



Moss.

An online journal of the Northwest.

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Issue 5. Summer 2016.

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Letter from the Editors

Los Angeles, CA & New York, NY · July 2016

On its surface, this issue of *Moss* may not seem much different from those that have come before, but in fact, it reflects some exciting changes behind the scenes. As those of you who follow us on social media may already know, our team has grown substantially since our last release—we're gratified to see how strongly the new perspectives and creative qualities of the expanded *Moss* crew have influenced the issue.

First, we've expanded our editorial team with five new contributing editors. We're honored to be joined by Sharma Shields, a writer based in Spokane, whose novel, *The Sasquatch Hunter's Almanac*, was published in 2015; Diana Xin, a writer who hails from Hebei, China and now lives in Seattle, where she's a 2016 "Made at Hugo House" Fellow; Portland's Mark Cunningham, a novelist and the founder and publisher of independent literary press Atelier26 Books; Elisabeth Sherman, a writer born in Seattle and now based in Jersey City, where she also works on the nonfiction board of *Apogee*; and Mike Chin, a writer who recently finished his MFA at OSU, where he was managing editor of the literary journal *45th Parallel*.

Finally, Amy Wilson has joined us as Manager of Outreach. A poet from Oregon now living in New York City, Amy has been doing incredible work expanding *Moss's* visibility on social media and finding new, innovative ways of bringing the journal to new audiences. If you've followed our Twitter, Facebook, or Tumblr you've most likely experienced the robust presence and enthusiasm that she brings to those platforms.

Moss has always been a project about community, and having the chance to bring more voices together in our ongoing exploration of Northwest literature is a true privilege. We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we've all enjoyed putting it together.

– Connor Guy and Alex Davis-Lawrence
Editors, *Moss*

An Interview with Mitchell S. Jackson

New York, NY · May 2016 · Interviewed by Connor Guy

Mitchell S. Jackson is a writer from Portland, Oregon who now lives in Brooklyn, New York. He is the author of the acclaimed autobiographical novel *The Residue Years*, which Roxane Gay, writing for *The New York Times*, called “powerful” and “affecting,” praising its “warmth and wit” and remarking that “Jackson’s prose has a spoken-word cadence, the language flying off the page with percussive energy.” His many awards and honors include the Whiting Award and The Ernest Gaines Award for Literary Excellence, as well as fellowships from Urban Artist Initiative and The Center for Fiction. Additionally, he has been a finalist for the PEN / Hemingway Award for debut fiction, the Hurston / Wright Legacy Award for best fiction by a writer of African descent, and the Center for Fiction’s Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize. He teaches at New York University and Columbia University. Earlier this year, he released a documentary about his life and his writing, also called *The Residue Years*, on *Literary Hub*.



Interviewer

Let’s start by talking about the Northwest since we have that in common. What does it feel like, as a writer, to be a Northwesterner out here in New York? Writers come here from all over the world, but do you feel that where you come from informs your practice or makes you stand out in a way?

Jackson

When I first moved out here, I didn’t know any other writers from Portland. Well, I knew writers from Portland, but they weren’t here. And so I felt

alone, in a sense, but it also felt special to me, like it was an opportunity to... I knew I was always going to write about Portland, so it felt like being here gave me an opportunity to elucidate in writing some parts of Portland that hadn't been touched yet. In one sense, it kind of dampened my sense of community but then on the other hand I thought, "oh, I could really do something out here." I don't so much worry about how what I write might relate to a New York audience or an audience somewhere else. I think in writing honestly (I'm not talking strictly about facts) about the experiences I choose, it will touch someone else. Tell the truth and let people come to it. Or not.

Interviewer

Do you see yourself as a Northwest writer? A Portland writer? You speak in your documentary about "getting out"—feeling that maybe there wasn't a future for you in Portland, that you needed to come here because this is where people come to make it as a writer. Would you ever go back? Are you a New Yorker now?

Jackson

I'm *definitely* not a New Yorker now. I actually still get turned around on the trains. But more than that, I don't write about New York. Most everything that I write is grounded in Portland and home and the people I encountered while I was there. And, you know, I wrote a few essays about mentorship in New York, but... So, one of the questions that I always find myself revisiting in some way when I sit down to write is "how did I get here?" And a lot of that is examining the early stuff, before I moved to New York. Because I think that was really most influential in shaping me. So yeah, man, I don't know if I would call myself a Northwest writer, because I don't live there, but Portland is always at the heart of what I'm writing.

Interviewer

There's been a lot of change in Portland recently, and the pace of gentrification has only grown more intense as the years pass. I suspect that when most people think of Portland today, they think of the TV show *Portlandia*—hipsters, organic food, general fussiness. But that world is so far from the world we see in your novel. In what ways have you seen or experienced this divide? How does it affect Portland's overall identity as a city?

Jackson

Well, I didn't really experience that divide much while I was there. I was just reading an article today—it was actually a sociology report—and it was talking about white flight, how when black people began moving to the cities during the Great Migration, the whites who had inhabited those spaces left. And I think it's interesting that when we talk about gentrification we don't call it "white return," because that's essentially what gentrification is. That term obfuscates what's happening. When I think about Portland, I think it's really easy to get upset about what happened, but it makes sense—the industry and the commerce and all of the things that people want to do are in the heart of the city, so once they get sick and tired of driving like 75 miles to get where they want to go, they just come back for good.

But the other thing is that it's such a long plan. City planners had to know that this was going to happen in the 70s or the 80s. It's easy to think of it as a conspiracy. Because in a way it was: they had to red line and raise prices and let crime go. That seems very conspiratorial. But on the other hand, we were a part of that process, too. Like, no one put a gun to my head and said, "sell dope on this block." And my drug dealing, our drug dealing and the elements that come with make it easier for someone or something to displace us. So I feel ambivalent about it. On the one hand, I feel like we were set up for this to happen, but on the other hand we were participants in making it happen.

Interviewer

In a way, I felt like your novel *The Residue Years* offers a kind of alternative history of Portland, of the Portland you don't see on TV. You describe so many restaurants, bars, and neighborhood spots in such detail—probably beyond what has ever been written about these places before. As Portland changes because of gentrification, do you feel that one function of your work is to preserve or commemorate those places?

Jackson

Absolutely. I think I've said this before, but I want to create a record that we existed. And that existence now is being erased. Like, the area I'm talking about in the book and the documentary, it just does not exist there anymore. So without *The Residue Years* and without other stories that go back to that... like, there may be sociological records and reports, but that can only go so far... without these stories, there will be very few records of this life, and that is an experience that shaped me and a lot of the people that were around there at that time. So if I were to make a list of my goals that would be high up there. I can't think of another novel about that time and area in Portland, which makes me feel a deep responsibility to do my very best in portraying it. It's a part of our collective legacy.

Interviewer

Do you feel like fiction is uniquely set up to do that?

Jackson

I think fiction is uniquely set up to do it in a way that doesn't feel didactic. Like, if you read a sociology report, you know you're getting information

that's meant to prove a point. But fiction engages you in a way and makes you care about the people in a way that you might not if you read about the same events in an academic report. I think fiction does the work without it seeming like much work. And it opens up more space for empathy.

Interviewer

Where do you find the line between fact and fiction in a book like *The Residue Years*? The cover has "A Novel" crossed out, which I thought was a clever way to hint at its double nature. As I understand it, and as I think you've acknowledged all along, much of the novel is autobiographical. What went into your decision to write this as fiction rather than as a memoir?

Jackson

Well, when I first started writing this, I had no idea about the genre. I was in prison and I was just writing. But somewhere along the line I realized that some of the people I was talking about... wouldn't take too kindly to me writing their stories. So I figured, "well, I'd better learn some fiction really quick!" So that was really the nexus of why I went from nonfiction to fiction. But then when I learned more about fiction and when I got to a graduate writing program, I saw that fiction gave me the most leeway to get at a deeper truth than what was in the facts.

I also think that the tool belt of a fiction writer probably has the most tools in it. You could have everything that you have in poetry, everything that you have in creative nonfiction, but it's not vice versa. You could be a poet and only write lyrics in which case you wouldn't have to worry about narrative. You could be a nonfiction writer and lack a skill that's in the repertoire of the poet or fiction writer.

I think fiction writers, the kind I admire, are also poets. They also have the skill set to write nonfiction. So I thought that fiction opened me up to possibilities that I wouldn't have had if I'd stuck to nonfiction.

Interviewer

One of the big themes that I see in your work is the idea of living in the present. There's a great line in your documentary—something along the lines of “it's important to look back to move forward.” There's also a scene in the novel where one of the central characters, Grace, tells her family, “it's not who we were, it's who we are, right here.” It's a beautiful idea, but you also explore how living only in the present can become dangerous, how it overlaps with the logic of addiction, with desperation. And this becomes particularly evident as things spiral out of control for Grace and her son Champ at the end of the book. How do you reckon with this dual nature of living in the present?

Jackson

I think that a part of that is... Grace is saying that because, to some degree, people who have troubled histories have to live in the present because the past anchors them. They would have a really hard time navigating the world and being happy and trying to figure out how to maintain some semblance of a life if they could let go of those things. But then on the other hand it becomes like the YOLO excuse, right? Like, “I can do anything because I'm living in the moment.” And I think that's really dangerous. But in both instances, I think the person has to be aware... like, it can't be an absolute. You'd have to try to recognize what element of that you need.

So if you take me for example, how would feeling conflicted about selling drugs to people's family who I knew serve me at as a 40-year-old college professor? So at a certain point, I had to let that go in order to do some work

on... changing. But then, I can't now... On the other hand, so when I was in that world, if I made \$7,000 in a night, I was like, "Oh, I'm gonna go spend five," right? So I think that's really dangerous, too. I had to figure out what is it that I need. And I don't know how people do that. I don't know how my mom navigates the world without feeling really, really down about her experiences. But I guess the people who figure that out, those are the ones who succeed, and the ones who don't...

Interviewer

So in a way, living in the present is a kind of defense mechanism.

Jackson

Yeah, like a coping mechanism, for sure.

Interviewer

What do you think it takes to get kids growing up in your old neighborhood today, kids who face the same problems you faced, interested in literature and in expressing themselves through the arts? And in what ways do you think literature and the arts can help them?

Jackson

Well, one of the ways to get them interested is to make writing and literature competitive with the arts that they're already involved with. So, I mean, most of the kids are probably listening to music, reading a lot about fashion. I think the average kid who's from where I'm from is concerned with how he looks, where he goes. And he's definitely concerned with music, because he thinks that makes him cool. So if there were some way to connect literature

to those things in a way that they could recognize, I think that could be part of it.

I also think we need to have more people who look like them that are involved with writing, more role models who they can aspire to. Even inside of what we call African American lit or literature from the African diaspora—there's a wide range of different kinds of ethnicities, different kinds of writers from different backgrounds. But I feel like the guys that are from where I'm from (I'm speaking specifically about guys from my old neighborhood, which is not that neighborhood anymore), they're like... they have a really narrow sense of identity. And there are not a lot of people that fit that identity even in the group of people who are in the African diaspora, there's not a lot of people who fit that kind of template for them.

Interviewer

One concern you keep coming back to in your writing is how people project their identity to the world, particularly with words. In a scene at the barbershop, for example, the central character, Champ, gets scolded by the barbershop owner for his “smart boy vocab.” And I think a big part of Champ's identity is this “smart boy vocab,” his intelligence and his ability to express himself in a really sophisticated way. But Champ speaks in different registers to project different identities to different people—to his mother, to his brothers, to his girlfriend, to his friends. Why is this?

Jackson

Well, when I hear that it makes me think of the James Baldwin essay, “If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” He talks about the necessity of Black English, the vernacular. He's arguing that it should be recognized... but there's a line in there where he says, “If I may use Black English.” So he's arguing for it and then there's a moment where he asks,

“can I use it?” to the reader. And I thought, “well here is Baldwin recognizing that in some instances this language doesn’t have the power that he wants it to have, even as he’s arguing for it.” So what does that mean? It means you have to be able to switch. Right? Any person of color who is successful has to be able to switch between the dominant language and their own—I assume that most of them would not have grown up in the dominant language—or you’re screwed, I mean, you’re not going to make it. So I think that’s something that Champ recognizes, but what he recognizes perhaps even more than I recognized growing up is how much power there is in being able to speak the dominant group’s language. How much more credible that can make you. But then also how much credibility you can lose when you speak it to your core group. Like, it’s almost the worst thing you could do in some instances.

Interviewer

Well this is also related to writing, right? I wonder if another reason this question comes up in your work is because, as a writer, you’re inhabiting so many different voices and perspectives. One thing that struck me about *The Residue Years* is how different the voices of your two narrators, Grace and Champ, are—but they also sound completely right and believable. How do you pull that off and how, as you see it, are language and identity tied to writing?

Jackson

Well, there are two things in the writing. There’s trying to create a believable voice—that took a lot of... at least for Grace that took a lot of interviewing and listening to people. Grace is really a composite of the different women that have inhabited my life since I was little. And so I was talking to them, listening, asking questions, paying attention to their idiosyncrasies. And then, with me, Champ is like, who I would want to be. He’s like Mitchell on

steroids.

For the writing though, I'm consciously aware of the reader. When I sit down to write, I'm usually writing to my former self, to the twenty-two-year-old guy who's into some trouble—who's smart, but not necessarily literary. But I also know he's not the reader for fiction. I find myself feeling really compelled to speak to both of those readers in a language that they'll recognize. So really, it's the force of the readers on me, and then the force of wanting to create something authentic that kind of pushes me to those voices.

Interviewer

I was really interested in the sections where Champ speaks to the reader directly, and also the way he's always specifying who he means when he says "we"—it's always in parentheses, "(the we being me and my boys)." And that made me think about who you're addressing the book to.

Jackson

I wanted to create a chorus. I'm always looking for ways to create to chorus, to bring something back with repetition. And yes, I'm always trying to define my audience. One of my mentors, John Edgar Wideman, said that the best stories are like letters, that the readers want to feel like they're an interloper to private communication. And that's the most intimate you can get with the reader. I think when I'm talking about "we" like I'm talking out loud, I'm just allowing you to hear me. Sometimes I just speak directly to the reader. So those "we" parts are really beseeching you to join in with me, to believe me and participate. I spend a lot of time in the book, and even in my nonfiction, saying, "believe me." In some way, I'm saying "trust me, trust and believe." I do a lot of that. I want you to join in so that I feel like I have a partner in this.

Interviewer

At times I almost felt like you're addressing an outsider, someone who doesn't know where you come from and what your upbringing was like—maybe even a white reader specifically. (It may be that reading the book as a white person, I felt this more acutely.) Was this something you intended?

Jackson

Yes, that was intentional, but I don't think I'm always addressing the outsider. Sometimes, I'm addressing... Like, I remember one time in the book where Champ addresses the reader and is like, "are you tired of my pussy monologues?" That's not really addressed to any particular ethnicity or gender. It's really like a mea culpa. But I thought this is for the person who's really invested in the book at this point. It doesn't matter to me what that person looks like. I want them to feel like I pulled away some layers to just let them see.

Interviewer

Another related idea that you keep coming back to is authenticity. At one point, Champ says, "Admitted, most days I'm percents of a stone-cold fraud, but which one of us is authentic 24/7?" What drew you to this idea?

Jackson

Well, I think especially for black males, a great part of their identity is built on this sense of manhood, and so... there's this book—I don't teach it, but I used to talk about it a lot in my classroom—it's called *The Cool Pose*. It talks about how so much of a black male's identity is built on this idea of coolness, and how it's something that is both empowering but also damaging to them.

Everybody wants to be a breadwinner you know, and feel educated and feel like they can take care of people. But when you can't do it, then you have to find other means of building your sense of identity and your sense of worth and I think this is why black males especially are concerned with feeling authentic in the world, because when you can't provide and you're not as educated as you'd like to be, you feel like a fraud. Right? Then they're always trying to figure out a way to say, "no, no, I'm..." No other group is as concerned with being "real." You don't hear white dudes going around saying "I'm a *real* white dude." You listen to hip-hop, in like every song—"I'm a real nigga"—they say that in every song. I'm like, "why are you so concerned with it?" But it doesn't exist elsewhere and I think that's because we've been dismissed and emasculated in such a way that... it's like a way to get back some masculinity.

Interviewer

I remember in your novel, in that same barber shop scene we were just discussing, Champ sees an old classmate who he says always puts a lot of effort into acting tough: "he plays like he's too tough for TV, a muthafuckin man of steel. But hold up before you knock it. That's how it is for us. How they made it... What I know is, no civilian should have to be that tough."

Jackson

Yeah, I remember that. It's like, "why can't you just be a human being? Why do you have to walk around like..." I was telling my students in class today about this study I read where they argue that trauma can change your actual DNA and be passed on to your offspring. They did a study on Holocaust survivors, and they saw that the trauma they experienced did something to their DNA, which has been passed on to their children, and in some cases it can go to your grandchildren. And I was thinking, "well, damn, obviously the Holocaust is a traumatic experience, but so was living through slavery"—so

what kind of trauma was passed down through the generations? So you think about that, and then a person who lived through the trauma of reconstruction, then the trauma of the people who were terrorized under Jim Crow, which then may have been passed to my parents' generation, which could still very well be in me.

So I was telling my students about this because of this other story. I said, there was one time in Portland, I was at Irving Park, one of my favorite parks, and there was a shoot out at this basketball tournament. And when I say shoot out, there were like seven or eight guys shooting, and they ran across the street and they were shooting over cars like cops and robbers. And that afternoon, during the shooting, I saw this guy—he was famous in the neighborhood because he was in the car during the first gang murder in Portland, he wasn't the shooter but he was there. All of the guys went to prison, but he was the first one that got out, and that afternoon was the first time he had been out in the public. We were all sitting out on the benches in the park, so when they started shooting everybody jumped off the bench and scattered—but not him. Like, he was so calm. He didn't jump or run. We were all hiding behind trees, and I just looked at him and thought, "why isn't he scared?" Now I think, maybe there's something in him that's made him conditioned for trauma in a way that the rest of us aren't.

Interviewer

From having lived through the trauma of being involved in the gang murder and going to prison?

Jackson

Or maybe his parents or his grandparents had experienced some kind of trauma, which was passed down, so now he's sensitized to it in a way that the

average person isn't. The average person hears gunshots and is like, "I'm outta here."

Interviewer

I want to ask about the title of your novel (and the documentary): *The Residue Years*. When it shows up in the book, it's the character Mister who says it. (Champ is dealing drugs and Mister is Champ's supplier.) In this scene, he's advising Champ about how much dope to take, how much he thinks he can sell, and he says: "One or two or twenty—get all you can while you can but not a gram or a dollar more than that . . . You want to last, that's how you last . . . Most of us, if we're lucky, we see a few seconds of the high life. And the rest are the residue years." There's a lot to unpack there, but I wondered if you could talk a bit about the meaning of the title and its importance.

Jackson

Yeah, so... we're talking about a situation where people are deprived of resources. I think what the drug dealer covets even more than money is to be visible in his community. For people to recognize him. So he comes by... I remember the drug dealers would come by and, you know, give all the little kids something, and park his car in the park with all his jewelry on. He wants you to recognize that he is a success, again getting back to the idea of how he builds his manhood. But there's obviously a danger in that because then you become the target for the people who don't have that yet.

And that makes me think, there was this guy named Darren Ezel—rest in peace—who was a really slim guy. We used to call him goggles because he had really big glasses. And of the street-level drug dealers, he was the one that came up first, so he would have his Benz, he would park his car at the park, and lean on it. And everybody was like, "There go Goggles!" But they

kidnapped him, took him to his apartment, to his girlfriend's apartment where they thought all his money was, and when they couldn't find it, they shot him in the nuts and said, "tell us where the money is." Well, the money wasn't there and he wouldn't tell them where it was and then they killed him. There's a consequence for being visible in the community. "Get all you can while you can but not a dollar more than that" is recognizing that there is a consequence to pay for too much wealth.

And then the line, "you only get a few minutes of the high life"—it's interesting that I had Mister say that, because Mister is a character that was based on my O.G., like the guy who really got me going selling dope. He was selling dope himself from the 80s to the early 2000s, without ever getting caught. I think he got caught in like 2006 and he got sixteen years—at the time he was fifty-something. So it's like, you had a career, you had it going thirty years... That's retirement! But you didn't stop. And so now I feel like he's in his residue years. He had more of the high life than any one drug dealer is supposed to ever get, and he still couldn't quit. He couldn't follow the advice that I put in his mouth as a character.

Interviewer

So the residue years are basically what comes after the fall?

Jackson

Yeah, it's like my uncle. I have an uncle who was like... there's a newspaper and I still have some copies (it's a defunct newspaper now) but the headline said, "Superman Goes to Prison" and the subtitle was "Oregon's Biggest Drug Dealer Gets Caught." They caught my uncle in 1982 with like \$384,000 cash in his trunk. Since then he's struggled with addiction for many years. Now if you were to see him, he might ask you to borrow a few dollars. So that's the residue years.

Interviewer

There was an article that went around a few months ago about Oregon's founding as a "White Utopia."

Jackson

Yeah, I saw that!

Interviewer

The article says that "When Oregon was granted statehood in 1859, it was the only state in the Union admitted with a constitution that forbade black people from living, working, or owning property there. It was illegal for black people even to move to the state until 1926." Did you have a sense of that history, growing up there? Did it shape the way you experienced Oregon growing up there?

Jackson

Well, not in any recognizable way, because I didn't know about it at the time. But then you look back at it and it all makes sense. Like, how is it... if we were to look up the statistics now (and I haven't done it in a long time), blacks have never been more than ten percent of Oregon's population. And you're like, "well they don't have any more exclusion laws, how'd that happen?" But it's built into the DNA of the place. Remember what I was saying about how trauma can be passed down through generations? Well, you're also passing down a sense of how you want this place to look forever and ever. So now it makes sense that the population is so small... that Oregon is, in a sense, a white utopia. There's probably no better place to be

white than Oregon. I don't know, maybe Vermont or Rhode Island or something.

Interviewer

At one point in the documentary, you're talking about when you were going about the process of getting your novel published, and you say, "My first impression of the publishing world was, 'that shit is not set up for me.' I wasn't represented there." You go on to talk about how you ended up in a good situation with an incredible editor and publishing team, and it seems that they really did right by your book—but in what ways did you experience publishing as a system that was not set up for you?

Jackson

Man, so, before I get to that—right now *The Guardian* is in the midst of posting the "Top 100 Nonfiction Books of All Time." So I was like, "let's see what they've got." I thought it was going to be the whole list but they've only got one through fourteen up right now. Of the fourteen, there was one book by a person of color on the list—and it was President Obama! Like, you got to be the president of the free world to get on the list if you're black? So I started thinking, "Who would be on here? Well damn, they called Baldwin the greatest nonfiction writer of all time. So how is it that not one of Baldwin's books is in the top fourteen?" It just didn't make any sense to me. But then it made absolute sense to me that this is how people build value in literature. Like, is the person who did it racist? I don't know—probably not. On the other hand, he's definitely exclusionary to think that only one person of color deserves to be included in the top fourteen. Granted, they did have a good number of women, so that's good at least.

But for me, I remember when was at the Center for Fiction dinner. It was the first time where I was in a room where I felt like the publishing industry was

there. There were publishers and there were editors, and I looked around. I remember this one dude was there who I knew from somewhere else, he came over to talk to me and he was like, “Mitch, look around.” And we looked around and we said, “we’re the only ones here.” And it was like hundreds of people. I was like, “whoa, that shit is crazy.”

Interviewer

I just wanted to ask briefly about your new book. Without giving too much away, can you say a little about it?

Jackson

Sure. It’s called *Survival Math*—it’s narrative nonfiction and it takes the story of my family and uses it to explore their issues, which I try to connect to the historical context. So for example, my mother’s addiction, which I’ve already written about—I try to connect that to the War on Drugs. One of my uncles is on death row so I’ll take that and connect it to issues with the criminal justice system. I had a father who was a pimp, which I talked about in the documentary; I’ll take that and connect it to the history of prostitution. It’s asking the same question that I ask of myself, but for them. How did we get here?

Interviewer

Wow, that sounds fascinating—are you still working on it?

Jackson

Man, yeah. I’m supposed to turn it in this summer.

Interviewer

Ah! Well, good luck. To close: I saw you a couple of weeks ago speaking at an event for the PEN Prison Writing program. I know this is something you care a lot about. Can you talk a little about the importance of that?

Jackson

Well, it's for the same reason that I'm writing to that version of myself. I don't think that those guys see enough people that they recognize themselves in who are serious about writing. Like, there's guys out there, who will go to prison, get out, write a hood story, make some money. That's not what I'm talking about, I'm talking about really living the writing life, being involved, being a literary citizen, and reading the good work and trying to do the good work. I think that until there are more people doing this who they can recognize, we're going to be hurting, right?

I don't think that there's much more respected in the world than a serious writer. And when you say someone who's a serious writer, what you really mean is that they're a serious thinker. You could be a celebrated athlete, but the people in the boardroom see you as a celebrated athlete and a commodity to sell some products to someone, and they don't necessarily respect your intellect. And that's something that writing makes the reader and the audience do, is respect that person's mind. So I want to bring that to them. If we could create a couple more Dwayne Betts or Nathan McCall, then... great.

Sinkhole

Leyna Krow

The realtor showed us the house on West Garland Avenue and insisted it had everything we wanted.

“Look,” he said, “there’s a fireplace, granite countertops, crown molding, and a large sinkhole in the yard.”

My husband Alex and I laughed because we thought he was kidding.

“No, really,” the realtor said.

We told him we didn’t want a sinkhole. That was not an item on our list. We agreed on this with absolute certainty. Back then, we always agreed with absolute certainty.

“I know,” the realtor said. “But the house is a steal. Way bigger than anything else you’ll find in your price range.”

He was right. Besides, size was what we wanted most: a home with more space for our ever-expanding brood of children and pets. So we bought the house and put up a fence around the hole to keep the kids from falling in and for a while after that, we didn’t pay much attention to it at all.

But then, one night a few weeks after the move, I asked Alex how deep he thought the sinkhole was. He said he had no idea. We went to look. We climbed our new fence and I held a flashlight while Alex leaned over the edge.

“I can’t see the bottom,” he said.

I stood beside him and peered in. It was almost as if the light was being swallowed up by the hole, eaten alive. We agreed it seemed sinister.

Then the beam of the flashlight began to fade and soon disappeared entirely.

“Piece of junk,” I said. Overcome by a childish impulse, I pitched it into the hole.

“That’s sort of wasteful, don’t you think?” Alex said. “It just needed new batteries.”

No, I said. I told him it felt good to throw the broken flashlight. The feeling alone was worth the waste. Alex chuckled at this. Back then, he thought I was funny.

Inside the house, the flashlight was waiting for us. It was perched at the edge of the coffee table.

“What the fuck?” I whispered, not wanting to wake the kids.

“Seriously, what the fuck?” Alex whispered back.

I picked up the flashlight. I didn’t know if I should be afraid or impressed. A minute earlier I had thrown it into a hole in our yard and now it was here, in the living room, on the coffee table. I turned it over in my hands to test its realness. I flicked the switch and the light came on.

“The sinkhole fixed it,” I whispered.

“Wait,” Alex said, and for a second I thought he was going to warn me to set the light down and back away—it could be dangerous. But he didn’t. What he said was: “Let’s try something else to be sure.”

He found a picture frame that had cracked during the move. I waited in the living room while he took the frame outside. In a moment, it was back on the coffee table just where the flashlight had been, the glass looking clean and solid. Alex returned and we inspected the repaired frame. We agreed it was incredible.

After that, we used the sinkhole quite often. We dropped in scuffed sneakers, forks with bent tines, books with torn covers. They all reappeared on the coffee table good as new. Soon the sinkhole became just another feature of the house we were grateful for, like the dishwasher and the walk-in closets.

We never considered the effect the hole might have on anything living. Not until the morning our oldest son, Jake, woke me to announce in a tear-ragged voice that something was wrong with his turtle. He was holding the turtle, named Bert, in both hands. I could see the creature was sick. I didn’t want to take both boy and turtle to the vet only to hear bad news. So, I led Jake to the yard and helped him over the fence to the hole.

“Put Bert in there and it will fix him,” I said.

I thought Jake would protest, but worry for his pet made him compliant. He set Bert into the hole and gasped when he disappeared. Back inside, he found Bert on the coffee table and ran to him. The turtle was much improved. But a pale of concern remained on Jake's little face.

"Is my turtle a zombie now?" he asked.

"No, of course not," I told him. "Zombies are dead things that come back to life. Bert was just sick. The sinkhole made him better."

As soon as I said those words—*The sinkhole made him better*—I felt a kind shiver run through me. Like I'd just found the answer to a very important question I hadn't even thought to ask.

I began to wonder what the sinkhole could do for me, if I put myself in it.

I wasn't sick like Bert. I wasn't broken like our clock radio. But I wasn't the best version of me, either. I was thirty-eight, my body damaged from childbearing, and before that from alcohol and hair dye and music that was too loud. The usual things. Adulthood wore down my character, too. I was impulsive and at times forgetful. No great crimes. But wouldn't my family be happier with an improved me? Wouldn't I be happier?

I suggested this to Alex one night and he said no.

"I like you the way you are."

I thought he was just being kind. Back then, we were always kind to one another.

"But wouldn't you like me better if I was better?"

"No, because then you wouldn't be you."

I didn't see this as the compliment he intended. I felt he was saying my essential nature was a flawed one.

Alex looked into my eyes and I could see the worry creep across his face.

"Please promise me you won't get in that sinkhole," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because it's weird. It's a weird thing to do."

I promised, but I couldn't help but see this conversation as evidence for exactly why I needed so badly to go through the sinkhole: My logic was

flawed, my thinking strange. What kind of woman wants to put herself in a hole? I felt strongly that if I used the hole to make myself better, I would banish such weirdness. I would no longer be the sort of person who wished to get into holes.

Alex kept looking at me. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to lie to him. Back then, we never lied.

I felt ready to get in the hole that night, but chose to wait. I wanted to be certain I was doing the right thing. So, for the next week, I went about my life as my normal, flawed self. I went to work, I visited with friends, I fed, cleaned, and entertained my children. I was kind and agreeable and honest and funny with Alex, like always.

But in my head, I kept a list of each mistake I made, every error a more perfect me would have been able to avoid—a burnt pan of lasagna, a forgotten birthday, a child scolded too harshly. And so on. Normally, I might have chastised myself for these missteps and later recounted them to Alex so he could reassure me they weren't really so bad. But instead I hoarded them almost gleefully. They were the evidence against myself. I was building my case for the sinkhole.

I made a habit of visiting the hole before bed each night. I took my flashlight and, dressed in my slippers and robe, stood beside it, looking in. It was a meditative practice of sorts. I tried to think of nothing while I did this—not my flaws, or what a flawless me might be like. I just stood and stared, letting the darkness of the cavern fill my mind with calm and hope. Sometime I was aware of Alex watching me as I did this, waiting at the bedroom window for me to finish my ritual. But he never said anything about it. Why didn't he say anything? What was wrong with me that my beloved husband could watch me do something that bizarre, night after night, and never feel capable of confronting me about it? Was I so fragile? So frightening? So beguiling?

Then one evening Jake went off for a sleepover and left me with instructions to feed Bert—what kind of veggies and how much. Of course I forgot. In the morning, the turtle gazed out at me from his cage with what I imagined to be a hunger-stricken look. *Never again*, I thought.

I went straight for the hole. As I climbed the fence, I wondered about my entry. Should I dive? Cannonball? No. Such actions would suggest a kind of playfulness. But this was not play. It was work—the work of repairing myself. I walked into the hole as if stepping off a curb. I tumbled over once in the dark air then I was seated, legs crossed, back straight (no more slouching for me!) on the edge of the coffee table, feeling calm and perfect. Like I was someone else entirely. So, Alex had been right, of course. I was no longer myself. But the new and better me didn't care. The better me was content to sit at the edge of the table, waiting patiently for Alex to come home so I could show him all the ways I'd changed.



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Summer 1984

Sonya Chung

The following is an excerpt from the novel The Loved Ones, forthcoming from Relegation Books in October 2016.



The boy was six, the girl nine. Their father, Charles Frederick Douglass Lee, was himself one of five children; each had looked after the next while Charles's mother worked night shifts and his grandmother worked days at the same corner store owned by a cousin. He'd come up fine and didn't believe in babysitters. It was his wife, Alice, who insisted the girl was not old enough to be left alone with the boy. "What if there's an emergency," Alice Lee said to Charles. She often made statements in the form of questions. She said "emergency" in a near whisper.

"She's a smart girl, she knows how to dial a phone." Charles favored the girl, loved her more, even; but he was careful not to show it as much as he might. Veda was dark-skinned, almost as dark as him, darker than the boy, but had most of her mother's features—heart-shaped face, gray eyes, celestial nose. She did have his full lips and bright, large-toothed smile, everyone said so. She had his dark, purplish gums, too; though no one said so. Veda's hair was dark brown, soft and wavy, but her mother didn't understand as well as her father what this meant, how lucky she was.

The boy, Benny, was light-skinned, but he had his father's thick eyebrows and prominent forehead. He was a big boy for his age and barreled around like a fullback, shoulders squared, hands balled into fists. He couldn't yet read, or wouldn't. Sometimes he still wet the bed. He'd bitten other children, more than once, and crashed full-force into anything in-progress that he hadn't himself started—a jigsaw puzzle, another boy's Lego house, his sister's My Little Ponies arranged for a pageant. Charles marveled at Alice's calm, even tones with both children. Sometimes he loved her for it,

sometimes he hated her. Sometimes he wanted to slap the boy and shove his wife; sometimes the other way around.

Alice Lee was going back to work. She was a social worker and had found a position at a Korean nursing home in Silver Spring. She'd been home with the children all these years and was fortunate to get the job after being out of the workforce. Alice did have a nurse practitioner's degree—she'd gone to night school when Benny started pre-K—and the nursing home needed someone like her, who could communicate well enough with the Mexican service staff (Peace Corps in Chile), with the residents and doctors (DoD educational assistant, Yongsan Base in Seoul), and with the pharmaceutical and insurance people on the phone.

For weeks Charles and Alice argued over whether to hire a babysitter—"discussed," Alice would say—and in the end Charles gave in, mostly for the girl's sake. Why should she have to watch over the boy.

"There's a nurse at the home whose daughter could do it," Alice said. "She sounds *perfect*. Polite, responsible. Her mother has been with the home for many years."

So she's already arranged it, Charles thought. Of course she has.

"Her name is Lee," Alice said, like an offering, and with a chuckle. "Hannah—the girl—Hannah Lee."

A Korean girl. Charles didn't like it. Just as he didn't like his wife working at that nursing home. Did the mother of the girl know about him? Charles didn't have to ask. No way she did. Not yet. Alice would wait to reveal it, her *gamman-saram* husband—to the mother, to all her coworkers—after she'd proven herself trustworthy, likeable. His wife was a smart girl, too. Lee was likely a useful name to have around there.

Charles wasn't surprised: so many of them were named Lee. He'd gotten used to it in Korea, the bitter irony. The KATUSAs had found it especially amusing: *Lee-san*, they'd called him, though he generally didn't take it as friendliness.

Hannah Lee came by herself on a Saturday afternoon in late May to meet the children and be shown around. When the bell rang, Alice was in the

backyard with the boy. Charles was scanning the scores and listening to WJFK sports; he got up from his recliner to answer.

The girl wore a navy T-shirt dress with a braided belt hanging below the waist, jelly sandals, and shiny lip gloss (in fact it was just Vaseline; her mother did not allow makeup). Her eyeglasses were perfectly round, her hair wavy and brown at the ends. Her legs were long, and she looked older than Charles had expected. Thirteen, Alice had said. Maybe it was her handbag, a square Gucci that was slung across her body and reminded Charles instantly of the fakes sold in Itaewon by the dozens to officers' wives. Or maybe it was the solemnity of her pale, rectangular face. When she smiled and introduced herself, it seemed to require effort, an awkward exertion. But it wasn't his black face that troubled her. Charles knew *that* look—he'd borne it over and again from Alice's friends and family. No, it wasn't that; it was rather the strain of nicety, a learned affect of cheerfulness that did not come naturally to the girl. Alice had apparently missed it on the phone the day before—*She sounds perfect*—and this knowledge gave Charles Lee a small burst of pleasure.

The phone rang just as Soon-mi squatted by the flowerbed with trowel and kitchen knife. She could hear it through the sliding screen door, and so could Chong-ho from across the small yard. The day was mild and still and overcast, and the deep ink-blue of the *Baptisia*—false indigo it was sometimes called—seemed to ring brightly, shockingly, along with the telephone.

It was late in the season to be dividing, but the forecast called for cooler weather and light rain tomorrow, Sunday, into Monday. There was space in the flowerbed that bordered the back of the house where a peony had been lost to an early spring storm (the gutter had come crashing down). Soon-mi thought she could divide and replant all three indigos, maybe finish the weeding she'd started earlier, too, before dinner.

Chong-ho looked to Soon-mi from the vegetable garden. Not with his eyes, but with his attention. The phone rang a second and third time.

Soon-mi stood and removed her gloves, laying them down along with her tools on the patio table. She slid the screen door open and stepped through.

Chong-ho looked up and saw Soon-mi's blue rubber slipper dangling from her foot. The slipper dropped to the doormat as Soon-mi disappeared into the house. Who could be calling, Chong-ho wondered, at this time on a Saturday. Probably one of Hannah's school friends. That girl who was always calling, the fat one with the brown skin and short skirt who talked too fast. She'd come after school with Hannah once but then never again. Maybe Soon-mi had said something, though likely not; Hannah would not need to be told. Chong-ho grimaced and went back to transplanting the go-chu.

During the week sometimes there were sales calls, but never on weekends. Soon-mi thought it could only be one person, and she let out an audible sigh when she heard James's voice—as if her wishing had made it so.

“Hi, *Ummah*.” There was an echo, along with yelling and laughing in the background.

“James?” Soon-mi said. She'd raised her voice, and it cracked. “Why so much noisy?”

“Those are just my suitemates. I'm in the bathroom with the phone. Remember when I switched the long cord from your phone last time? It's the only way to have any privacy around here.”

“Sweet? Mate?”

“Roommates, *Ummah*. I have two, I told you. They're okay. Just blowing off steam before exams.”

“Unh. Exam. You have exam now. That's why you call today?”

“Exams are next week,” he said. “I have study groups tomorrow, all day.” There was a muffled bang, then the crash of aluminum cans hitting the floor. James covered the mouthpiece and hissed, “Hey, dickheads, knock it off.”

Soon-mi waited.

“Sorry, they're just horsing around. Anyway. Um . . .”

They spoke for just a few minutes, as always. When he asked for Hannah, Soon-mi said she'd gone out, and didn't mention the babysitting

job. It was a long story, and she didn't care to get into it; Hannah could tell him herself next time. And who knew how long it would last anyway. The American woman, Alice Lee—her children were old enough to be home alone, really.

"Tell her to call me sometime," James said. "Just, you know. Whenever."

"Unh, okay," Soon-mi said. She told him to make sure he ate well, not just ramen noodles, and he laughed, even though she wasn't making a joke. Then they hung up.

Soon-mi stepped back out onto the patio and retrieved her trowel and knife. As she pulled on her gloves she became thoughtful and laid the tools again on the table, then walked toward the far end of the yard, the sunny corner, where Chong-ho was putting the last of the go-chu seedlings in the ground.

"*Moh han-eun goon-yo?* What is it?" Chong-ho handed her a seedling, then proceeded to mix in the fertilizer he'd just sprinkled over the hole. Soon-mi cupped the ball of spindly roots in her orange gloves. She told her husband that James was fine and conveyed his reason for calling on a Saturday. Chong-ho clawed at the dirt in the bottom of the hole with both hands—he never wore gloves—making sure the plant food was deeply and evenly mixed.

When he was done, Chong-ho held out his right hand, which was dark with earth, and Soon-mi placed the seedling in his palm. "Hannah missed talking to him." The words formed themselves, and multiple meanings, from an uneasy place that Soon-mi knew well; though only as a kind of bodily thrumming. She couldn't have named it, not even to herself.

"Where did she go?"

Soon-mi was silent. She had not anticipated this question; that is, she had not considered how she would answer it. She had been distracted sending Hannah off. Of course Hannah's father would question the purpose of her having a job: they provided for her, she should be studying. "Out with a friend," Soon-mi said, and their eyes met briefly as Chong-ho stood to stretch his back. In that glance, Chong-ho was saying, *What you tell me is*

always truth enough, and Soon-mi was saying, *I understand the nature of your trust.*

Chong-ho squatted again, and Soon-mi knelt next to him. He mixed in the plant food and set the seedlings in the holes. She scooped dirt and filled the gaps, then patted the soil. When they got to the last hole, Soon-mi said, “Hannah should call him. He has good advice for her, I think. He is becoming more responsible, concerned for the younger one.”

Chong-ho said nothing. Soon-mi shifted her weight to achy ankles and hips, and brushed off her knees. As she turned to work on the *Baptisias*, Chong-ho raised his head and said, “She will be home for dinner?”

“Unh,” Soon-mi said.

Chong-ho lowered his eyes, and with that, it was agreed: he would encourage Hannah to call her brother.

Soon-mi’s slippers made a muted slapping noise against her socks as she walked toward the house. She would have time to divide and transplant only one of the false indigos. She worked from a squat, and when she plunged her trowel into the ground, loosening the root ball on all sides and then pulling up from the base of the stalks, she felt how deep and intricate the roots were; how they clung to the earth that fed them. She dug deeper, pulled firmly and evenly from the top, wiggling the plant from side to side. The roots loosened, and Soon-mi thought, *Why should* Hannah work for the American family? Soon-mi had made the offer to Alice Lee without thinking, though it seemed right at the time. She’d felt relief when the woman wrote down their phone number. Hannah would be occupied, looking after children. Soon-mi was not convinced this was a bad idea; nor a good one, exactly. The uneasy thrumming persisted.

The root ball came up, and Soon-mi fell back on her heels but maintained her squat. She laid the matted, gnarly thing in the dirt and eyed the knife, which she’d staked upright at the border where dirt met grass. She sighed. This was the part she didn’t like. Always she had to remind herself, as she sliced through the bone-white roots and offshoots like baby hairs, that she was regenerating, propagating, and not destroying.

It was the Saturday before Memorial Day, and Kenyon Street was lined with American flags. They shot out like saluting arms from the porch roofs of row houses. The flag on Charles and Alice Lee's four-bedroom brick was smaller than the neighbors'—colors dull and faded by comparison, material drab. In this way, the house stood out.

Hannah Lee walked east from the Columbia Heights Metro station along a sidewalk that was clean but badly cracked. Weeds and tree roots pushed up with a brute force that made her think of her crooked front tooth—how the baby tooth had hung on stubbornly until the permanent one had to come breaking through at an angle.

There were people sitting on every porch or stoop along the block—black people, mostly old people, a few babies and toddlers in their laps. They stared as Hannah walked by. She stared back. No one smiled. One little boy waved. Hannah was not frightened or nervous, though she had some awareness that perhaps she should be. She didn't mind—liked it even, a little, this being noticed.

The Lees' house was exactly mid-block. There was no one sitting on the porch or stoop, just a mess of bicycles and car/truck/train toys, and potted plants, flowers mostly, unkempt and clustered along the left end of the red-painted steps. Hannah liked the house right away, though she could not have said exactly why. She did think of how her father would have scoffed at the annuals in the pots—her parents grew only vegetables and hardy perennials, in large beds that they tended meticulously from March to November—and how her mother would have pursed her lips at the disorder.

Soon-mi had not asked to see the exact address; Alice Lee had told her, "a short walk from the Columbia Heights stop," but she had not said in which direction. Soon-mi assumed west, toward the park. Alice Lee was a white woman with a master's degree, after all.

Hannah rang the bell and waited. A man came to the door. He looked surprised, and he stared at Hannah, though in a different way from the porch and stoop people. Hannah did not mind this man's staring either, though after a few moments of silence she couldn't help but think of her

brother, James, who—now that he was majoring in business instead of smoking pot behind the Burger King—had started calling her “spacey.”

“I’m . . . Hannah. The babysitter.” Something caught in Hannah’s voice—a flatness swallowed her words. She had intended to be polite, and cheerful. She didn’t know what had come over her: it was like when she had to read Ophelia’s *Hey nonny, nonny* section in front of the class and she delivered it deadpan, even though she knew she was supposed to be dramatic.

The man was very dark, and big like an athlete. He had a broad, smooth forehead; wide Eskimo cheeks; a strong jaw, which hung slightly open. His eyes were round and shiny and black, like licorice jelly beans, and Hannah looked straight into the right one (his left), which she could just barely do without craning her neck. He was handsome, this man. She liked the word—much more than *cute* or *hot*—and enjoyed the pleasure of both beholding and thinking it. (*Pleasure*, on the other hand, was a word that Hannah would never have thought, or spoken.)

Charles blinked once. Hannah lowered her gaze to the many-colored flecks in his brown sweater vest, then to the crisp white of his T-shirt. Her eyes landed on Charles’s collarbones, which pushed out just like the sidewalk’s thick tree roots.

Hannah cleared her throat. “Mrs. Lee said . . . three o’clock.” Her feet pressed hard into the concrete, her shoulders dropped from her ears. Charles lowered his chin, put one hand on his head as if to rub it, then stepped back from the door. He said her name and got it wrong—*Come on in, Anna*—and Hannah corrected him: “No, it’s *Haa-nah*.” The voice that came out this time was strangely familiar—it was the one she normally heard only inside her head. Not rude exactly, but absent the interrogative tone that all the girls had begun using.

The voice had raced out. Hannah wished she could chase after the words and smash them with her hands like ants, but then Charles Lee’s hand came off his head, licorice eyes rolling up and smiling bright. “Sorry, right. Come in, *Haa-nah*.” Voice warm and deep. Not deep like a tuba, but lighter, and a little sad, like a clarinet. Hannah stepped past, two long strides, and into the house.

Charles led Hannah through the kitchen to the back door. Hannah kept both hands on her purse. In new places she felt loose and awkward with her hands dangling at her sides; she always wanted to touch things, like a blind person groping for direction.

Charles opened the screen door and stepped out onto a cement landing. “Alice,” he called, and motioned for Hannah to descend the steps. His voice had changed: it was both heavier and more floaty. Hannah watched her feet as she took each steep and slanted step. Charles disappeared into the house, the screen door crashing shut.

“No slamming!” A boy stood up from a crouch, sausage finger pointing up in the air.

Alice Lee was kneeling in the grass. She raised herself up without using her hands, brushed dirt from her denim pedal pushers, then nudged a bouncy blonde lock from the corner of her eye with a knuckle. “And no shouting, mister,” she said.

The boy was Bennett, after Alice’s maternal great-grandfather. They called him Benny. He grinned, slapped a chubby brown hand over his mouth, then frog-leaped to another corner of the sandbox, toward a yellow dump truck. Noisy, catastrophic collisions ensued. The boy was all hair, big and Brillo-y, the same burlap-sack color of his skin. He wore a T-shirt two sizes too big, shorts that went down to his calves. He was an ugly boy, and not a little frightening.

“You’re Hannah,” Alice said, smiling with her lips but frowning with her eyes.

It was an odd greeting; it made one feel caught out somehow.

Charles leaned on the kitchen sink drinking a Pabst and looking out the window. He felt for the girl. He watched his wife amble over in her cowgirlish way, reaching out her hand. The two were likely the same height, but Alice slouched slightly—or maybe it was just her sharp shoulders and short neck, it was hard to tell. Charles did not care to watch anymore. He went back to the scores, to his La-Z-Boy.

Out in the yard, Alice said, “So this is it,” spreading her arms. “Did you have any trouble finding us?” Hannah shook her head no, said from

Wheaton it was six stops and one transfer, and a short walk from the station, just as Alice had said. “Good, I’m glad it won’t be a long commute for you. Makes everything simpler.” Alice went on to describe the areas of the small yard and what each child liked to do there—Veda at the picnic table with her craft projects, Benny in the sandbox or on the climber. There was a trellis with thick brown vines growing all over it that looked like something out of a children’s storybook. It was in fact a small fig tree whose branches had grown long and snakelike. “Hose play is fine, especially on hot days, but you should hold the hose for them, or else Benny gets a little wild.”

“Should they be in swimsuits?” Hannah asked.

“Veda will want to change. Benny can just lose his shirt.”

Hannah nodded.

“So Benny is six,” Alice continued, as if pointing out yet another feature of the yard.

“Six and a quarter!” Benny shouted.

“Six and a *quarter*.” Alice rolled her eyes, and Hannah pushed out a small laugh. “Veda is nine, ten in August. She’s at a friend’s house down the street. I’ll show you the rest of the house and then you and I can walk over to the Mitchells’ to pick up Veda. She’s over there enough that you should meet them.” Hannah nodded again. Alice Lee was clearly, thoroughly in charge.

After the tour, which was just a walk around the first floor, Alice told Charles they’d be back in a few minutes. Benny continued to accelerate, crash, and explode things in back. “When you can’t hear him, *that’s* when he needs checking on.” It was not clear for whom the statement was meant, Hannah or Charles.

The front gate closed behind them; Hannah and Alice headed west to the Mitchells’. With her mind, Hannah looked back toward the house; with her eyes, she noticed Alice Lee’s bouncy blonde hair. It was just the style she herself had hoped for when she’d gone for a perm. On Alice Lee, though, with her pointed shoulders and skinny legs, it looked somehow not-right—like movie-star sunglasses on a cloudy afternoon.

They walked in the opposite direction from the station—just two streets over, but a different neighborhood altogether. The sidewalks were

wider, and even; the faces mostly white, and relatively young. On one side of the street the houses were very tall and lean—all brick, and without porches. Some of them looked like castles, with their bay windows and turrets. On the other side, the porch roofs were held up by beautiful white pillars. None of the houses on the Mitchells' street had chain-link fences.

Hannah thought how her father would consider all these houses inferior—attached to one another, with tiny yards. But Hannah liked them—the way she liked chess, which her friend Raj had taught her, and memorizing vocabulary and verb conjugations for Madame Glissant's French class. Anyway, she knew her father missed a lot of things; that he and her mother lived so much apart from others, and that they didn't—couldn't, somehow—see everything clearly.

Alice stopped in front of a fancy iron gate and let out a mysterious sigh. It was a tall porchless house with green double doors. They ascended the steps, and Alice rang the bell. "Karen's a pediatrician, so I never worry when Veda is over here on the weekends." Alice spoke in tight, confident tones, like a receptionist for an important person. "Amy is Veda's best friend, and they're young for sleepovers, but I allow it. Amy's a very sweet girl."

On cue, they heard the pitter-patter of small feet. A tiny, full-freckled girl pulled the door open with both hands.

"Hello, Amy," Alice said, leaning down as if she might pet her.

"We knew it was you," Amy Mitchell giggled. Her bare feet were cross-stacked on top of each other, one knee bent, in the manner of children who have to go to the toilet. She chewed on a strand of frizzy brown hair, the rest of which was piled elaborately on top of her head with a fistful of bobby pins. Sparkly pink earrings hung from her lobes.

"Hi Alice, come in!" a voice called from within. Alice helped Amy with the door, pushing her way inside.

"They're here!" Amy called.

"My, what pretty earrings," Alice said, reaching out with her fingertips.

The girl leaned forward so they could be properly admired. “We’re playing makeover.” Amidst Amy’s freckles were glitter stars, sparkling around her eyes and cheeks.

Amy turned and pattered back toward the kitchen. Alice and Hannah followed. Alice fell behind Hannah, lingering to notice the new bamboo floors. The lighting was different, too—modern half-moon sconces led them down the long hallway. Karen Mitchell had a busy practice and was highly sought-after among the government set; she also published articles and taught at Georgetown. Her husband, Rick, was an estate lawyer.

“Hi, Karen. I guess we’re a little earlier than I said.” It was not quite an apology.

In the kitchen they found Veda sitting in a lacquer bar chair, legs crossed at the ankles. Her hair had been tightly French-braided and tied up in back. A rhinestone tiara circled her crown. Karen Mitchell leaned over her, applying blue eye shadow.

“Ta da!” The shadow was light and shimmery on Veda’s dark skin. The girl sat perfectly upright, and with her hair pulled back so tightly her face looked both calm and alert. Against the shimmer of the blue shadow and the sparkle of the tiara, Veda’s grey eyes turned translucent, shifty and complex like a crystal.

Hannah nearly gaped. The sight of Veda took her breath away, and for a moment, she saw not a made-up child in a stranger’s kitchen, but an African princess.

“My goodness.” Alice’s tone was somehow both airy and taut. Amy giggled with her hand over her mouth.

“Oh, I hope you don’t mind, Alice. I had a feeling this blue would just be spectacular on V. Do you remember wearing this stuff? God, the seventies!”

Alice smiled weakly. She’d never worn eye shadow in her life. Karen’s thin pink T-shirt was sliding off her bare shoulder, pale and freckled like her daughter.

“These next, these next!” Amy was jumping up and down, holding a small black container with a clear plastic top. False eyelashes.

“Put those down, honey. Those are for another time, maybe. In a few years.” Then Karen winked at Hannah. “Maybe when you’re old enough to babysit.”

“Oh, gosh, sorry.” Alice’s voice was looser now, but too loud. “This is Hannah, who I was telling you about. She’ll be watching the kids after school.”

“We have a babysitter, too,” Amy said, twirling around on the ball of one foot. “She’s sixteen, and she has big ones.”

“Amy.” Karen flashed her daughter a look, but she was smiling.

“Well, Hannah is thirteen, but she’s very *responsible*.”

Hannah flushed. Something had changed in the air. Karen Mitchell stepped back from Veda, who thus far had not said a word.

Veda blinked her eyes and climbed down from the chair, her head and neck held perfectly still. She reached for Hannah’s hand. “You have to help me wash this off now,” she said, as she led her new responsible babysitter to the bathroom. Amy skipped along behind, and Alice stared after them.

Karen cleared her throat. “They had a nice time.”

“She always does,” Alice said, remembering to smile.

“I thought I might have to run to the hospital and leave them with the sitter, but I’m so glad I was able to get someone to cover for me.”

“Mm,” Alice said.

“So Hannah seems nice,” Karen said. “Very calm. How long has she been with you?”

“Oh, just today. It’s her first day.”

“Oh! My gosh. I didn’t realize. I’m sure she’ll be just great. And it’s so terrific, Alice. You back to work. And using all of your . . . experiences, after all these years. I don’t know if I could do it. If I’d stopped working when Amy was born. But you’re so *brave*, and you’ve had so many interesting *adventures*. Remind me—you speak Korean, right?”

“Just a little.”

“And is Hannah’s English pretty good?”

Alice looked at Karen, whose linen miniskirt showed off her athletic thighs. Karen was turned away, gathering the makeup containers. Something hot and scratchy rose in Alice's throat. "Karen, Hannah speaks perfect English. Don't you have any colleagues at the hospital who are immigrants?"

Karen turned back with a quizzical look. She might have been considering Alice's question; she might have been considering Alice.

Alice laughed, a little too sweetly.

Amy came skipping from the bathroom to find the two women locked in silence. It was Alice who turned away first. "How's it going in there?"

"The soap," Amy said, "it's stinging her eyes."

"Oh, jeez, you need this," Karen said, reaching for a small blue bottle. "Here you go, pumpkin."

On the way home, Alice walked with her arm around Veda's shoulder and said to Hannah, "That Amy really is such a sweet girl."

It was the first day of summer. The children's summer. School was out, but Hannah still took the Metro to Columbia Heights station in the afternoons, as she had for the previous three weeks. Alice worked the 3-to-11 shift at the nursing home, which meant she was home until 2:30. "So it will just be an hour earlier every day," she had said, and Hannah said that would be fine. Her only other plans for the summer were to read *Le Petit Prince*—which Madame Glissant had recommended to her—and to swim every day, which she did at the pool in Silver Spring. In the fall, Hannah would start high school and intended to be the number-one seed in backstroke. Raj's brother Ravi had said that the girls' team *sucked*, and this, Hannah thought, boded well for her.

Alice did not ask what else Hannah would be doing when she was not watching Veda and Benny. But she did raise Hannah's wage by fifty cents an hour. "It's the least we can do. There must be so many other things a girl your age wants to be doing with her summer afternoons." It was a funny thing to say, Hannah thought—as if Alice Lee had some completely different

girl in mind when she said it. But Hannah was happy for the raise; it was the first time she'd had her own money, and she was saving up. For what, exactly, she didn't yet know.

In the evenings, Charles arrived punctually at six. Sometimes he carried bags of groceries, sometimes takeout Chinese or pizza. He wore short-sleeved collared shirts in light blue or yellow, sometimes plaid, with a white undershirt that showed through; pleated slacks; and black rubber-soled shoes. He did not wear a jacket or tie. Hannah tried to guess where he was coming from, but found she could only guess where he was not coming from: he was not a lawyer or businessman, he did not work at a bank. He was probably not a doctor, either; though maybe he worked in a lab doing research like her father (who wore a pin-striped shirt and gray pants every single day). He was clearly not a plumber or construction worker: he had smooth, long-fingered hands; the half-moons of his fingernails were perfect and white. He looked like he could be a teacher, but then it didn't make sense that he would be going to work all day in the summertime. Hannah resorted to considering what sort of job the husband of Alice Lee would have, but that got her nowhere. In general, Hannah had trouble holding Alice Lee and Charles Lee as a pair in her mind; except for the first meeting, she never saw them together.

Hannah missed seeing Charles's licorice-bean eyes, as he always wore aviator sunglasses now, even inside as he unpacked food or handed Hannah her wages. When she left, he would say, "Have a good evening," and always in an adult voice, as if Hannah were not a young girl but a restaurant hostess, or one of the grocery checkout ladies. When she looked into Charles's aviator lenses, Hannah tried to pretend she was looking straight into his left eye again, but all she saw was her own warped reflection, in which her forehead appeared huge, and her eyeglasses too round.

On the one hand, Hannah was glad about not having to make conversation. She was glad, for instance, that she did not have to be driven home by Charles Lee. She'd seen a movie once on TV where the husband pulled over on the side of the road, strangled the babysitter, and dumped her in the river. The scariest part, she thought, was that they didn't show the

actual strangling, only the man (who looked like a teacher) reaching toward the girl with both hands; then the camera shifted to the outside of the silver Jeep with tinted windows, which sat still and silent in the dark night.

But then again, if Charles Lee drove her home, maybe he'd take off the sunglasses and not be scary at all. Maybe she'd find a way, again, to make his shiny black eyes go wide and a little confused. Maybe that voice—that strange, familiar, inside-her-head voice—would come back, and Hannah would say things she'd never said out loud before; wonderful, interesting things she only half-knew she'd thought. Maybe, too, she'd hear that sad woodwind warmth again in Charles's replies.

Before leaving, Hannah always told Charles briefly what they'd done that afternoon, what they'd had for a snack, usually too some report on Benny's troublesome behavior. On that front, Hannah had found she had no trouble administering effective punishment: the boy hated two things above all else—silence and wearing shoes. And so Time Out meant putting on his sneakers and sitting in the Silence Chair. For his sixth birthday, Alice Lee's brother had given the boy a plastic digital watch, which he loved and wore every day. To keep him busy Hannah would set the stopwatch for two minutes. The countdown, with its racing milliseconds, at least partially absorbed him; so while he whined and pouted all throughout the lace-up of the sneakers, he kept quiet for the two-minute period. Once, Hannah had offered Veda the chance to set the watch. The girl considered seriously for a moment, brow furrowed; then she raised her eyes and shook her head. *I'll have no part of it*, she seemed to be saying, and went back to beading a bracelet.

One evening Hannah described the shoes-and-Silence-Chair procedure to Charles. The children were off washing their hands. "You're a pro at this," Charles said. He raised his sunglasses off his nose to rub his eye, then dropped them back down. "You figured it out pretty quickly."

Hannah had gone home that evening wondering what he'd meant by "it." She felt she knew even as she tried to understand. "It" had something to do with the girl's superiority, and the boy's stupidity. "It" was something she

and Charles now shared, this understanding, and was something Hannah felt quite sure Alice Lee did not share, did not understand.

On the Metro ride home now, Hannah sometimes replayed the father-and-babysitter scene from the movie. She imagined herself as the babysitter and Charles as the murderer, only in her version, when he pulled over to the side of the road, Charles reached to pull her into an embrace. Once, while she was swimming backstroke at the pool, his clarinet voice came into her ear. The voice was soothing, and kind, complimenting her on her long, smooth strokes and speed.

The boy was eating lo mein with his fingers and letting the noodles hang down from his mouth. “Raaahhrrr!” he was saying, “I am the swamp monster!” Benny rolled his eyes up almost to complete whites. Charles sighed into the refrigerator, reached for a Pabst, then closed the door extra slowly. He’d had a long day at work; the East Gate cameras at the stadium were malfunctioning again.

The boy was waiting for someone, his father or Veda, to react.

Charles turned to his son: hair like a tumbleweed on top of a cactus. Swamp monster, indeed. “We’re taking you to the barber shop on Saturday.”

The boy had told his mother he liked his hair this way, and she’d said fine. Later, Charles and Alice had argued over—discussed—it, and Alice told Charles that children need freedom and a sense of self-determination. They also, Charles said, need to learn how to sit still; this was the real reason, he knew, that the boy didn’t like to have his hair cut. He was six years old, what did he know or care about liking his hair one way or another? You’d be surprised, Alice had said, how early it starts now. How early what starts? The importance of appearances, and self-image. Good god, Charles had said, though now he couldn’t remember if he’d said it out loud or only in his head. He’d expressed it one way or another; Alice’s hard silence had made that clear.

As a child, Charles himself always had short hair. His grandmother made sure of it. By the time Afros were getting taller and fuller, he’d enlisted.

Only once—when Benny was a toddler just starting to walk on his own (and learning to make fists and throw tantrums), and life was becoming a constant chaos of noise and mess—Charles went two months without a haircut. “You look like Bill Withers,” Alice had said, and she’d sounded pleased about it. Charles remembered her saying that, because he remembered they had sex that night—rare in those days—and Alice had shocked him by giving fellatio. Charles always sensed her semi-unwillingness to use her mouth in any sensual way—she never ate tomatoes because of the sliminess of the seeds, and she bit off bananas with her lips pulled back, teeth bared. That night, though, Charles hadn’t cared. He pushed Alice to her knees. Had he pushed hard? What was “hard”? Where were his hands while she did it? Where were hers? Charles couldn’t remember.

“Stop it, Benny. That’s gross.” Veda had spread a thin layer of pork and cabbage and was rolling her moo shu pancake into a narrow tube.

“Here,” Charles said, reaching over from behind. He unrolled the pancake, dropped in another large spoonful, and re-rolled it. “You need to eat more, V. Skin and bones.” He pinched Veda’s upper arm playfully. She squirmed and giggled, then picked up her pancake with both hands. A strand of hair fell forward into her mouth as she got ready to take a bite; Charles hooked it with his finger and tucked it behind her ear.

On Saturday Charles took Benny to the barber. He’d been going to the shop on the corner of Georgia and Keefer Place since he was a boy. He’d known Vernon Mills for twenty-five years. In the end, this was how Charles had gotten Alice to agree: it would be a tradition, a father-son outing. Alice liked the historical notion of it, and she liked anything “special” that Charles did with the boy. As for Benny, *just like Daddy* was something to which he was generally responsive; it was how they’d potty-trained him (well, almost) at five and a half.

Vernon was not much of a talker. He let his customers do all the talking, and he listened. Charles had always liked this about Vernon—not only was he comfortable in his silence, but generous. After Nona dropped him off, young Charles would sit quietly in the chair while Vernon clipped

away, sometimes humming. Usually he had a cigarette going, ashtray within reach of the chair. Charles would will himself not to cough and stare into the corners of the mirror, where he could see everyone in the shop. The other men, most of whom weren't there for haircuts or shaves, would talk, and talk. Charles didn't understand most of it, but what he perceived in the talk was that what they were saying, and what it really meant, were different things. For instance, the tone was often complaining—taxes, mayors, wives, landlords—and yet the collective feeling was one of joy and pleasure. It was something that would come back to him, and ring familiar, in small moments, years later in the Army.

Charles vaguely dreaded bringing Benny to Vernon's. He considered taking him to a different shop, where no one knew him. His friend Dennis, who he came up with (and who'd talked him into enlisting when they were seventeen and no-count), had always gone to Van's on 11th and Kenyon. But Charles had already told the boy about Vernon, and whatever lie he might concoct to fool him now would need to be elaborate. Anyway, even if the boy believed it, his mother wouldn't.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Vernon spoke in almost a whisper now, his lungs and throat worn to reeds. He'd always slouched, but the slouch had curled into a stoop. He seemed ancient, though in fact he couldn't have been much older than sixty.

"Vern," Charles said, nodding. "My son. Bennett."

"Bennett Lee, Charlie's boy. And how are you, young man?"

"Fine." Benny was pulling at the hem of his long T-shirt with both hands, twisting back and forth.

"Fine, *what*, Benny." Charles put his hand on the boy's neck and pressed with two fingers.

"Fine . . . thank you," Benny mumbled.

"Fine, thank you, *sir*," Charles said, and Benny looked up at him with eyes that made Charles shudder. If the boy had the words, Charles thought, if the boy were smart, he'd be saying, *You fraudulent fuck, the word "sir" has never once been uttered in our household, and you know it.*

Vernon's nephew Mike interjected then, slapping the chair opposite Vernon's. "Come right here, little man. I'll take care o' you today." Mike was a fat man, gregarious and cheeky, everything Vernon was not.

Benny plopped into Mike's chair, staring up at him with wonder. It took a moment for Charles to understand what exactly had captivated the boy. Then Benny said, "I want *those*," pointing at Mike's braids.

They were tight against his big skull, skinny rows hanging down the back of his neck and beaded at the ends. On Fat Mike the Barber, pushing forty, they were fine, they said Cool Cat; he was an exuberant born-again, he led Bible studies for prison inmates, the braids were like plainclothes. On a young boy wearing too-big T-shirts, it was a different story.

"Something tells me your pops might have something to say about that," Mike said, eyeing Charles.

Benny was quiet, his face radiant. The boy, Charles saw, had a vision of himself—one he was too young to fully understand, and yet, maybe, there was also a child's wisdom to it, something essential. *The importance of self-image*, Alice had said. Charles smiled and shook his head—not at Mike, nor at Benny, but somewhere inwardly.

"You know, why not?"

Vernon's eyes grew wide. Mike's narrowed. Charles shrugged his shoulders, which, for a blessed moment, felt looser, unburdened. Vernon shook his head too, but in his case it meant, Boy, you better know *what* you're doin. Vernon had had the occasion to meet Alice once, at a wedding.

Benny watched all of this, eyes big and waiting.

"The boy knows what he wants," Charles said.

Benny pumped his fist into his hip. "Yessss!"

Mike called in his cousin Yvonne from the back, where sometimes her girlfriends came in for manicures and extensions. "We need reinforcements; small, strong hands," he said to Charles. Then to Yvonne, "What's your sister doing today?"

"Maureen? Nothin."

"Get her over here. So these gentlemen don't have to be here all day."

It did take some time, and while the girls prepped for Benny, Charles sat back in Vernon's chair. "While we're at it, let's shave mine, all the way down. Gimme that baby's bottom special."

Vernon shook his head again, this time laughing from the gut. "You want a shave, too?"

"Nah. Let's grow that."

Everyone set to work. There was industrious joy in the shop, all around. Mike stood back and let the girls and his uncle work. If he wasn't already, Mike would be the new boss soon. They needed to bring in more young men to stay in business, maybe this was A New Day, fathers and young sons coming in together, before they started losing the boys to the corners and all the rest.

At one point, Benny did get restless, wiggling around in the chair. Charles reached over and set the boy's stopwatch, two minutes at a time. It worked like a charm.



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The Jimmy Report

Tiffany Midge

Thursday, May 7, 2004. 11:00 AM. Bellingham, WA.

I pass by the front counter and spot him in the back, climbing out from beneath a sizeable pile of clothes. He's wearing dark blue, polyester pants from a deceased WWII veteran's closet. The pants have some sort of multi-colored dashes woven into the fabric that look like moth infestation. They're obviously too big for him, so he belts them with an orange scarf. The shirt is ordinary and coordinated with his pants.

Jimmy owns and operates Blue Moon Vintage Clothing, housed in a proverbial bulwark near the waterfront in the old town section of Bellingham. I happen to catch him on a good day. He says he's feeling good because he just received a windfall—the aforementioned hill-sized pile of used clothes—from a guy he knows in the wholesale business, some kind of rag dealer. The clothes seem okay, useable, but looks can be deceiving.

I make a mental list of the pile's contents. A black bustier in a child's size 2M; a wispy blouse that appears at first glance to be leopard print but is actually owls; Ziggy Stardust shoes; acid green, poly-plaid golf pants (real beauts, Jimmy says, but too small for him), with a matching green Nebraska Tech College t-shirt; a purse with tags still attached; a red, faux-leather, trench coat, à la Audrey Hepburn; tennis shirts from the Bruce Jenner collection; assorted western style shirts, the snappy kind.

Jimmy says that he isn't selling his business after all, the pile of new clothes apparently the culprit for his optimism. Not to be a naysayer, but I'm not sure there is a thousand dollars' worth of merchandise in his pile, even with the fetching owl-print blouse. Obviously it makes him happy to think otherwise, and things are looking up from his previous month's "donation" to the local Lummi tribe—AKA the casino's craps table—so who am I to rain on his parade? While I'm relieved he isn't bailing out this week, next week could be different. Eventually, the property management is going to want their back rent, money that Jimmy professes not to have.

Jimmy relays how Paris Texas, the store next door, had been sniffing around his property the month before, and how he feels contemptuous of their hipster posturing, their empty brand of style. He thinks they pander to a faux counter culture, a type of trust fund street waif, which offends his sensibilities because Jimmy considers himself to be the genuine article. A large part of his clientele aren't posing as poverty stricken, homeless addicts and alcoholics, they are poverty stricken, homeless addicts and alcoholics. Many are Mission residents, or railroad car buddies, apparently. I want to say mostly men who are down on their luck, who possess hearts of gold, but that'd be a cliché. A pair of Alaskan Natives appear on the sidewalk in front of the store and Jimmy rushes out to greet them, slapping one guy on the back and mumbling something about stolen lands and Custer. The pair and others drop by the store frequently throughout the day because Jimmy gives them cigarettes, and all that's required in return is that they stand still long enough for Jimmy to tell them a funny story.

For me, Jimmy represents the quintessential everyman's man, champion of the underdog. I admire his contempt for capitalism and corporate sellouts. Part of what drives his decision not to sell the store, he says, is that his retail neighbor wants the space so they can expand, and he takes delight in denying them what they want. As if he's staying afloat just out of spite. (As he once said, "If someone told me I couldn't be a Roman Catholic priest, I would be!") At one point, he posted a sign in the window—written on the back of a poster for *Beat Angel*, an independent film he starred in—voicing his disdain, and informing his patrons that the rumors weren't true: *Not Selling Out to Paris Texas!*

Scanning the expanse of the store I ask him where his Goth girl clerks are, and he says they're probably tired of being paid only in clothes, adding that his employees are the only reason he's able to stay afloat, because unlike him, they aren't constantly wheeling and dealing and slashing prices on a whim. He regularly greets his customers with a rousing "everything's half off! More if it looks good on you!" He's excellent with his regular customers: they'll wander in and he directs them to their preferences and sizes—like a good bartender who always remembers the customers' usual. A man and woman come in and ask whether Jimmy has any leather chaps. The man is unusually tall, and the woman is unusually short. Some days the *Blue Moon* looks like the set of a Fellini picture. Jimmy pushes a cart of clothes free for the taking out to the sidewalk. He says proudly that Bellingham has the best-dressed homeless in the country, largely due to him.



Friday, May 8, 2004. 9:30 AM. Bellingham, WA.

I've arranged to meet Jimmy for a hunting and gathering errand to Skagit Valley thrift shops. The ironic t-shirt and trucker caps department is running critically low, and he's out of vintage slips. We made plans to restock. He doesn't have a car or a license, so I offered to help him out. Jimmy complains, "No one dresses up anymore." He's referring to the eighties, the thrift store glory days of Bananarama and Cyndi Lauper, that magical decade when New Wave celebrants and hold-overs from the UK punk scene dressed up like serial killers or Ringling Bros. Circus clowns, the times before irony ruled supreme.

Jimmy phoned at 8:00 to set our meeting back to 9:30, something about a gutter man. Good title for a book: *Waiting for the Gutter Man*. I don't ask. When I get to the store to pick him up, Jimmy's sitting on the curb studying his shoes and gripping a brown, paper sack, filled with not alcohol but a collection of his personal effects: money, checks, ID, comb, etc. He blows into my car like a cyclone hitting a cattle barn.

As the car sits idling in the drive-in bank, I worry that we look like rookies in a drug cartel. A couple of ill-prepared, clumsy mules. The passenger floor is littered with checks and twenty-dollar bills, loose cigarettes, and change. Jimmy loses the pen, he can't manage to sign his name legibly, can't find his ID—it's a hot mess. Then he insists we visit McDonalds for breakfast, which delights him because he apparently doesn't have access to fast food restaurants living downtown—he also looks forward to asking the drive-thru

window guy if fellatio comes with the Happy Meal, or rather the Happy Ending Meal, as he's decided to call it.

We stop off at the grocery store where Jimmy buys a can of Crisco. I can't imagine why anyone would want to buy a giant can of Crisco before 10 A.M., but again, it's better not to ask. In addition to the Crisco, he feeds dollar bills into the scratch-ticket machines, and buys a seven-dollar gadgety lighter shaped like a rocket that shoots out sparks.

Our first stop is a retirement home thrift store somewhere near Stanwood. It's dollar bag day and Jimmy, self-assured and in his element, gives off a heady note of swagger. What's better than Norwegian geriatrics and the musty clothes of the recently deceased? Each item has a story to tell and we're intent upon keeping a running commentary. 1) The needlepoint kit resembling a flattened possum: "Nothing says Home Sweet Home better than a framed cross stitch of road kill." 2) The ribbon and plastic flora bound books: "An anti-literature craft project for wayward readers." 3) The Costco-sized bottle of lotion which was too expensive and put back on the shelf: "There goes your social life, Jimmy."

After stocking up with several grocery sacks of items, Jimmy nearly enters into a physical altercation with some blue haired dame in a sunflower headband. From what I manage to piece together, the proprietors are pissed about his being a messy, inconsiderate slob. Apparently, on a previous visit, Jimmy carelessly abandoned clothing items all over the aisles, on the floor, left them stranded on chairs, and forgot his baskets of items beneath the racks. The blue haired woman chews him out and good; Jimmy's been shop-shamed. Not that it's the first time, I'm sure.

"Yeah, but I bought like nine bags of clothes." Jimmy says to the lady. Nine dollars; I'm sure they really appreciated his business.

"Well, it probably wasn't you, but the man you were with, then?" Blue hair lady offers diplomatically. I guess she's referring to Bill, Jimmy's so-called biographer, a guy who keeps tabs on Jimmy's activities and helps promote his writing and acting career.

Next stop: Camano Island for another dollar bag sale. That Jimmy—he really has a finger on the pulse of second hand goods! We're greeted in the parking lot by a jaundiced man with a lopsided scar on his face and a silver hook for a hand. He appears to be the shop's fix-it man. Jimmy really works up a froth inside the store, telling the proprietors that he's picking up for clothing charities, like Evergreen Youth Home—at one point I overhear him telling one of the clerks that he's a priest and is picking up clothes for orphans at Paulie Shore's House of Casserole, which the clerk assumes is some kind of restaurant. We cram more grocery bags into the trunk of my car. I suggest gingerly that he might consider holding off on the shorts and tank tops and concentrate on adding to his winter/fall departments; a problem since Jimmy seems mostly interested in buying trucker caps, t-shirts, and polyester men's suits. Stuff he wears.

Jimmy naps most of the way home. When he does manage to stay awake he finishes his McDonald's sandwiches, tries reading part of a brochure on northwest salmon out loud in a variety of celebrity impersonations, smokes a couple of cigarettes, and in his customary Jimmy style holds forth on a

critique of western civilization and his growing up in Queens as an Irish Catholic altar boy. He regales me with names and descriptions of all his homeless buddies, his married girlfriends, his epic drinking binges once upon a time on the Blackfeet Rez, and tells me about his partner in poetic crime sprees, the Lakota poet Luke Warm Water. Then he falls back asleep and a few minutes later awakens with a startled “HEY, BABY.”

When we pull into Bellingham I take an inventory of the inside of my car, which now resembles the nest of a very large and messy bird—strewn newspapers, pamphlets, receipts, spilled bag of chips, crumbs in every crevice, cigarette ashes, scratch tickets, leftover McDonald’s bags, used Kleenex, and the Safeway card Jimmy claims is his only form of ID.



I first met Jimmy at an independent film festival in Burbank. Jimmy played a spoken word poet in the aforementioned *Beat Angel*, an independent film about Jack Kerouac coming back from the dead. In it, Kerouac’s spirit lands in the body of a hobo bumming for spare change during a poetry open mic held in celebration of Kerouac’s birthday. The filmmaker was from Bellingham, as were many of the actors and crew. Jimmy’s role was brief, just a flash compared to the rest of the film, but I must have watched and re-watched his scene dozens of times. He was so charismatic. He wore a *Mad Men*-style light-colored suit and a matching fedora. He was smoking a cigarette as he recited one of his original poems, I don’t remember which one, it could have been from one of his chapbooks—“It Takes a Whole Mall to Raise a Child,” or “Women are from Venus, Men are from Bars.” On the back covers of his chapbooks more established poets wrote glowing reviews of Jimmy’s work, saying he wrote in the tradition of Jack Kerouac, or Charles

Bukowski. One of his bios described him as having worked as a bouncer on the Blackfeet Indian Rez, as a welfare cheat, and as a plasma donor.

In Burbank during the film festival and within just a couple of hours of meeting him, he barged into my hotel room with all the grace of a jacked-up Billy goat, jumped excitedly from topic to topic, picked up and handled most of my books and personal items, asked dozens of questions, paced from room to room, even checked out my closet, “NICE ROBE, I COULD SELL THESE,” before scrambling out the door as if he was making a critical run for a toilet. That was his style. Hyper-mania. And it often left me feeling ramped up and exhilarated, like some kind of electrical storm just touched down, but the kind that made you feel lucky it picked you to visit.

After *Beat Angel* premiered at one of the cinemas in Burbank, a group of us drove around, stopping off at different bars and small clubs. Outside one of the clubs, Jimmy introduced himself to a potpourri of hipsters smoking outside. He made the rounds, shaking everyone’s hand saying, “I’m Jimmy Henry, I’m a janitor at Hollywood High, I live in my parent’s basement and I collect gay bondage porn.” And then later at another restaurant he offered to buy my friend and me a drink. But he didn’t have any money, so he told us he’d be right back and left to busk for spare change.



Sunday, April 11, 2004. 10:00 AM. Bellingham, WA.

I’ve been home a week after getting back from Burbank, and I happen to be hanging out at Stuart’s, the coffee shop just around the corner from Jimmy’s store. I’m sitting in the upstairs balcony at Stuart’s when I notice movement coming from the area across the length of tables at the wall opposite me. I look up from my book and watch in astonishment as a rather large section of the wall is removed from the inside,

then crashes to the floor. Next, a tall man in polyester plaid pants scuttles rodent-like through the hole and steps casually into the coffee shop, brushing himself off in a resolute kind of way before he turns back to the wall section, hoists it up, and fits it back into the wall like a piece of a life-sized jigsaw puzzle.

It's Jimmy. He has his own secret entrance from his apartment above the Blue Moon onto the balcony of Stuarts. When he notices me sitting at the table across from the crawl space, my jaw hanging open, he holds his finger to his lips, then nods hello, says he'll be back, before disappearing down the stairs to grab his morning coffee and pace up and down the street out front, smoking cigarettes and chatting people up.

This is how we become friends—or how I become Jimmy's personal ATM and chauffeur. We exchange phone numbers and make plans to listen to music at the Grand Avenue that night. He doesn't show up.



It's no great associative leap to say that Jimmy was Neal Cassady incarnate. For one thing, he never stopped talking. And it seemed like most everything he said was either pee-your-pants riotous or some deep, philosophical truth, like a soothsayer, a soothsayer with a laugh track. A shaman with mic. When I told Jimmy that his vagabond life of riding the rails, eating in missions, and sleeping on the streets should be made into a sitcom, he immediately said, "Yeah, a sitcom called 'Honey, I'm Homeless!'"

My money and resources seemed to swiftly disappear around Jimmy. But I continued hanging around him for the hilarious things he would say. Once,

when he stood me up for about the hundredth time, his excuse was that some old railroad car buddies were in town and they insisted he drink with them all night. Railroad car buddies. As if he just stepped out of a page from *The Grapes of Wrath*, on his way to the land of milk and honey. He sometimes referred to his sexual encounters as “untying the Boy Scouts,” a euphemism meant to corrupt what’s wholesome or innocent, as in, “I took this high school girl who works in the store to a fancy party, a fundraiser, and after we drank wine and sampled the cheese platter, we went back to my loft and untied the Boy Scouts.” I asked, “Oh, did she wear a backpack? Did she color at the table?” Jimmy once said that when he visited schools to present his poetry, his then-wife, Marilyn, insisted on accompanying him. “Like she was afraid I’d run off with a cheerleader or something.” He joked about a junior-squad cheerleader being too old for him.

Jimmy was decidedly feral. He was the sort of person who would phone you up at three o’clock in the morning on what seemed to be a drug-induced manic jag, in order to read you a poem newly scrawled out in what I imagined might be a purple crayon. Or for a more serious occasion, to bail him out of jail. It also goes without saying that despite all this, I liked him immediately, until the day I decided I didn’t like him anymore. Or couldn’t afford to. Because aside from the charming aspects of his personality, his humor, his energy, Jimmy could also, quite often, be insufferable.

The last time I saw Jimmy was sometime just before he lost his business and left town with plans to bicycle across America. He invited me to drop by his loft to say goodbye. While I sometimes thought he might have a drug habit I never knew for certain, but the unmistakable glass pipe and butane torch sitting atop the coffee table like a gritty still life subject confirmed my suspicions. I didn’t hear from him ever again, but a few years ago I found an article on the internet from some website out of Duluth that explained how Jimmy had spent the last few years of his life living there as the unofficial barstool poet laureate.



Monday, April 3, 2004. 9:00 PM. Burbank, CA.

Jimmy gets back to our table, with money to buy us drinks and appetizers. He tells us he recited poetry on the street to raise the cash. While we sit and enjoy our panhandled drinks, our begged-for appetizer, he pens “tattoos” on himself with a Sharpie. On the knuckles of one hand he writes “LOVE,” and on the knuckles of his other hand, “HATE.” On his left arm he writes “Mama Tried.”



Tiffany Midge has published fiction and nonfiction in *As/Us*, *Hinchas de Poesia*, *The Raven Chronicles*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Sovereign Bodies*, *Quarterly West*, and more. The 2012 recipient of the Kenyon Review Earthworks Prize for Indigenous Poetry and recipient of the Diane Decorah Memorial Poetry Award, she holds an MFA from the University of Idaho and currently serves as the Poet Laureate of Moscow, Idaho. Her poetry collection *Outlaws, Renegades and Saints: Diary of a Mixed-up Halfbreed* was published by Greenfield Review Press, and her poetry collection *The Woman Who Married a Bear* is forthcoming from the University of New Mexico Press. She is an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

This is Meant to Hurt You

Leah Sottile

1. Sick

En Media Res.

It is August and it is hot and in the other room my husband is dying.

It has become the only explanation that makes any sense. Joe is a 34-year-old man in constant, unbearable, searing-hot pain, a patient doctors have called a “mystery,” as if that were some kind of comfort. The life he wants to live—where he’s a graphic designer and a drummer—dangles in front of him. If he lives that life, he gets sick. If he doesn’t...

He lies on our king-sized bed, his bare legs twisted up in the thin white summer sheets patterned with red branches and petals that look like droplets of blood. When he is awake, he shifts and writhes in constant misery, two box fans blowing hot air at his face. He sighs when things are bearable; he moans the rest of the time. He takes pain pills and suffers in the hot, dark room staring into the ceiling, past another fan whirring so fast its glass light fixture jiggles and plinks from the motion. He crawls to the bathroom.

It’s a 100 degree day in our fourth floor west-facing apartment in a building made of brick. Our place is a pod of three small rooms—nothing fancy, but fairly new. From the windows, though, there’s an unobstructed view of Portland’s emerald green St. Johns Bridge. Its red lights blink from the tips of the bridge’s spires day and night like slow-beating electric hearts. When we signed the lease on this place—in a brief moment of health—we reveled at the idea of the gothic gem of the Rose City outside *our* window, as if this would be our very own *Frasier* apartment.

But too many times lately, as we watch cop cars and ambulances fly over the bridge, sirens screaming, I worry about how close it is. What if, like the people we’ve seen teeter on the edge there, Joe, too, would feel the pull of the bridge’s platform? What if after all these years of fighting he would

shuffle out there in his pajamas and give up trying to figure out what was wrong with him? If anything was wrong with him?

Or what if it would be me out on the ledge there, the air whipping around me on a hot summer day?

Cool, quiet relief, for a moment. And then nothing.

2. Pain

February 2015.

It has been seven years since Joe first set foot in a doctor's office. Seven years of pills and syringes and ER trips, of visits to specialists who gave him a diagnosis of a disease we couldn't pronounce and no one we knew had ever heard of.

Ankylosing Spondylitis. It sounds like the scientific name of a dinosaur.

It is an awful biological creation, a mutation of the body that is sometimes called "bamboo spine" for how the backbone fuses into a hard, inflexible branch over enough time. For Joe to feel any semblance of a normal life, he sits for hours in a chemo center, surrounded by people with shaved heads and in wheelchairs, where the only drugs that make him feel better are administered through an IV.

"You don't have cancer, babe," I reminded him the first time we arrived for his treatment. "Don't start to think that way. You're not like these people. You're sick, but you're not dying."

Like every medication he'd tried before, these drugs worked for just long enough that life, it seemed, was normalizing. Joe was playing his drums in a band, even going on weekend-long Northwest tours. He was working. It started to feel like we were a normal couple in their early 30s again.

We planned a cross-state move. Joe took a new job with a big company.

It felt like we were finally strapping lead weights onto the memories of this past seven years, this time of misery and struggle and uncertainty, and

we were watching it disappear underwater, sinking slowly toward the bottom of the ocean.

April 2015.

I don't know exactly when Joe's pain made its grand, dramatic reentry.

It starts in his neck: a hot pain that pulls his shoulder muscles tight like stiff ropes, that sends electricity up into his head and through his forehead, tightening like a vise around his skull. The word headache really doesn't do it justice.

The throbbing moves down his spine, into his lower back, bending him forward into a hunch, as if someone has smacked him across the back with a two-by-four and he's frozen there, unable to ever recoil from the blow.

But the worst of it is in his hips: a stabbing so miserable that he walks with a limp. Not like a bounce-walk after you've stubbed your toe: Joe's legs move like he is constantly trying to step onto a stair and missing every time. Calling it a shuffle would be too graceful: Joe walks like a lurching skeleton, a machine without grease. At doctor's offices and hospitals, he refuses wheelchairs from nurses who look at him with furrowed brows, preferring to be seen hobbling violently and slowly than to drop into the invisible, unseen realm of the wheelchair-bound.

He moves like a young man who has grown old overnight.

His mind is demolished as he comes to grips that there is no real reason why he's here. Why he's walking like this, or why he, a young man, has spent hours in waiting rooms beside women with white permed hair and men with canes while everyone else his age seems to be traveling the world and having children and buying houses.

There is no better way to explain it than this: shit happens.

Too many times Joe looks at me with those blue eyes I fell in love with so long ago. They're clear and desperate and angry. He asks me if he's crazy. If he feels so much pain, why can't doctors stop it? Is it all in his head?

“Of course it isn’t in your head, babe,” I say, because I can’t tell him I’ve been wondering the same thing all along. When you love someone, there are certain things you just can’t say.

May 2015.

The doctor waits until after six to call, and when she does, Joe picks it up on the first ring.

She tells Joe that she’s reviewed his MRI, and can definitively say that he’s spent seven years treating a disease that she, an expert, does not believe he actually has.

This is good news.

This, to Joe, is bad news.

He is pissed. Fuming. Spewing *who-is-she-to-tell-me-what-I-haves*.

And I say maybe it’s good news. Maybe this seven years of toiling was for nothing, and we can put it behind us.

And he looks at me again with those eyes and says he’s still in pain.

That he’s more scared now than he’s ever been.

If his pain isn’t caused by the disease he thought he had, he says, “Then what the fuck do I have?”

3. Blood

December 2003.

Joe’s band was called These Arms Are Snakes.

They were a band for which fans were not casual, whose love ran so deep and true that many a young girl tattooed a black raven with an exposed red heart—the band’s logo—onto their skin.

These Arms Are Snakes would become one of most popular underground punk groups in the country, signed to a respected independent label. They were strange and aggressive, sensitive and off-kilter. Joe, the

band's original drummer, hit his drums with a ferocity and force that inspired just as many onlookers as the band's enigmatic lead singer. He pounded and pummeled: a beautiful, masculine violence.

But rock bands don't last forever. Joe knew he had more inside of him than just music, and he quit the band after two years of touring the country nonstop.

After his very last show in Seattle, he packed his forest green kit into their bright blue cases and piled into a 15-passenger van headed toward Spokane, his hometown, five hours to the east.

Less than an hour from his family's front door, the van hit a patch of black ice that caused the vehicle to spin out of control, slam into the guardrail on the right side of the road, whirl in a circle and, suddenly, stop. They were facing the wrong way, looking through the night mist at the approaching headlights of a semi-truck.

Joe was in the back, asleep across the middle bench seat without a seatbelt on. The sudden jerk of the van, set off its smooth course, caused him to open his eyes and see the headlights bearing down on them, blinding and clear as if they were the eyes of God, and he thought to himself, "So, this is how it ends."

The truck, with a gargantuan piece of metal strapped to its open bed, jack-knifed as it steered and skidded to avoid the van, causing that hulking object to launch into the air and embed itself in the icy blacktop like a meteor.

When the truck collided with the van, the metal encasing left Joe and his friends crumpled and folded as if it were an empty soda can. The windows exploded, sending shards of glass into their hair and skin. There was a six pack of beer somewhere in the van, and the pieces pierced the tin spraying the terrified passengers in alcohol. One of Joe's drum cases launched into the head of one of his friends.

They were bloody and they were covered in beer, but the impact, somehow, didn't kill them. Everyone in the van, including Joe, walked away from it. The accident made the headlines of punk news sites.

For Joe, though, it was more than a Buddy Holly moment. As he stood there on the side of the freeway in the freezing cold, as ambulances and police cars swarmed around he and his friends, Joe knew that everything could have just ended. He felt lucky.

He had no idea that, somewhere deep inside his body, everything had just changed.

March 2004.

Joe was wearing freshly-pressed pants and a smart sweater when he walked into the newspaper office where I worked as a music critic. He wore cologne and had combed his hair. We met at the bottom of the spiral staircase that ran like a spine through the center of the office and I remember thinking he looked like a square.

He was smart enough to realize that people make a lot of assumptions about folks that look like he does, and he projected the very image he hoped would get him hired. Nice guy. Smart and easy to talk to. He got the job.

After a few weeks of winning the office over, Joe showed who he was. He grew out his beard, long and bushy and bright red. He arrived at work in jeans and t-shirts, revealing bright blue roses and a dead man in a gas mask tattooed across his arms. And he came upstairs, knocked on my cubicle wall and asked if we could get coffee and talk about music.

I said I had a boyfriend. He didn't care.

Soon I didn't either.

Before I met Joe, my world was a blur of beer-bottle green. My best girlfriends were the types who'd hold each others' hair back every weekend, but we never once talked about if we drank too much. We knew we did. I think we probably all silently agreed that we were having too much fun to overthink it. We were young, we had our whole lives to be sober.

My boyfriend back then was this Friday Night molotov: a corporate guy by day who was quick to throw fists on the weekend. I'll never forget dragging him away from a fistfight that tumbled out the front doors of a bar

on Seattle's Capitol Hill. He'd starting something with a redheaded guy who looked at him wrong. It was embarrassing to be that girl clutching her purse with one hand and dragging her idiot boyfriend by the shirt out of a pile of bloody noses and split lips with the other.

But anger had always been attractive to me. It was never something I feared—just something I excused as a natural consequence of passionate people. In the house I shared with my friends, I covered the walls of my bedroom in portraits of it: pictures of WTO protests in Seattle, where anarchists covered their faces with handkerchiefs when cops used tear gas. Above my bed, amid punk posters and snapshots from protests I'd organized with my friends, there was a shot of Trent Reznor from Nine Inch Nails' "Head Like a Hole" video, dreadlocks flying as he's screaming into a microphone. There was a lot about the world that pissed me off when I was young, but I found an outlet for it through the punk and metal scenes. Anger, there, wasn't a scary thing; it was a shared human experience. Through our collective rage, we could disappear into the noise and feel more alive.

Not long after I met Joe, I knew my already-rocky relationship was done for when my ex said he liked Joe because he relieved him of needing to talk to me about music—as if it was this silly, passing thing I was nagging him with. I knew long before that Joe—who was broke then, living in his parents' basement—could give me more than that guy ever could. He wasn't an angry person. He was patient, quiet—a simmer to my inferno.

In an act of post-1990s courtship, Joe gave me some of his band's music to listen to. I would put in my headphones and play one of the songs on repeat as I walked to work. It's called "Drinking From the Necks of the Ones You Love." At the song's climax, the singer repeats these lines:

*Tell the future to come in the back door,
Tell all the stars that the stars are no more.
Tell the future to come in the back door,
Tell all the stars that the stars are no more.*

It's mumbling that turns, soon, to screaming. He says it again and again and again, Joe's drums rolling like a soldier's march behind the words and then everything explodes—the kind of rock and roll A-bomb that makes fans weak in the knees.

I listened to it over and over until I could feel those words driving my pulse, felt them pushing my heart into a steady beat and infusing the blood in my veins with a message: the future was Joe. If I let him in the back door of my life and waved goodbye to everything else I knew out the front, that the even the beauty of the stars, as I knew them, would change.

I remember when all was said and done, when months later we had an apartment together, we agreed that one day we'd have a good story to tell about our earliest days.

We didn't know then about the invisible darkness growing inside of Joe. But it was as if his body did. As if it led him to quit the band he loved, guided him to find someone to help weather the storm that lay ahead, tumbling toward him like boulders of black thunderclouds.

To find someone whose neck he could drink from when the stars were no more.

4. Love

2015.

You can say “in sickness and in health” all you want when you're 25 and standing at an altar, but really, are you picturing your loved one withering before you? Are you thinking of the lonely hopelessness that you'll feel when you offer your beloved their pain pills?

I wasn't. I thought I had my whole life to prepare for the “sickness” part of that statement. I was young and naive enough to believe that getting sick is only for old people.

It has been months since Joe got the call that he was misdiagnosed, an opinion that a handful of other doctors we visited agreed with. He goes to new doctors: rheumatologists, neurologists, pain specialists, speech therapists,

physical therapists, occupational therapists and a pain therapist who explains to Joe what happens to the brain when the body hurts.

You panic.

We rule out diabetes, multiple sclerosis, cancer, low vitamin D levels, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, Lyme Disease, cancer.

During a test to cross muscular dystrophy of the list, Joe lays on a bed in his underwear, and a lab tech inserts long needles into his muscles and twists a dial on an ancient looking computer, sending surges of electricity into his muscles. Joe winces in pain as the test progresses, his body jiggling. I pretend to look down at my phone. I don't want him to see that I'm crying.

When Joe goes on disability, suddenly we are together more than we ever have been, crammed in our hot apartment together.

I escape long enough to feel sane, but not long enough for Joe to feel abandoned. I put a leash on our dog and walk across our neighborhood toward a purple and yellow painted house with a coffee can stationed in front, the words "positive affirmation bucket - take one!" written in black marker across the top.

Day after day, I reach inside and pull out neon green slips of paper with hippie wisdom written on them. As much as I want to laugh at the idea of positivity coming from a coffee can, I cling to my pilgrimages here. I hope that one day the answer to surviving this time will be written on a slip of paper inside. On one visit, I think of upending the whole can, dumping all the affirmations onto the sidewalk and pawing through them until I find the one I need.

I am paralyzed by the guilt that I feel for being angry at Joe when he sends me links to articles called "15 Things Not to Say to Someone With a Chronic or Invisible Illness." I'm bitter at the minefield his body has set up for us to live in. I feel like I'm not married to just Joe, but to his illness, too—and I'm mourning seven years of my own life lost, as if he were this vampire sleeping beside me, draining my energy and drinking my blood in order to keep going.

And I feel so selfish for feeling all of it, for grieving a past that never was.

There are times when I cannot physically listen to Joe moan anymore—when I walk into the other half of the apartment, out of his sight, clap my hands over my ears and stretch my mouth wide in a silent scream.

One day, Joe interrupts me while I'm writing, cracking open the door to say "I love you?" A question, not a statement.

"OK," I say. He opens the door wider and tells me he can see how I look at him when he walks into a room. He can tell I dread the sight of him.

I tell him how I hate his disease, but I hate even more when he says he loves me like it's a question.

"If I didn't love you," I say. "I wouldn't be here."

In November, Joe gets a name for the way he feels. It's called fibromyalgia—a disease that doctors say many in the medical field don't actually believe is a real. They call it an invisible illness.

When we ask how he got it, doctors run down a list of potential triggers, several of which Joe had experienced.

"Have you ever been in a bad car accident?" one asks, and Joe and I look at each other, a photograph of the crumpled van so many years back flashing across the movie screen in my mind.

For some people, a traumatic event like that is something they shake off. Maybe they go through physical therapy for a while, or they take pain pills. But for others, like Joe, their bodies become a written record of their past, aching and creaking in such a way to remind them of how quick, how fragile and how fast this life is.



By 2016, Joe's body starts working again. He can walk, he starts to work. He leaves the house everyday and suddenly—just as fast as he got sick—life becomes normal. Quiet.

We move, too, out of the apartment that became the stage for the worst of his sickness. We get a house in the country where an ostentation of peacocks struts across the lawn, fanning their feathers and standing on our

fenceposts to crow at the sky. At night the old tree by the bedroom creaks and a wooden chicken coop door slams and groans in the wind.

One of the first nights after we moved in, I looked out the bathroom window. It was black outside, not a light around except the stars. A heavy wind was stirring, and the bamboo chimes I'd hung out on the porch were chattering in bursts. It wasn't quiet, but it was peaceful, and it occurred to me that I couldn't recall a single time in the last decade when I had used that word to describe my life.

We sat down to eat dinner recently and Joe stopped me when I referred to a period of time as "back when you were sick"—as if it were some kind of ancient history.

"I'm still sick," he said. "I'll always be sick."

It hadn't occurred to me that even before Joe was in pain, he was sick. That when he asked me to marry him in our kitchen as I was cooking dinner one night, he had been sick then, too. He just didn't know it yet.

There were times throughout the worst of Joe's pain when I sobbed uncontrollably about this horrible hand we'd been dealt. The thing I remember about those times is how much worse it made me feel to cry on the shoulder of a sick person.

But that is what love is. It is a thing defined at the worst moments of our lives. Love happens at the bottom, when we willingly tilt our necks to the sides, push our hair away from our neck and offer up our own arteries to drink from when there is no other way to take the pain away.



Leah Sottile is a writer and journalist. Her work has been featured by *The Washington Post*, *Playboy Magazine*, *Portland Monthly*, *The Atlantic*, *Vice*, *Broadly* and *Al Jazeera America*, among others. She contributed a comic strip on First Amendment issues to the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund's *2013 Liberty Annual*, and her short fiction work has appeared in *Spokane Shorties*, *The Spokesman-Review*, and more. She lives in Portland, Oregon.

About *Moss*

The Pacific Northwest is home to a thriving, vibrant literary culture. Following in a long tradition of finely crafted regional writing, a new generation of local talent is trying new ideas and crafting cutting-edge, experimental prose. Published three times annually, *Moss* is an online journal dedicated to bringing Northwest literature to new audiences and exposing the emerging voices of the region to discerning readers, critics, and publishers.

Moss was founded by Connor Guy, an associate editor at a publishing house in New York City, and Alex Davis-Lawrence, a filmmaker and creative producer based in Los Angeles. Both were born and raised in Seattle.

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Call for Papers

We are now accepting fiction and nonfiction submissions for our second volume, which began with this issue. Though we will consider pieces of any length, we prefer submissions of at least 1,800 words; shorter pieces may be paid at a reduced rate. We are not accepting poetry at this time.

Submissions are limited to current residents of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and British Columbia and those with a substantial connection to the region. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable, with the condition that you notify us immediately if your piece is accepted for publication elsewhere. Please send only one submission, attached as a Word document, to [mosslit \[at\] gmail \[dot\] com](mailto:mosslit@gmail.com).

Moss pays \$125 for each accepted piece. We buy First Serial Rights. There is no fee to submit.



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