

Book Ten
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The Flexible Persona



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An Addict's Tale

by Mariya Taher

Suraya studied Jones as he cut his medium rare steak into halves, wondering all the while if she would go on a second date with him. She glanced at the pink layer of meat, indicating perfection, on his plate. Saliva built at the back of her throat, and she couldn't decide if it was due to the meat or because she hadn't had sex in a while. As Jones' fork penetrated a lettuce leaf and rectangular piece of meat, Suraya was overwhelmed with a desire to touch his face. To feel his rough, fire beard and his jaw's movement as he chewed the meat's toughness. Suraya, herself, ordered broiled salmon. She'd achieved a liking for seafood ten years

earlier aboard a ship, on a program called Seafaring Students, during college. She didn't like reminders of that voyage, of Rick, but her seafood craving was incessant, the rich-buttery flavor and enticing coral meat reminiscent. When the waiter brought their menus, she'd ordered the fish right away. Now, she wanted what Jones had. Or was it she wanted Jones? Suraya had no idea this question would plague her for decades to come.

Jones informed Suraya that he enjoyed the lettuce's watery texture and how it made meat slide down his throat in a delicate manner. She found it an odd explanation, and wondered

what other quirks this fire bearded man possessed. She thought such a man would tear meat with his bare hands and shove jagged pieces of it into his mouth. This contradiction between grace and unshaven face, hinted a symbiotic balance of ruggedness and sophistication Suraya found intriguing.

"Do you ever go back to India?" Jones asked finishing his bite. Suraya noted he didn't stop to wipe his face with the restaurant's bleached white napkins between bites and inferred this action to mean he felt a comfort with her. She decided to be truthful.

"Used to." She was not surprised he popped the "India question." With her pistachio shell skin and onyx, shoulder-length hair, it was an obvious question, one that people upon meeting her always asked, to suss out the making of her physical features. Suraya's answer to the India question generally depended on her mood. She either leaned in close to the person asking the question, widening her *kajool* lined eyes so their charcoal color would be their most alluring. Or stared blankly, replied "yes," and found herself in an incredible hurry to be elsewhere. The question she'd learned was subtext - a way for others to connect with her - it made sense then that she pursue a Doctorate degree in Communication. "I specialize in the influence of media subtext in U.S. politics and culture," - that what she'd told Jones earlier in the evening.

"Not anymore?" Jones said, his furrowed eyebrows suggesting a genuine interest in their conversation and not just an impressive ploy to bed her, which Suraya wouldn't have minded either.

"Not in over ten years."

"Why?"

"Not into it."

"Not into Bollywood?"

"You know Bollywood?" Suraya said, curiosity in her voice something she knew Jones heard.

"My sisters love it. They want to

go to a Bollywood wedding so bad."

"Bollywood's ridiculous." If things between them were to progress, Jones needed to know she didn't tolerate the film industry. "Their movies are full of ridiculous storylines and inconsistencies." As Suraya said this, the image of an Indian actor appeared before her. His face blurry, so she couldn't recall his name, not that she really remembered the names of *desi* actors anymore. She could make out the actor's brown skin and heard him say, "*Far out, man.*" Suraya huffed at the out-of-style phrase. The actor was obviously a comic relief character, his skin too dark, and his face too full of pudding lumps to be considered the hero, the one who got the girl in the end.

"My parents love Hindi films," Suraya said refocusing on Jones. "It's surreal. They've been away from India for decades, but still keep up with the stuff." Suraya took a bite of her fish, already half eaten, and chewed slowly to collect her thoughts. After the rich juices dissipated down her throat, she raised her eyes to Jones' face. His eyes, the color of straw with a hint of green, looked alive and his thick eyebrows, surprisingly a fawn Labrador color, were rounded in an absorbed manner. Suraya felt a flutter of hope.

"My parents dragged me to the Indian store every time they needed rice or okra. They'd check in with the store owner, this Punjabi guy with a teal

turban, to see if a new Hindi film arrived. I'd hear the store owner say *Bunty Aur Babli* is hilarious or *Salam Namaste* is a sweet movie." It was a long time ago, but as Suraya told Jones her story, a thin, bony girl with two plaits down her back pulled her back in time, to that store. She could hear her father's husky voice speaking Hindi, arguing with the store owner over which actress was the best, the humble Madhubala or Mumtaz, an Indian actress whose parents were actually Iranian.

Suraya stopped speaking. Bollywood was cunning, she thought. Trying to take her hostage and lull her back into a superficial, undependable world. She'd promised herself she wouldn't speak of Bollywood and hadn't since her shipboard affair with Rick. She was surprised at the ease she felt with Jones. "I overdosed on Bollywood," she told him, thinking of the heart that appeared next to Rick's changed relationship status. *Engaged*, Facebook announced just a few days ago.

Jones laughed, his beard stretching in the widening of his grin, one Suraya was sure he reserved for lovers. Suraya threw her head back and laughed as well, hoping to conceal the drop-let of pain that crept into her voice. "Every time a cheesy fight scene came on or some character tried crying, I wanted to scream at the TV and tell them they sucked!"

"Suri." Jones called her, a

nickname he'd given her over dinner. She liked it. "I agree. You've done your time with Bollywood. How about an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie on our next date?"

Suraya chuckled, wiping food from her mouth, relieved at the change of topic. She said, "I'd like that." Then excused herself to visit the restroom. As she walked, she opened her clutch to pull out a black tube. She needed to reapply her sunset fuchsia colored lipstick.



Jones was away and Suraya found herself unsure what to do until lethargy enshrouded her and she could fall into bed. She was correct in her assumption four years ago that her fiancé exuded ruggedness, despite his graceful eating habits. He owned a construction firm, and was at a financial management workshop. As evening approached, alone in the house Jones and she moved into six months earlier, built by his firm, Suraya heard the phone ring and went to retrieve it.

"Did you get it?" a woman's voice urgently asked her.

"Well, hello there, Freya."

"Hi, did you get it? Freya asked again.

Get what?" Suraya asked, feeling both irritated Jones wasn't

on the other end and excited to speak to her longtime friend.

"You didn't get it then," said Freya, chagrin traveling across the cellular network. Ever since they'd met ten years earlier, Freya sought to surprise Suraya. "You'll get it soon."

"No hint?" Suraya asked. She heard a child mumble in the background and her friend's sudden motherly tone told Suraya their phone call would end prematurely.

"Think of the package as a belated engagement present displaying my craft," Freya said. Something photo related, Suraya thought. Freya was a master scrapebooker, a hobby the two of them bonded over while roommates on Seafaring Students. Before Suraya could confirm the package's contents, Freya said, "Ahh, gotta go, someone's painting our tile floor red!"

Suraya had yet to meet Freya's daughter. She hadn't seen her friend in five years, since Freya's wedding, but she was relieved not to be the one cleaning the four year old's mess. Not that she didn't want children. Children were permanent, a product of love, and Suraya wasn't sure. She was having a difficult enough time deciding wedding details. Having to decide on children would cause an unnecessary fight with Jones. She was sure she happy with him. Wasn't happiness contextual?

She was glad Freya was far

away, and not making Suraya confess her hesitancies. Freya always said, "The soul needs confessing." On the ship, she'd follow Suraya around obsessively, making Suraya give video testimonials about ship life, like MTV's Real World. Suraya wondered what happened to those videos. She resolved to ask Freya next time they spoke.

Suraya, inspired by Freya's call, decided to indulge in her old hobby. She'd been scrapbooking since her youthful days in size five, yellow dancing shoes. She enjoyed rummaging through old photos, finding scrapes of paper, and feeling the texture of dried glue as she attached picture to construction paper. Scrapbooking allowed her to make sense of life. She could pick from an array of objects, place them in an arrangement of her liking, and make a relic to reveal she lived a life worthy of record.

Suraya poured herself a glass of red wine and collected her materials from an antique chest belonging once to her parents. They chest, meant as a housewarming present, was solid teak with good patina, brought from Gujrat, India to be passed down the generations. Suraya and Jones's children were to receive it years from now. Suraya momentarily convulsed at the thought.

She dug through the chest's contents and found photos of Jones and her on their one-year anniversary. They'd rented a cabin in Tahoe and when they weren't on

the mountain slopes, they were in the hot tub. She combed the pictures, casting a steady gaze on one of them holding champagne glasses, with arms interlocked like twine and a fireplace roaring behind them. They hadn't taken a trip like that in three years, not since Suraya started her thesis, and Rick's client load had doubled. Suraya placed that photo aside, wanting a frame to hang it on the living room wall, which still remained bare. Jones was busy visiting construction sites all over California. His firm had a reputation for success. Jones attended to his client's every need, and always completed projects ahead of schedule. His fortitude is what drew Suraya to him. She liked breathing the silica dust air his stability promised and did not mind the naked walls, she told herself.

Suraya removed the next envelope from the chest. On the flap, written in handwriting she recognized as Freya's read, *pics from the sea*. She folded the flap back and staring at her was a ten-year-old photo of a lanky, young woman in a red bikini and pasta colored skin. Suraya was sure Freya would pout, seeing how thin she was back then, before the pregnancy, and the onset of her adult, married life. Suraya herself, wore a black bikini, and her face was rounder than the face she'd seen in the mirror this morning after her age-defying face wash. The two girls, lounging poolside held ice-cream cones with chocolate swirls of yogurt. They were so young.

Suraya's jaw tighten at the sight of the following picture. Rick was in the photo. It startled her, seeing him standing there, content on his face. She had grown use to keeping his memory in the background, like a forgotten whisper. Freya helped, never mentioning his name on their phone calls. The picture was evidence of a time when they spoke every day. Rick and Suraya had done no such thing in four years, not since his engagement. She hadn't seen him in ten years, not since the voyage's end.

In the photo, Rick and she stood at the ship's bow while the sun, mimicking her favorite lipstick, sunset fuchsia, set in a crimson red background. She'd worn the lipstick the first time she met Rick. The color made her mouth appear fuller, plumper, and more desirable. That night she'd been eager for Rick to bite her.

She wore a knee-length, black cocktail dress and he wore a light gray evening suit, the first few buttons of his shirt undone. In the present, Suraya's grip made the photo's edges crinkle upwards. Her breathing grew labored, and she coughed letting out the congestion that built inside her. She remembered this physical sensation, she felt it the first time Rick kissed her.

She'd been happy, the idea popped in her head unsuspectingly, like a pick pocket you never expected. Suraya stood, leaving the scrapbooking materials to the ground, taking her wine and photo of Rick with her. She

found herself in front of the computer in Jones's study. Thoughts she'd avoided for years flew like a spinning top.

"Can I sit here?" Rick asked all those years ago. A code blue was announced over the intercom. Captain Laskaris was dead. Suraya imagined him under a white sheet, growing bluer, with each passing inhale and exhale she took.

"Yes," she replied.

The union, a small auditorium on the ship seating two hundred emptied out. Suraya glanced at the remaining students, saw heads leaning on shoulders, and heard sniffs as a tissue box was passed around for dripping noses. She felt out of place.

"How you feeling?" Rick asked.

"Never experienced death before." She leaned towards Rick, who sat in a cushioned, oval-shaped, chair facing her, and whispered, "I should be sadder. I'm not." She felt guilty for lacking the feeling to mourn.

"I know what you mean. First for me too," he said, cupping his hand as he whispered in Suraya's ear. Suraya felt a tingle, the thin hairs on her arms sticking up as his hand brushed her ear. If Rick noticed her shiver, he hid it well.

"It must be difficult," Rick said leaning back in his chair. "Dying with no family around. Must've been a grandpa." Suraya noted



Rick’s faraway look. His eyes, an aqua matching the waters flowing underneath them, were cloudy. She wondered what Rick’s family was like and if he was thinking of his own grandpa. Suraya knew nothing of this man except he was from Louisiana.

“That thought never crossed my mind,” she told him. “Such a Bollywood movie.” The minute she uttered those words, she wished she hadn’t.

“Bollywood?” Rick asked.

“I can’t believe I said that,” Suraya’s cheeks burned.

Rick looked at her. “You got my interest.”

Suraya studied Rick. He was so very different from her. Tall, sturdy, with a body that made her

think of Roman Gods, chiseled, marble statues they’d seen in Italy. She likened Rick to Mars, the God of War, and stared at him, imagining his naked body. Rick also had thin, shaggy, blonde hair that besides revealing his receding hairline, contrasted Suraya’s dark hair, and revealed his European ancestry. Finally, he spoke with a southern drawl Suraya was not used to hearing in her part of the United States. Later, he would tell her his accent made him feel uncomfortable outside the South. People thought the long drawn out vowels reflected a poor education on his part. Suraya found it sexy and the accent made her want to tell him everything.

“It’s a melodrama. Captain Laskaris dying at sea,” Suraya said. “His loved ones back home in Greece.” Suraya imagined the

Captain’s wife, a woman in her seventies, slightly hunched, wearing one of those old lady dresses with a lacy collar. She wore a red shawl over her shoulders because she’d reached the age where a heavy chill penetrated her bones, one hidden from the young. As she described this image to Rick, Suraya couldn’t help but feel nervous, shy, under his gaze. He did not blink. Suraya interlocked her fidgeting fingers. She said, “His wife’s world is about to be shattered, but in this moment, she is far enough away, and technology hasn’t reached her to know of his death. By living in ignorance, she still believes her best friend will return and embrace her. A perfect Bollywood tragedy,” Suraya finished. Bollywood was a nucleotide in her double helix strand, seeped in her skin, and strengthened by the sweet

buttery milk flavors of *chas* consumed each summer on visits to India as a child.

In the present, in her life with Jones, Suraya thought Bollywood was a recessive gene needing quarantine. Back then, she’d told Rick she wanted to choose love, like the hero and heroine of *Kuch Kuch Hootai Hai*, a love story of two childhood friends reunited after years apart.

Suraya stopped speaking. She hadn’t meant to word vomit and was afraid Rick would scare off.

“You’re not who or what I expected you to be, Suraya.” Rick said.

“You’re making me blush.” She flicked her hair in front of her face to hide the magenta hues brightening her cheeks. “Don’t worry, I know Bollywood’s ridiculous. No one can even kiss on the mouth. The Indian Censorship Board finds it inappropriate,” she explained.

Suraya thought about the irony of scenes in which the hero and heroine are caught in a downpour, how their naked skin pressed against drenched clothes, were *okay* by this censorship board. Rick’s bare body popped in her mind. She wondered how his lightly toasted skin would look tangled with her much darker toast skin. “You can taste the sexual tension in those scenes.” Suraya said.

“Close your eyes,” he said. Suraya, caught off guard by his

request, found herself obeying. She felt Rick’s breath on her neck and something wet against her lips. Her lips parted, welcoming his mouth. Rick slowly pulled away. Suraya felt her heart skip the way Bollywood informed her it should. She wondered if she should feel violated, pretend to be put off by his audacity to kiss her.

“I’m hoping your Indian Censorship Board won’t mind I stole that kiss,” Rick said.

Suraya saw his mouth covered in lipstick smudges. Delight warmed her.

“I think they might,” she said, wiping color off his mouth. “But I won’t tell.”

The memory of that kiss remained with Suraya as she returned to the reality of an empty house. She typed “Rick Walsh” into a search engine, striking each key gently, not wanting harsh keystrokes to disturb her concentration. She scanned the search results, looking for “Louisiana” or “Veterinarian.” She’d done this before. Only when she was alone. She found his bio on the Nola Veterinary Hospital website:

Dr. Walsh is Co-Owner of Nola Veterinary Hospital. As a young child, Rick helped stray kittens and dogs, eventually turning his home into a small shelter and treating their wounds. Seeing animals that were not able to receive the medical attention they needed motivated Dr. Walsh

to become a veterinarian. He earned his Doctorate of Veterinary Medicine from LSU Veterinary School of Medicine. He is a member of the American Veterinary Medical Associations. Dr. Walsh has a black Lab named Onyx. In his spare time, he enjoys triathlons and tailgating with friends at LSU games.

Beside the bio was a picture of an older version of the Rick in her crumpled photo. She tried to straighten the crumpled photo out, flattening it with the underside of her palm. The creases in the photo now matched young Rick’s face to older Rick’s wrinkled face. This Rick wore a white lab coat and held a black lab puppy. His jawline appeared fatter, not unattractive, but not the chin of Mars, beach sand scruff covered this chin. Suraya found herself becoming aroused with desire.

The night Rick and she slipped out to the ship’s stern, accompanied by only stars in a deep black sky, came to her mind. He told her to shut her eyes. She did willingly. She was always willing with him. They began a slow dance, the ocean sounding like wind sweeping through reeds, encouraging them to move. She opened her eyes and saw his blue eyes staring back at her. She stood on her tippy toes to let their lips meet. She longed to go to his cabin to explore more, but Rick wouldn’t allow it that last night on the ship. Suraya knew it was because of the girlfriend,

but she said nothing. The two of them stayed that way for a while, both feeling the desire, but not falling prey to their body’s murmurs.

Suraya rose from the computer, her head felt woozy from alcohol streaming through her veins and thoughts of that night. She took her cell phone, the half empty wine bottle and the crumpled photo of Rick with her and climbed the stairs to her bedroom. She laid on her bed, the side away from Jones’ recess into the mattress, and placed the phone by her ear.

“Hello? She’d called the last number she had for Rick. Unable to hear a southern twang, she wasn’t sure if it was him on the phone. “Heelloo? Damn, is that you Big Ale?” Suraya hung up. She still wasn’t sure, but the voice, distinct enough from a Californian, made her believe it could have belonged to Rick. It was all she wanted, a sound, a present relic to take her to the ship. She felt a tingling and her hand slipped under the hem of her underwear to increase the sensation. She shut her eyes and imagined Rick touching her in those spots and her fingers drilled harder and faster. She opened her eyes and glanced around the room to ensure the windows were shut. Her body convulsed and she screamed Rick’s name.



Suraya tried to leave the house in a hurry. Jones had returned and she was not prepared for another quarrel over wedding details.

“It’s been a year since I proposed, Suri,” Jones said in a resigned manner. “This is *our* wedding. Pick something, please.”

“I’m late. I’m meeting a wedding coordinator,” said Suraya.

“Wedding Coordinator? You made a decision?” Jones said surprised. Suraya booked the appointment while he was away. She’d hoped to pacify his concern she wasn’t interested in planning their wedding. She was. She just didn’t mind if he made all the decisions. It mattered more to him the flowers match the table settings. Suraya decided a wedding coordinator, who could make all the decisions, would quell those arguments. This reason was the one she could tell Rick. The other reason, that one she hid from him, was Suraya needed to assuage her guilt.

“I have to go,” Suraya said again. As she passed Jones, he reached for her arm, in response Suraya turned and faced him. On happier occasions, Suraya saw herself reflected in Jones’s irises. She found no reflection now. They were solid, a dirty straw color that emitted no warmth.

“I love you, Suri,” Jones said, anger in his voice dissipating, replaced by a softer, defeated

tone. “Cake or cupcakes?”

Suraya shrugged, averting her gaze. She felt uncomfortable with the darkness in his eyes, as if it was shadowing Jones’ feelings for her. She hated other people’s confusion. She recognized her hypocrisy. She pecked him on the cheek. “I’m heading to the appointment.” Jones released his hold on Suraya, and she went out the front door, not turning to wave goodbye.

Suraya stood on the platform waiting for the BART train. A strange humidity overtook the city, and the lack of wind stifled her, causing her to feel lethargic and dizzy. She leaned against the cement wall dividing outbound and inbound trains, and plucked her cell phone from her purse. The message, marked read, still sat in her e-mail inbox.

Suraya,

It’s been some time. Send me your phone number.

~ Rick

Suraya wiped sweat off the base of her neck. She’d received Rick’s e-mail that morning and the ironic timing of the message had not escaped her notice. Jones was showering and she still waking up. Out of habit, she’d grabbed her phone from the nightstand to turn the alarm off. On the phone’s screen, she saw one new e-mail. From him. She’d felt hot, delusional, too

many blankets covered her and she pushed them away with her feet. She had blocked her number when she called Rick. Or, she believed she had. She leapt out of bed and ran into the shower to be with Jones, feeling remorse for desiring Rick, and thinking the Gods or Fates she’d learned about in Italy, must have conjured this melodrama to spice up their boring, eternal lives.

The e-mail incident, unbeknownst to Jones, spurred their fight this morning. Suraya tucked the phone into her purse. She hated herself for thinking of Rick while Jones’s aroused manhood hardened against her back in the shower stall. Suraya was glad the steam’s hazy gray made it difficult for him to see her contorted face. She’d wished the water could injure her skin. She tried twisting the showerhead to a harder pressure setting, but the water stream hit Jones directly in the eye and Suraya changed it back. She hated herself for thinking of Rick even now, when in fifteen minutes time, the Bart train would have her arriving at a store filled with assortments of white lace, signature napkins, and samples of his and her parting gifts for a happy couple’s wedding guests.

“Tell me,” the wedding coordinator, a woman named Nancy, with skunk striped hair said after Suraya entered her office. “When’s the big day?”

Suraya immediately thought of Cruella Deville, the cartoon character did nothing to tranquilize

her. “We’re working that out.” Suraya said. She felt a surge of condescension from Nancy, as if Nancy knew Suraya was wasting her time, and already spurning her.

“What colors will you wear for your wedding?” Nancy asked.

“White, I suppose,” Suraya said.

“But, you’re Indian,” Nancy said as if a question. Her eyebrows, thin, pencil drawn were black and one raised above the other in a scowling look.

“I am,” said Suraya. She was losing interest with the woman, and felt fidgety, scraping the cuticles from her nails, and crossing and uncrossing her legs.

“Forgive me, I *assumed* you’d want reds and golds. My *Indian* friend. I didn’t plan her wedding. Her dresses were absolutely gorgeous!” Nancy continued.

Suraya stared at her like an unsmiling porcelain doll. She felt hives creeping up her back and swatted the nape of her neck.

“I have a doctor’s appointment,” she said, jumping up.

“Oh,” Nancy said, straining the word in the way a salesman might watching his commission walk away.

“When shall we reschedule for?” Nancy hurriedly put on her red framed glasses, they hung from a string tied around her elongated neck. Suraya thought she

was an untrusting skunk. Nancy opened her day planner. Suraya heard the whoosh accompanying Nancy’s rapid turning of pages.

From where Suraya stood, Nancy’s handwriting was upside down. Names and phone numbers were listed in white square boxes, each representing a single date. She wondered how those couples were so certain that September 10th or January 15th was the perfect wedding date. Had they checked the Farmer’s Almanac? Inquired fortunetellers? How had they decided to celebrate this one date year after year? Suraya felt light-headed, the colors in Nancy’s office began to swirl in an opaque kaleidoscope of greens, yellows, and blues. “I’ll call you,” Suraya shouted, as she headed out the door.

Once around the corner, in an alley, away from *Forever’s Eternity*, a store name she found too cliché to joke about, Suraya leaned against the walls of one of the brick buildings towering over her on three sides. The surface was hard on her back and the cool temperature of the brick made her shiver despite the stifling heat. On the wall opposite, the initials R.B. + J.B., were graffitied in glossy red spray paint. The letters looked hazy, and she wondered if the heart with cupid’s piercing arrow was a heat induced mirage. Nausea overtook her and she peeled over, squatting on the ground. Her underwear, moist, attached itself to her bottom. She yanked

her phone out. Rick’s message appeared.

Suraya,

It’s been some time. Send me your phone number.

~ Rick

Suraya hated admitting it. She’d denied it when it happened. The moment Jones proposed, Rick’s face blurred her vision. Only for an instant, but the effect was visceral, primitive. She convinced herself the ache in her chest was acid indigestion, after all, the health concern ran in her family. Suraya’s thumb hovered over the delete button. She hit reply instead and wrote:

Wow. Rick. It’s been a long time. How are you?

~ Suraya

Suraya read over her response and trashed the draft. She remembered Rick’s girlfriend, now wife, and the first time she saw them together. Freya and she ran to the ship’s deck the morning they arrived in the Bay of Biscay in Santorini, Spain. As Freya and she grasped the handle of a heavy painted steel door leading to the deck, they were met with an uninspiring view. The dock looked industrial, with big red factory buildings and steel chimneys. Suraya felt the nausea that seemed to come and go in

her interactions with Rick. A few nights after news of Captain Laskaris’ death, Rick let her know his girlfriend was waiting for him in Spain. The knowledge made Suraya feel filthy as a chimney sweep covered in soot.

“There they are,” Freya said, leaning precariously over the deck’s railing. She pointed to a group huddled together. Suraya felt her airway constrict. The girl’s long hair reached her mid-back and her bronzed skin glittered in the day’s light. Rick, leaned in close, had his arms wrapped protectively around the girl’s waist. Suraya imagined flares sparking as Rick held the girl. Suraya lowered her gaze. Soon, she’d become a distant memory to Rick. A fling to reminisce about over a beer with his buddy. Rick called her a fantasy when he confessed about his girlfriend. Suraya called him a “dick.” He replied, “You’re not my reality.” Suraya’s tears fell, joining the ocean floor that had been her foundation during those months.

Suraya opened Rick’s e-mail once more and positioned her thumb over the delete button, only to remove it. She repeated these gestures for more than an hour, irrespective of the delirium the sun’s heat brought.

After the voyage was over, Rick wrote. He said things like, “I miss you” and “You have a smile that lights up the room.” He remained with his girlfriend. His relationship status never saying single on Facebook. Sometimes

months passed between letters, now it had been four years, but when he wrote, she couldn’t help replying. It’s not that she lacked self-control. When Suraya was nine, she fasted the entire month of Ramadan. The religion, she’d long since given up, yet, today she wished to access the dedication she’d used to starve herself of Rick.

Suraya’s legs cramped from sitting. She welcomed the pain, surrendering to it, and yelled indistinguishably to the horrid, muggy air. She looked to her side and found a soda can lying in the gutter. She reached for it from her crouched position and flung it against cupid’s heart. The can was empty and she felt disappointed that soda hadn’t bled the red paint.

She stood to make her final gesture. She tapped the delete button and watched the digital envelope fly inside the trash icon. Suraya breathed in relief, the arm clutching her phone going limp alongside her body. She then heard a beep and pulled the phone to her nose. Condensation had built on the screen and she wiped it off. She saw the e-mail from Rick, a mistake, she thought, and clicked the e-mail to delete it a second time. The message revealed itself. Suraya dropped her phone.

“Suraya, I’m divorced. Let’s talk.”

~ Rick

The phone lay unbroken with the screen side up. She half-wished it had cracked, that Rick’s message wasn’t lit up, staring at her from the ground. She picked it up, scowling at the inanimate object, and typed, “553-555-3842” into the phone. If his number had remained the same, Rick would soon know she had called him the other night. She watched the digital envelope fly into the ether.

Suraya wandered in a daze the rest of that morning and into the afternoon. She continuingly checked her phone, turning the silent mode on and off. She was unsure if she wanted to hear the phone ring when Rick called or if she would rather it go to voicemail. She turned the corner. Somehow, she’d found her way to the Indian grocery store, *Gulub Jammon*, the name of Suraya’s favorite rice-ball dessert as a child. The temperature had cooled off some since her jaunt with the graffiti tagged wall, but still her clothes weren’t liberated from sweat until after she walked through the store’s front doors and felt the air condition on full blast. As she cooled, she wandered up and down the aisles, reading the lentil’s names lining the wall – *masoor daals*, *mung beans*, *toor daals*. She hadn’t stepped inside an Indian store in years.

She passed by a glass counter containing sweets she once feverishly craved – rice balls covered in tooth aching syrup and diamond shaped dough covered in vark, an edible tin foil. The shelves behind this counter

contained DVDs of Indian films, and her lips moved in silence as she read the Hindi titles written phonetically in English.

“Hello, Miss. Can I help you?” said an Indian man in an accent she knew well and familiarity engulfed her.

“I was browsing,” she shrugged.

“You want to see a film?” he asked, emphasizing the ‘L’ in film to sound more like “flim.” He walked behind the counter in step with Suraya as she floated down the aisle gazing at the titles. “There are some very nice ones out now.”

“Do you have *Kuch Kuch Hotai Hai*?”

“Oh yes, classic *flim*! That Anjali, beautiful no?” he nodded in a suggestive manner, Suraya chortled, the nod was meant as more of a statement than a question, but to the untrained eye in would be hard to decipher, another gesture Suraya knew from her *desi* upbringing. The shopkeeper searched for the film. “Yes, here it is. Do you want to buy? I give you good deal.”

Suraya caressed the smooth, bendable, DVD cover. Shahrukh Khan’s and Kajol’s backs were leaned against one another. Their faces were forward and pleading with Suraya to take the DVD home. Kajol wore an orange, bridal sari, her gold jewelry anchoring her to the ground, a golden tikka hanging down her forehead from the part revealing

her smooth hairline. Shahrukh Khan had his usual smirk, and wore a light tan, sports jacket. The print quality on the cover suggested to Suraya the DVD was pirated, and the recognition of this illegal activity made the actors on the cover more urgent in their pleading for Suraya to take the DVD home. She handed over a twenty dollar bill.

When Suraya was a child, she pranced around the living room, flaying her arms about, and shaking her hips to the tambla beat she heard on the movie’s soundtrack. The mixed tape was a present from her cousin, so that Suraya would remember her monsoon summers. Suraya thought the cassette of *Kuch Kuch Hotai Hai* songs was the best present anyone could give her. She’d hugged that cassette to her chest so hard that later a reddish imprint on her bare skin was found underneath the spot. An adult Suraya clung the DVD to the same spot on her chest and hurried to catch the next Bart train.

Suraya arrived home moments before the pale orange sunset disappeared. Jones was asleep on the living room couch. She wondered, if it could have even been possible to NOT fall in love with him. Such a goofy man, who after learning as a child, she adored 3-D puzzles, bought her the Empire State 3-D puzzle and assembled it with her. The structure rested at the far side of their fireplace.

Suraya kissed Jones on the

forehead. She caressed his cheek, wanting to feel the red scruff that had grown over night, a gesture she associated with comfort.

“Mmmm. You’re back,” Jones said as he woke, stretching.

“Yes, I am.”

“Good. What’s that in your hand?”

“Watch a movie with me? It’ll make me seem really Indian.”

“Huh?” Jones replied with confusion that could be ascribed to either Suraya’s remarks or his having woken up. She saw him as a helpless child seeking answers.

“Bollywood,” she said, holding the DVD cover in front of his face. Jones squinted to make out the title with his scrunched, barely awake eyes.

“Suri, I thought you hated Bollywood.”

“I thought I’d give it one more try.” She wanted to add that her life depended on it. Their relationships depended on it.

Suraya placed the movie in the DVD player and lay next to Jones, curling inside him on their couch. Soon, Suraya heard Jones’ snoring. He’d fallen asleep before the first musical number. She couldn’t help wondering if Rick would have fallen asleep. Suraya tighten the grasp of Jones’s arm around her,

needing to feel the pressure, and returned to the movie. The storyline hadn’t changed. Not that she expected it to.

Suraya heard her cell phone ring. She gazed in the phone’s direction. It was inside her purse, hanging off a dining chair. On the table, Suraya noticed for the first time was a cardboard box, wrapped it hemp string. Suraya listened to the phone ring melodically over and over, in a never-ending pattern. She was trapped under Jones’s arms and his body weight pressed her down. She did not want to wake him. Suraya let a tear fall onto Jones’s maroon shirt, dampening the cloth below her cheek. Soon, she let herself doze off in the arms of her fiancé as the movie still played, the aspirated consonants of Hindi continuing to be spoken. Anjali with her short hair tucked behind her earlobes, waved goodbye to Rahul and Tina, the woman her beloved Rahul had chosen instead of her. The bright white of the *shalwar kameeze* Anjali wore illuminating the scene. The absence of color to her Indian outfit signifying Anjali’s mourning, half of the hundred and seventy-seven minutes in the film still to go.



Suraya would think of that moment often, but not until her hearing was mostly gone and she sat day in and day out on a bed someone else made up for her that morning and every

morning afterwards, would she take a look out the window and see Bollywood in the sunset’s shades of crimson, a sunset that never set, leaving twilight hues to light up the sky. Suraya would then glimpse a moment of clarity. She’d chosen the calm of the night sky over the sunset’s blinding light.



Mariya Taher is currently pursuing an MFA degree in Creative Writing at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She received her Master in Social Work from San Francisco State University and her B.A. from the University of California Santa Barbara, where she majored in Religious Studies and double-minored in Global, Peace, and Security & Socio-cultural Linguistics. Prior to attending Lesley University, she worked in the gender violence field for 7 years, working at W.O.M.A.N., Inc., The Women’s Foundation of California, and San Francisco State University. She aims to combine her passion for social justice with her passion for writing to bring about change by sharing stories of challenges faced by vulnerable and marginalized communities. She has contributed articles to *Solstice Literary Magazine*, *Trainless Magazine*, *Global Voices*, *The Express Tribune*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, *BayWoof*, and a piece on Female Genital Cutting that was shared on Imagining Equality Project put together by the Global Fund for Women and the International Museum of Women. Her first short story was published in 2013 in University of La Verne’s literary journal *Prism Review*. She received the 2014 Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences Dean’s Merit Scholarship from Lesley University. This award is given to a person with a strong academic background, demonstrating leadership skills, and a commitment to the field of education, the arts, social services, the environment or counseling.

Connect with Mariya on [Twitter](#) and [Linkedin](#).

Whitney George is a composer and conductor who specializes in the use of mixed media to blur the distinctions between concert performance, installation art, and theater. Utilizing a wide variety of material including literary texts, silent film, stock footage, and visual arts, George's compositions are characterized by an immersive theatricality that thrives on collaboration in all phases of the creative process. Her affinity for the macabre, the fantastic, and the bizarre frequently gives rise to musical programs that evoke the traditions of phantasmagoria and melodrama, challenging musicians to experiment liberally with their stage personae, and audiences to widen the scope of their attention. George holds an undergraduate degree from the California Institute of the Arts and a master's degree from the Brooklyn College Conservatory, and is currently pursuing her PhD in composition at the CUNY Graduate Center, where she has studied with David Del Tredici, David Olan, Bruce Saylor, and Tania Leon. For more information, visit

www.whitneygeorge.com



- Fiction submissions are open until October 31, 2015 for the first print version of The Flexible Persona.
- Authors will receive one physical copy of the issue and a token payment.
- Submit stories between 1200 – 6500 words in length.

<https://theflexiblepersona.submittable.com/submit>

Durty Diana

by D.A. Watson

His protesting lungs, heavy from the pack of Marlboro he smoked earlier. The weight in his legs, like someone's lined his jeans with lead pellets. The jolting *slap-slap-slap* of his feet on concrete.

Gary's gritting his teeth, trying to ignore the encroaching dizziness, the burgeoning stitch, and the five pints of Tennents and three Glenmorangies sloshing around in his gut. He's trying to remember the breathing techniques from his days in the Greenock Harriers Athletics Club. He'd been quite the sprinter then. Twenty years ago right enough, and six waistline inches.

Ahead of him is a woman in a yellow hi-vis vest, a whistle pinched between her lips. Gary's close enough to see her chest inflate. He knows if she blows that whistle, it'll cost him dearly.

"Hold on!" he shouts, waving to get her attention. The words come out in an unintelligible wheeze, *Haaaawwwwn!* but she turns and sees him. She scowls, but waves him on impatiently.

God bless you, you absolute diamond.

The sliding doors ahead

begin *peep-peep-peeping* in warning. Gary lunges forward with the very last reserves of his strength and will, throwing himself through the doors and into the train carriage.

Gasping for air, his trembling legs like unset jelly, supporting himself by a handrail, he's aware of a few drunken cheers and a smattering of applause from other late night commuters on board the crowded train, who Gary's sure must've watched - most likely pishing themselves laughing - his drunken dash for the 2350 to Gourrock. Though he feels sure the pressurised blood pounding in his temples is a harbinger of a devastating stroke, he manages to raise a hand, acknowledging his fellow passengers' acclaim.

That was too close. If he'd missed the last train, the taxi home would've set him back at least fifty or sixty quid, and Paula would've freaked big time. She was already annoyed that he'd gone to the work's night out in the first place.

As the train doors emit a pneumatic hiss and begin to slide closed, another latecomer, a girl with long brown hair, just manages to squeeze through at the last second, stumbling

into the carriage beside Gary and bringing another round of inebriated ovation from the other passengers. She smiles ruefully, dipping a dainty little curtsy in response, then she turns and looks at him.

"That was close," she says, breathless and grinning. "Didn't think we were going to make it."

Though still convinced he's about to throw up and/or pass out at any given second, Gary's still able to see that she's something of a looker. Tall and slim figured, with striking green eyes and wavy chestnut hair shot through with reddish highlights. She's maybe twenty-two or so, dressed in a short leather jacket, a clinging navy blue skirt cut to mid-thigh, and sheer black nylons. She holds a pair of high heels in one hand, evidently having removed them to sprint for the train.

Without the necessary breath in his lungs to form a reply, still wondering if his pounding heart will give out before the brain embolism kills him, Gary manages a nod of agreement and returns her smile.

Then they're both laughing, except Gary quickly succumbs to a prolonged coughing fit. Eyes watering, he stands with his

hands on his knees, wheezing and hacking while the girl, still laughing, pounds him on the back.

Then the train starts, the sudden shift in momentum and his weakened, alcohol impaired condition sending Gary stumbling clumsily into the girl, tripping over his own feet and sending them both tumbling to the floor in an ungainly tangle of limbs. They wind up with Gary lying on top of her, the girl spread-eagled beneath him. Several passengers in the crowded carriage cheer and whistle, delighted at the undignified little scene.

"Smooth move, big chap!" someone calls out amid the hilarity, bringing fresh gales of laughter. Gary, completely mortified, wishes either the heart attack or the stroke would get a move on and just finish him off.

"I say!" the girl says coquettishly, her face inches from his, still smiling, her emerald eyes dancing with amusement. "At least buy me a drink first."

✖✖✖✖✖

"So what were you up to tonight?" the girl asks. "Just another evening stalking the trains, looking for unsuspecting women to dry hump?"

Following their inadvertent clinch on the train carriage floor, Gary had helped the girl to her feet, repeatedly asking if she was okay, apologising profusely

and hoping he wasn't about to get a swift kick in the balls. She'd taken it well though, laughing and directing Gary to a vacant seat, teasing that he'd better sit down before he fell down, again, and then surprisingly, settling herself into the seat next to him.

As the train pulls away from Glasgow Central and rattles its way across the railway bridge over the Clyde, he's recovered enough to see that close up, the girl's more than just something of a looker. She's actually quite the wee stunner. When she removes her jacket to reveal a tight fitting top with a deep plunging neckline, Gary has to make a conscious effort not to stare at the exposed cleavage. Likewise with the generous amount of shapely, nylon sheathed thigh her short skirt displays. As much as he tries though, he can't help his gaze occasionally flicking to the girl's chest and legs. He's sure his interest doesn't go unnoticed - girls are conditioned to clock that kind of thing - but she doesn't seem to mind him taking a quick browse at the goodies on show. He likes that. It's been a long time since an attractive young woman had flirted with him.

Yeah, he's married, but he's also... well... a guy. And married. Paula had let herself go big time since the wee man came along last year, and her interest in Gary as a man... well. 'Nuff said. The combination of *this* little honey's looks, the heady scent of her perfume - something smoky and exotic - and her coy-yet-saucy manner, evidenced by her

cheeky quip about dry humping, is having quite an effect on Gary.

Why not play along? he thinks. *Nothing wrong with a little ego inflation.*

"Ach, well," he says now with a nonchalant shrug. "What else are you going to do on a Friday night? Actually, I usually do my train stalking and surprise dry humping on Wednesdays, but it's been a slow week."

"Is that so?" she replies, raising a meticulously plucked eyebrow. "Well that makes me feel so special. Amn't I the lucky girl?"

"That you are," Gary replies. "That you are."

He used to use this kind of patter when he was younger. A calculated mixture of humour, sleaze, confidence and cool. It'd been his *modus operandi*, and though it hadn't always worked, twenty-seven notches on the bedpost wasn't a bad innings. He'd been quite the ladykiller back in the day. Seemed he still had the touch too. The wee bird's risqué banter and the way she was looking at him made it clear that she was up for it.

Not that he was going to actually *do* anything, but fuck it. It was nice to know it was a possibility.

"I'm Gary by the way."

"Diana."

"Nice to meet you, Diana. So

what about you?” he asks. “Doing anything interesting tonight?”	“Yeah.”	crotch.	<i>Do it.</i>	the bowl, her green eyes flaring, gloss painted lips peeling back from her teeth in an unconscious snarl.	onto the couch beside her and meows softly, pawing at her arm.
“Oh, you know. Just a few drinks, out on a manhunt.”	“Prettier than me?”	He wants to, holy jumping Jesus, he wants to. It’s been so long. But... no. He can’t. There’s the wee man to think about. His own dad wasn’t around when he was growing up. He doesn’t want that for Milo.	<i>I can’t.</i>		
<i>Wa-hey! We’ve got a live one here</i> , Gary thinks.	“.... No.”		<i>You could...</i>		
	She smiles and shifts a little in her seat, turning toward him. Raising her legs slightly. Her right knee grazes softly along his thigh. She makes no move to break the contact.		*****		“Hello, Wournos,” Diana croons, smiling fondly and putting the upper half of what’s-his-name’s skull aside. “You’re getting fat, you know that? Yes you are, my lovely chubby wittle kitty. Who’s mama’s baby?”
“Aye? Any luck?”		He can’t.	<i>“Fuckin’ men!”</i> Diana screeches, launching her high heels across the living room in a fury.	Some time later, when she’s managed to still the frustrated fury twitching and writhing beneath her skin, she leans forward, picks up the potpourri bowl, and settles back into the soft cushions of the couch again, putting her feet up on the coffee table. Staring into space, she slowly turns the bowl this way and that in her hands, thinking about where she got it from, absently caressing its hard, off-white surface, her fingertips lightly tracing the thin zig-zagging join lines.	She thinks about the guy on the train earlier. The boy scout. Gary. He’d actually been quite good looking. Nice bone structure. She probably <i>would</i> have shagged him.
“Not yet. The night’s young, though.”		Can he?	<i>Just when you think you’ve got them figured out, when you’ve perfected your method, the one fuckin’ boy scout in fuckin’ Glasgow comes along and fucks with your fuckin’ system!</i>		
<i>Oh, this is too easy. The wee dirty!</i>	<i>That was no accident! Recommence ego inflation!</i>	“I’m sorry,” he says, reluctantly removing the girl’s hand from his leg. “This can’t happen.”		She realises she’s shaking, grinding her teeth, hard enough to hear them creak in her gums, and forces her jaws apart. It takes some effort.	Before killing him, and feeding bits of him to her cat of course. Like she had with the five others.
“So how long have you been married?” Diana asks.	“And what would Paula say if she knew you were talking to me?” Diana asks, tilting her head slightly to the side, those vivid jade eyes all wide and innocent. They’re really quite spectacular.	Diana gives him a demure little pout. “ <i>Sure</i> I can’t tempt you?” Her fingers move to the hem of her skirt, raising it a few inches, revealing yet more thigh, then a lacy stocking top. Gary actually groans aloud. He can’t look away. His heart hammers. His mouth is parched.		<i>Brian, his name had been. Or maybe Brandon. Bruce?</i>	
<i>Bugger. Stupid wedding ring.</i>				She can’t remember. What she does remember, and with great fondness, is the way he’d screamed when she’d taken the cranial saw to him.	
“Hmm. Four years.”	“She’d not be a happy bunny, that’s for sure.”				
“Like it?”		“I tell you this, girl,” he says, still unable to tear his eyes away from the exposed lingerie. “You’re tempting the absolute fuck out of me, but... sorry. I’d love to, I’d really <i>really</i> love to, but... I just can’t.”			
“S’allright. Ups and downs.”	“And what about if I were to do this?”				
“Kids?”	She lays her hand on his leg, just above the knee.				
“Aye. Milo. He’s just turned one.”	“Oh, now that’s just improper.” <i>The fuck?! She’s not shy, this one.</i>				
“Aww. I’ll bet he’s a wee cutie.”		A recorded announcement informs them that the train is now approaching Paisley Gilmour Street.			
“He’s my world. Want to see a picture?”	Staring him dead in the eye, Diana’s hand slides upwards, lightly raking his jeans with her perfectly manicured nails. Gary feels it all the way up his spine. She leans closer. “I bet you’ve got a big dick,” she purrs.				
“No.”					
“Oh. Okay.”					
“What’s your wife like?”		“This is my stop,” Diana says. “Sure you don’t want to get off with me?” The double entendre is subtle as a house brick.		Dumb, cheating, selfish, superior, misogynistic, raping <i>pigs</i> . All of them.	“That was a close one, wee man,” he whispers, reaching down to gently stroke the silken blonde curls above Milo’s ear. “Daddy almost fucked up.”
“She’s... fine. Works as a legal secretary.”	“Whoa, settle down there, missy,” Gary says, placing his own hand on top of hers, halting its ascent a mere inch from his	Gary hesitates.		As Diana sits there, her mind pleasantly adrift in thoughts of the past, a cat, jet black and severely overweight, jumps up	After a time, he kisses his fingertips and places them lightly
“Pretty?”					



D.A. Watson

studied Music and Digital Media at the University of Glasgow and Creative Writing at the University of Stirling. His debut novel *In the Devil's Name* and short story *Afterburn* were released on Amazon in the summer of 2012, both becoming Kindle Free Store bestsellers. Picked up by the Greene & Heaton Literary Agency in 2014, he has published stories and articles in *The Gothic Imagination*, *Wyrd Books*, *Glasgow Inner Circle*, *Career Addict*, *Sugarpulp*, *Acidic Fiction*, *The Flexible Persona* and *Dark Eclipse*. *In the Devil's Name* and his second novel *The Wolves of Langabhat* - a semi-historical epic involving Vikings, werewolves and rock n' roll - are currently under consideration with several publishers. He lives with his family in Western Scotland, and is working on a third novel.

on the baby's forehead, then leaves the nursery. He crosses the hall, and leans in the master bedroom doorway.

"You awake?" he whispers. "That's me home, babe."

In the darkened bedroom, an indistinct lump under the duvet, Paula grunts something, farts, then begins snoring lustily.

Gary sighs, then trudges downstairs to his study.

At his desk, he sits with his head in his hands for a while, staring at nothing. Then he reaches under the desktop and opens a concealed compartment built into the side of the leg space, withdrawing a glass

fronted display case.

The human eyeballs within, all varying shades of green, are individually encased in sealed Perspex globes filled with preservative glycerine. Each one carefully mounted so the eyes always stare outwards, towards him. He lays the case on the desk and counts them.

Twenty-seven. Same as always.

He really had been quite the ladykiller back in the day.

It's been five years since the last one. Since he'd met Paula. Until tonight, he hadn't felt the Need, and as tempted as he'd been, he was proud that

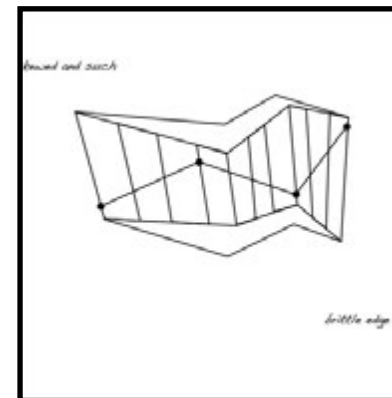
he'd managed to suppress the old urge. Especially when the opportunity had presented itself so brazenly. So willingly.

Still though. Nice to know that it was still a possibility.

Gary smiles, affectionately brushing his fingertips along the wooden frame of the case. He does it with as much love and tenderness as he'd stroked Milo's hair, less than an hour earlier.

Then he counts the eyes again.

Twenty-seven. Same as always.



skewed and such, consisting of percussionist Trevor Saint and laptop performer Jeff Herriott, performs original, semi-improvisational works for glockenspiel and electronics that focus on real-time exchanges between instrumental and computer performers. Their co-composed pieces utilize simple pre-compositional structures, which allow for extensive interplay between the performers in real-time; in particular, this approach allows both Trevor and Jeff to explore subtle details within a single sound or musical idea, a concept that is central to their individual careers and has united their work as a duo. Trevor and Jeff have performed together at the 2011, 2013 PASIC (Percussive Arts Society International Conference), Spectrum NYC, UW-Whitewater, as part of MUSE-Fest in Madison, UW-Milwaukee, Project Lodge, Denison's Tutti Festival, and others.

Recordings of skewed and such's "Brittle Edges EP" can be heard at <https://skewedandsuch.bandcamp.com/>

Liquid Folds is the first piece we co-composed, and it grew primarily out of the fact that we both love the sound of his bowed glockenspiel. Prior to working on that piece, we performed a short improvised set as a house party in Madison during which a majority of the set was bowed glockenspiel and processed bowed glockenspiel. Although we both could be happy just listening to bowed glockenspiel for hours at a time, we decided to frame it with a bit more context and contrasting material in *Liquid Folds*.



Jeff Herriott / Skewed and Such

Wisconsin, U.S.

Jeff Herriott is a composer and laptop performer whose music focuses on small, subtle sounds and minute variations in timbre, with slow-moving shapes that shift and bend. He creates unhurried music, using slow-moving shapes with a free sense of time. Jeff's music has been supported by a MATA Festival Commission for bass clarinetist Michael Lowenstern; an American Composers Forum commission through the Jerome Composers Commissioning Program for the Ancia Saxophone Quartet; a McKnight Foundation Visiting Composer Residency for which Jeff spent 2 months recording sounds in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and working with local students at the Ely Public Library; and a commission from the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition for concert-length work for the ensemble Due East (Erin Lesser, flutes, and Greg Beyer, percussion) plus percussion ensemble. Jeff is a Professor of Music at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. (<http://jeffherriott.com>)



Trevor Saint / Skewed and Such

Connecticut, U.S.

Trevor Saint is active in progressing and expanding the use of the glockenspiel through performance, composition, commission and improvisation. He has commissioned and premiered the first solo works for the extended-range instrument by composers Christopher Adler, Christopher Burns, Matthew Burtner, Thomas DeLio, Jeff Herriott, Matt Sargent, and Stuart Saunders Smith, among others. Trevor performs with Skewed and Such – a duo with Jeff Herriott for glockenspiel and computer, Skøefst – an improvisation trio with Christopher Burns (guitar) and Amanda Schoofs (voice), the Great Lakes Improvising Orchestra led by Hal Rammel, Minor Vices, and the percussion duo, Undue. Trevor holds degrees in percussion performance from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (B.M.) and the University of Alaska-Fairbanks (M.M.).

(<http://trevorsaint.net/>)

Ordinary

by Tania Moore

John Berger

The first time I saw her, she was looking in the window of Timeless Treasures on West 9th Street. I knew exactly which store it was because I lived in a one bedroom walk-up on Thompson Street a few blocks away. This was years ago, when a local thrift store could still pay rent in the West Village.

It was April, the callery pear trees lofting soft and white, and I spotted her from down the block, a seam running up the back of her pink tights to where it trailed beneath the hem of her denim skirt. Her chestnut hair was scraped back into a bun. More than anything, though, I could tell she was a dancer by the way she stood, as if she were being lifted through the crown of her head like a puppet on a string, everything falling into line except her feet, which splayed out beneath her like something spilled.

I pretended to browse in the shop window, but really I was peering at her reflection in the plate glass.

“Which one do you like?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she replied. “There are so many pretty things.”

We stared at the display crammed with glassware, religious effigies, a stuffed ferret on a stand and necklaces draped over a velvet-lined box. I remember it as if it were yesterday, the acrid, metallic scent of the city drowning out whatever whiff of saltiness might have remained on her skin.

“Do you like the necklaces?” I asked.

“Maybe the amber one.” She peered closer, then pulled back abruptly. “Well, have a nice day.” she gave me a sideways glance before hurrying away.

Lily Parrish, from her journal April 22, 1981

It was one of those spring days where it felt as though the earth was swollen up from all the soft, warm light. The flowers were tumbling from their buds, and it

was too nice out to go straight back to Katherine House with its chintzy furniture in the lobby and scowling Ann manning the switchboard. On Sunday nights, when my parents call, a buzzer sounds in my room, and I run down the hallway to one of the dark green, wooden phone booths on each floor to tell them that everything is going great, that I’m learning a lot and making friends. I’m not lying, not exactly. Today, though, I decided to walk beneath the white lofting trees in Washington Park, the sun like a Monet painting on the sidewalk.

I’ve been in New York since September, but today was the first time that Mme. Petrovskaiia put me in the front row with the scholarship students during point class. I wish Carey Giannoulas had been there to see.

Thinking about Carey Giannoulas, though, reminded me of Becky’s party, when Carey cornered me in the stairwell of her basement just so he could yell in my ear over REO Speedwagon, You’re not going to make it. This was after I had told him that I was graduating high school early and moving to New York, which was after we’d shared a bottle of Baily’s Irish Cream in the parking lot behind Filene’s on New Year’s Eve and he kissed me, and I teetered home with the taste of Carey Giannoulas and Baily’s on my tongue.

He seemed so certain what it meant, to make it, but since coming here, I’m not so sure. At

my latest audition for the Seattle Ballet there were hundreds of dancers divided into groups of twenty-five, for two spots in the company. Not everyone had the perfect proportions, the most exquisite arches or épaulement, but after the first few cuts, if I squinted in the mirror, I couldn’t tell us apart. How do you define an aura, though, something that glows brighter when certain dancers perform onstage? Whatever it is, I’m not sure I have it, and I wonder if that was what Carey saw when we huddled on the low wall behind Filenes in the thin, cold air, the salt glittering on the asphalt, not talking much but held together in the sweet warmth of our kiss? When I dance my body carves through space and time and I dissolve into the music, transformed into something both less than and greater than myself. I’m not sure it matters to me, though, whether there’s an audience to see. I was cut after the sixth round.

Today as I stepped into the sunshine there was a sense of possibility in the air, people walking around in too little clothing. I wandered into the park and the drug dealers whispered promises under their breath – Smack ludes blow mama – everyone looking for something.

I found a spot on a bench, but just as I got settled someone sat next to me, jostling my elbow. When I looked over I saw that it was the same guy who had talked to me in front of the thrift store window.

“Oh, hello,” he said. “Fancy seeing you here.” Then he giggled.

I ignored him, which wasn’t easy considering there was barely an inch between us. I also realized that he was old, like fifty or sixty, which made me feel sorry for him, sitting there in his cardigan, surrounded by pushers and college students in miniskirts. I thought maybe he was a professor, but he seemed too shy, and his clothing was a little shabby.

“You must be a dancer,” he said.

“Um, yeah.” I stuck out my pink, tight-clad leg.

I was suspicious that he had followed me, but then he smiled with a gentleness that made me wilt inside. Only now, sitting in my room in Katherine House, do I realize that no one has looked at me that way since I said goodbye to my mother on the Amtrak train platform seven months ago.

At the time, though, a group of NYU or Parsons students walked past reeking of pot, and I glanced at my neighbor, but he didn’t seem to notice. I wondered if maybe he was famous, a choreographer or director. The city is like that, you never know who you might bump into. Once I walked right by Woody Allen and didn’t realize until after he had gone.

The guy asked where I was from and I told him, Waltham, Massachusetts. Then he asked if I was visiting with my family,

and I said I was taking classes at the Joffrey Ballet School and staying at Katherine House. Maybe I shouldn’t have told him that, but he seemed harmless.

“Is that the residence for young women on 13th Street? It looks nice.”

I told him that I liked it okay, but some of the girls complain because of the rules, like you’re not allowed to bring guests above the first floor, and they have an eleven o’clock curfew. I didn’t tell him that even though Ann acts as though she’s doing a huge favor just to hand you your key, I like knowing that she’s there with her gray hair aerosoled in place and her canny eyes watching everyone who comes in and out.

My journal lay unopened on my lap, but it was nice to have someone to talk to, even if he was old enough to be my father. He didn’t remind me of my dad, though. For one thing my father has thick, tortoiseshell glasses and unruly eyebrows. He’s also convinced that the only reason I like ballet is because of the glamour. I guess he doesn’t see the pale moons of skin that peel away from my toes no matter how carefully I tape them, or the blood that I wash out of my sweaty tights each evening.

I didn’t say any of this out loud, but when I turned to my companion and saw his doleful, expectant expression, I had the urge to tell him what it feels like to step into an arabesque, every muscle and ligament straining

for a perfection that I might never achieve, but which I sometimes brush against, or that moment when a pirouette gathers into the music, and I become an instrument of light.

The clouds, meanwhile, had drifted over the sun, and a shiver of goose bumps rose over my arms. I slid my journal into my bag and rose to go.

“It was nice meeting you. I’m John Berger.”

“Lily Parrish.” I reluctantly shook his pale, clammy hand.

“Lily –?”

“Parrish.”

John Berger

Lily. Lily Parrish. Her name flitted to the corners of my mind like a creature kept in the dark, a butterfly, easily bruised. When I closed my eyes I imagined her creamy skin, the plumpness of childhood still clinging to her flesh, and I stood quickly, trying to shake off the image. Once the thoughts start, they’re difficult to get rid of.

I followed Lily from a safe distance as she left the park. She never looked back, skipping up the steps of Katherine House as she fumbled for her key. When the door swung open she disappeared inside, leaving me to contemplate the brick façade with its five stories of windows looking out over the street, wondering which small room belonged to Lily, or whether,

perhaps, she was peeling off her damp clothing in one of the interior chambers that probably looked out over a courtyard.

I hated myself for imagining her this way, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave so I stood across the street, watching the girls come and go like bees bringing honey to and from the hive. When I finally tore myself away, I stopped by the Joffrey Ballet School to pick up a schedule of classes before heading home.

Lily Parrish, from her Journal May 6, 1981

It poured all day, and since it’s Sunday there aren’t any classes. All day is a long time to spend alone, imagining my friends back home. They’re probably thinking about graduation and prom, and even though I have no desire to be doing any of that, it’s not as glamorous here as they probably think. The Joffrey is cliquey, and a lot of the girls already know each other. There is one girl, Amanda, who I’ve become friendly with, but as soon as class ends she stuffs her point shoes into her bag and rushes outside to the Lincoln Continental that’s waiting to whisk her uptown to where she lives.

I had another audition this week for the Kansas City Ballet. The number 176 was pinned to the front of my leotard, and we were crammed in so tight at the barre that we had to stand at an angle to make room. I recognized several of the Joffrey scholarship girls, but without their pale blue

leotards – everyone at the audition had to wear black – they looked like everyone else. I was cut after the fourth round.

Unless something changes, my parents will drive down from Waltham in a couple months to move me out of Katherine House, and then I’m heading to Rhode Island and college at the end of August. So this is it, almost the end of my grand adventure. And Carey Giannoulas was right. I didn’t become famous or even make it into the corps de ballet of a small, regional company.

When I left that audition, knowing that I was failing at the one thing I had wanted ever since I was seven years old, watching The Nutcracker on TV, I felt as though pieces of me were crumbling away, pebbly chunks disintegrating faster than I could keep up, but then I realized that this sensation was happening not outside of me, but inside. I couldn’t figure out what was worse, knowing I wasn’t good enough, or having to tell my friends that I was coming home, that I hadn’t made it. As I walked down Sixth Avenue, my dance bag bumping against my thigh, I wondered who I’d be without it. What if I was ordinary, just like everyone else?

This morning I sat in my room and watched the rain blur the gray-streaked bricks across the courtyard, and I thought of the audition as Carey’s words echoed in my mind. Such certainty, I thought, from someone who had never grand jeté

across a room, that split second – weightless, suspended – before tumbling down in a whirl of limbs like water rushing over pebbles in a stream. Did the pebbles make it, or the refracted light off the water?

My room is just big enough to fit a bed, a bureau, a small desk and a sink, so on Sundays I go wandering. I’ve gone as far as the Brooklyn Bridge and as high as the Cloisters. Today I pulled on my rain boots, snapped up my raincoat and headed out the door.

There’s a reading room in the public library on Forty-Second Street filled with carved oak bookcases and a ceiling painted with pink and blue clouds. I’d packed The Sound and the Fury and my journal, and soon I was settled at one of the long wooden tables, reading, when I got the uneasy feeling that I was being watched. Everyone around me had their heads bent over their work, though, so I figured I must have imagined it. When the sensation didn’t go away I put a marker in my book and got up to go to the bathroom. On my way up the aisle a person in the reference section looked familiar, and when I glanced back I found myself staring into the face of that guy, John Berger. His stringy gray hair was plastered over his forehead, shadows rimming his blue eyes. The sight of him singed a trail of goose down up my spine, and all I could think to do was walk out of the room. When I came back he was gone, but I was too unnerved to concen-

trate, so I left a short time later.

Now that I’m back at Katherine House eating a bowl of granola, the rain still pelting down outside, I keep wondering how, in a city as big as New York, I could run into John Berger in the reading room of the public library, thirty blocks from where I saw him the first time. I couldn’t shake the feeling that he secretly wanted to be seen even as he cowered behind the shelves.

John Berger

The first time I talked to Lily, when we were looking in the window of Timeless Treasures, she reminded me so much of Jean Marie that it was the most I could do not to cry out Jean Marie’s name, as if it was really she, unchanged after all these years. There have been other girls who have shared Jean Marie’s features, her auburn hair or clear complexion, but as soon as these Jean Marie look-alikes have spoken, their coarse manners or bold way of speaking have been so unlike Jean Marie’s playful intelligence that I’ve known right away that they were nothing like the real Jean Marie.

Several weeks after being discovered by Lily in the library, I followed her up to Central Park and watched from behind a parked car while she talked to one of the horse drawn carriage drivers. I could tell he was trying to lure her into his wagon, and I wanted to rush up and warn her that he would know all the deserted nooks and crannies in the park, and she shouldn’t

go. I was afraid that I’d startle her, though, the way I had in the library.

It had been a Sunday, pouring rain, and it was pure chance that Lily had come outside Katherine House in those few minutes when I had been lingering in my usual spot beside the gingko tree. I hadn’t seen her for a few days, which always makes the thoughts worse, as if they get trapped in my head, circling round and round like fruit flies over a bowl of pears. I knew that if I could only see her I’d be reassured that she was okay, and I’d worry a bit less.

I almost couldn’t believe it, then, when she appeared in her Wellingtons and a bright yellow rain coat. I followed her up to the library and watched from the stacks. I wasn’t as careful as I usually am, though, and on her way up the aisle she turned unexpectedly. I know she saw me, I was sure of it, but she continued out of the room, leaving her journal on the table, practically begging me to pick it up, to run my hands over the red, suede cover. My heart had been racing too fast for me to comprehend what I was reading as I sifted through the pages, afraid that she would return, or that one of the people sitting at the table would ask me what I was doing. I had been pretending to write her a note when my name, John Berger, scrawled in loopy, blue ballpoint jumped out from the pages of her diary. My vision blurred, but not so much that I couldn’t see the old crone staring at me from across the table.

I pushed the chair back over the stone floor with an excruciating scraping noise and stumbled from the room, giddy with what I had seen, my name etched in Lily’s journal as though it was engraved on her heart. That’s when I knew that Lily and I understood each other, the same way Jean Marie and I had before everything got ruined.

It was not easy, then, to crouch behind a Buick Regal, trying not to draw attention to myself while pedestrians glanced at me curiously as they walked along the park. I wanted so badly to warn Lily about the carriage driver’s intentions, and as he chuckled slyly at something she said it was as if I could see his hands groping under her purple Haagen Dazs T-shirt, and I closed my eyes to try and block it out, but the sound of horses whinnying and pawing the ground echoed in my ears. The vision was so real that I pressed my forehead against the cool glass of the car’s window to steady myself. It was too late, though. I was already tumbling back through a murky, ominous past.

Until the day she died, Mother assured me that I hadn’t to hurt Jean Marie. When the thoughts started coming into my head, she said I shouldn’t listen.

What no one understood, though, was that I loved Jean Marie, and she loved me. Whenever I start to doubt myself I remember the way she would stop and talk to me on her way home from school, accepting a gift of a fresh apple or

a sprig of forsythia in the spring. She was a freshman at Baruch College, and after high school I got a job working at Gristedes in the produce department. I liked sorting through the apples, picking out the bruised ones and lining up the rest into symmetrical, even stacks. Jean Marie had lived down the street from me my whole life, and we were friends. She would tease me about my white produce jacket or what she called my fancy way of speaking. Then one day on my way home from work I saw her kissing Joey Damutto, who was a year older than she and wasn’t worth her pinkie finger.

I wanted to charge up to them and shove him away, but I didn’t. I waited until he had gone, my breath shallow, pinpricks of light in my eyes. He didn’t even walk her home.

Oh hello, she said when I stepped out from the alley where I had been hiding. Fancy seeing you here. She trusted me and knew I wouldn’t hurt her. I told her I had something I needed to tell her. It was July, a hint of light still rimming the sky. I could see the stoop of her building down the block, but she agreed to walk with me. I waited until we had turned the corner, and then I told her that I loved her, that I wanted to marry her. She laughed. I told her again, and she said she had to get home, that her parents would be expecting her. She didn’t seem to be listening to me, and I thought maybe I should do what Joey Damutto had done, that

this was what she wanted, but it went all wrong. She misunderstood, and I got scared.

After that the bad thoughts started coming all the time. I kept trying to see her to make sure I hadn’t hurt her, but no matter how often I was able to reassure myself, I still worried. Even sorting apples didn’t help, and one raw November day, the sidewalks slick with rain, Mother took me to the hospital. When I came home, Jean Marie was gone. Mother told me that she had transferred to a school in California, but I kept thinking that it was because of something I had done. At the hospital they had taught me ways of distracting myself from the thoughts. Ruminations, they called them. The medicine didn’t help, but sometimes walking did.

Then two years ago mother passed away. She had put the apartment on Thompson Street in my name, though, and with the small annuity she set up, I have more than enough for my needs. I was starting to think that I would never find anyone after first Jean Marie, then mother went away. Until I saw Lily, and everything became brand new.

Lily Parrish, from her Journal July 16, 1981

I’ve been seeing John Berger all over the place, stepping into shops, disappearing down side streets. Last week I was walking along Central Park South, and one of the carriage drivers

offered me a free ride. I was tempted, thinking it could be fun to clip clop around the park watching the people pass by, but I also didn’t want to have to sit next to the driver. He was handsome in a seedy kind of way, with stringy blond hair and a frayed, black satin vest, but one of the things you don’t get from the pictures of horse drawn carriages is the smell of horse dung. I thanked the driver and said I had to meet a friend, and as I was walking away I swear I saw John Berger turn into the Seventh Avenue entrance to the park. I’d become almost accustomed to his lurking around down town, which is where I assume he lives, but I couldn’t believe that once again he had found a way to follow me uptown, so I rushed after him, but when I got into the park there was no one there.

I know that what he’s doing is creepy, and it should bother me more than it does. Sometimes, though, in a city where I’m surrounded by people, I’ve never felt so alone. Knowing that there’s someone who cares, even if it’s John Berger, and even if he doesn’t actually know me at all, can be oddly comforting.

Two weeks ago I woke up feverish and achy and couldn’t get out of bed. On the second day the buzzer in my room jolted me awake, and when I stumbled over to the intercom, I heard Ann’s raspy voice telling me that there was a bowl of soup outside my door. Sure enough, when I opened the door there

was a bowl of chicken noodle soup, a slice of toast and a cup of tea sitting on a tray in the hallway. So Ann and John Berger, that makes two.

John Berger

I waited for Lily at the end of the day, when she’d be returning to Katherine House. It was a hot, stagnant August afternoon that left a greasy film on my skin, and I was so nervous about missing her that I had been waiting for two hours. Finally I saw her coming, and I rushed across the street with my present in my hands.

“Are those...what are they?” she frowned.

“They’re for you. They’re called Streptocarpus.” I’d spent all week searching for the perfect gift, and when I saw the purple blooms, their moon-white throats curving towards delicate stems, I knew that they were for her, for Lily.

“But what are they for?” she demanded, her hands stuck by her sides. “Why are you following me?”

“I...wanted to give you...” There was a sound in my ear, like rushing water, and I was afraid I would drop the pot. “Please –” I whispered, pushing the flowers towards her, thinking that if she would just take them everything would be okay.

Lily Parrish, from her journal dated August 1, 1981

I was coming home from class, and when I turned off of Sixth Avenue the first thing I saw was John Berger balancing an earthenware pot on the banister of a brownstone across the street. As soon as he spotted me he rushed towards me with a smile on his face as if he’d been waiting all afternoon, an entire lifetime, for me to arrive. I glanced desperately at the door of Katherine House, Ann ensconced just a few feet away behind the brick façade, wishing fervently that I had told him to stop following me before he showed up on my doorstep.

I demanded to know what he was doing, but he became so flustered that I thought he was about to cry. There was a tremor in his hand, and I didn’t know what to do, so I took the flowers.

“Thank you,” I stammered. “They’re pretty.”

“They’re for Jean Marie.”

“Who?”

“For...I’m sorry –” He giggled, dark patches of sweat staining his shirt, and I felt sorry for him.

“Did...Jean Marie...did she like flowers, too?” I asked gently.

“I don’t know,” he murmured. “I never had the chance to ask her.”

“I’m guessing she did,” I said tentatively, the petals fluttering in the updraft of a passing car. “She probably would have thought your flowers were love-

ly. In fact, maybe they can be for both of us, for me and for Jean Marie, wherever she is.”

“She went away. A long time ago.”

“That happens, doesn’t it? I’ll be leaving soon, too. I’m going to college.”

“To college? In California?”

“No. Not California, but still far away. I’ve decided that I want to learn a lot of new things besides just dancing.”

“Jean Marie went to college,” he said, twisting his long, boney fingers.

“I was thinking. It might be hard for me to water your flowers at school. But if you brought them home, maybe you could take care of them. It could be a way

of...remembering.”

He lifted his tired blue eyes, his expression haunted and hopeful, and I reached out and put the Streptocarpus in his hands.

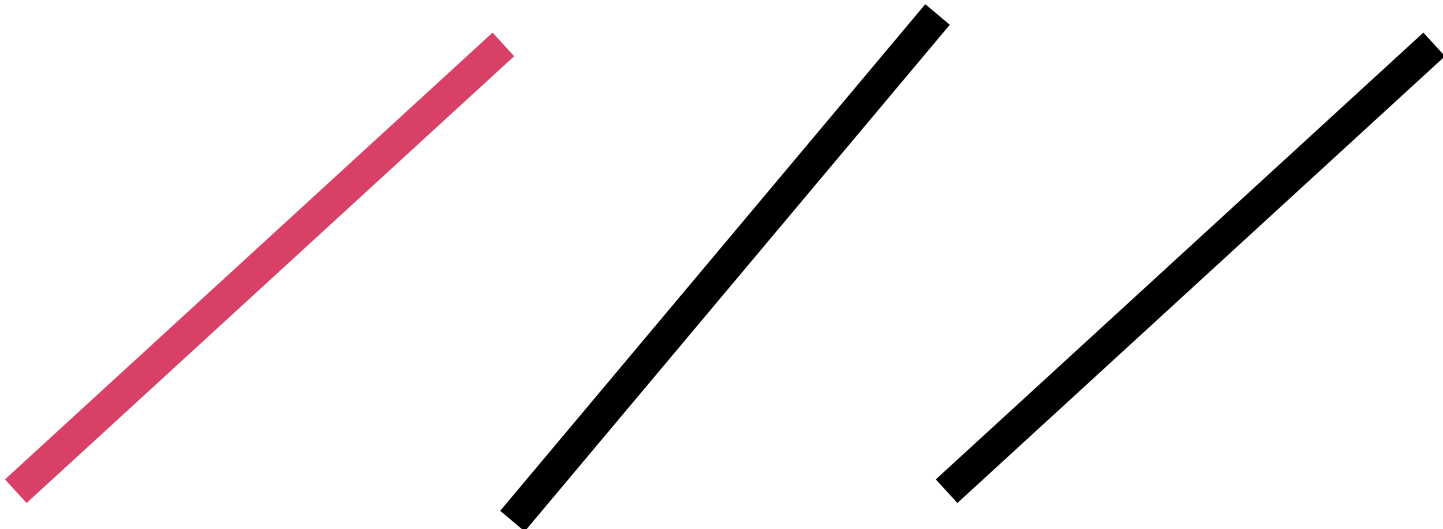
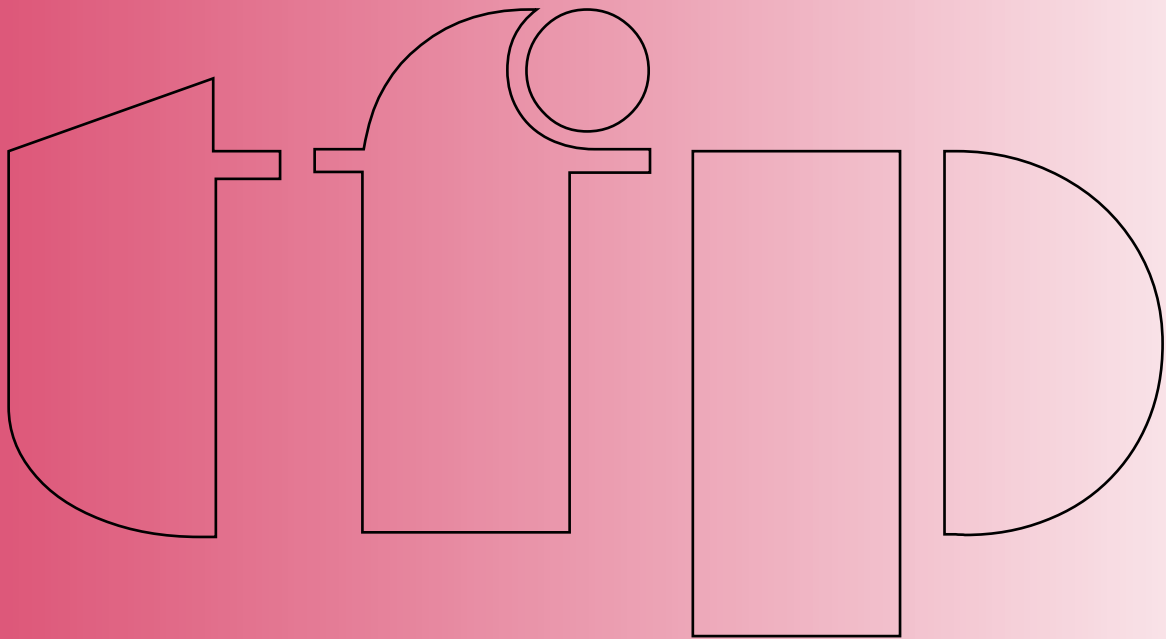


Tania Moore’s short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in The Madison Review, St. Sebastian Review, Quiddity, Kestrel, The Other Journal: an intersection of Culture and Faith, About Place Journal: A Retrospective of the Civil Rights Movement, among others, and she has been anthologized in Up, Do, Flash Fiction and Crack the Spine. Having earned her MFA from Columbia University School of the Arts, she now teaches creative writing at Riverdale Country School in the Bronx, and lives along the mighty Hudson River. You can visit her at www.taniamoore.me.



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Next Issue

story: John Parras’s

music: Helen Hall’s

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transposed by Priscilla Layne

music: Eduardo R. Miranda’s

story: Gerard McKeever’s

music: Paul Rudy’s

Marouflage

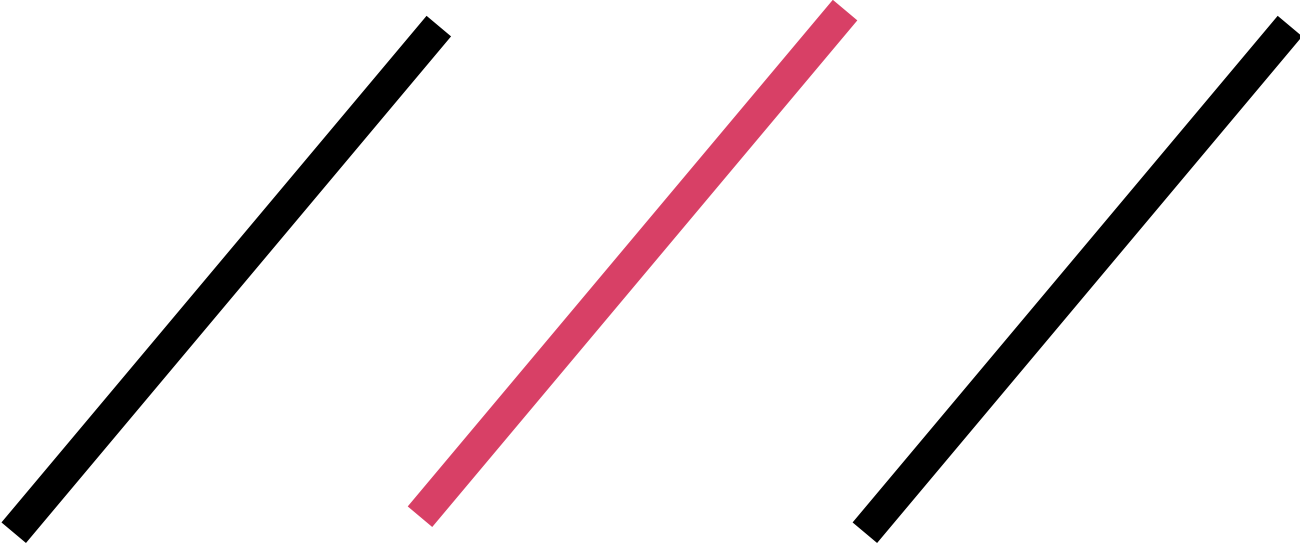
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