eastern. *Are you Lebanese?* she asks, and you tell her no but you understand what she means.

•

You love your parents. They love you, too, and they're committed to making sure that if you or your sister ever have any questions, then you get the answers - in two languages, if need be. When you're ten, they show you the paperwork your egg donor and sperm donor filled out. Mommy isn't in touch with the egg donor anymore - she moved away, either to California or Colorado, before Facebook got big - and none of you know anything about your sperm donor, not even his name.

There are spaces where the egg donor and sperm donor could write something for their future progeny to read. A time capsule of themselves, to send back into the past for their offspring in the future.

Both of them are blank. The egg donor drew a line across hers.

"It's because she knew I would tell you girls anything you ever needed to know," Mommy says.





You're in Mommy and Μητέρα's room. Above the bed on the wall is the Shelf of Honor, where all your and your sister's favorite toys retired to pasture after you stopped playing with them. You put your stuffed dog up there months ago, which made your sister throw a tantrum. You didn't want it in your shared room anymore. There was something needy about its black button eyes, something antithetical to the core of you, autarkic girl that you are; the expression *hangdog* came to mind. So you Konmarried the bitch. The dog's your parents' problem now.

"What's the sperm donor's name?" your sister asks. On the shelf, the dog watches you. You don't meet its eyes.

Μητέρα ruffles your hair. When she lets go, you can feel curly wisps still straining towards her fingertips like static cling. "Let's call him George."

•

Your father may be dead.

•

Your father may be bald, may have hair, dark or reddish-just-add-sunshine. Your father may have curls like petals, like the Met's marble statues, so when will you stop straightening yours?





Your father may be young. Your father is thirty-nine years old, maybe forty by now, because he paid for college by donating half of your double X. CryoFreeze lost the papers. Your father is every time a stranger says twins must run in the family and you cross and uncross your legs to hear it.

Your father is no hey-sport, no gone-fishing, no just-buying-cigarettes and no regrets.

Your father is haunting the house, is no being held past the age of three, is no heading the ball in soccer, is no playing catch on the lawn and no shovel talks. Your father is your mother's friend asking your mother *hey, can your daughter stop bringing up that time my son said she was born in a Petri dish? He said he's sorry*. Your father is every word you can't pronounce in Μητέρα's native tongue and Mommy saying *no dogs allowed*. Your father is #notallmen and no single men in New York. Your father is an accountant and a vet and a clockmaker and a lawyer, is your aunt telling you you need a haircut and your grandmother telling you you need Jesus, is a letter from your uncle asking your mothers what right they have to sleep in his mother's bed when they stay the night. Your father is a son of diaspora and you are twice removed. Your father is every time a child cries when they hear you have two mothers because the only one they ever had is dead and it's not fair, is both of your mothers and how easy it was to come out to them and how hard it is to live up to how hard it was to bring you into the world, is James Bond and Spider-Man and Indiana Jones, and the only truth you know for sure is your father was Greek and that's why they chose him, and then you were born in a Petri dish and now you're here.





## “night swimming in america”

by Christiana Drevets

i was grabbing a cherry lemonade in the sonic drive thru  
x large with the crushed ice when she called and said *come over*

it tasted like the best red syrup  
so i texted *no, let's sneak into the pool*  
and hopped the fence in my vans,  
added grass stains to my hoodie

the highway in town was busy at all hours  
but it was easy to sneak into the pool past midnight  
kids for decades had been slipping in to swim when they shouldn't  
i liked to sink for as long as i could  
she liked to feel the water on her legs

the lifeguards' red whistles were hanging from their stands  
they swung like rosaries in case we needed something to believe in

when she said we'd keep coming back there forever, i believed that.





## “I promise we won’t always be this painfully alive” by Christiana Drevets

i grant you permission to get the pair of shoes you’ve been wanting.  
it’s april, i know, and the boots might be too warm in the afternoons,  
but you deserve them, you’ve survived the past few days. they’ve what,  
been bearable? we all know you’re struggling. come on and wait with  
me while i let my clothes spin in the washer. i’m getting all my errands  
done now so that i can be clean with you, free with you. i will even play  
your favorite game although it’s always clear who’ll win. we can stretch  
in a patch of sun like cats. we can boil kettles of water for tea and forget  
and let them cool. we can rest. i’m usually not strong enough to stay up late  
for the hitchcock reruns that come on at 2 am but for you i’ll drink mango  
flavored monster drinks from the market on the corner. yes, cheap stimulants  
bring them on, if only to savor every moment of our time here together.  
we don’t have much, but we’ll spend every bit of it eating glistening apples,  
wearing beautiful boots. we’re making the most out of everything, out of april.



