



*Blinders Journal*



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# **Blinders Journal**

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# BLINDERS LITERARY JOURNAL

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NANCY K. JENTSCH  
*ALL MY DAYS*

This egg-warm day slips

into bed with me  
like a sighing shadow

welcomed by a blanket  
of yesterdays

who wait, still and smooth,  
till one, tickled

by my toe twitch  
stretches, twists

seeks out my sleeping mind.  
My fifth birthday, perhaps?

Loud with party hats  
and pony-tail parades.

Or an ordinary Thursday?  
A filigree whisper

free as steam  
leaving jasmine tea.

Now and again that October day  
stirs, its wet-wool weight

robs my lungs of air  
coats me in shivers

then sulks in its bolthole  
like cold coffee grounds.

How many more  
will bed with me  
till we are borne away  
as feathers, cushioned

by my last sigh?



## ONE CONCERT GRAND IN GAZA

One concert grand  
and one music school

can't stitch the wounds  
of thousands of greasy guns

of streets scalded by spite  
families dismembered

of spring curfewed by fire  
children's dreams gagged

But imagine Gaza  
with just one gun

and thousands of pianos  
playing as gently

as the first spring rain  
filling a cup

that had forgotten  
it could hold water



TONYA EBERHARD  
*WAITING FOR THE MOON TO SING*

If the light of the moon flutters thick ivory lashes,  
who opened its rusted-shut eyes?

It is the ivy that snakes its way up the brick wall  
like octopus tentacles, spiraling up into the starless sky.

For branches of the heart unfurl to the heart-shaped  
moon in anger. Crows vomit blood onto the Holy Host, stained.

Curl the fist to the white-knuckled moon,  
white plate, white heartache and stomachache in the mind.

If the moon sings, the wolves will not howl.  
If the wolves howl, the moon cannot be heard.

Waiting for the moon to sing is to say  
what one could be, but not what one is.

To hear the moon sing is to find the words  
'somewhere, here; nowhere, there'  
chalked up on a brick wall underneath the coarse ivy.



## CLOSING HOURS

Under a pool of light they eat oval moons, empty plates that chip each tooth with every voracious bite. Night is not promising. Not in a world that is toothless and starving, buried under snow. The employees are bereft with their customer service jobs, showing it with every apathetic broom sweep and hopeless apology for mistaken orders.

They pay without leaving a tip. Every crumpled and folded dollar bill must be carefully spent by the two ruthless teenagers. As they leave, hastily buttoning up coats and adjusting wool hats, the sign on the door is turned on its belly. *Sorry, We're Closed*, it says, in the color of a depressed cerulean blue. The figures shuffle their way through the snow, a pair of disappointed hunting dogs that failed to catch the fox bounding through the frostbitten wood.



JONATHAN JONES  
*CONVERGENCE*

Beginning at 3 a.m. Your thoughts  
are sticky as though licked  
to seal an empty  
envelope. Tiny legs tread  
and tear across  
the plastic cosmos, wet  
like carnage neatly  
splayed out for collection.  
Days crowd out with pheromones.  
Marked for Passover, the language  
throbs and swells  
a pure efficiency. Far colonies  
of intricate construction  
slide the deadbolt shut.  
Wade out into the shallow sun.  
No history meets here, for all  
its human engineering.  
Starfish aligned from stern  
to bow. The hysterical  
shaking of the tree of life,  
three hours of slow  
descent; a new convergence  
far and dissociate.  
Inheriting these sands  
you exit Babylon on a temporary  
passport. Your heart  
a silent speed dial where  
each morning supersedes  
its simple fact. The human  
is no mere commodity.  
You cannot hold your breath.  
Wipe your fingers in the Holy  
Baptistery



ANGIE ROMINES  
*A PRETTY WORD FOR GOODBYE*

Welcome & Announcements

My church meets at night. We have to because the building isn't ours. It's borrowed from a more-traditional Presbyterian congregation that uses it on Sunday mornings, which means I have the benefit of looking at dusty stained glass with missing fragments without having to sit through a formal, liturgical service.

I have my own pew, chipped and wooden—left side, six rows from the back. It's technically not mine, but I sit there almost every week, so it feels safe to assume some form of ownership. I need to have a stationary place in this building, something to clutch.

Every Sunday is like this Sunday. I wonder how and why I got here. I am twenty-three, old enough to choose not to attend. And yet I am here, grown up and back in church. It feels strange that this choice is mine, yet it feels unrecognizable to me. The major force behind my being here is not faith, but a longing for familiarity, to be part of a whole that has grown up with the same flannel boards, Sunday dress tights, and church jargon.

Even after I'm positioned in my pew, I want to duck out and go home. But I stay, sitting in my hard seat and studying the painting on the wall above the piano. I hate that painting, an asymmetrical cross surrounded by a gaudy crown with a feather sticking out of it. I've been in this Christian snow globe—a world within a world—my whole life, and I've never heard of a feather being used as a religious symbol. A dove, yes. A sparrow, sure. But not a mangled-looking writing quill.

I know all about symbols of faith. From the time I was five and my mother told me she was sending me to Blackhawk Baptist, I have been learning. I have all the answers to the questions that don't matter. I can tell you the name of the oldest man in the Bible, the high priest of Salem who compared himself to Jesus, and how a man carved a prostitute into twelve pieces to teach somebody some sort of lesson. But I have none of the answers that I need to know, like why I sit here week after week.

Back in school, our teachers would say that going to church didn't make us Christians. What they meant was that church and faith are two separate entities. In saying this, they were implying that to live a holy life, both church and faith must be a part of the equation. But if church is the home of the Christian, why is it so uncomfortable for me to be here? Is it because I'm not a Christian? Or is it because I'm not a certain kind of Christian?

I can't stop looking at that damn feather painting, and I can't stop hating it. Maybe I like hating it. It forces me to focus on something small, something less huge and terrifying than why I've come. I sit with my Bible in my lap and silently hate the painting, which has nothing to do with my salvation.

I don't think salvation is supposed to be scary. The dark, jagged place you are before you are saved is supposed to be frightening, but not the actual saving part. The only trouble is, I can't remember where I was when I decided to ask for God's salvation. I was four, maybe five when *it* happened. And *it* didn't just happen once.

Picture this scene repeated for five or so years. I'm young and small. My hair is damp from my bath and in braids because that'll make it wavy for school in the morning. Even though I'm tired, I get out from beneath my quilt and kneel beside my bed. The carpet bites



the skin of my knees. Doesn't matter. This is important. I clasp my hands tightly while I pray. It is less scary when I have a good grasp. "Dear Jesus, please come into my heart and save me from my sins. I will love you forever. Amen." It is okay to sleep now? I do wonder what sins I was feeling so guilty about at the age of five.

In school they taught us that when the Bible said, "Fear the LORD," it didn't mean he wanted us to be actually scared of him, but just that we should respect him. It felt like they were lying. When I was young, I was scared all the time. I dreamt of angels falling from the starlit heavens and yanking me down with them into the fiery lakes of hell. They told us the fire is not the worse part, that it is the separation from God that is unbearable.

My mother and father were afraid before I was born. My mother gets uncomfortable when asked to share her testimony because she wasn't saved once, but many times—like me. Every altar call, every church camp revival, my mother would find herself being drawn to the front with the crowd of people seeking redemption. She isn't sure which time was the "real time," so she doesn't want to talk about any of them. My father was converted by his mother's hand that held a switch. When he was older in high school, he knows he made The Big Decision in earnest, but he can't remember any of the particulars. He knows it happened, though.

But I never knew the spiritual version of my parents. All I knew were the two people who never answered my questions. "Faith is private," my mother would say. I was angry that they didn't go to church. We were taught that our parents were supposed to be spiritual examples for us, especially our fathers. Once I was old enough to argue convincingly, I made them take me to church. My mom would pour my cereal, brush out my hair, and dress me in Sunday clothes, and then my dad would drop me off at Blackhawk Baptist Church, which was attached to our school. That way I didn't have to be embarrassed at school by being the girl who doesn't go to church, and my parents didn't have to sit through an unwanted service. It was our great compromise.

### Call to Worship

I like to sing, but only in church. And not up front with the piano, guitar, and microphones, but I like singing from my row amongst the many. It's comforting to hear my voice blending with dozens of others. No pressure. Worship songs are characteristically easy to sing. I try to match the voices around me, and it sounds beautiful, possibly because I can't hear myself. I don't have to depend on my one voice but can rely on a collection of voices.

In junior high, everything I experienced was with an intensity of emotion, usually as an unpleasant side effect of rapidly fluctuating hormone levels. But when it came to God and spiritual matters, I see this passion as something special, like a piece of old jewelry I was allowed to cup in my hands for a short while before gingerly returning it.

The songs especially caught me. I used to be very concerned with the message of the worship songs I'd sing. I can remember standing with my friends in our youth group building—the floor was tiled in black and white; vintage video games lined the walls; basketball hoops and foosball tables were scattered throughout—and feeling so full and happy and calm.

If I was ever truly converted, it was during this time in my life. One night after an especially moving worship service, I locked myself in my bedroom and hummed songs we had sung earlier. After closing my eyes and singing the last few lines aloud, I decided that it was time to really be saved. I was nearly thirteen, and I could feel God.



And so, I was converted. From what, I'm not sure. I dug through the chaos of my dresser drawer and found a stationary set this girl I didn't know very well had gotten me for my birthday. The cards were blank on the inside with pictures of kids kissing and playing in piles of leaves on the outside. I wrote in cursive because cursive is more special than print.

*Dear Jesus,*

*I now know the meaning of the song "Surrender." I will be coming home to you in heaven someday. I am officially saved on this day, Wednesday, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1996.*

*Yours forever,  
Angie*

The song, "Surrender," was actually pretty awful. There were echoes, so the word "surrender" was repeated far more times than necessary. The lyrics were trite and the chords repetitive, but I was too young to recognize cliché. For me, it was perfect, transcendent moment. The kind that doesn't last.

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I never liked Ken. He technically was the high school youth pastor, but he loaned himself out to us younger junior high kids from time to time. I'd never actually spoken with him, so the only tangible evidence I had for my aversion was his choice in music. Most of his songs I liked, but he had a penchant for the song "All in All," which I did not appreciate. It moved too fast and scaled too high. We sounded like mice when we sang it.

"He's a bad man," I used to whisper to my friends when I'd hear the familiar intro chords to his favorite song.

"He's a pastor. Pastors are good," they'd tell me.

"Not this one. I can feel it," I'd say before joining the song.

Ken left our church the summer before I graduated from junior high to high school youth group. It took a couple of months for the news to trickle down to the younger kids. They told us Ken was caught dating one of the high school girls from a nearby public school.

"How do you date someone when you're married with kids?" a friend asked me.

"You don't. That's the point. Told you he was bad," I answered.

Youth group was no longer a place I wanted to be. Emotional sways weren't enough anymore. I wanted it to make logical sense. I wanted to see it lived out. This man didn't just go to church, he was a pastor. He was as involved as you could be.

That's the problem with pastors. They tend to be charismatic, which works well for spiritually moving a congregation, but not so well in one-on-one counseling with a damsel in distress. I didn't want to be in a place where the people who were positioned in leadership were the ones you could trust the least.

### Fencing & Invitation to the Table

We line up for communion now. I've always liked communion. It is somehow comforting to know that the same symbolic gesture has been repeated for two thousand years. The bread and the wine are a constant.



Pastor calls communion a sacrament. That means there is a mystical, supernatural element to the act, and it is sacred. Because of the gravity of the act, he fences the table by saying, “This sacrament is intended for those who have been saved by the grace of God. If you are a part of that family, come and partake. If you are not, we say, ‘Welcome,’ but ask that you do not take the bread and the wine.”

It always makes me nervous when the table is being fenced. When making a covenant with God by participating in one of his holy sacraments, it is the not time to be dishonest or even uncertain. And so I always hesitate, unsure if it is sin to remain seated or sin to partake. I end up having to convince myself that no one is ever really sure. And so, I file behind the other believers. I consume the soaked bread and return to my pew, letting my tongue roll over the familiar taste of wine.

Through most of high school, I had no idea what alcohol tasted like. I started off my senior year tentatively sipping mixed drinks, but by the time I reached college, I was educated. There was even less of a reason for me to go to church on Sunday morning when I was still dehydrated and shaky from Saturday night’s drink of choice--usually vodka, rum, or tequila. I didn’t like to waste time with anything that didn’t kick you in the face after each shot. But even if I wasn’t hung over, I still wouldn’t have gone to church.

*Disillusionment.* I didn’t know there was an actual word for it until I grew up and went to away to college, a Christian college as per my parents’ unarguable request. During my four years at Indiana Wesleyan, I skipped mandatory chapel whenever I could figure a way to get around the chapel monitors. On Sunday afternoons, I’d go to lunch in the cafeteria having just woken up, my face striped with sheet marks. People would say, “Oh, looks like someone went to Bedside Baptist with Pastor Sheets,” and I didn’t really care that they knew.

When Indiana Wesleyan friends—good Christian friends—would ask me why I had such an aversion to church and chapel, I’d make it simple and say, “I don’t believe in organized religion.” But to my classmates who were raised that Sunday mornings were to be spent in church fellowshiping with other believers, to say “I don’t believe in organized religion” meant I needed to be labeled as disillusioned, a backslider. At least now I had a word for the unanchored position I was in, and a smart-sounding word at that. I needed that word. I needed something to cling to while I was hovering between two worlds, belonging to neither.

### Confession of Sin

When I was a junior in college, I thought I’d found a boy that could save me from my apathy. He was reformed, saved from his years of rebellion through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. During his freshman year, he did so much cocaine that blood would pour from his nostrils at very inopportune times. But he quit all that and came back to the church, said it meant more to him now that he had fallen so far and yet had chosen to return.

He was always concerned with the state of my soul.

On Mondays after class, we’d get coffee and have confessional time. With him and me, confession was informal, more storytelling than relaying my sins with a penitent heart.

“Well, let’s see. Saturday night, I drove down to Indy with friends from high school, got lit, and made out with [insert name].” Not as hardcore as snorting coke, but then again, I wasn’t very sorry about it.

He never told me to stop doing any of it, just asked if he could pray for me. I thought if he knew enough about me, what I had done, then he’d step in and fix it. For two



years, I continued my recitation of sins, hoping he'd forbid me to drink. But he never did. So I kept talking, and he kept listening and praying. And nothing ever changed.

I feel ridiculous looking back, hoping that I could pass off responsibility for my soul on another person. I don't know what made me think I could replace God with a boy from rural Ohio.

### Benediction

The service is ending. It always ends the same. With the benediction, which is just a pretty word for goodbye. The pastor places himself in the aisle between the two rows of pews like Moses at the shore of a freshly parted Red Sea. He reaches his arms up toward the vaulted ceiling, looks out upon us and says, "The benediction is a good word from God. Hear it now and be blessed. 'May the LORD bless you and keep you. May the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.'"

I like that last line about peace best. It always calms me as I gather my Bible, purse, and keys and walk through the doors onto 2<sup>nd</sup> street, leaving the congregation behind me. The feeling follows me all the way to my car, but it always dissipates by the time I'm alone behind the steering wheel. I don't know that I will ever have a lasting sort of peace. I wonder sometimes what it would be like to be stupid but sure, like I was in junior high. I've been told many times that it is considered a blessing to wrestle with your faith. That it should not come easy. That doubt is the sign of a well-formed mind.

I don't pray very often. When I do pray, it's when I am feeling unfinished and lost, if I have nothing left of me, when my brain can't hold these complex, ethereal ideas anymore. With this kind of prayer, I don't kneel; I collapse. I pray too fast and frantically to remember all the words. I ask for help over and over. When I rise up from the floor, there is no knowing, no stillness, no peace.

This idea that I might be someone different than who I thought I was for the past few decades, that I might not fit into the only world that's ever been offered to me, I cannot believe. Faith is laced through my bones. It is me, more so than my face, my name, or my family. If it were to become separate from me, then I don't know what would remain.

I walk through those heavy church doors every Sunday evening. I come in out of the dark and into the light. I sing with the others and make a joyful noise unto the LORD. I tear the bread and dip it into the wine. I recite the words of confession. I hush my questions and doubts. Answers are not for this fallen earth, they tell me.



JOE CARRIERE  
*ODE TO A LITTLE GIRL HOLDING A BALLOON AS SHE  
LOOKS OUT BEYOND THE EDGE OF LAGUNA PUEBLO*

Nothing lasts forever. I will remember this  
when I recall the brief souvenir slowly burnt into my calves  
as I stood at a stone wall, watching the eagles dance  
with the butterflies in the sun

On a shaded table, a buffalo is exhibited, for sale—  
shaped from stone, palled likeness of the slaughtered stupendous,  
mere relic of herds who shook the land  
when the dance was young and free

As I leave, I try to see—the crowds are shrinking,  
curious visitors, as I am, carrying clay or turquoise curiosities  
from tents to cars, sunlight glinting from the interstate  
where a sign proclaims a “SCENIC VIEW”

But I am struck, now lost in my own footsteps,  
when a mylar sheen flashes against the distant stone horizon  
and I see her, holding the dance on a string in the breeze,  
atop the world, peaceful,

able to grasp a world  
that has not yet floated away



JAYNE MAREK  
*LIMNED*



AMY KITCHELL-LEIGHTY  
*THE WEIGHT OF A HEAVY FOOT*

My mama stood on a stool, her belly poking out so far it touched the wall as she stuck another tack into the “Happy Birthday” sign. She sighed, brushed a blonde lock of hair from her eyes, flinching as her finger ran across the faint mark of a bruise, and asked, “Is it straight?”

“Mmmhmm.” I replied.

The sign was for me. “You were a fast delivery,” she said to me every year. “I ate a cheeseburger with an onion for lunch. I thought I had indigestion. You thought different. Before I knew it, your daddy was rushing me to the hospital. Forty-three minutes later, you were here.”

I scooted a chair out from under the kitchen table and sat down on my knees. My birthday cake was cooling on a plate. “When you gonna icing it?”

“It’s not time yet.” She dried her hands on a towel, finishing the dishes. Her hair fell in long curls all the way down her back, stopping at the top of her maternity pants. Whenever she vacuumed the carpet, scrubbed the kitchen floor, or planted flowers in the backyard, her curls would tighten up in wet sprigs around her face. Mama was going to have a baby boy. “He should be here in June,” she told me one day while we hung sheets on the clothesline. I was going to help change diapers and warm bottles, just like I had done with my little sister. Gretchen was four and looked exactly like mama: blonde hair, light blue eyes. I looked more like daddy. My hair was dark and straight and the only way I could get it to curl was to roll every strand in pink sponge rollers and sleep on mama’s satin pillow case. My special pillow case had been my grandma’s. It was ivory with a line of red roses down the seam and had been part of a matching set. “This is all I have left,” mama would say when I’d ask to sleep on it. She kept it tucked away at the top of the linen closet in the hall, had to stand on her tiptoes just to reach it.

I heard a knock at the front door and ran to answer it. There stood Aunt Claire holding a box covered in balloon wrapping paper and topped off with a yellow ribbon. Uncle Benny was by her side.

“Happy Birthday, kiddo!” Aunt Claire said, handing me my gift. She was a tall woman, taller than Uncle Benny. She wore long dresses with her white slip showing in the back, and every piece of jewelry she owned shone from her plump fingers, wrist, neck, and ears. Uncle Benny wore gray slacks and long sleeved shirts even in the summer, and always took his hat off before he came through a door. They followed me to the kitchen and I set my present on the counter.

“Need some help?” Aunt Claire didn’t wait for a response, began smothering my white cake with strawberry icing. “Paul here?”

“He’s sleeping.” Mama responded.

Aunt Claire snorted, “Is that what you call it?”



“Benny, there’s beer in the fridge.” Mama said, ignoring Aunt Claire’s remark and rummaging through the junk drawer. “Or I could make you coffee,” she added, holding up a box of candles and closing the drawer.

“He’ll take coffee,” Aunt Claire answered.

Uncle Benny went to the living room and sat down on the sofa. I went to the television and pushed the power button. “Whatcha wanna watch? We can’t find the remote.”

“I don’t care, honey,” Uncle Benny replied.

I pushed the channel button up, finding a football game, and went back to the kitchen. Aunt Claire and mama quit talking. I could tell I had walked into something I wasn’t supposed to hear. I did that a lot.

“Baby, go check on Gretchen.” Mama forced a smile like I didn’t understand.

I pulled my shoulders back, squeezed my lips into a thin line, raised my right hand to my forehead, and saluted. Then I turned on the heel of my purple Nike shoe (the ones with the soles that had lost their glue somewhere between the monkey bars and the permanent Hopscotch game at the playground—but still my favorite pair.), and I marched down the hall.

I stopped at Daddy’s bedroom. It was closed. I put my hands against the woodwork, leaned in, and pressed my ear to the door. I heard the humming of the box fan that sat in the corner of the room next to the dresser. I heard the snores that fell from his mouth. I turned the knob slowly, carefully, and opened the door just a crack to squeeze through. I stood in the dark room blinking my eyes for them to come into focus. The air was thick and hot and smelled like beer. The curtain was drawn. Gretchen’s Winnie-the-Pooh beach towel was draped over the window, and I wondered where mine with the pink flamingo was. Mama had bought us those towels last summer for our trip to Circus World. The four of us left so early it was still dark outside, and Gretchen slept in her pajamas the whole way there. Not me, though. I woke up early, dressed myself in my favorite jean shorts and that blue shirt with the butterfly on the front, and sat on the couch until the rest of them got up. Mama had packed a cooler with bologna and cheese sandwiches, Pepsis, and Little Debbie snack cakes. “No beer today,” She told daddy as she spread the ice on top of our lunch. But he talked her into just a couple of cans, making her rearrange everything just so they would fit.

That day was hot as we walked from one end of the park to the other, Daddy and me stopping at every ride we passed, Gretchen in the stroller, and Mama saying, “I’ll wait here. It’s more fun to watch.” And she did. Daddy and I wound our bodies through lines of people like garter snakes, pausing every few steps to wave at Mama and Gretchen. Once he sat me up on top of his shoulders and turned me around in a circle just so I could see what I had been missing way down there where I usually stood.

Daddy let another snore roll from his lungs, bringing me back to the aroma of his bedroom, and I scooted backwards into the hall. I saw the front door open and in walked Uncle John, Aunt Marcy, and their three-year-old twins, Ronnie and Donnie. Aunt Marcy was an eighth grade math teacher and a cashier at Kroger’s on the weekends. Uncle John couldn’t keep a job for very long and had now come up with a plan to make the whole



family rich, but it was going to take some time and a little bit of cash, and Mama had told Daddy that he'd better just stay away from that plan of Uncle John's. The twins ran past me, knocking me up against the wall, heading for the backyard yelling.

"Be a doll and take the boys out," Uncle John said, rubbing the top of my head with his knuckles.

He was my least favorite uncle, always talking loud, making fun of the things I said, the way I walked. "I don't know how you two put up with your husbands," Aunt Claire said one day when she and Aunt Marcy had come to help Mama clean the house after one of Daddy's rages.

Outside, Ronnie and Donnie were as loud and rough as their dad. They swung on the swings, ran up and down the alley, and finally settled in the sandbox with Gretchen. I sat on the swing, twisting the chains tight, spinning out of them, and wondering if Mama might take us to the park pool tomorrow when I heard Gretchen scream; I ran to her. She was covering her eyes, sand powdering her hair. Ronnie and Donnie took off for the house as I walked Gretchen inside to the bathroom.

"What's going on?" Mama asked, pushing past me and kneeling in front of Gretchen, who was now sitting on the toilet seat.

"One of 'em threw dirt," I said.

"Get a warm washcloth."

I held a washcloth under the faucet feeling the water heat up. Aunt Marcy appeared in the doorway. "She alright?"

"She's fine," Mama said as Gretchen sobbed brown tears, leaving trails down her cheeks. Then she looked at Aunt Marcy, sighed, and said, "Tell John to wake up Paul, would ya?"

I left the bathroom, making my way back to the kitchen. Aunt Claire was lighting the eight candles now standing upright in the middle of my pink cake. Several presents lined the counter, along with paper plates, forks, and a gallon of vanilla ice cream. Ronnie and Donnie sat at the table shoveling chocolate chip cookies into their mouths. Mama brought Gretchen in, sat her down at the table, and handed her a cookie. Gretchen's eyes were red and swollen, her curls pointed in every direction.

"Where's Paul?" Mama asked to no one in particular while blowing air from her bottom lip, making her bangs fly up off her forehead.

"Wouldn't budge," Uncle John hollered from the living room, his eyes on the game. Aunt Marcy shrugged her shoulders.

Mama let out a slow breath, closed her eyes, and walked back down the hallway. A few minutes later she was back, blowing out my candles, and saying, "It's going to be a while."

I plopped down on the chair, wondering if she even bothered to make a wish when she blew those candles out and thinking that it probably wouldn't come true anyhow because it wasn't really her birthday.



This was always happening with us: Daddy wouldn't get out of bed on Saturdays when Mama just wanted to get out and go somewhere, take a drive, go to the park. He wouldn't come home from work. Instead, he'd stop off at Kramer's with his buddies. And when Mama would finally call because supper was cold and we couldn't eat without him and me and Gretchen's butts hurt from sitting so long on the hard, wooden seats, well, he wouldn't come home then, either.

Thirty minutes later, Aunt Marcy lit the candles and asked Mama to try it again. "Not yet, honey," Mama said to me when she returned from their bedroom, and with one quick breath blew those candles out again.

"This is ridiculous," Aunt Claire said. She grabbed the lighter and lit the candles. "Benny and John, get in here!" she called out.

Uncle Benny and Uncle John came in while Aunt Claire pushed the cake in front of me and started singing as the others joined in. "*Happy Birthday . . .*" I looked around the room at all of their faces: Gretchen's bloodshot eyes, Ronnie and Donnie's chocolate covered cheeks, and my daddy, who had emerged from his sleep, now stood in the doorway of the kitchen. The song ended with the sound of his fist on the molding. Everyone turned to look at him. I let the air out of my mouth, trying not to blow out my candles, but two flickered out anyway.

"Startin' without me?" He looked at Mama, who was standing behind me, her hand on the back of my chair. He was barefoot and wearing a pair of Levi's with no shirt. The black hair on his chest was wet and clung to his skin in clumps. He held a Miller Lite in one hand, the other hand propped against the wall. "Startin' without me?" He slurred again. "Blow out your candles," Mama said to the floor.

I blew out the remaining six, forgetting to make a wish as Ronnie, Donnie, and Gretchen clapped. Daddy grabbed the basket of ivy that hung from the ceiling and threw it past me and at mama's head. It hit the wall instead, as Mama screamed and dirt and leaves scattered to the floor. Ronnie and Gretchen started to cry, and Donnie slid under the table. Daddy stormed across the kitchen and snatched Mama by the back of her head, her curls coiled around his fingers.

"C'mon, Paul," Uncle John said, stepping toward him.

"Fuck you, too!" He let go of mama's hair, shoved Uncle John, and they stumbled into the cabinets. They threw punches. A picture fell from the wall, chairs scooted across the kitchen, and Aunt Claire hurried the four of us kids to the couch.

"Paul, please," Mama whispered, as the two men pummeled each other's faces. Daddy fell on one knee, breathing hard. Uncle John took a step away from him, his shirt untucked, his usual slicked-back hair messy.

Uncle John swung around to face his wife. "Let's go," he said, grabbing the twins by the arms and shoving them all out the front door. But not before Daddy stood up, running out after them yelling, "You no good son-of-a-bitch!"

Aunt Claire went back to the kitchen and began scooping melted ice cream onto plates, telling me and Gretchen to get back up to the table, and Uncle Benny grabbed his hat



off the hook by the front door. Daddy came back in the house cussing and hollering, blood trickling from his lip, his hair standing at attention around his head. He just stood in silence staring, his eyes darting back and forth from each of us. Mama cut the cake into squares and placed them on the plates with the liquid ice cream. She handed me the first piece, then Gretchen. Uncle Benny said he'd just take coffee. And just like that, as if Daddy had had his fill of my eighth birthday party, his bare feet thundered back to his bedroom. We heard drawers slamming and closet doors banging, and then like a light bulb flash, he flew by us, boots and flannel shirt gripped tightly in one hand. The screen door crashed closed and his muffler groaned as he sped out of the driveway.

Later that night, when I was sleeping, my bedroom door clicked open, shedding light in from the hallway. I heard the floorboards creak with the weight of a heavy foot and felt my bed sink in as someone sat down on the edge. I opened my eyes and looked at my daddy. His eyes were as bloodshot as Gretchen's had been earlier that day, his breath thick with beer. He handed me a doll with a yellow dress, red yarn hair pulled back in a ponytail, and a little blue star at the top of her right cheek. He left my room and I held her to my face, smelling the newness mixed with smoke and alcohol.



ALEX STOLIS  
*POSTCARD FROM THE KNIFE THROWER*  
*APRIL 28 MONTEREY, CA*

Before we were taken up by a whirlwind, before  
we brought fire down from the sky, every day was  
an incantation. Now, we're all sharp-eyed, and clear  
over the edge. The bleeding's stopped and we're left  
with visions. We are stray dogs. Dust-bowled, empty.  
We're the incorruptibles, we preach to the dead, call  
it prayer.



STEVE KLEPETAR  
*HARD TO KNOW*

It gets harder to know where to leave my eyes  
in this house that never changes

where sky hangs in the windows and across the road  
neighbors have built a fire made of ice and mist

or so it seems when I hang my head in the air  
and watch naked oaks with their sullen

branches snapping in the wind while dark birds  
settle on the deck rails and leave black markings

of their wings, a trail of gashes in the body of the day.



## *WEIGHT OF SKULLS OR STONES*

Around the house a circle of skulls,  
or maybe just stones bleached white

in the sun. Hard to tell if those are  
mouths or shadows, or what wave

has flung them to rest among weeds.  
Iris mass and push by a red fence,

blue and yellow tongues panting after  
light. At night their silence feels

smooth as skulls or stones or spring  
breeze among oaks. A house settles

on a high bank above a river made  
of fog. In the window, tongues of flame.

Silence has the weight of stones and skulls,  
a measure of shadows among clotted roots.



MIKE MCCLELLAND  
*OLIVE URCHIN*

-1-

Detailing the arrival of Olive Urchin

At the tippity-top of Hong Kong island, above the treeline of wealth that prevents the common folk from setting down roots in its soil, there is one thing that all homes large and small contain: a maid; and one such maid will be the focus of this tale that I have long wanted to tell.

Olive came to live with my family on my tenth birthday. I am embarrassed to admit that, in many ways, I thought of her as my birthday present. My parents had fired our previous maid Ginger just a week before. Ginger had been with us for nearly the entire time we had lived in Hong Kong, almost two years, and I missed her terribly. Following my mother around to all of her appointments, massages, and teas was exhausting.

The day before my birthday, I overheard my mother on the phone. It was impossible not to overhear phone conversations in our apartment. Though we lived in the Mid-Levels, which was “almost the best part of Hong Kong,” according to my mother, our apartment on Conduit Road was about a fourth of the size of the house we’d had in Boston. I could tell my mother was talking about a maid because she and her friends didn’t use names when she talked about Ginger or other people’s maids. Only pronouns.

“Okay, but is she Malaysian? I just can’t handle Malaysians. They can’t take directions. So disrespectful.” Ginger had been from Kuala Lumpur.

“Oh. Vietnamese? You know, I just don’t know. My father served in Vietnam. You know what they did to Americans there, don’t you? Those people just don’t value life the same way we do.”

“Oh, she’s that young? Her parents weren’t even in the war? How old is she?”

“Yes, I’ve seen her picture. She’s light-skinned for a maid, which is good. Oh, that’s why you called her Olive? Because of her olive skin? I’m not sure I’d call it olive, but I see what you’re doing there. I was so sick of people staring at Ginger with my kids, like I’d let some street person kidnap them. And she’s not too pretty, which is good. Ha!”

My mother’s laugh was more of a squawk than a laugh. It served as punctuation. She never laughed in the middle of a sentence, only to end it.

“Okay, well, you owe us after how Ginger worked out.”

“Five thousand a month? That’s five hundred US. Does everyone pay that much?”

“Okay, fine. We’ll do forty-five hundred. That’s my limit. You know, we’re giving her a roof over her head, too. Free rent. You know?”

“Okay, bring her by tomorrow. Dicky will be distracted by the party and Barney’s going to drop the girls off at the Corneys’ house for the day.”

“Why are you telling me that? I know about Sundays off.”



“Ginger said that? Ginger is a lying thief and that’s why she’s back in Malaysia. I always gave her Sundays off. You ask these people to do one little thing. You know how it is.”

My mother hung up, and I heard her in the kitchen, fiddling with the dishwasher. A few turns and cranks and then the click-clack of heels across the tiled floor after she gave up.

A new maid. I was so excited. A new friend. She would take me to school, watch me during the day, make my meals, and take me to my friends’ houses, if I had made any friends. I’d spent all of my time with Ginger. She and I would walk the dog together every evening. Actually, we’d walk the quarter mile up the road to the walking path that led to the top of Victoria Peak and sit on a bench. Ginger would send text messages and I’d play on my Nintendo DS while our Samoyed, Fledermaus, sniffed around the ferns.

I woke up late the morning of my birthday. It was July and school was out for the summer. It was cold, our apartment at its usual sixty-eight degrees, despite the temperature outside approaching a hundred. In our time in Hong Kong, I had discovered it to be the coldest city I had ever visited. It’s natural temperatures soared high, but every home, shop, school, and taxi, and subway had its air conditioning set to frigid temperatures. Boston, in my memory, was like the center of some nostalgic sun.

I wandered towards the kitchen, hoping to get to the living room unnoticed, where I could turn on my Playstation 2 and get my headphones on before my mother noticed. I rounded the corner into the kitchen and found my mother dramatically turning the knobs of the coffee maker, demonstrating for the girl standing next to her.

“Dicky! Happy birthday, my love!” my mother squealed when she saw me, and click-clacked across the kitchen to wrap me in her arms. She smelled like her dress-up perfume, and the fabric of her glittery top scraped against my cheek as she hugged me.

She gestured to the girl, who reminded me more of the older boys at my school than of a girl. She was tall for an Asian girl. She was wearing brand new sneakers, which made her a little taller, but not nearly as much as my mother’s heels made her. Her face was handsome, plain, and angled like a tortured video game hero’s. Her hair was cut short, curling around her ears, each of which had a greenish stone poking out of the lobe. She was wearing a short-sleeved, blue button-down shirt that fit her well across her broad shoulders but at the chest and waist looked about three times too big. It had a patch on it that said “Mrs. Mann’s Maids” in fancy cursive. Her arm muscles were taut and round, and I wondered if she played sports at school. Her black skirt was also too big, held on by a thin gold belt that she kept adjusting, like something itchy on a Halloween costume.

Her presence made my mother, with her big lips and big boobs and perfect makeup, look even prettier. “Darling, this is our new domestic helper, Olive. Say hello to Olive.”

“Is Olive your real name?” I asked her. Ginger’s real name had been Batryisia, and my mother had yelled at her for telling me. I figured I would get it out of the way early this time.

My mother’s eyes and lips opened in her fake surprised look, all perfect “O” shapes.



“Dicky, that is very rude. Olive is the name she has chosen to use here and we will respect her decision.”

“Ginger said you made her use a different name,” I pointed out.

“Richard, that is enough! It is easier for them if we let them choose a new name for the themselves.”

She turned away from me then.

“Olive, you’ll need to take Fledermaus for three walks a day. Take Dicky with you if he’s around. He needs the exercise.” She tossed a look back in my direction, challenging me to talk back. “There are poo bags in the front closet. You’ll also need to take a water bottle with you to clean the sidewalk off with if he piddles.”

She continued showing Olive things in the kitchen. I grabbed a Pop-Tart, and set myself up on the couch, ready for day of video games. I was going to put my headphones on, but I found myself curious as to what my mother would say to Olive and eager to hear if Olive would say anything in return. There was something exciting about Olive. She was like a mixture between a boy and a girl. And her face was completely blank. Everyone my mother knew had huge reactions to everything. They said “Oh my God” to everything my mother said. And my father was always either laughing or pretending to listen while doing something else. Olive’s face was present and emotionless.

Eventually my mother led Olive through the living room, continuing her list of instructions and explanations. “My husband, Barney - call him Mr. Bumble - often works late, so you’ll have to cook meals that can be easily reheated. And I work from home. I design handbags - so you can reach me in the case of an emergency, but I don’t like to be disturbed during office hours.”

I rarely saw my mother in her office, what could have been the largest bedroom in the house but instead held her “mood boards” and the two handbags that she had made and not thrown into the trash somewhere in the process.

“And this,” my mother told the still-blank-faced Olive while opening a door on the other side of the living room, “is your room.”

Olive’s room was also the laundry room, and had a single bed, a miniature refrigerator, and a nightstand in addition to the washer and dryer and ironing board that folded out from the wall. It had white tile floors and one small, circular window that faced the side of the building next door. It was the smallest room in the apartment, the next smallest being the guest bathroom.

After they’d done the rounds, my mother returned the living room with Olive in tow, and sighed heavily, like she’d just finished a particularly difficult task. “Okay Olive, that’s all for now. I’ve left a list of important rules, numbers, recipes, and things like that in your nightstand, so have a look at that. You’ll need to clean things up before Dicky’s party this evening, which starts at six, and make sure he’s showered and dressed in the outfit I left on his bed. I’ve got to get to my massage, so if you try to call and I don’t pick up, you’ll know why. The girls are at the Corneys’ house. They have your cell number so make sure you have it on you. You can meet the girls tomorrow and we’ll go over their schedule and changing



times, etcetera etcetera. Do you even know etcetera? Listen to me! Ha!” My mother turned to me.

“Dicky, am I forgetting anything for Olive, sweetie?”

I shrugged and tried to focus on my game, but I was enthralled by Olive’s silence, which was obviously unnerving my mother.

“Oh! Yes, I left a box of hand-me-downs under your bed. Some old things of Ginger’s, and some of Dicky’s, which should fit you. He’s grown out of a lot of things lately. Ha!”

Then she was gone and I was alone with this new, silent person.

Olive looked around for a moment, sighed deeply, and sat down next to me on the couch. She laid back and rubbed her eyes with the meaty parts of her palms, which made her arm muscles look even bigger than they had before. Her legs were spread wide, like a boy would sit, and she seemed loose and limber where she had seemed taut and rigid just moments before.

She looked at the television and then at me. “What are you playing?”

“Final Fantasy 12,” I told her, knowing she wouldn’t know what I was talking about.

“Really? The last one I played was ten. Well, ten-two, actually. Which was weird, wasn’t it? Why wasn’t that eleven?”

“You play video games? How?” I didn’t mean to say how, it just came out.

“You mean, how could a poor maid afford to play a video game? Well, I wasn’t rich growing up, but I had four brothers and sisters, and a Playstation was a pretty good way to get one present that would make all five of us happy. And my dad knew a lot of rich people from the hotel he worked at, so, now that I think about it, he probably got it secondhand.”

“That is so cool. Do you want to take a turn?” I didn’t have any friends that played video games.

“I’ve got to do some sewing. So how about I sit here while I sew and watch you play. Then we can both decide what you’re doing to do. That way it’s like we’re both playing.”

This was awesome. I hadn’t had anybody to play video games with in years. My dad had played with me back when I first started, racing against me in Mario Kart and stealing the controller from me to “show me” how to beat the bosses in Chrono Cross. But, especially after we moved to Hong Kong, he had less and less time to play video games with me. He was always at the office, and, when he wasn’t, he was sitting in his chair, drinking wine and playing on his laptop.

“But, I’m going to need a favor, Dick. You’re going to have to show me the places your mom will look to see if I’ve cleaned.”

-2-

Olive masters the mundane

Olive quickly became a part of our daily lives. She took to her daily tasks quickly, and, by her third day, was accomplishing everything Ginger had and more. After a week, her



routine ran like clockwork. It would change slightly when school began again. I'd have to get to The American School in Happy Valley by eight and my sister, Essie, would have to get to nursery school by nine. Then she'd only have Sophie, my eight-month-old sister, to look after during the day. The streets of Central Hong Kong would also be busier. Many of the really rich people, the people who lived at the very top of Victoria Peak, left Hong Kong for July and August because it was too hot. They would go to France or London, or visit family. These were the same folks who spent December in Switzerland or Norway. These were the people my parents aspired to be.

Olive's current schedule, however, involved a lot of me. Ginger had pretended to like my company, but I could tell she was happier when I wasn't around. I'd sometimes come home from school and find her doing dishes or making dinner with her headphones on, dancing around the kitchen. She'd have her eyes closed and she'd move so freely, like a piece of pasta rolling around in the butter on the bottom of a dish. Then I'd say hi and she'd straighten up, take her headphones off, and put something that I liked on the radio. I'd tell her to listen to her music, that I didn't care what she played, and she'd say, "Oh I like this a lot. It's hip. This is what the kids are talking about in school, right?"

If Olive changed around me, however, it was for the better. When my mother was around, which was often, Olive would move through the apartment as silent as a cat. When it was just her and me, though, she was different. She'd pretend to struggle with her chores, lugging the vacuum cleaner around like it was a bag of rocks and wiping fake sweat from her forehead. She would watch me play video games and quiz me about what was happening. Once, early on in her time with us, she was in another room and yelled, "Are they talking? Tell me what they are saying!" I read the lines of dialogue to her. I was nervous. I was a good reader, really good for my age, but reading out-loud made me embarrassed.

"You're reading like a list of ingredients. Read the characters. I am here cleaning up your dirt. The least you can do is entertain me!"

My cheeks were bright red, but we were alone in the apartment. I spoke in the most raspy, evil voice I could come up with: "Give me the crystal! I will seal you away in the dark realms for eternity!"

"Oh, is that the bad guy? Very scary," Olive said as she dusted knick knacks and picture frames.

"I command you to stop. I am the queen of this land," I continued, now in my best princess voice.

"Oh, she sounds tough. Like me!"

From then on, I would narrate my video games to Olive when we were alone together. I found myself choosing to play games with more dialogue so that I could perform for her. She would always ask me questions about the characters, the worlds the games took place in, and the items I would use.

Olive would wake up every morning at 5:30 and prepare breakfast for everyone. One morning, I got up to go to the bathroom and saw her in the kitchen, a towel on her head,



mixing eggs in a bowl, setting bread on a plate in front of the toaster, stirring formula in bottles, and shoving them in the refrigerator.

My dad woke up every morning at six-thirty, his eyes puffy and red, and Olive would throw the eggs in the pan and toast the bread, and have him fed and out the door. Olive would never linger while my parents ate. While my dad wolfed down breakfast with CNN International blaring on the television, she'd take Fledermaus for his first walk of the day. When she returned, she'd wake Essie and Sophie and feed them. Essie always demanded that her orange juice be served in a champagne glass, and Olive would refer to her as "your highness" and then would read to her while she balanced Sophie on her hip.

After the girls ate, Olive would pick an activity for the girls — which usually meant keeping the baby on her hip and finding something for Essie to color — while she mixed a smoothie for my mother. She wouldn't dare wake my mother directly, but the blender was loud enough to do the job. My mother would shuffle in, grab her smoothie, and then shut herself in her office to "check emails" for a couple of hours, which I knew from spying meant either napping on the daybed or buying shoes on the internet.

When I'd wake up, Olive would make a show of how late it was, and then have me assist her in making whatever I wanted for breakfast. I think if I'd thrown a tantrum she would have immediately just made it for me by herself, but I liked being near her and I liked learning to do things in the kitchen. My parents had cooked when we'd lived back in Boston, and I had always loved watching my dad cut meat and make sauces and my mom chop vegetables and mix salads. They hadn't cooked since we'd moved to Hong Kong.

Then, while I ate, Olive would either sew or, if my mother was walking around, clean things in the kitchen. Olive had a cycled cleaning schedule, making sure that every inch of the apartment was scrubbed at least once a week, but she would always do the kitchen, my parents' bathroom, and all of the mirrors if she had free time because those were the places my mother would notice first.

Eventually, my mother would leave for an appointment, either for coffee with a friend or a massage or a visit to Harbour City or Pacific Place, her favorite malls. Sometimes she would take Essie along with her in a stroller, leaving Olive with me and the baby. On rare occasions, my mother would stay at the apartment, sitting in her office and cutting inspirational pictures from magazines or talking on the phone with the accountant. I always felt weird with my mother around. If she saw me playing a video game, she would tell me that I should be reading a book, which I preferred to do at night. Or she would ask me to help with her mood boards, ask me about tennis lessons, or ask me if I had heard anything from my friends about what their parents were up to.

On these days, Olive would ask me if I wanted to run errands with her. We'd take the Central Escalator down to the wet market on Graham Street, where Olive would pick still-living seafood out of small aquariums in front of open-air shops. When the fishmonger wasn't looking, she would tap the side of a container with her foot and wash the disturbed fish swim around. Then she'd choose the ones she wanted.

"How do you know which ones to pick?" I asked her once.



“You need to look in their eyes. If the eyes are clear, the fish is still alive, which means it will be freshest.”

She went silent for a moment, like she was debating whether to keep talking. Then she turned to me and said, “Plus, you should always look something in the eye before you hurt it.”

-3-

In which the rules of Hong Kong Sundays are established and promptly broken

Sundays were Olive’s day off. It was a rule in Hong Kong that all of the maids got the entirety of Sunday off. My mother, for some reason, rebelled against this idea. I think she knew she shouldn’t, but, like picking a scab, she couldn’t help herself. She had argued with Ginger about it on more than one occasion. I had thought that she’d be better with Olive, particularly as Olive did twice as much work during the week as Ginger had ever done. At first, she had let Olive have her day. Olive would dress in her clothes from home, beautifully sewn tunics and light pants, grab her phone and her book bag, and get on the escalator down the hill. I had seen what the maids did on Sunday. It was amazing. They covered every inch of public space in Hong Kong with sheets of cardboard and then sat on them. Some would fold the edges up, and the maids would look like butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers bobbing on the cement sea of Hong Kong. They’d gather in groups, some as small as three and some as large as thirty and play cards, eat, nap, braid each other’s hair, and all sorts of other things on their little cardboard picnic blankets. Olive told me that some girls got up as early as three in the morning in order to get the best space for their friends.

The Hong Kong government had a special rule that applied to the construction of buildings. Depending on the amount of space the building took up, the owners of the building had to offer a corresponding amount of public space as a form of payment to the city. So, in addition to the sidewalks, bridges, parks, and walkways, you would find groups of maids on the roofs of skyscrapers, in the lobbies of malls, and even on the little platforms between sections of the Central escalator.

They did this in every inch of Hong Kong, from Hong Kong Island to Kowloon to Lantau to Lamma. Apparently, they even did it in the New Territories, a massive spread of land on the mainland side of Hong Kong beyond Kowloon and, according to my mother, beyond civilization.

Eventually, Olive made friends with other maids, particularly with a few Vietnamese girls, most of whom worked further down the island from us. Her closest friend, Diamond, the only one who also worked on Conduit Road, would often walk back with her late on Sundays. I would watch out the window for Olive, eager to catch a glimpse of her under the streetlights. She and Diamond would walk up the hill, cheeks red from the sun (“and cheap beer” my mother said once), arm in arm, swaying and smiling. I was so jealous.

After a time, my mother began to infiltrate Olive’s Sundays. At first, it was requests for little favors, asked in a baby voice late on Saturday night. “Olive, sweetie, would you



drop this package off at the Chesterton's on Hollywood Road on your way to play with your friends?" was the first request.

Eventually, she dropped some of the sweetness. "Olive, since Barney's out of town on business and I'll be watching all three kids tomorrow by myself, can you pick up these groceries on your way back home tomorrow?" She handed Olive a list.

Olive didn't complain, but we all knew that Olive had shopped ahead on Saturdays so that we would be set for Sunday, and that she didn't come back until around nine, hours after the grocery store closed on Sundays. I waited all day to see if Olive would finally rebel and stand up to my mother. Still, I was happy when she appeared at six on the nose with a few bags of groceries. She had chosen us.

Olive came into the apartment, blank-faced, and emptied the bags of groceries. She kept her shoes on, which I had never seen her do. My mother appeared and said, "Olive, thank goodness you're home. Can you please take those filthy shoes off? Essie wants me to play Barbies with her but Sophie's giving me so much trouble. Can you take them off of my hands for a little while? I have to get some work done. Today has been a complete write-off."

Olive never changed her expression. It was obvious that she had been planning on unpacking the groceries and heading back out. She went to the door, took off her shoes, neatly stacked them in their drawer, and returned to the kitchen. She took Sophie from my mother and continued to unpack groceries while balancing the baby on her hip.

Several weeks later, Olive was folding laundry on the couch next to me while I played a video game. Olive was asking me about Ivalice, which was the world where Final Fantasy 12 was set. My mother padded into the living room, her robe wafting around her in the air conditioning like a royal vestment. "Olive, I'll need you to take Dicky to his tennis match tomorrow morning before you go out and play."

Olive stiffened momentarily, then nodded and grabbed a pair of my mother's underwear from the ironing board, folded it into a tiny square, and placed it into the basket with the rest.

"Is that okay with you?" my mother asked, though I am sure she'd seen Olive nod.

"Yes, Mrs. Bumble," Olive said.

"Okay great. Barney and I have brunch with the Corneys tomorrow, and their nanny is going to watch Essie and Sophie. They have a maid and a nanny! Can you imagine the luxury? I would get so much more done. Dicky needs to be at his match at ten. You can just drop him off and Barney will come and get him after brunch."

The next morning, Olive had me up and dressed for my match by nine. She made me breakfast and then grabbed my tennis bag and marched me out the door. We walked up Conduit Road to Old Peak Road. Old Peak Road was insanely steep, and I got winded just walking up the small part of the road where Conduit met Old Peak and the LRC. The LRC was the Ladies Recreation Club, which was not just for ladies, despite its name, and, according to my mother, was the "most prestigious athletic club in Hong Kong." I was a part of a tennis club there, and, even though I sucked, my mother decided that it was a good



networking opportunity for her and my dad to meet other parents of kids my age. However, they had never been to a match.

“Olive, will you stay and watch me play?” I asked. I didn’t want her to go and play with Diamond. I didn’t want her to like Diamond better than me.

Olive smiled and said, “Of course I can.”

She followed me inside. A woman at the front desk caught up to us and whispered to Olive, “Miss, I’m afraid your attire does not meet the dress code. If you’d like, you can purchase something from the pro shop.”

This kind of phrase would have horrified my mother. I had seen it before, like when we’d arrived at a restaurant that required a reservation and did not have one. Olive just laughed.

“Can you tell me what part of my outfit is breaking the rules?”

The woman looked at Olive, in her peach tunic, calf-length pants, and sandals, as if she were insane.

“I am afraid that shorts and t-shirts are only permitted for those participating in sporting activities, and closed-toe shoes are a requirement for everyone, outside of the showers.

“It’s okay, Olive, you don’t have to watch me,” I told her.

Olive looked around, surely seeing all of the lighter skinned members breaking the rules.

She turned to me and said, “I’ll be right outside. I’ll meet you afterwards.”

“But don’t you want to go meet your friends?” I asked.

“I want you to go and have fun, and I’ll be here when you’re finished.”

She turned to the attendant. “Is it okay if I wait outside for him?”

I was down 3-0 by the time I heard her. Olive was standing on the top floor of the parking garage attached to the LRC, wedged in between a Jaguar and an Escalade, waving and cheering. “Hit to his right side! It goes into the net!” she yelled.

She must have meant his backhand. I wasn’t good enough to execute this plan very well, but I lost more respectably than usual, 6-4. I hit all of my serves to his backhand, which was, in fact, pretty bad. I found myself playing much better with Olive watching, running for balls I usually just let land. Olive cheered loudly, her accented English echoing through the court, and the parents of my opponent watched her from their seats with their mouths hanging open.

Afterwards, Olive walked me back home.

“You are very talented,” she said to me as we walked.

“I haven’t won a match yet.”

“You were close. If you keep exercising, you’ll get those extra balls and win. It’s like a video game. You use strategy and beat your opponent. You’re a natural.” She seemed exhilarated by the experience.

We got home around one in the afternoon. Olive didn’t leave to meet her friends. Instead, she sat next to me and sewed while I played video games. When my parents



returned home, my dad swayed back and forth as he told me how the measure of a brunch spot was the quality of their Bloody Marys, and that I should never forget that.

Olive walked into the kitchen, and I heard her greet my mother. My mother spoke to her in one of her loud whispers: “Olive, we received a call from the McCallisters. Dicky played their son in his match this morning. They said that you were acting in an entirely inappropriate fashion today. I am so embarrassed. I am shocked by your behavior.”

I was angry for Olive. I wanted to go and confront my mother. But I just sat there, raging. I expected Olive, as always, to give into my mother. To apologize. But this time she did not. I gasped when she said, “Today was my day off. I was not working for you there. So how I acted in my free time was not your concern.”

My mother didn’t speak for a moment, and I guessed that her face had gone red as it did when she was angry or embarrassed.

“Olive, you were representing this family in a negative way. You were setting a bad example for Dicky. That is unacceptable.”

“Mrs. Bumble, do you know what a bad example would be? Breaking the law. And, by asking me to work on Sunday, that is what you are doing.”

Even my father had perked up. He sat up in his chair, and looked towards the kitchen. I had expected him to rush to my mother’s defense, or at least look angry. Instead, he looked scared, like he was wondering if he could sneak away without being noticed.

“What is it that you want from me?” My mother’s voice was more of a yell now. “I feed you, I clothe you, I put a roof over your head. What do you want from me?”

From her volume and gasps for breath, it was evident that my mother was in full performance mode. I was sure she had her arm to her chest, grasping her heart as she did when she was at her most dramatic. It was also clear from her tone that her question was rhetorical, but Olive still chose to answer her.

“What do I want from you? More, ma’am. More time. The time I am owed.”

I could tell this hit a nerve. “More time. You want more time? In addition to free room and board, free clothes, and a salary? And you’re asking for more time?”

Olive’s voice was an ocean of calm in contrast to my mother’s gasps and wails.

“Yes. Please, ma’am, I want some more.”

-4-

An important segment on handbags, details of which the canny reader will remember

After that, there was a throat-tightening amount of tension in the room whenever my mother and Olive were both in it. Olive was given her Sundays off, but my mother made sure to complain about “the lazy maid” in every conversation on the phone. Olive acted as she always had, curious and inquisitive with me, Essie, and Sophie, and with a face of stone around my mother. One morning, my mother’s friend, Patrice, came to our apartment for coffee. Olive laid out a spread of coffee, tea, and pastries, and then disappeared into her



room to do laundry. Olive asked me to play with Essie and Sophie in their room. If my mom had asked me, I would have thrown a fit.

I could hear mom and Patrice in the kitchen, gossiping about their friends, complaining about how hot Hong Kong was in the summer and about all of the Asians in Central who had no sense of personal space. I asked Essie what she wanted to play with and she said “Barbies!”

I preferred Barbies to trucks, but I had outgrown both by that point. Still, I pulled Essie’s box of Barbies from the shelf. I set Sophie on my lap, where she belched and cooed, and began to take the Barbies out, one by one.

As we played, I heard Olive enter the kitchen and offer more coffee to Patrice and my mother.

“Patrice, I didn’t even tell you that Olive is from Vietnam. Weren’t you just there?”

“Yes, it was divine!” Patrice replied. Patrice always spoke to everyone as if she were speaking to them from across a crowded room.

“You know, what always strikes me about Vietnam is how French it is,” Patrice continued. “It’s like a little French oasis in Southeast Asia. So lovely and colonial. Don’t you think, Olive?”

I didn’t hear Olive say anything, but my mother said, “Patrice, I don’t think Olive is from that part of Vietnam.” They both laughed.

Then, and I had to ask her later what she had said, Olive said, “Oui il y a encore une grande influence française au Vietnam. Pour de bon ou de mauvais.”

This time my mother said nothing but, Patrice, delighted, exclaimed, “Olive! Vous parlez français?”

“Oui, madam. More coffee?” From Olive’s tone, I could tell that French lessons were over.

I continued to play with the girls, but kept an ear to the door. After more gossip, Patrice said to my mother, “Oh Stephanie! I almost forgot to tell you. I was talking to Arthur about your hobby and he said that his colleague Rose is creating a new handbag line, and she wants it to represent flavors from the various parts of Hong Kong. It would be for next year’s summer collection. And she doesn’t have anyone from our circle, if you will, so your chances will be that much better. Rose will be looking at portfolios next month. Just call this number and tell them Arthur referred you. That will get you an appointment, no questions asked.” I heard clinking and crunching as she searched around her handbag.

“Here’s Rose’s card.”

My mother must have been genuinely excited because she didn’t use the shrill fake-happy voice that she used when my sister showed her something she finger painted or my dad told her about a new account his agency had won. Instead, she sounded like a little girl, whispery and breathless. “Oh my goodness, Patrice. This means the world to me. Really. The world. I’ll call her tomorrow.”

It was moments like this that I wished I knew my mother better. I knew that she hadn’t been born rich, though she’d taken to it naturally. I knew that it had been her dream



since she was a little girl to be a designer. I knew that she had gone to school for design in New York and that she'd worked briefly as an art director at an advertising agency, where she'd met my father and they'd fallen in love and he had swept her off of her feet. They had married quickly, and, nine months later, I was born. Since then, she had been working from home on her business, drawing and sewing and collecting. When I was really little, I remember her doing it all the time. But, in Hong Kong, where she had more time, she did less.

"Well, it's just a referral, doll. And Lord knows you'll get no credit for it. But it's a foot in the door. Now, did you hear about the Wongs? Remember the wife, Kitty, the very-articulate Chinese lady? Yes, they were at the Schmidt's Memorial Day party. Yes, the one with the boxed wine. My God, did Lara really think we wouldn't notice if she put it in a punch bowl with some fruit slices? Well, the Wongs got their daughter a Hong Kong passport through a loophole, but Kitty only has a Chinese passport, and now..."

They continued to chat. Olive came in to check on us, balancing a basket of laundry on her hip and smiling. Essie and Sophie had both fallen asleep, Sophie in her crib and Essie in a pile on the floor. I was pretending the Barbies were warriors waging battle against an invading troll brigade. I asked Olive, "Would you ever think about making purses? You sew all the time. It sounds like that lady Patrice knows wants designers from every part of Hong Kong. You should go!"

To my surprise, Olive laughed.

"Can you see me showing up there at the same time as your mother? She would kill me. Or fire me. Probably kill me because then I'd be fired, too." I just stared at her. I'd never heard her say anything about my mother before. She usually avoided the subject.

I expected her to say, "let's just keep this between us," like Ginger would say when she said something bad about my parents. Instead, Olive straightened up and said, "I forgot myself for a moment. It's not my place to speak to you about your parents. My apologies."

"It's okay, Olive," I said.

"No, it's not, Dicky. That is not how this world works. You need to learn that."

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Olive, after being goaded by Mrs. Bumble, makes a choice

After the Sunday disaster, I think that we were all waiting for my mother to snap again. So, when she came home in a rage one Thursday night, it was almost a relief. I saw so much anger on her face as she came through the door that I thought Olive had done something truly terrible, impossible as it seemed.

"Olive? Olive, where the hell are you?"

Olive came out from the kitchen, actually looking surprised.

"Olive. Ashley McCallister told me that she has seen you just leave a puddle of Fledermaus's pee on the sidewalk right in front of their building."

"That's not true," Olive said.



“So now you’re calling my friend a liar?”

Olive kept her stance firm, but kept her eyes to the floor. I decided to try for distraction.

“Mom, Olive always uses the water bottle after Fledermaus pees. I go with her sometimes.”

My mother turned to me and got the look on her face that she used at school meetings, the fake smile and the squinted eyes. “Darling, she does it when you’re there because that’s how people act in front of the people they work for.”

I would be lying if I said that my ten-year-old self didn’t feel a surge of power being called someone’s boss, but I saw Olive swallow hard as my mother said it. At the time, I thought it was her pride. But I now feel like it was watching her hard work being stripped away. Olive had been raising me in the months she had been with us, and she was watching her work be undone.

“Olive, I’m sure your mother raised you in disgusting conditions and you don’t know any better, but this is too much.”

I figured that Olive would just let my mother rant for a while, but she spoke back.

“Don’t talk about my mother.”

I don’t know if it is a trick of memory, but I think my mother smiled, triumphant in finally finding something that could rattle Olive.

“Why? Why shouldn’t I? What kind of woman raises an entitled brat who doesn’t know how to clean up after herself?”

My mother was rambling, like she herself knew she was going too far but couldn’t stop herself.

Olive raised her eyes from the floor and stared right into my mother’s eyes. “Don’t you dare talk about my mother.”

As soon as the word “mother” passed Olive’s lips, my mother slapped her hard across the mouth.

It was shocking and made little sense. Olive was angry, but hadn’t been rude. I expected Olive to recoil. To put her hands up. To leave.

Instead, she slapped my mother back. It was quick and loud.

My mother’s reaction was so overblown that I looked around to make sure that she hadn’t fallen against something and been impaled. She screamed a blood-curling scream, right out of a horror movie, and then gasped, over and over, her lips puffing like one of the fish at the wet market.

She grabbed me and ran to the girls’ room, shutting us in with them. She pulled me close, hugging me like she hadn’t done since I was little, and pulled her cell phone out.

She called the police. I couldn’t believe my ears. We heard a rush of footsteps around the apartment and then the slamming of the front door. Then the apartment was silent until we heard sirens several minutes later.



Detailing Olive and Dick's correspondence

As it turns out, it was very easy to have a domestic worker's visa revoked, particularly one that was accused of a crime. Finding her, however, was a completely different matter. Olive had vanished. She took only her few meager belongings with her. I think my mother was disappointed that she hadn't stolen anything. She went through her jewelry five times just to be sure.

My mother was wrong, however. Olive had stolen something. A picture of me, Essie, and Sophie from the bookshelf in the living room. I noticed it was gone and my heart sang. I searched the house for a note, a secret message that she had left only for me, but found nothing.

Soon we had a new maid, Candy, who was from the Philippines and cost extra because no one else wanted to come live with us. Candy spoke mostly Spanish and loved to sneak me cookies when my mother wasn't looking. But I could not stop thinking about Olive. I knew she was in Hong Kong. I wrote her letters, telling her how Essie, Sophie, and I were doing, how we missed her, and how we were on her side in the whole slapping incident.

I decided to take action. I put the letters I had written to Olive in an envelope. I was about to seal it when inspiration struck, and I ran to my mother's office to retrieve one more item for the envelope. The card that my mother had received from Patrice, the one with the purse lady's number on it. I sealed it up and wrote "Olive" across the front. I volunteered to take Fledermaus for his walk while Candy made dinner. I walked him up Conduit Road, back and forth, until Diamond came out with her family's dog, a Shiba Inu named Puffin. She turned the other way when she saw me. I hustled to catch up with her, which was hard because both her and Puffin were in much better shape than Fledermaus and I.

Finally we caught them and Diamond said, "Please go away."

"No," I said. "I know Olive is still in Hong Kong. Can you give this to her?" I handed her the envelope. She just looked at it. "Olive is back in Vietnam. I don't know her address."

"Please give this to her. It's from me. It's important."

Diamond stared at me for a long time. She was shorter and wider than Olive, and wore much tighter clothing. Her face seemed to fall naturally into a suspicious expression. Finally, she said, "I'll throw this out for you." Then she took the envelope from me and walked away.

A week later, I convinced a very stressed Candy to let me walk Fledermaus by myself again. My mother had been in a daze since Olive had left, alternating between frantic sessions in her office preparing for her big presentation at Patrice's husband's company and stretching out on the daybed with a big glass of red wine, staring out of the window. When I asked her if it was okay if I walked Fledermaus by myself, she didn't answer, so I took it as a yes.



I waited outside of Diamond's house until she and Puffin arrived. She said nothing, but walked a long distance down Conduit Road until it turned back on itself and became the pedestrian-only Peak Trail. She and Puffin looked fresh as daisies, but Fledermaus and I were on the verge of death, panting and sweating.

"Olive sent this from Vietnam. Read it then give it back to me."

She handed over a letter.

*Dear Dick,*

*I wrote you a whole letter saying that I was back in Vietnam. But I threw it away because I don't want to lie to you. I am still in Hong Kong, living deep in the city on Kowloon side. You know how crowded we thought it was on Hong Kong island? Well, Mong Kok, where I live now, makes the island seem abandoned by comparison! One of the other girls, Jackie, told me that there are 350,000 people per square mile in Mong Kok, the densest it in the world. It pulses with people, making it seem even hotter than it already is. And the air is bad here. I wear a scarf over my mouth while I work, and when I go to bed at night it is black with soot.*

*You know, it reminds me very much of the Rabanastre city in your Final Fantasy game, full of high buildings and dark alleys, small shops and interesting characters. How is that going? Please write to tell me what has happened.*

*It's funny how you asked me once if I would make purses. Now I sew knock-off purses all day long. I work for a woman, Fa Gin, who runs many shops in the Ladies' Market on Tung Choi Street. She calls all of the girls who work for her, most of them former domestic helpers like myself, "her little urchins." She takes more than her share from the purses we sell, but no one here can sew like me, so I am able to negotiate with her. You must make sure that you hone your talents: your imagination, your storytelling, your kind spirit and listening ear. Someday you may have to depend on them.*

*Though most of my days are spent sewing morning into the night, on Sundays I get the day to myself, just like I did when I worked for your mother. Ha ha ha.*

*I avoid the parts of the city near the MTR stations because the police wait there and ask women like me for our papers. But I do explore. Most often, I walk through the Yuen Po Street Bird Market, where thousands upon thousands of beautiful birds sing to each other from the cages, strung together along the fronts of shops. They sit there and wait for tourists to come and buy them, to take them away to sit alone in their cold homes. But, when I walk down the street, I don't think about that. I listen to them sing to each other and watch them groom their beautiful feathers.*

*Thank you for the gift in your note, but I do not know if I can use it. Not because it is a risk, which it is, but because your mother gave me much more than she took away. That said, if I have lost so much of my honor already, what would the consequences be of losing more? That is not a good message for me to be sending to you, but I do not want to tell you anything but the truth. I hope that someday we see each other again, but you must not ever come here. Still, if we keep this a secret (and know that I am wrong to ask you to keep a secret from your parents), we can keep annoying Diamond by passing notes through her.*



*Sincerely,  
Olive, the Urchin*

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Whereupon Olive Urchin and Stephanie Bumble take divergent paths

A few days later, my mother came into the apartment looking sadder than I had ever seen her. When Candy saw her, she muttered something about having to fold laundry and disappeared into her room, Sophie on her hip. My father was working late, and I was watching Essie color while I drew pictures of my favorite video game characters for a comic I was working on.

It was disturbing to see her look so sad. Though my mother was expressive, she rarely showed any real emotion. She walked to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of white wine from inside. It was three-fourths full, and she poured its entirety into a big glass. Then she went into her office and shut the door.

I thought that maybe I should go comfort her, and ask her what was wrong. But I didn't.

When my father came home, he didn't even say hello. He went straight to my mother's office and shut the door.

Through the door, I heard her wail and scream and weep. Eventually, she managed to tell my father what had happened. She had gone to Patrice's husband's office, and the woman who she had been supposed to show her purses to, Rose Nguyen, had declined to even look at her handbags.

She told my father how stupid she was, how she couldn't believe that she had let herself get her hopes up. Of course this was another disappointment, like everything else in her life, she said.

Months passed, and my mother sank into a deep depression. Then, one Sunday, I came out to the kitchen to find my mother clutching *The South China Morning Post*, her knuckles white. I had just settled into my seat at the breakfast table, waiting for Candy to give me something to eat, when my mother threw the paper down on the table and then picked up her coffee cup and hurled it at the wall. Her face was a mask of rage, but I was more used to her angry face than her sad one so it was slightly preferable.

She stalked out of the room, and I grabbed the paper from the table. It was open to the style section, and there, staring up at me from the page, was Olive. She was working hard at a sewing machine, a fresh tattoo of a songbird on a tree branch stretched across her bicep. Behind her stood a striking Asian woman in a red business suit, looking on with a smile. Above the picture was the title "Real Life Cinderella" and below was a story.

When I read it, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"It's just the best story," Nguyen said. "She just showed up out of the blue, with the most beautiful samples. I asked her where she was from, and she said that she knew I was looking to capture all of Hong Kong with my new collection, so why not show the maids?"



Can you believe it? We all have one or two in our homes but it never even crossed my mind. Brilliant, isn't it?"

Nguyen adjusts her pearl necklace before continuing. "I wanted to hire her on the spot. But then came the question of her visa. You see, her last job had gone south fast. She worked for some demon. We all know how it goes. And — this is what is going to make the headlines — we discovered that she is my niece! Can you believe it? We just took a few visits down to the immigration building, and I called my good friend Jiang Shan, who works on the Legislative Council, and her paperwork was all sorted out!"

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And Last

The fortunes of those who have figured in this tale are nearly closed. What little remains for me, their historian, to relate, can be told in few a simple words.

It has been nine years. Olive, as I am sure you know, is the owner and chief designer of one of Asia's most famous fashion companies, Olive Urchin. Her company is known for its fair pay and hours, and particularly for its ban on any Sunday work communication.

Olive and I have remained great friends over the years, and she told me the real story of how she got her lucky break. Rose Nguyen, born Nguyen Chi Long, was not really Olive's aunt, of course. But when a dirty, underfed Olive came into Rose's company's head office, the girl at the desk asking where her mistress was, Rose, by some twist of fate, had left her office door ajar and had heard the Vietnamese accent in her response (which had been, "where's yours?").

Rose took one look at the purses Olive had brought along and offered her a job on the spot. Olive, to her credit, then burst forth with the story of her situation, that her and her siblings had been orphaned and she'd come to Hong Kong as a maid but had committed a terrible crime. Rose, who had wanted to slap more than one Mid-Levels Hong Konger, asked about Olive's mother.

"She was quiet. She loved for us all to take a bus down to the markets floating in the Mekong, where she'd grown up, and we'd drink water with sugar cane and peanuts and ride bicycles around the dirt roads. She cooked pho bo at least three times a week. She loved the noise of Saigon. She always told us that we could have the entire world if we worked hard. She worked every day of her life, and she taught all five us a skill that we would be able to use to feed ourselves."

At this, Rose smiled, and said, "Olive, it is obvious to me from what you say that your mother and I were sisters. Both from Vietnam. Which makes you my niece. Which means it is my duty to have you with me in Hong Kong as family."

This sounds rare, but when anyone has a lot of money anywhere, and Rose Nguyen had a lot of money, even by Hong Kong standards, it is pretty easy to convince the government to give you what you want, particularly Hong Kong's government. Soon, Olive had her own apartment in Wan Chi, and, soon after that, her brother and sisters had come to



live with her. After a few short years, Rose invested in Olive's own venture, Olive Urchin, and the world knows them as one of Hong Kong fashion's first families.

This is Olive's story, not my family's, but I will say that my mother and father both stayed true to character. After reading about Olive, my mother did all that she could to have her arrested, fired, deported, and shamed. My father stayed out of her way, glass of wine in one hand and laptop in the other. After a while, when it became clear that Rose Nguyen's money and word went further than my mother's money and word, my mother gave up, but gossiped horribly about them for some time until she found herself invited to less and less functions.

My mother went the way of her friends after that, choosing her opinions strategically and spending her days attending brunches and charity events, though she was more busy with childcare and housework than most of her peers. You see, though the labor may be cheap, the maids of Hong Kong are close-knit and loyal, and my mother was never able to find another one once Candy quit after following a wild goose chase of Sunday errands.

I don't know my mother well. I never have. She is utterly foreign to me. But she is not foreign to Hong Kong. She is a part of the world at the tippity-top of Hong Kong island, above the treeline of wealth that prevents the common folk from setting down roots in its soil. Where all homes, large and small, are cages. Cages for the most beautiful birds you will ever see, locked away with no one but each other to listen to their songs.



CHEYENNE TAYLOR  
*THE SMOPHORIA*

The room too cold, the sun still shuttered up,  
a fern curls back into a Coke-brown crozier  
and sloughs its dozing cells into the carpet.  
She doesn't care, her house dress thin as autumn's  
slow, distant thrills that peak when summer stops  
ivy-ing up the walls, explodes in seeds  
of parakeet green, and waits for harvesting.  
The eggshell wit of evening's matte light flattens  
against her cheek. This year she doesn't have  
her daughter, zephyr in her campus colors,  
hammocking on the green with long-haired girls:  
her new, and only, sisters. Home is hollow  
as a phone receiver, no vibrations humming  
from jaw to ear, just tinny distance. She buffs  
her feet, alone, and lets the room go dark,  
rubbing until the pomegranate flesh  
blooms from her piebald heels, until she molts  
enough to brush her dead dust to the floor.



## CONTRIBUTORS

JOE CARRIERE earned his B.A. in English from Xavier University in 2012. He currently lives and teaches literature and writing on the Navajo Nation, where he also enjoys hiking canyons, parks, and more-hidden paths, or even just walking past the Denny's up the road.

TONYA EBERHARD recently graduated from the University of Missouri. She currently lives in Minnesota. Her work has appeared in *Fauna Quarterly*, *The Commonline Journal*, *The Gambler Mag*, *Creative Talents Unleashed*, *Algebra of Owls*, *Dirty Chai*, and many others.

NANCY K. JENTSCH has taught German and Spanish at Northern Kentucky University for over 30 years. She has published numerous scholarly articles and her short fiction and poetry have appeared in journals such as *The Journal of Kentucky Studies*, *the Aureorean*, *Postcard Poems and Prose*, *\*82 Review* and *Masque & Spectacle*.

JONATHAN JONES qualified in 1999 with his M.A. in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University College and in 2004 with an MRes in Humanities from Keele University. He now teaches writing composition at John Cabot University in Rome.

AMY KITCHELL-LEIGHTY holds her MFA from Bennington College. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Main Street Rag*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Unrorean*, *Salamander*, *Coachella Review* and many others. Her poetry manuscript, *Ghost Babies*, is awaiting results for publication. In addition to poetry, she writes fiction and non-fiction; she is working on her first true crime about an unsolved murder that took place in 1972.

STEVE KLEPETAR's work has appeared widely. His poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Recent collections include *My Son Writes a Report on the Warsaw Ghetto* and *The Li Bo Poems*, both from Flutter Press, and *Family Reunion*, forthcoming from Big Table Publishing.

Writing and photography take up far too much of JAYNE MAREK's time, but she's not likely to stop. Her poetry and art photos have appeared in publications such as *Flying Island*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Spillway*, *Gyroscope*, *Panoply*, *Camas*, *New Mexico Review*, *Blast Furnace*, *Gravel*, *Lantern Journal*, *Siren*, and *Windless Orchard* and in anthologies. She is author of a chapbook *Imposition of Form on the Natural World* (Finishing Line Press, 2013), co-author of *Company of Women: New and Selected Poems* (Chatter House, 2013), and a full-length book due out in December 2016. Her work has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She recently watched an eagle steal a fish from an otter.

Before becoming a writer, MIKE MCCLELLAND worked as a grave digger, wedding singer, antique salesman, and marketing strategist. He has lived on five different continents but now resides in Georgia with his husband and a menagerie of rescue dogs. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in several anthologies and a number of journals, including *Queen*



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AE REIFF works in glass, ceramics, concrete when he is not writing fictions of the new world. These are indexed at the site Encouragements For Planting, during business hours.

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ALEX STOLIS lives in Minneapolis; he has had poems published in numerous journals. Recent chapbooks include *Justice for all*, published by Conversation Paperpress (UK) based on the last words of Texas Death Row inmates. Also, *Without Dorothy, There is No Going Home* from ELJ Publications. His full length collection *Postcards from the Knife Thrower* is a finalist for the Moon City Poetry Award. He has been the recipient of five Pushcart Nominations.

CHEYENNE TAYLOR is a recent graduate of the master's program in English and Creative Writing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. As a student of formal poetry, she attended the West Chester Poetry Conference on scholarship in June 2016. Her work has appeared in *Southern Women's Review*, *Dirty Chai Magazine*, and *Fourteen76*.

