

under the

gum tree

TRUE STORIES. REAL ART. NO SHAME. SPRING 2022.





this is no ordinary lit mag

Each issue of *Under the Gum Tree* is a carefully curated showcase of art and literature. Its full-color, glossy pages honor the work of our contributors.

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Under the Gum Tree is an independent literary arts magazine. Because we strive for authentic connections through vulnerability, we exclusively publish creative nonfiction and visual art. We publish quarterly and accept submissions year-round. Digital and print back issues may be purchased at underthegumtree.com. Visit our website for complete submission guidelines.

We believe that publishing true stories told without shame alongside visual art brings beauty into the life of our readers—that's you! And the magazine would not be what it is without your participation in what we like to call contemporary, grassroots patronage. By incorporating the beauty of these pages on your living room coffee table, or waiting room magazine rack, or in your hotel lobby, you can support talented, hard working artists and writers.

Though producing gorgeous creative work is rewarding in itself, it can't buy the celebratory wine. With your help as a subscriber, we can begin to pay our contributors and staff. For some, writing is therapy and for others, reading is therapy—and therapy is expensive! Instead, for less than the cost of one visit with the psychiatrist, you can have a whole year's worth of beautiful art delivered straight to your inbox.

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why beauty matters

I've been feeling a little helpless and a little hopeless since the news about Russia invading Ukraine broke.

I feel helpless because I wonder what I can do that will even make a difference. Sure, I can make a donation (and I did), but it's still hard to know how much of an impact that will actually make.

I feel hopeless because I start to think about the work I'm doing and question whether it really matters. If people on the other side of the globe are dying, fleeing their homes, fighting every day for their lives, uncertain of whether or not they will make it through the day, even unable to get bread, then why does it matter if I publish another issue of *Under the Gum Tree*? If I travel to the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) annual conference in Philadelphia this year? If I host an off-site reading there featuring writers that we have published in our pages?

Why does any of that even matter?

Maybe you're feeling the same way about your own writing or story.

When people are suffering on such an extreme level, and we see it in our news feeds every day, how can we justify indulging in our art?

Then I saw this post on Instagram that said "Why beauty matters in wartime."

And it reminded me why beauty and art matter, even when things seem bleak. In fact, that's why they are even more important. We need beauty to remind us that war and destruction are not the only things that exist in this world. That humans are capable of so much more.

It reminded me of why I do the work that I do—especially with supporting and making space for true personal stories, like the ones we publish in every issue.

This issue the stories remind us that humans are capable of dealing with the awkwardness of an uncontrollable bladder, the discomfort and frustration of hearing loss, family tensions including expectations of parents and the complications of love.

The news may be a lot right now, but when the conflict ends—and it will end, because nothing lasts forever—we will have so many stories of what humans are capable of: making it to the other side of something horrible.

That is not to discount the suffering and loss and grief, just to remind us all that both joy and pain are a part of what it means to be human.

And that is why, in a few short weeks, I will travel to Philadelphia for AWP, I will host our off-site reading, and I will continue to publish stories in these pages.



Janna Marlies Maron
Editor & Publisher



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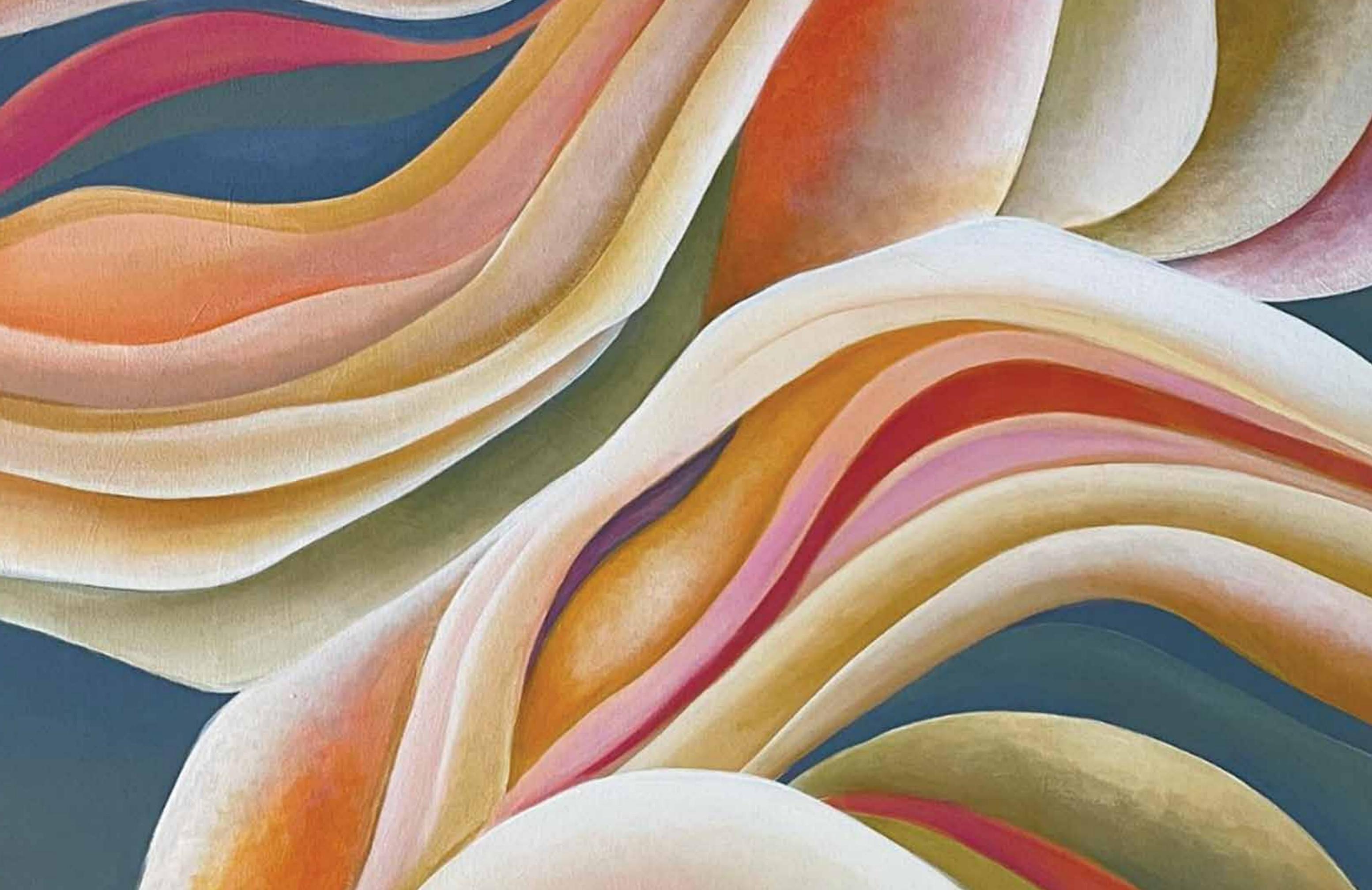
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{ feature }



emptied

ben lewellyn-taylor

When I arrive in the multileveled building of medical specialists, I struggle to find the correct office.

Someone in the lobby asks if I need help, my face betraying my confusion. I say no and pretend to walk with a sense of direction. My hope is to locate a sign before someone else asks, but—finding none—I step onto an elevator and ride to the third floor, the highest, so that I can work my way down without talking to anyone. The doors slide open, and I approach the railing that overlooks the lobby of the first floor. I get lucky. A sign on the second floor is visible from where I stand—Dr. Ryan, Urologist.

When I arrive at the receptionist's desk, she looks at me as if I am still lost. She and

her three co-workers are all young women, perhaps older than me, but not by much. I see them looking at me, but I speak quietly, so that only the receptionist will hear me.

“I have an appointment at 11:30.” I am talking too loud. I am barely audible.

I announce the specific time, to signal to her that I am not lost, that I am in fact where

need to go before he calls me back. I pour a cup of water and drink it slowly, trying to focus on the TV screen—as Kim works with designers in her store—trying to ignore that everyone must be wondering why I am here.

• • •

“When did it start?” asks Dr. Leigh, my general practitioner.

“If I was reading, writing, with people, in a movie, in class, at the store, in my car, asleep, waking up, trying to do anything at all. It didn’t matter I needed to go, all the time. It was consuming my life.”

I mean to be, that I am twenty-five years old and have an appointment with a urologist. Is she doubting this? Is this normal? Behind me, the people in the waiting area appear to be in their sixties or older. One is with a younger companion, who I assume is there to help him. The rest, like me, are alone. Though my back is to them, I sense their gaze.

I take a clipboard with forms to complete and turn to the room. No one is looking at me. Some watch the Kardashians on the wall-mounted television. Others stare at nothing. Underneath the TV is a coffee station and a water filter. I think I should start drinking water so that I am ready to provide a sample, but I worry that I will be waiting a long time for Dr. Ryan and will

I tell her I don’t know, that one day it wasn’t like this, and then the next, I was doing it all the time. If I was reading, writing, with people, in a movie, in class, at the store, in my car, asleep, waking up, trying to do anything at all. It didn’t matter—I needed to go, all the time. It was consuming my life.

Dr. Leigh asks several more questions. I try to be accurate. I know there are no wrong answers, but I worry over details as if a cure depends on my accuracy.

“What do you drink?”

“Coffee, water, tea, an occasional soda.”

“No alcohol?” she questions.

“Only with friends, but it’s been some time.”

“How full is your stream?”

“Depends.”

“What do you eat?”

“All of the time? What do you mean?” I feel the need to get this right.

She moves on. “Have you picked up any new habits?”

“No. I don’t think so.” She looks at me, waiting for me to be sure. “Definitely no.”

“Has anything major in your life changed?”

I straighten my back. “Yes!” I say, animated, then I slump. “I was teaching, and now I’m not. I’m back in school.” My response hangs in the air. “Could it be related?”

“Maybe,” she says. “But I can’t say for sure.”

She stops questioning me. Was that the last question? Do they ask until something falls into place? What if there’s something else she needs to know, something more that could help?

“I’m referring you to a urologist,” Dr. Leigh says. She begins typing on her computer, to find what my healthcare covers.

• • •

When it begins, I am convinced it is only a matter of the amount of liquid I am drinking. This seems obviously related. I read on a website that caffeine can make it worse, that sugar can make it worse, that it is not just what you drink but also what you eat, and I am overwhelmed by the endless possible ways I am causing this inconvenience, this frustration, this breakdown.

I am tired of feeling responsible for

my body, the ways it does not work. As a child, I had eczema on the inner creases of my arms and legs. Though brought on by allergies, my pediatrician told me that scratching only worsened the rashes. I was the one who could make myself better or worse, and I came to see all aspects of my health as a mark for or against my ability to behave properly. It’s wrong, I know. I try to tell my body it’s okay, it’s not your fault.

• • •

An assistant escorts me to a bathroom and hands me a plastic cup to provide a sample. “Do you need water?” she asks, and I decline before taking three minutes to fill the cup halfway.

This is how it is—sometimes I am ready with a full stream, and other times I am lucky to produce droplets. I worry I didn’t drink enough water in the lobby. The assistant did not tell me what to do with the cup, so I hold it awkwardly away from my body while it warms my fingers. I look around for a place to put it, but I can’t focus, so I just open the door. She is still standing there.

“Um, what do I do with this?” I ask. I am flushed with guilt.

“Oh!” she exclaims, embarrassed for me. “There’s a slot behind the door.”

I place the cup in the metal cupboard that has only just come into view, and she escorts me to a patient room where the door closes. A nurse enters and closes the door again. She explains that she will rub a jelly substance above my pelvis to see if I “emptied.” This term, she explains, is used by the doctors and nurses to describe the

amount of urine in the bladder, with the goal that we “empty” each time we go. This makes my bladder feel less like a part of my body and more like a dispenser, something apart from me.

When they use the word “empty,” they never say, “your bladder,” leaving the verb detached from its object. I read my own shame into this silence, assuming I am being treated gently so that certain messages go unstated.

She frowns. “Well, you didn’t empty.” She takes my blood pressure and looks more concerned. “Are you nervous?” she asks.

“A little,” I say.
“Why?”

How do you explain that you feel you are too young for this, that you are afraid treatment will cost a lot of money, that you are sure something much deeper is wrong with you, and that this is only the beginning? I was teaching, and now I’m not. I had money, and now I don’t. I was okay again, and now I’m not. I was finishing sentences, and now my stutter is back.

I don’t hear my answer to her. My body loves me, it loves me not. I ask to go to the restroom again.

• • •

Dr. Ryan is perplexed. “It isn’t normal, but it’s also not unheard of, for a person your age to develop an overactive bladder.”

He doesn’t think it is a deeper problem, but he can’t be sure. He instructs me to keep a log over the next forty-eight hours, to monitor my frequency. After that, I will try taking medication for three months.

He instructs me to take a pill daily, then taper its use in the final month. After that, I will complete a follow-up log and we will reconvene to see if everything goes back to what he considers normal.

“What is normal?” I hear myself ask, like a plea to some unmerciful god.

“Around eight times a day. How often would you say you’re going now?”

“Sometimes that much in an hour,” I mumble. I feel I am confessing a sin, that my body has condemned me.

“I want you to practice staying in the bathroom until you really feel like you’ve emptied,” he encourages me. As if I have just been doing it wrong the whole time, and I will be cured when I learn how to do it right.

I begin to log my frequency, and I wonder if Dr. Ryan really just wants proof of my condition, as if he doesn’t trust me. In a note on my phone, I type: 7 a.m. full stream / 7:34 a.m. half stream / 7:59 a.m. half stream? / 8:17 a.m. full stream / 8:24 a.m. false alarm / 8:36 a.m. full stream / 9:03 a.m. half stream. I count my days by how many times I go, each one a mark against normalcy.

• • •

While the causes are largely unknown, an overactive bladder is characterized not only by the frequency of urination, but the urgency one feels in needing to go. Many times, the person does not even need to urinate but feels they do. Only a few drops are produced, followed by a fear of leakage. There’s a constant sense of pain, like a throbbing ache in the lower abdomen, a

phantom force haunting the bladder. And there is never relief, except for those rare instances where I can forget myself.

When my mom asks how the pills are working, she opines that the problem is probably psychological. Knowing that doesn’t mean I can fix it. I mumble agreement, unsure what else there is to say.

• • •

In the first month, the pills are free, as a benefit of the drug being in the trial stages. The next month they are \$300. It was my fault for not asking, but I did not want to ask for help, then act like I needed to consider it. I already felt I had to convince Dr. Ryan of my ailment, the proof not obvious like a cut or a broken bone. Later, I learn that another pill is only \$36 a month.

When I quit my teaching job, my first job with health insurance, I didn’t calculate how much I was losing in health coverage, since I had only used it for my glasses and asthma inhaler. I had planned to teach while going to school, but I relied too heavily on a plan that fell apart with a change in administration and had to quit just weeks before classes resumed. I started paying \$187 a month for the required student insurance, with a part-time tutoring position that paid \$600 a month. It doesn’t cover the pills, or even the cost of my general doctor shaking her head and telling me she cannot understand how a man my age could have bladder problems out of nowhere. By the time I secure another tutoring position with better pay in October, I have already spent most of my savings from three years of teaching. My parents help me

pay for the medication, which adds to my shame, despite them not minding.

Before Dr. Leigh refers me to a urologist, I am tempted to ask her if anxiety and depression can cause changes in frequency. I have just started seeing a counselor through my school’s free services. This is the first time I have sought out help after years of struggling with social anxiety and depression triggered by major life changes. I feel as if I am under a weight I cannot lift, and that something must give. Still, I say nothing to Dr. Leigh about it, and I say nothing to my counselor, Patty, about the urination issues. I hide information that might help them help me.

• • •

“Do you ever feel like there are voices in your head?” Patty asks me. I ask for clarification. “Do you ever feel like there are multiple voices inside of you, talking to you?”

I do not reply for some time.

“What about when you think people around you are talking about you?” I ask. “Is that the same thing?”

For as long as I can remember, I have been pee-shy around other people. When I am in a public bathroom, if someone is within proximity to my urinal, I will take great pains to forget that I am not alone—counting wall tiles, playing word association with the urinal cake brand: Bemis ... Max Bemis ... singer of Say Anything ... I wonder what he is up to now.

Anything to tell myself, *this is not happening*. No one knows I am here. Patty tells me that the results of my depression

index indicate that my social anxiety sometimes borders on paranoia and asks if I will consider seeing a psychiatrist. She wants me to watch for signs that I am avoiding contact with others or being mistrustful. I tell her I probably cannot afford a specialist, failing to mention the one I already have.

• • •

At the end of the first three months, I complete another bathroom log for forty-eight hours. Although Dr. Ryan had told me he would be retiring, I didn't think he meant before the three months were up. Everything he instructed me to keep track of had felt like a homework assignment that he would personally check.

I bring my log, which includes an especially terrible morning: 2:07 a.m. full stream / 3:30 a.m. full stream / 5:30 a.m. full stream / 7:03 a.m. full stream / 7:24 a.m. full stream / 7:25 a.m. leak / 7:33 a.m. half stream.

A woman, much younger than Dr. Ryan, enters the room and asks how I have been doing, and if I have my final log. Even though it is on a note in my phone, and already open, I tell Dr. Lillian I have misplaced it, and that everything is fine now. I return my phone to my pocket.

None of this is really happening, I tell myself. There was never a Dr. Ryan and I am not embarrassed to talk to a woman about my overactive bladder, as if it has some bearing on my masculinity. I know it is wrong to avoid talking with a doctor because she is a woman, but I am ashamed of my condition, not distrusting of her. I can't convince myself this is excusable, and my guilt piles on.

Dr. Lillian asks me a series of questions that I answer truthfully. She tells me that she can prescribe a cheaper pill, one that I can afford long-term. Dr. Ryan had told me he hoped three months of medication would solve the issue.

"I have to take this pill for the rest of my life?"

She nods, looking sorry for me. "The point of taking the pills is maintenance. There's not a cure, but we can work to get you to a place where you are comfortable and not having to think about it all of the time."

Already, Dr. Lillian is more straightforward than Dr. Ryan, who mentioned nothing about the high cost of the pills during my first visit.

As she makes a note about the new medication, Dr. Lillian says, "And, of course, if this medication causes leaking, call us immediately, because you shouldn't be leaking at all."

It is too late to admit the log is on my phone.

At reception, I schedule a six-month checkup.

Later, I call to change the appointment.

"Of course," the receptionist says. "When would you like to come in?"

I agree to a random date and time that she offers and hang up without writing it down. I know I will not be coming back. I will not be taking pills anymore. They aren't working, I do not feel better, and I do not have the money. I am convinced the entire medical practice, from doctors

to prescription companies, is conspiring against me. None of this is my fault. None of this works.

• • •

The first time I lose control of my bladder, I have just gotten dressed for school. I am on my way out the door when I feel the involuntary push, warmth, wetness, tears, followed by the recitation of expletives that have become my prayers.

"No. Stop," I beg.

I change my clothes, but in class I feel like I am wearing attire that doesn't look natural on my body. I know that everyone in the room is thinking the same thing—that my skin is not mine, that I am ill-fitting. I need my body to shed these layers and start over.

I stop drinking water and dehydrate myself so that I will not urinate as frequently. When this doesn't work, I read more information on a medical website. Contrary to popular opinion, it says, drinking less does not decrease urination, but actually increases it, as the body must work harder to break down food in the stomach.

There is no way to satisfy my body's demands.

At times, when I am sure I have emptied, and have used two squares of toilet paper to dab away the extra droplets, I pull up my pants and immediately feel dampness on my underwear. On my worst days, I fold four squares and use them as a buffer. I try not to think of it as a makeshift diaper.

Once, on the eighth or ninth trip to the restroom within an hour, I tell myself I will just spend the day there, alternating between

laying on the floor and emptying my bladder. Who cares? What is the point of trying to do anything else?

• • •

Symptoms of overactive bladder include an avoidance of social activity for fear of embarrassment. I begin to worry when people invite me to activities that I will reveal just how much I am urinating. For the first eighteen months of our relationship, Meg lives in Houston, and we travel back and forth on weekends to see each other between there and Dallas. I plan for the four-hour drive by decreasing what I drink forty-eight hours in advance.

One weekend, Meg surprises me with an airbnb in New Orleans. We are taking a road trip.

We stop for gas in the first hour. I go inside to use the restroom after drinking coffee on the road. Two, or twenty, miles down the road—anxiety collapses time and distance—I tell Meg I need to stop again. I am going to burst. I apologize profusely, but she assures me that it doesn't matter, that we have time. I am afraid that I will need to tell her I have to stop over and over, until there is no time left.

I tell my counselor I am sometimes afraid to be around other people, and she asks why. Among my reasons, I do not mention my bladder problem. Patty is not a urologist. She cannot know the answers that even my urologist doesn't know, can she?

I don't know how to reach out for help.

• • •

I am learning to do Kegel exercises, to retrain my bladder to regulate itself, and I

realize it is probably best if I stop urinating in the shower. I must teach my body that there is a time and place for this, that urination cannot have free reign over every space in my life. Most days, I cut the shower off early to rush to the toilet.

One morning, I am at work as a writing tutor. I find myself in the bathroom three times in thirty minutes. Each time, the same

my brain and body, and not because of any lack of ability, as if health is somehow tied to some flimsy definition of merit.

Yes, there are healthy ways to eat and exercise and live, but health issues also concern access, both to money and systems. Mental health issues are not personal failures, and they can be affected by life conditions and changes, environmental factors, changes

“ I try to make it appear that I am blowing my nose, taking a call, doing anything but peeing three times, but I sense I know that they all know what I’m really doing. ”

students are waiting in the lobby area, the same person who is working the reception desk sits unmoved, the same people in my office remain in their seats. I try to make it appear that I am blowing my nose, taking a call, doing anything but peeing three times, but I sense—I know—that they all know what I’m really doing. In the bathroom, I curse myself. I look down at my body and wish it were not mine.

• • •

Shame at having an overactive bladder at the age of twenty-five is irrational, an unfair confrontation with my mortality, a fear that my brain functions are directly related to my body, and that both are failing, and will continue to fail, because I am somehow inept. This particular problem has nothing to do with age. The real connection is between

in season, and brain chemistry, all of which exist—at least in part—outside of what we do, or don’t do. I will not fix my bladder through good behavior or right thinking. I will not fix my anxiety or bouts of paranoia through awareness of their irrationality. But I can be gentle with myself as I learn to navigate my mortal condition, the one I shared with everyone in that waiting room, and beyond. The compassion I feel for others must extend its reach to my own body and brain, not separate entities, but one—me.

I know this, I know all of it, but still—I want it to be over, to be released from this condition. When I tell my mom I have been seeing a counselor, she asks if I have been having “thoughts” again. Another euphemism, this time with the unstated adjective “suicidal” in front.

“No,” I say. I look her in the eye. “I promise, not this time.” I look away quickly, feeling that I have overstated what I believe, what I hope, to be true.

• • •

I am nearing thirty, and I have learned to manage my bladder both through the advice of Dr. Lillian and Dr. Ryan, and also because I have learned to manage my anxiety better. I no longer take the pills, and only occasionally, on bad mental days, do I notice the frequency of my bathroom trips. It’s okay, I tell myself, it’s just one of those days. Mostly I am forgiving, gentle with my body and my brain.

My mom’s favorite story about my birth is how I entered the world and immediately

urinated on the doctor and nurses in the room. It was my first act, my grand entrance, my prophetic legacy. My mom always says that everyone was laughing. It must happen all the time.

When she tells this story, I feel no embarrassment or guilt. I was an infant; I had no control. One second I was not here, and the next I was. I could not have already learned what was normal in that liminal space, could not be expected to know what was shameful and what was not. Someday, I think, I will return to that space. I will greet my body and not see it as a thing to be rid of, emptied and discarded, but met with grace, whole, and worthy of care. 🌱



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{ feature }



notes on being half-deaf

tim bascom

I have two ears like most people, but the left one is lower than the other.



When I wear reading glasses, they tilt. Sometimes I wonder if that was a sign—a premonitory symbol I should have heeded—for I have become completely deaf in the sagging ear, and the higher one is deteriorating. To make matters worse, I hear a constant high-pitched whine, as if someone is blowing a dog whistle.

The deafness kicked in during my

thirtieth year, while I was manning a booth at a bookselling convention in Los Angeles. I suddenly became dizzy and felt as if I was descending into a well. The voices of passersby sounded removed, muffled. A fellow worker put a hand on my arm and asked if I was okay, but she sounded as if she was standing, up above the rim of the well. Allergies, I thought. But I was wrong, and ever since, I have lived as if I am ten feet below the surface of normal life—or further,

now that a recurring inner-ear infection has wiped out the rest of the hearing in my left ear.

• • •

To become deaf is isolating. Being unable to hear takes away a main means of connection. Even if I see you talking, I can't tell fully what you are saying—can't be sure what you are thinking, or what you want, fear, hope. Not unless you write it down and wait for me to respond—which is exactly what I once did with the deaf father of a friend. I was at a house party with a lot of cheerful talkers, and I felt sorry that this fellow was limited to his daughter's sign-language, so I wrote on a napkin, "Where is home for you?"

"SW Kansas. Near Dodge."

"Do you work there?"

"Farm."

Whew, I thought. At least farming was something that could be done in a solo fashion, although I wondered who helped him negotiate grain prices or buy implements. I wrote one or two more questions about cattle and soybeans, but then, because conversing in this fashion felt cumbersome, I gave up. Even though I was half-deaf myself, I went back to the larger discussion, chipping in my reactions to a recent film—"It worked for me. Everything but the soundtrack, which seemed like it was constantly telling me how to feel."

I'm fortunate. Unlike that deaf farmer, I still get half of what is being said by people around me, even more when I am in quiet settings. During one-on-one conversations,

I probably don't seem too distracted or obtuse. However, I still have to do what others who are hard of hearing do. "Sorry, could you repeat that?" I ask. Or if I am really struggling, "Do you mind spelling that word?"

I'm self-conscious at such moments. I remember what it is like to be a person who hears well. I know how frustrating it can be to try to talk with someone who has bad ears. As a child, I actually had good ones, but my father didn't. He was the half-deaf one, the one who had trouble hearing me in the car or in restaurants, asking me to repeat and repeat and repeat.

Even as a first or second-grader, I noticed Dad struggling. A cardinal would whistle in the trees, and I would call attention to it—the cheery two-note repeat of its piercing call—but if the call came again and I lifted my finger to alert Dad, even though he crunched his brow in concentration, he had to shake his head wistfully. "You have such great hearing," he told me, which made me sad. How could he be so kind when reminded of his own debility?

At the same time, his affirmation made me proud. I had something that not even my father had—a strength, a sort of power.

Little did I know how much power I actually had back in those days, most of it relational in nature. I didn't realize that I was able to take charge of a conversation when I wanted, or that I tended to respond so deftly that people laughed. I didn't know that I was constantly convincing people I wasn't slow or dull—making it more likely

I would get invited to parties, would get higher grades, would eventually be hired.

With this hidden power, I could appear to be interested and caring—not aloof or indifferent. I could tell people about the whispering couple arguing in the fitting room. I could join the rest of my friends when they sang along with song lyrics.

Today, though, I don't have that linkage. Listening to music, I'm especially cut off. I don't share the auditory pleasure that others experience. What I can hear with acoustic songs is a weak, distorted version, missing most of the upper range, and dampened by whining tinnitus. I might as well be sitting in a dentist's chair with the drill running. If I go to a rock concert, the effect is worse. The guitars shriek painfully. The singer's words are hopelessly garbled. After I emerge onto the street, everyone sounds as if they have been packed in cotton—as if I am buried in a box of the stuff, listening from there.

My love of rock concerts has been wiped out. What was once a communal delight is now a threatening, uncomfortable encounter. Throw in someone trying to talk to me, shouting in my ear and gesticulating, and I am pretty much an exasperated mess. Which is distressing, because I have two sons who are musically talented—who write their own songs and perform in bands, drumming and playing electric guitar. I go to hear them perform, of course, and I comment warmly on what I can decode with regard to their lyrics, but the fact is, I sit through their concerts with my ears plugged, trying to protect myself like

Odysseus's sailors did as they passed the island of enchanted Sirens.

It's not all bad, of course. Occasionally, being hard of hearing is even an advantage. I don't get disturbed in bed, especially if I sleep with my usable ear on the pillow. My wife can get up and rattle around without any effect. When I read or write in public places, I can concentrate, because I don't make out the individual words of the people talking around me.

Nevertheless, my impaired hearing remains a reminder that I am not as connected as I wish, as I once was. I am turned dumb, both in the sense of understanding, and in the ability to reply. There have been times, at parties, when I have simply given up and walked out of the house, right out onto the lawn, to stare into the night sky and spend time with the only person I can actually hear—myself.

To his credit, my aging father kept fighting against this encroaching isolation. He kept introducing himself to strangers, asking what mattered in their lives. He kept nodding, even if he didn't know what had been said.

I have not been so gracious. For me, hearing often seems like too much work. It requires that I watch lips and lean in, straining to supply the words I miss. I am forced to cobble together a theory of what is being discussed—and the guesswork becomes exhausting. Often I retreat into myself, observing at a safe psychic distance.

I suspect I seem humorless at such times, especially in boisterous gatherings.

A casual acquaintance would never guess that I used to be one of those people who, at a party, was most likely to have a quick, playful comeback. As a young adult, my humor took the form of reflexive banter. I might not tell the big, central story, demanding attention, but I could be counted on to help that story become more compelling, introducing inventive twists and spurring the speaker on. I rode the wave of conversation like an expert surfer.

Not now—and what I realize, as a result, is that loss of hearing has meant a loss of identity. Deafness forces one to become someone else, affecting relationships. In my case, I may not have lost my sense of humor, but expressing it has become difficult, more disruptive. If I want to banter with my son—who is helping with a political campaign and explains, “Tonight I have to go out to canvas”—then I have to work with what I thought I heard. “So how are you going to get all the way to Kansas?” I might say. Or if someone tells me, “She seems more happy now,” I have to create wordplay out of what I misheard. “Did you say *sappy*?”

Such semantic repartee is good for an occasional laugh, but not sustained conversation. It can even become a way to sabotage the normal interactions of people who still have the power of hearing, which is what one of my uncles seems determined to do these days, despite having a cochlear implant. Uncle Jim willfully destroys conversations with a string of non sequiturs. Whether you are planning what to cook for dinner, or what to sing at a funeral, he

derails the dialogue so completely that the conversation never, ever, arrives.

“Did you and Dad sing a lot?”

“Sting? Not usually.”

“No. *Sing*. Like with a choir.”

“A wire? Only if we were spying, I suppose.”

“C’mon. I know you know what I’m saying.”

At which point, he might put a hand behind an ear and mime the words, “What’s that? Did you say something?” Thus, he forces others to experience the very thing he experiences, straining for meaning in a fractured, disjointed fashion.

• • •

Will I eventually become like Uncle Jim, using humor to hold everyone at emotional arm’s length? Maybe not. I am still driven—at least so far—to engage with others, as I do in my day-to-day work as a teacher. However, I have had to develop some quirky coping mechanisms. For instance, I start each semester by pointing to my hearing aids and stating that I am fifty-percent deaf.

The students laugh, and I laugh along, but I tell them, “No, I’m serious. I don’t hear out of one ear at all, which is why I get confused about where sounds originate. You may have to put your hand up and wave when you talk, so that I look in the right direction. And speak up, because my good ear is full of constant ringing.”

I move around a lot, stepping right beside the person who is speaking. I tell anyone who is reading out loud or making

a presentation that they need to shout, since there might be someone (not me, of course!) who is hard of hearing. I allow less open dialogue, opting for lecture, because it is easier to manage. And when I have a student with a foreign accent, I apologize repeatedly, until that student simply has to recede, saying less.

There will always be losses, no matter how much I adapt. I regret deeply not being able to make international students more at home since I lived much of my childhood in East Africa. I would love to go back to Ethiopia, and to try teaching there, but I fear I would be rendered useless due to my struggle with accents. I now understand why my father used to say, during the last decade of his medical career, that maybe he should retire early. After all, mishearing symptoms could lead to misdiagnosing.

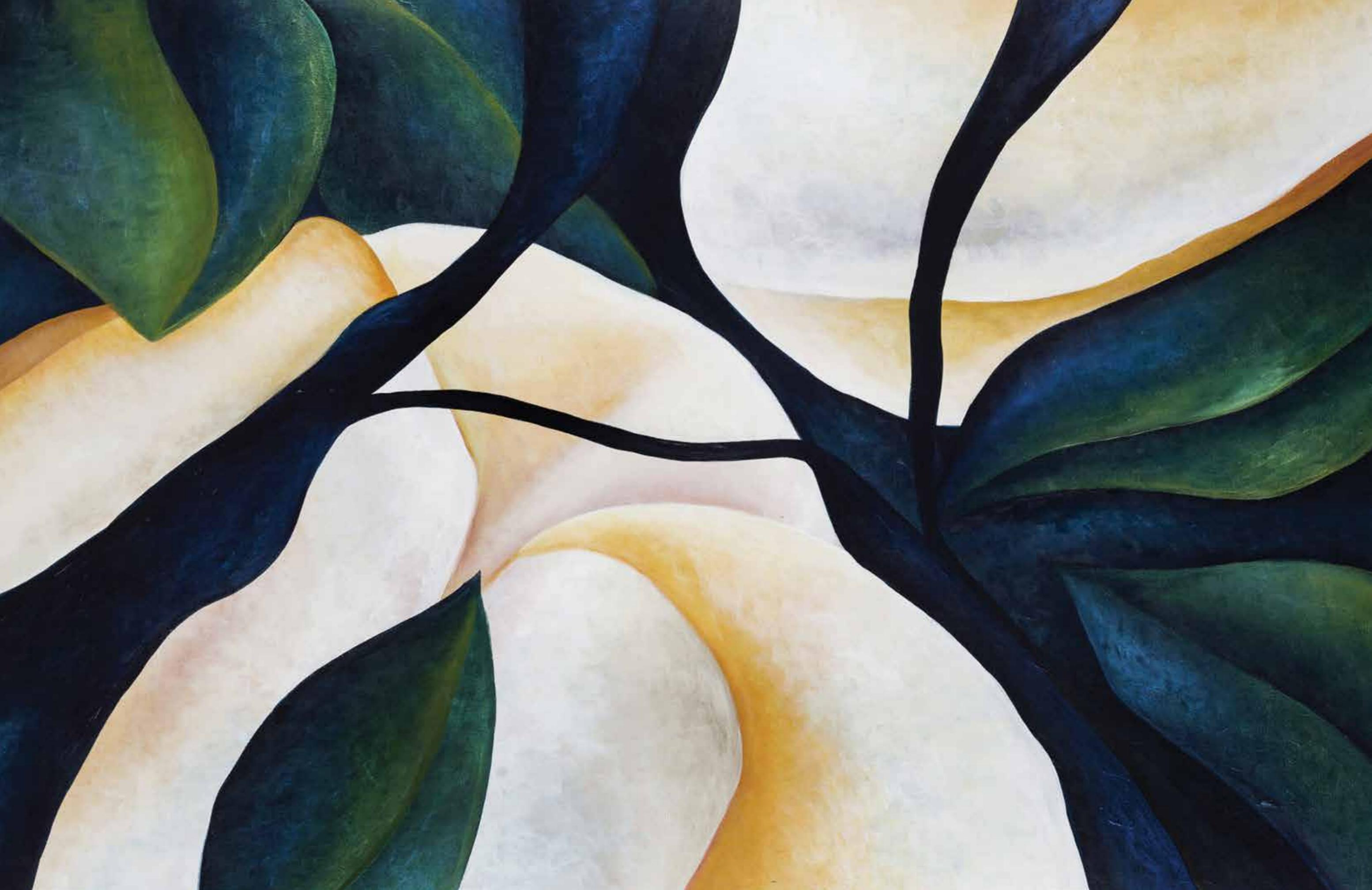
Poor hearing has that kind of power—enough to end a career. Nevertheless, I am thankful my dad didn’t quit, and that others have refused to retreat from their roles in society. I am thankful that Beethoven, at

the end of his career, was still composing with a pencil clamped between his teeth, pressing the tip to the sounding board of his piano so that he could feel the vibrations. I am also thankful that Thomas Edison, who claimed he had stopped hearing birds when he was twelve, became so obsessed with his main aural invention, the phonograph, that he kept refining it over a span of fifty-two years.

Who knows, maybe losing a particular sense is, as some believe, a way to focus more fully. While the blind person becomes acutely aware of sound, the deaf person becomes acutely aware of what is visible. Sign language suggests this heightened visual alertness—an ability to “read” what is seen. And I know that, in my own way, I like to read the signs these days. I like to ride in a car for thirty quiet minutes at a time, simply staring out the window at the cornrows, the blackbirds in the marsh, the shadows behind the trees, the shifting clouds, letting them say what they want to say. 🌿



Tim Bascom is author of a novel, two essay collections, and two prize-winning memoirs about years spent in East Africa as a youth: *Chameleon Days* and *Running to the Fire*. His essays have won editor’s prizes at *The Missouri Review* and *Florida Review*, and have been selected for the anthologies *Best Creative Nonfiction* and *Best American Travel Writing*. His fiction has appeared in *Zone 3*, *Mainstreet Rag*, *Lalitamba*, and *Briar Cliff Review*.



(flash feature)



that's what kids are for

rae haight



I wonder what you thought the day I was born.

You said you feared you might lose me before I even was, before the air of this world burst into my lungs and my cries swelled and retreated. I, your daughter—the child you named—weighed, measured, and checked for good health.

There I was in your arms, the lights bright and the blankets soft. My head rested in your hand as you gazed down at me. Maybe you thought: *She's going to take care of me one day; that's what kids are for.*

You tally every diaper, and the cost of

food, for what you give you will receive ten-fold.

That's what the Bible says, isn't it? Or something like that.

Your son, you know, will marry and have a life of his own. He'll leave, but she'll stay. She'll stay close to home.

You have a mold cut out for her, in the image of your own. She'll grow up and it will fit just right, so you read her stories and buy her toys. You tell her about the sunrise on the day she was born and you tell her, when she's far away, that you can both see the moon.

You tell her she's an angel and you tell her that she's just like you. ⚡



Rae Haight lives her life in pursuit of truths as the bold expression of experience. Rae grew up under the Montana mountains, earned an MA in Psychology from San Diego State, and is an MFA student at the University of Wyoming. Her work has been published in *River and South Review* and *Pollen Magazine*. She serves as coordinator of the UW MFA Reading Series and is co-founder of *The Meadowlark Review*. Know her better at rae.wiki



(flash feature)



the scarab

linda murphy marshall

A tiny scarab charm, the size of a large teardrop.
A solid-gold Egyptian beetle. A microscopic, undecipherable hieroglyph engraved on the back.
I found it a few days after our trip ended, wedged under the backseat of my beat-up red Chevy Vega—the car jammed with suitcases, blankets, clothes, books, toys, snacks, two car seats, and a purse. My two small children and I had barely fit.



What did the hieroglyph mean?

When had my mother put it in the car, and where?

Why hadn't she simply handed it to me before I left town?

The scarab was tucked inside a scuffed and crumpled envelope, amid empty cookie wrappers, broken pens, dog fur, a few half-eaten saltines, petrified hard candy, a dry cleaner claim check, and a smashed paper cup. At first glance, I mistook it for trash.

"You analyze things too much," my mother would have responded, if I'd posed my questions to her. A common refrain in response to my tendency to dissect words, phrases, silences, body language. "What does it matter?" she'd have closed with.

I do analyze what people say and do, but especially my mother. Gaping holes, double entendres, and passive-aggressive jabs have always characterized her speech. Grimaces, sour expressions, hands planted on her hips. They all tell many stories. She is a hieroglyph herself.

Her note to me was folded inside a small, plain, white envelope with "Linda" written on the outside in her distinctive loopy hand. She had placed the envelope containing the note and the hieroglyph somewhere in my car. Original location unclear. It might have been the dashboard, or the console between the front seats. Perhaps the side pocket on the door, or on top of my purse. Recognizing her handwriting stopped me from

pitching it into the plastic bag I was filling with trash, post-trip.

The note accompanying the scarab sounded softer, less harsh than normal. She wished me luck and happiness in my new life, the scarab a part of the message. An aficionado of anything connected to ancient Egypt, my mother owned a similar one herself, or so she wrote, mentioning that I'd once admired her scarab. I didn't remember any of that, only that she loved Egypt, old things, and gold. I knew that scarabs had been used in Egypt as seals, beginning around 2,000 BCE, and that they represented transformation, protection, luck.

Is that why I hung it on a sturdy gold chain and why I never take it off? I absentmindedly touch it a dozen or more times a day, checking that it's still there. Perhaps it's a stand-in for love she couldn't express. Clandestine, undecipherable love she buried behind harsh words, beneath boxes of belongings I packed to escape an antagonistic world. A small seed of hope for a daughter desperate for her mother's love.

It reminds me of the daisy-picking game I played as a child—*she loves me, she loves me not, she loves me, she loves me not*. I wonder if the scarab tipped the balance in my favor, or was a blip on the screen of our relationship. There's a darker possibility—that the scarab reflected her relief that I was leaving town, a treasure to soften the blow of her "good riddance" feelings for a daughter with whom she'd always competed.

She was right. I do analyze things too much. ⚡



Linda Murphy Marshall is a multilingualist and writer with a PhD in Hispanic Languages and Literature and an MFA in Creative Writing. Her essays and stories have appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, *The Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *The Ocotillo Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and numerous others. She was runner-up in *Blue Earth Review's* 2021 Flash Creative Nonfiction Contest.



{ soundtrack }



djembe power

debbie chase

It was 5:20—rush hour—and traffic was terrible. I passed cars, ran yellow lights, honked my horn, and pulled up five minutes past the start time, just in time to be the first person there.

*t*he building was locked, and mine was the only car in the lot. When would I learn not to stress about being late? Drum class never started on time. I got back in my car, slumped in the seat, and waited for my friends to arrive. I had started playing the djembe four years before that September evening. . . . My son danced in a West African troupe led by an Ivorian man whose goal was to inspire everyone to dance. When

he was five, his kindergarten class had a guest instructor in African dance. With all his young child energy, my son had been climbing up the walls of my house—door frames, specifically. When he came home that day, eager to show me his new dance steps—“*Diansa*, Mommy, the back-together dance”—I watched his arms and legs extend as he sang, his curly blond hair

My son embodied this sensibility. Show him a series of steps—West African, modern, tap, jazz, or hip-hop—and he could repeat the pattern with instant confidence. He took energy from being front and center. His blond mane flew as he moved his head to the beat, back arched, fingers flexed and reaching toward the sky, holding the audience in his ecstasy.

“

They danced traditional rhythms that celebrate harvest and rites of passage. I yearned to share the experience.

”

whipping back and forth with surprising precision. I needed to find this artist who had corralled my son’s energy away from house destruction towards constructive expression.

And so began my son’s love of dance.

“African dance is my passion,” he told me, at age seven.

As his love for African dance grew, I was intrigued to discover what inspired him. I would sit in a corner of the dance studio, editing documents, watching the beauty and power of this dance. They danced traditional rhythms that celebrate harvest and rites of passage. I yearned to share the experience.

“You must learn to dance like your son,” the instructor told me, after one of my son’s classes. His smile was kind and engaging. “You will feel good in your body. You will feel *free*.”

Later, his ability to attract a crowd when speaking in public—his body movements fluid and graceful—was a testament to the confidence he’d built as a dancer.

I tried the classes, but for me, West African dance moves in front of a mirror, surrounded by other people, only reinforced my self-doubt.

The djembe, though, *that* drew me in. During dance class, I stood in back watching the drummers. I moved my hands through the air, trying to mimic their rhythms. When the lead drummer for the dance company noticed, he took me aside and said, “Come with me, Mama, the drum is for you.”

He was right. I had rhythm, and if I could hide my body behind the drum, I could express it.

The first time I came to drum class, I felt the strength in my hands. I sat in the

chair, placed the drum between my spread legs, and began to warm up. I hit the goat skin with my palms, knuckles, and fingers, legs wrapped firmly around the wooden base, back erect, but not tight. My mind began to release. I type all day at my computer, creating silent messages. Here, my hands met the drum at precise angles, creating volume, depth, and power.

• • •

That September evening, when I’d arrived to find myself alone and the building still locked, the other drummers finally started filtering in. I got out of my car, eagerly grabbed my drum bag and folding chair, and chose my space in the gravel yard outside the dance studio. I’d been doing this for four years and had tried to adjust to African time—class starts when everyone is there.

“When is that exactly?” I used to ask. “I need to write it in my planner, so I know how early to leave work on drum class day.”

“When we arrive,” I was told. “When we are ready, then class will start.”

I learned a lot more than drum rhythms in this class.

My best friend in the group was Victor, a respiratory therapist at a hospital. When I asked him how his day was, he would tell me whether or not he’d had to remove a patient from a ventilator that day. It surprised me that he smoked weed four times a day.

Victor once told me to respect the drum, to never leave it in a hot car.

“Isn’t it hot in Africa, where the drums come from?” I asked.

He glared at me.

“For a long time, I had a real hard time with you all being the chosen people,” he once told me, over beers after class. “But I’ve come to terms with it.”

“I can’t understand how a respiratory therapist smokes weed all day long,” I replied.

He elbowed me in the ribs. I took a sip of his beer. He rolled a joint.

As we waited for our teacher to arrive, we arranged ourselves in a semi-circle. Victor always set up directly across from me, so he could watch my hands. There was no printed music. We relied on each other to remember the rhythms.

Young Miles arrived next. Barely taller than the bass drums he played, he hit the skins with sticks that were longer than his arms. He always sat to the left of me, trusting me to see the mangled right ear that he hid from most adults. Most people tried to talk to him, then thought him rude when he didn’t respond. I only smiled in his face when I saw him, because I knew. He rewarded me with a hug each week as a greeting.

Eleven-year-old Jah bounced in next. With the boundless energy of a cheetah, a long day of school left him ready to play. He insisted on using a full-sized djembe and wrapped his small legs around it like twigs. His dreads already reached halfway down his back, and when he played, his whole body moved—his hair flew, and

his smile took up most of the space on his face—while the drum stayed still.

We were rehearsing for a big performance, a fundraiser for the tiny dance studio where we practiced, called Pinx. The show would be held across the street, in a vacant lot adjacent to an auto repair shop. We'd play three West African rhythms of celebration, harvest, and rites of passage, before the ballerinas and hip-hop dancers came out.

After about thirty minutes of practice, Baba, our teacher, sauntered in. He insisted we call him Baba in class, which meant "father," or "learned man." This had confused me at first, because the dictionary

display, drumming outside an amusement-park ride, his talent and creativity most likely lost on anxious families waiting in line for the roller coaster. After three years at Disney World, Caph had made his way to the Midwest, seeking a wife and the community of Ivorians who lived here.

After the day he pulled me aside to become a drummer, we became friends. He prepared fried fish, plantains, and ginger juice for me, and—of course—he taught me the drums. He introduced me to African reggae and made me feel safe dancing around his tiny living room. I helped him obtain his green card, arguing with immigration officials behind bulletproof

“

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”

said "Baba" was a rich sponge-like cake, soaked in rum and sugar syrup. His real name was Caph. A drummer since he was a toddler, he had immigrated to the United States at seventeen, to play drums outside the Animal Kingdom in Disney World. I had taken my children to Disney World, and I tried to imagine Caph as a teenager on

glass, when they claimed they'd lost his paperwork.

After Baba placed his drums in the center of our circle, signaling the official start of class, we played through the short set. He tied his drums with orange, green, and white rope, the colors of his country, wrapping the strings tight around the

intricately-carved, deep caramel-colored base that he'd brought from home.

"Sit in the middle, Mama," Baba ordered. "Count us off."

"Let Victor lead," I said. "Age before beauty."

We started to play, and the day's events started to melt away. Hitting the taut skin with my hands, feeling the resistance that almost hurt, and the calluses formed over years, filled me with a sense of accomplishment and release that writing strategic plans for nonprofits never quite did. I believe that the drum gave each of us the power and strength to let go of what had hurt us during the week.

After class, I drove Baba home.

"Everyone looks at you when they play, Mama. They know you know the rhythms. You need to lead."

"I'm not good enough. Besides, I just want to hang back and be like everybody else."

"Mama, you never own your power."

"Ugh, not this again. Tell me a story," I said, to change the subject.

He told me that his country, Côte d'Ivoire, had just made it legal for women to have multiple husbands. Baba was incensed.

"This is terrible news," he said.

"What do you mean?" I said. "That will make it fair. Men already have multiple wives." He shook his head furiously.

Baba had a girlfriend in each city where he played, but to him, this was a man's right, not a woman's.

"This means that the president's wife can marry another man too. Does that seem

fair? Is this how we respect our president?"

Male logic. Even though he wanted me to advance my power, it was clear to me that Baba still felt a man should inherently have more. Was this a contradiction? Or was it the familiar story—that as long as a woman's power didn't infringe on the man in question, he was fine advocating for a woman's position of strength.

Baba never made a pass at me. I'm not sure if it was because I was sixteen years older, or because he valued what we had as unique, and didn't want to spoil it. A sexual pass would have taken all my trust in him away. Maybe he knew that, too.

After our conversation in the car that day, I practiced until my hands swelled. To perform in front of people, I needed to master every note, every moment of timing, every transition.

The big day was a hot, sunny Sunday.

Victor called me as I was finishing my final practice. "What time are you coming? You are coming, right?"

"I'm only coming if Baba comes," I said.

"He's coming."

"Are you sure? When did you last talk to him?"

"Yesterday," Victor said.

"But not today?" I asked.

"No."

"Shit," I said.

Caph had a pattern of not showing up. Sometimes he missed class because he overslept. Sometimes he missed whole performances because he forgot to tell the

dance leader that he was out of town. Other times he just wasn't in the mood. We never really knew whether to depend on him. That was another lesson I was learning—even when people let me down, I didn't have to give up on them, or myself.

I pulled my drum from the back seat, flung it over my shoulder, and walked toward the back of the stage. The belly dancers were about to go on—three women in their sixties with layers of skin folding over what had once been glittery costumes, wiggling their bellies just by shuffling across the stage floor.

Victor had left to pick Baba up at the subway station. Twenty minutes later, he came back alone.

I did not want to do this. I did not want to be there without my teacher.

"Hey, what are we playing?" Victor asked.

Everybody looked at me. So I called the order of the songs. As I arranged our motley crew, I heard a shy voice behind me.

"Are you a girl?" A small girl, her head covered with braids, each tied with a different color yarn, peered up at me. She frowned with confusion.

"Yes, honey, I'm a girl. Why?"

"I didn't think girls could play drums. Can I touch it?"

"Sure, you want to come out on stage with me and play too?"

The braids and yarn bobbed up and down. She held out her hand to stroke the wood of the drum.

I thought about myself at her age. I

thought about myself now. What had held me back from experiencing the fullness of life when I was a little girl with braids? What held me back now? Hesitation to approach the unknown? Fear of attention? When I played basketball as a kid, I only passed, never shot a basket. When I give presentations at work, I provide lots of slides and data, so people will focus on the information, and not on me. I'll sit in the chairs against the wall before I'll sit at the table. All of this has held me back as a leader. The drum showed me that leading doesn't have to be about power. It can be about spreading joy.

I flashed back to my son—how those early years of dancing had given him such joy and had led to the confidence he harnessed throughout his life. By the day of the drum show, he was already in high school, no longer interested in dancing or hanging out with his mother. Still, I let those memories fuel me.

Our troop of drummers walked up the rickety stairs and lined up on stage. In the middle of our set, I snuck glances at the audience members sitting on the lawn in picnic chairs and on blankets. They looked up at us, smiling, enthralled, their bodies moving to the sounds of the rhythms. I kept my eyes on them, wondering why they'd chosen to watch us. Then I looked around at our crew. Jah was in front, soloing, and locking eyes with everyone. Miles raised his sticks high into the air before they landed with vibrato on the bass drums. Victor and I played djembe loud and fierce, in perfect

sync with each other. The inquisitive little girl beamed and hit her own little conga, her small hips swaying side to side. Dreadlocks flew, hands bounced off skins, and we danced in unison while we played.

Joy is contagious.

Baba called me the next day. He laughed when I told him about the show.

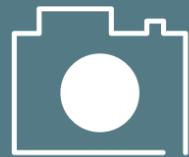
"See, Mama, I told you—you could do it."

He had planned on staying home all along. 🗨️



Debbie Chase is a strategy and development consultant for nonprofits and universities focused on social justice. She has been playing the drums for over ten years. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri, and writes personal essays about the experiences she has in the world, the people she meets and the joy that relationships bring.

{ 1,000 words }



and breathe

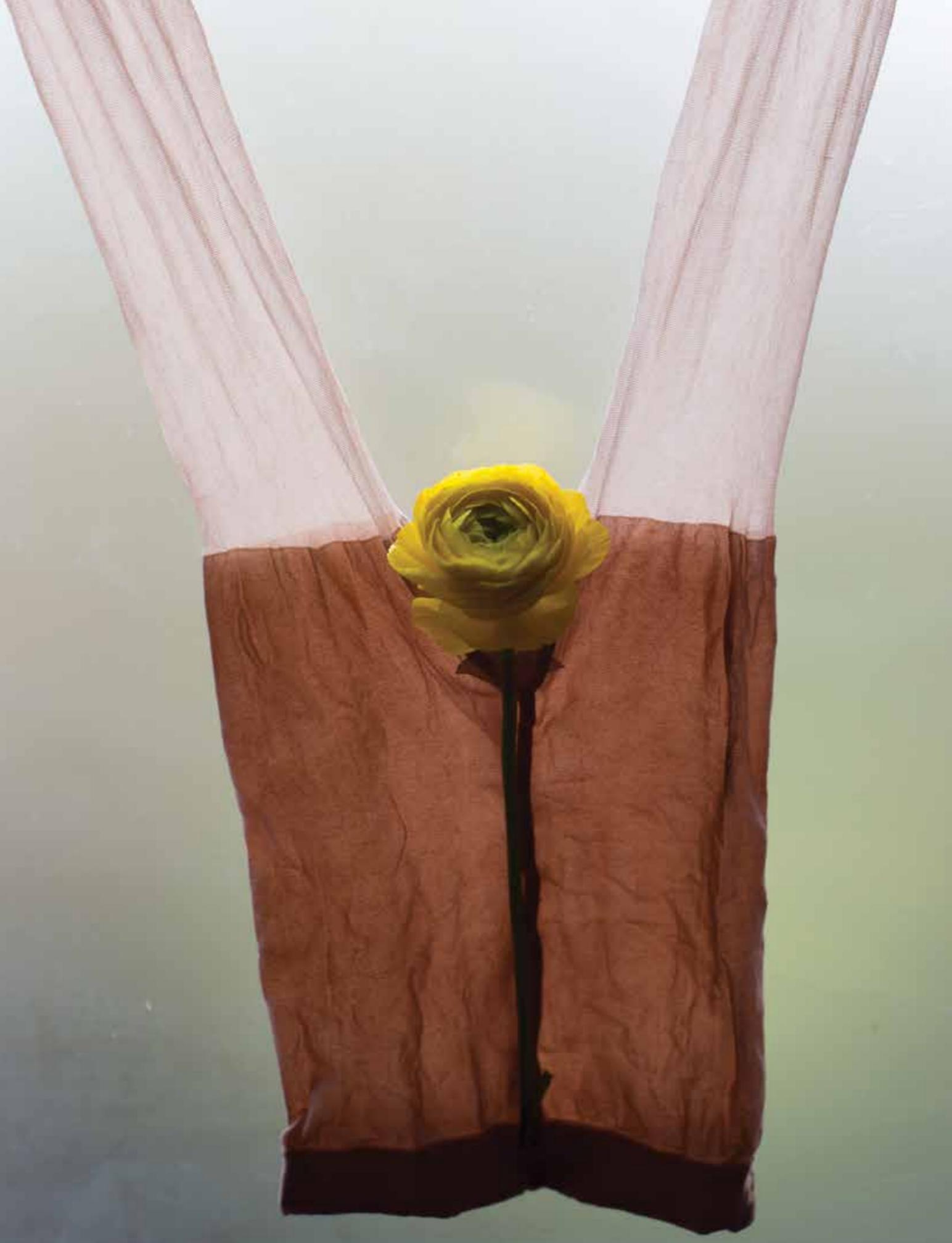
carole rey













Carole Rey is a photographer based in The Netherlands. Her work often uses flowers and light to create images that balance aesthetic beauty with harmonious combinations of decay and freshness. This combination of disparate elements into a cohesive ensemble is in homage to Japanese Ikebana art, or flower arranging, which is an influence on her work. She has published a book of her photography, entitled *Metamorphosis*, and regularly teaches photography workshops.

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{ fork and spoon }



to peel a difficult fruit

rikki li

To peel a grapefruit, you must be patient.



With a knife, slice off a thin layer of rind near the stem, then dig your thumbs into the exposed edge. Pry outwards. You can rip the tough exterior off in large pieces, but the pith requires a gentler hand.

My parents could do it on autopilot, peeling the pink flesh from its white webbing, careful not to crush the fruit into a pulpy mass. I'd watch in envy, as my mother's long and tapered fingers pulled each segment free. I thought: *If only I had fingers like hers, I could sew neat rows of stitches and fold uniform pleats in my dumplings.*

“You’re just like your Ba,” she would say, always when he was in earshot. My father’s brow would wrinkle upward in response, but so would the corners of his mouth.

To peel a grapefruit is to speak a language. On Chinese New Year, there was always some kind of citrus in our kitchen—oranges in the crisper drawer, dried tangerine peels on the windowsill, and pomelo halves at breakfast. Tradition said they were tokens of fortune. For my parents, who arrived in America over twenty-five years ago with two suitcases and \$150, tradition was their only wealth. As I learned to speak Chinese, I too learned the language’s mythos—peaches symbolized longevity, “apple” was a homonym for “peace,” and Ma and Ba could never share a pear, because the phrase in question sounded too much like the word “divorce.”

For all my mother’s teasing, my father did most of the grapefruit peeling, usually while sitting at the dining table as she cleaned the remains of dinner. Without fail, upon extracting the first sliver of fruit, he’d trot over to the sink and feed it to her. She always insisted she wasn’t hungry, even as her lips parted to accept the offering.

• • •

To cut a pineapple, you must be precise. The trick is to preserve as much of the fruit while removing all the eyes. My mother did the spiral cut—she’d slice off the bottom and the crown, then hold the fruit upright as she shaved off the textured rind in long strips. Then, laying the pineapple on its side,

she’d cut shallow V-shaped grooves into the fragrant flesh, following the diagonal pattern of the eyes, like connecting the dots.

I never thought to cut a pineapple myself. But after moving away to college, bloated from a semester of takeout and frozen meals, I found myself craving the pineapple’s tang and tingling numbness. The next year, when my parents moved back to China in pursuit of better jobs, the craving grew.

“They call us *hai gui*,” my mother had said as she broke the news. Sea turtles. It was a Chinese nickname for those returning to the mother country after years abroad. Even after twenty years, America wasn’t home for my parents. I remember imagining a stretch of beach filled with hundreds of wiggling shells, struggling across the sand to the waterline before being swept away by the tide.

For a long while, I grieved the loss of little things—the basil plant my mother kept above the kitchen sink, the weekend trips to the Korean supermarket, the post-dinner walks around a cul-de-sac, shadowed in watery dusk. The wild strawberries we’d planted under the porch never grew back. I missed the summers we spent in the backyard, grilling peppers and pork ribs under our magnolia tree.

But by senior year, I grew used to returning to an empty house and managing video chats despite the twelve-hour time difference. One evening, I tried to cut a pineapple. Though messy and slippery, the natural spiral was consistent and forgiving

and not as hard as I imagined. I cubed up the remains and sprinkled them with salt, then called my parents to show them my efforts. “See, you can do it,” my mother said, and we stayed on the phone long enough that by the time I hung up, the pineapple juice I’d left on the cutting board had started to stick.

After I graduated, I found a job in Shanghai and moved back in with my family. The apartment was tiny and warm. Right next door lived a fruit seller, and we’d venture out into the balmy night for plastic bags of lychees and jeweled cherries. The fruits in Shanghai were tastier than the ones back in the United States—so soft and so sweet.

• • •

To prepare a durian, you must be brave. They often come frozen, wrapped in yellow netting. Thaw for at least six hours, then balance with the stem facing upwards. Each fruit has five swollen lobes, separated by indented grooves. Saw through the groove with a knife, careful not to cut too deep, then pry open the incision. Inside will be a delicate, fleshy seed. Grab the seed and pull until it releases. Repeat.

Despite the messy peeling process, my mother loved the durian’s creamy texture and savory-sweet pungency. My father couldn’t stand it. Whenever he saw her heft the spiked bulbous fruit out of the fridge, he’d wrinkle his nose and say, “no kissing,” though we knew he didn’t care how she smelled.

I fell in love for the first time the spring after moving to Shanghai, with a woman

who spoke the same love language as my parents. She kept her verbal affection private but always stashed an extra jacket in her backpack in case I got cold. At dinner, sitting on the same side of the booth, she’d peel my shrimp despite my protests, so my hands wouldn’t get dirty. On rare occasions, we’d steal away to hotels, tangled together until the sun rose.

“I don’t smell good,” I’d say, fearful of my morning breath, and she’d wrinkle her nose in jest and pepper me with bites and kisses anyway. As the marks bloomed red across my shoulders and neck, we called them *cao mei*—strawberries.

At most, we could do this once a month. Her parents didn’t know she was gay, and she intended to keep that secret. For a while, I hid our relationship, too. While my parents thought I was staying late at work, she and I would stroll around the city, my hand tucked in her jacket pocket. On weekends we’d wander malls, sharing iced teas crammed full of watermelon pieces. She always left me the biggest slice.

But even the high of first love couldn’t mask how lying tasted in my mouth. I knew my parents wondered why I was never free for family outings or why I was always checking my phone. When I came home late, there were leftovers waiting on the counter or apple slices on the table, turning brown. I’d eat as my mom snacked on her durian across the table, and the guilt churned in my stomach.

Three months in, after my girlfriend and I shared “I love you” for the first time, I

told my parents. I wanted them to know she called me *bao bei*, her treasure. I wanted to show off the roses she bought me in our family room vase. I wanted to describe how her eyes crinkled when she laughed.

But, for the first time in my life, my parents didn't want to listen. I remember the screaming, the crying. I remember calling my girlfriend in tears from under the blankets, and my father swinging open the door.

"Stop wasting your time," he said. She heard every word.

"Maybe you should listen to your parents," she told me, and hung up.

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To peel a mangosteen, you must be gentle. Though the smooth purple exterior is hard to the touch, it takes only a squeeze to reveal the soft, perfumed bulbs inside. Hold the fruit between both palms and press—if ripe, the skin should give slightly, like an avocado. Apply pressure on both sides until the shell cracks. Careful not to press too hard, or you'll bruise the fruit inside and stain your fingers magenta.

For a while after I came out to my parents, I felt like I was squeezing a mangosteen. No one had energy to fight, so we simmered in silence. Somehow, that was louder than the screaming. My girlfriend and I stopped calling every night. When I went out to meet her, I just said I was "going out for a while." At most, my mom would reply with a curt, "hum." My dad said nothing at all.

Writing was difficult in those months.

I didn't want to think too hard or feel too much. I knew that documenting anything was to confront piercing truths—I couldn't change who I loved, and my parents couldn't change their upbringing. They couldn't change how their family and friends viewed homosexuality. The problem was not, we won't accept you, but *they* won't accept you.

Reputation is an ancient currency in China. We call it *lian*, or face, because you protect it like a body part. I have the rules ingrained in my bones—always soften your "no." Eat what your elders put on your plate. Do what is expected of you. Break these rules and you could lose face, or *diu lian*—an act of humiliation. This was why sometimes you left things hidden or unspoken to keep the peace. *Lian* reflects how the culture is sculpted around the group and not the self.

Once, in the heat of an argument, my mother said that my sexuality was selfish. "If it was just us in the world, I don't care," she cried. "But it's not just about us. We can't fight everyone."

Prejudice is a peel my parents cannot remove for me. It is grapefruit pith stuck under my fingernails and pineapple juice corroding my gums. Sometimes, I wonder if I am selfish. Every day, I roll the question around in my mouth.

But I know they're trying. Near the end of my time in Shanghai, I came home before dusk after a date. My mother was at the stove, tossing noodles in scallion oil, and my father was at the sink. We could have

pretended it was too loud to speak above the running water and sizzling pan, but as I passed the kitchen door, my father held out a pale, plump bulb of mangosteen. A plastic

bag full of them sat on the counter, spilling into the basin. His leathery fingers stained pink and still damp, I let him feed me the first slice. 🍈



Rikki Li is a writer from Philadelphia whose works often revolve around themes of food, cultural identity, and queerness. She completed her master's in journalism from Northwestern University in 2020 and began working at the University of Pennsylvania's Gene Therapy Program as a science editor. Her works have been previously featured in *Forbes & Fifth*, *Moly Review*, and *Young Memory Anthology*. If not writing, she spends her time baking cakes and caring for her beloved monstera plant.





skin trouble

danielle thien

When my father's mind begins to degrade, I talk a lot about my skin.

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I tell my mother I've got to go to the dermatologist again. I say I've got skin trouble. Skin trouble is not so far a reach. I have always been prone to various epidermal conditions. Nor is it the only ailment my mother and I have invented.

My parents' lives have always been intertwined, but there are certain things my father leaves to her. When he hears about my dermatological complications over the phone, he thinks nothing of it. But my mother knows that "my skin is flaring up again" means, he's talking too much. It means, call me when you can get away from him. It means, we need to talk.

In a sense, the three of us have always communicated in coded ways. My parents, both natives of the island of Borneo, brought over the Hakka dialect when they immigrated to Canada, then passed it down to me. It is a tainted form of the dialect—a potpourri of Chinese, Malay, and English—so convoluted that it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint what we are actually speaking. Yet it is a language we understand. A language we use when we don't want others to understand.

Hakka remains so rare, both in the city where I grew up, and in the Swiss city I now live in, that to this day, when I overhear someone speaking it, I am startled, as though they have somehow tapped into our secret language.

When I tell my mother about my skin trouble, she usually calls back an hour or two later, from the ladies' room of the gym where she works out, always obliged to seek out the spaces my father will not wander into. Our conversation invariably seems drawn from the same script.

I point out the quantity and rapidity of my father's speech. The accents he places on syllables that would ordinarily be unaccented.

"But that's what he's always been like," she says.

"When I called this morning, he was interrupting us," I say. "He was overly excited."

She stiffens. My words are an accusation of neglect on her part.

"Do you think I can't tell when he's not normal? I'm the one who has to live with him every day."

She puts her finger on my guilt, this ocean I have put between us. And yet I know my father's voice.

"You're being paranoid," my mother says.

She does not want to talk to me anymore, but she will not hang up on me. So I let her off the hook. I say I have to go.

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The Hakka phrase *ng hao yi si* means, "it's embarrassing." It's often used in trivial social situations. *Ng hao yi si*, my parents

would say, when a family friend insisted on paying for dinner. *Ng hao yi si*, they would say, if we were offered a generous basket of fruit.

When my father was hospitalized, I took the first flight back to Vancouver. Each time the nurses issued him passes to go out for a meal or spend a night at home, I was terrified of what he would say to other people. When my father's moods are in a heightened state, he approaches veiled women to say, *As-Salamu Alaikum!* He calls busboys with tanned complexions to our table, to ask if they speak Tagalog.

"What do you want to do?" my mother would say. "We can't keep him locked up forever."

My mother is right. I am paranoid. I worry, and I fret, and I break down the intonations of my father's voice like I would break down a musical score, but I cannot allow the mania to escalate to the point where we must have him institutionalized again. To the point where he hurls fury at me until I'm left dry-heaving on the sidewalk in front of the hospital, uncertain of how to breathe.

My father has always been thick-skinned. He can slice into his fingers and brush up against scalding pots without wincing. He had two major bike accidents when I was growing up. The first time, he got a stone lodged in his forehead, damaging a nerve so that he could only lift his arm to a thirty-degree angle for months. The second time, he blacked out and the asphalt razed the skin off his face like a cheese grater. When

my mother and I arrived at the hospital, he grinned at us.

"I had an accident," he said, delighted in his ability to withstand.

My father is stubborn. My father is stoic. My father is strong.

The only time I ever saw him cry was when I was five and his own father died. It was Halloween, and my mother had bought me a book about a haunted house. There were bats on the cover and cobwebs, and in my own house, a heaviness I had never sensed before. I showed my father images of purple draculas as he sat beside me on my bedroom floor, tears trickling down his face. Grieving for a man he had always thought invincible.

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When I was growing up, our next-door neighbor had a cat named Toby.

One time, we bumped into the neighbor and I asked, "Where is Toby cat?"

Unable to decode my soft-spoken voice and childish enunciation, he stared at me blankly.

I repeated, "Where is Toby cat?"

He still did not understand my question. Frustrated, I switched tactics.

"Toby cat *choi la hang?*" For if he could not comprehend my English, then English could not be his language.

To this day, it remains one of my parents' favorite anecdotes, a sign that their daughter was destined to become a mediator of different tongues.

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I work in the translation department

of a Swiss university, a place where people worry over words. Where people mull over meaning. But how do you find the words to speak about what remains for so many unspeakable? Meaning is so hard to define when it comes to mental illness. When strangers see my father in the midst of mania, they brush it off as extroversion, eccentricity, or an inability to read social signals. They think he's a real character.

I have been living away from my parents for too many years. I am losing my Hakka day by day. I can feel the language slipping from me. The vocabulary no longer comes as instinctively. Sometimes, I do not use the correct tones and the words emerge uncertain, hovering over the wrong pitch.

My psychotherapist has asked why I never cry during our sessions. I tell her I'm not sure, that I suppose it's because I'm not accustomed to crying in front of people I don't know.

Not that I often cry in front of the people I do know.

At some point growing up, I reached an age where an outpour of emotion was no longer acceptable to my parents. My father

would walk out. My mother would stay, only to say, stop.

Ng hao yi si.

It's embarrassing.

You are embarrassing us.

I seek other ways to express myself. Aside from weekly therapy sessions, I learn how to play the drums, finding comfort in the physical act of striking something. In rhythms that need no melody.

Mostly though, I write. I write about my father's illness in little black notebooks with lined pages. I began in the first days of his hospitalization and I've continued ever since. The truth is, I cannot stop writing about my father.

On my way to work one day, the words so overwhelmed me that I stumbled out at the next tram stop and wandered into a café. I could stem neither the words nor my despair, weeping openly as I wrote. At a nearby table, a girl stole glances at me, concerned. I felt her eyes. But there are times when we must shed.

First, embarrassment.

Then tears.

Maybe even skin. 🏠



Danielle Thien is originally from Vancouver, Canada, but now lives in Geneva, Switzerland, where she is finishing up a PhD on the role of translation in the creation of nineteenth-century Shakespearean opera. Outside of her academic activities, she writes, translates, and plays in a piano quartet. Her work has appeared in *Cimarron Review* and *The Dalhousie Review* and she was awarded the 2019 Geneva Literary Prize for Nonfiction. She is currently working on a memoir.



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