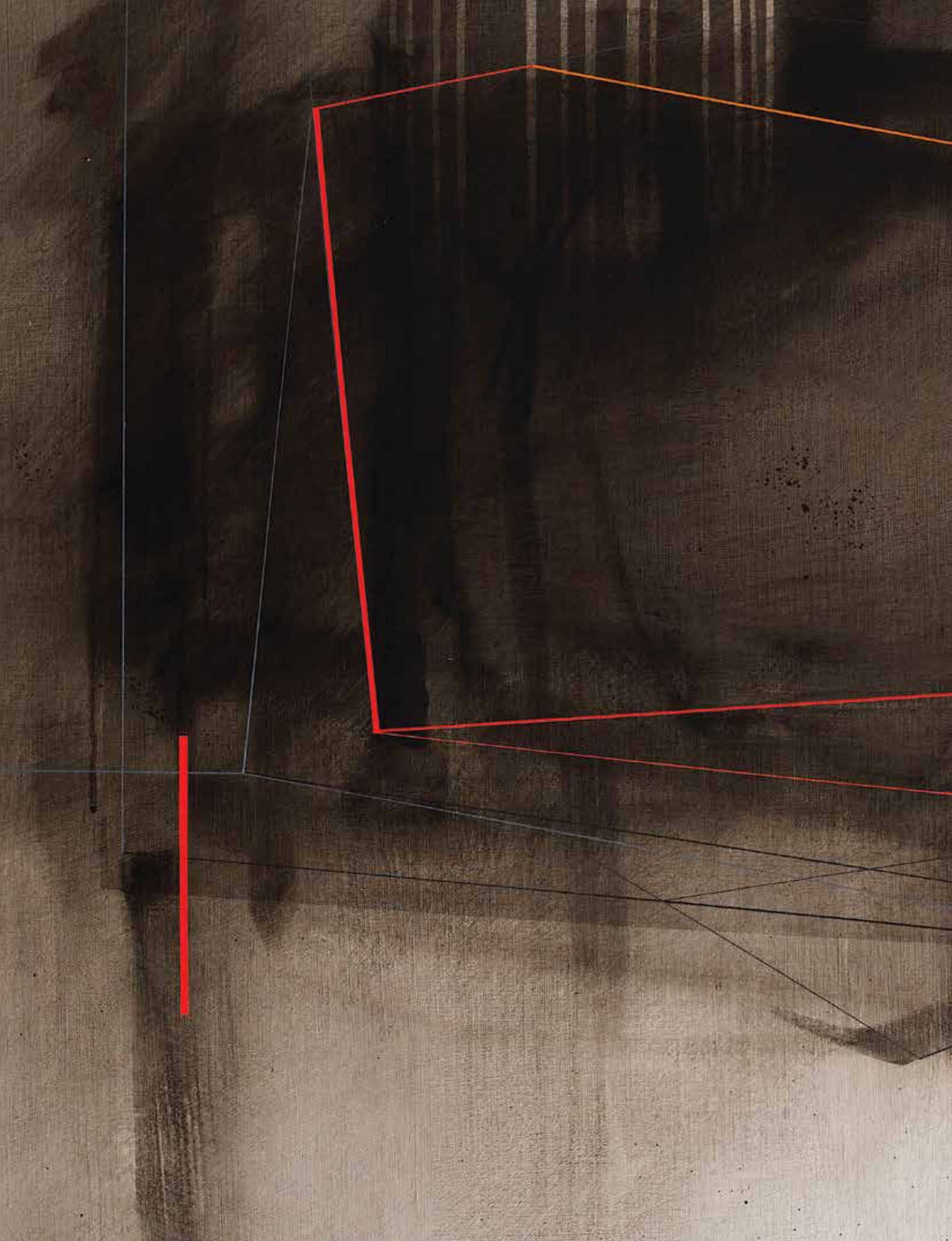


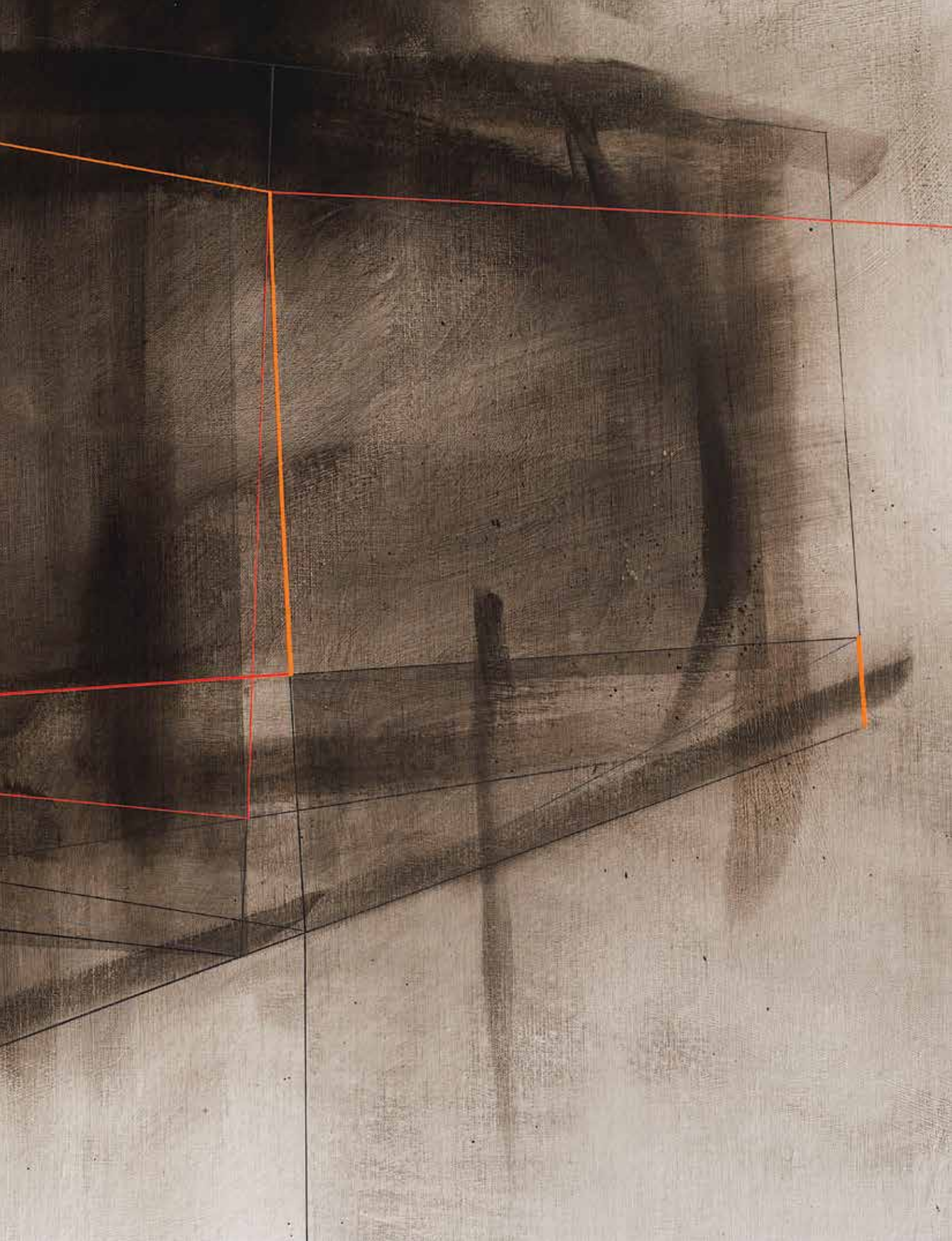
under the

gum tree

TRUE STORIES. REAL ART. NO SHAME. SUMMER 2021.







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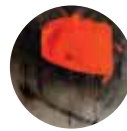
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about

Under the Gum Tree is an independent literary arts micro-magazine. Because we strive for authentic connections through vulnerability, we exclusively publish creative nonfiction and visual art. We publish quarterly and accept submissions year-round. Digital back issues may be purchased at underthegumtree.com and print back issues may be purchased at magcloud.com. Visit our website for complete submission guidelines.

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summertime comfort

We made it to July 2021. Can you believe it?

I say this every July: I love summer. But it's been a while since I've looked forward to summer as much as I am this year.

Last year this time my editor's letter included the pandemic, political unrest, and racial tensions. We certainly have not moved completely beyond any of these problems, but we've made some baby steps forward. At least I hope so.

In the last year I have seen more awareness and willingness to talk openly about tough issues. And while that may not be enough, it is a start in the right direction and that feels like a bit of a respite. Even if you don't see it or feel it, we all definitely need a respite and that is what summer has always been for me.

This year the respite that summer offers may be a little bitter sweet as it brings the anticipation of opportunity for travel and recreation, which is wonderful and exciting—but with it also comes the stress and anxiety of the familiar pressure to fill up our schedules again.

The demands on our time—I'm not ready!

But the thing I keep reminding myself of and keep coming back to is this: The world will not end if you press pause.

I mean, didn't we learn this lesson to the extreme in the past year? The world certainly did not end when we all came to a screeching halt for more than twelve months back in March 2020. Sure, it brought its challenges, but haven't we learned and grown through them? Isn't that what facing challenges is all about?

So now as economies begin to re-open (here in California, we officially reopened on June 15), I am still pressing pause at strategic moments throughout my work week and, heck, even multiple times during one day! And one of the best things to do when I'm pressing pause is to settle in with some personal stories, where I always find comfort.

This issue is no different. With stories ranging from connecting to the land, the life adjustments that come with a first-born child, and memories of music that reverberate in our bones, to the struggles of adolescent body image, the joy of chasing around a grandchild, and the grief over the life we could have had, this issue touches on both pains and pleasures of our human existence.

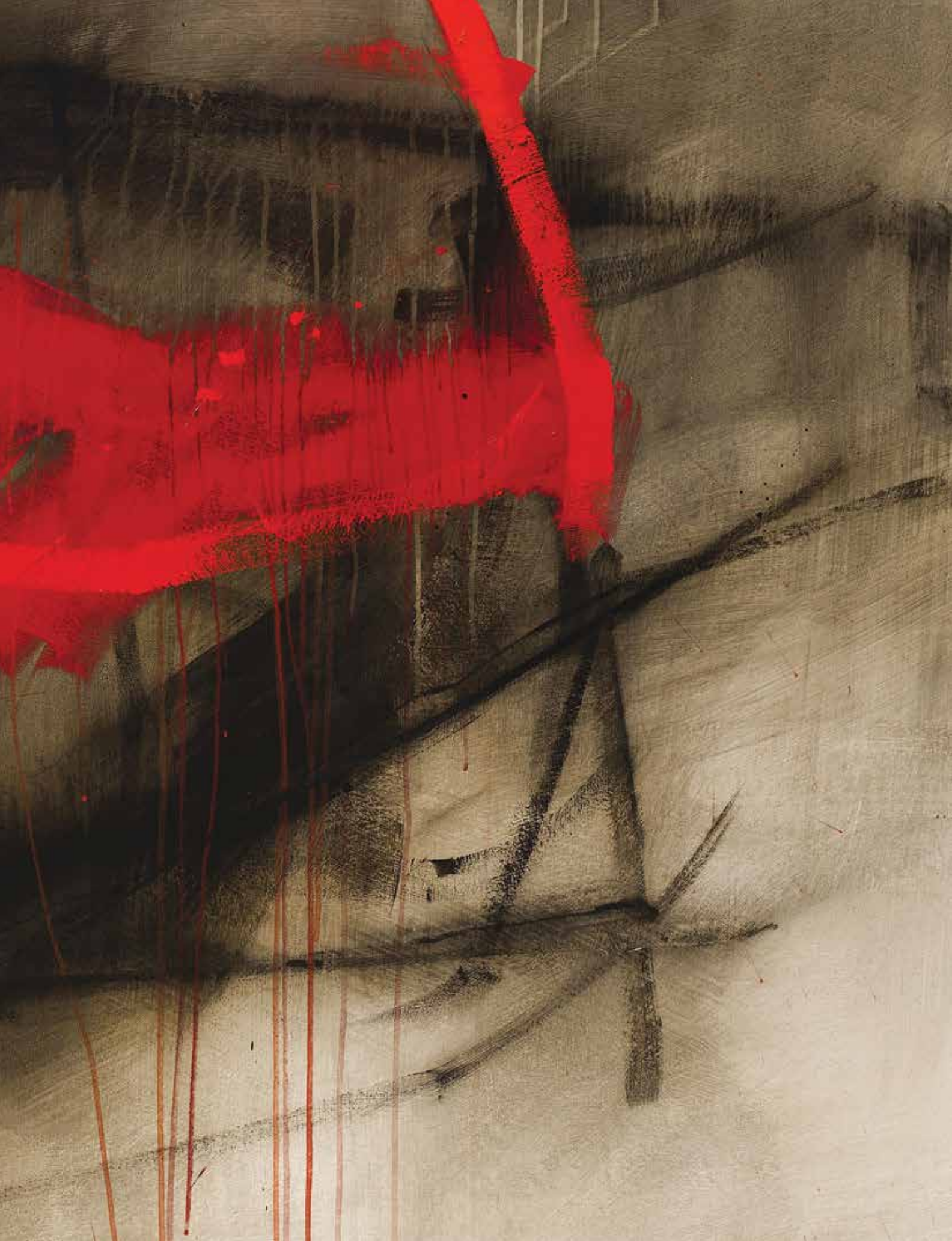
It's perfect for summer reading, which is exactly what I'll be doing, starting...NOW. Happy summer reading, my friend. Let these stories comfort you as they have me, and share them with someone else who might need the respite of a little summertime comfort.

Yours in storytelling,



Janna Marlies Maron
Editor & Publisher







fleeting

annie penfield

I nest. I pull my children close and build a home around us. I want to be like that mother hen that lifts her wings and the small, yellow fluff of chicks bellow out.

They are so clean and soft, and unscathed by the messy world around them. My husband, four months sober, heaves great stones with a crowbar, building a restraining wall to hold in a new vegetable garden. A library of rocks arranged before him on the ground. He picks and chooses

as he puzzles together the wall. Behind him—in the chicken pen—hens putter, chasing bugs.

We build our own little world. And within this world, the children create another little world. I work in my over-ambitious garden by the chicken house.

I have dug out the seasonal spring to capture the water in a stone basin. The kids revel in the dirt pile: “Mud Chiefs” is the name of the game. It’s not “King of the Mountain,” or building roads for matchbox cars, but something that involves smearing mud over their entire naked bodies and running up and tumbling down the mound. They do this for hours, and I can see them from the tractor as I mow the pastures, hacking back our parsnip invasion, in an effort to support healthier legumes for grazing. In an effort to establish control.

The August-high parsnip plants hit the bucket of the tractor. The seeds flick onto the hood, slide the smooth green surface bouncing with the turbulence of the engine, and cascade the crown to fall back to earth. Parsnip is not kind: opportunistic, it spreads wildly across our hay field and seeks out small cuts in our skin. It finds little fissures to implant its poison. If not washed off quickly, it will spring to life as blisters on our bodies. Painful blisters that pop and their footprint remains a red circle on the skin for months. The marks remain long after the pain, and in a few months’ time finally fade. It’s a way the land teaches respect, and I respect the parsnip, but I still want to get rid of it.

We bought these pastures eight years ago, laden with a crop of weeds. With three children under four, we had searched for a home, and found this land in this town. After having moved every two years for eight years, our plan was to live in one place during our children’s school years.

The real estate market was hot at the time—perhaps the Y2K self-reliance, back-to-the-land movement. There was no room for hesitation; one day on the market and they were sold. So we found ourselves thirty minutes from his work and standing in a seventeen-acre, weed-infested field, within an eighty-acre parcel.

In the midst of timothy and milkweed, parsnip and alfalfa, I saw our lives unfolding before us: gardens to feed us, terraces to read books on summer days, post and rail fences delineating pastures, riding rings for my future riding children. I saw the opportunity. Potential spilled around me. “We’ll take it,” we told the realtor as I bent forward to pick a stem of alfalfa and gather it up. And we built a home.

We discovered the parsnip contained a concealed poison. We’ve all had parsnip poisoning, even one-year-old Tucker, his small, soft toddler body flecked with delicate blisters. I have learned from the parsnip. Today, I wear jeans and long sleeves to prevent the infection. I prefer to wear a tank top to feel the precious rays of summer and raise my extremely low vitamin D level. According to the *Farmers’ Almanac*, we average fifty-eight days of sun a year—better than Juneau, Alaska’s average of forty-four days. Still, Vermont ranks as a cloudier state than Alaska, though slightly better than the number-one overcast state, Washington. When my children grow up, they will go to colleges in the sun. Today, I lift my face to the sun, take

in this rare commodity, drive south down the swale into the thickest of the parsnip plants, avoiding the Black-Eyed Susans.

The mower cuts a five-foot swath, evening the field to a manicured look. In mowing the weeds, I discover long-lost items: a single clog, a horse's halter, stuffed animals. The stuffed animal is hacked and puffs of cotton scatter. On one pass, the long grass sways from a sudden movement and a fawn, small and spotted, leaps to its feet and runs up the hill, through the wire fence and into the hayfield. My heart races for a moment, considering what it would have looked like to have mown that baby deer.

"Mowing a deer is messy," my neighbor with the nine-foot mower tells me later.

I have sidled up to make conversation on the sidelines of the soccer field. I talk about my pasture, now that I am an experienced mower.

"It's nothing like mowing a turkey nest though. They don't move," Earl continues.

I have never seen a turkey nest, although we have rafters of turkeys on flyway through our pastures. In morning light I watch them parade across the field, as I sip coffee and prepare to head to the barn for chores. They run across the pasture and up the ridge to the hayfield, not even gathering the attention of the dogs.

He continues, "When I turned to look behind, all there was left was two legs on either side of the nest of eggs." As mothers, our vigilance can be our weakness. We can overfocus on one area and miss so much

else. As farmers, our tasks can be merciless. When did he see the nest? Would he have avoided it, if he had? Or would that have been inefficient—to alter his route?

The sidelines provide conversations that create community, and on a horse farm surrounded by dairy farms and timberland it's easy to feel removed from others, to slide from solitude to loneliness. The games are a time to catch up on family news and connect about plans: When might he come and do the second cut? Who's driving to the next away game? Here is a kind of level playing field, when clearly we are not. I am a farmer that would drive around the turkey nest, like I leave the patch of Black-Eyed Susans.

I am not really a farmer; horses are not livestock. I know with two incomes and a barn of horses, we have an ease our neighbors don't know. Still, we are together in a small Vermont town with two paved roads where everyone is neighbor. Lifestyles are thrown together in a precarious balance. Some lawns have flower beds and others have rotting hulls of cars. Most have vegetable gardens and animals; some have a deer strung up from hunting and others have strung up "Posted: No Hunting" signs. It is a blend of flatlanders like me and natives like our seventh-generation neighbors, trailer homes and large homes, residents and seasonal inhabitants, farmers and commuters. Drinking levels a playing field. In the rehab clinic, we were many lifestyles—doctors, lawyers, motorcycle

mechanics, pharmacists, waitresses, mothers, grandmothers, unemployed—and all damaged by addiction and stumbling, precarious with sobriety.

Farming is a hard life to inherit and a crazier life to choose. Milk prices fall and syrup income is not enough. Barns tumble. Tractors rust. Paint flakes. Stanchions in my neighbor's dairy barn now stand empty. We purchase hay from him now that he has it in abundance because he no longer keeps cows. This is the economy of the neighborhood. Goods and services are traded and relationships cultivated. Farms—the partnership of people with their land—disappear from our landscape because the income from farming cannot keep food on the table, pay the bills, nor repair the home.

Our town is small, but so are the neighboring towns. We are a network of tiny villages, populations around one thousand, points on the map—each cited by a post office, a general store with gas pumps, and a church. The general store, the place we trade information, is the village hub.

In the line at the general store I gather the shape of our community by the smells surrounding me: oil and grease of the mechanic, sawdust and gasoline of the logger, disinfectant of the surgeon, urine of the old retired constable, and the manure on the cow farmer. The organic sweat of our livelihoods mingles together in this line as we talk of the weather. Many complain of the rainy summer and difficulty with

haymaking, or the impeding long winter, unchanging elements of life in Vermont. No feeling of upward mobility in this climate—we are all just ordinary here, and there seems no getting ahead on land. Our time is clocked by the ascendancy of our children through the grades.

School unites us. We do not live on a tree-lined street with neatly-packaged houses, but in a neighborhood of disparity. Houses notch hills, rising above streams on land stripped of trees and removed of rock. These valleys hold secrets. On Greenup Day, I found dead bear in a green plastic trash bag on the steep banks of the creek along our road, along with other bags of trash. The logger found Pete in the woodlot passed out in his car. Walking through our woods, I stumble into a clearing to find a bag of grain and a salt lick: deer bait. Riding, I pass a camouflaged man with sidearms beside the trail: "I am looking for my ginseng plants," he claims. Our land had been empty for so long that trappers and hunters and foragers have claimed our woods. Out skiing, our dog follows the scent of raw meat and encounters leg-hold traps, one on a front paw and a second she backed into on her hind paw. Secrets. Stashed in the woods.

A car speeds down the road and tosses a plastic bag with needles out the window into a neighbor's driveway. For a time there were petty thefts—selected goods stolen to pay for the next hit. Vermont has the highest per capita illicit drug use in the country. Rural isolation leaves few

choices, little opportunity, and plenty of boredom. A heroin highway, a pathway to destruction, runs through this state, and we were lucky not to be on it. We ran on a parallel pathway to destruction. Alcohol kills more people than heroin. Getting treatment is exceptional and chances for recovery are slim. One-third of people sober for less than a year will relapse. Four months is a good stretch, but I feel how soft the ground is underfoot and how easily we could slip back to binge drinking disappearances. I want to be rid of it. Those disappearances are like the marks made by parsnip, scars slowly integrating back to the blush of skin. Constructing a wall today; destructing on booze tomorrow. I could drive home and his car could be gone. Again I could get the phone call: "I thought you might want to know, my brother found your husband passed out in his car in his woodlot." I knew the trail into that woodlot. A wildlife corridor, bears and moose crossed the road at that juncture. I always slowed down, hopeful for a rare sighting. I didn't know my husband could have been parked out-of-sight in the woods. He didn't want to drink at home around the kids, so he would disappear for a day, or two, then three. I didn't tell anyone. Kept this information, and my children, close—a mother hen gathering chicks and stories like secrets under my wings.

Around the corner lived a registered sex offender in a trailer. News circulated about his location; he moved after one winter to the next town north. He may have

thought, in his small trailer tucked into the hem of the woods, that he had a clean slate, but we knew. A small town offers up secrets, like unearthing a thrown horseshoe in the paddock; they work themselves to the surface eventually, to be found if you're looking.

We have no pubs or bars in which to drop in for company. We had a café. It seems to open and close every six months. We have trails, and the general store, and basketball games. We have drugs, alcohol, and snow machine trails in the woods. A former classmate of Pete's begins a traveling law service to assist battered women. She visits wives out in the woods without a car, or a phone, or knowledge of how to balance a checkbook. She tells me a town with a green has a lower instance of battered women. We have a green for summer concerts, and a meeting hall for town meetings and reading series. Neighbors gathering is not simply company, but accountability. I think we require our children to play team sports as much for ourselves as them. And teams are very inclusive. It's easy to be a contributing member of the team, because sometimes it's hard to have enough kids to make up the team, even for basketball.

When I turn right at the bottom of our driveway, I travel through the expansive valley that marks my neighbor's three-hundred-acre, two-hundred-year-old farm with the only usable round barn in the state. Next I pass a falling-down barn that no longer has horses because the plastic-

wrapped round bale he fed them last winter killed them with botulism. Across the dirt road is a tiny shed and thin horses foraging in a crop of burdock within a small pasture, enclosed by telephone pole posts with wide-tape electric. These horses never have hay. In a landscape where every open meadow lining this road is hayed—a bounty of hay at their fingertips—there is not a stalk on the snow with these horses. All winter I watch the horses.

As I make my daily commute, I monitor the changes until the day I notice one horse has been nailed into the shed with a single board across the opening. I slow to see a bag of grain and a bucket of water. The day the horse backed up close to the opening of the shed, the truth was visible. He pressed his body up to the board—a simple act to warm his bones, to feel the warmth of the sun on a winter's day. I stopped my car to be sure of what I saw. What on a horse is normally an apple-round rump was instead slack-hollow. The skin hung from the protruding spine to the points of the hip bones, like a tent heavy with moisture that sags on its frame. His frame so pronounced I counted each rib and each distinct vertebrae normally absorbed by flesh.

I called the state of Vermont and reported the horses. I was told the matter would be looked into. I also called the local vet. He offered ways I could donate hay. He told me the horse was old and the owner had received conflicting advice on care. Despite repeated protests to the

authorities—mine and others—words fail to change the course of events. One day there is a new patch of brown dirt in the snow and an empty shed.

I commit to this place, despite powerlessness and isolation. To commit I consider what holds me here: My children to stay put through the grades, my joy in riding through these woods, my friendships with my neighbors, my appreciation for the land, my desire for my children to ride horses.

In our first years, I walked these woods pushing the children in the jogger, sowing wildflower seeds into the wood-floor churned soft by the treads of the bulldozer that had cleared out trees and released the musky scent of leaf-rotting soil. I planted visions, hoping they would bloom to a whole satisfying life. But the following year there were no signs of wild color. The flowers were swallowed-up by berry and pricker bushes as the natural canopy shot up and consumed the seeds. I cannot force an outcome. That was my first experience of fleeting.

Transplanting plants from the gardens of friends and family, I created perennial beds around the house. Like furniture inherited from my grandfather, I have invested this place with the stories and energies of those we love. We planted lilacs and fruit trees and a magnolia. We began with apple saplings. My daughter, in her red hat and small trowel, shoveled dirt around the root bulb. Each day for a week, twice a day, I carried a bucket of water to

each tree and filled the well around the small trunk. We lost more than we gained: Tent caterpillars, thoughtless snowplowing, bad exposures, and our own constantly escaping goats killed trees, until only one remained. Other apple trees thrive on the edge of our property, away from the house, planted by farmsteads from years ago.

Trees fell all the time in our first years. Logging had compromised the strength of the remaining trees throughout the property. The weave of the root structure had been weakened by the removal of their neighbors. The unsecured survivors could not send their footings deep enough through the ledge and into the soil to save themselves. When a fierce wind blew, trees crashed to the ground. Without the strength of their community, the trees fell. The wind knocked them down, ripping their foundations from the earth. Pete cut them up for firewood, because nothing offered is wasted. Five cords blocked and drying, waiting to be stacked. This is how we heat our home. We accept the offerings of the land.

When the snow melted this spring, our remaining single apple tree had been stripped of bark by mice. We see the evidence of their appetite: All winter they feasted on the tree. I spray-painted over the bare trunk—to keep it safe, or to trick it into having skin in order to survive. I do not mourn for the possible loss of my apple tree. I cannot feel anger for the animals that satisfy their hunger. The painted apple tree struggles to leaf out again.

Now summer and apples tip the branches of my tree. The paint, a phantom layer of bark, supported the tree's survival. Each time I walk to the barn to ride my horses, I marvel at my apple tree, how it emerged from scarcity to bear fruit. How it survived the mice to carry red globes on its crown, like a hope against odds. I ride into the woods and pass wild trees, overpopulated with small orbs, and milkweed rising in the small clearing in the woods; the fragrance floats in the air with the pollen.

Now August and life brims. I mow the pastures. We hay the field. The horses laze in the heat of the mid-day sun. By late summer, Brussel sprouts, squash, lettuce, and tomatoes tangle together in the new vegetable garden. In the cool evenings we sit on the porch and eat together as a family, share stories of our day, as the horses snort off in the shadows. In the dusk, we see their tails swish off flies.

In the fall we pick the apples. Our tree bears a wimpy fruit; it has survived. More abundant were the old wild trees on the property. Pete buckets the children in the front-loader of the tractor and raises them high in the air. They pluck the fruit from the branches, and then drop them into the bucket until they are nested by apples. He returns to the house where we transfer them to barrels. I expected sweet. Too bitter to eat, the apples are pressed for cider. For a month, they sit in our equipment shed. Squirrels steal them from the bucket and create stores. I look

around the trusses at the little misshapen orbs waiting for winter. The landscape prepares—slowly pulling down into the roots, building stores of foods, lining dens with hair—and we stack the wood into the shed Pete built on the house, freeze applesauce and cider, and put up hay for the horses.

On a dark December night, I pour a little bit of the gold of autumn into our glasses at the dinner table, as we sit and talk about our day, bare branches out the window. Now nine months sober, and the ground feels more solid. The odds are improving. The dread of drinking slowly leaves me like poison, swallowed up by the goodness of the work we do side by side on this farm. Each sober day builds more certainty. The evolution of our home, the gardens and walls, build contentment. Certainty and contentment I squirrel away and store.

While the tree is bare, the skeleton is strong. It is the frame on which I hang my hopes. I believe in this land, and the constancy of seasons, and the strength of my partnership. We will endure. We are a family, and this is our home. I am here for the long haul. Friendships are not purchased or claimed but grown slowly. It may take years to feel a sense of belonging and a lifetime to know a place. I trust this home we are creating will keep us safe and together in every season.

The variables of each season bring change, fresh like the scent of the lilacs wafting around the porch, vibrant like the

bursts of wildflowers interrupting the green palette of the fields, content like the horses lazing in the sun in the pasture, glorious like the canvas of fall colors that stroke across the hillsides surrounding us, or the peace of deep snow cradling the house. You have to like your landscape and I do. I like working outside, shaping our farm. I may carve and contort the landscape but when the wind blows and a tree hits the ground I am reminded I am powerless.

As the children and I venture into the woods, we have discovered secrets. A small creek is now just a dry channel through the woods. A large ring of maples towers in the midst of a tight second growth. Old stone walls run this way and that. Pine needles and layers of dead leaves carpet the interior of an old cellar hole. I lay a small quilt on the ground and the children and I have a picnic in the old cellar hole. I tell made-up stories I hear from the land: A magical farm and the hard-working animals. After our snack we will search for the stone bridge, near the ring of giant maple trees.

I pick out the clues of a former life: The cellar hole where the house once stood is only a square indentation in the ground with one side lined with rocks, not a nail nor a piece of glass remain. The small maples and larger pine trees have grown up, a second growth rising between stone walls. The once-cleared pastureland is now reforested. The sweat of a former generation dried up. Opportunity lost.

We follow the hint of trail to the old stone bridge over a dry creek—a nearby

water source that once sustained the family and their animals—and a road traveled often enough that the creek required a bridge. All remnants of a life that had once been full, carved into a hillside, shaped to their needs, coexisting with the woods, and now all that remains is the footprint of that life—the cellar hole.

They put down roots and made a homestead. We have found no neighboring cellar hole as obvious, so perhaps they held a large tract, isolated from the neighbors, a far ride to the village. Diminished by a place, the balance shifted and the land swallowed them up. Perhaps, they followed that old road away from their home, the stream, the house, the pastures—all disappeared right behind them—right

into the woods, leaving not a trace. The economy of the woods: It saves nothing it does not value.

This land has steadied me. When my husband left, I stayed to make a home. When he returned, we were here. I hid from neighbors and kept company with my horses and chickens and dogs. Sequestering myself away, I tended the animals and the gardens and watered the trees. But I also know I am nothing without community. I know that I am powerless and life can be unmanageable alone. I couldn't save the horse. I won't be able to keep my children home always. I can't stop my husband from drinking. It's all fleeting. 🍷



Annie Penfield is a graduate from the MFA in Writing Program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has been published in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Fourth Genre*, *Hunger Mountain* online, *r.k.v.r.y*, *Equestrian Quarterly*, *Assay*, *Beautiful Things*, *Prairie Schooner* online, and forthcoming in *Ninth Letter*. She lives in Vermont and is working on a narrative based on her essay “The Half-Life,” winner of *Fourth Genre*’s Steinberg Essay Prize and a Notable Essay by Best American Essays.



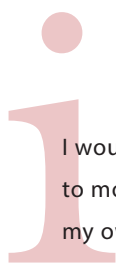




the thought of *US*

cicily bennion

All my possessions are in a garage, but the only items I can see are the ones on the periphery: A rocking chair, our mattress, a lamp, a box that says “Dresses” and another labeled “Bathroom.”



I would love nothing more than to unpack, to move out of our in-laws', to sleep on my own mattress instead of the one in the spare bedroom upstairs. It is a mattress that has lost its integrity on the edges; it slopes

down towards the ground and I spend my nights gradually sliding off. But the two-bedroom apartment we hoped to move into—an upgrade we decided to make to accommodate the coming addition to our

family, the baby who will make us a party of three—is water damaged. And for the last few months, I’ve been here: Four, then twelve, then eighteen weeks pregnant, sleeping on a bed that does not want me, while supposedly, someone, somewhere, is making repairs.

It’s embarrassing to admit this, but there have been nights when I’ve cried for our old apartment. Not gracefully, either, but in choking, gasping sobs, which I tried to muffle with a pillow so that my mother-in-law sleeping across the hall would not hear. My husband, Nathan, would try to point out the silver linings as he wiped away my tears—we were saving so much money on rent and food, my commute to school had practically disappeared, and this new place, when we finally moved in, would have a room for a nursery. When that didn’t help, he’d admit that he missed it too. Together, we would list the things we missed: How the morning sunlight gave color to our gray walls in the winter; how we read barefoot on the patio together in the summer. He missed walking to the movie theatre together on a weeknight. I missed the sound of his footsteps coming down the corridor, the sound of him coming home. And then, having exhausted myself with memories, I’d fall asleep on the mattress that still did not want me.

I read Amy Leach’s *The Round-Earth Affair* and I’m jealous of the ease with which she says “we” when speaking of her whole neighborhood: “We were each like a tree grown in a cage. My neighbors

and I slept tucked behind thin gates and thin doors . . .” She goes on, speaking confidently of the feelings and whims of the neighborhood around her: “We were hard to horrify” and “We were resigned.”

And then quickly, slyly, just as easily, her “we” becomes all of humanity: “. . . Nature needs us like a hostage needs her captors . . . We are dubious heroes who create peril and then save its victims.” I find myself thrilled to be part of her “we” even if it is a we of clumsy devastation. I point this out to my creative writing students in class and they stare back at me, glassy-eyed. *See how she’s drawing nearer to you with this one little pronoun?* I ask. *We are part of something bigger*, I say. *We are part of this story*. My voice is growing desperate. They nod as if to reassure me. It does not reassure me.

After school, I take the bus back to my in-laws’ house. I look at the homes which contain people who never seem to emerge. And then one of them does emerge, and I avoid meeting her gaze. I spend the rest of the afternoon in the living room watching sitcoms with my brother-in-law. Later that day, I drive past the apartment we’re supposed to move into, past all the tiny houses on the block, and I can’t think of a single thing I can say about “us,” my neighbors and me.

I recall a time in our former apartment when my neighbor and friend knocked on my door with her not-quite-two-year-old in tow. “Would you mind watching Ella while I unload the groceries? It’ll just take

a minute." Ella and I sat together on the kitchen floor, eating sliced strawberries from a bowl before she got up to toddle around the living room. I was not pregnant yet, but I wanted to be. And just when I began to sink with that thought, Ella ran to me. She called my name, her babyspeak transforming "Cicily" to "Silly," and I was happy to be whoever she wanted me to be, so I scooped her up, and both of us were spinning, spinning, spinning.

* * *

At eight o'clock, I tell Nathan I'm going to bed early. Alone in the spare bedroom,

I ask our baby how he's doing in there. In response, my belly rises and falls with my breathing. In these moments it's easy to believe I know this being inside me, and despite the fatigue and the morning sickness, I thrill at the thought of us. When Nathan comes to bed later, I rouse long enough to tell him that I think this little baby is a sweet one, and he kisses me back to sleep.

We woke up two times in the night to pee, and in the morning, we were startled awake, having nearly fallen off the bed again. 🙄



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duende

cyndie zikmund

On a dark stage lit by a single beam of light, a pony-tailed singer warmed his throat.

h His voice sounded raspy as if emanating from tobacco-etched lungs. The guitarist played in perfect rhythm to the singer's mournful cries. Seated at the base of the stage with my nose at floor height, I was

in Madrid, Spain and about to experience my first live Flamenco show. But I felt as if I had known Flamenco all my life, having replayed in my mind the one dance I had seen when I was seven years old.

It was 1965 and we lived in a Montana railroad town when Ed Sullivan brought a Spanish dancer into our living room through the sorcery of television. She drummed the stage with her nail-bottomed shoes, wearing a long, white ruffled dress and a pink flower in her hair. Her facial expression carried a haunting determination I'd not seen in my Scandinavian and Eastern European families.

Suddenly, I saw another side to the gentle guitarist sitting cross-legged on a wooden chair. He played like he had

the next move. I memorized her features, arm positions, and every detail of her dress: Its high waist, scooped V-neck, triple ruffle running diagonally around her toned body until it graced the floor. When she slowly turned to face the audience, her eyes were fixed downward, not yet acknowledging the room of strangers.

Her hands started clapping in counter rhythm while the music grew louder.

My eyes were glued to her, goosebumps traveling from spine to scalp.

The dancer lifted the skirt of her long, black dress, shifted her gaze to the



We saw, for the first time, the red polka-dotted lining of her dress like a secret shared between lovers. The feet of this fiery woman moved in super-human ways.

four hands, each vibrating at a different frequency. Enchanting rhythms floated and collided midair while my heart pounded to his penetrating sound.

Out of the darkness, a dancer appeared. The diffused beam surrounded her in particles of light, illuminating her curvy figure as she took the stage with the presence of a bullfighter. Her shadow fell like a veil, dropping a silhouette that was neither forced nor natural.

I imagined she was angry. She detested the pain in her life, but she confronted her losses the way I longed to defy my own. The dancer held her position, contemplating

audience, and started to play percussion with her shoes. We saw, for the first time, the red polka-dotted lining of her dress like a secret shared between lovers. The feet of this fiery woman moved in super-human ways. She balanced on the heel of one foot while the other moved from toe to heel, teeko-toka-teeko-toka-tok-tok.

Her pace quickened.

Guitar man followed her lead.

She was in charge for what seemed like seconds, but I knew minutes had passed.

She bent slightly forward, raised her right arm over her head and lowered her left arm, forming a propeller. She spun—

with such force an illusion of a circle formed around their arc—once, twice, three times before landing with her right arm rounded in front and floating her left hand to her waist as if nothing had happened.

Her inspired frenzy had ended as spontaneously as it had started.

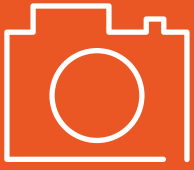
Her chest heaved. Sweat poured down

the sides of the dancer's face, gliding across the bare of her neck, absorbing into a red triangular scarf rimmed with red fringe. We were connected, this gypsy woman and I, bonded by the music of her world. Hypnotized, I had felt her duende engulf the room. Something inside of me had changed. I had felt her power.

And I wanted that power too. 🍷



Cyndie Zikmund's essays have appeared in *The Literary Traveler*, *Magnolia Review* and *Pink Panther Magazine*. Her book reviews have been published in *River Teeth* and *Southern Review of Books*. She served as CNF Editor for *Qu Literary Magazine* and *The Magnolia Review*. Cyndie holds an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte, an MBA from Santa Clara University, and a BS EECS from UC Berkeley. She is currently finishing work on her memoir, *Oreos, Red Wine, and a Hot Bath*.



growth

shaylin wallace



























S

Shaylin Wallace is a graphic designer and artist who creates content for businesses and individuals. From cover art to logos and apparel designs to advertising media, she uses Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop to create defining content for brands. Wallace specializes in photo-manipulation and photo-editing. She creates surrealistic, imaginative pieces by combining multiple images and clip art. She has been editing photos for six years and had her first gallery exhibition in Fall 2018.



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sweet and sour

zoe w. briscoe

Kit Kats were worth jail time. At the Target checkout, I waited for the right moment to strike.

The window of opportunity rested on the convergence of several things: One, Mom would walk ahead of me towards the register. Two, the cashier's eyes would lower after his customary half-hearted greeting. Three, I would be *just* close enough to the boxes of candy to get what I

wanted without drawing suspicion.

Mom held her Visa, overseeing the flow of lettuce, carrots, and Diet Mountain Dew into bulls-eye-stamped plastic bags. Together, they would make up my breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the next three weeks until I performed in

my upcoming ballet competition. I was the only family member subjected to such torture. My older brother got to eat burgers and pasta while I nibbled at my lettuce, trying to savor every tasteless bite and trying to avoid looking at his plate. I imagined that the lettuce was something tasty like chips, and that made the diet marginally easier. Ninety-five pounds wouldn't cut it—I had to look fabulous.

Up until two months ago, when I couldn't fit into the stupid Sugar Plum Fairy costume, I'd never stolen in my life. It was only after I'd been cursed to an eternity of treadmill walking, rifling through empty cabinets, and telling my rumbling stomach to eat itself at night that I realized I could get what I wanted another way.

I leaned closer to the candy. Rows of neon packages were angled precisely towards the check-out aisle, tempting customers into breaking their Atkins. Swiftly, I took a Kit Kat from the shelf and tucked it inside the sleeve of my puffy coat.

Mom's high-pitched laugh as she talked with the cashier spooked me. The removal of the Kit Kat's wrapper was a delicate process, after all. To get the first tear, I had to discreetly bring my left hand over to my right sleeve. Even I couldn't do it with only one hand. The obnoxiously bright plastic gave way rather loudly. My shoulders tensed, but neither Mom nor the cashier took notice. At times like these, I was grateful for Mom's overly animated friendliness.

I worked on shimmying the Kit Kat out

of its wrapper. I was scared of dropping it because my hands were shaking so goddamn hard, but I managed to separate the two. The adrenaline made me a little paranoid at this point, as I tossed the wrapper into the back of the Kit Kat pile, holding my prize between my fingertips. With an exhale, I looked towards the exit—

A young security guard stood there, watching me, his arms folded across his chest. His eyebrows arched so high they looked like the McDonald's M, only in black instead of gold. His eyes, the color indiscernible from this distance, zeroed in on my right sleeve.

I'm going to jail.

This was the end. I could imagine the headlines: *Are Kit Kats Worth Getting Arrested Over? This Thirteen-Year-Old Seemed To Think So.* Mom would kill me. I couldn't decide whether I was more scared of her knowing that I stole or that I'd broken the diet.

Every step we took towards the exit felt like an eternity. Mom said something, but I couldn't focus on anything other than the guard. As we drew closer to him, he stared right back. I waited for him to either yell or grab my arm, forcing me to reveal the Kit Kat. My legs shook uncontrollably, and I was nearly in tears when we finally came side-to-side. Emerald eyes the shape of almonds bore into me. He knew what I'd done; it was undeniable. I prepared for the worst.

But it never came. No shouting that I was a thief, no tackling me to the ground

and prying the Kit Kat from my sticky fingers. The guard stayed silent as Mom led me out of Target and into the February night.

I was a wreck all the way to the car. The freezing wind carried my tears away, but the sound of my heavy sobs wasn't so easily masked.

"What's wrong with you?" Mom asked,

confused. She ran her free hand over the top of my head.

"My stomach hurts," I lied.

Before we got into the car, I dropped the Kit Kat into the grass. It laid there, taunting me. The wafers were now visible, the chocolate having melted. Its liquidy residue stained my hands like blood. 🍫



Zoe W. Briscoe is a junior Creative Writing major at Emerson College. Her work has previously been published in *URCA: The NCHC Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity* and is forthcoming in *Glass Mountain*. After graduating, she seeks to pursue a career in both fiction writing and academia. She currently resides in Austin, and in her spare time she can be found playing Sudoku or watching the latest figure skating competitions.





Spencer 14



pointers for spending
24 hours
with a *five-year-old*

susan vespoli

If you get the opportunity to hang out with a five-year-old for twenty-four hours a week during not only a blazing Phoenix summer but a pandemic, rejoice!

You won't have a moment of privacy (think sock puppet shoved under the bathroom door and "Grandma, Grandma!" while you're sitting on the toilet), but you'll be so busy spinning in the wake of a happy tornado, you'll never even have time to think about the apocalypse, not to mention your long-term relationship in crisis or the loss of your beloved dog. The dog that was kept by the man who said you do not "meet his safety guidelines" due to your watching

this young dervish while your state's COVID numbers shoot through the roof. No worries. You and the little girl can have the time of your lives if you just:

Let Her Cook

Each week, plan something (anything) she can cook. When you were a Montessori teacher back in the day, the once-a-week cooking projects were the kids' all-time favorites. Let her squeeze lemons to make

lemonade, press cookie-cutter hearts into pie crust, bake cupcakes, crisscross peanut-butter cookies with a fork, slice bananas, top pizza with shredded mozzarella, and crack an egg. Listen to her say, “This tastes like joy!” when she bites into the cupcake or, “Oh, my goodness, look at all this egg jelly!” as the yellow and clear goop oozes into the bowl like slime.

Let Her Make Art

All you have to do is provide a large cardboard box, pom poms, googly eyes, magic markers, tacky glue, water paints, pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, socks, child-friendly scissors, buttons, paper, and watch the magic unfold. She will turn the cardboard box into, first, a playhouse graffitied with hearts and flowers, and then into a puppet theater. With the creation of stick and sock puppets, she will perform shows in the living room for you and the old dog, Sylvia—not the young one, James, who you wake up dreaming about, now in Flagstaff with the guy who’s afraid of your germs. Over the weeks and months, watch your walls, doors, and fridge be covered with portraits and collages of love.

Let Her Swim

Every Thursday, drive her across town to your oldest son’s house—your only kid without a drug problem, the one you got pregnant with in high school the year abortion became legal, the one you wanted to keep more than the guy whose sperm made you a mother, the kid who turned

you from bratty selfish teen into protective would-do-anything-for-this-kid Mommy. On the way to his house, play “I Spy” with the little girl, taking turns spying street signs, skyscrapers, flags, inflatable dancing men, and brilliant orange umbrellas over a road crew. When you arrive, park and let yourselves into his backyard, because that is the deal. He unlocks the gate, but stays inside due to the virus, because everyone knows that you and your little charge could be packing their death. For weeks, slather her with sunscreen, push inflated floaties up over her biceps so she won’t drown, and jump in. In the early weeks, before the sun warmed the pool to bathwater, the water had seemed freezing. You, who’d inched in one frozen millimeter at a time, had admired the child who’d flop into the cold without hesitation, while saying to you, “C’mon, you can do it; you’ve got this!”

One Thursday, you arrive at the pool and are notified by text that your Sunday drive to Flagstaff is canceled by he-who-texts: “I’ve been looking at this pandemic and must take adequate precautions considering the changing situation. I will be keeping company with James for the time being.” You feel daggers and tears roiling inside you, but you hold them in and jerk back to reality because—Splash!—your granddaughter has jumped into the pool. Her eyes twinkle as she says, “Oops, I took off my floaties.” You gasp and hotfoot it into the pool and then, suddenly, she is gliding past you underwater, feet swishing like a mermaid’s tail, coming up laughing, “I can

swim!” and your heart that just broke with the text is now illuminated like Leonard Cohen’s *there’s-a-crack-in-everything-that’s-how-the-light-gets-in* song lyrics and you can’t believe she is swimming and she looks like the seals back in Tacoma bobbing in the Sound along the walking path where you and that dog-hoarding dude used to stroll. By the next week, she dives right in, swimming underwater across the pool over and over, surfacing each time to shriek, “THIS is my life!” Only once does she choke, because she opened her mouth underwater to say, “Weeeeeeeeeee!”

Let Her Sleep with You

The guy’s not there anymore, so you and she can take the bed. You were sleeping on the floor next to her in sleeping bags back before the virus, when he was still in town, before you and the little girl became lepers, back when she was scared to sleep alone. Set up a routine: Run the bath, stripe the toothbrushes with toothpaste, let her take a side of the

bed, have her pick three books for you to read. Never drink or take medicine or even ibuprofen in front of her, because she may associate it with her earlier years living in a nest of addicts. Once, when you forget and take the vial of estrogen from the cabinet, her eyes will widen as she asks, “What’s that? Your little midnight helpers?” And you wonder where in the world she heard that or if she’s been reading *Valley of the Dolls*.

After the three storybooks, turn off the lights, lie down next to her, tickle her back for two minutes and say, “Good night. I love you,” and some nights she will say, “Let’s snuggle,” and she’ll nestle against your side and some nights she’ll roll around tossing the blanket in the air with her feet like a horizontal soccer player and some nights she’ll say, “You’re my favorite grandma” or, “I love you times a million,” and you will always reply with the same magnitude. And for the last few weeks, she’ll also say, “I wish I lived with you” and your heart will clench, and you’ll say, “You do, you live with me one day each week.” 🍷



Susan Vespoli writes from Phoenix, Arizona. She returned to school in her fifties to earn an MFA from Antioch University L.A. Her work has been published in *Rattle*, *Nailed Magazine*, *Nasty Women Poets: An Unapologetic Anthology of Subversive Verse*, *Mom Egg Review*, *Emrys Journal*, and others. When Susan’s not writing essays and poems, she’s leading virtual writing circles on writers.com, playing with her granddaughter, walking her two small rescue dogs, or riding her blue bike.







wild oregano and *thyme*

diana gittins

In 1967 I was renting a one-room basement apartment in a working-class area of Athens. The windows were just above street level and offered a view of feet, wheels, and paws.

e Every day at six in the morning a knock clattered on the metal shutters above my bed. I staggered to the kitchen corner to get my bowl, opened the shutters, exchanged *kalimera*, good morning, with a small, leathery man who always had a cigarette dangling from his mouth. From the back of his motorized cart he lifted a block of ice, bent down towards my

window and plonked the ice into the bowl. I took the ice to the lead-lined icebox I had bought in the flea market in Monastiraki, made a coffee on the hot plate and started to write. My plan was to settle in Greece and become a writer. I supported myself by teaching English in the evenings.

I wrote until the fishmonger came singing his wares down the street a couple

of hours later. His face was a dried-up river bed. He walked with a steady rhythm and had a flat straw basket of fish perched on his head. Behind him paraded a motley assortment of scrawny cats, whose plaintive cries almost drowned his own. When other people were on the street, he made as if to kick the cats and swore at them. But when he thought nobody was looking, he slipped them tiddlers and muttered to them softly.

When the fishmonger had gone, I tidied the apartment, went out to the shops to buy bread and cheese, fruit and halva, and returned in the hope that my lover, Nikos, would soon be there.

How different Greece seems on this trip to the island of Rhodes with Jonathan, from when I first came here as a tall, dark-haired young woman overflowing with hope and the ambition to become a writer. I miss the dazzle of danger in the unknown, the frisson of the unexpected and the buzz of meeting strangers. The last star is fading. Dawn slips in. The lights over the hotel terrace have gone out. All along the Bay of Lindos are hotels, hotels, hotels. No fishing boats, no little huts on the edge of the shore. Yet the air is full of Mediterranean scents of pine, wild oregano and thyme. The sea is the same azure and cobalt. The doves still coo despite tourists snoring securely in luxury suites with locked doors and air-con.

Two days after our arrival, Jonathan and I set out by bus to Rhodes Town. The walled city of this ancient town, with its medieval *auberges* of the Knights of St.

John, its cobbled alleyways, shops and medieval towers, its tavernas and squares are a refreshing antidote to the miles of plate-glass hotels, apartment blocks and shops. We settle in a taverna beneath a pergola of vines. Jonathan drinks cold beer. I sip lemonade and suck on the ice cubes. Dappled shade flickers patterns on the red-and-white checked tablecloth. A cooling breeze from the harbor relieves the heat of the day.

A tall, dark-haired man strolls down the alley, playing the guitar. Greek music makes my body soften, sway, melt. He starts to sing *strosse to stroma sou ya dio*, make up your bed for two, and I am back in Vouliagmeni, forty-seven years ago, dancing under the stars at the open-air all-night disco on the edge of the sea. Warm breezes surround us. Nikos holds me tight.

I start to cry. Jonathan looks distraught and tries to comfort me. The guitarist watches me with cello-brown eyes. He is probably in his late forties, around the age of the baby Nikos and I should have had. I had wanted a girl and wanted to call her *Melissa*, honey bee. But of course, it could have been a boy. It could have been this honey-colored man with long fingers and a mellow voice. He might have been my son. He plays on. I try not to weep.

"Tell me about it," says Jonathan.

Nikos had the stature of a Greek god, although he was atypically blond with blue eyes. He worked for his father in a small business that had something to do with import and export. We saw each other

almost every day, ate together, danced and slept together. We went to Delphi, Nafaktos and Aegina. On a hot night in late August, we went to Sounion and swam naked among the phosphorescence, swimming in stars.

One winter evening we were in the cinema. The film panned in on a bowl of shiny red apples. A surge of yearning pulsed through my body.

"I want an apple!" I whispered to Nikos.

"Shh!"

"No, I mean it. I've got to have an apple. Now. I really do!"

"Be quiet, will you? Wait 'til the film is over."

I grabbed my jacket, got up and left the cinema. On the street outside, the smell of roasting chestnuts wafted through the night air. I peered around to see if there was a greengrocer's. Nikos burst out of the cinema.

"What's *wrong* with you?"

"I told you, I HAVE to have an apple!"

He stared at me. "You're pregnant, aren't you?"

A shaft of light shot through me. Pregnant? Me? A mother? I couldn't take it in, while at the same time every cell of my body glowed with recognition. I was going to have a baby! Nikos and I would have a family in a little apartment on Kolonaki Square! The moment was infused with something divine that I have never understood and probably never will.

What followed was far from divine.

Nikos would not marry me. His father

was adamant that Nikos had to marry a Greek woman. Yes, Nikos insisted, he did love me, but we could not be married. Did his father threaten to fire him, disinherit him if he married me? I don't know. It's quite likely, but at the time I wasn't rational enough to consider the pressures that were on him. I just wanted to keep my baby. I wanted to live in Greece. I pleaded with Nikos, tried to persuade him to change his mind. Had he forgotten our trip to Delphi and our siesta under the olive trees where we drank the most delicious water I ever tasted from an ancient spring? Had he forgotten our dancing, our swimming, our making love together all the previous year?

He would not budge.

A Turkish friend, Tota, told me I could take him to court, but what I would get would be a paltry sum, if I got anything at all. I would have to live a life of poverty and shame, alone without family in a culture I barely understood.

I wanted Nikos to be the baby's father. I wanted Nikos to be my husband. How could I do it alone? Tota gave me the name of a gynecologist, insisting that even if I found a way of keeping the baby, I would need to see a doctor.

I went to see Dr. Manouilidis, a friendly man with horn-rimmed glasses and an American accent. He had trained in Boston. He asked me about my situation and background.

"I can arrange for you to have an abortion in the hospital. I will say it's a miscarriage and that you're married. It will

be safe, but you'll need to get a good deal of money from your boyfriend." He named a very high fee.

"But I don't want to have an abortion!" I blubbered.

He handed me a tissue. "Well, you have two weeks to make up your mind. After that, an abortion will be too dangerous."

Who would help me? My mother was in a mental hospital, my father and I were barely speaking. I contacted my sister in the States and pleaded with her to help. She offered to get me into a refuge for unmarried mothers somewhere in the hills of Tennessee where I could go, on condition I agreed to give away my baby immediately when it was born.

"But I want my baby!" I shouted down the phone.

"You should have thought of that earlier, shouldn't you?"

During those two weeks in Athens, I paced the city streets by day and I twisted and turned the nights away. Time ticked so slowly. Time ticked too fast. I felt sick. I kept bursting into tears. Whatever decision I made would be wrong. I hated myself. I hated Nikos. I hated everyone. I stopped writing.

At the zero hour I went back to see Dr. Manouilidis and handed over the envelope Nikos had given me. It was fat with *drachmas*.

In the hospital, as Mrs. Smith, I shared a room with a Greek woman who had just given birth to a daughter. Her husband was furious with her for not having given

him a son. What was wrong with him? I so envied the Greek woman because she had a beautiful little daughter. As I was coming round from the operation, woozy with anesthetic and weeping, the woman's husband came to my bedside and handed me a box of chocolates.

"Present for you," he leered.

"What—?" He had brought his wife nothing. Why was he offering me this?

"Open! Open!"

"But—your wife—"

"No, no—is for you!"

His wife turned away as I finally opened the box. Inside was a note: *I like to fuck you. Here is telephone number.* I dropped the box, turned away and threw up.

A few weeks later, I went to see Dr. Manouilidis for a check-up. He asked me about my plans. I explained that I hadn't really worked anything out. I thought about my writing and how much I had wanted to commit to that, but now it seemed selfish, ridiculous, pointless. I was no good at anything anyway. I still wanted to write, but no longer felt able to allow myself to do what I wanted to do. Life was meaningless. What was the point?

"You need to leave Greece," he said.

"Greek men are no good. You deserve better than this."

"But I love Greece! I want to live here—and anyway, I have nowhere else to go."

"Surely you have a friend somewhere?"

I thought of my ex-lover in Amsterdam with whom I still corresponded. We had become close friends.

“Contact your friend,” he smiled. “And find a better, safer place to live. You’re too good for Greek men.”

As I was about to go, he pulled out an envelope from his jacket pocket and handed it to me. “Take this and get out of Greece.”

It was the same envelope Nikos had given me. All the money was still there.

Part of me has remained in Greece ever since, and when I return, the woman I had been, the baby I lost, call to me from dark corners in shaded alleys and in the scent of oregano, the sound of *bouzouki* and the purple haze over the distant shore. For years I wanted to go back. I wanted to reconnect with a lost part of my old self. I punished myself by not writing in the way I had always wanted to. Instead, I frantically tried to cover my mistake by rushing to other countries, other relationships, a different work trajectory. I denied my creative desires and locked myself into an academic career researching

fertility, fecundity, mortality and power relationships between men and women. Only when my career fell apart, when I fell apart, did I seriously reflect on what had happened all those years ago and what it had done to me. Was it too late to change?

Jonathan, fighting his own tears, holds my hand as I weep. Something rather special has happened between us during our afternoon in the taverna in Rhodes Town. We have uncovered a new layer of understanding and warmth. As we make our way to the bus station, an old woman sits outside the city walls with a display of jewelry. She looks at me as if she sees through to my core. Jonathan spots a silver disc, a replica of the linear A inscription on the Phaistos stone, the writing of the ancient Minoans that has never been translated or understood. I love it. He buys it for me. It feels just right, a reminder that not everything can be wholly understood and that sometimes, by going back, things can change. 🌀



Diana Gittins has published four works of nonfiction and two poetry pamphlets. Her creative nonfiction has been published in *The Mechanics’ Institute Review*, *On the Seawall*, *Tears in the Fence* and *BRAND*. Born in the USA, she worked in higher education for a number of years and now lives with her husband in East Devon. She is currently working on a memoir set in the early 1980s and loves early mornings, cats, and Bach.





f

Fernando Gaspar is a self-taught visual artist whose first exhibition was in 1986. In the time since, he has exhibited regularly in art galleries throughout Portugal. His first solo exhibition outside Portugal took place in 1995. He is the recipient of National Prizes, collective participations, and has had more than 50 solo exhibitions both in Portugal and internationally.

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