

# E C H O

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*A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE NONFICTION*



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# ECHO

JOURNAL OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

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# Echo

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## **About Echo:**

A heart echo test, or echocardiography exam, is a painless test that examines the structure and function of the heart, according to the National Institute of Health. This test may involve the injection of saline or a specific dye into the patient's veins to showcase the heart.

We choose the name "Echo" because we expect the work to come from the heart. We want to publish the greatest creative nonfiction that we can find in our quarterly issues.

We are accepting creative nonfiction all year around, and would love to read the work that you have for us.





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# LETTER FROM *the intern*

Dear Reader,

I am writing on behalf of The Paragon Journal, an online literary magazine dedicated to showcasing the works of both new and established authors. We are currently seeking submissions for our first chapbook contest.. All are welcome to submit, with a small entry fee of only \$20. The prize for this contest will be publication and \$100.

The Paragon Journal is looking for chapbook manuscripts that push boundaries. Entries should contain roughly 15 to 30 poems of varying lengths, the theme of which will be up to the contest entrant. Initial judgment will be overseen by our staff, while the top 5 chapbooks will be judged by poets Gabe Kahan and Marissa Higgins. Entries will be accepted until June 30<sup>th</sup> of this year.

If you know of anyone who might be interested in this opportunity, please tell them to contact [ashay@theparagonjournal.com](mailto:ashay@theparagonjournal.com) with any questions. You may also direct them to The Paragon Journal's website, [theparagonjournal.com](http://theparagonjournal.com) for more information.

Thank you very much in advance.

Sam Bixler  
Intern  
The Paragon Journal



# ČAROVNICA

WRITTEN  
BY **SARA RAZTRESEN**

This coffee tastes a bit like dirt.

It's the coffee I had each morning while vacationing in my mother's home country, Slovenia—a hearty kava, more like an espresso. It's supposed to be served in a small coffee cup, but America is not home to little fair folk that use tiny spoons and dishes, like Slovenia is. “Supersize me,” and all that. I boiled a large heap of this coffee and am now drinking it out of a nice big mug.

There's a process to making this drink. You have to boil the water first, then dump the coffee and sugar in there and boil it for just another few seconds before you pour it—grounds and all—into your cup. Add your milk, give it a final stir, and let it sit for a minute. Then drink up.

My mom stops by the kitchen table. She takes a sip and cocks her head. “It's just not the same,” she says with a sigh. “The water and the milk are too different here.”

It does taste a little weird from how I remember it, but it's not too bad. The dirt taste translates to a bold yet cozy earthiness. Either way, I'm more interested in what I can do when I'm done drinking. According to my mom, the old ladies in Slovenia drink this kind of coffee and discern the future through the rings and lines that the grounds leave behind.

I'm more of a tarot gal myself, but I'll take a shot at this grounds-reading.



My personal altar is both a space for devotion, and an aesthetically pleasing way of keeping track of most of my tools. Three of my four incense burners sit on it, though the fourth, a potpourri burner I got during our brief visit to Austria, sits on my vanity. There are also candles big and small, a box of gemstones, wands, animal figurines, pentagrams, angels, rosaries, a bottle of holy water, a holy water basin on the wall, and a picture of Jesus.

For six years now, I have considered myself a Christian witch, specifically a witch that deals in herbs, stones, candles, and incense (earth and fire). Magic, and the fact that it was even real beyond the fantasy books I read, were things I discovered through Wicca at age eleven, but I didn't like the religion's gods, nor did I like their rites, or the whole Skyclad business. It felt off to me. I had been raised very Catholic, and I didn't want to abandon my God for some 2000-era website's explanation of the “Green Man” and “Triple Goddess.”

And it didn't sit right with me that magic would be against God, anyway. It made my stomach twist to even try to understand how a spell to heal someone would be a sin, and so I scoured the books and websites for at least some kind of clarification on the whole situation. Lo and behold, what I knew about the Bible from this measly, endlessly manhandled English translation was hideously far from what was originally written there. In fact, the ancient Israelites and early Christians really made no distinction between religion, medicine, and magic until it was necessary to win points over different sects by accusing them of bad magic. And as far as the neighboring pagans were concerned, Christians were just bums doing parlor tricks on the side of the road, anyway.

Magic has always been a part of the Abrahamic traditions, tightly interwoven with everyday life (and, in fact, a common tool of the lower class). Instances where the word “witch” is mentioned, such as Exodus 22:17, are actually references to specific types of sorcerer—Exodus mentioning one of Sumerian origin, “a type of sor-

cerer who brought misfortune in its many forms and was therefore ‘condemned by the government,’” but not all magical practitioners in general. There’s also a common factoid that floats around my Christian witch circles: King James was a scaredy cat afraid of witches and went switching all the words meaning “poisoner,” “deceiver,” etc. to “witch” so that he could justify hunting those he thought were potentially using magic against him.

When I encounter those people that think the Holy Book could never be tampered with, that no one in the Church ever had a more insidious agenda, I laugh, and laugh, and laugh...



Mom suggested that next time, I make this coffee without milk if I want stronger rings, but in truth, I have no idea what I’m doing. I can’t even read tea leaves, so I’m not sure why I thought coffee grounds would be any easier. Hell, I still use the little book that came with my tarot cards, though I’m very tempted to bust those out because it’d be easier to try and read my cards than this nonsense. I mean, is this really divination, or just an elaborate Rorschach test?

I’m also not sure if me sloshing the grounds around and hoping they make something recognizable counts as cheating, but I’m doing it. It’s Saturday, at nine in the morning, and I’m sitting in my jammies reading coffee grounds. I twist the cup some more.

Hey God, I start as I stare at the brown sludge, can you throw me a bone here? Am I just stupid? Are you trying to tell me something? What am I doing?

A smirch of grounds stick to the cup in a hill shape as I tilt it towards me. I also manage to get one thin line of grounds up beside it, and I take a closer look at the little image I’ve half-accidentally made. It looks like a hill with smoke rising from the base, and my imagination starts chugging along. Maybe someone lives on that hill. Maybe they’re having a nice fire.



Looming over a little rural Slovenian town, Cerknica, is a hill. This hill is called Slivnica. On Slivnica, there are apparently witches that have been meeting and living there for centuries—bad witches. In their little cave, they brew all kinds of nasty curses and misfortunes to dish out to the poor people in town, and their evil magic was the cause of all the fog around the hill. These people, scared of the witches, tried to plug up the entrance to that cave with a boulder, which ended up rolling back down the hill and “almost crushing a home.”

I don’t think the people of Cerknica tried that again.

Unfortunately, while I have called myself a witch for six years, the word “witch” has meant something awful to European Christians for hundreds. If you poke your nose around those small-town areas in Slovenia, you’ll find that these people still consider “witch” to mean an evil person “who does harm by using supernatural forces” (which might explain why my cousin Tjaša was so hesitant to outright call herself a witch, despite her magical tendencies). Allegedly, all witches in the traditional sense are out to hurt people. It’s obviously a convenient way to explain bad luck: you must have been cursed by a witch!

But traditional magical practice is a part of the everyday Slovenian life, too; they just don’t call the “good” practitioners witches. Semantics, really. But there was once even a whole group of people called “unwitchers” dedicated to removing curses from the evil magicians. Typically, though, magical practitioners both old and new find themselves among the Christian cunningfolk, calling themselves “healers” and working with things like herbs, rocks, bells, holy water, and special incantations. There’s even a special spell book that some magicians use: the Kolomonov Žegen. Some believe these powers can be inherited down a line of powerful and knowledgeable people, too.

I like the idea that magical aptitude can be passed down, especially considering my great grandmother, Kristina Raztresen, was apparently very good with herbs. Rather than go to the local doctor, her neighbors would come to her for help when they were sick or injured. She died in her thirties of some mysterious illness. The family has a rumor that she was poisoned by her doctor: some believe it was because he was jealous of her skill, others because he thought she was a witch.

And if medicine is magic is miracle, then who's to say, really?

◆

I tilt the cup, and I study the white space the grounds leave behind in the middle.

What I get is a picture that very clearly looks like a dragon's head in the center, with people surrounding it, holding fire in their hands. My mind drifts to the old folktales of the Ljubljana dragon, of Jason and the Argonauts, or St. George, who apparently killed it with a spear—symbolizing the death of whatever old Slavic paganism was left around the area.

St. George's legend follows a typical tale; he was a Catholic martyr, beheaded by the Roman emperor Diocletian, who first offered him much wealth to convert to Roman paganism, and then turned to torturing the Saint, whose miracle magic was healing completely from his wounds each day through prayer. In death, he performed more magic from heaven. His feast day, April 23rd, is his death day, and there are countless legends of him killing dragons from various cultures.

Honestly, Catholicism, with all these Saints and angels, with their big incense thuribles and robes, their various styles of chants, their statues and candles and holy water, it is a gateway to all things magical—it is ceremonial magic. That thing the priest does to make the Eucharist? Transmutation. Those candles you stop to pray at on the way out (and have to pay twenty-five cents for)? Candle magic. And to sit in on a Catholic Mass is to partake in something almost haunting, with the way everyone hums together, sings together.

Slovenia is full of all things Catholic. I remember, in the famous church in Brezje, a small display case of a certain Pope's rosary, surrounded by all kinds of gemstones, and I was excited to see them, as a witch who works with similar colorful rocks. And at a different, smaller church in Piran, the church of St. Francis of Assisi, I remember a holy water basin made of a large seashell, and thought of the sea witches. I remember puzzling over churches built into mountainsides, over the need for more than three churches in one small town. I remember the countless street shrines to Saints, to Mary, whose altars were covered with flowers and candles. I remember looking up at a mountain and seeing a space carved out to hang a crucifix.

But as much as I love me a good aesthetic, there's a place where the Catholic charm wears off. In Brezje, I sat in that elaborate church, full of gold and marble and beautiful paintings, countless renditions of the Maria Pomagaj ("Mary, Help Us"), and an atmosphere so immaculate that I hardly dared to breathe.

I imagined Jesus in this church, looking around. I imagined He had no expression on His face—that He nodded, appreciating, if for nothing else, the amount of time and effort that went into creating it all.

I imagined Him saying, "This is nice. But how many people could you have fed with the money it took to build this?"

(And when I bought a few things for my altar from the little souvenir shack outside, I could practically hear that whip cracking.)

I've been staring at this dragon for a while now. My mom walks by, and I show her the cup. She peers inside, considering the image for a moment, as I haven't told her what I see yet.

“I see a roasted chicken,” she says.



#### (SOME) HERBS AND SPICES USED IN SLOVENIAN CUISINE

Dill: “The herb is protective when hung at the door and carried in protective sachets. Placed in the cradle it protects children... Dill, owing to the number of seeds the plant produces, is used in money spells.”

Coriander: “Coriander has long been used in love sachets and spells... The seeds are used for healing, especially easing headaches, and are worn for this purpose. If pregnant women eat coriander, their future children will be ingenious.”

Fennel: “Grown around the home, fennel confers protection. Wearing a piece of fennel in the left shoe will prevent wood ticks from biting your legs. Fennel is also hung up at windows and doors to ward off evil spirits, and the seeds can be carried for the same reason.”

Bay Leaf: “Bay is used in clairvoyance and wisdom brews, although its taste is strong. Bay leaves are placed beneath the pillow to cause prophetic dreams, and are also burned to cause visions.”

Peppermint: “Peppermint has long been used in healing potions and mixtures. [It] also has a long history in purification spells... It is rubbed against furniture, walls, and floorboards to cleanse them of evil and negativity.”

Basil: “Basil bring wealth to those who carry it in their pockets, and is used to attract customers to a place of business by placing some in the cash register or on the doorsill.”



I need a break from this junk. My little session isn't over yet, as I'm not ready to call it quits, but it's been a half an hour now. I just want to use my cards.

“Mom,” I groan as I push the cup away, “tell me some witchy stuff about your family. Didn't you guys do anything with herbs or whatever?”

My mother, a woman who unknowingly bought wall hangings of the Green Man and Dionysus because they “look cool” and never took them down, doesn't share my excitement for magical things. She's recently discovered the fun of herbalism, as I can see by the peppermint essential oil-soaked cotton balls in the cabinets (“to keep pests away”) and the endless beauty products with rosemary essential oils (“so my hair gets thicker”), but she sticks to good old-fashioned prayer and candles when things get rough.

I mean, there was that one time that she asked me to do something about a pesky person that was annoying her, so I may or may not have a jar buried in my backyard with that person's picture tightly tied up inside, but that's no big deal.

She looks up from the toast she's making and blinks. “Not quite witchy stuff,” she says, “but they didn't have all this modern medicine back in the day, so they knew a lot of old remedies for things.”

For tapeworms:

“Eat whole cloves of raw garlic. Nothing likes garlic.”

For menstrual cramps:

“My mother always told me to drink chamomile tea.”

For an upset stomach:

“Peppermint is good for the belly.”

For gas and bloating:

“Use cumin! Especially if you’re cooking something with cabbage.”

If other remedies weren’t working on more serious illnesses:

“Well,” my mom throws up her hands, “shit outta luck. Guess you’re dying.”



## MOTIVATION MEDICINE FOR MY COWORKERS

### A SPELL BY YOURS TRULY

Herbs and Spices:

Cayenne pepper

Basil

Cinnamon

Stones:

Carnelian

Tiger’s Eye

Etc.:

Red candle

A pot and spoon (optional)

Procedure:

Honestly? You could do this a bunch of different ways. The whole “get in a robe and do some long, rhyming incantation” thing is cheesy to me, so I don’t do all that. But will you find me, within the next week, standing in front of a candle and some rocks, burning handmade potpourri, and clanging on a pot as I yell in the name of God for my coworkers to respond to my e-mails and send me the information I need to do my job?

If they don’t get back to me by Friday, it’s likely.



In my purse is a little shield with Gabriel carved into it. Along with being the epic messenger of legend, and one of the few angels actually named in the Bible, Gabriel is also the guardian of the element of water, and the patron of writers. I keep that shield in hopes that he’ll help me out with the whole “be a successful author” thing I’m working on.

I also used to have a statue of Raphael, who rules over medicine and the element of air, but he toppled off my altar and broke. I only have a piece of his wing now. As for Uriel, who guards earth, and Michael, who guards fire, or any other Big Name Angels, I don’t have anything for them save a couple cards in my angel oracle deck that I hardly use. In general, I have a little ball of celestite that I use as a sort of Angel Antenna when doing spells, in hopes that they might carry up the energy faster (or even lend their own), but otherwise, I haven’t touched the topic much. All I know is that I can’t play with angels and fairies at the same time; they don’t get along.

Back when I was in middle school, I’d eat up those books and websites on different mythologies—Greek, Japanese, Celtic, anything. They had such cool monsters and spirits. Nymphs and chimera, fox spirits and cat demons, banshees and brownies, all kinds of fun stuff. There never seemed like there was anything

“cool” or “fun” about Christianity—not with the way most Christians I knew went about it. They believed in God, of course, but hardly ever the devil. They believed in angels, but only so far as the ones on the Christmas and Easter cards. They believed in Jesus—and every awfully misquoted, mistranslated, misinterpreted line of His that they could think of.

But never anything fantastical. Never anything even slightly like the amazing creatures of other cultures’ myths. Never even like anything actually in the Bible. I mean, really—Ezekiel saw some wild things in his day. Flaming wheels covered in eyes, six-winged angels burning so bright that they couldn’t even be looked at, angels with four heads staring in each direction? Angels are terrifying. Angels, if anything, are more like the Angel of Death in *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* than those fat little trumpet-toting babies stamped on the Hallmark cards.

And you can talk to them. No one ever thinks to talk to their angels, even for a second, or to even use some of those fancy prayers that the Catholic church has for Saint Michael and others. A couple times, I’ve asked my guardian angel a question. A couple times, they’ve answered. Not in words, but images. So, of my guardian angel, I know only three things: that their name begins with Z, that they like tigers, and that they have saved me only a thousand times from crashing my junky old Saturn and ending up in the hospital. I am not the best driver in the world.

Maybe I’ll pour Z a drink. They’ve earned a few.



I’m afraid of the dark.

Namely, I’m afraid of what could be in the dark.

So what the hell did I think I was doing, armed with nothing but a squirt bottle full of homemade Ghost-Be-Gone, a rosary, and a prayer that won’t load on my phone, in the middle a work friend’s dark apartment at 10 P.M?

Getting rid of a poltergeist, of course. Because I’m absolutely qualified to do that. Totally.

Two of my roommates at the time were with me, both pagan witches armed with their own tools—homemade incense and a cauldron to burn it in, candles, sage. We turned off all the lights and taunted this thing to hell and back just to get it to come out, and it felt like we were dealing with an angry animal trapped in a corner. In fact, the darkest corners I looked at felt like they were full of solid blackness—like a giant black wasp’s nest, just concentrated, angry, spiteful darkness.

Now, here’s the thing about poltergeists. The word is German for “noisy ghost,” and they’re not really sentient, like other spirits might be—they’re more residual things manifesting from someone’s own toxic energy that comes back around to torment them through creepily physical phenomena: knocking things over, tapping at the walls, messing with household objects and electrical items. Whatever was going on in this apartment, it had been doing all that stuff.

Awesome. I wasn’t even fighting a real demon—just a psychic projection—and I was still too chicken to look in the dark bathroom and spray the room clean without barreling backwards, muttering “nope” over and over. It was like the darkness was trying to push me out, thick and heavy like water filling the room, but a hand on my back forced me to stay there.

“Don’t let it take the space,” my roommate said. “Drive it out.”

Right. Drive it out. I had a charmed napoj in my spray bottle, and after I squared my shoulders and decided I was in charge, I went buck wild with it. I sprayed everything. It was the Febreze of exorcisms. In fact, I got so bold that when I thought I found where it was hiding next (as this little manifestation, this scrap of my



work friend's subconscious, was not a happy camper), I looked it straight in its face nest and sprayed it.

We sprayed it out. We smoked it out. We shouted it out. We laughed it out. And what's better? The prayer finally loaded on my damn phone.

St. Michael the Archangel,

defend us in battle.

Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the Devil.

May God rebuke him, we humbly pray,

and do thou,

O Prince of the heavenly hosts,

by the power of God,

thrust into hell Satan,

and all the evil spirits,

who prowl about the world

seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

Our friend did the final push to get rid of it—it was her ghost, after all. By time we were done, and we felt the place was clean, we sat at her kitchen table and just took the time to relax and chat. My work friend's eyes sparkled, and her daughter was peacefully watching T.V. in the living room. The darkness didn't feel like it was full of wasps anymore, so we must've gotten it out.

A few months after, we checked in with her. Whatever nasty energy she had in that apartment didn't come back. She also hasn't had the urge to move out again.

God bless.



That is a frog.

Right there, in the middle of my cup, plain as day, that is a frog. I don't know what to make of the smirch next to it, but I can see the shape of this frog from what seems like the back of it. I stare at it for a moment, wondering what to make of an image that crisp, or what to make of the fact that the outline that the frog sits in looks like a person's profile. Frog in the head? Frog thoughts? Hey God, what's this supposed to mean?

Though, frogs are a stereotypical thing to associate with witches—frogs and toads, pointy hats, old broomsticks, all that kind of stuff. It reminds me of the Halloween costumes I wear year after year—all I need to get is the hat, and the rest of the stripy, Gothic costume comes from my own wardrobe. In fact, I, myself, have a few stereotypical witch things about me, whether I dress the part or not.

I have a grouchy, old black cat.

I heard somewhere that green eyes were the mark of a witch.

I get warts on my hands.

It's part of what's fun about witchcraft: the aesthetics. That's my old Catholic background creeping up on me,

for sure, but I love the whimsy of a light-hearted “witch” image, with her cauldron and her cat and her books, her big hat and fluffy skirt and little wand. I also love the image of the big-skirted village sorceress, with her staff and her familiars and her old hut on the edge of civilization. Someone once asked me why I call my power “witchcraft” and not “gifts of the Spirit,” myself “witch” and not “wise woman,” or why I call my work “spells” and not “prayer with props,” as some other Christian witches do, and my answer was pretty simple.

I just love the look.



My oma looks like the kind of person I’d go to if I needed a potion. While in her apartment, I looked at a picture of her and my late opa on the beach, and I noticed on her younger face what I hadn’t noticed in the sweet, plump old woman I’d known most of my life.

In this picture, she wore a babushka over her reddish-brown hair, and her face was starting to crease with faint lines. Her nose was not curved upward, like mine, but curved down, a long and strong nose that one might expect from someone with a bit of magic tucked away somewhere. Her eyes were—and still are—a bright, icy blue, staring out sharply, despite her smile.

Never did my oma do anything outright magical that I could see, but I do know that I thought she was sixty years old every single year (and I’m still not sure how old she is). When she would come over for a few months, she sat there every morning, slathering at least four different types of lotion on her, and she never sat out in the sun. She wore red and black, especially if she was going somewhere, and she passed on all those old herbal remedies to my mother. On top of that, when we went somewhere, like my other grandmother’s house, she would attract all the children, even when she was sitting and minding her own business—even though she spoke not a word of English.

She also brought my opa over in her suitcase on every visit.

The last time she was here, I was a freshman in high school, and since Tjaša and auntie Teja came with her, I had to sleep on an inflatable mattress in the living room for a month. During that time, all the usual things happened—radios suddenly blaring music, lights turning on and off, thumps and bumps all through the night. I laid there one night, on that inflatable mattress, and listened to the downstairs doors thump, and I remember thinking, opa, come on, I have school in the morning.

The thumping stopped.

I’ve never met my opa; I’ve only seen pictures of him. But I know that he hangs around my oma even now, as her mind is fading, and her once plump and huggable little frame is now thin and skeleton-like. While at her apartment, my father watched a picture of my opa—in a stable place, with no one stomping around—fall straight over with a loud clank. He was saying hello, I think.

Some Christians get testy about ghosts. I know I do. While I don’t think they’re wandering around, per say, or able to be summoned, I do think the dead can see and watch us, maybe even interact with things, like angels and Saints. Jesus communicated with long-dead Moses and Elijah. The Witch of Endor got a nasty surprise when she accidentally summoned the real Samuel and not her usual tricks. There’s weird stuff going on for both sides of the argument. I think that if my opa’s really the one messing with things, that he’s doing it from heaven—not Earth.

But I don’t know if my oma is aware of him anymore, or if she ever really believed it was him knocking things around in the first place. Now, she just tells the same four stories over and over again, hardly hearing anything we say to her, hardly responding to much anymore. I got her to say something different once, but it soon fell back into her rhythm.

“Everyone is dead. My husband, my parents, my sister, everyone. Dead. Gone. Everyone is dead, and I’m here all alone...”



Just one more shake, and we’re good. I’ve got a nice collection of clear and vivid images, and I’ve taken pictures of them all with my mom’s phone (as mine is still in my room). One more swirl, and I’ll call it quits and head to the gym.

What I see, right there in my cup, is a lump that immediately makes me think of Slovenia by its shape, and a figure above it—a witch flying on a broomstick. The witch is exactly the same shape as the little witch souvenir I bought from Ljubljana Castle, which hangs in my room.

If that’s not a sign from God on this subject, then I don’t know what is.

After I snap a picture, I hurry downstairs to show my parents, careful to keep the water from sloshing it away. When I show them, my dad is skeptical, but my mom nods along with me.

“Yeah, that looks like Slovenia! I see the witch, too!”

When I get back upstairs, I look at that image a little longer. It feels very affirming. With the new book I’ve picked up on Christian magic, the rich history of magic in Slovenian folk tradition that I’ve discovered, and with this little cup in my hands, I’m only more nestled into what I believe, and more positive that I’m doing fine.

As I scrape those grounds into the trash, however, I’m carried back into the mundane. There’s homework to be done, there’s projects to figure out, there’s books that need reading. Witch of God or not, I still have to do less-than-witchy things, like pay bills and think about graduate school and study for exams. There’s no spell to get my papers writing themselves, as far as I know, and even if God guides me on the subject matter, I’m still the one doing the typing. I’m instantly stressed out at the thought of all the things due in the upcoming week.

But one of the awesome things about God is that He doesn’t only appear in certain places. At the risk of sounding ridiculous, I’ll gladly recount one moment I had at the gym during my senior year of high school—what I thought was the hardest year of my life. I was listening to Nine Inch Nails’ album, *The Fragile*. Once, and only once, have I ever been hit by the end of the song, “The Fragile,” in such a way that I felt as though God were speaking to me, shouting, again and again,

“I won’t let you fall apart.”

If He kept me in one piece in my senior year of high school, I have faith that He’ll do the same for my senior year of college.



Hey God, just one last thing: can I get a card for the road?

## XX – JUDGMENT

Meaning: “Enlightenment. An acceptance of oneself and one’s achievements in life. Standing ready for divine scrutiny, confident in the knowledge that one has lived a fair and just life. This card indicates both an end and a new beginning.”

It’s just humid up there.

I also use this in prosperity spells; write a wish in Sharpie and burn that sucker. They crackle nicely.

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# THE NUMBER

WRITTEN  
BY **LORETTA MCDANIEL**

Nine, two, one, four, nine, zero. I write the number in the box. Like other important numbers in my life, it's a number that's committed to memory. I've known it for twenty-two years, and I've said it and written it countless times, just like I'm doing now. It isn't my bank account number, nor is it the pin number for my debit card. It isn't the account number of my IRA, and it isn't my employee number. It is just a number, but it holds me in thrall like nothing else.

When the form is completed, I get the key to the restroom from the man sitting at the desk. I need to use it now because I will not have another opportunity for an hour and a half. Before I return the key, I choose a locker and put my jacket, driver's license, and car keys inside. I insert a quarter into a slot and remove yet another key. I stop at the change machine and turn five one dollar bills into coins. Then, at the gate, I take a tub from the stack. I remove my shoes and put them inside. I am unsure what to do with the coins and the locker key. Each facility has different procedures. The man tells me I may put them in the tub with my shoes. The tub and contents slides into the machine. I walk through the detector and I do not set it off. I have not worn jewelry and I have no belt. The woman tells me to turn and face the wall with my arms outstretched. I comply, and she searches me quickly, arms, armpits, under my breasts and around my waist, down each of my legs. She asks me to lift my feet so that she can see the soles. I pass inspection. I'm permitted to put my shoes back on. Other places I've been to will examine me more closely. They want to see behind my ears or into my mouth. They make me lift my tongue to prove no contraband hides underneath.

At the end of the hallway there are heavy doors that are opened and closed by a man in a room with walls of dark glass. I can make out his form but I cannot see his features. I wait for him to open the door for me. There is an anteroom on the other side. Four doors exactly alike meet at this room, one on each wall. One door will open and close before another can be opened, except when staff passes through. Less important traffic waits while those with business pass through. I wait.

Soon, the door opens and shuts and I'm alone in the anteroom. Open and shut again and I enter the visiting room. North and south walls are lined with vending machines. There are lines of colored tape on the floor, black, red, black, in rows, several of them. Molded plastic chairs are placed along the black lines, facing each other, with a red line in the middle. I suppose the red line is one that can't be crossed. I approach the desk. A young woman is sitting there. I give the number again, nine-two-one-four-nine-zero. She points to a row and says a chair, number 17. I sit in 17 and look at the others sitting in chairs, a smattering here and there. I see people dressed normally, in jeans, leggings, sweaters, facing other people dressed in brown jumpsuits. I can see the faces of the normal people. I see the backs of brown jumpsuits. Then, I notice the chairs are unbalanced. There are more chairs in the row I'm facing. The row I'm in is outnumbered, two to one. I realize I'm in a chair reserved for jumpsuits. I switch positions. Now, I am facing the door where the jumpsuits come in.

Several jumpsuits come through the door, it's heavy and opens remotely like the others, but it's fixed in the open position. I suppose no one tries to force their way into this part of the building. As the men enter, their eyes scan the room looking for their visitors. One approaches me, looks at my chair number, then goes back to the desk. I see the man leave. He stares at the chair in front of me as he goes, as if wishing his ticket matched the seat. A moment later, the desk lady tells me there has been a mix-up. They sent the wrong person to see me. Someone should have double-checked their numbers, I think. More minutes pass and the desk lady assigns someone to chair 18. The visitor sits next to me, close enough I could put my arm around her. She is

young and friendly. She strikes up a conversation with me. "It is chilly in here," she says, "they made me take off my sweater; they don't allow layers in here." The girl has on jeans and a thin t-shirt, one obviously made to be worn under another piece of clothing.

"Yes," I say, "after a while you pay attention to how you dress when you come here. One time, the underwires in my bra kept setting off the metal detector and they wouldn't let me come in. I had to go into the restroom and chew my bra until I got the wires out. They wouldn't give me a scissors."

"I couldn't get by like that," she laughs, referring to her sizable chest, "I can't even wear a bra without underwires." We continue to make small talk about the various indignities that we've endured. We discuss the high prices on the vending machines, the expensive phone calls. As families soon learn, there is money to be made from a captive audience. As we talk, I look around the room and see that everyone has a few chairs between them except for us. I start to feel uneasy. I'm expecting an emotional conversation and this lack of privacy makes me anxious. Just when I begin to hope that we can focus on our visits enough to ignore each other, her jumpsuit arrives. She stands and wraps her arms around him.

"Happy Birthday, baby!" She sing-songs, "I have missed you so much."

"Where's Jack?" Jumpsuit asks, "I thought he would come since today is my birthday."

"Well, you know how it is," she answers, and her voice trails off in my mind as I try hard not to hear her answer. I already know more about their pain than I want to. I have plenty of my own to deal with. I get up abruptly to confront the lady at the desk.

"Can you move me?" I ask. She looks at me as if I've asked for her firstborn. "I'm sitting here and they are having a personal conversation. I don't want to hear."

"The seats are assigned." She answers. I resign myself. This is a bureaucracy and its decisions are immutable. I turn to go, then turn back.

"I hate to complain, but visiting someone in prison is the most dehumanizing experience I've ever had." I don't expect this to make a difference. In the back of my mind I'm wondering if she's thinking I want to be moved because this young woman and her jumpsuit are black. The desk lady is black. I don't want either of them to think my request is about color, so I say this to make sure she understands what motivates me. I also understand, in the back of my mind, that my jumpsuit has become a passionate racist. I didn't raise him that way, the system did, but I don't want him to be preoccupied with who we are sharing space with.

"You can move down to twenty. That's the best I can do."

"Thank you." I'm sincere when I say this, and sincerely surprised she changed her mind. I touch the young woman's shoulder as I pass her. "I want you to have a little privacy." I say this to her, but I mean it for myself as well.

My jumpsuit arrives. He looks somewhat disheveled, like he was awakened suddenly. His eyes are wild, anxious and open wide, as if what woke him so abruptly was a nightmare of terrifying proportions. I hug him, and I say in his ear, "No, no, it's nothing bad. Nothing bad has happened; everyone is okay." There was a death in the family recently, and this visit is unusual, so I understand his apprehension. He has been in and out of prison many times, and my visits are often sporadic. Whether I see him or not doesn't seem to have any impact on his outcome, but most of the time it makes me so sad I can barely breathe.

Now the muscles in my throat are constricting tightly around the lump I'm breathing against, and it's painful to speak. His eyes are still huge, and I watch them reel around the room as he assesses his surroundings and tries to calm down. He looks nearly the same as when I last saw him six months ago. His hair has become a bit greyer, his beard is about four or five days old. He looks healthy and just as handsome as before. For the mil-

lionth time, I wonder at how I could have mothered someone so intelligent and good looking. For the billionth time, I wonder how I could have mothered someone so morally corrupted. I watch him struggle to control his emotions.

“Are you okay with me being here?” I ask, “I know you need to keep your composure.”

He wipes tears as he answers. He shakes his head and his voice isn't much above a whisper. “No. It's okay. The past few months have been hard, that's all”

I try to think of some news that is good, or at least neutral, but I draw a blank. The past few months have not been especially good for me, either.

“How is the program coming?” I ask. He is in the Indiana Department of Corrections' premier program, CLIFF, or “Clean Lifestyle is Freedom Forever.”

“It's okay. The program is bullshit but it comes with a time cut. It will put me out about the end of August first of September.”

“You're still bitter about being here this time?” He isn't here on a new conviction. He violated his parole by using drugs. The parole board sent him back. What he doesn't know is I asked the parole board to either send him to an inpatient drug rehab or put him back in prison. I didn't expect them to show any regard for either of my requests, but they granted them both. I was grateful they did. He was so out of control, I know he would be dead by now if he wasn't locked up. Maybe he wouldn't be the only one dead. He was unhinged and I was afraid of what he might do.

He shakes his head, affirmative this time. “I've been in a cage almost my whole life. It hasn't done me any good.” I couldn't agree more. It hasn't done anyone any good. “I know using drugs makes no sense, but I am so sad, and I feel so bad. Doing drugs is the only thing that gives me any relief from the sadness. When it goes too far I don't care. I don't care what I do or what happens to me. All I care about is that little bit of relief I get when I get high.” I say nothing. I will let him tell me whatever he wants. “I've been trying to process what happened to me on May 1st.” This is the day he overdosed, and this is the first time he's talked with me honestly about what happened. “I haven't been able to wrap my head around it. It didn't seem real. When I woke up in the ambulance I didn't understand. Then, at the hospital they were asking me questions. I didn't quite get it. When I got home and saw all the wrappings from the medical stuff on the bedroom floor, it still didn't register. I'm just now coming to grips with the reality that I nearly died. If I'd been alone, or with some other junkies that didn't care about me, I'd be dead. It makes me sad. It's like the cup is so full that anything, no matter how small, makes the cup spill over. Seeing you today makes the cup spill over.” He doesn't have to tell me about the cup. I've been holding it in my hands for years. It's the size of the ocean and I'm drowning. It's the size of a thimble and I'm swimming in it. Now, we are holding it between us and we are both choking on it. I'm glad we are in a public place. Otherwise, I'd be on my knees, pouring even more tears into that overfilled vessel. “You know, I've been thinking, trying to figure out what it was that set this off. What happened to me that caused all this to happen? I don't know what it was. There isn't anything that seems so bad. I can't understand it. I think if I understand it, then maybe I can fix it.”

“I don't think it's as simple as that.” I answer. “The reason that you used at first was something that probably has no relationship to why you use now. It may be something that you have gotten over, or at least it's something you aren't so troubled with now, but it's become the center of a snowball. That snowball has been rolling downhill for more than twenty years. There has been plenty of trauma added to it over time. Every terrible thing you've done, every terrible thing that has been done to you is part of it now.”

The desk lady interrupts us. I don't understand it, but she wants to take our picture. There is a cloth with a painted scene hanging on the wall. It's an amateurish fall scene with a waterfall. The background will fool no

one, I think, the jumpsuits will give it away. Everyone will know it's a jailhouse picture. How anyone can make a pretense of happiness or normalcy in a photo taken in prison is beyond me. Inside is despair, but outside I am smiling, and so is my son. The fraud on our faces will match the background behind us.

The photography breaks up the dread in our mood, but we are still somber. Even though he claims the program is bullshit, I recognize some principle in his conversation. He wants to tell me some things. He tells me what I already know. He confirms suspicions. He shocks me, but he doesn't surprise me with his confessions. What does surprise is how his past behavior roils his soul. As he speaks I allow myself to imagine the unimaginable. It's a quiet Sunday in my home. My son and his children are around the table and we are having dinner. They are smiling. They are healthy. I am happy. It's an experience I've never had before, but what he is telling me makes me think maybe something inside him can change this time, and it gives me hope. I hope his soul searching continues. I hope he can benefit from the program he's in. I hope he can repair his relationships with his children. I hope he will stay clean when he's released again. I hope he can learn how to live. I hope he commits no more crime. I hope he lives. If he is unable to stay clean, I hope his agony ends quickly. I hope that one day I will no longer remember the number. I am his mother, and no matter how hopeless he is, I will always hope.



# TO CATCH A GLIMMER

WRITTEN  
BY **TIANNA GROSCH**

Sometimes life weighs heavy on my shoulders and the temptation to shrug it off overwhelms me.

Self-destruction will begin in: five, four, three, two... The one thing I may be better at than anything else. The ticking time bomb that explodes over and over again. Destroying all the good I've built up, brick by brick — undoing the mortar with the same hands that built it, until my fingers are rubbed raw. My bones stick through skin, and splinter.

Self-resurrection is the harder thing to do. To pull yourself up from the waves crashing down, knocking you back and sinking you lower. To fight against the current sucking you deeper, dragging your mind away from your control.

I know loss of control. I've felt it at the hands of others. Violent men, who took my body and claimed it like something to be conquered. Something to be owned.

“No.”

I whisper this to myself when I'm alone. I say it loudly in my room with the door shut tight.

My voice doesn't waver. My voice doesn't break.

“No, no, no.”

I hear myself crystal-clear, the words when they are repeated throbbing like a heart, beating and thumping in my chest. Liquid like the sweat that pooled and dripped down my back. They sink into the air and disappear but they leave their stain on my ears.

Why didn't they stain his?

Maybe they did. At least I can hope that somehow he recognizes what he did. But this isn't about him, or what he did. It's about me - how I overcame it.

I still watch for his shadow behind me, I still linger on the image of someone standing behind me, in a reflection in the window. Maybe I am still a little bit broken. But I'm here just the same, and I'm surviving.

“I'm surviving.”

Despite him.

Him in this sense is plural. It's not just one male. It's every single man I've come across over the course of my life who has disappointed me, who has abused me — emotionally, verbally, mentally, physically — and who has taken advantage of my good nature and willingness to see the good in every being.

Hitting rock bottom is never graceful. It's plummeting, falling splat on the concrete. It's feeling like you lost all purpose, lost all understanding or recognition of who you are.

For me, it came with a startling realization and actions I thought I would never commit.

The dollar bill was rolled tight into a thin straw-like resemblance, the hole in the middle small enough to make a mini telescope and look through.

The white powder was spread in a line across the black tabletop. A pile of snow dust, fallen from the sky.

I placed the end of the dollar-bill straw to the top of the table, resting at the start of the line. Dead end, I thought. No turning back.

I looked across at him, the one who thought I was worth nothing, would amount to nothing, could do nothing right, deserved nothing better... and I took a long snort, moving the bill along the pile of powder in a smooth line, a sharp inhale.

My nose burned as the powder soured up through the makeshift funnel. I felt lightheaded from the deep breath and coughed slightly.

I didn't feel anything at first, and then it was like a rush, tingling through my brain all the way to my toes. Close to numbness, close to not-being. Non-existence.

The next morning, I woke up and I felt like my soul was partly stripped from my body. I felt detached, disjointed. I dragged myself to the toilet where I heaved my guts out and continued to heave for the rest of that day.

I still went to work, afraid of calling out. The manager on duty was the one who sold me the heroin. I told him that it might have been laced, that I was sick as a dog. He didn't believe me, and wouldn't let me go home. I continued to puke in the lady's restroom until he finally let me leave.

I looked in the mirror when I got home and didn't recognize her. She stared straight into my eyes, but that wasn't the girl I knew. The straight-A student, dedicated to her studies, dedicated to her friends, dedicated to her boyfriend.

What friends? I had lost almost all of them. And my boyfriend thought I was a worthless cunt, a whore, a slut. He had taken my virginity, and still he called me these things.

For him, I had thrown it all away. I had snorted H. I wasn't the same person anymore, and I had to decide who I wanted to be. Who I would choose. The straight-edge girl, or the one who wanted to destroy herself.

I have weathered many storms in my life. Clinging to a piece of jetsam from the shipwreck in a stormy sea. Feeling like I may just let go and drown at any moment. Wanting to drown. Wishing it would end. But still, holding my head above water.

I have endured emotional and mental abuse, which then became physical. I always considered myself resilient and stubborn (hard-headed, if you will). I don't take shit from anyone anymore because I spent years of doing just that. Sitting back and enduring. Holding my head just barely above the waves and choking on the salty water flowing into my lungs.

Sometimes welcoming the water, sometimes sucking it in myself, but always coughing it up, sputtering and breathing. Willing myself to breathe.

That's another amazing thing about humans — our endurance and our will to survive. Not wanting to give up, not wanting to let go, fearing that we will no longer be able to continue but always, always finding a way. Seeing what a human can endure, what they can overcome, what they can defeat. Continuing on in the face of doom and hopelessness and despair, but still — carrying on, forging ahead.

I battle my own mind on a daily basis, a battle against myself to continue going, to keep trekking on in the face of despair and loss of hope. To find a little glimmer to hold onto, to power towards, to focus on. Don't look in the rearview mirror, just keep driving ahead.

Not being in control has always been one of my greatest fears.

Telling someone you trust “no,” telling him not to hurt you, believing he never would, denying the fact that he has even to yourself, even if you go in the bathroom and sob afterwards, even if you feel dirty, even if

you feel like a worthless piece of shit for “letting him” do it, again.

“Told you that you’d like it in the end.”

This he said to me after I cried once he had finished. After he had forced me down on the bed and taken me from behind, often holding my hands behind my back and forcing himself between my legs. No matter how I clenched and tried to fight him off, it’s like he enjoyed the challenge more. I wouldn’t get wet but he would still find a way to force himself inside, and I wondered if I might get scars from this forced entry. It felt like he was ripping me to pieces from the inside out, like he was cutting me and bruising me. As he moved on top of me and inside me I kept saying “no, no, no,” kept saying “stop it,” kept saying “get off me,” but he didn’t listen.

“You just raped me,” sometimes I would say afterward, tears in my eyes. I would limp into the bathroom and sit on the floor and cry. Sometimes I would bring scissors in with me. I would want to cut my wrists and let them bleed out onto the floor. He would follow me into the bathroom and lift me up by the armpits and tell me, “Stop it.” And I would listen to him.

He denied that it was rape. Denied and denied, until I barely believed it myself. This went on for a year. He lived with me. I opened my home to him, my heart, my family. I opened my already beaten and broken trust. I gave him everything, and nearly lost all of myself. He continued to disappoint and hurt me. Even if he never saw it himself.

On the start of the new year, 2016, when it should have been a celebration, we went to a party with two of his best friends. I had known them for years and considered them my friends as well. More than he was a friend to me. He started drinking before we arrived and was drunk by the time we got to the party. I hid in a corner and sipped a bottle of Crown Royal, apple flavor. It burned as it went down. I cried by myself. A couple people walked over to put their coats down. I think I was sitting behind a piano. They saw me but they walked away. I was making a fool of myself, I guess.

He kept drinking, more and more, until he got that glassy look in his eyes, the one where it was like he didn’t exist inside his head anymore. If I walked up to him, it took him a while to realize it was me. He started dancing, I tried to dance with him, and then he went outside for a cigarette. I stayed inside, back by the piano again sipping my bottle.

There was a bit of commotion by the door and I looked up to see one of his friends, Tyler, dragging him inside by the ear. Tyler told him to sit down and not move. I rushed over to try to talk to him and ask what had happened but he couldn’t even articulate anything. Some girl came up to him and I gathered that something had happened outside.

“Hi, I’m his girlfriend,” I said to her and held out my hand. “Did something happen?”

She looked down her nose at me like I was a speck of dirt and she and the girlfriend she was with told me to fuck off and turned away. I felt pretty crushed and lonely. I went to find Tyler and try to see what had happened but he was nowhere I could find. It was his work party.

The girl kept going up to my boyfriend, and I tried to talk to her two more times with the same response. Finally, it got to the point where I found out someone was coming to pick my boyfriend up. Or something. Because the girl screamed in my face, “He’s coming home with me!”

I didn’t think, I just blacked out and shoved her. She was drunk and stumbled, falling on her ass and then her boyfriend was in my face shouting at me, telling me that he was going to hurt me. Telling me I had made a big mistake.

A stranger, some guy I didn’t know, grabbed me by the arm and carted me outside. It was cold. December

30th, or was it already January 1st? I couldn't even remember if we had welcomed the new year. My teeth chattered.

"What's going on?" the guy asked me, my unknown savior.

"I don't know," I told him.

"Why did you shove her?"

I started crying, hot tears streaking down my cheeks. It wouldn't matter if I tried to explain. Even when I did, all he said was, "That's no reason to do what you did." But even so, he had still saved me. I didn't recognize any of the faces around me anymore, until a car pulled up. I was still standing outside with the man I didn't know, who seemed to care more what happened to me than my own boyfriend. Two familiar people got out of the car, my neighbors from down the road who I had met at a summer party with my boyfriend when I had accompanied him.

"Tianna?" they asked. I felt good to at least recognize them. "Are you okay?"

"No," I said. "Not really."

"Come on, we can give you a ride home," they said. "Our cousin called us, we're here to pick her up."

I had a sinking feeling but I waited while they went inside and sure enough, the girl I had shoved came out, all a rage. She glared at me. My boyfriend was being led out by one of the other guys. They helped him into the back of the car and even though I didn't want to go, Tyler had appeared by this point and encouraged me to just get in the car.

The ride home was silent and tense. I tried to apologize to the girl, and explain myself, but she didn't want to hear any of it. She called me names. She looked ahead. Her cousin who was driving told her to stop it. I remember apologizing over and over again as I got out of the car when they had finally arrived at my house. My boyfriend got out with me.

It was supposed to be celebrating a new year, new beginnings. I cried when we got up to my room. He yelled at me. I reached up as if to slap him, I was so angry at how he had treated me, how I had acted.

I don't think I would have even touched him, but he grabbed me by the throat and choked me with one hand, shoved me onto the ground and continued choking me. I couldn't stop sobbing after that. My dad came up to ask what was wrong. I told him and he was angry, very angry. My boyfriend didn't seem to care or think anything he had done was wrong. I wasn't surprised — that was normal for him.

The emotional damage the rape and abuse had done to me was something I didn't see clearly until I found my fiancé months later and discovered what real intimacy is like. I couldn't stand being touched sometimes, and often in the middle of intercourse I would make him stop because I felt close to a panic attack. Scott was always gentle and understanding. He never forced me or expected anything from me, as the others had done. The others seemed to believe since I was dating them, I became their property. An object to be used as they pleased.

Scott coaxed me to open myself back up to me. It was a long process, still ongoing. There are often days I don't even feel like myself — who am I, anyway? Days when my mind consumes me with tormenting memories. Flashbacks of being held down, feeling like all the air was pushed out of my lungs. The throbbing in my limbs afterwards. Feeling my heart beating throughout my body, keeping time, keeping life. Why did I want to destroy such a thing?

Would it be pills, an entire bottle of antidepressants that I had saved. Never took. Just saved. For an emergency when I would want to take them all. I nearly flushed the bottle down the toilet countless times but the pearly

pills glistened up at me from their orange cave and told me, not yet. What would happen the one day I needed them? All of them.

I fight against myself.

There is still so much to live for. So much to anticipate and look forward to. To desire. Dreams to pursue and achieve. Experiences to cherish. First snowfalls to enjoy from the comfort of a living room, the fire burning bright and toasty from the wood stove, the freshly decorated tree glowing by the window. First sights — of daffodils popping up their golden heads in the moment of welcoming spring; of newborn kittens with eyes shut tight, mewling and covered in afterbirth; of the glistening white sheet of snow spread across a silent lawn; of magnificent colors winding through the sky like paint from an artist's brush stroked across the clouds; of the first flames licking at the wood, crackling and popping or igniting on the end of a candle's wick offering a romantic glow across rosy cheeks; of fresh baked cookies coming warm and gooey out of the oven...

I have placed my trust and love in the wrong men, over and over. And now it's time to rectify that, to become reborn. I have discovered a man who treats me with love and respect, and while it is often difficult to trust in his good nature, it has been a lesson. Not every man can be judged for the actions of others. I've seen that in my mother's third husband (who really should have been her first and only), and I've seen it now in my fiancé, who overtook my life with light and love.

A single word can often make all the difference. When we speak, we want to be listened to. A single word can save a life, can alter a person's mindset. A single word has the power to overcome, to instill hope or take it away, to empower someone or drain them of strength. A single word is underestimated. Sometimes it is ignored. Other times it is heard, understood, accepted, and appreciated.

As a writer, I appreciate the power of words. I mourn the loss of many of their meanings - how awesome and awe-inspiring have lost the allure behind what they really mean. The emotions they are meant to evoke and instill in those who speak or read them.

I only hope I can do well enough with my words to make an impact, to leave my meaning loud and clear upon the lips and ears of those who read and speak and listen to what I have to say.

# HONOR

WRITTEN  
BY **LUKE MEIER**

"On behalf of the President of the United States and the United States Military I present this flag to you for your loved one's faithful, and honorable service."

I've said it a thousand times.

This kid was 12. How I know, this I cannot recall. An adolescent boy trying not to cry. Trying to be a man, apparently the only man left in the household. He was dressed up, wearing a tie. He couldn't look at me. He tried. He looked at the flag running parallel to my chest, one last token of a life cut short. You could see the apprehension when to take the flag from me, a slight nuance he wanted to get right. We synched. I nudged forward after saying what I had to say as he stretched clenched hands open to take it.

The act of folding the flag for a military funeral was a game inside my head. A game to get the folds just right. To get the appropriate stars to show, one and three, but most importantly, avoiding any red or white from the stripes. This game has no end, there is no cruise control, for every flag is made with slight differences. My job was to fold, the holder was to present. An audible thrown out at the last minute. I was now doing both.

A Military Funeral is a service offered by the state for free to anyone having served in the military any discharge other than dishonorable. For years I have been holding, folding, presenting, firing rifles, and holding automated bugles. These services for active duty members, focus on the ones left, reminders of a sacrifice too large. Even the recalled stories of glory and honor from family and friends, leaving out the 40 plus years since.

The family puts their focus on us from time to time, how we are appreciated, how they want to share about their loved one's service, how they did this, knew this person, and can we relate. Maybe the family thinks that is all we are interested in? Every situation different. Family members offering to buy us a beer, take us to lunch, saluting us when we are the support for them. We are honoring your loved one.

All of the details run together from time to time. Standing in front of the crowd next to the casket. Looking at a focal point to avoid getting too attached to another buddy lost or their family members. There was information available, the military career we could have learn about, but it never helped. Instead, when I read of a Purple Heart or other distinguished recognition of sacrifice, I only interpret it as a reminder me of my own military insignificance.

Priests, Pastors, Rabbi, Bishops, all presenting what they knew of a life no longer contained in their human form. Religions of all types performing their own ceremony all with intent to recognize a bigger picture. A life lost, but not forgotten. Family, stories shared, songs played, memorabilia displayed. I could only fathom how many times the funeral directors have seen this.

My team members and I stand at ceremony rest. Our hands crossed in front, heads slightly down, feet, shoulder width apart. The creases of various my Air Force Uniform sitting perfectly symmetrical on either side of my anatomy. The cuffs of the coat resting perfectly on the beginnings of the crisp-white gloves, an indicator of purity, for only what is pure can touch this soldier's flag. No matter the conditions, we hold this position, wear these clothes, are expected, by our own standard to look the same in 60 degrees and sunny as we would in 110 and muggy, or, in my opinion the worst, the negative temperatures with wind. We hold our demeanor. We protect and honor. Carry the casket or watch and observe, silent participants, we are seen, not heard, accent, not distract; honor, not dismay.

No matter the number, and the ability to perform, doing what it takes, there is always a curve ball, an oddity that catches each one of us off-guard. One story about a dog waiting for its lost owner to return. Sitting atop a porch looking at a driveway. Loyal to a man who was never coming home. The preacher tells this story as the two rows of family members in grass-green colored chairs showing wear only years of use and over cleaning can produce, as my partner and I, the holder and presenter in this particular funeral, stand next to the highway. I am attempting to distract my listening to the cars racing by, following their assumed life-path as wherever they are headed is a better use of my attention than to listen to this sad depiction only an animal's perspective can provide. My eyes well. I allowed my emotions on this one. The dog doesn't know any better, blind obedience not found in a reasonable human.

Before and after any funeral service the conversations held light. The team, we get along despite different military backgrounds and career paths. Nothing heavy, for we would get burned out if conversations were as serious as family assumes. We joke. Arrogant in our skills to perform. We are good at what we do. My own OCD allowed to run free on the flag. The family wants to frame it for generations. Something that once completed, done so for life. There is no room for error. Hundreds of hours of practice go into this one performance lasting less than a few minutes. A performance that is remembered for life.

Through ice, wind, hours in the sun, we perform without error. No slipping allowed when carrying the casket. No shaking allowed when at attention. No complaining or falling out no matter the miserable conditions.

Disagreements in the van afterwards about which is worse. Too hot or too cold? I prefer too hot for I can sweat through my jacket. There is a pride felt which excessive sweat seems to intensify. A pride I learned in basic training in that hot Texas sun, in the middle of July.

Too cold has no end. I never warm up, unable to apply layers to remedy the piercing outside conditions only a graveyard provides. The petite, white gloves provide no warmth, hands cannot feel, usual articulate movements lacking flare. A veteran does not deserve this because they died in February. My brain tries to perform but the machinery unable to keep up.

The sun provides just the opposite. The slow simmer of the sun's direct rays evaporating what little moisture the graveyard-grass holds; a sauna ensues. The jackets seem tighter, the people breathing heavier, the air supposedly surrounding the world, gone. The funeral director offers us a way out, a pass to sit in the shade until needed. We decline. It is not our duty to be comfortable. Our duty is minuscule compared to him in the casket and those ordered to carry on, mourning the loss.

Performances with brass, the officers. Officers whom are prestigious in their military career, yet unfamiliar with this duty. They are specialists and leaders however, when here, we lead. We inform, instruct, for we are the experts at the graveside. Majors, Generals, all listening to the commands of the enlisted. Me an E-5, a Sergeant, barking orders in confidence because this must go right. There is no room for military bearing and cowering to an unexperienced officer to the fault of a presentation honoring one of our own.

This 12-year-old boy whose father died of a heart attack in his 40s does not care for my wellbeing, military rank, or the weather. Nor should I make him aware of these things. This is about his father. A father who served lacking care for his own health. A father who was loved as evident by the people in attendance, standing room only.

His dad is gone. He gets a flag and some firing rounds encased in plastic.

I present my phrase, the flag, and the rounds balanced on top. As I move from kneeling, attempting to make eye contact, to a proud stance directly in front, saluting slowly, a four count, my mental self, sending out a form of love that connects all humans. I allowed myself to feel his pain, to understand his father, for it is the

only way to send the appropriate amount of love needed at this time.

My stance is brief, but intense, I confidently right face, marching out of the tent and towards the van parked far away. We march out of their lives for we are not the star of this show. We are the accent.

This boy, sits in the same green-colored chair as all the others, front and center to a casket holding his father, gripping the flag as if this was him. Surrounded by people that will never fill the void. This boy, like so many brothers-in-arms leave behind, must carry on. The family has to come together now, support each other, be the missing piece of a void created by circumstance.

Driving away from the cemetery to perform our formal check-ins of materials at the Honor Guard office, I rarely think of the performance. The performances all go as expected, anything less than is rare, and scrutinized. My day typically continues as I am in school and have to keep going. Today however, my mind stays with the child. His day continues as well, his life goes on. The only prayer for this kid is that his father was memorialized and remembered for the ultimate sacrifice made. This was our duty.



# A FROZEN COKE AND A SANDWICH

WRITTEN  
BY **SUSAN EDELE**

“Your mother wants a Coke Slurpee from McDonalds,” Dad said.

Clenching my cell phone between my shoulder and my ear so I could have both hands free to load the dishwasher and then stir the pot of chili on the stove, I said, “Ok. I should be leaving here in about 15 minutes.”

“Great. She says that sounds good, and the nurse says it’s ok to bring it in,” he said.

“Awesome,” I said, closing the dishwasher and grabbing some bowls from the cabinet to set the table.

“Just make sure it’s from Mickey Ds,” he said.

“Got it,” I replied, turning off the stove and putting a lid on the pot.

“See you in a bit,” he said.

Dinner was ready. Kitchen was tidied. I checked my school bag – I had papers to grade, chapters to read, and assignments to plan. I wrote a quick note for my family, and for the third time this week, I collected my guilt and my belongings, and left.

“Welcome to McDonald’s. Would you like to try. . . “ the voice said through the speaker.

I scanned the menu board, looking for the McSomething that was a frozen Coke.

“Um, I’d like a small fry and a medium frozen Coke,” I said.

“Oh, we don’t make those anymore,” she said.

“Ok. Well, I need the frozen Coke, so I’ll just pull out of line. Thank you,” I said.

“Do you still want the fries?” she asked impatiently.

“No thank you,” I said, rolling up my window.

There was another McDonald’s about 20 minutes in the opposite direction. I turned the car around and headed there, passing a 7-11 on my way. It would be convenient to pull in, grab the Coke Slurpee, and be on my way. But the request was quite clear. A Mickey D’s frozen Coke.

The drive thru was six cars deep, so I pulled into a parking spot. The line was long inside too. Again, I scanned the scrolling menu, not seeing the drink. I asked the teenager at the register, and he excused himself to check with the manager. He’s new, he said. I heard the sigh of the man standing behind me. The teenager returned, shaking his head.

“We haven’t had those for a long time,” he quoted his manager, looking at the man behind me.

“Did you want a sandwich?” he asked.

“No thank you,” I said.

I left the restaurant, climbed back into the van, and started the car. I had no idea where the next

McDonald's was located. I decided to drive back to the 7-11 and get the damn Slurpee there. It was better than nothing, I reasoned.

My cell phone rang.

"Mom?"

"Yeah."

"Is the chili on the stove for us?"

"Yep. Did you see my note?"

"Note? Oh, yeah. It's here."

"How was your day?"

"Good. How long will be you be with Grandma?"

"I'm not sure. I like to stay until the night shift changes over and she gets her last round of meds and we get her teeth brushed and ready for bed. Maybe 9? 9:30?"

I pull in to the 7-11.

"Ok."

"Did you need something?"

"It can wait."

"Is it something Dad can help you with?"

"Yeah. I can ask him."

"Ok. Sorry about that."

"It's Ok. Say hi to Grammy."

"Will do – love you."

"Love you too."

I turned off the van and entered the store. In all my 51 years, I had never purchased a Slurpee. I grabbed the cup, pulled the lever, and let the frozen Coke fill the cup. I popped don the lid, grabbed a straw, used my credit card for the \$2.31 purchase, and left.

Dad sent a text: ARE YOU ON YOUR WAY. He doesn't use punctuation, and he keeps the Caps Lock on so he can see the text better. He's happy with his flip phone, and has no interest in a phone that is smarter than he.

Yes, I texted back. I wanted to type that I was running 30 minutes behind because I was wasting time looking for a freaking Frozen Coke from "Mickey D's" that didn't even exist, but I didn't.

My phone dinged that I had another text, and then another, and another. I found a parking spot at the hospital, pulled in, and turned off the van. I checked my phone.

A text from a colleague telling me to check my work email.

A text from my aunt in Colorado asking for an update on Mom's condition.

A telling me that we've used 90% of our data, and we will be charged \$15.00 if we use the remaining 10% before the 15th of the month.

I grabbed my bag and the Not From McDonald's Frozen Coke and walked in to the hospital.

I took the elevator to the sixth floor, passed the nurse's station, passed the rooms with doors open and TVs blaring and conversations in hushed tones and nurses asking questions about pain and bowel movements.

I opened Mom's door and entered the dimly lit room. The baseball game was on the TV and Dad was dozing in the chair. He opened his eyes and stood up. Mom looked over at me and smiled.

"Here's your frozen Coke," I said, putting it on her tray. I reached into my bag for the straw, pulled it out, and put it into her drink. "Would you like a sip?" I asked.

She nodded and smiled. I held the cup and she took a small sip.

"That's good," she said.

"I'm sorry it's not from McDonald's. They told me they don't make those anymore," I said.

"Well, which one did you go to?" Dad asked. "I just got one for Mom a few weeks ago," he said, shaking his head.

When I was 16, I lost the gas cap to my dad's car. Back when the caps were not connected to the cars, I must have put the cap on the roof of the car, filled up, went inside to pay cash for the gas, and then drove away. I never even heard the cap hit the road. It wasn't until Dad had to fill up that he realized it was gone. It was that same look I got now, 35 years later: disappointment.

My phone dinged.

Dad wants to know if he should start the dishwasher, my daughter texted.

Yes please, I responded.

Dad gave me a hug, kissed his wife, and left for the night.

I settled in to the recliner, pulled out my stack of essays to grade, began responding to my texts, and listened to Mom chat about the game.

# POTENTIAL

WRITTEN  
BY **MEREDITH ARENA**

Toward the end of our senior year of high school, Holly stood at the mirror in the narrow bathroom cursing her hair. A breeze that found its way through the buildings into the window still smelled fresh, like the tops of trees, before summer, when the concrete would heat up and smell like garbage and metal. The spring air was promising, a reminder that senior year was mostly done, that “life” awaited us.

We were late for school. I calculated how long the trip would take from her apartment on 125th street to our high school on 66th and knew we would never make it on time. “Fuuuuuuck!” She screamed several times, in between guttural shouts, as she tried to get the mini buns in her hair perfect, pulling, twisting and pinning each one. I was wearing an outfit put together after closely examining Holly’s outfits. Long, fitting skirt, chunky shoe, button-down shirt. Senior awards were that day and I would clack up to the stage in those shoes to accept mine for something I can no longer remember. The award did not matter, the outfit mattered. I didn’t have the mini buns in my hair that day, but in later years, I sometimes stood in front of the mirror, tired arms twisting handfuls of hair into little knots around my head.

The person in the mirror today 25 years later, her pouting eyes with deepening lines, messy hair and hoop earrings, was created through many acts of imitation and avoidance. From middle school onward, I saw the potential in the world that I liked, including in myself, and copied it. I saw the potential that scared me and tried to avoid it. In my late teenage years, I was a sponge for ideas and lifestyles I thought would make me the person I wanted to be. I was often in awe of the people around me in a way that made their daily dramas and rituals seem enviable.

And I watched the people I feared becoming closely. My recognition was often a sign that I already had something in common with them.

“You’re a calming presence,” Holly said to me she twisted her hair. I beamed at this, but played it cool.

“Thanks. You are beautiful,” I answered earnestly.

I don’t know why she liked me. What she saw in me. We made up poetry on subway rides, going line by line. We read Carolyn Forché to one another. “We have each of us nothing, we will give it to each other.” She lived in Manhattan, uptown. She was white and had a kind of nineties hip hop aesthetic I admired. She was aware of race politics in a way that complimented my dawning consciousness about race and class.

In between junior and senior years, I had attended a college program for high schoolers where I studied gender and homosexuality in American history. I read lesbian literature including the works of Audre Lorde and wrote a paper about Black lesbians in New York City in the 1940s.

Holly’s family was political and intellectual. They seemed to point a way out of my own history. Raised in an all-white part of Staten Island, the borough known for having giant garbage dump and its large Italian and Irish population, I felt like a dullard. I grew up in a house with a

backyard and that was a privilege I wanted to disown. I wanted a different history. An apartment in the city, the freedom and sophistication I associated with city kids like Holly.

Holly’s white, professor, socialist parents had a framed picture of Audre Lorde on their kitchen wall. A flyer from her memorial I think, which was in January of 1993. Printed on the flyer were her words: “When I dare to

be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.” The words of other poems adorned their walls, cut out from *The New Yorker* and framed. This seemed so natural to them, this loving of words, that one would hang them on the wall and so foreign from my families’ habits. My parents were educated and politically aware, but they were not radical. They were not academics and they were not poets and I viewed this as a deficit.

I was attracted to the urgent need to create community in the lesbian narratives I read.

That I related to the feelings of exile of which I had read and wrote was not apparent to me. That summer in the early college program, I decided that I was bisexual. Holly went to London that summer and returned with a suitcase of stories that entranced me. She had fallen in love with a man. A man, not a boy. In her sadness at leaving him, she played Bjork’s album, *Debut*, again and again. When Holly sang the song *Aeroplane*—I cannot mmm live mmm peacefully without you, for even a moment—I experienced her longing and sadness as if they were my own. But my feelings seemed less poetic, less like art.

Holly understood melancholy and femininity and I tried to be around her as much as possible during our senior year of high school. Shortly after graduation, Holly invited me upstate, with her family, to a house her parents owned with some friends. A large wooden house with no electricity and shutters instead of screens. We spent the days slightly stoned, swimming

and jumping from a high rock into the lake. In long evenings, the light slid down the walls as we played games and talked.

One afternoon, I went out on a canoe with Holly’s younger brother. Showing off, he paddled us into an overgrown nook in the lake, where the sun came through the forest in patterns. He was probably 15. His face wide and square like Holly’s with similarly luscious blue eyes. I was 17, with frizzy curls popping out from a headband. We kissed. On every occasion that I kissed a boy in high school, I had the feeling that I had outwitted my fate as an unattractive, unintelligent girl. I felt lucky and each occasion left me embarrassed by my own sexual desire. This was no different with Holly’s brother. Later that evening, while we watched a movie with Holly, her brother and I sat close and out of Holly’s sightline and cuddled a bit. Her brother’s touches seemed ambivalent. He didn’t want me or didn’t know how to.

A week later, sitting outside the Mexican restaurant where I was bussing tables for the summer, I told Holly about the kiss. She opened her mouth wide and unleashed a long, wordless yell. The sound was part of how she processed the incident. And this was why I loved her. She was emotive and eccentric, like she had rituals I didn’t know about. Her thick hoop earrings fluttered on her ears. Holly looked beautiful while yelling, seated across from me at our sidewalk table. This kissing was a kind of betrayal that we could not put into words, but I knew she was angry. Not only that, but I had wanted more and was anguished about the rejection. The age difference between 15 and 17 seemed somehow perverted. I felt fiendish and insecure. I always suspected that the incident marked me as such. We never discussed it again.

We stayed friends during the first year of college. I visited her at Sarah Lawrence a few times, meeting her new friends. The summer after our first year in University, I worked and saved money for a road trip to California. She had an internship in San Francisco, where she was

living and she had started dating a woman. I spent a couple of days with her. It was my first time on the west coast. She showed me around and I listened to stories about the girlfriend and the summer’s action. Of course, there was passion and romance and drama and of course it seemed more artful, somehow better performed than my own. After that, I don’t think I saw her again.

We simply grew apart.

~

I went to college in Manhattan, achieving my dream of living in a sort of apartment, which was actually a dorm in the East Village. Early on in college, I got involved with activism, but was intimidated by the activists. They were unapologetic about the parts of their identities that were not status quo. I worried that I was status quo. I was afraid to say who I was—queer, white, insecure. There was potential, but it was clouded by doubt. I had no mentors like me, at least, none I could recognize.

Barry Karp was one of my instructors, a white feminist philosopher. She taught us about the intersecting of feminism and race politics. Barry was beautiful in a way I could not comprehend and did not acknowledge. She wore flowy clothing, red lipstick and carried several bags that she lifted and placed on the desk of the classroom. To my 18-year-old eyes, she seemed old and her many colored assortment of bags—filled with books, papers and probably snacks to endure a day of teaching and meeting with students—made me embarrassed for her. During class, I could not take my eyes off Barry. She was probably the age I am now. I think about her a lot, as I pack my bags for a day of writing, eating and teaching.

In her class, we read theory, learned about overlapping oppressions and differences inherent in the female experience if she is black, brown or white; middle or working class; documented or undocumented. We watched “Daughters of the Dust” and looked at Carrie Mae

Weems’ “Kitchen Table Series” depicting a Black woman’s identity through the lens of family. We talked about Cindy Sherman’s many depictions of femininity. As a teacher, Barry was sharp and strict. She taught me how to think and talk about gender, race and class. But to me, her frilly feminine excess, her soft white skin betrayed her, pointed to her weakness. She was eccentric like Holly, but she was not cool, not copiable. I did not consciously look up to Barry because I was afraid of that vulnerability and truth, even though I constantly sought it in others.

~

I spent my time wandering around the Lower East Side, watching the punks, the hippies, the bohemians—lives I envied, but that eluded me. I often sat in Odessa diner, sipping free refills, writing late at night. On Easter Sunday of that first year in college I didn’t go to dinner with my family in Brooklyn or Staten Island. I put on a pale green vintage dress and walked out into the early spring, down St Marks into Tompkins Square Park. It was the promising time of year again, only a year since I had watched Holly scream at her hair. Street kids poured into the park and spent the days there, lounging on tattered sleeping bags, skin slick with sweat and dirt, talking shit to one another, asking passersby for money. During the years I lived in the Lower East Side, I only spoke with these kids a little, but I envied what I perceived as their freedom.

I crossed over the cobblestones, stood on a bench to reach the top of the fence, and hopped over it into the grassy center of the park. The dress fit awkwardly and the humidity caused the fabric to cling. I sat there for a while, alone in that grassy area, wearing the dress, listening to the sounds of the park. I didn’t know anyone and no one knew me.

This wandering continued the following year when I lived in an apartment east of Tompkins Square Park. Most of my time was spent alone or at school. I made acquaintances, but not friends. The walk to school was longer; I crossed the entire East Village. Each morning, I

passed men playing dominoes, gutter punks as they were waking, Odessa’s early morning diners, women sitting on their sidewalk crates and the first of the hordes of yuppies who went on to take over the neighborhood.

~

Although I had started to say the words “I am bisexual,” back in senior year in highschool, I was still in the closet. I used to hang around outside Meow Mix, the new lesbian bar and Boiler Room, an old gay bar. But I

never went in. I could have; I had a fake ID and no one used to check ID's at the door of a bar. But I didn't know what I would do there. I didn't drink and the only kind of hook ups I knew were the ones that occurred randomly in a canoe. Stacy and Sharon were sisters who lived in the apartment adjacent to mine. They were very nice to me. Once Stacy saw me lurking around Boiler Room and asked about it the next day. "I swear you walked into Boiler Room and then left." It had been a Sunday afternoon and I had peeked in briefly. "Oh, I was looking for a Village Voice," I replied, flushed.

~

I thought I might be a dancer. The belly dancing teacher was a white woman, adorned in jewelry with a serene smile who had converted to Sufiism. I still don't know if one converts to Sufiism. She was staying in Manhattan for a few days over the Sufi bookstore near the Mexican restaurant where I was one a busboy. My infatuation with her lasted long enough to consider moving to India and to make several calls to the bookstore and the retreat center where she told me she lived full time. I was not able to locate her, but I fantasized about her for months. I wanted to imitate her participation in spirituality and I wanted to fuck her, which embarrassed me, made me feel the fiendishness I assumed all others saw in me.

I felt fiendish lurking outside the gay bars, just like I had with Holly's brother and like I did with Barry Karp. While I wanted Barry's attention and sought her approval, I could not look directly at her without squirming. I wanted to speak with her authority and intelligence, just as I had wanted something from Holly—her poetic sensibilities, her unscripted reactivity. I also wanted something from the activists—acceptance, community, but I was a solitary bundle of potential, ashamed of all my desires yet bursting with them in all my encounters.

~

I never saw the Sufi girl and didn't meet girls at Meow Mix, although for a brief period, I sold cigarettes from a box around my neck at there. My first girlfriend happened right after I'd graduated college. I never officially came out of the closet, but emerged in pieces. Gradually, I accepted the parts of me that are Holly, Barry, the gutter punks, the activists, the total fiend and copycat. And I came to accept that within my own sense of exile was where I would find my style, my power.

When I am surprised or frustrated, I unleash a guttural yell. I still wander and often upon entering a space, feel sure that there is no place in the new space for me. But I try to remember that the potential is limitless. And though I know myself better now than I ever did back then, still, at least once a year, in late spring, I smell the same potential that came into Holly's window and feel as lonely as I ever have.

# VACUUM EXTRACTION

WRITTEN  
BY **KAT MCNICHOL**

Once, in an ultrasound room, a technician in a faded grey frock asked me which pregnancy this was.

“My ninth,” I said in a flat voice. I was there because I was bleeding and I knew what that meant.

A look of shock flashed across her face before professionalism took over and she wiped the look away.

“How many living?” she asked in a neutral tone.

“Two,” I said in the softest voice possible, a part of me analyzing that voice, the quiet numbness of it, the otherworldliness of it. It had a hollow sound that surprised me.

The technician paused, shutting her eyes against my pain. The ultrasound wand shook gently on my stomach.

“Well, you’re definitely persistent,” she finally said.

She was sympathetic, and I didn’t correct her assumption that I’d miscarried every time. Most were miscarriages but two were abortions. I was usually upfront with healthcare professionals, but if I was losing another one, I wanted her sympathy.

As she pushed the wand against my aching bladder, I lay staring at the wall, anticipating the familiar words, “The doctor will tell you the results.”

That means I’ve lost my baby. If my baby is alive, the technician lets me hear the heartbeat, shows me pumping flashes of blood like psychedelic tracers on the screen, points to a circular shape, or maybe little arms and legs that wiggle, and we both smile. But if my baby is dead, they wipe my belly clean while turning the screen away so I can’t see its silence, say, “You’ll have to speak to the doctor.”

Once, when a different technician, a male technician in a cheerful blue frock, said that for what was my fourth time, I knew my baby was dead.

In Canada where I live, when your baby is dead, you leave the ultrasound room and wait until the doctor can fit you in for an appointment. Then you’re told. It’s not an emergency. Physically, you’re fine. Mentally, it’s torture. Imagine knowing you are carrying a tiny human whose heart is probably not beating but you’re told to wait.

No! He needed to tell me. Knowing the truth would dispel any false hope I might cling to until the doctor finally confirmed what I felt in my heart. I couldn’t – I wouldn’t – go through that torturous waiting again.

So I begged him. “It’s inhumane to let me leave without saying it... I already know, but please just say it!”

“Promise not to tell anyone I told you?” I heard fear and pity beneath his stage whisper.

Nodding, I felt the smallest pang of guilt. He was young, obviously new, and I’d made him uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry, there’s no heartbeat.” Turning his eyes from mine, he wiped his wand clean.

So the next time, in the room with the sympathetic technician and her gently shaking ultrasound wand, I decided to be strong. I wouldn’t make her tell me my baby was dead. I’d just walk out, carrying my dignity if nothing else, and wait until the doctor fit me in. Then I’d schedule another dilation and curettage and let them take my baby out.

Did you know curette is French for scoop?



But, she said something different. “There’s a heartbeat.”

I twisted to look at the screen she hadn’t turned away, saw the blood-lines flashing. She spun a dial and the sound of galloping filled the room.

“I don’t know what to do with that.” My eyes filled and her eyes became glassy too as she gently wiped my stomach clean.

Today, I am playing with my son, who turned two last Saturday. I brought him to my bed after his nap so he’d wake-up easy. We’re hiding under the blanket. It’s a white feather-blanket and the late afternoon sun from the window shines through the puffy pockets in places where the feathers are thin, like a cloud, like heaven. He’s happy here, tucked underneath with me. I am his mother and he loves me unconditionally.

I cuddle him close and realize his diaper is wet. “You have a yucky bum. Pee pee in there.”

His face fills with glee. “Pee pee!”

“Yup, pee pee.”

Something about the way I say it makes him laugh from the deepest part of his belly, his head rolling back, teeth showing in a massive grin. “Pee!” he says, “pee, pee,” and giggling, I say, “pee pee,” and then laugh from the deepest part of my belly.

And I think then of all my babies: my son, my two daughters, the four I miscarried, but especially the two I let go.

They don’t use curettes in abortions anymore. They prefer vacuum extraction now. I think scooping seems more humane, like gently removing them with a ladle.

It’s not that I regret it exactly; I was a child in a woman’s body and I’m definitely pro-choice. But, back then I didn’t know that I could belly laugh under a cloud blanket talking about pee. I didn’t know, and now I do, but I can’t undo the choices I made.

I can only mourn them.

# GUN CONTROL AND MENTAL ILLNESS: MY LIFE WITH A SCHIZOPHRENIC FATHER

WRITTEN  
BY **REBECCA SNEDEGAR**

It's dark. Musty. Smells like piss from one of my older brother's sleepwalking excursions. Claustrophobic. Tears are silently streaming down my cheeks as I crouch in the closet surrounded by discarded army men and RC cars. Muted, I can still hear the yelling emanating from the kitchen. I am hiding. Scared. Terrified. He is looking for me and when he finds me which he will, there will be hell to pay.

"Becky, where are you?" He yells. I can hear my Mom crying. I wish for once she would just stand up to him but she never does. We are all prisoners to his rage.

The bedroom door swings open. He is here. I hold my breath, trying to make myself as small as possible. Invisible. Sometimes I wish to be nothing more than to be invisible.

He is tall and slender with dark hair and a black mustache that reminds me of a bushy caterpillar. His skin is tan and leathery from years of smoking, his long slim fingers permanently stained yellow. His light blue jean pants are barely hanging on. His clothes are always too big. And mostly tattered with holes. To the world he is insane, to me he is Dad.

He flips the small twin mattress in the air discarding my teddy bears and baby dolls. For a moment there it looks like it is raining toys. I can see him through the slit in between the closet doors, his body is rigid. His soft liquid brown eyes black as coal.

"Becky, where are you?" He yells again. I make myself even smaller. He is leaving the bedroom to search the rest of the trailer when my foot gets a cramp and slips, knocking over a few of my brothers long ago discarded toys. The falling toys even though they are small and don't make much noise, it is still enough for my father with his ever precise hearing abilities to detect. My hiding spot has been discovered. I am found, Caught. The closet doors, my once safe haven, are thrown open.

"Gotcha." He laughs. He grabs me and even though I try to fight, squirm away from his strong grasp, my five year old body is nothing compared to his adult strength.

He drags me from the closet, pulling me roughly from my limp wrist. His fingers pale white from applying so much pressure. I try kicking and screaming but doing so would only make things worse. When he is like this, it's best just to stay silent. He pulls me from the cramped small bedroom now messy and littered with toys, down the small dark carpeted hallway and into the living room as if I am nothing more than a flimsy rag doll. Mom is standing in the kitchen, her long black hair flowing down past her shoulders. An apron tied around her house dress. She had been cooking. It seems like that is all she ever does is cooks. Her thick wire rimmed glasses tear stained as silent tears run down her freckled cheeks. She is obviously upset but yet she does not speak,

He pushes me against the white now stained brown couch. The couch is old and dirty, a hand-me-down. Little motes of dust fly through the air as he pushes me face first into the couch. For a second I am mesmerized as the dust motes float through the air, the sunlight from the open window filtering in, making them shine, a brief lull in my current predicament. He pulls down my thin cloth pants exposing my white stained underwear, he undoes his black leather belt, cracked in places from years of use, snaps it in the air for good measure and

whips me once, twice, three times until my bottom is sore and whelped.

Afterwards he puts his belt back on and it is as if nothing has ever happened. He goes outside to chain smoke while alternatively drinking coffee laced thick with non dairy creamer which he chases with a large glass of ice water because he is paranoid and a health nut and thinks if he chases the coffee with water because he believes it will flush his kidneys of any toxins.

I sit in the dirty floor, next to my whitish blonde hair brother who is five years older than me and who has already received his punishment, pondering what I did this time. Maybe I laughed when I shouldn't have or perhaps I didn't sit up straight or eat enough, because while most kids get punished for stealing, lying, or being disrespectful, we get punished for laughing a little too much at a sitcom. Such is life when your father is a paranoid schizophrenic.

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Mental Illness. Two words that makes the rounds daily in almost every news cycle especially now when the nation is rocked with another school shooting and the topic and debate of gun control is front and center. Whatever the case whenever the topic of mass shootings comes up, it always comes down to ONE thing. The shooter had a MENTAL ILLNESS. Two words that are shrouded in such a stigma that people who suffer from such routine mental illnesses such as depression or general anxiety are so afraid to admit that they have one or may need help that it goes uncured most of the time. It's a topic most people avoid until something horrific happens and then the person and their mental illness is always a point of blame.

I've been around "crazy" my entire life. I was only five years old when I realized something wasn't quite right about my father. That my family wasn't like everyone else's. Growing up poor in rural Eastern Kentucky was rough enough. There aren't a lot of job opportunities from where I'm from. Not much room for advancement. Most people barely even graduating high school. And my family was no different. My mother dropped out of school when she was only in 8th grade, my father graduating high school just a few years before the disease lying dormant deep inside would wake up essentially rendering him disabled. Incompetent. Not coherent enough to drive, let alone live a "normal" life.

Dad was only 25 when his sanity was robbed from here. The year was 1987. The year I was born. I guess according to Mom he had always been quite peculiar. A little standoffish. Introverted and shy, he would rather avoid crowds and stay at home than be out in public. His odd behavior only got worse as the years went by. And by the time I was born, he had been diagnosed with both paranoid schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Childhood was extremely rough. We were literally dirt poor. Our only income came from Dad's disability check. Mom didn't work. She had her hands full taking care of us and him, which was a full time job. We lived in a two bedroom trailer with no running water or working facilities. We used an old ice cream bucket as a toilet and a tub of lukewarm water to bathe with. That would have been enough of challenge for any kid, but we also had Dad.

His mood swings were rough. He could be manic and happy one moment. Joking around, laughing, always a lit cigarette and cup of coffee in his hands. The next his eyes would be black as coal and he would be screaming and yelling at us for something so random as laughing during a sitcom. He was extremely paranoid. Always suffering from auditory and visual hallucinations, usually centered around the government or some sort of agency being after us. Planting bombs in our rundown cars or whatnot. He would lash out in anger towards us, usually at some unseen threat that he perceived was going to hurt us and he was just trying his best to protect us though he was in fact the only one hurting us,

He was medicated of course. From Lithium to Haldol, he has pretty much taken every medication on the mar-

ket for bipolar and schizophrenia. That is when my mother could get him to take his medicine. Which was a daily battle. He thought his medication was “poisonous” and downright refused to take it the majority of the time. My mom, older brother, and I would be forced to deal with his increasing episodes of mania/depression. His violent outbursts which were more verbal and emotional than physical. His increasing hallucinations. We would stay until his condition was deteriorating to the point where we were worried about our safety then we would go and stay with my grandparents (my Mom’s family) for a few weeks until things settled down, the only place I EVER felt safe.

My Dad’s life was a ever revolving door of psych wards and hospitals. He would be admitted long enough to get his moods and meds stabilized then he would be released to come home, where he would vehemently refuse his medication with threats of violence, until he was readmitted for a few more weeks. And repeat.

This cycle continued for years. There were so many incidents in my childhood were I feared for my life on a daily basis. Once my Dad had a really bad hallucination that a bomb was in the car so he wouldn’t let us leave and took the keys from my Mother, forcing my 12 year old brother to fight him for them and literally causing my brother to have to jump into a moving car after Mom got the keys back, my brother fighting my father to the point where he was nearly unconscious because even after we got the keys back, he stood in the front of the car so we couldn’t move. That is just one example of many. Incidents like this was my normal.

My mother, who was raised as a Freewill Baptist was extremely religious when I was growing up to the point where she wore dresses all the time and wouldn’t cut her hair, forcing me to do the same, causing me to me a object of ridicule from my classmates. She didn’t believe in divorce. She eventually gave in however when I was 13 years old and my father attacked me to the point that if she and the police hadn’t intervened when they did, he very well may have killed me.

After the divorce, my father’s sister became his power of attorney and has been institutionalized since. His mental illnesses are so severe that he can no longer care for himself and has to be in a place that can insure his safety and others and that can monitor his medications better. I’m an adult in my thirties now and it’s still hard for me to see him. The last time I visited him was a couple years ago and it was absolutely heartbreaking. He didn’t even recognize me. His thoughts so incoherent he couldn’t hold down a conversation. My barely 50 year old father forced to wear a diaper with tattered clothes, his black hair now thin and gray, mumbling the entire time I visited about how the demons scratched his legs and took him through the heater vents and punished him because he didn’t say his morning prayers before breakfast. When he wasn’t mumbling about demons he was crying and begging me to take him home, treating me like the child he was when he left, his mind forever stuck in the past.

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I’m not an expert on gun control nor mental illness. I don’t pretend to know the answers. I can only speak about my own personal experience with mental illness and to try and help raise awareness about it and the stigma surrounding it. In my experience, if my father had had a gun when I was younger, I probably wouldn’t be writing this today, it pains me to say. My father isn’t a bad man or an evil man. In fact, anytime he “hurt” us growing up, he was only trying to protect us from threats that were never there. Deep down he is a loving and caring individual with a debilitating and misunderstood disease. In my belief the root of the cause is the stigma against people suffering from mental illness. There needs to be more education so people that are suffering from a mental illness aren’t afraid to ask for and seek help. There needs to be nationwide health care reform so that individuals with mental illnesses can seek treatment and be able to afford medications and treatment at little to no cost. And there needs to be gun control. There needs to be more background checks. More education. Make it harder for an individual to obtain guns. Ban assault rifles because NO ONE besides the military etc needs an assault rifle. Thoughts and prayers aren’t enough. There needs to be action and NOW is the time.

# THE TIME I INVENTED LESBIANISM

WRITTEN  
BY **CHRISTINE DESTREMPE**

At thirteen, I was unprepared for the surge of sexuality that electrified my body. I was not yet developed in any obvious way: no pubic hair, menstruation, or perky breasts. But I was aroused all of the time even though I didn't know yet the exact mechanics of what I should do about it.

Masturbation never occurred to me because I didn't know about orgasms yet. Nor did I know about vaginas or clitorises. Everything surrounding sex was a mystery. I liked feeling aroused and assumed that another person was necessary to escalate the feeling, even though I had no idea how it was done or where the escalation might lead.

Sex was never discussed in my family. When I turned twelve, my mother forbade me to play with Harold, my best friend and next-door neighbor at our summer cottage. No explanation was given, except that good girls don't play with boys. I liked to fish, swim, catch snapping turtles, frogs, and snakes, and wander the woods and there were no other girls around the pond who had the same interests. So, I ended up eating potato chips on a screened porch in the summer heat with Sheila, who sported a swimming-unfriendly, teased, hair-sprayed flip.

One evening back in Arlington my mother told me sternly she had something she wanted me to read. She walked me down our long, dark hallway like an executioner leading the condemned. She directed me to sit in the parlor and left me alone with a book called *Mother's Little Helper, Twelve Heart-to-Heart Talks of a Mother to Her Daughter in Three Parts*, published in 1952 by the Franciscan Herald Press. She pointed to specific pages I was to read and left me alone. So much for heart-to-heart.

The parlor was the first room to the right of the front door and was reserved for company that we never had. It housed the upright piano; a boxy sofa and chair in purple synthetic upholstery with silver specks; a gleaming, Masonite coffee table with matching end tables on which huge gaudy white and gold ceramic lamps stood guard, cellophane protecting their oversized, white shades from dust that never got the chance to descend. The outer drapes were hot pink in the winter and white in the summer, both accompanied by those gauzy white sheer under drapes. The acrylic cobalt blue wall-to-wall carpeting covered a hardwood floor. The patterned wallpaper was pale green; my mother had painted the dark, crown molding white. There was an archway leading to another room, which my parents partitioned off with beige plastic accordion-fold doors. There was a Jetsons style metallic blue and silver candy dish on the coffee table holding ancient, individually wrapped, hard candies. Bowling trophies and framed school pictures sat on top of the piano. This room, my mother's pride and joy, was off limits except at Christmas and existed to make a positive impression on piano teachers and encyclopedia salesmen.

I sat in the scratchy chair and got to reading with doubt that light would be shed on the mystery of sex. The nuns and priests whom I'd encountered to date were neither trustworthy nor forthcoming with any useful information. My suspicion was validated by floral, yet firm, prose regarding precious substances, temples of the Holy Ghost, intimate acts of embracing, and sins of impurity. What were they trying to say and why couldn't they just spit it out? After awhile, my mother awkwardly returned to collect the book and asked if I understood. My response was that I already knew all this, which was a lie aimed at making her more uncomfortable. It worked because the conversation didn't continue and I never saw that book again until I cleaned out my father's condo after he died.

Shortly after my heart-to-heart talk with my mother, my older sister, Viv, did explain about periods to me, and that a man and a woman had to have sex in order for the woman to get pregnant. I was too afraid to ask her what "have sex" actually meant. From the wisdom and experience of the Franciscans, I was unable to decipher what it meant that an intimate act of embracing was a sin of impurity, which led to a precious substance in the temple of the Holy Ghost.

There were many times throughout my childhood when I vowed to myself never to treat my child the way my mother was treating me. I would enter a state of contemplative disassociation and visualize treating my future child, who was a boy, with kindness. This was helpful especially during bath time. Once a week my hair would get washed, which meant my crying and my mother telling me that my pain was nothing. Fortunately, my mother was a nail biter, so the ends of her fingers weren't as dangerous as they could have been. Otherwise she would have drawn blood by her furious scrubbing as though I had been using raw sewage the way she used Dippity-Do.

"That's too hard; you're hurting me."

"This is nothing; you should have seen the way *my* hair was washed."

My tears were caused by physical pain as well as confusion. I couldn't understand why my mother, knowing how much this hurt from direct experience, would do the same thing to me. Her grand finale involved wringing out my hair with so much force that it felt as though it would all come out in her hand at once. This resulted in my screaming in pain and weeping because my mother was intentionally hurting me. We had towels. Her behavior made no sense. This happened every week until at the age of nine I was deemed old enough to shampoo myself.

I was true to that promise. When my son, Jesse, entered the bath he was given a spa-like experience. Supporting his neck while he lay back to wet his long blonde curls, I spoke to him in a soft voice and told him to relax and pay attention to how good the water felt. Then he'd sit up, I'd gently dab the water from his face and would massage shampoo into his scalp; he'd close his eyes and smile. Jesse had no idea how much of a gift that was. Then he'd go back down for the first tub rinse. For the final rinse, I'd fold a facecloth and he'd hold it over his closed eyes and I'd tell him to tip his head back, all the while reminding him to pay attention to how good it felt to have warm water poured slowly over his head. I didn't wring his hair out, but stroked his head and used a towel to blot the water. I'd wrap him in a towel and hug and kiss him and tell him how much I loved him and how good he smelled.

Another vow made to my future child was that I would answer all questions to the best of my ability and would not withhold any information especially about sex no matter when or where the questions were asked. I also believed in family nudity. When Jesse was about three he did a double-take as I got out of the shower. "You don't have a penis."

"No, I don't. Girls and women don't have penises. Just boys and men have penises. Women and girls have vaginas."

"What's a vagina?"

"It's a part of the body that allows babies to get from inside their mothers to be born."

"Oh."

That was easy.

A few months later we were having dinner in the posh, sprawling home of my boyfriend's father, a pediatrician, and stepmother in Short Hills, New Jersey. It was my first introduction to his family. I had seen neighborhoods like that only on TV and felt a little intimidated by their education, architecture, and Morgan horses romping in the paddock out back. Jesse was always well behaved, polite, and engaging, so he charmed the parents and the attention was not on me.

A beautiful bowl was at the center of the table. Jesse admired it from afar and asked,

"What's that bowl made of?"

"China," the father said.

"You mean where babies come from?"

The father cocked his head at Jesse and then at me, brows knitted.

At that moment I asked myself what's it going to be—squash the kid or tell it like it is?

"No, the bowl is hand-made from special clay and then painted. You're thinking of vagina; that's where babies come from."

“Oh.”

An awkward silence descended. The stepmother looked down at her plate and moved her fork around. My boyfriend popped his eyes at me as he stifled a laugh. The doctor raised his substantial eyebrows and guffawed, “Good for you. That was a great answer.”

xxx

In my junior high school the most significant rite of passage was making out. All of the cool kids engaged in prolonged kissing and then boasted about it in detail. Achieving this milestone was one of my preoccupations and I scanned the halls daily to see who might be a willing partner. I wasn't interested in the boasting part, but I craved the experience because it would take me closer to adulthood, which meant freedom. By this point I knew that second base was petting breasts and third base involved a hand in underpants.

My friends and I would occasionally have pajama parties where we played board games, ate popcorn, giggled, and whispered into the night. There were five of us who took turns hosting. Of course, my house was the least fun. Between parties, a thought occurred while in my usual state of unrequited arousal that pajama parties were the perfect opportunity for my girlfriends and me to not only make out, but also go to second and third bases. I was so pleased with this realization and felt as though I had invented something spectacular that would take off and be a resounding success; that I had invented a whole new way of being in the world and eventually I'd be recognized for my genius. It was a perfect solution and we could practice at pajama parties. The adults would be clueless. We'd have the whole night. The next time my friends were all together, I pitched them. “I have a great idea. Next pajama party, let's all make out and go to second base. Why chase after boys, when we have each other right in bed? Our parents will have no idea about what we're doing. It'll be great. We can forget about boys.”

Ellie, Kathy, Debbie, and Linda sat silently as they contemplated my proposal. I expected a little more enthusiasm. One of them reluctantly admitted that it might work, but who would be willing to be the first to try. “Well, I would, of course. Who wants to do it with me?”

The who didn't matter to me because this wasn't about love.

“We'll have to think about it.”

The four of them apparently had a conference when I wasn't around and decided that at our next pajama party, which was at Ellie's house, Kathy would be my partner. When we finally were behind closed doors, Kathy and I got into Ellie's double bed and faced each other. Ellie was on the other side of Kathy and Linda was behind me. Debbie hung back. I tried to kiss Kathy, but she shook her head no. Then I tried to put my hand up her pajama top and she again refused. She said, “I'll feel you.”

I thought it would be way more fun if we felt each other up at the same time, but this was no time to argue. Her hand was cold and clammy as she put it under my pajama top. Though my breasts were tiny, basically nipples that were outgrowing my flat chest, they packed a powerful sensation as her damp hand investigated tentatively. The experiment didn't last long and resulted in my feeling more aroused than I ever thought was possible and still clueless about what could be done about it. Everyone was left feeling awkward and we quickly settled down this time with no giggling.

On Monday morning as we walked up the hill to the junior high school, Kathy said, “I told my sister what you *made* me do and she said that it was really bad and that we are never to do anything like that again. She said girls who do things like that are called lesbians and no one likes a lesbian.”

I had never heard that word. So much for my invention. I was crushed that someone else had come up with this before I did and that it was already named. I also felt shame as Kathy was the one who seemed to enjoy feeling my breasts and now she was scornful and gave me the cold shoulder. They all followed suit, snubbing me as they quickened their pace, leaving me several paces behind.

I was never again invited to another pajama party.

When my son was sixteen he woke me up from a deep sleep one Sunday morning with, "I did it." What Jesse was referring to didn't register; I grunted and rolled over. He climbed onto my bed, sat next to me and said with emphasis, "Mom, I did it. Last night. With Katrina." Now he had my full attention. I bolted to a seated position and looked at him. "You did?" He gave me a huge smile and shook his handsome head in the affirmative. "Wow," I managed.

It took a few moments to collect myself from this cosmic wobble. Not only was my son now sexually active, he couldn't wait to tell me. "Did you use a condom?"

"Yes."

"Good. Don't ever, ever, ever have unprotected sex. The last thing you and Katrina need at your age is a pregnancy. Does Katrina's mother know?"

"Not yet."

"Is she going to tell her?"

"Yes."

"Great. I will talk to Kathy after Katrina tells her."

Then we both settled into the pillows and talked about love and what it means to be intimate and how you must take responsibility not only for yourself, but also for your partner's feelings and pleasure. We talked about the level of immaturity in high school and how some of his friends may want details that should never be disclosed. We talked about how women aren't always stimulated the same ways or as quickly as men. About what it means to be faithful and trustworthy and how both of those qualities nurture more gratifying experiences. At the time, all of my words of wisdom were still aspirations, as I had never had a successful relationship with anyone other than Jesse and my dog, Guido.

I thanked him for telling me and made him promise that he would continue to come to me first with any issue no matter what. We hugged, told each other how much we were loved, and then got up and made Swedish pancakes.







# CONTRIBUTOR

## Notes

**Meredith Arena** is a writer and performer from a place in New York City called Staten Island. All her writing is inextricably linked to her attempted escape from that place and relearning the lesson that we cannot change where we come from. She moved to Seattle in 2011 and learned how to drive in 2015. She was a Teaching Artist in Brooklyn for ten years and now works for Arts Corps in Seattle. Meredith's writing investigates intersectionality and the interior self in a world where things we hold dear are constantly being destroyed or decaying or both. She is the Blog Editor for the journal Lunch Ticket. Her work can be found in Entropy, SHIFT Queer Literary Arts Journal, Lunch Ticket, The Interdependence Project Blog and Lion's Roar. She recently completed an MFA in creative writing at Antioch University Los Angeles.

**Susan Sinclair Edele** is a wearer of many hats - writer, daughter, dog whisperer, mother, chauffeur, sister, editor, wife, teacher, referee and reader. She teaches at Lindenwood University.

**Tianna Grosch** lives in the woodlands of PA, works as Assistant Editor at Times Publishing Newspapers in Bucks County, and received her MFA at Arcadia University this past May. Her work has previously appeared in New Pop Lit, The Odyssey and Loco Mag. Follow her on Twitter @tiannag92.

**Kat McNichol** is the Co-Editor for the Journal of Integrated Studies and the Editor-in-Chief for Dreamers Creative Writing. She holds a B.A. in English Literature, and an MAIS in Writing and New Media, and Literary Studies. She is currently completing a PhD in Career Writing at the University of Tilburg where she is using autoethnography and writing as method to research the impact that therapeutic writing has on career identity. Kat has spent the past decade writing marketing copy for the high-tech industry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous trade publications, journals and anthologies including Riverfeet Press, the Journal of Arts and Humanities, The 16 Percent, and Every Day Fiction.

**Luke Meier** has served in the military for six and a half years, his most honorable act was performing funeral duties for those who have died with any honorable relation to any branch of service. He considers himself a writer first, therapist second, for the latter pays the bills. He has published two books using a creative non-fiction format, specifically memoir. The featured writing has been fact-checked from his own personal experience and discussions with comrades to ensure the most factual truth.

**Rebecca Snedegar** lives in Eastern Kentucky with her dog. Currently working on a memoir of her childhood and her life with a paranoid schizophrenic father. Committed to raising awareness about mental illness and the stigma that surrounds it.

After a brief encounter with higher education **Christine Destremes** majored in fine arts, then worked for many years as a graphic designer. She is also a painter and printmaker and, at one point in her fine arts career, was represented nationally by six galleries. For the past ten years she has run a small non-profit art organization, Art & Dialogue, where she used the process of art making to generate conversation about today's issues and

how they often intersect, creating monumental art installations through public-participation.

**Sara Porcaro** is a Rhode Island writer dealing in the surreal--from magical realism to high fantasy, with a little dusting of magical topics in her nonfiction, as well. Themes of religion, romance, and the horrors of everyday life especially interest her, and she believes genre lines were meant to be bent and broken.



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