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†2017 Fiction Prize Winner / 2018 Poetry Prize Winner / 2018 ½ K Prize Winner

Hearing Loss

Finalist for the 2018 Poetry Prize

A person with mid-frequency hearing loss has difficulty hearing mid-frequency sounds but can still hear high- or low-frequency sounds. The human voice is a mid-frequency sound.

I've been pollinated by silence since

I was a child, dawdling,

insulated, uninterrupted,

save a perched sparrow's whistle,

or the thrashing of

a lemon in the garbage disposal.

The doctor said *the human voice*.

Light rain. Unwrapping

a gift, *the sound of the paper tearing*. Each night,

bees wring patient

drops of honey into my ears.

Someday soon, I'll no longer hear

anything but that sweetness—

Bloom

Yunnie employed three undergrads in her lab and one of them—the one she actually needed—was missing. She assumed it was a case of the midterm flu, which struck every semester just before exams. But of the three students she'd hired in the fall, she considered Bram the most likely to contract the imaginary bug. Bram the Ham, she called him, though not to his face. Even pale, timid Catherine, who was reliable but not terribly bright, was a more likely candidate to disappear mid-semester than Andrea.

"So you haven't seen her lately?" Yunnie asked.

Bram looked up from a tray of papaver samples and removed one of his earbuds, letting the twisted green wire hang in front of his chest. "What?" he almost shouted.

A quavering female voice leaked into the lab, singing the first lines of "I Dreamed a Dream." Bram was minoring in theater, which he described as his passion, as if majoring in biology had simply been a concession to his tuition-paying parents. For weeks, he'd been listening to the soundtrack of *Les Misérables*, preparing for his role in the upcoming spring production. This, despite the sign posted directly above his workstation that read:

NO MUSIC

NO MISCHIEF

NO MISTAKES

"I was asking about Andrea," Yunnie said. "Neither of you have seen her lately?"

"We're not in any classes together, so I probably wouldn't." He took a swig from his water bottle, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

Catherine raised and quickly lowered her gloved hand. "Andi lives down the hall from me, but I haven't seen her this week?"

The ends of Catherine's sentences always lifted into questions, even when she was saying something true. Yunnie often encouraged her to state facts as facts to avoid inviting skepticism, but the girl seemed immune to such mentoring.

"I heard she's taking an extra class this semester, so she's probably just studying?"

"Well... more pizza for us then." Yunnie made an effort to smile as she stepped into the adjoining break room. She set the extra-large box from Antonio's on the table and lifted the top. The half-cheese, half-pepperoni combo looked particularly unappetizing today. "Come on in," she called. "Help yourselves."

Friday was the only day of the week when all three students' schedules overlapped in the lab, so Yunnie brought in food from off campus for a group lunch. It was a team-building strategy suggested by one of her colleagues, who said that his students appreciated the break from cafeteria food, and individual progress reports helped everyone feel like they were contributing to the lab's mission. Yunnie hadn't asked for his advice, but as a new assistant professor, simply walking down the hall was an invitation to older colleagues to tell her something she didn't know or recommend something she didn't do. Eating with her students struck her as a particularly strange practice—in Korea, professors would never—but there was no denying the animated conversations she heard when she passed her colleagues' labs.

"Antonio's again?" Bram slid two oily slices of pepperoni onto a paper plate.

Yunnie felt a familiar pressure on the right side of her face, as if her molars were about to crack. "Don't all college students live on pizza?" she asked.

Neither Bram nor Catherine laughed as they took their seats around the small conference table. Yunnie sat down across from them, trying not to look at Andrea's empty chair.

"So...how are the native samples coming along?" She asked as casually as possible, aware that Catherine sometimes seemed alarmed by direct questions.

"I'm about a fourth of the way through? I've catalogued the calendula through the hollyhocks."

Yunnie paused. "The what through the what?"

Catherine lifted her eyes to the ceiling, scanning the dull white acoustic tiles from left to right. "I've catalogued the *Calendula officinalis* through the *Alcea...rosea*?"

"That's right. Nice work, Catherine."

She insisted that her students—in class and in the lab—use the botanical names for flowers instead of their common names. Students frequently objected to this, as if the effort to be correct was simply too much trouble. The first time someone raised her hand in class and asked if it was really necessary to memorize the Latin, Yunnie had been so taken aback by the question that she didn't know how to respond. She simply stood at her lectern, the blood rising to her cheeks, wondering what Mr. Rhee, her old cram school instructor, would have done.

Mr. Rhee had been the most feared member of the faculty at the *Yongin Hagwon*, but also the most effective. Every day, he boasted that one-hundred percent of the students enrolled in his exam prep courses gained admission into their first-choice university, usually Seoul National or Yonsei. Some of them even got into American universities—Harvard, Yale, Stanford, MIT. But the price for results like these was accepting his teaching methods without question or complaint. Often, Mr. Rhee struck his students with a wooden ruler for the smallest offense—answering incorrectly, speaking too softly, crying because he’d raised his voice, glancing out a window when their eyes should have been glued to the board. “This is for your own good,” he’d always shout. Or: “Someday, you’ll thank me!” Whenever Yunnie came home with bright red welts on her palms, her parents would shake their heads and click their tongues at her.

“Study harder,” they’d say.

Yunnie was certain that none of her students studied as hard as she did at their age, with the possible exception of Andrea. The rest would never survive the cram sessions, the back-to-back all-nighters, the thrill of being admitted to a top-tier university followed by the crushing realization that they’d have to do it all over again to get into the best graduate school, and then to land a respectable job after their Ph.D. Only someone who truly loved science would subject herself to a gauntlet like this. For a while, Yunnie thought that might be Andrea, who was easily the most impressive student she’d met since her arrival at California Polytechnic. It was something about the girl’s questions—thoughtful, intelligent questions that spoke to a deeper kind of curiosity. Once, Yunnie asked what had first inspired her interest in plants and Andrea described blowing on a dandelion as a child, watching the cottony white tufts float “away, away, away.” The expression on her face as she told this story was so earnest and filled with wonder—it was hard for Yunnie to look at her and not see a younger version of herself.

She took a small bite of pizza, frustrated by the sad excuse for a lunch gathering, which felt so lifeless without Andrea’s presence. For a while, she tried to keep the conversation going, but her attempts to encourage Bram and Catherine sounded patronizing and insincere. Yunnie knew, and she assumed they knew too, that their work assignments were largely inconsequential. They entered data, took measurements, and catalogued samples. If they disappeared for a few days, or even a few weeks, nothing in the lab would suffer greatly. The only person Yunnie had ever entrusted with real work was Andrea, a decision she was beginning to regret.



Although she rarely had time to eat lunch during the week, on Fridays, she lunched twice. Once with her lab assistants, and then a second time

with Helen, the other new assistant professor hired by her department that year. At first, the pairing—suggested by their department chair—seemed like an inconvenience, yet another hour-long block to add to her already busy schedule. But she agreed to the meeting because it didn't seem wise to decline. She also thought it might be helpful to have a peer with whom to navigate the first year as tenure-track faculty. Over time, she'd come to enjoy Helen's company, to appreciate how frankly she spoke about everyone, students and colleagues alike. And she did so in her beautiful South African accent, which made her sound charming, even when she was being critical, which was her default state. This fascinated Yunnice, the idea that they didn't have to hold it all in.

When she arrived at the faculty dining commons that afternoon, Helen was in a particularly bad mood.

"He's a prick," she said, before Yunnice had even sat down. "An absolute prick."

They tried not to use names in the faculty commons, but Yunnice knew of whom she was speaking. Helen complained about the same grad student every week.

She lowered herself into a plush, velvet-covered chair and unfolded a napkin on her lap. Helen had already ordered a salad and started eating, which seemed somewhat rude, especially since she'd arrived on time. She always arrived on time, for everything. Yunnice signaled a passing waiter. She didn't want to waste any part of their hour flipping through the enormous menu, so she ordered the same salad as Helen even though it was liberally sprinkled with walnuts, which she didn't care for.

"Yesterday, I told him to prepare sterile saline solutions," Helen continued. "And he said I should have one of the undergrads do it. Can you believe that? Second year Ph.D. candidate, and he's trying to tell me how to assign work in my lab."

"So what did you say?"

"I told him to do what I asked or go home, so he prepped the solutions, but you should have seen the look on his face. I swear he would have murdered me in my sleep if he could have gotten away with it."

Helen studied zebrafish. She was interested in their spinal columns, which had a flexible, zipper-like construction that could self-repair after injury. Before the department had even hired her, she'd received a major federal grant during her post-doc to study how self-repair could translate to the development of fetal spinal cords. She was only thirty-two years old, four years younger than Yunnice.

"One of my students didn't show up again today," Yunnice offered. "My best student, actually."

Helen sighed dramatically. "It's like they don't even realize this is their job."

Yunnice took a sip of ice water. Because Helen had a grant, she could afford to employ graduate students in her lab and pay them an almost

living wage. Yunnie had no grant yet, so she was left with undergrads who worked in exchange for a line of experience on their resumes. “Job” wasn’t quite the right word for what she provided them, but she didn’t bother to correct the mistake.

“Have you contacted the student yet?” Helen asked.

“I sent her an email before I walked over.”

“Oh, God no, Yunnie. Students don’t email. Not like we did when we were in school. Besides, email’s not urgent enough for something like this. You have to text her.”

She’d never texted a student before. She rarely texted anyone these days. “I shouldn’t call her instead?”

Helen’s eyes widened. “Are you kidding? They’re millennials. They don’t talk on the phone. My husband’s in Massachusetts and *we* hardly talk on the phone.”

There were so many things about Helen’s life that Yunnie found interesting. Living apart from her husband eight months out of the year was one of them. He was the head of a research group on cold water marine biodiversity, based in Woods Hole on Cape Cod. Although good tenure-track jobs were hard to come by, Yunnie still didn’t understand how Helen could stand to live so far away from someone she loved. It had been almost a year since she’d left Ji-Woo in Seoul, and she still hadn’t recovered.

“If this is her first absence, you have to be firm with her.” Helen wiped a dot of French dressing from the corner of her mouth. “You have to nip this in the bud or she’ll walk all over you.”

Yunnie’s salad arrived and she slowly raked her fork over the walnuts, moving them off to the side of the gold-rimmed plate. She couldn’t bring herself to say this to Helen, whose competence she so admired, but it already felt like her students were walking all over her, not only the ones in her lab, but those she taught. Yunnie thought the majority of them were spoiled and rude, accustomed to being treated like customers instead of students. There was no greater proof than the little surveys they filled out at the end of the semester, as if her courses were nothing more than services they’d paid for. Whenever she thought about the evaluation comments from her fall botany class—“way harsh grader,” “doesn’t seem to like students,” “can’t understand what she’s saying,” “makes learning about as un-fun as possible”—her skin blistered with anger. “Un-fun” wasn’t even a word, yet she and her department chair had discussed it for the better part of an hour—him, peering at her over his glasses, looking deeply concerned.

“The Korean system you were educated in was probably very different,” he’d said. “In American higher ed, we have to engage our students as learners. We have to figure out how to turn the lights on.”

Yunnie had nodded agreeably throughout their meeting, even jotting things down as he spoke, which he seemed to appreciate. Later, in the

car, after she'd dried her eyes, she reviewed her notes, which weren't really notes at all, but simple words and phrases that she'd written and circled over and over again, probably in relation to how often her chair had repeated them. *Have fun*, he must have said at least a dozen times, judging from the whirlpool of circles she'd enclosed the words in. *Engage. Inspire. Relate.* Afterward, Yunnie went to a local copy center and ordered a large plastic banner. *HAN LAB*, it read, the letters alternating between neon pink and yellow, with flowers of different shapes and sizes printed in the background. She hung the banner in her lab, not on the blank wall that actually needed decoration, but the wall her colleagues could see when they walked past her windowed door.



Want to read Jung Yun's "Bloom" in full?

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Report from Inside a White Whale

Biblioteca Vasconcelos in Mexico City
holds a massive white whale skeleton.
I once climbed inside the belly on a visit.

I did it knowing that one day Cali will be
gone, the whole state swallowed by water,
my body a boat with holes, my limbs in need

of a ship. I found a man named Jonah in
the gullet taking field notes. I used him
to serve as my witness. You should always

have someone to record—a historian,
a spouse, or a child will do just fine.
We made music in the bowels of that beast.

Jonah spit when he talked. We were Bone
Thugs-n-Harmony, joined at the cross-
roads of wildfire and revelry like knuckle-

heads of stone and skin. Our outer
limits flanked with a flood of the blues,
the archaeology of loss afloat.

I never once asked Jonah to cover his mouth
but I believe I understood what he was saying—

*How dare the two of us make art when
god has ordered us to drown.*

The Snake

Finalist for the 2017 Fiction Prize

I

The story begins with the clumsiest of metaphors: a snake appears in the garden.

Lenore is thinning out the vegetables, squatting carefully between the rows of beans, balancing the weight of her third-trimester belly. She can feel the baby moving inside her, elbowing its way around, making space for itself.

The boys play with sticks and dirt under the maple tree. The city has already worn off them in the ten months they've been on the farm, and they look healthier, calmer, and something else, too: rawer, more sincere. More innocent.

"A worm!" says Kale in a rising note of wonder, at least three syllables long. Lenore looks up, and sees Aaron holding something stripy and very straight by one end. A stick. But then the stick flips around on itself, the head pulling itself up, making a "J," moving towards Aaron's hand. Lenore screams.

"Put it down! Throw it down! It's a snake!"

Aaron turns and at the sight of his mother's face, immediately begins to cry. He flings the thing away and it whips itself back to horizontal and rick-racks away through the grass. Both boys are crying now.

Lenore pulls them towards her.

"It was just a snake. Just a little garter snake. Won't hurt us."

She shuffles them onto the porch and runs quickly up the stairs behind them.

"Just a garter snake, no big deal," she repeats while the boys eat their grilled cheese sandwiches. She stands at the kitchen sink, staring out at the garden, keeping watch. Her trowel and gardening gloves lie where she threw them, between the rows of beans.

After lunch she calls her best friend Katia, in the city.

"A snake! But you hate snakes!"

Katia's outrage is clear across the ninety miles between the city and Lenore's farmhouse. Lenore phoned her because she needs talking down, but this is clearly not going to happen.

“You can’t have a snake in your garden! This will ruin everything!”

Lenore can hear city all around Kat, can hear the thump of her breath as she walks and talks, clutching her fat pink phone as she stomps along King Street. She can hear streetcar, and other languages, and arguing, and crowd. Lenore closes her eyes as she sits on the bottom stair, the only place she really gets reception in the kitchen.

“Oh my god. I just got the craziest looks after I said that,” Katia whispers into the phone. “Listen, you know who I saw yesterday?” And she rattles off the names of three of the women from their Yoga Moms group; they all went for drinks last night on Queen Street. Katia and Lenore gossip about the other moms for a while: about which one is still breastfeeding, about who can’t control their son, about who thinks Disney stuff is okay. “Can you believe I’m still waiting for a streetcar? I’m going to be so late for the dentist,” Katia complains, at the end of a long diatribe about finding daycare, and Lenore, ninety miles away in the farmhouse kitchen, smiles in relief. Lunch dishes glitter in the dishrack, stalks of rhubarb wait in the sink for tonight’s pie, and the boys sit at the table, drawing and murmuring to one another. Paper garlands hang above the cold woodstove, and under the window, Lenore’s sewing basket is full of fabric ready to be made into clothes for the new baby. Lenore sips her tea and thinks, *I have all afternoon. I have all day. I have—* and her heart swells with the abundance of their life here.

A year ago, she would have been eating lunch with Katia in the food court, then rushing back to the office, then rushing to the daycare, then rushing home. A year ago, she would have been the one waiting for the crowded streetcar, throwing dirty looks at the woman having the loud conversation. A year ago, before they moved out to the farm, just before Aaron was supposed to start kindergarten, right after Kale’s second birthday.

They had talked about it for years: it had started with conversations about vaccinations, and antibiotics, and organic baby food. It grew in a community of like-minded parents who felted their own diaper bags and met at the farmers’ market every Thursday to bake pizza communally. It elaborated over dinner parties where other parents shared stories of visiting their friends who lived in a beautiful farmhouse in Picton or Fergus, and it solidified over photos on Facebook of prayer flags framing old Ontario porches, baskets of strawberries, happy, longhaired children.

Neither Lenore nor Jim was from the country, but they weren’t from Toronto either, and so the city had always just seemed like a phase. When Lenore’s contract ended and Jim was offered a severance package from his P.R. job, it only made sense to sell their house, whose value had skyrocketed in the three years they had lived there, even though they’d barely made a dent in the mortgage, and god knows they hadn’t

renovated anything. Jim could work freelance, they would homeschool the boys, and they could live a better life, the life they really wanted.

It was surprisingly easy to dismantle their Toronto life, to take themselves off the hopeless waiting lists for toddler daycare and school-age daycare and French Immersion and swimming lessons. “Delete reservation,” Lenore punched on the websites late at night, as packing boxes surrounded her and her brand-new sewing machine waited in its box. The last daycare check went through, the last paycheck went through, they drove north in their new used Volvo station wagon, and they moved themselves into the old house in the valley almost before they’d had time to question what a mad and delightful idea it was.

“Are we really doing this?” Jim said to Lenore, grinning like an idiot, as they drove down the lane Labour Day weekend. The sun was setting and the line of pines to the west of their property was blackly wet against the sunset, but the windows of the little house were bathed in gold.

“I can’t believe our luck,” said Jim, and Lenore, holding a sleeping Kale in her arms, started to giggle with love and good fortune.

And now Katia is in the city, and Lenore is in her beautiful farmhouse kitchen, basking in the June afternoon, until Katia brings up the snake again and everything is ruined.

“Lenore, you just need to befriend the snake, okay? Relish the snake, enjoy the snake. Don’t stay inside avoiding it!”

But after Lenore and Katia make plans for a visit in July, Lenore puts the boys down for their nap, takes out her yoga mat and stretches it out in front of the woodstove. She is doing a modified practice these days, but she loves the feel of her strange body, the globe of her belly resting against her leg in pigeon pose. She starts seated and tries to clear her mind. Inhale strength, exhale anger. Inhale peace, exhale fear. Lenore quiets her mind and makes herself happy, but then, unbidden, the image of the snake returns, swinging around towards Aaron’s wrist. The snake arching as Aaron drops it to the ground. The snake ruining the peace of the lawn, disrupting the grass. Ruining the garden.

When the boys wake up, they want to go outside, but Lenore sets them up with paper and paint at the kitchen table while she chops onions for the soup.

“Mama has to cook, sweetie. Paint me a beautiful picture, instead. Paint a picture for the baby.”

Once the soup is simmering, Kale asks again: “Now, Mama?” Lenore looks at the clock—5:05. Jim won’t be home for at least twenty minutes. She holds out a hand to Kale.

“I need you to help me make biscuits! Wash your hands and put on an apron.”

5:10—this pre-dinner time was something they never had in the city. They were always rushing from work to daycare to home at this hour.

When Aaron was two and a half, he would have been strapped into the jogging stroller, holding the bag of pre-washed spinach Lenore had picked up at the supermarket by the daycare, her computer bag heavy in the stroller's storage compartment. But Kale at two and a half stands barefoot on a kitchen stool, his darling face covered in flour, his pudgy hands helping to make the biscuits.

"What did you do this afternoon?" Jim asks the boys as they sit at the table on the porch, eating the delicious soup.

"We had a snake!" says Kale, "A nasty, nasty snake."

"Don't say that," says Jim. "Snakes are beautiful; they are beautiful living creatures."

"It was stripy," says Aaron.

"It won't hurt you," says Jim, methodically chewing the fresh-baked bread. They are trying a thing where you chew each bite forty times.

But it will ruin everything, Lenore is about to say, but Kale knocks over his juice, and anyway she feels embarrassed. It's a dumb problem. A city-girl problem. She knew there would be snakes, right?

(Not snakes, she reminds herself. One snake. A lone snake.)

"It'll be miles away by now," says Jim and smiles at Lenore.

(Why? wonders Lenore. Where would he go?)

After dinner Jim gathers the boys into the hammock with him to read *Charlotte's Web*, but Lenore sits on the top step to watch the sunset. Her gaze rolls tentatively across the lawn, knowing she cannot see the snake from here, but watchful nevertheless.

If she can just make the property inhospitable to the snake, perhaps he will leave. She looks around: rock pile, wood pile, stone wall, all potential refuges. A rock pile seems like an idiotic thing to have if you don't want snakes hanging around your place. But how do you get rid of a rock pile? You can't just throw rocks out. No matter what do, you still have a pile of rocks. Snake paradise.

Lenore feels overwhelmed by it all: the rocks, the weeds, the vegetables. There is so much weeding, and watering, and what if an animal eats everything anyway? What if they have to buy most of their vegetables again this year? What if Jim's contract with the county doesn't get renewed and he can't find other work? What if the baby isn't healthy? What if they need a proper hospital, a city hospital? As the sun drops and the fields before her cool, worries eddy around her like trash blowing about on the subway stairs. What if they have made a terrible mistake?

A terrible mistake, a terrible mistake. The words slither into her mind, all-knowing. The peace of the garden evaporates. The boys snuggled up in the hammock seem foolhardy in the face of this awful doubt: why had they moved out here? How would they ever get back to the city? They must have been crazy, quitting their jobs and disentangling themselves

from city life; now if they moved back, they would have to find a new apartment, and it would have to be close to a good school, and a good day care, and they would both need jobs but not until they had daycare. And anyway, Lenore has thrown out most of her Toronto work clothes; she couldn't go back to work in all these tunics and leggings and hand-knit things. This is their life; there is no way back into the city. Not now, not with the kids. Not without their jobs. Not without daycare.

The snake has ruined everything. Lenore assumes that metaphors are meant to protect you, to keep you at arm's length from danger. They are supposed to be *meta*, for God's sake. But this snake is literally (*literally*) threatening her paradise. What's a meta for, if not to give you a little distance from reality?

Be our friend, she says to the garter snake, wherever he's lurking. *Protect us from—from whatever.*



The next day, the snake answers. Lenore is sitting on the top step of the porch shelling peas, the bowl one step down, her legs open around her big belly. She doesn't see him arrive, she just hears the voice:

"I can't protect you, lady."

Lenore looks around and there he is, right next to her on the porch steps, curled up like a cute little rope. The bowl of peas flies down the steps, but Lenore can't get up.

"Here's the thing," continues the snake. "You asked me to protect you, but I can't really do that. It's not really my line of work. Not really my... bawliwick." (Lenore will learn later that the snake avoids words like "speciality" because he is self-conscious of his hiss. Or, as he would say, mortified about his accent.) "Not really my thing."

Lenore says, because she feels he expects it, "What is your thing?"

"I'm a messenger, obviously. I bring messages."

Again Lenore knows it would be rude not to ask, "Like what?"

"You kind of have to figure it out for yourssself," says the snake, and blushes under his stripes at the sibilation.

"You're not much of a messenger, then, are you? Just sort of a warning that there will be a message?"

The snake stares at her, blinks once.

"You're not a messenger, you're an omen!"

"Your words, not mine," says the snake.



That night, Lenore lies in bed sleepless. The clock says 2:15. Jim ebbs heavily next to her, the room close and silent. The night is hot for

June, more like July, and Lenore's belly prevents her from finding a comfortable position. She has not told Jim that the snake has spoken to her. Obviously.

And then, just as a cool breeze lifts through the window and she finally feels her body sink into sleep, a sound. Something. A knock on the door? The room lies silently around her and Jim, but Lenore can feel the echo of the sound.

She stills her body, strains to hear. She could get up and go to the window five feet away, but the blind is furled high to allow the breeze into their room, and she imagines a figure in the driveway, imagines herself clearly visible at the window. But if she pretends she heard nothing, will the knock come again?

Lenore lies in bed like a mouse cornered, waiting for the knock that she dreads, and eventually falls asleep before the footsteps do or don't move away, along the length of the driveway and out to the road, back towards town.

II

The next day, Jim is working around the farm, cleaning up the shed and doing some planting, so Lenore packs the kids into the car and drives into town. They run a few errands and then make it to the library for Thursday Music Time. While the children sit on the leg-scratchy rug and sing about jolly fishermen and a moose with a front tooth loose, Lenore smiles at the other mothers. She is circling around a few women she's met since they moved, other homesteaders recently arrived from the city, women she can talk canning and indie bands with: a woman with five kids who moved out here several years ago; the former actor who is now a potter and has a boy about Kale's age; the woman who teaches yoga in the church basement. These outsider women bump into each other at the farmer's market and they talk about getting the kids together for playdates, but they are all so busy with home schooling and bee-keeping and refinishing furniture that these interactions are rarer than Lenore would like. The woman with five kids is having a Summer Solstice party next week, though, and Lenore is really looking forward to that.

After Music Time, Lenore sits in an armchair by a sunny window while the kids pick out books. With each book, Kale asks if he can take it out, and is delighted when Lenore says yes, the munificence of the library all hers in her little boy's eyes.

"This one, too, Mama?"

"Of course my love," laughs Lenore, and leans back into the boxy chair. She is exhausted from lying awake last night, but the sunlight and the joys of the library are erasing her worries about the imaginary

knock on the door, about the snake. Obviously no one had been there. Obviously the snake hadn't spoken to her. She had imagined the whole thing. Lenore watches Kale stockpiling Eric Carle books, while Aaron sits cross-legged in the dinosaur section, looking for books for a homeschool project. Lenore closes her eyes. At home, the laundry is drying on the line, Jim is planting new fruit trees, and this afternoon he has promised to take the boys to the town beach. Craft supplies from the general store sit in Lenore's bag, ready for the boys to make a solstice banner.

It's everything she wanted. It's going to be okay.

At home, something is different. Lenore sees it from the road, before she has to turn down the long driveway. As she comes over the crest of the hill, there is a view of their little house in the valley below, and although she should be watching the road, Lenore always pauses for a moment here and looks to the left, searches for the flash of blue-gray tin roof among the trees.

But today, she knows it even from up here: something is different. Something just-missed, a flicker at the corner of the frame. She turns down their driveway and as she nears the house she sees two of the press-back armchairs from the kitchen pulled out on the grass by the pond. Who would put chairs there? No one is sitting in them; they wait with an odd festivity. As the boys bound up the porch stairs, their canvas bag full of the crinkle of plastic-sheathed library books, Lenore bends at the knees to get the groceries out of the trunk and waddles up the stairs after them.

Jim is sitting on the kitchen counter. It is somewhere he and Lenore have never sat before, but now he perches next to the sink, his wool-socked feet bumping against the cupboard door. Across from him, at the kitchen table, is his brother Mark, with Kale on one knee, his arm around Aaron. The boys look up at Lenore as if it's Christmas.

"It's our uncle!" Aaron says, although the boys have never met him before. As if Lenore doesn't know who he is.

Lenore looks at Mark, at the ruined reflection of Jim's face in his, like a cautionary tale. It's been three years at least.

"Lenore!" he says and holds out his arms, as if big pregnant Lenore is supposed to come and sit on his lap, too. "You look beautiful. This place is beautiful."

He can't stay, thinks Lenore.

Mark has always meant trouble; drinking, then too much drinking, affairs even when he was living with someone, then cocaine, then a spell living in his car, a move out west, then silence. Heroin, the last Jim heard, but that was a few years ago. When Lenore first met the brothers they had been close, but as Mark got wilder Jim kept his distance, especially after Aaron was born. "Can we have him in our home? Can we trust him?" said Lenore, and Jim met his brother on the front porch instead, sent him on his way with a "loan." "You're welcome," Lenore thought,

watching them from the bedroom window with Aaron held tight to her, watching Mark count out the bills as he walked up the middle of the street, like he was in a frontier town, not downtown Toronto.

Also, Lenore had to be honest about this: it was Mark she liked first. When she moved to Toronto from Chicago after college she met Mark at her first job, at the coffee shop in Kensington, and it was Mark who she instantly recognized as her type: rangy, sarcastic, with an accent she didn't realize for at least a week was Canadian. "That Scottish guy, or Irish," she said to her coworkers, and they looked at her funny and cracked up when they realized she meant Mark.

"Mark! He'd kill you! He's from Nova Scotia."

But it never amounted to anything, and within a month Mark had introduced her to Jim. By then Mark was dating an eighteen-year-old and doing coke every weekend, and Jim, who was less sarcastic but equally handsome, kissed Lenore one night on the traffic island in the middle of Spadina Avenue, and Lenore noticed how much more fun and nice he was than his spiky brother. And then Mark disappeared for a few years, and the next time Lenore saw him he was so wrecked from drugs and time on the street that she looked at her grown-up, substantial now-husband and his weedy brother and thought, *What was I ever thinking?*

"That was delicious," says Mark, who it turns out is now called Marcus, leaning back from the plate of brown rice salad he's barely touched. "I don't eat that much anymore," he says. "You have to be so careful what you put in your body," explains the ex-heroin addict to his vegetarian brother, and as they talk about Mark's philosophies of grains and fats, Lenore watches Jim and sees how much he has missed his brother.

As the brothers sit over tea (no beer for Mark—sorry, Marcus—now), Lenore goes out to the garden for some mint to throw on the strawberries she bought at the farmer's market—they would have their own strawberries next year—and tries to figure out how Mark/Marcus has changed. He looks better, healthier certainly, although he has also aged a great deal, but he doesn't look older, as such. He just looks—olden. Like he's from the olden days. From days of yore.

"Yore," says Lenore, trying the absurd word out on her tongue. "Yore."

"My what?" says the snake, peeking out between the trees of mint. Lenore jumps, but she is surprised to find that she's glad to see him.

"Who's the prophet?" asks the snake, and Lenore laughs, because that is exactly what Marcus looks like: full of solemnity, full of a performative (as Katia would say) importance and piousness. He is dressed in ridiculously unfashionable clothes: corduroy pants he must have had to search through an entire Goodwill for, a collarless shirt that is just a bit too flowy. He walks about with his head bowed and slightly cocked to one side, in a show of humility.

“He walks,” Lenore tells the snake, crouching down close to the mint so that it looks like she is weeding, “like he is being followed. Like he has followers, like people are waiting to hear what he has to say.”

The snake nods. “I know the type.”

“But that’s the thing,” says Lenore. “It’s like he’s arrived to help us, or to tell us something. Like he thinks we asked him to come here. Like we want his advice.”

“Well, do you?” asks the snake.

“No. No.” But all through dinner, Jim had nodded as Marcus explained things about rotational grazing, and solar panels, and eggs. When she came outside they were drawing up plans for a goat-shelter or something; Marcus had built one just like it in the Yukon. “How long were you in the Yukon?” asked Lenore, but no one answered her.

“Jim hasn’t talked to him in years, but now he’s hanging on his every word. It’s weird.”

“Well, beware of false prophets,” says the snake. “I’m just sssayin.” He blushes a bit at the sound, before disappearing back into the mint.

♦ ♦ ♦

“How long can you stay?” asks Jim—*Can?* thinks Lenore—and Marcus says he has to move on but the little boys plead with him.

“It’s the solstice festival this weekend! You have to stay for the solstice festival! We’re going to a party, and there will be lanterns, and a maypole, and we’ll stay up until it gets DARK!” says Aaron.

Marcus smiles and winks at Lenore.

“All right then.”

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How to Explain Lesbian Baby-Making to Your West Texas Stylist

Start by mentioning that you have children. Talk about said children for as long or little as you want. Change the subject afterwards if you want. Mention blueberries, or cloud formation cycles, or the irony of the queen bee's power and might. But at some point, let a moment of silence settle between you, one uncomfortable enough that she's forced to speak. And then wait for her to ask about your husband.

She will likely ask what your husband does, or, maybe, where he's from, or even how he likes his hair cut. Just wait for her to say "husband."

Then laugh and tell her that, actually, you have a wife.

Then wait again.

In this interim, you can talk about almost anything, because she won't be listening. Talk about Sisyphean weariness with the Sisyphean myth. Talk about *Ghostbusters III*. Talk about how much sex you're not having anymore, now that you're a mother of two. Though if you do that, know you're accelerating things. Because sex will remind her of your husband, which will remind her that you don't have one, which will remind her that she's confused.

"So," she'll eventually say, "are the children *yours*?"

Or: "So, how did you get the kids?"

Or: "How *does* that work?"

If the last question sounds familiar, it is. Pause for a moment, and remember your early 20s, when you had more sex and sleep, and—for unrelated reasons—also lots of guy friends. Remember how you would go out for beers with those guy friends after work sometimes and, eventually, every time, one of them would have to ask. One of them would *really need to know*. How you. . . . You know. Did it.

And you always told them. Probably because you were drunk. Maybe because you like to talk about sex. But also for the same reason you will eventually capitulate in the chair now, her standing so close behind you, a pair of scissors in her hands.

Because this is your lesbian duty.

To explain yourself.

And human fertilization.

Because, is it really her fault she doesn't understand? Is it possible that if she just knew how you and your wife produced a child, and then another child, she might suddenly see everything anew? That if you explain yourself one more time, next time you won't have to? That maybe one day you'll sit down to get your haircut and mention that you have kids and your West Texas stylist will say, "I bet you and your wife are exhausted, huh?"

But that day is not today.

So start with the sperm.

Start with the sperm and the radical idea that they might be donated rather than spilled, jacked off, etc. If you want to get personal—which for some reason you always do—mention that yours were donated by a friend. But tell her these things also happen anonymously, that there are banks of sperm out there and websites with photos and biostats so that you can pick and choose.

After sperm acquisition, move to implantation. Tell her the whole turkey baster thing is a myth. Have you ever seen a turkey baster in real life? It's huge. Have you ever measured the amount of sperm a man produces in a single ejaculation? It's not huge. She might get a little pale in the face here, but just keep talking.

This is good for her.

If, at any point, she accidentally calls the donor a father, prepare a short lecture on the difference between biology and sociology. Explain that "father" is a role that a man sometimes fills in a home or in our limited imagining of domestic life in Western society, while expending sperm and donating them to your lesbian friends is an act—a generous one, but still an act. Tell her there are contracts out there articulating these kinds of things for people like you, and people who question the choices of people like you. Mention how great the world is—isn't it?—that we now have so many ways of reimagining families.

Afterwards, she may say, "You're the first lesbian I've ever met."

Or: "I had no idea any of this was possible."

Or: "Wow."

Those are all good signs. They mean your work is done. Or as done as it will ever be.

If she asks how your kids feel about *all this*, though, or how you're going to explain *all this* to your kids once they're older, know that your work is not done. That your work will never be done. That telling your one tiny story of lesbian baby-making cannot erase centuries of wilfully ignoring and sometimes demonizing the possibility that people like you and your wife exist and that, as people, the two of you might one day decide to have a kid and, if you do, that the two, now three, and eventually four of you would have the audacity to call yourselves a family.

But you can try. While she cuts your hair. To make her understand.

And afterwards, you can get up from the chair, give her a nice tip, and push your way through the glass doors and into the early morning heat of a West Texas summer. You can take your \$40-haircut and get in your car—it's a minivan, by the way—and think as you drive about what else you could have said or how else you will say it, next time.

Because there will always be a next time. Because there will always be a West Texas stylist who needs to know more about lesbian baby-making, even when you are no longer in West Texas, even when you finally have a stylist you like somewhere in Arizona or Pennsylvania and she's totally hip, even then, there will always be a West Texas stylist somewhere, waiting with her irons and brushes and scissors for you to sit in her chair and start talking about your kids.

Sachi Bachi

Runner-Up for the 2017 Fiction Prize

You will wonder why a woman of my age and good standing should know so much about the unfortunate soul called Sachi Bachi. I will tell you: it is because I killed her. And because her death is mine to regret, her life has been mine to anguish over.

Perhaps I should not speak of such things to a girl as little as you, Miye-chan, though you have eyes and ears enough. The truth is, every day I watch you watch the box with light and pictures and you become less receptive to what I've lived this long while to tell you. I suppose that is how it must be: every new generation is sure to build its house so the old one has no key. Hoo-boy, the grave looks better and better then! I assure you, Miye-chan, I will do my best to die soon and make room for you. Maybe tonight. But there are three mountain ridges of time between us and I must first try to strengthen our thread of connection if it is to survive the distance at all.

Are you listening, Miye-chan?

Do you know what *bachi* means? It is how we Japanese say *bad luck*. Do you know bad luck? I will tell you it is the strange, often sad, thing that happens and makes you wonder who is in charge. It is the stink of life. You see, some of us are born the tree and we are rooted to the ground, weighted by permanence and the power to grow. Others are given the fate of the branch and might go some distance to tell us trees what they see. And then there are the leaves, fickle things. They change color and shiver at the slightest breeze. Do you see how it is? It is the fate of the leaf to get pushed around. They are the first to fall and are never with us for long.

That is why we called her Sachi Bachi—she was the sorriest leaf to ever sprout.

Now of course *bachi* can take many forms. Sometimes it is as small as a rotten tooth. Other times it is the air that spreads across the land, affecting a whole people. A hundred years ago was Japan's *bachi* time, an era of famine and great suffering. In desperation, people turned to an idea: the Kingdom of Hawaii. Villages throughout Japan were papered with fliers that touted the benefits of contract labor in the distant land. Do you know how many applied to be field hands? Twenty-eight thousand! But in the end just 936 *kanyaku imin* were chosen to sail.

Among them was a woman who might've felt lucky stepping aboard the *City of Tokio* vessel in that dead of winter. She might've felt the tides had changed for her when they had not. Because within this woman a child clamored to be born and it was bachi to give birth while at sea, without the assurance of solid footing. One week after setting sail, she was found below deck in the darkness of steerage, lying in a pool of warm blood. To give birth is our particular pain, Miye-chan, but not every woman can be a mother.

They named the baby Sachiko, passed the dead woman's name to the child who killed her. When the ship arrived to the island of Maui, they processed the baby like any other, hung at her little neck the metal tag meant for her mother. Swaddled in newspaper, they slipped the baby into an old rice sack and handed her over to a man said to be the dead woman's husband. You see, the couple had wed young and was separated the whole seventeen years of their marriage. Miye-chan, you are too small to understand what this means, but I will tell you that while the head hangs low from grief, it hangs lower still from shame.

The only luck Sachi would know was the kindness of this man. He taught her to call him father even though she did not come from his seed. Because he could not afford to pay another man's wife to watch the child during her tender years, and because he longed to be within earshot of the growing girl, he moved to the outskirts of town where he degraded himself by raising hogs. Even so, I imagine the years passed happily enough. That is until Sachi began to show signs of being uchinanchu.

Now I will tell you about the uchinanchu because they will not teach this to you in your American schools, little girl, so listen to me closely.

When I say *Japanese*, I mean *naichi*. I mean people from one of the four main islands—naichi. At a vast 275 miles south of us lie the Ryukyu Islands. This is where the Okinawan people live—the uchinanchu. Miye-chan, I know your father is a white man, but to them we are all the same, us Orientals. But you must know: Okinawa ken are *not* Japanese. The two do *not* go together.

And yet, Sachi and her father were never seen apart. They rode through the camps sitting side by side on their cart hitched to a mule, perfectly dissimilar. He always stood between Sachi and the others so that she was barely known, telling her to stay in the cart while he collected the slop from each stoop. He was a kind of garbage man, you see, but properly Japanese with fair skin and eyes set to an angle. By the time Sachi was a teenager, she'd begun to run the pails herself and people were quick to notice the differences between her and her father, how her eyes were round as quarters, how her hair grew thickly at her brow and along the dark skin of her arms. Before long, Sachi made the rounds alone and children would run after the cart throwing stones,

calling, 'Okinawa ken ken, buta kau kau!' In the end, it was on the day Sachi did not show that people understood her father was dead.

Ay-yah. So sad, so sad, I know. But sometimes, Miye-chan, the worst thing to happen is simply the preparation for more.

Around this time, the uchinanchu began to arrive to the islands in earnest. They wore loose dress, spoke strangely, and possessed the same round eyes as Sachi. The worst of them was a man called Choki. A dark and hairy business, that man, and with the manners of a stray dog. Many stories were told as to why his one arm was cut off, but in the end, *choki choki* goes the scissors.

Choki with his one arm was inferior to other men. Hoo-boy, how he hated to be reminded! Instead of working in the fields, he was forced to run the furos, collecting and lighting keawe wood so that the workers came home to hot water for bathing. Choki found this degrading. What little money he made went to sake, which fueled his temper, and soon no woman would have him. So he settled on Sachi, who was barely sixteen at the time and half his age. She had no other options.

I cannot imagine the inner walls of that house and what must have been witnessed of that marriage. Of course, at the time of their wedding, Sachi received the markings on the back of her hand, as was the uchinanchu way. This might've allowed her the brief glory of status had their small community accepted her. But having been raised Japanese, Sachi did not know their language or customs. And so she fell between the cracks once again and lived in that sort of shadow.

But perhaps I should say she lived in darkness, as a shadow cannot be seen without some measure of light.

Around the time children were expected to come from Sachi, the burns and bruising began to show instead. It seemed Choki's pleasure came only from her pain. Through it all, she continued making her rounds throughout the camp, and though people shook their heads and lowered their eyes, the whispers flew. I will tell you, people can be cruel, Miye-chan. There were those who said no children would come because Choki preferred to peg a pig than—

Ay! Never mind that last part, little girl!



As I was saying, the years went by in this way. And these were the same years in which I was growing up very far from here in Niigata, a northern prefecture of Japan. It is a beautiful countryside, my home, and all those hard years for Sachi were gentle for me. My father was a horse trader and so I grew alongside those graceful creatures, coming and going as they did. Perhaps it was for this reason that I learned to say goodbye early on, a skill that would prove useful once I turned seventeen.

I will never forget the day the nakahodo came to our house with a picture of a young man she suggested as a proper husband for me. I remember thinking, *I will not marry a man who lives so far away*. But when my father agreed to it, I obediently walked into town for my picture to be taken and sent to the man in Hawaii. A long time of betrothal would pass before I truly accepted the match. Miye-chan, you must always try to be good as I was good. No use in stirring trouble when the tides will not change for you.

After the simple ceremony that married us on paper, I obeyed the custom and went to live with my new husband's family for six months, which were the longest of my life. Hoo-boy, I worked and worked like a slave for my husband's mother, who felt it her duty to properly train me in the ways she felt her eldest son deserved. But she was not a kind woman and it is for this reason that though I was strict, I was never cruel to my own daughter-in-law. I never took a switch to her backside, not even once.

Many girls in my situation were weak and ran back to their families in shame. Those girls were divorced from their husbands before they even met. But not me, I never cried or complained. I never fought back. I bore the difficulty as best I could and soon found myself in a store-bought kimono sailing for the distant island that would become my home for life, though I did not know it then.

My first memory of Maui is one of great discomfort. Miye-chan, you have never worn a kimono before so you cannot know the tremendous heat. The day we docked and met our husbands, all of us picture brides stood on deck wildly waving our fans. We were like a flock of nervous hens eager to see if the men would live up to the pictures we'd studied so closely with faces that held the contours of our dreams.

I have always been lucky. Like I said, a tree is a tree. My husband was well built and nice looking. Some girls were not so lucky and found their men much older than their pictures, or drunk, or someone else entirely. We were given a week together, my new husband and I, and then I was sent to work in the fields with the other women. Hoo! I couldn't have known what was coming for me!

The whistle blew each morning at 4:30 a.m. and even now I can hear it in my dreams. There was food preparation for the day—a boiled egg for breakfast, a bento of pickled vegetables, rice and cooked beans for lunch. And then there were the household chores that needed to be done early before our energy slacked. After that came the most important task of all, the one that determined what sort of day you would live.

Dressing for work was complicated and had to be learned well if one was to lessen her suffering. We wore cotton pants as the first layer like another skin, then wound around our legs the kyahan and pulled tight our tabi. From there we tucked our long-sleeved shirts into the hakama

skirt and wrapped our waists with the obi until we could barely breathe. The te oi covered our arms and prevented the sharp cane leaves from slicing our skin, which was our secondary concern to centipedes and other vile insects. It was important to keep our complexions fair, too, so we donned wide-brimmed papale hats made of white muslin. And finally, there was the handkerchief we wore across our faces so that in the end only our eyes could be seen and it was hard to know even yourself from the next person.

Hoe hana was hard work beneath a cruel sun, Miye-chan. From 6:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. we labored with only a half hour for lunch. If the work did not break the spirit, it broke the back, which is why I sit here hunched in my chair. To make matters worse, just when I found a rhythm to my days and had accepted the life I'd been given, my obi began to stretch tight and my monthly bleeding wouldn't come. Of course this was Kotaro, my son, who, it is strange to think now, is a grandfather himself—your ojiichan.

We did not receive pay for those days we missed so I tried hard to work through my many illnesses. But there were mornings when I could not even stand and had to roil in bed alone. There was no easy medical relief then, remember. And every penny was precious for the earning. If I did manage to rise on those days, it would be to sit out on the stoop for fresh air. And that is how I first encountered Sachi in earnest.

Until then, I had seen her only once before. Of course I knew of her even in my first days on the island, as her name was never spoken without a click of the tongue. 'Ay, Sachi, poor thing...' or, 'You! Don't be like Sachi!' I had asked my husband who this Sachi woman was and he only snapped his newspaper taut so that I never asked again. He was very sensitive to outside perception, you see, and did not want to be sullied by association, even privately. The other women I found more eager to gossip and it became a little game to see if I would know who Sachi was when I saw her. And I did.

In those early days when we were all so new to each other, our husbands wanted to show off the beauty of the island before we settled into its harshness. One Sunday, a few of the men rented a cart and treated us women to a day at the beach. Hoo-boy, those wheels didn't need horses to turn, we were so excited! Along the way, the men quieted as we approached the Japanese cemetery and us women looked ahead to where a solitary figure stood at a headstone.

At first, you might've thought you were looking at a man as Sachi had taken to wearing the clothing her father had left behind. But the thick braid of hair and her general smallness made you keep looking until you saw a woman. As we drew closer, she raised her eyes to us and we had no choice but to turn our heads. It was not what you saw that made you want to look away, no. If it were just about the spectacle, you'd want

to stare, of course. She was much more than just a sad sight. She was a feeling you had, like the shivering of your soul before your heart loves or breaks. We looked at her to see what we had, instead of what we didn't. We then turned from her to look ahead. And once we stopped seeing her, we forgot, because we are always responsible for what we remember.

Of course I see now that it is only natural to assign our sadness to places too far or people too lost for us to easily find. Yes, I see that now.

Months passed before I encountered her again. It was one of those days when the child in me demanded all my strength. I rallied at some point and stepped outside. Before long, I heard the wheels of Sachi's cart turning over the dirt road. I unhooked our slop can and walked the short distance to meet her.

She pulled up on the mule and the cart rolled to a stop where I stood. The stench of slop baking in the heat was enough to make my eyes water. In one swift movement she slid from her seat and stood there, head low, eyes to the ground. I could tell she wanted me gone but I had the pail she needed. We were so close I could've touched her. My eyes wandered up and down her small, filthy frame, as if she'd given up on ever being seen, as if she no longer had a self to care for. You see, she was very much like a stray dog—not the kind that is a nuisance and scrapper like Choki, but the kind that has learned to cower because it expects the violence of a hand before it does a caress. I did not feel as if I was looking at a person, or the bearings of a person, someone who might possess a peculiar laughter or unbidden tears or anything at all that was hers alone. She was pure instinct, bent on staying alive by keeping hidden.

I understood she would not raise her eyes to me nor would she outstretch her arms for the pail before I offered it. So with her head bowed and hands clasped she waited for whatever it was I wanted from her. And what I think I wanted was to hear her voice, to hear her speak. I wanted to know she did in fact exist in some small measure. For language is the way to a person, Miye-chan, which is why I am speaking to you in the words from home. But I was not to hear her voice, not that day. When the tangy stench overcame me, I felt I might be sick. I handed over the pail and stepped back from the cart, breathing only once she was gone.

Ay-yah, I was so young then. I would have said something to her if it had been now. Yes, I have plenty to say now that I am as old as my time is short. But in those days, I was just an eighteen-year-old girl on the brink of womanhood and Sachi was fifteen years older than me. It has taken my whole life to understand that it was wrong of me to think I could not learn from her.

Thirty-three is a strange age, Miye-chan. It is not very many years, though it is long enough to have felt joy or regret or even pain, as Sachi had by then. But you must always remember that in our culture the most

dangerous year for a woman is this year. For most of us, thirty-three comes and goes without much reason for concern. For Sachi, it was the year Choki disappeared, which you might think was a good thing. But I will tell you: it was not.

Everything started when he failed to show up to the Saturday night card game. The other uchinanchu men missed the money they usually won off him, but it was when the workweek began and the furos were not heated that people started asking questions. Tuesday and Wednesday came and went. Soon everyone grew tired of having to light their own fires and wait for their baths. So a few of the men went to Sachi's house one night to ask after Choki, my husband among them.

I had just given birth to Kotaro and spent that night pacing our room with the baby in my arms, though he was long fast asleep. The whole community had curled its ears to the matter of Choki. Because it was a mystery and because people were hungry for drama, they invented stories. Some said he had run off with another woman to the jungles of East Maui where he couldn't be found. Others said he might've drunkenly wandered into the cane fields where he was burned alive in the recent harvest. And then there were those who ventured to say Sachi had killed him and fed his parts to the pigs!

All we really knew was this: though he was despised, Choki was not a man to cross. The uchinanchu were a tight people and rallied around even the least of them. When our men returned home from Sachi's that night saying she didn't know where Choki was, that according to her Choki had gone fishing and never come home, it appeared the matter would remain mysterious. But Choki rarely fished and the uchinanchu were not satisfied with that explanation. They grew displeased with the inaction and began to say more would have been done had Choki been naichi. And us naichi wouldn't stand for the accusation of being unjust. So you see, Miye-chan, the whole camp was soon in uproar over much more than just Choki. The matter festered on in this way until someone—most likely an uchinanchu—did something about it.

The things people do when they are threatened by the truth about themselves, they are unspeakable. Ay, little girl, it makes me tired to feel this sad. But what happened next is bewildering to me even now and I will not hide it from you.

Throughout the commotion, Sachi had kept to her work, diligent to remove from our lives all that we didn't want. Until one day she simply didn't show and that day turned into everyday thereafter. And the reason was that by then she no longer had pigs to feed. They were all as dead as Choki surely was. Of course Sachi did not report the matter or raise a ruckus in any way. And when I think of it now, I think I know why—though someone had poisoned the slop, it was she herself who had fed the pigs.

Of course the pig farmers from the other camps were quick to gain from her loss. People are people, will always be this way. But I do not know how she even fed herself at that time. I only know that someone had to pay the price for bitterness stirred and that price had been uniquely high. Once paid, everyone settled back into routine, as if the whole story had been an inconvenience, just a fly to wave away, and not the utter destruction of a way of life.

To make matters worse, there was news of Choki before the month was out. A fisherman was said to have caught the largest tiger shark on record, a big story for islanders then. People gathered at the wharf to get a good look at the beast, saying they would one day tell their grandchildren about the wonder they'd seen. But it wasn't the size of the hulking creature that would live on in memory. When they sliced open the shark's curiously swollen underside, out rolled a body that had been swallowed whole! Though the hair had been eaten away and the skin was gummy, the only thing missing was that arm.

Do you believe me, Miye-chan?



Want to read Rachel Kondo's "Sachi Bachi" in full?

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Ever-Guests

Luke and I wake up one morning in mid-December of 2017 and find that we have moved to Canada. We awaken into a cold, quiet semi-darkness, the blackout curtains wounded by daylight. We wrap bathrobes around our bodies like tobacco between rolling papers, dexterously and definitely, and open the bedroom door. We climb the stairs of the split-level. We take in the living room, a composite of things we had in other homes but mostly the new things we have only known in the context of this place. We index these artifacts of acquisition, of memory. We try to remember where we were before this. We pull back the living room curtains, revealing a snow-clad neighborhood, its houses and cars hidden beneath soapy turrets.

We exchange our bathrobes for warm clothing we find in a closet and take the dog for a walk. How many centimeters of snow are on the ground? I couldn't tell you for I'm still forgetting my imperial nonsense, but the snow glistens and squeaks underfoot. We walk until the houses give way to a four-lane expressway, beyond it an expanse of land and sky. Here, the terrain opens into a sudden wrinkling of land that tumbles from the flat expanse of prairie into a canyon. The change is so sudden that to gaze at the landscape is not unlike watching someone trip and fall. At the edge, a sequence of hills and tiny valleys dissipate into a cottonwood-lined river. *Coulees*. We know this word. It comes to us immediately. We put a *the* in front of it confidently. These are the coulees. Let's go for a walk in the coulees.

This unfamiliar landscape accomplishes what the 2015 viral phenomenon #TheDress could not: it is at once gold and white, and black and blue. Snow drifts swoop elegantly over ashy earth frilled by tufts of tall prairie grasses and low, red-berried bushes. As we walk, the crests of the steep, tapering hills cut lines across the sky, some jagged, others smooth. The coulees swallow us pleasantly. Against the sun, it's possible to see individual flakes of gold floating in the air: glitter, my god. It is as if we are walking in drifts of sequins. The earth has become a disco ball, a rhinestone tiara, and the universe is one great drag queen wearing #TheDress, the All-Dress, every color, all at once. If you can wake up one morning and find yourself living in Canada, what isn't possible?

We begin to see Canadians. They are self-contained but not unfriendly, greet us warmly but without excess. Their dogs, likewise, are

polite, playful, but ultimately more interested in losing themselves in the puff and sigh of running in snow. Weren't we living in Michigan? Luke wonders. I consider and shake my head. No, I think we were living in San Diego, in California. The names of places feel heavy in my mouth, slick on my soft palate. I want to cough and swallow them back like Jell-O, like phlegm. They sound like fantasies or like lies.

Geese fly over us. "How funny," I remark, "that we once lived where geese flew to, and now we live in the place they leave." I say it ignorantly, for how can I know where these geese go? How can I know what is North and what is South anymore? I am now the farthest North I've ever been. I hear the recent voice of a professor calling me a Southerner, and an automatic, desperate mapping occurs inside of me, a compass needle knotting itself blindly over what is not a rose but a hole. Southerner. I who grew up in Northern California. Not Wikipedia's NorCal but the NorCal that begins at Sacramento, sweeps north- and eastward past smoking rice fields and dying nut trees to a wooded and tumble-weeded corner of mountains, grasslands and buttes, cowboys, hippies, immigrant workers, armed weed growers and armed Jefferson State separatists. How am I of a South when I have always been of that particular North? Could she perhaps be referring to Mexico, my estranged motherland? But I know that isn't what this professor meant by *South*. She was referring to a different South. I feel vertigo integrating these new Norths, these new Souths. My sense of continent undergoes a sudden growth spurt, a hulking. It feels like nudity, an exposure, a naked distance. You know that joke about polar bears not eating penguins? It is because they are paralyzed by the enormity of body, landscape and place.

Geese fly over and I have no fucking clue where they're going. They are less like sky-bound *m*'s and more like the marks an uncapped pen leaves in the lining of a purse. And can we have a moment, too, for the sound of geese, not their honking but that inelegant and meaty cough of feathers beating against the air? We left for a reason, didn't we, I ask Luke. She nods. I think so. I remember fear, disgust, a constant anxious hemorrhaging. That makes sense, I say. The leaving of a place is so often preceded by the impossibility of staying. Trump, says Luke. Excuse me? I'm not sure what she has said. It sounds like she said *fart* or *burp*. Trump, she repeats. We don't say anything else. There is nothing more to say. When people ask us why we are here we say this word and it is enough. "Can't argue with that," they say, and they don't.



A dark ride is one of those indoor amusement or theme park rides where they put you in a little car or boat or flying thing and you move from room to room, getting wet or being scared or simply navigating through

a story. Pirates of the Caribbean is a famous dark ride, as is “it’s a small world.” Animatronics, plastic foliage, concrete landscapes and queasy projections are all mainstays of these ingenious fakeries. A dark ride requires surrender of the rider. It is a trip down the birth canal, a ride-thru mother, or, a ride through Mother. A dark ride is also a death, the chasing of a distant point of light. Or perhaps, simply it’s a dream, a guided tour of a subconscious, usually not your own, usually a collective subconscious and many times a colonial subconscious. Cowboys and Indians, savages and explorers, pirates and captains, princes and witches, villains and heroes, children and adults. A dark ride is a full-bodied narrative interpretation of power struggles to which you must deliver yourself entirely.

I don’t remember much about applying to Canadian MFA programs in the days after the election. But I do remember the ecstatic daymare of dark ride videos that followed that submission process, the endless dopamine-fueled scrolling through YouTube search results, each as sweet and pert and promising as a petit four. Self-employed at the time, I watched hours upon hours of these videos while I worked, while I ate, while I sat on the toilet. I watched on-ride videos filmed at obscure amusement parks: haunted houses, enchanted fairylands, sawmill rides and mine trains. Virtually, I rode every version of the Haunted Mansion ride at every Disney theme park in the world. I was engaging in a new kind of astral projection that allowed me to flee, to pass through the darkness and there, amongst the jerky movements of wax-faced robot ghosts, find meaning, resolution, and illumination. And this is how I passed the time while we waited to hear back from Canada.

Sometime in February of 2017 I looked in the mirror and thought, *My god, I look like shit*. I took the dog for a walk that morning and every person I saw, every person with whom I engaged in that mutual skirting of each other’s gaze, looked like shit. Luke also looked like shit, and I said to her, “My god, we look like shit. Have you noticed that everyone looks like shit?” At grocery stores, at the post office, at the park we looked carefully for faces that did not look like shit because surely those would be the victors, the ones who had gotten what they wanted, what they had insisted with such fervor that they needed. But everyone looked like shit even though over half of Grand Traverse County’s voters should have looked triumphant.

A few months later, I was accepted to a graduate program in Southern Alberta. We started selling our things, making plans, acquiring permits. At the YMCA in Traverse City, Michigan, a young man thrust out his narrow chest, pulling flat the wrinkles in his American flag shirt. IF THIS FLAG OFFENDS YOU I’LL HELP YOU PACK read the shirt in wanted poster letters, the kind of font that translates to yelling inside your head. I watched him through the weight machines, his crust of

blond hair, his pale skin holding together the kind of lank that promises to fill out, get scary. Would he, I wondered, help me pack? Certainly, I could have used a hand getting the boxes out of the house. We were planning to take only what fit in the car, which wasn't much, but Luke was recovering from a stress injury and I was doing the heavy lifting by myself. I lay awake wondering about the boy. *Imagine literally acting out your ideologies. Imagine what that would look like.* But imagination wasn't necessary anymore.

As we prepared to leave some friends told us, "Please stay, you belong here." But honestly, did we ever belong anywhere? And if we did, why didn't we know it? Why didn't we feel it? Our move was a convoluted one, and included a detour through rural Minnesota where we stayed in a cabin, a self-made writing residency. We kept our phones on airplane mode, allowed ourselves Internet use one day a week when we drove to the nearby town for groceries and laundry. During this time, an odd list of unfulfilled American desires sprouted in me overnight, a mycelium's sudden fruiting: I wanted to go scuba diving at the Mall of America. I wanted to buy a 365-day pass to Disney World and live out an entire year of my stupid life going to The Magic Kingdom every single day, and there write a memoir about being full of distances and removals. I wanted to live on the shores of a Midwestern lake forever, to feel the reeds bend under my twenty-dollar inflatable raft and the give of the cheap plastic oars buckling in the tannin-stained water like skinny arms. The smother of summer, the gargle of red-winged blackbirds crying *covfefe*. But more than all these things I just wanted to leave. I remember when, in August, we finally crossed the border into Canada. It felt like leaving someone I'd once loved very much who had finally succeeded in making themselves impossible to love.



Want to read Migueltzinta Solís' "Ever-Guests" in full?

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Bless Them

God bless the rented floors
under my feet, the upstairs neighbor
whose restlessness wakes me

through a paper-thin ceiling
belonging to neither of us. Bless his
heavy-footed, early morning steps

that become my father's in my dreams.
And the landlord with his list of names,
his ring of keys like jewels without a crown,

bless him. And the cop who passes
our childless home as he places soggy notices
on doorsteps explaining that a girl escaped

the grasp of two men in town this afternoon.
Let us praise the holy angle of her arm
as it slipped between their hands

and the mother she returned to.
With every spent breath I give myself
to a season where everything migrates

or learns to survive. Bless the fullness
of the moon as it illuminates this:
the neighbor's dog raising a leg

onto my garden. And the afterward
apologies, let them be praise
onto an earth we pretend to own

even as it steers us in a circle
of its own devising. Bless this world-
weary dizziness that finds me

in a moment of rest where I know
you are no more mine than
the trees outside our window.

Where I am not moving but moved through
like a low-hanging cloud on a highway,
like the old skin of a sinless snake.

Treatise on Fallen Fruit

Finalist for the 2018 Poetry Prize

Sleep. And that's all we did.
We perfected a way of leaning
like beams on the verge
of ambulance. Slept in the shared carriage of the couch,
the television orange as a deer's mouth,
A missing student,

white noise from falling cities, and our lips over-
poured with salt: tomorrow
will work itself out. The world
sways between the quiet and guided
disasters. Like fireworks. Like the heart. Then smoke

in the night. We always found the paths back
into each other's arms. On my way home to you,
the carpool passed the overcast of Lake Michigan,
and I could tell by the color in the water
that we had bombed Syria. However this started,
it is also about drones making light of men.

Like this does. Whether or not we mean for it,
the car glides under the bridge where brown lives.

I am coming back to curl next to you, for sleep to dangle
like playthings from our arms. In good years

like this, we buy flowers.
I might wake by the fire first
and look for your word,
and whatever you are saying in your sleep
couldn't possibly be. Imagine we are a canoe
in movement. I drag my thoughts behind me like an arm in the water
or a fuse. You know the throat of the world, too, is brown.

If there is a God, some secret weekend exists
where He sleeps with his legs stretched

like this upon an impossible couch.
Neither do we distinguish between love
and hush. Did I tell you

they stopped reporting after the very first day?
I looked every night. On the one hand, we test the limits of passion
and, on the other, the limits of history.

This afternoon, they found the black boy's arms
and, legs in the lake. After that, the children played

in the water. Then it got to be late. The police ask again
for us to leave. We pack our things into the smalls
of our backs. We move hellishly slow, the light from an explosion.

Contributors

Noah Baldino has poems and reviews that can be found or found soon in *Poetry*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere. They currently live and teach in Indiana.

Molly McCully Brown is the author of *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded* (Persea Books, 2017), which won the 2016 Lexi Rudnitsky First Book Prize. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming in, *Tin House*, *Crazyhorse*, *Pleiades*, *Blackbird*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere. She is a 2018 United States Artists Fellow, and the 2018-2019 recipient of the Amy Lowell Poetry Traveling Scholarship.

R. Cassandra Bruner was born and raised in Indiana. Currently, she is an MFA poetry candidate at Eastern Washington University, where she works as the Managing Editor of Willow Springs Books and the Web Editor of the literary magazine *Willow Springs*. Winner of the 2017 Montana Book Festival's Emerging Writers' Contest, her work has recently appeared in, or is forthcoming from, *Hunger Mountain*, *Pleiades*, and *Vinyl*.

Kartika Budhwar writes about the porous borderlands where languages spar and fuse, where gender and sexuality collapse upon themselves, where the supernatural and organic have equal claim. She is writing a novel about sea turtles, Hindu goddesses, and other cultural orphans. She has an MFA in fiction from North Carolina State University, and is currently an MFA candidate in CW and Environment at Iowa State University.

Leila Chatti is a Tunisian-American poet and author of the chapbooks *Ebb* and *Tunsiya/Amrikiya*. She is the recipient of fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and Cleveland State University, where she is the inaugural Anisfield-Wolf Fellow in Publishing and Writing. Her poems appear in *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, *American Poetry Review*, and elsewhere.

Nina Li Coomes is a Japanese and American writer from Chicago and Nagoya. Her work has appeared in *Catapult*, *The Atlantic*, and *On Being*. For more information, please go to www.ninalicoomes.com.

Vanessa Cuti's fiction has appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *The Southampton Review*, *Hobart*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Word Riot*, and others. She received her MFA from Stony Brook University and lives in the suburbs of New York with her family.

Originally from New Hampshire, **Elizabeth DeMeo** is the Managing Editor of *The Arkansas International*. She is a fourth-year MFA student in fiction at the University of Arkansas, the Director of the Arkansas Writers in the Schools program, and a former intern for *Tin House*.

Denise Duhamel's most recent book of poetry is *Scald* (Pittsburgh, 2017). *Blowout* (Pittsburgh, 2013) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. A recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, she is a professor at Florida International University in Miami.

Sara Fetherolf's poems have recently appeared in *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Muzzle*, and *Iron Horse*, among other journals; she has critical essays in *The California Journal of Poetics* and *Plath Profiles*. She holds an MFA degree from Hunter College and is currently a Dornsife Fellow in the PhD for Literature and Creative Writing at University of Southern California.

Charity Gingerich is from Uniontown, Ohio, where she currently teaches creative writing and poetry at the University of Mount Union. She taught writing at West Virginia University from 2008-2014, where she also obtained her MFA. Her poetry has appeared in: *The Kenyon Review*, *Arts & Letters*, *Ruminate*, and *FIELD*, among other journals.

Benjamin Gucciardi's poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Journal*, *Forklift Ohio*, *Orion Magazine*, *Terrain.org*, *upstreet*, and other journals. A *Best New Poets* nominee, he is a winner of a Dorothy Rosenberg Memorial Prize and contests from *The Maine Review* and *The Santa Ana River Review*. He works with refugee and immigrant youth in Oakland, California.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs is the author of *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, *M Archive: After the End of the World*, and the co-editor of *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*. Alexis lives in Durham, NC where she co-creates the Mobile Homecoming Trust with Sangodare Akinwale. Alexis is currently the visiting Winton Chair in Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at University of Minnesota.

Mikko Harvey is the author of *Unstable Neighbourhood Rabbit* (House of Anansi, 2018). His poems appear in places such as *Gulf Coast*, *Iowa Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Missouri Review*, and he serves as an associate poetry editor for *Fairy Tale Review*.

Tom Howard's recent fiction has appeared in *Numero Cinq*, *Tin House Online*, and the *Cincinnati Review*, and his individual stories have received the Willow Springs Fiction Prize, the Robert and Adele Schiff Award in Fiction, the Masters Review Short Story Award, and the Tobias Wolff Award in Fiction. He lives with his wife in Arlington, Virginia.

Mitchell Jacobs holds an MFA from Purdue University, where he served as managing editor of *Sycamore Review*. His poems appear in *Gulf Coast*, *Lumina*, *New Ohio Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Salt Hill*, and other journals.

Ingrid Keenan's stories have appeared in *Room*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, and online at *Shirley*, *The Collapsar*, *The Puritan*, and *The Rusty Toque*. She recently completed her first novel, a feminist re-boot of the Don Juan myth. She lives with her family in a small town in Upstate New York, where she gardens and avoids the snakes.

Caroline Kent is a Chicago-based visual artist who explores the relationship between language, translation, and abstraction through her enigmatic paintings and drawings. Kent's marks and forms are driven by a process rooted in improvisation that then are choreographed onto the surfaces of her large-scale paintings. Kent speculates in both the potential and the limitations of language, and ultimately questions the modernist canon of abstraction. She has been exhibited nationally at the The Flag Art Foundation, the California African American Museum, The Suburban, Company Projects, and The Union for Contemporary Art. She is the recipient of awards from the Jerome Foundation, the Pollock Krasner Foundation, and the McKnight Foundation. Kent is co-founder of The Bindery Projects, an artist-run exhibition space founded in Saint Paul, MN.

Rachel Kondo was born and raised on Maui. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Electric Literature*, *Ploughshares Solos*, and *Indiana Review*. A recent graduate of the Michener Center for Writers, she now lives in Los Angeles, California.

Mallory Laurel was born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley, a border region in South Texas once called “Magic Valley.” She recently completed her MFA in Fiction at The Ohio State University. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Salon*.

Esther Lin was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and lived in the United States as an undocumented immigrant for twenty-one years. She is the author of *The Ghost Wife*, winner of the 2017 Poetry Society of America’s Chapbook Fellowship. Currently, she is a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and an organizer for UndocuPoets.

Jacob Little is the Managing Editor of *Brevity* and a PhD-Nonfiction candidate at Ohio University. His recent work is published or forthcoming in *The Pinch*, *DIAGRAM*, *Gigantic Sequins*, and *Split Lip Magazine*, among others.

Ruth Madievsky, originally from Moldova, is the author of a poetry collection, *Emergency Brake* (Tavern Books, 2016). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tin House*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere. She was the winner of the American Poetry Review’s 2017 Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize. She lives in Boston, where she works as an oncology pharmacist.

Amanda Jane McConnon received her MFA from New York University, and her poetry has appeared in *Best New Poets* and others. She lives at the Jersey Shore with her fiancé and their dog and works for a travel copywriting agency, where she writes about people’s houses in faraway places.

Susannah Nevison is the author of *Lethal Theater* (Ohio State University Press, in 2019) and *Teratology* (Persea Books, 2015). New work can be found in or is forthcoming from *Tin House*, *Blackbird*, *Pleiades*, and elsewhere. She teaches at Sweet Briar College.

Meghann Plunkett is a poet, coder, and dog enthusiast. She is the recipient of the 2017 Missouri Review’s Editors’ Prize as well as the 2017 Third Coast Poetry Prize. She was a finalist for Narrative Magazine’s 30 Below Contest, The North American Review’s Hearst Poetry Prize, and Nimrod’s Pablo Neruda Prize. She has been recognized by the Academy of American Poets in both 2016 and 2017. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in *Narrative*, *Pleiades*, *Rattle*, *Muzzle*, *Washington Square Review*, and Poets.org, among others. She received her BA from Sarah Lawrence College and her MFA from Southern Illinois University. She serves as a Poetry Reader for *Adroit Journal*. Visit her at meghannplunkett.com

Anne Ray has worked as a waitress, a gardener, an English teacher, and a fish monger. Her work has appeared in *Pushcart Prize Anthology XLII* and won the 2016 Dahany Fiction Prize. She is the author of the libretto for *Symposium*, a ten-minute opera, performed in 2017 by Boston Opera Collaborative. She works on the eighteenth floor of an office building in lower Manhattan.

Alison C. Rollins, born and raised in St. Louis city, is the second prizewinner of the 2016 James H. Nash Poetry contest and a finalist for the 2016 Jeffrey E. Smith Editors’ Prize. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *The Poetry Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and elsewhere. A Cave Canem and Callaloo Fellow, she is also a 2016 recipient of the Poetry Foundation’s Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship.

Maureen Seaton has authored nineteen poetry collections, both solo and collaborative. Her awards include the Lambda Literary Award, NEA, and Pushcart.

Her memoir, *Sex Talks to Girls* (University of Wisconsin Press), also garnered a “Lammy” and has been reprinted in paperback (2018). Her new poetry collection, *Fisher*, is out from Black Lawrence Press (2018).

Brian Sneed is the author of the poetry collection *Last City* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2018). A 2018 PEN/Heim recipient, his poems and translations have appeared in *Asymptote*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Harvard Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and other publications, and translations of his poems have been published in international magazines in Greek, Italian, Albanian, and Serbian. His translation of Phoebe Giannisi’s poetry collection *Homerica* (World Poetry Books, 2017) was selected by Anne Carson as a favorite book of 2017 in *The Paris Review*. Brian received his MFA from the University of Virginia, where he held a Poe/Faulkner Fellowship in creative writing and served as poetry editor for *Meridian*. He is the senior editor of *New Poetry in Translation*.

Miguelzinta C. Solís was raised in California and Mexico. He has been a dyke, a butch queen, and the queer sum of these things. He holds a BA in interdisciplinary studies from The Evergreen State College and is currently perusing an MFA in visual art at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta. His work has appeared in *Midnight Breakfast*, *Lunch Ticket*, *PANK*, and *Apogee*, among others.

Emily Tuszynska lives in Fairfax, Virginia with her husband and three children. Her work can be found in recent issues of *Salamander*, *Water-Stone Review*, *The Southern Review*, and many other journals.

Jan Verberkmoes, an Oregon native, currently lives in Oxford, Mississippi, where she is a John and Renée Grisham Fellow at the University of Mississippi and a candidate for her MFA in poetry. Her poems are forthcoming or have recently appeared in *Ecotone*, *Pleiades*, *32 Poems*, *Lana Turner*, and elsewhere. She is a 2018-19 Stadler Fellow at Bucknell University.

Sarah Viren is the author of the essay collection *Mine*, which won the River Teeth Book Prize, judged by Andre Dubus III, and translator of *Cordoba Skies* by Federico Falco. A graduate of Texas Tech University’s PhD in creative writing, she now lives with her wife and two kids in Arizona, where she teaches at Arizona State University—and has found a hairstylist she likes.

Natalie Wee is the author of *Our Bodies & Other Fine Machines* (Words Dance Publishing, 2016). Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Drunken Boat*, *Asian American Writers’ Workshop*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Adroit Journal*, and more. She has been nominated for the Best of the Net Anthology and two Pushcart Prizes. Born in Singapore to Malaysian parents, she currently resides in Toronto.

Keith S. Wilson is an Affrilachian Poet, Cave Canem fellow, and graduate of the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop. He has received three scholarships from Bread Loaf as well as scholarships from MacDowell, Ucross, Millay Colony, and the Vermont Studio Center, among others. Keith serves as Assistant Poetry Editor at *Four Way Review* and Digital Media Editor at *Obsidian Journal*. Keith’s first book, *Fieldnotes on Ordinary Love*, will be published by Copper Canyon in 2019.

Jung Yun is the author of *SHELTER* (Picador, 2016). Her work has appeared in *Tin House*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and *The Atlantic*, among others. She has received an honorable mention for the Pushcart Prize and residencies from the MacDowell Colony, Ucross Foundation, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the National Humanities Center. Currently, she is an assistant professor of English at the George Washington University.

