

# SUBURBIA JOURNAL

## Absurdity Anthology

2022



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# LETTER from the EDITORS

Dear Readers, Writers, and Friends,

I often think about "The Metamorphosis." The moment when Gregor Samsa awakens to find he has turned into a giant bug. There is nothing he can do to fix it or change it. All he can do is accept his new tragic fate. I believe Kafka is both right and wrong. Life is scary and absurd: tornadoes ravage areas they've never been, U.S lawmakers are taking a step towards hatred and away from progress everyday, it has become obvious that people care more about guns than they do children, it is snowing in California, there are riots in Paris, acid rain in Ohio, America is rapidly looking more like Gilead, the world is looking more like Parable of the Sower. Everything about this moment in time is absurd and horrific.

I also partially disagree with Kafka, however. In "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa is alone. No one helps him. Or cares. His family neglects him, leaves him to become stagnant and depressed until he dies. Kafka implies that absurdity is an isolating and quieting force. I do not believe this. Unlike Gregor Samsa, we have each other. We have the ability to fight back. We have art. We have our voices. We have the drive to enact change. We have those small pockets of time where everything feels okay, warm, anything but absurd.

Our togetherness became even more evident to me while reading the final draft of this issue. As these narrators face the absurd, they also exude incredible heart and care.

We hope you enjoy this issue. Here you will find stories about coping with the absurd—Jesus gets therapy, a lobster takes over. mothers are grown from the ground. We are so excited about each piece in this anthology and we want to thank each writer for their craft and each reader for their time. We hope you are all taking care of yourselves and each other in these turbulent times. Welcome to *Suburbia Journal*.

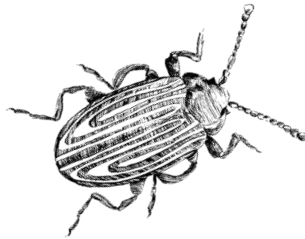
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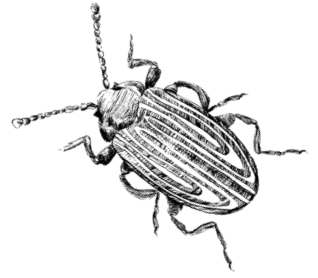
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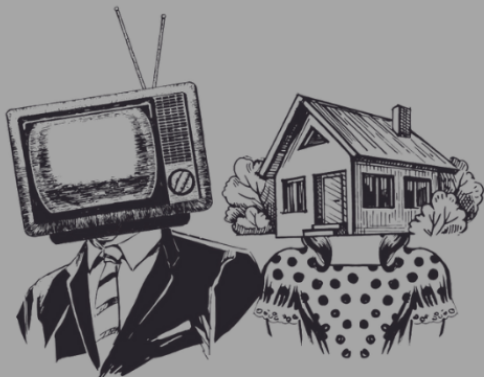
# absurdity anthology official cocktail

## THE CAMUS

- ONE OUNCE OF  
WHITE RUM
- ONE OUNCE OF  
COCONUT RUM
- TWO OUNCES OF  
PINEAPPLE JUICE
- SPLASH OF  
AMARETTO



MIX ALL  
INGREDIENTS AND  
POUR OVER ICE.  
GARNISH WITH  
FRESH PINEAPPLE.  
ADD A LITTLE  
UMBRELLA FOR  
EXTRA FUN.



**SUBURBIA**  
JOURNAL

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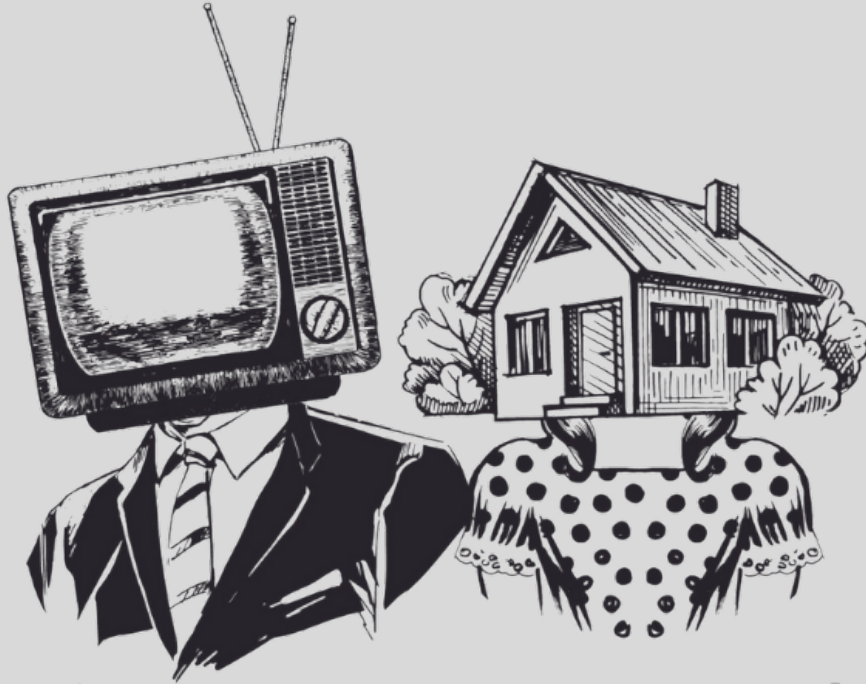
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JOURNAL

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# SUBURBIA JOURNAL'S

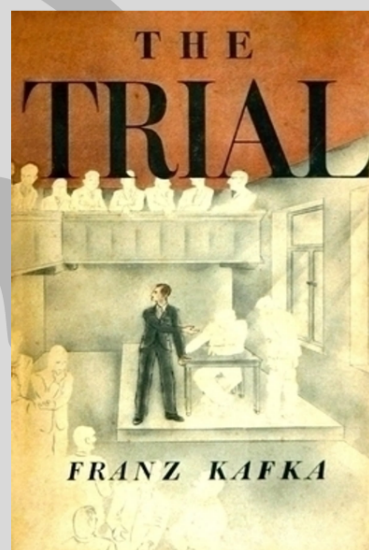
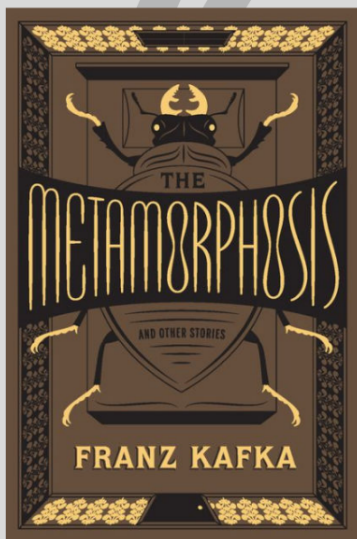
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# GUIDE TO ABSURDITY

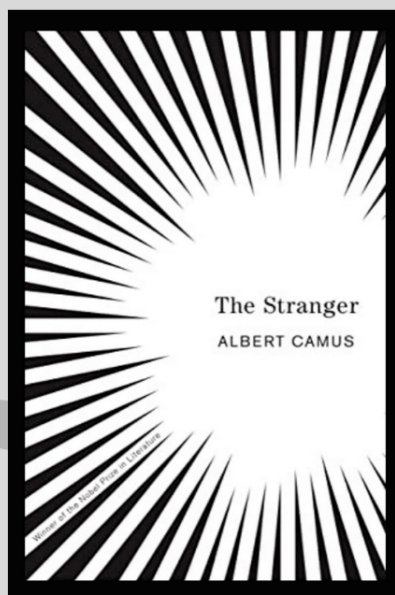
2. The Trial by Franz Kafka

## FOR BEGINNERS:

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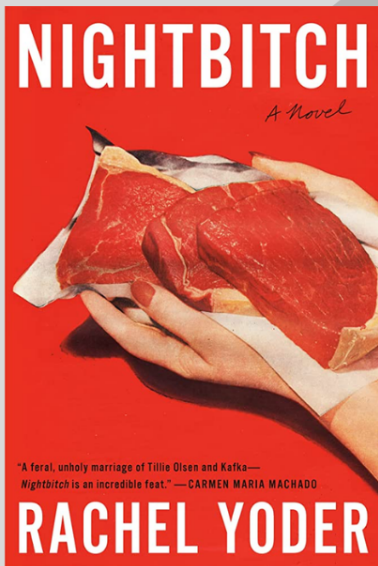


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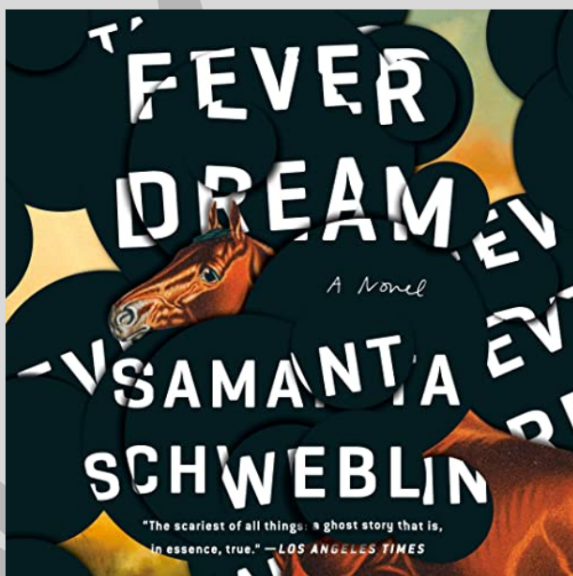


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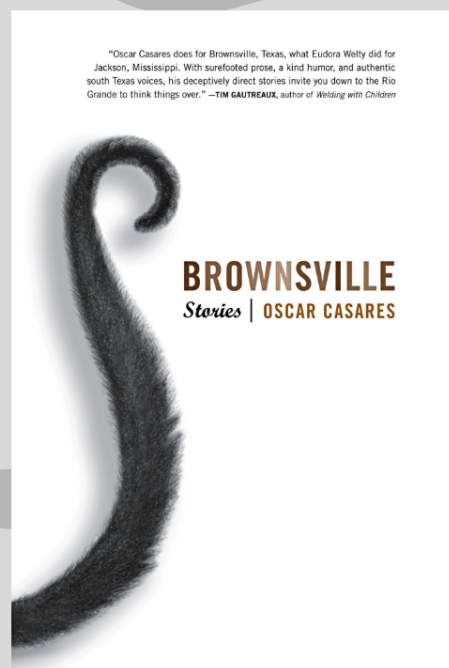
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7. *Brownsville* by Oscar Casares



# ABSURDIST MOVIES:

## 1. Everything Everywhere All at Once



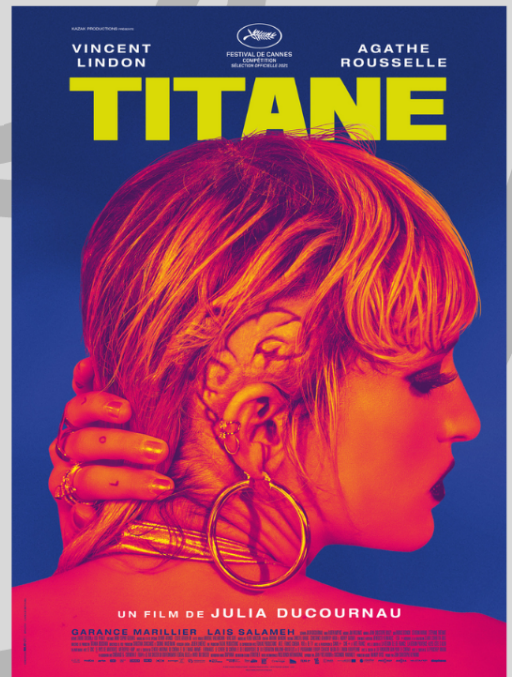
## 4. The Lobster



## 2. Blue Velvet



## 3. Titane





# THE LOBSTER

*Ellen Azevedo*

The town was being ravaged by a giant lobster. It was a disaster. The people of the town were unsure what to do. There wasn't exactly a precedent for this sort of thing. Sure, they had seen blizzards and hurricanes, but this, as one faithful citizen so aptly put it, was a different kind of problem.

The lobster had risen from the sea at 2 o'clock on Friday and scuttled ferociously down Main Street. It smashed in eight storefronts, flattened eleven vehicles, and utterly decimated the Henderson's tulips, before crashing through the doors of the town aquarium, where it seemed to have decided to make its new home.

The responses to this unexpected crisis were varied. A few of the town nuts began worshipping the lobster, forming a cult around the creature as their new deity. The cult gained followers quickly and was getting dangerously close to being able to declare itself a full-blown religion. Luckily, members of the cult were easy enough to dodge as they waddled up walkways in their puffy, red lobster costumes to ask, "Do you have time to talk about our lord and savior the great arthropod?" Harry Wilkins of Wilkins Costume Emporium was overjoyed at the turn of events and began posting fliers for the cult alongside big, hastily drawn signs that read, "Get your lobster gear HERE!"

Those town members of more sound mind demanded an emergency meeting of the City Council be planned, while a few citizens simply packed up and moved, deciding that the whole thing was altogether too silly, as people being terrorized by giant lobsters often do.

The day of the big City Council meeting, the entire town was bristling. Everyone was eager to resolve the problem so they could get back to feeding their children and trimming their begonias and politely commenting to one another on the weather. The Fine Wine Fellas senior men's jogging club had all arrived early and were huffing politely in the far corner of the room, doing their best not to lose pace. The cult members had hauled their lobster-shaped pool floaties in early from their morning worship in the harbor. Several of them appeared to have fallen in the water as their lobster costumes were soaked and sagging, and a heavy stench of kelp and brine hung in the air. The teachers from the local elementary school had all brought in their classes to learn about politics, and presumably also about lobsters. The employees of the town grocer and the post office came, the town plumber, the town mechanic, the town psychic, the town piano teacher, the high school football team, the high school badminton team, the town dentist, the town doctor, and the Anne Rice book club were all in attendance. Needless to say, it was a packed house.

"We have come up with two plans," a member of the City Council announced, grandly. "We will be deliberating between them over the coming weeks but have no fear! The lobster problem WILL be resolved!"

Most people cheered, except of course for the members of the cult, who, without hesitation, sparked a heated debate on religious rights that lasted the rest of the meeting. And it was only later announced, through fliers and word of mouth, what the two proposed plans were.

The first plan was to build an enormous copper pot and an equally enormous fire pit. Using a combination of ropes and pulleys provided by Smith's Hardware (because we *Hardcare*, as the slogan went), they would maneuver the great creature into the pot and, when all was said and done, the town would have a wonderful feast.

The second plan involved binding the lobster's claws with two very large rubber bands and dragging it by the tail into Chesterfield Woods, where it could be tied up and left to die. In this scenario, rubber bands and ropes would also be provided by Smith's Hardware.

Privately the members of the Fine Wine Fellas and the Anne Rice book club, and all of the friends and family in between, would whisper amongst themselves that wouldn't it be better, all in all, to just use the

ropes and pulleys to put the lobster back in the ocean?

But this was not one of their options and so the townspeople found themselves being drawn deeper and deeper into a vicious dispute over whether the Copper Pot Plan was better or the Rubber Band Plan. Soon they found themselves in the midst of all out chaos. Brother was pitted against brother, sister against sister, mothers against their children, husbands against their wives.

Two members of the badminton team had to be dragged apart as what started as a friendly conversation broke out into a somewhat embarrassing fist fight, with both members attempting to cover their faces between wild, poorly aimed swings.

Later that week, the town dentist and one of the elementary school teachers were spotted screaming at each other in the Harvestland Pumpkin Patch.

“Building a copper pot that size would be far too expensive! It would use up the entire town budget,” one shouted.

“The whole town would get a free lobster dinner! If we just leave the lobster in the woods to die, all that meat goes to waste,” the other screeched back.

In the end they both smashed each other’s pumpkins and dragged their sobbing children away. They knew of course, in their hearts, that the lobster should just be chucked back into the sea, but what could they do? The Rubber Band Plan and the Copper Pot Plan were their only choices, and something had to be done.

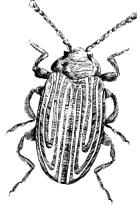
As the war raged on, the Mayor had come up with a plan all his own, which, thankfully, was unsupported across the board. He was a fat, red-faced man, who looked a bit like an organic tomato that someone had spotted the vague outline of the face of some saint or another in. Which is to say, he was ill-defined. He’d been the Mayor for many years, though no one could recall voting for him.

After the lobster had risen out the harbor and sent adults and children fleeing the crustacean annihilation, the Mayor had immediately taken to the internet to proclaim that this was the tourism opportunity they'd all been waiting for. He sent out post after post declaring that this would put them on the map and that they should change the town name to Lobsteropolis. He proposed billboards along the interstate and started wearing a big red lobster hat that conveniently hid his comb-over.

Meanwhile, the lobster had died in the aquarium, where it had apparently not decided to make its home at all, but had simply gotten wedged in. The dead lobster began to stink badly, and so two new plans had to be presented. In their homes the townspeople whispered once again that they should perhaps just throw the crustacean back into the ocean, and instead dedicate their time and resources to finding the members of the cult who had gone missing after the death of the lobster. But this, of course, was not one of their options. A new debate swept the town, and the Mayor began advocating for an elaborate lobster funeral to draw in tourists.

Then one morning the lobster was gone. Drag marks indicated that someone had pulled the creature from the aquarium to the harbor and sent it into the water to its final resting place. The Mayor was livid and the members of City Council put out a reward to anyone who came forward with information about the person who disposed of the lobster. People began pointing fingers at their neighbors and friends, more fights broke out in the grocery store and the Christmas tree lot, and no one noticed that the first snowfall of the year was particularly pristine, blanketing them all in sparkling blue-white.





**Ellen Azevedo** holds an MFA in creative writing from San Francisco State University. Her work has been published in F(r)iction Magazine Issue #16: Monsters and helped inspire the Literary Tarot, to which she was a contributing author. She lives in Northern California with her husband and her beautiful, screaming cats, Casper and Spider.



# MODERN WOMAN

*Sonia Curtis*

What is the blunt 'but-' that beats dumb  
in my gut? My belly's dull bleeding again,  
hot blood draws a sticky control line down my thigh,  
slimes white rayon red  
under cheap work wear.<sup>1</sup>

The seams of our comfortable story  
are all stitched up for us.  
But we will pay:  
There may be blood magic,  
but there are no bargains.

We plumb the earth's guts for minerals,  
refill the empty space with waste,  
with the ashy remnants  
of burned textiles, with cracked screens  
and bloodied cotton and woodmince.

A relative stranger cradles me,  
rocks a leaking cradle –  
I'm bleeding: I'm empty again.

What a feral little mammal I am.

I keep birthing hot blood to clean up.  
But I keep the birdbath bason dry  
Because all the water's dirty.

I sink my hips down to *malasana*

when the pain gets too bad,  
squatting against the cool tile of the  
seaside changing room wall  
to ease the racking  
of my lower back.

A seagull lands on the skylight  
and definition dims.

High tide, full moon.

Salt slips between my lips; my teeth hurt, ripe with cold  
when I laugh and involuntarily sip in the Irish sea off Sandymount Strand.  
Swim, my freezing  
senseless body,  
float, my baby-less belly, feel the  
sea – the sea! -- while it's still a feel-able sea: see, I'm bleeding,  
into a polyester bikini bottom,  
I'm empty again.

On the DART ride home  
salt dust crumbs:  
the dry water dries out my lips,  
but it's from  
too near the sewage run-off to lick away.

<sup>1</sup> We wear discounts  
paid for by  
other women's poverty;  
we hold  
the labour of other women's children  
in our palms  
and take funny pictures of our chins.



**Sonia Curtis** is a 27-year-old copyeditor, proofreader and German-to-English translator living in Dublin, Ireland. She grew up in Switzerland and spent her early twenties working as a legal assistant in immigration law in Greece and the UK.



# FILLING THE SINK

*Martine van Bijlert*

1

this morning I turned on the tap  
and out fell a big fish with sharp teeth  
and a single eye on a looping stalk

it flopped in the sink  
and lay there

I rummaged for a plastic bag  
tried to pick it up surprised  
to find it wasn't warm

it buckled in my grip and slipped from my hands  
fell onto the floor with a smack  
its flopping left wet imprints on the tiles

I crouched to look  
far enough away to avoid its teeth

go away I hissed  
go back to the deeps

2

this morning I turned on the tap  
and out came a little snake

it slapped the sink with its tiny body

coiling into itself head gliding  
tongue flicking trying to get its bearings

slowly it moved around  
the tip of its tail now in one of the small holes  
of the drain slowly disappearing backward  
downward—don't do that, no, you'll get stuck!

but it was already gone

3

this morning I turned on the tap  
the water was a muddy trickle I cursed  
and slapped the faucet it coughed  
out some more and then  
it stopped

4

this morning I turned on the tap and out came the  
sun and the rain and the beginning of a storm  
that whipped through my dish towels  
and tangled my hair

I stood there and thought: this  
not more, not less but this

5

this morning I turned on the tap and out fell my  
fiftieth birthday two weeks early and out fell  
my parents holding a gift saying we don't  
want to make you celebrate this day  
but it's so amazing to have a child who is fifty  
and just as I wanted to speak a table fell out  
and a chair and I rushed to turn it off but  
the faucet was stuck and out rolled a cheese platter  
and wineglasses and replies to invitations  
I didn't remember sending—stop it I shouted  
and then everyone looked at me



6

this morning I turned on the tap  
and out came four weeks with guests

a little boy with a toy digger and unwavering attention  
a little girl who smashed the front wheel of her walking bicycle  
into the pavement's edge and cried because of the  
impact rather than the pain and because of how  
she could have fallen face first

and the white lilies of last week's visitors  
are starting to droop and the sun is already shining  
through yellow leaves creating translucence  
where there was none

as if to say: hold on  
your house is almost yours again

7

this evening I stared at the tap  
tired of what it might bring

I'm thirsty but I will not  
want to drink what it  
releases

8

this morning I turned on the tap  
and somehow the whole system started convulsing  
the pipes in the walls shook and the walls heaved  
and the doorposts creaked and I hurried  
like an inverted Samson—not trying  
to pull the walls and ceilings and  
pillars down but rather  
to keep them up

and my arms were too short  
so I stood in the door opening as if this were  
an earthquake and the post was my best hope of survival

or maybe the stairs but then I would need to  
go down them first  
or maybe the bed in the spare room  
made from used wood by my husband's brother  
for our wedding or certainly the heavy table  
in my studio

but nothing was breaking  
just heaving and suddenly the tap sputtered  
and out came the sludge from deep down

I didn't want to look but I couldn't look away  
it filled the sink

it filled the sink!

and the house was not stopping

I grabbed a bucket but how could that be enough  
I spread newspapers on the floor but what would that do  
I stood at the sink and bowed my head—it's okay I said  
you're going to be okay

I tapped the wall with the flat of my hand  
it was warm and still moving  
quivering under my touch  
like a nervous dog

slowly the heaving stopped  
the sludge dripped  
and then it  
settled

9

this morning I opened the window  
and in flowed a November morning dressed as spring

water flowed from the tap clear and even  
not calling attention to itself

I eyed it suspiciously and filled a glass  
everything looked normal  
it was too much to bear

I set down the glass and left  
just to see what I would find  
when I came back

10

this afternoon I turned on the tap  
and out rolled the forest in the colours of  
burning rust  
trees like backlit feathers  
earth carpeted in yellow and black  
leaves everywhere

my kitchen filled with the colours of autumn  
and all I could think was:  
this is wasted on me

and the forest whispered back:  
get over yourself  
be quiet

look



**Martine van Bijlert** is a poet, novelist and non-fiction writer, who grew up in Iran and lives in the Netherlands. In between she worked as an aid worker, researcher and diplomat, mostly in Afghanistan—a country she still closely follows from afar. Her work has appeared in *kerning*, *Otis Nebula*, *Hole in the Head Review*, *Olney Magazine*, *Pangyrus Lit Mag*, *Consequence Forum*, *Tiny Spoon*, *NonBinary Review*, *Oyster River Pages* and other places.





# WHERE YOUR ROOTS GROW

*Sally K Lehman*

I planted a new mom last week.  
Used the ashes left over from the old one,  
plus a little love, blood, tears.  
The backyard gets enough rain and sun,  
I figured it would only take a year or two to  
harvest her.

I was wrong.

My new mom's hair popped up  
through the dirt within a few hours.  
Still brown. Still curly,  
but thicker than I remembered.  
Lacking the gray that accumulates  
in life.

The next day, a forehead poked up.  
Not as lined as the original, but  
this mom hadn't been through nearly as much  
– like raising five kids  
– like having cancer  
– like dying.

Those'll all leave lines.

I checked in that night and saw  
closed eyelids thick with dark lashes,  
and the beginning of a nose bridge.  
Within two days, my new mom had  
a full face.

Five days in, she was a head, neck, and torso,  
eyes, ears, mouth still closed tight.  
I began to worry she would never be truly  
alive, but figured could wait longer  
see what the legs would bring.

My new mom's legs came in by day six  
with a nice set of new feet,  
and there I was in the backyard,  
dusting earth off my  
brand new mother.

I hugged her off the roots and  
gave her a cup of coffee.  
That always did wake her up.  
She opened her eyes  
and smiled.

Next week, I'm planting grandpa.





**Sally K Lehman** is the author of the novels *The Last Last Fight*, *In The Fat*, *The Unit – Room 154*, and *Living in the Second Tense*. She is also the editor of the anthologies *Bear the Pall*, *War Stories 2016*, and *War Stories 2017*. Her work can be found in several literary magazines including *The Coachella Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and *34th Parallel*. Sally has an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Wilkes University where she worked as Managing Editor for *River & South Review*. She lives in Portland, Oregon and works as Managing Associate Editor for *The Corvallis Advocate*.



# JESUS OF NAZARETH ATTENDS AN ABUSE SURVIVOR SUPPORT GROUP

*Kristen Meehan*

So I guess it all starts with my bio dad,  
who knocked up my mom and then fucked off most of the time,  
and Joe was great but he wasn't Him and the problem  
wasn't that He fucked off, it was that He kept coming back.

He put me through a lot to make me prove I loved him,  
like this one time he starved me for 40 days,  
but mostly He'd stand me in front of his friends  
and make me talk, say things I didn't really understand,  
but I knew they were true because He said them.

The word He put in my mouth most often was Forgiveness,  
and when something shapes your tongue that often  
it's hard not to believe it.  
I did believe it. I do believe it.

I left and He still followed  
even if he wasn't there.

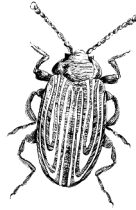
And I kept saying Forgiveness just like he taught me  
and people started coming to me because that's the word I said  
and they put me through a lot to prove I loved them.

You know, the first boy who kissed me  
only kissed me to kill me,  
and all my friends watched while I died.

After it was over

I let them push their fingers into my wounds.

It was the only way I ever learned  
to show someone I loved them.



**Kirsten Meehan** was born and raised in Southern New York, growing up in the same house her father grew up in. She received her BFA in Creative Writing from SUNY Potsdam, and then worked in the publishing industry for a time after graduating. Her work has appeared in the *The Dillydoun Review*, *Mistake House*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and *Hare's Paw Literary Journal*. Currently, she is a student at Arcadia University, studying towards an MA in English and an MFA in Poetry.



# THE GIRL WHO LAMINATED HERSELF

*Jordan Crider*

The girl laminated herself because she was either bored or dying. Of course, it is entirely possible that both reasons were the deciding factor, however, there's no way of knowing for sure. All we know is that she was so incredibly bored and so actively dying that she flattened the tip of her left hand's index finger and shimmied it into the narrow slit of the laminator.

The Girl Who Laminated Herself was surprised by how pleasant the process of being composited under heat and pressure felt. It was just the tip of her left hand's index finger but the euphoric feeling was enough to coax her into flattening her middle finger, her ringless finger, her pinky finger, and have her reveling in the hot mangling of the laminator's rolling lips.

In some ways it reminded her of the first time she realized that she was going to die. But, mostly, in another way, it reminded her of the time she sat on her knees and quivered and her mother looked at her ashamed and reluctant to teach her daughter about the intricacies of her own body and how her body could make her feel more alive, from time to time, than her own awareness of touch and consciousness ever could. So, The Girl Who Laminated Herself proceeded and focused on the dying part.

What did it mean to die? And what was the difference in dying and feeling guilty for discovering something pleasurable? The Girl Who Laminated Herself was almost 32 years old and still had never eaten durian fruit or gnawed on chicken feet and dreamed about getting lost on a train. Pleasure was something she wished to understand. And she wished to understand how desire was fulfilled. But she was just a girl with half a hand in a laminator and she knew that she needed to delve deeper. So, she flattened her thumb and her palm and let the laminator pull her in farther.

The laminator hummed and hawed and shuffled on The Girl Who Laminated Herself's desk. From across the room her boss looked at her, gave her a disapproving glare and then turned away, embarrassed. She was taken aback. Why did he turn away so quickly? So frightened? So sickened by her presence, her attendance and dedication to the brand's integrity, authenticity, and human resources? She gave so much and asked so little. What could possibly hurt her relationship with the company and her chances of running her own division? She didn't know, but what she could feel that was giving her real answers and purpose, was the laminator, hungry for more.

And so, like her left hand, she flattened herself more and more. The forearm, the bicep, the shoulder, and the right hand's fingers to her right arm. And somehow she willed herself to flatten the rest of her body before she turned her head into a flapjack and inserted it into the laminator.

It really wasn't anything. It was easy and she enjoyed the process of turning her body into an unraveling scroll. But the thing she loved least about the process was the difference in ideation and product. She had a clear idea of what she was doing but, the result of her hard work was unique from her mind's eye's end product. But still, it was good because it was her own and The Girl Who Laminated Herself thought she had some sense of control in her fate. She became sleepy and when she felt the sticky plastic on her paper thin body she felt at home. She felt warmth.

#

But the real reason we are here discussing The Girl Who Laminated Herself is the Laminator, itself.

What people don't know is that laminators don't actually understand what they're laminating. There is no grand scheme or secret meaning and everything that is laminated is laminated for the first time and therefore amateur at best. Laminators will say that they know what they are doing, or knew what they were doing at the time, but they're lying to themselves. It's the same for everything else, pilots, doctors, microwaves, chefs, knives, and tillers. No one knows.

Now, how does the Laminator feel about the whole incident? Would it be relieved to find out that The Girl Who Laminated Herself is well preserved and prospering, happier, healthier, and more entertained than ever? That she found love with a paper mache bust of Ronald Reagan? That she finally ate durian fruit and chicken feet and is currently waiting for a train? Or would it, the Laminator, be sad about its brief tryst with The Girl Who Laminated Herself? Be upset that it allowed love to invade its feelings of infatuation and brief brush with physical intimacy? Of course, all of this is possible and we will never know.





**Jordan Crider** grew up in Southern Idaho where he explored canyons, railroad tracks, and the desert. He graduated from Boise State University, taught English in China for 3 years, two of which were with the Peace Corps, and is now pursuing an MFA in Fiction in the Southern United States.



# IDA

*Isabel Beeman*

Dressed in white, Ida walked a serious walk, eyes straight ahead; something like how she imagined angels moved. Doing God's work was not to be taken lightly after all. Not that she thought so highly of herself, but at least she could model her vision of things. Regardless, the patients needed her, and most of them had given up on God anyway.

At home, her mother. Mostly another patient. How sad really, she thought, but she did not feel sadness; more like frustration or annoyance, which is why she tried to think of her so little. Besides, many had it worse. Like the man with no leg. Yesterday, Ida had peered down at the bloody tendrils which spurted and twitched, anxiously searching for their missing halves. She shuddered, clenching. It was not the gore that bothered her so much as the emotional reckoning with absence. The rest of his life, those tendrils, flailing forever, severed and incomplete. It filled her with an unnameable dread. She shook her head as if the thought would fall from her ears.

Working at the hospital served Ida as a sort of warning to be gentle with her body. Watching surgery, she prayed to never be entered in such a way. In her nightmares, tiny men would pry open her lips and crawl down her throat, begin construction. After waking she would vomit, just to be sure.

Her fixation on the body led Ida to be quite still. She attempted to live in such a state of stillness that the universe would forget about her existence entirely. On the train, she barely sat, but more hovered above the seats. Her step was so light that the floor sighed with relief wherever she went. When reaching out for an object, she first wove her fingers around it carefully, touching its space, making contact only if absolutely necessary.

At the hospital, stripped down air burned her nose. As if it was the air that

was killing people. After sanitizing, Ida's hands shriveled up tight. Pores locked their gates to intruders. She put on a mask, though it was not necessary; she simply felt more at ease when all her openings had been accounted for. As she delicately changed catheters and emptied bedpans, Ida felt an overwhelming sense of calm.

During breaks, Ida liked to watch the world explode behind her eyelids. Lightning struck, and often a glowing ring appeared, continuously morphing and changing color, but always maintaining its essence. Ida strained her eyes to keep it in focus. She treasured it like nothing else. Sometimes, she would press down hard on her eye sockets, just to make sure it was still there, watching her; it did resemble an eye. She thought of it as her inner God, a third eye, a hag stone.

Ida's days at the hospital passed in this way. Mostly without thought. She hardly spoke to the other nurses; she liked to preserve her words for safekeeping. An occasional "see you tomorrow," was exchanged, nothing revealed, merely recreational speaking.

On the walk home, Ida reflected on her work. She tried not to be proud, but sometimes it slithered up inside her, against her will. How she helped the sickly! And, in passing moments, how she wished the world could know! People would certainly regard her differently, maybe even write of her in the papers. But when she paused to give it a true thought, she recoiled from herself in disgust.

Nearly there, she would confront her favorite statue. An iron angel looked down at her sternly, breasts pointed to the sky. Ida looked up, tried to maintain her poise. It was a daily standoff she subjected herself to. The angel struck fear into her heart. The angel had her own ideas about things. Ida wished she could look at her through the hag stone behind her eyelids, strip her bare. But without that divine assistance, she was helpless. About to leave, having lost as usual, something kept her. Today, the angel had something to say. Today, her iron curls fell in tresses along her shoulders, and every strand resembled a screaming tendril. Ida's eyes filled with tears that would not fall. Was this the way of the world? To always be broken up, cut off, searching? Without end? She tried to look away, but even her own fingers were suddenly grotesque, the way they dangled there in space. What horror! She cried out, ran the rest of the way home. She tried to put it all out of her mind. Pull back your loose strands of hair, don't look at your hands. Still, she fumbled

with the key in the lock; forcing the key into the lock made her nauseous. Think of dinner, and showering! And opening the mail...

(Ida took a secret pleasure in reading the mail. Even phony letters, scams for money, were written so tenderly that they filled her with warmth.

*Dear valued customer,*

*We are so glad this letter has reached you safely...*

So glad! Safely! Who could be behind this? She sometimes fantasized about writing back, just to say hello and see how that person's day was going. It seemed to her that whoever it was had a lot of pent up sensitivity.)

And in this gentle reflection, as she fingered through the envelopes, Ida regained some peace of mind.

Without warning, night soaked into the walls. The smallest sliver of the moon taunted the window. Ida remembered her shower. She undressed mournfully, as if resigning to be sacrificed. The hot water burned her skin, but the cold was too cold. She settled for burning over freezing. In the corner, a spider spinning thread...red thread from a spool. Perhaps it had run out of spider silk? Regardless, there it was, making do. Ida focused on the spider, its little black body weaving over and under. The beginnings of a magnificent scarlet web were forming. Ida reached between her legs, never looking away. She wove her fingers in and out and around herself until she was knitted entirely, simultaneously undone.

#

Ida liked Saturdays the least, for she hated having nothing to do. Her mother's prescription filled, the laundry done, the groceries bought and put away; still lying in bed, she checked them off one by one. She lost herself in a stray cat walking along the balcony outside, briefly longed for that existence. In the back of her mind, the statue still loomed. A little agitated, she rose up and decided to start the day normally,

without so much fuss.

She dressed in her weekend clothes and stepped outside. The big world greeted her; she looked away bashfully. Today, everything was dirty and shameful. But Ida pressed on, determined to find some small beauty, like a perfectly preserved butterfly wing, or a daytime star. Instead, a white ticket fluttering in the wind, held in place by a small iron thorn. Ida refused to look yesterday's assailant in the eye, and yet curiosity consumed her. Eyes fixed on the ground, she traced the rim of the thick paper with the tip of her finger. Then, in a swift motion, snatched it off the statue, held it up to her face. A series of meaningless abbreviations. One word stood out from the rest: dance. A dance at Archa theatre. It began in minutes. Ida felt the aura of the angel; something inside her churned. What else to do? Ticket in hand, she headed towards the theatre.

To Ida, the building before her resembled a great hall or a church. Either way, she was prepared to undergo divine judgement. The people around her walked into the building with purpose. Ida refused to move until she could convincingly imitate them. She watched how they stepped heel-down-first, heads angled slightly upward. Well, I can do that! But the moment she tried, she felt like nothing but a chicken. So she closed her eyes and rushed in, hoping her blindness would render her invisible. Inside, a man promptly took her ticket, and she was escorted to her seat in a flurry. It was as if she had been carried to that very spot, no recollection of walking after passing the grand swinging doors.

In a theatre, there is nothing to do but look straight ahead. Ida found comfort in this. She lost herself in the slow, soft rippling of the red velvet curtain. Behind it, chaos ensued, communicated only by the tiniest ripples. Ida laughed out loud. Surely this is what we looked like to God!

Before she knew it, the lights dimmed, voices hushed. The red curtains split down the middle; Ida winced at the sight. Tiny people rushed out, blood flowing from the wound. Stillness, then an outburst of movement. A coming together, and a dispersal. Ida watched the dancers blend in and out of each other like moving flecks of paint.

Then one, strong and elegant, took the stage for herself. The dancer struck the air, only to articulate each bone of her foot onto the floor, one at a time. Bending, nearly snapping, bouncing lightly when it

seemed she would be heavy. Seeing her dance, Ida seized up tight and began to sweat. Every movement sent a tiny pulse through her body until she was vibrating continuously. Her weight fell deep into her seat. So deep, she fell all the way through.

On the other side, Ida sat under soft red light, was danced around, was caressed lightly. The dancer touched Ida's space. Ida reached out and touched hers, would grab it if she could. Small strands of the dancer's hair fell upon her cheeks. She picked them off, and having nowhere to put them, yet unable to contemplate losing them, placed them on her tongue. The dancer lurched forward, withdrew, arched and swayed. Ida sat heavy as a stone, gathering loose hairs on her tongue, sweating profusely. When the dancer had coiled herself around the chair completely, Ida thought of speaking, but could only breathe with inflection. Then, a red velvet curtain closed between them, and Ida was alone.

Something on the surface of the world cracked. Ida scrambled to put it back together. But a piece was missing: a thin shard now pierced the flesh of her thigh. Agony, followed by that little ecstasy of pain. She got up, left the theatre. And there was that daytime star.

#

Ida couldn't find when things had changed. Now, she was making a painting. A painting! Of a red girl swirling through water. She had the unusual desire to display it. Instead, she fell asleep on it, acrylic sticking to her hair and cheeks. The next day, she put on her red dress and headed towards the theatre, canvas in hand. Paint still stained her face in spots, almost elegantly, like echoes of the dress.

The dance studio comprised three glass walls, the fourth a mirror. It was situated neatly at the back of the theatre. And here were the company dancers, leaping in black leotards. Through the glass, Ida could see herself reflected in the mirror and felt she was part of it all. She had the ridiculous notion to jump. Before she could, she spotted her dancer: tall and serious. Those painfully serious black eyes, studying herself in the mirror. Until she glimpsed Ida, who gasped, because the intensity of those eyes made it seem that she already knew. Ida felt exposed, naked. Aware of her own eyes as entrances, she shut them tight. The dancer already knew.

“Who are you?”

Ida looked up. Somehow, the dancer stood tall before her.

Ida offered up the smudged canvas, her only explanation. The dancer inspected it, glanced back up at her repeatedly. To Ida, time ceased. Meanwhile, the dancer was doing something like smiling.

“I’m Amelia. And you are?”

“Ida...” she heard herself say.

“Ida...” the dancer, Amelia, repeated, “would you like to get dinner with me, Ida?”

Ida’s blood surged, fell in waves, so violently that only her pure consciousness remained, untarnished. Accepting this, she nodded slowly.

“Meet me here in an hour,” Amelia said, and with that, she was back in the studio, flowing in perfect form. Ida stood next to her in the mirror, still as a statue. The reflection of Amelia’s body wound about her, and she blushed. Then she hurried away, pretending she had something else to do.

Ida chose to pass the time on an uncomfortable bench, which she felt forced her to confront reality. She was aware of herself, yet could not fathom herself. She certainly could not fathom this dancer, her candidness. But what had she expected? She felt the attention she was drawing like the heavy weight of wings on her back. Her head in her hands, she cradled her mind; it was so fragile, she feared it might break. More than anything, she wanted to know: what did she think? But she was blank, stripped of everything, except for one thought: Amelia. Amelia and the way she moves.

An hour of ruminating on this, to the point of delirium. The ringing of a bell summoned Ida back to her body. She rushed to the studio, prayed she was not too late. To her relief, Amelia was there,



leaning against the glass wall with her twin reflection. Ida greeted them both with a slight nod. A yellow cab waited on the curb.

“I want to take you someplace,” Amelia said, then reached out, grabbed the car door, swung it open, gestured for Ida to enter. She slid in, and as the cab shifted beneath her weight, she felt terribly important.

In the cab, Ida inspected her new companion, who returned her gaze fearlessly. The two women looked at each other and nothing else. Amelia was noble and striking, her features crystallized. And those eyes that interrogated, swallowed. Next to her, Ida had the air of a willing victim. They sped through town in a charged silence; Amelia seeing, understanding. And Ida meditating on that new stirring in her belly that propelled her forward.

Looking at Amelia, Ida’s soul no longer had anything to do with her body. She had been carved right out, separated. It was so simple. Now, she could float without straining her muscles. Amelia blinked slowly, did everything slowly. Rested a cheek on her hand, weightless! Ida tried it too, letting her eyes run over the quick stream of life outside.

All around her, Ida was met with decorated people on stilts. A vendor on the street offered passersby a reach into a mystery box. Amelia turned, followed her gaze.

“This is where I’m from.”

Ida imagined her dancer here, gliding through the streets. Reaching into the mystery box, unafraid.

The cab screeched to a halt. Ida was swept outside by an arm, Amelia’s arm, and then a hand in hers, Amelia’s, guided her.

“Come on, I want to show you something,” Amelia said. They stopped at the base of the tallest building Ida had ever seen, so tall she couldn’t imagine the top. It was green, and a little bent, with too many windows. Ida followed Amelia inside.

They were greeted by infinite doors, no end in sight. Ida was tempted by a bright pink door to her left, covered in jewels.

“Open it,” Amelia said. Ida took her permission gladly. She had shed something of herself, and without it, her decisions lost all the heaviness of meaning.

Behind the door was a huge bed wrapped in satin. On it, two black spiders as big as dogs stroked each other with their long, hairy legs. They paid Ida no mind, lost as they were in each other’s touch. Ida melted into nothing. She began to shut the door slowly, not wanting to intrude, but never looked away. So many thoughts passing over her tongue left it heavy and useless. She stared at Amelia in disbelief; disbelief soon outweighed by an overwhelming need to touch. To touch Amelia, as the spiders did.

Ida quivered. She feared Amelia could feel it, that she was shaking the whole floor. She covered her mouth with her hands to trap the sounds that wanted to escape. Amelia brought her lips to those hands, Ida’s hands, as if she already knew. Which she did. And with that, they came together in an endless loop of being. Nothing left to chance. Even their toes interlaced, their hair all contained in fistfuls.

Oh, to be entered! Ida felt every part of her open up, little forgotten wells that needed to be filled. She devoured, and was devoured. Amelia, filling her, until she overflowed into a fountain, ceaselessly replenishing herself. They laid in a pool of themselves, sipping hard, lest they drown. Ida’s hairs waved like sea anemones. She submitted to a rush of wet silver, let her head be cradled; a private baptism of sorts.

Followed by a bottomless sleep. Towards morning, Ida dreamt of a green snake coiled around a tree, separated from her by an ocean, which could only be traversed on floating wooden planks. Before she could try, she awoke in a feverish sweat, and immediately rushed to the toilet to vomit. Amelia’s toilet. Then returned to a bed she did not remember, where her dancer remained asleep.

Suddenly, a protuberance! Ida folded over in shock. Her belly was poking out, hard and round. She hesitated to even touch it; it seemed to be something that had latched onto her in the middle of the night, rather

than anything she had grown organically. Either way, she was sure she felt something deep inside of her move. She let out a small cry, wishing she could back away from her own skin, its strangeness.

Amelia roused herself, pulled Ida close.

“You’ll see.”

Ida was stiff, refused to touch herself, as if by feeling nothing she could cease to exist. She had opened, and in her vulnerability, the world had seeped into her, spread through her veins. Now that it had a grip on her insides, she was weak; she wilted beneath the strain of this thought. There was nothing to be done. Her belly rippled.

Oh, what to do! The laundry done, the groceries bought and put away...where was her mother? And how was she in these sticky sheets? Ida’s head throbbed. Her ears filled with fluid.

“Stay a little longer, please. I’ll make you tea.”

Unable to think of a solution, Ida relented; let herself fall into a mound of pillows and be waited on. She lacked the energy to handle any of it. So she shut her eyes until she found her hag stone. It came quickly, bright and powerful. She damned it for its tantalizing wisdom but ultimate uselessness. She wanted to pluck it right out of her skull.

Amelia brought the tea, and Ida remembered why she was here. Little flashes of the night struck behind her eyelids, electrifying her skin. Their fingers sparked while exchanging the tea cup.

“Sorry...”

“So you can speak. Last night, you mostly growled.”

Ida turned red. If her lips had briefly unzipped, now they were sealed with glue. She stared at her tea, sipped it slowly. Peering back up,

she found Amelia shone with a lightness that nearly made her translucent. Ida tapped her arm, just to be sure.

“You’re strange,” Amelia said. Then stood up and stretched down to touch her toes. Ida was taken with her flexibility. How relaxed her body must be. She stretched up, revealing small deposits of fat sitting atop her hips, which Ida longed to chew on. Every latent desire awoken.

“If you fall back asleep, I promise you’ll see.”

The warmth of the tea was soothing. The fan above was spinning. Ida thought of a hypnotist’s watch, and so she left herself in the heavy calm of Sunday morning, and once again, slept.

#

The soft cry of a baby woke her up cold. At first, Ida could see nothing in the darkness. How was it night again? But a round yellow face, moonlike, stared up at her, smiling. What was this? It crawled up on her, giggled in her ear. She held its doughy limbs. Never had she felt a stronger urge to hold.

“Isn’t it amazing?”

Ida jumped, then felt Amelia’s warm breath on her shoulder. It smelled as delicious as food. She inhaled deeply. She held her baby up, got a good look at it. It looked exactly as a baby should. It was whole, still connected to her belly. She would never sever it! She hugged it, kissed it, did all the things one does. She did not wonder how, or why. She reveled.

Ida looked at Amelia. Her eyes filled with tears. What will I do? The baby crawled onto the bed, pulled by some curiosity. Pulled Ida’s belly; she rolled over, cried out in pain. Amelia grabbed the cord, ripped it in half with her teeth. Ida’s tears fell.

“Shhh, shhh.”

Amelia offered her the slimy white tube, stripped of all its life pumping, nothing but meat. Her baby was now crawling on the floor...how had it gotten there? Ida had the maternal instinct to taste her placenta, but it was foul, and she spit it out immediately.

For an instant, a green python slithered on the carpet. It was a happy thing, and Ida longed to touch it, for it to notice her with its yellow eyes. But then it was gone, and again her fat baby, which Ida stared at dumbly.

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” Amelia said. Ida couldn’t look at her, she was suddenly so sick. Whatever it was, it could not be hers. She looked down at her deflated stomach, horrendous. The most terrible she’d ever seen. Everything around her, terrible, stained. Nothing to do but run home.

And so she did. Bringing with her only that white tube, clutching it in her fist, so tight she nearly squashed it. Steam rose out of her skin as it met the cold air. Burning with fever she ran. As she passed the statue, she grinned with pride, dangled her own tendril in its face.

“I’m not scared of you!” she cried, laughing a little.

And with a sigh of relief, she was closing the apartment door behind her.

“Ida?” her mother called out. Ida ignored it, slumped to her bedroom, in bliss from the adrenaline. She locked the door behind her.

Ida looked down at the mushed up cord in her palm. She scraped it onto a used saucer, placed it on the balcony, and waited. Before long, she strolled up, the long black cat with piercing black eyes. The two acknowledged each other with reticence. Then she began to feast. Ida enthralled in her biting and lapping. Until it was gone, and Ida had peace; a glass wall between her and the cat who had tasted her flesh.



**Isabel Beeman** is an emerging artist and writer from the east coast. She is currently an MFA candidate in fiction at the University of Colorado Boulder, where she was the 2022 recipient of the John F Barker Memorial Fellowship. She also teaches creative writing at the university and reads submissions for the MFA program's associated journal, TIMBER. In her spare time, Isabel enjoys going dancing with her friends, knitting, and caring for her plants.





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# THE HOP

*Michael Giddings*

Dan and Julie emerge from the subway as their fight hits a crescendo. These moments no longer involve screaming, tears, slammed doors, or book stacks toppled with violent gestures. Fights now lack articulated grievances, revelations, and concessions of any kind. Forget about makeup sex. Sex in general has become scarce. Dan and Julie do not enjoy one another in any way. Their families are looking forward to the wedding.

Dan knows why they are fighting. Julie is upset because her friend Eve's book about macaroni and cheese is hitting shelves this week and Julie's book about deep-dish pizza will never see the light of day. The launch party tonight will be gut-stuffed with sycophants and flatterers, all of them focused on Eve and not Julie. An abominable injustice, in Julie's opinion, Dan knows.

But Julie knows what this fight is about, really, *really*: it's about the macaroni and cheese book. Sure, which is stupid, but stupider still is the fact that Dan implied earlier that the book is *not* stupid, that Dan fakes such generosity of spirit whenever one of their friends manages to flutter lackadaisically into some ethereal echelon of Brooklyn hipsterdom success-in-the-arts, that Dan claims this deep pride for everyone they graduated with, celebrating whenever someone dribbles out some prose poem about, say, a nostalgic fondness for Pixie Stix, or when someone buys a dog or gets pregnant or buys a dog that gets pregnant, but, to be clear, this is a symptom of what the fight is about, not *really* what the fight is about because what it's about is the falseness of Dan, how he himself *is* one of the sycophants and flatterers that bloat these parties, how he might even be a sociopath, and

how that reflects on her, on Julie, a woman who is not only unable to leave him, but also unable to sell her stupid book about deep-dish pizza. Also the L-train sucks and they're late. And her new boots are pulping her toes. And Dan is staring dreamily at the pinkening sky over the East River with a half-smile plastered across his face, a smile indicative of some cruel secret he's harboring, another woman he's been rolling around with most likely. Also it's humid.

"I'll suffocate in all the melted cheese," Julie moans, but Dan has hustled ahead.

Eve is so darn happy that Dan and Julie could make it. Isn't this place the tops? She actually says that: *the tops*. Eve has done herself over as a retro-50s housewife, though she is not a wife and has probably never heard a Drifters song. But, yes, Eve just thinks it's super-cool and neat-o that her book is coming out this week. It's ultra-ultra. And this place, this loft the publisher set up for her? How swell!

Dan starts kissing up Eve's arm like an unsexy Gomez Addams. He keeps the kisses platonic, congratulatory, but with an implication that, if Eve is interested, he has less platonic kisses available in the backroom. Right now, though, in the doorway, congratulations.

"You did it, kitten," Dan says. "You really pulled it off."

"Yessir, daddy-o," chirps Eve.

A flood of men in pink paisley shirts gushes from the elevator. It's like the blood wave in *The Shining* but with beards, Hot Pocket tattoos, and sanctimonious quips. Eve shrieks: "Johnny, Jimmy, Jack, Petey, Joey, Mikey, Linus, Fred!"

The gang is all here. More of the gang is yet to come.

Dan and Julie disperse into the crowded room. They order drinks at separate bars. They glare at each other from across the room. They disperse again.

Dan ends up talking to Red-Brick Rob, the Dogfish Poet, who is fixated on the semicolon. Kurt Vonnegut wrote an obituary for the semicolon, Red-Brick Rob says, but nobody would have remembered that if not for the quotes hashtag on Tumblr.

“The semicolon should be resuscitated posthaste,” Red-Brick Rob declares. Dan has no choice but to agree because Red-Brick Rob is a heavy hitter. A blurb from Red-Brick Rob can fly a man to California and back six times over.

Julie presses her face against a window and stares at the underside of the Williamsburg Bridge. She tries to decide if the bridge gives off masculine vibes or feminine vibes. Maybe this is a poor use of my time, Julie thinks. Maybe I don't need to be gendering iconic bridges. She drinks her drink. Dan is still chatting up the idiot dogfish poet Red-Brick Rob who had a poem in the *New Yorker* last month. Julie read it and her jaw hit the floor. “The man has the depth of an upside-down Snapple cap,” she had tossed the magazine to Dan. Dan's eyes narrowed as he read. He beamed. “I think it's good.” Julie had picked her jaw up off the floor and had taken a long walk. She would like to take a walk now, too, but it would be bad form to leave the party so soon, and her boots really are killing her.

There is a band of some note. They take a moment to huddle with the caterers to make a game plan. Diplomatically, they decide to unveil the food at the exact second the music begins to play.

“That way,” says the singer sleepily. “It'll be like a theme song.”

She climbs onto the small stage, waits for her three tall lads to adjust their guitars and pick up their drumsticks. She toys with her bangs. She does a little boogie with one sneaker.

“Hello,” she says, mouse-voiced, into the microphone. “Dinnertime is served.”

A dissonant guitar chord and the caterers rip off the tinfoil. Macaroni and cheese. Naturally.

Dan and Red-Brick Rob tour the tables, loading paper plates with unique variations on a timeless standby—crab, parmesan, gorgonzola, tempura, all with esoteric names like *Velveeta Cheetah*, *Spookster Curds*, and *The American Fast Food Venture Capitalist*. Eve did not create any of these recipes for macaroni and cheese. She compiled them and took photographs. She wrote descriptive passages.

“Ah, I remember Saturday morning cartoons,” Red-Brick Rob says, taking a scoop from a tray labeled *The Third Ninja Turtles Iteration*. “Spinach in this one. *Popeye* might have been a better name, perhaps.”

“Totally,” Dan nods. He remembers too. Julie is still over by the window. Dan wonders when she’ll try to make amends. She owes him, Dan thinks.

The sun has dipped below the horizon, leaving an orange sherbet glow lingering over the city. Julie is grateful for air conditioning. The swelter will last all night. Her hair will frizz. At least her dress looks nice. Her toes cry out as they perish.

Somebody approaches her. Dan should be coming to apologize. But he won’t. He never does. Instead, the person standing next to her is a stranger, a short woman around Julie’s age with hair even more wrecked by humidity.

“I like your tattoo,” says the woman.

Julie has, peeking out from under a shoulder-strap of her dress, a line drawing of a character from a book series she’d read as a kid: a humanoid teen mouse, brave and curious. This mouse and her friends solved mysteries.

Julie recognizes this woman was a local author. A book of stories came out a few years back. Well-reviewed. Julie can’t remember the title. It was a made-up word, she thinks. A composite. Something snide—

“*The Mozzarella Murders* was my favorite of those books,” the author

says, still referencing Julie's tattoo. "It was the stupidest one. Kind of naval-gazing. Sort of like this little shindig, huh? Kind of like this groovy hop? All cheese and hysterical squeaking? Dudes who look like rats?"

"God," says Julie. "I would love if somebody here got murdered."

They chat about murder for a while. Julie notices Dan staring. He would absolutely know who this woman is, would know the title of her book. He is seething with envy right now. The crowd oozes around the space, chewing noodles. People pick up glossy copies of the book, crack the spine, set it down again reverentially. The band goes gooey, major chord, minor chord, the singer droning and eeping.

"At least these events always have rooftops," says the author nodding towards a stairwell. "Shall we?"

The moon looms. A few men of stature drift between tiki torches asking one another about market values. How much does a blot of ink go for these days? Which type of virtual space is best for gains?

Julie and the author order piña coladas and step over to the edge of the roof, behind a semicircle of empty folding chairs, to a corner by a fire escape. Night has come, and the city skyline looms moonward on either side of the river. The Williamsburg Bridge cracks her back and settles. Manhattan looks a fortress. Not long ago, Brooklyn's view was flatter, but skyscrapers now protrude like adult teeth from baby gums. They are building a tower, high and bleak, with howling elevator shafts and cold, architecturally inconvenient apartments for crypto-speculators to rent and then abandon after the grift collapses. There is the building topped with the glowing red and yellow hotdog. There is the Williamsburg Savings Bank. Sophia, the author, has known this skyline since babyhood, has grown with it. She remembers a friend who claimed the Williamsburg Savings Bank as her favorite building of all time.

Sophia's job is to remember such things, to track them, to wrestle them into print. She's been at it all day. Now she is here, tipsy with a new friend, Julie, who seems to be battling demons of her own. Sophia watches carefully.

Dan saw them go to the roof. He is livid. Julie owes him an apology and it is past due. Dan wants to go after Julie and that author—oh, that author, she’s nothing special herself, Dan thinks, glorified children’s literature, basically, but with a bit of weird sex in it, we’ve all seen *that* before, we’ve all read our Dunn, our July, our Broder, and our DePaul, Dan thinks, and it’s all very well and good, but this little crabapple Sophia Gallows and her book *Snideways*, a slim collection that was derivative and cold, he read it and disliked and would love to pay compliments to the author, to lather her up and see what comes—but he’s glued to this spot on by Red-Brick Rob’s words, spoken through masticated pasta and cheddar, noodles dangling from his beard, talking ceaselessly at Dan, he’ll never stop speaking Dan thinks, Dan knows.

The band churns out a song like butter. The singer’s voice is a sticky splat, like heavy cream dripping from the edge of a table. Eve signs a book and does a little shimmy. Someone congratulates her. Eve does another shimmy in gratitude. More steaming dishes are wheeled out. Cheese particles fill the air. “*We’ve been Katie and the 80s,*” says the singer. “*Buy a record, buy a T-shirt,*” her voice burbles through the hum.

Dan decides it’s time to take action. He’ll yell at Julie, cause a scene, he doesn’t care. Anything is better than standing in this sticky room any longer. It’s Julie’s fault, Dan thinks. She soured this evening for him. He doesn’t know how she did it, but she did. He tries to break away from Red-Brick Rob who is still talking.

“This microbrewery is naming an IPA after me,” he says. “They’ll call it the Red-Brick Poetically Hopped IPA.”

There are more noodles in Red-Brick Rob’s beard now. It’s possible his beard is *made* of noodles, Dan thinks. He tells Red-Brick Rob he has to pee.

“You have to pee, poppy-o?” Eve materializes behind Dan. “At a time like this? On my special night?”

Eve shimmers in the grease and steam. Her eyes seem to be melting, but her mouth remains fixed in glee. The paper-thin spaces between her teeth—carefully, painstakingly aligned—are filled with melt and mash. The sole of Dan’s shoe sticks to the floor. He pulls it up with effort. The elevator doors open and a pile of cottage cheese slithers out. Something bubbles through the floorboards. Dan manages to break away but moves as though navigating a swamp. He’ll get Julie for this. He’ll be revenged upon her.

Cheese yellow, optimistic beyond all apology, the moon seems to be coming closer to the moon. Julie half expects it to break into a grin. But maybe she's projecting. Because, here's the thing: now Julie is having *fun*. This author—with her bushy, almost mulleted hair, her crooked teeth, and her damp forehead—is pleasant to spend time with. Sophia makes a joke about a party for the omelet book next week and the sangria book the week afterwards.

“What about the deep-dish pizza book?” Julie jumps in.

“Don't even start with me about deep-dish pizza.”

They banter about deep-dish pizza. The moon chuckles along. Manhattan presents itself with the usual glitz. The stars above outshine the stars below. Sophia begins talking about how the couple in the *Piña Colada Song* are dirtbags. She talks about dirtbags in general.

“But,” she pivots abruptly. “I don't want to judge them too harshly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, they're *retrying*. That's the thing. Even the ones who seem vapid or who make bad art or who will talk your ear off about podcasts. They're all trying. I'm trying, too and, honestly, that's scary to admit.”

Julie considers.

“There's always the fire escape,” the author says nodding at the ancient ladder. The moon, deep-dish pizza, innovations of anthropomorphic mice, dopamine, and the distant rumble of the despicable L (the Icarus of the MTA). Julie puts her empty glass on the ledge. The rungs are encrusted with grit and city filth.

The invisible ooze downstairs is moving more quickly now, climbing upward. Below them, the room moves slowly, conversations like molasses and tar. Even Red-Brick Rob has slowed to a drawn-out, languid moan. The band plays on, minor chords, synth and drum brush. Dan is after Julie, his eyes hard and

cold. It's her fault, he thinks. Witchcraft or bad vibes, Dan doesn't know, but Julie did this. He pushes through Velveeta. He'll give Julie a piece of his mind.

Julie and Sophia know he's coming.

"In every space like this, there's an escape hatch of sorts," the author says. She laughs and coughs into her hand. "I don't mean to preach to you. I learned about this kind of thing when I was younger. Spent a lot of time crawling into junkyards and staring at liminal spaces. It kind of messed me up, but I learned some things. Whenever you enter a room filling with viscous energy, blowhard opinions, and sweat, a door opens somewhere. It's just a matter of walking through."

"Ramifications?" Julie asks.

"Wide-ranging," Sophia says. "You might not wind up marrying the person you thought you'd marry. Some foods won't taste as great, others will become irresistible. But the world won't end. Mild changes. Bland, you could say."

Dan gurgles her name from across the roof. Cheese-men in Hawaiian shirts swivel their heads. Too late.

Sophia nods. Julie grabs a rung. A warm salty smell gusts from the city and the moon bellows. It's only a quick hop down towards bigger joy.





**Michael Giddings** is a writer, cartoonist, and musician from Brooklyn. He works as a preschool teacher and is an associate fiction editor for *Fatal Flaw Literary Magazine*. Michael's chapbook of linked stories, *Kelly Marie Wants to Talk to You*, will be published by the Cupboard Pamphlet in 2023. He is currently at work on a novella, *The Homeschoolers*, in which Red-Brick Rob will return.



# BEYOND JEALOUSY

*Soramimi Hanarejima*

A.

It's 2PM on Thursday: time to be jealous again. So you clear your desk and get out the list of everything you've recorded since last week. All the things people said/did/got/flaunted that could be enviable.

- Trina's promotion
- Verst receiving that award—*cash* award
- Remina's tropical vacation
- Marigold's existential breakthrough
- The glowing reviews of a classmate's debut novel
- Last weekend's amazing concert by that piano prodigy

Going through them one by one, you feel whatever they evoke in you. Led by desire, resentment and inadequacy, a familiar slew of emotions runs its course. Then, you look at all the items together, as a mass of emotionally charged goings-on, to see the shape of envy in aggregate and get the overall message—what you might really want for yourself or need in your life.

This time, it's different. The ache of loss swirls in your chest. A visceral elegy for lost time, opportunities, potential—not squandered, more like not seen, only visible in hindsight and even then through a haze of uncertainty.

There seems nothing else to find and decode. Longing and regret settle in.

After work, you go to the lava tubes outside the city, so their cool darkness can soothe you. Starting with The Meshler, the most extensive set of tunnels with the kind of merging and diverging passageways in which you could cross paths with yourself if you're not careful. But you've studied the map thoroughly and planned out your entire route—a long hairpin loop. With hard hat and headlamp on, you descend the metal ladder to the ancient subterranean realm where there's nothing to be jealous of.

B.

While she's asleep, you sneak into her time machine. The interior is of course dim but faintly aglow with enough light from the third window for you to get to the cockpit without needing the flashlight you brought. Taking the pilot's seat, you work the controls beneath the pitch-black forward window, adjusting the navigation system to set course for a future modestly better than the one she's been aiming for. The alteration should be imperceptible without some scrutiny, the difference in direction easily attributable to drift—or a serendipitous turn of events, if there is one later.

With that taken care of, you go to the third window—the one that looks out on the spectacular sights she occasionally mentions. It's wider than you expected—almost panoramic—gloaming with distant colors. Your hands tremble with impatience as you undo the latches and push the thick pane out so it tilts upward, until the hinges lock it open at an ample though still acute angle. Through the window frame swirls a jungly breeze thickly floral and earthy, with notes of spice, smoke, melon and tea leaves—reminiscent of home: the garden, kitchen and pantry.

You lean out, towards the tremulous shimmer of myriad couldhavebeens—all those reflective and refractive mirages forming a mirrored maze of recent possibilities. You peer beyond them, at the neverwillbes. With its crystal palaces, floating cities and enchanted forests full of exotic creatures, that exuberant wonderland practically entreats you to clamber out and abscond into realms of fantasy and mystery. But of course, you don't climb out the window, afraid of how easily you'd get lost in the multitudinous unrealities that intricately combine the past, present and fantastic on and on into the distance. Instead, you leap out with your gaze, through the binoculars you've brought.

You adjust the focus and see her in a workshop, carefully arranging

emotions in a half-finished song on a wooden table. Behind her—this version of her—are racks of tools and shelves of components: various rhymes, stock chords, melodious refrains. Deftly, she crafts the song so later she can perform it the way a croupier might deal hands from a deck surreptitiously stacked to charm all the players at his casino table into each thinking good fortune has at last arrived.

You want to find out who will hear this song, but there's so much more to see, and at most, you have only a couple hours in the time machine. If you look elsewhere, will you be able to find this troubadour self of hers again? Will the time machine's new course lead toward or away from her? It can never reach her, of course, but will it get closer?

C.

She gives me the love her parents gave her—not the totality but the bulk of it. Something like 90% in her estimation. Mostly from childhood, both special occasions and daily life.

“For safe keeping,” she says when leaving the box with me, the sun slipping beneath the hills behind her.

It's much sweeter and mushier than anything I ever got from my parents, which both intrigues and repulses me.

I put it all in my bedroom closet, so it'll be out of the way.

I tell no one about this abundance of emotion she's made me the custodian of. And it becomes a de facto secret—a part of my life that I don't have to withhold from friends and family but end up telling no one about.

Soon, my mornings pulse with a fresh energy. When I choose the day's clothes from my closet, under everything draped on and clipped to hangers, the warm glow from the box alerts me to my role as the keeper of this treasure. Like a second alarm clock, waking me up to life.

D.

At The Gallery of Pure Enjoyment, I start the workday as I always do, by freshening things up. Opening the numerous display windows, I change the perishable stimuli and swap in new objects—the latter done as a kind of

redecorating for patrons who come regularly. In the vase below the artificial nose, I replace the lilies with roses. For the painting viewer, I switch the portrait of a woman on a park bench reading to a still life of various stone fruits and leafy vegetables on a wooden tabletop.

Once I've gone through the checklist for this morning, I head back to the staff offices via the tactile wing. Briefly, I look at the sandpaper feeler as it runs the plastic fingertips of its robotic hand lightly over the grainy sheet beneath them in a steady back-and-forth rhythm. Then I go to the soft things corner and sit down on the bench there to watch the meters above the display windows in front of me. Their needles flutter between 8 and 9 as they indicate the degree of gratification experienced by the feelers behind these windows. One strokes a silk scarf, while another rolls a cotton ball with its robotic fingertips, and another squeezes a ball of yarn. There's something soothing about the fact that these materials are simply being enjoyed. It appeals to our ideal of uncomplicated pleasure.

Even when a visitor to The Gallery becomes jealous of all the exuberant enjoyment taking place here (or jealous of a specific kind of pleasure playing out—say, that of whispered endearments heard by an artificial ear), their envy is soon dislodged by wonder—marvel at these technological achievements, amazement at this collection's constant partaking of what the world offers with such plenitude: the qualities of things.

As I linger on the bench, that amazement tinges my mind, but mostly these feelers reassure me. There is much pleasure to be had in textiles, and they are having it.

For me, this is The Gallery at its most enjoyable. No patrons. Only a peaceful quiet in this room and the marble corridors outside it. Beside me waits the cart laden with its hodgepodge of old flowers, shriveled ginger slices, flat soda and everything else I've removed from various experiencers' niches.

Soon, I will wheel it to the workshop and sort out its contents, then turn my attention to what is missing in The Gallery: experiencers that enjoy passages of literature and mathematical equations. Once again, I will confront the problem that still confounds us: how to conjure intellectual pleasure without contemplation, without the risk of boredom.

Though I am tempted to first design an experiencer that will take pleasure in the love that resides in my closet.

E.

Alone at the bus stop by the edge of the park, she gazes up at the night sky, again struck by how different the constellations are here.

*What is it about this new city?* she wonders—and she knows she should stop calling it that; it's new for her, but the city itself is quite old (founded 500 years ago and existing in some form or other during centuries prior). Eventually, it will become her home, but for now, newness is what defines the city for her.

And right now, it's the newness of these constellations—the stars in their usual arrangements but strung together by her mind in ways they never were before. Clouds too are different. More hopeful, less wistful. Something about the sky here must change the way she sees what's in it.

The bus she has been waiting for arrives, and she reminds herself to get on through the rear door, even though she can see through the windows that, unsurprisingly, there are no passengers.

*October*, she thinks when she steps aboard. The air conditioning makes the glowing interior a pocket of crisp autumn in the July heat that barely lets up at night. She knows her mind will keep assigning months to things and places here until everything feels like it belongs in the present.

She takes a seat, and the bus pulls away from the curb. Time to go back to the new apartment—to leave the April greenery behind and return to the pale February quiet. To dream of removing the constraints long ago placed upon your shadow, so at last you will know what else it can become.



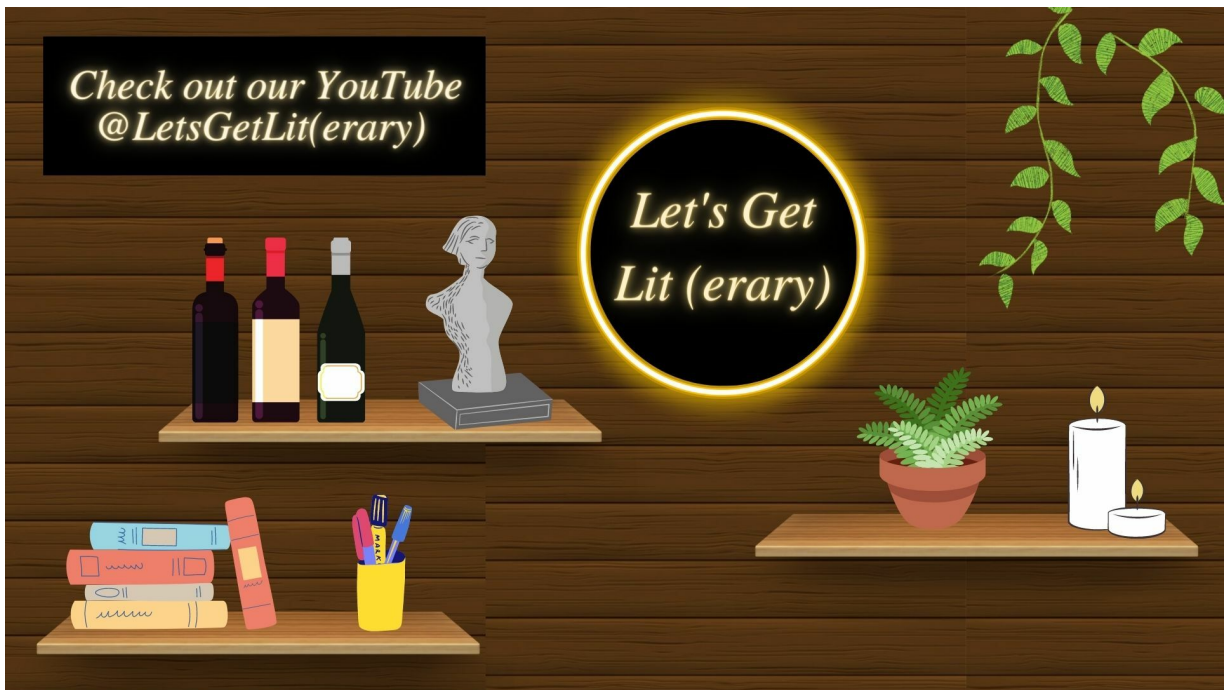
Ever yearning to be spellbound by ideas of a certain fanciful persuasion, **Soramimi Hanarejima** often meanders into the euphoric trance of lyrical daydreams, some of which are chronicled in Soramimi's neuropunk story collection *Literary Devices for Coping*.











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