The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of green, succulent-like leaves. The leaves are densely packed and covered with numerous clear, spherical water droplets of varying sizes. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the leaves and the glistening surface of the water. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of green, from vibrant lime to deep forest green, with the white highlights from the water droplets.

THE **MOVING FORCE** JOURNAL

SPRING/SUMMER 2021
ISSUE 4

THE MOVING FORCE JOURNAL
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IF IT RAINS

LAWRENCE BRIDGES

The rains have left the beds
with the gift of spring
and quite a day's in store
for lovers
and readers and athletes
who like to stretch.

If it rains, I'll pull in
the trash barrels
and balm my wounds and hope
they heal before I die
then shiver in a house
that's a drum

to raindrops that say
stay inside today,
your house won't heat, coats
won't warm, so sleep
instead, because you are
as a dream to your joys

computerizing pictures and papers
from time past
as if you or someone

you love
will want a year of rain
instead of

a day to live.

ALL THINGS SPARE AND STRANGE

MARY CAMILLE THOMAS

In the desert
nightfall is a gift to the creatures
who burrowed below ground during the day,
sought shade in a juniper bough
or secret cave.

Now iguanas scurry
across red sand in moonlight,
and rattlesnakes slither,
released at last from summer's sun-stoked spell.
Cool air caresses skin and scale,
and darkness opens wings –
jack rabbit aquiver,
owl silent on his pinyon pine perch.

Spider casts out her silks
among the cholla's keen needles.
On a night such as this
who knows what prey
she might get,
silent and strange,
in her silver net?

FOR MARY OLIVER

MARY CAMILLE THOMAS

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

I took these as directions for an aspiring poet,
but you offered them as instructions for living a life.
Maybe for you the two were one and the same.
Now you have closed your eyes for the last time
on this world you praised
right down to the *fringe on a cricket's feet*.

Last night mighty winds tore through town
and pulled a river from the sky
to drench our land.
Now, after ten thousand prostrations to the storm,
the redwood and the cedar have resumed their stately posture.
Each needle is silent on the altar of repose,
and the earth opens her pores to the moisture seeping in.
She who thirsted in the everlasting days of summer
that burned into a long, dry autumn
now drinks her fill.

Dear Mary,

Do the lily and rose await your gaze still?

Does the heron?
Do they know in their cells,
petal and scent,
feather and flight,
that the queen of attention,
their praise singer,
has departed this world?

Dear lily, dear rose,
feel my eye upon you
in your grief for her absent gaze.
She lauds you still and always will.

THE IMPRESSIONISTS

CATHERINE REEF

Their colors don't blend. They collide.
Red against yellow.
Pink over black.
Green beside gray beside white.

Brisk strokes become meadow grass.
Dots of color: flowers.
Soft dashes suggest
a parasol or dress.
Hazily, messily,
the sun burns through a steely sky
and tints a morning river.

These are *impressions*, some say,
the impression of a sunrise,
or ladies outdoors,
or a field of poppies.

Clouds fleeting across the land,
leaves fluttering,
effortless, alive,
like people picnicking by the Seine,
or gathering in a train station
where a locomotive coughs blue steam.

SKETCHING

CATHERINE REEF

The clean page
invites the line
that begins
near its top
and curves
toward the base.
The first line is a promise
of a form to come.

Lines march forward,
thick and bold,
or travel lightly,
hesitant and shy.
A line meanders
and turns back,
changing its mind.
Lines diverge, run parallel,
intersect,
and a figure
fills the page.

Shading creates depth,
giving roundness
to a hip or belly,

and suppleness
to a reaching arm.
Shading brings out
the planes and angles
of a human face.

A pencil rubbed across the page
reveals a shadow on the ground.

ADDICTION

JEANETTE LYNES

In summer the ditches grew rampant with grass –
bluestem, tall cord grass, twitch, wild rye,
panic grass, brome, quack grass, juiced-up fescue.
Summer brought the addicts out, the four-legged
ones otherwise known as our dogs. Through the cold
months they coiled by the fire, performed being pets.
But when ditches sprouted feral green fur
our mutts turned hardened criminals, rose
from some murky folk tale, their hides
Jekyll'ed, fangs honed. Winters stretched far,
those years. A dog needs its fix, summer –
crouches in a ditch – when a car draws near, dust-plumed,
the cur springs, all menacing barks,
lunges and snarls and hurls itself at the tires
shredding gravel. Astonishing how far those
dogs could race alongside a car, until it receded
in a nimbus of road-scurf, flown grit, towards town.
Then pant, repeat, wait, hollowed, hidden, all stealth
for the next car – this was dogs' crack – speed – trip – high –
rush. *Bad dog*. But hell-near impossible, if your dog stalked cars
to break him. The only rehab – incarceration in the barn but
how'd *you* like being barred from summer?
And doesn't your secret hooligan heart long just a *little*

to hide in grassed hollows, hang there with crazed crickets
and fervent, shimmying butterflies and dash
after the next big machine and yip and
yawp just because you *can*, because
you're *alive*?

GRIEF

JEANETTE LYNES

It's like when you bid a place goodbye,
swivel your heel one last time to glance
the kettle's ghost, the stovetop-spiral
where it lived, rumbled water for mint tea.
Then you close the door. Outside, those tiny blue
spring flowers spike through grass
everywhere and how dare they lavish like
that without you? When did they grow
so callous?

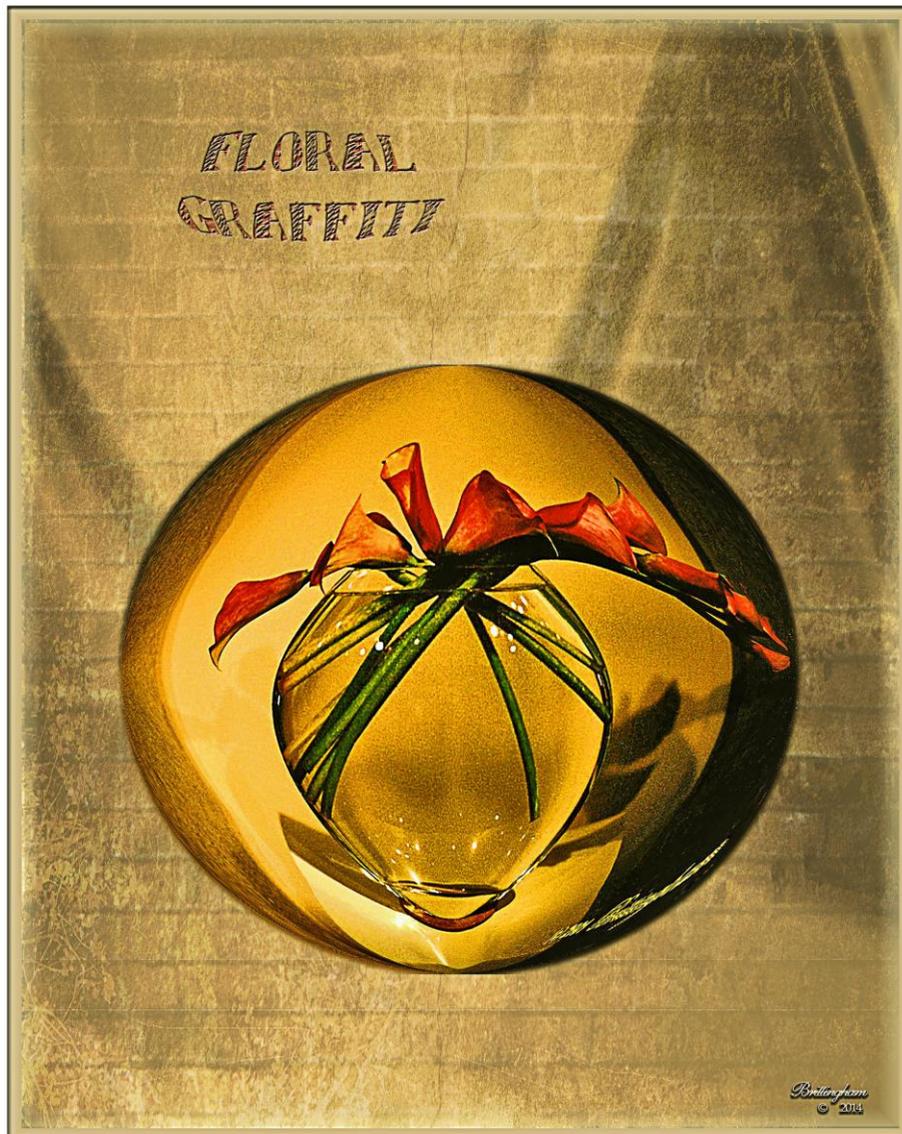
It's like when your friend hits a wall and all
you can do is smooth a blanket over her
or *you* hit one and she tucks a quilt
around you and later you don't speak of
it and she doesn't. The lone, surviving fact
is a blanket's solace, the spectral hands
that placed it there.

It's like when another, faraway friend
writes and you lag, can't shape
words into *you're fine, everything's okay*
because *fine* and *okay* took a hike from
your lexicon and this linguistic shambles
sets you so awash in shame you can't

muster the grit to *make something up* or
reply the weather has greatly improved
and there are flowers and blankets
still in the world and *fine* and *okay*
might be hitchhiking on some highway
carved through rock, who knows, might
be having the time of their *fine-okay* lives.

FLORAL GRAFFITI
B.A. BRITTINGHAM

Floral Graffiti



THE REAL DEAL

BRITTANY ACKERMAN

My mom wants to leave my dad. She brings it up in bouts of emotional despair when things have gone awry at home. "He didn't file our taxes correctly." "He picks at all his scabs." "Did you know he was engaged to another woman before me?" she says to me now over lunch, and no, I did not.

"Your dad was set up by his mother to marry another woman," she tells me, "And just a few weeks before the wedding, he met me at the travel agency and called it off."

My dad worked in a travel agency and my mom was in there, looking to get away. I wonder where she intended to go, if she had a life planned that never came to fruition. But my dad said that after he "saw my mom's ass," he wasn't about to let her leave his store without her phone number. I imagine my mom thumbing travel pamphlets on a rotating store rack, eyeing my dad at his desk, maybe an oscillating fan blowing her blonde hair across her back, and him in his chair loosening his tie before speaking.

"Isn't that good?" I ask, naïve, hopeful, still believing in love. They've been married for thirty years.

"You'd think," she says. "But it just goes to show how he can never make up his damn mind."

The two of us dine at a restaurant called Mariposa hidden deep inside of Neiman Marcus. We both work at the mall. She's been in the Men's department at Macy's for almost fifteen years and I just started working at

Abercrombie and Fitch. I'm an MIT, Manager in Training. It was the only place that would hire me after getting a master's degree in creative writing at a local university.

All my friends had gotten jobs in public relations and copywriting, but I wanted to be a real writer. I wanted to tour the country and give readings and have fans. I wanted my work to be important. I admired writers who had stoic photos in their book jackets, who had been published in renowned presses, who had accolades. So I applied to graduate school, ready to dedicate my life to the craft of the written word. When I got accepted, my parents helped me rent an apartment on campus. After I graduated, I stayed, unsure of my next move. I was too old to be living on a college campus, but I really had nowhere else to go. My parents had moved into a small condo when I was in college and there was no room for me there anymore.

I would sometimes see my old professors walking to and from class while I was on my way to my car in the parking lot. They carried coffee mugs from home, wore poncho style sweaters and held accordion folders with student papers and manuscripts inside, I presumed. I once saw a professor, Mr. Dornfeld, who taught fiction. I had taken his class one semester and he had asked all the students what our plans would be if the writing business didn't pan out. I remember saying "how dare he" and "of course I was going to make it," the rectangular table and my peers' faces becoming a blur, and storming out. I felt like something had been taken from me, something I was promised from childhood, the days of yore. The phrase "You put the EXTRA in EXTRAORDINARY" painted on the walls of my kindergarten classroom and being told by my teachers, "You can do anything you put your mind to." I had put my mind to writing. I had entered into a deal in my mind that the hard

work plus time equals success. I had to email Mr. Dornfeld an apology, which he accepted, but I remained quiet the rest of the semester.

A woman walks around the restaurant and offers us popovers. My mom declines, but then reaches over and rips mine in half so we can share. I dab a smear of strawberry butter on my portion of the popover. The restaurant overlooks the valet and I look at all the nice cars: a white Mercedes Benz, a bright orange Porsche, a baby blue Tesla.

The first place I took my car when I got my driver's license was to the mall. The mall is my sanctuary. Mall-goers are my people. My friends and I used to do infinite laps around the mall eating Auntie Anne's pretzels, clutching onto large Diet Cokes and our Nokia cell phones, hoping to meet boys in the food court and hangout at the Sharper Image in La-Z-Boy massage chairs. We went to the Barnes and Noble and read *Seventeen* magazine, took turns changing our tampons in the bathroom, holding each other's purses, sharing each other's Hard Candy lip-glosses. The mall felt more like home than home did. Growing up in Boca, most of us lived in mini mansions with palm trees and pools, manicured lawns and homes that ranged from beige to eggshell white. We brought Starbucks lattes to high school and wore uniforms: khaki skirts and polo shirts the colors of the American flag. I dreamed that one day I would be rich enough to come back to the mall and buy everything I wanted but didn't need just to prove a point.

It embarrasses me to have ended up at Abercrombie and Fitch, a store I used to make fun of shortly after growing out of it; the store where male "models" stood shirtless in windows during Christmastime wearing nothing but jeans and Santa hats. There was always a deep love for the store that I

had to keep quiet, to hush in front of the presence of others. I still owned a denim mini skirt that sat in the back of my closet that I never wore but kept there as a memento, a promise to a future self to be better, to rise up, to inflate so large and then blow away in the wind, forever.

I had been “recruited” one day by another manager. I was coming out of Nordstrom after buying a pair of Springy espadrilles when a bouncy blonde in a flowery dress came up to me and handed me a card with information on it to apply. I was shocked to be asked, feeling a little old to work in a store like that. Wasn’t it just for kids? For people in between things? I knew where I wanted to go, what I wanted to do. I had written a manuscript during my time in graduate school. It was a collection of essays, a memoir called *No Room for Poetry*, stories about growing up in South Florida, girlhood, all that. But despite my sending it out all over the place, it had not been picked up yet. Most agents I submitted to hadn’t even responded at all. I had so much hope that any day now I’d get an email that someone wanted to publish it. If I could just get this one book out there, I’d find my way in the world.

The girl who handed me the card could tell I was skeptical.

“I’m Lila, the store manager,” she said.

“I’m twenty-five,” I said, as if stating it aloud would allow me to bypass all this.

“I’m twenty-six,” Lila said, smiling. “Look, you’re a little too old to be a sales associate, so you’d be working with me as a manager in training, an MIT...”

“Do *you* like working there?” I asked, hoping to catch a glimpse of self-hatred in her voice when she responded.

"I do. I love it there. It's a great job to put on a resume. You learn how to manage a company, how to be responsible for other people, and you get to basically play dress-up all day."

A part of me liked the idea that I could put "Manager" on my CV. But this thought also triggered the idea that the rest of my life might be a series of manager roles, a succession of store after store, meeting new people all the time when all I really wanted to do was be alone in my room and write.

"Just think about it," Lila said.

The other part of me realized how happy it would make my mom to work at the mall, alongside her. We could meet up for lunch and plan to take our breaks together. We could bitch about customers and long hours and our tired feet.

I applied online and was invited to interview with Lila the following week. I figured at the very least it could be a way to make money until all my dreams came true. I dug up an old pair of A&F jeans that I had from high school along with a classic white button-down for the interview. The questions were more so about my personality than about anything managerial. "How would you describe our style?" "What do you do for fun?" "What's your favorite season?"

"Laid back, shop, summer."

And then I was hired. And my mom was thrilled.

"Is it busy today?" my mom asks, snapping me out of it. She's the only one that might be able to truly understand me, I think.

"We've got a redline on denim, so that's drawn a few people in," I say, still deciding between a beet salad and a cheeseburger for lunch. "Would you share a burger?"

"A guy came into my department looking for jeans and I got him a pair of Perry Ellis, so he went in to try them on and came out of the dressing room naked."

"Did you call Security?"

"I asked him if he needed to buy some underwear too."

*

On days when I open the store, I leave my campus apartment at 8:00am. I park near an area of the mall called The Terrace, an outdoor section with a Crate & Barrel, Anthropologie, and a Sleep Number store. I walk across to the other side of the mall to Starbucks and order a tall cappuccino, then head back to the southeast side and unlock the entrance of the store. I lock the door behind me when I enter and make my way to the back and into the stock room. I put my purse in a locker and start up the computer. It's the opener's job to leave a voicemail to corporate with the daily sales report, goals for the day, week, month, new hires, terminations, and then a customary sign off, something hopeful. We have to use words like "conversion rate," "gross profit," "net profit," "loss prevention," "shrinkage," "units per transaction," and a bunch of other things I never understood no matter how many times I read them in the manual. After the voicemail, I turn on the stereo system and take my cappuccino to the cash wrap to count money in the register.

Lila comes in around 9:45am. A sales associate comes in around then too. She doesn't have a key of course, so she has to ring the awkward

doorbell up front and we have to let her in. Lila tells the sales associate to Swiffer the floor and see if there's any new merchandise in the back, things to keep her busy while we book it to Starbucks. The store opens at 10:00am, but we hurry to get our Grande iced caramel macchiatos with extra drizzle and whipped cream.

"I don't know how much longer I can keep drinking these," Lila says as we rush back to the store. Even though Lila is only one year older than me, she's married. She is beautiful with blonde hair and green eyes, a perfect human. She always has the most put together outfits and somehow wears heeled boots all day during her ten-hour shifts. I only have to be at the mall for eight hours, and I still barely manage to put outfits together. I take advantage of the store's allowance in letting us wear flip-flops, so I mostly do that and throw on a summery dress with a denim jacket. Lila has been a manager for three years, and she's taken me under her wing. She wants me to become the store manager here so she can move up a notch to the West Palm store.

"I know," I say. "There's just so much sugar, and I've already had a cappuccino this morning..."

"Don't tell anyone," she interrupts, hushing her voice. "But I'm pregnant."

"Oh! Congratulations!"

"I want to work as long as I can, though. We need the money. But I'm three months already."

I feel special that she wants me to know, like a golden child in the store. The rest of the day she has me do things that are no longer safe for her to do. I change a light bulb that involves climbing an unsteady ladder. I

move boxes from the mail delivery dock to the stockroom. I conduct an interview because Lila feels nauseous. She gets annoyed when I hire everyone at the interview, a total of five people. But then I listen to her go over baby name ideas for the last hour of my shift and all is forgiven.

Before I can clock out, Lila wants me to take out the garbage. I've never done this before. It's something she usually makes one of the new hires do. But she says she wants me to really know this mall, inside out. She hands me a pair of gloves and tells me to get a dolly. I pile up about eight or nine bags full of trash onto it and head out the stockroom door.

It's about a hundred degrees outside. The sun is out and blazing above me, but in the distance, I see dark clouds congregating, conspiring. I know I need to hurry because it can start pouring any moment now. That's the thing about Florida summer; one minute you can be tanning at your parents' pool, the next you can be soaking wet sitting in your car and wondering where the hell your life is going.

I can't seem to get the dolly to steer straight. The trash area is a ten-minute walk from the store, and once I get closer, I see there's no one out there to help me. I open up the dumpster and try to throw the bags in, one by one, but it's almost full and my fourth bag just about fills it up. There's a sign warning against overfilling the trash, that you're supposed to take trash to another area if it's full, but I leave the bags on the floor next to the dumpster instead. I turn to go back, but then feel guilty, a crippling fear bubbles up inside of me. I worry that someone might see me leaving the trash and that they might tell on me, get me fired, and then I'll have nothing. I won't even have a job that I hate. But I don't want to load the bags back up

and push them to another destination. I want it to be easier. I want things to come easy. I load the bags back up and walk around the perimeter of the mall. I walk around the back of Bloomingdales and find another trash area between there and Neiman Marcus. I imagine someone sitting at Mariposa looking down at me while I struggle with the garbage. I imagine them wearing a flouncy dress and eating popovers, actually able to enjoy it because they don't work at the mall, but they can get in their Tesla and its self-operating system will drive them back home to their Boca mansion where they don't have to worry about a thing.

Sweating, I push the dolly back to the mall. Back at the store, I wash my hands in the employee bathroom and rinse under my arms, my chest, my face. I slink down onto the floor and feel like crying. I feel very far away from where I was trying to be. If only my friends in publishing and public relations could see me now, they'd all laugh, or feel sorry for me. They'd be glad they weren't me, that they got to work in clean offices with normal daily activities and projects, not dressing mannequins or collecting coffee cups that people left around the store, not working in a mall like some idiot.

I step out of the bathroom and gather my purse from my locker. Lila is waiting with a Snickers bar. "For later," she winks. Maybe something good always comes after something bad, I think.

It rains on the way home, the rain turning into a storm, fast. The college campus only has outdoor parking, so I run inside and take the elevator up. I remember touring the building when I got accepted to the graduate program. I recall romanticizing the idea of becoming a student again, of wearing a backpack and having places to be, lectures to attend,

papers to write. Every time an established writer visited our campus, I sat in the front row and took notes on their journey to stardom. I thought that if I had done A,B, and C, I'd end up with X, Y, and Z. Now that I've graduated and nothing's happened with my life, it annoys me to see the kids who are still in school. They're lax and careless, only worrying about sneaking liquor into their dorms. I remember I have to take out my own trash, but it's only one small bag. I pass a girl in the hallway sitting on the floor and crying on the phone. I pretend not to see her, to save her from any embarrassment, and throw the trash in the chute where it is easily taken away from me and I don't have to think about it anymore. It would be nice if more things in life were like this.

I take a shower, hoping to refresh myself. I eat the Snickers bar and feel inspired to write. Back in graduate school, everyone told me I should fictionalize my nonfiction, that novels were selling, novels were the real deal. I had an idea about an experience I had in college and that maybe that would make for good fodder, maybe the depths of my frustration and embarrassment can at least lead to a rebirth of my writing, a renaissance, a new era. I spend all night writing with bursts of hope and faith. Every time I write, I want it to feel like this, a labor of love, to be the mother of something, of this work of art. The creation will outlive the creator. Maybe I need to make art for the sake of making art. I feel good about the writing that happens when it's happening as it's coming out of me onto the page, and maybe that's it, that's all there is.

This enlightenment, however, leaves me upon waking up the next day. The fear of the unknown future reenters my mind but creeps its way into the back, the stockroom of my mind, stored there until unleashed.

*

Every Friday I take a test at work; a test that, if I read through the allotted manual pages for the week, I will pass. I usually miss a question or two, for which Lila sits with me in the stock room and reviews my wrong answers, explains the correct ones. During this time she also lets me eat Cheeto Puffs out of the family size bag in the office. Then together, we go through the new merchandise and she lets me try on outfits.

"So cute," she says after each one, except a pair of overalls that we decide will never come back in style.

"How long did you date your husband before you got married?" I ask, wearing a faux fur vest that's meant for fall, but we got a shipment in early for some reason.

"We dated for a year, then had a horrible break-up. I was alone for like six months, like totally alone. No hook-ups or late-night-whatevers. We really separated, found ourselves, took the time. And then he proposed."

When I was a teenager, all I had to do was get the guy to look at me. The rest was easy. It was more about having a collection of interested parties rather than keeping any of them. The fact that they had once looked my way was enough. The validation, the "hello" of it, the night ending in a kiss, maybe. That was enough for me. But getting older feels like getting lost. I wonder if I'll ever really get it together, if I could be the type of woman like Lila who wears uncomfortable shoes because they make her look better, stand taller, act a certain way. Or maybe I would always let myself go, let myself be, let myself be less.

Lila can tell I'm overthinking. A good manager is intuitive like that, can tell when her employees need a break, a quick fiver, or in my case, when I'm obsessing into the great beyond.

"I had faith, too," she says. "You have to have faith that you can manifest the kind of love you want in your life, the kind of love you deserve."

I spend the rest of the day in the vest, but I put it back in the box from where it came at the end of the night. I tuck it away like a precious thing.

When I get ready in the morning, I do my hair and makeup so I can look good for the customers who come into the store. I wing my eyeliner, like how Lila does hers, and flip the ends of my hair under so it looks like a fresh blow-dry. I fantasize about meeting someone on my break, or stopping at the grocery store on the way home and talking to the clerk for a bit too long. I imagine faith as taking weights off my body and putting them down somewhere else, out of my concern, freeing my body to float to where it needs to be, to where it's supposed to go.

Lila has to go to West Palm for a manager's meeting. I get her a caramel macchiato and meet her in the parking lot before she leaves. She's sitting in her jeep doing her makeup and I knock on the passenger side door. She lets me in and motions for me to sit. I hop in and she's putting layers of highlighter and bronzer on her face, systematically—a thing I've never learned how to do.

"So tell me about your book idea," she says, and it catches me off guard.

"Well, I already wrote my memoir, but I want to write a novel next..."

"And a novel is like, one big story, right?"

"Right. And in the book, the novel, in the story, it's about a girl in college who is in love with this boy, but he breaks up with her before they graduate and she tries to kill herself. But she fails, obviously, because she's telling the story, and then she realizes that maybe she needs to be alone and figure things out."

"Wow," Lila says. "That sounds really deep. But maybe I'm just like, low-key sensitive." Lila stops doing her makeup and is drinking her macchiato. "I really need to stop with these, but I'm addicted. My baby is probably going to be addicted to sugar right out of the womb."

"Ha! Yeah, probably," I say.

"I have to get up north, but text me if there's any problems today."

Lila drives off and I go inside to open the store alone. My mom texts that she's having lunch with her boss today and can't meet. On my break, I go to Godiva and get a sundae for lunch. The mall is dead and feels cold and dark even though it's a summer day. I try to comfort myself in the ice cream, the pillows of vanilla and warm fudge, but it makes my stomach hurt. I sit on a bench by the fountain and watch the water dance, a private little show just for me.

The day goes fine and I spend most of it in the stockroom with a stomach ache, making the sales associates do go-backs and tidy up the store. Back at my dorm, I realize my winged eyeliner is uneven. I fall asleep and dream that I'm stuck on my high school campus, and the smartest kid in my

Geometry class owns me. He makes me walk around campus and tell everyone how wonderful he is even though I hate him and I'm secretly plotting to escape. I try to kill him a stapler but he strangles me with an extension cord and I wake up gasping. I read a missed text from Lila that reads: "My day was a dream!"

I open the store alone again the next day. I'm tired, but I have a black coffee this morning. It's a bit too hot, so I take the lid off to let it cool down. I count the money in the register and check my phone out of boredom. I have an email from an agent in my inbox. I lean against the register and read the email.

Dear Marissa,

Thank you for submitting your manuscript, *No Room for Poetry*, to the Barry Whitmore Agency. While we enjoyed reading your work, we do feel your writing is too green to accept at this time. We encourage you to keep writing and to send more work along, perhaps a novel, when you are ready. We also suggest a title change for your collection if you should decide to perhaps fictionalize it in the future: *Gaps and Bridges*. Thank you again for writing to us, and we look forward to reading your work in print someday!

It takes every fiber of my being not to throw up. I was hoping the email would be the anecdote to my fear. I was hoping it would absolve me of some sin I wasn't aware I'd committed. I wanted it to bear good news, the good word that I'd been accepted, recognized, published, freed from this life and onto the next. But no, here I am, still, opening a store for slutty teenagers and Boca moms.

I turn and spill the coffee all over the cash wrap. I run to the employee bathroom and grab paper towels. I try to clean off the money, the change, which is now sticky and has been misplaced in the wrong sections of the drawer. I somehow manage to fix it all and spray the store perfume all over myself and the register before Lila shows up right before we open the doors. She says I smell good, and she doesn't notice anything. I don't tell her about the email. I don't tell anyone for that matter. I wish I hadn't read it.

Weeks go by. I go with my mom to get our nails done. She tells me she met someone at the store who works at a local high school and that they're hiring English teachers for the fall. She puts the card in my purse and tells me I should give it a try.

"I think it would be better than retail," she says. And I know she's right. I will email the school, I will try.

"Thank you," I say.

"I'm going to leave dad," she says. "I've been putting money into another account I opened at the bank. He doesn't know about it. There's almost \$10,000 dollars in there. I just wanted to wait until you got on your feet to do it, but I think once you start teaching..."

"But what if I don't get the job?"

"You'll get it. Mothers know these things."

And I do get the job. I decide to tell Lila in person that I'll be giving my two-weeks notice. She's showing now and she's had to tell her general manager and the regional manager about the baby. I'm hopeful she'll be happy for me since I'm finally on a better path. With teaching, I'll have more

time to write and manifest my writing career. I plan on telling her these things, but Lila is angry at my news.

"I won't be able to transfer now," she says. "Can't you think of anyone except yourself?"

"I'm sorry, I just don't think retail is for me..."

"Yeah, well that's clear. Why don't you just leave now, it's not necessary to work your two weeks."

I take the store's key off of my keychain and put it on her desk in the office. I clock out and walk out of the store at 9:50am. As I walk to my car, I beat myself up for not saying things I wanted to say, for not giving my speech the way I had practiced it in my head. I wait in the parking lot trying to will Lila to come out and look for me, but to no avail. I drive off, a baby bird leaving the nest.

I have dinner with my parents. My mom sets up Styrofoam plates and cups while we wait for my dad to come home. I tell my mom I'm nervous about the teaching job. She says it'll be fine and reminds me of the benefits I'll receive for working full-time. Health insurance, paycheck security. I'm worried I won't have as much time to write, if I'll even continue writing once I start teaching.

My dad walks in carrying bags from Pollo Tropical. My mom starts divvying up the dishes and my dad pours Pepsi into my cup without asking. My mom snatches the receipt stapled to the outside of the bag.

"What happened to the coupon?" she says, her voice already high.

"I gave it to the cashier," my dad answers. "Did she not apply it?"

"No! The total here is \$28.57 after tax, and you were supposed to get a dollar off!"

"Well, I gave it to her."

"I knew this would happen!"

And there's no stopping her now, so I take my chicken sandwich and Pepsi to the terrace. Their voices become a hum when I slide the door shut.

Lila texts me that my last paycheck is available for pick up. I go to the store in sweatpants and no makeup. I want to look sad, remorseful. Lila is more pregnant than ever and her skin is glowing. She's behind the cash wrap when I walk in, but she leads me to the stockroom. There's a succulent in a ceramic pot on her desk with a balloon tied to it that reads, "Good Luck!"

"I'm sorry I was such a bitch," Lila says. "Maybe it's hormones."

"I'm sorry I'm leaving," I say. And really, I am.

"No! This is such a better opportunity for you. I want you to keep the plant in your classroom and don't forget me, okay?"

"I feel bad about your transfer though."

"I'm going to hire another MIT, already did actually. Her name is Caden. She kind of sucks, but it's fine. I just need someone to take over, soon." She rubs her belly.

We hug and I leave the mall. I drive to the bank and meet my mom there. She's inside already talking to a banker at one of the private cubicles when I arrive. I join them and the banker explains that I have to cosign on the account my mom has, the separate one that is for when my mom leaves my

dad, even though she never does. But I'm overwhelmed all of a sudden. It hasn't happened in a while, but I feel a fit coming on. I walk outside, but my walk is a jolty run. I fall into the grass outside the bank and cry. My mom runs out after me. The banker stands in the middle of the automatic doors, keeping them open with short intervals of closure every few seconds.

"I can't do it!" I scream, and there's no going back now.

"I'm not going to leave him yet," she says. But I'm not even talking about signing the papers. It's something else. Something that was always deep inside me. Demonic, but that's not the right word. The crippling fear, but it's angered. It's awakened.

"I can't put on a show," I say, no idea where it comes from.

"You don't have to," my mom says back. She's afraid to hug me, her own daughter, so she hovers over me in her Macy's uniform, her red top and black cardigan, her blonde hair, a bounce. "You don't have to," she says again. But we do, we all do.

ILLUSORY

JEROME BERGLUND



VACANT CHARLEROI
JAMES READE VENABLE



A SCARF FROM KABUL

MARK STONEMAN

"Meester! Meester! You wanna buy bracelet? You wanna buy scarf?"

The girl holds up half-a-dozen cotton scarves in one hand and at least twenty plastic bracelets in the other. She's about seven years old, Afghan, beautiful in both a childish and aesthetic way, and absolutely filthy. She has large, bright, brown eyes that call out to me from her soft but powerful features, a blend of the Pashtun, Hazara, Uzbek and Persian people who have lived in this country for centuries. Her skin is a rich brown, and dirt is not so much smeared on her face as it has become a part of it. She is crowned by a mop of short black hair, which is matted into visible knots in several places. I imagine her ten years from now in another place, somewhere she could bathe every day and wouldn't have to sell trinkets on the street: she could be a model.

"How much for a scarf?"

"Ten dollars!" she yells at me confidently. The scarves would cost the equivalent of fifty cents anywhere else in Kabul but this, as they say, is a seller's market. We're on a street in the Green Zone, the central part of the city occupied by the U.S. military since we invaded Afghanistan in 2001. It's ringed by concrete walls, and access is controlled by Afghan soldiers and policemen at numerous checkpoints. Every country represented in Afghanistan has located its embassy here, and NATO runs the war from several bases located behind their own guarded, concrete walls within this enclave. It's easy to think that you're safe here, but you're still in Afghanistan, and the Taliban loves to kill Americans where they feel most secure. Soldiers from every NATO

country serving here and contractors from many more besides walk the crumbling and uneven sidewalks with varying degrees of concern for their safety.

“Ten bucks! No way!” The negotiation begins. She may be only seven, but she’s a seasoned haggler and indicates she’s up for the exchange by beaming a broad smile and launching a confident counter-offer.

“Eight dollars!”

“Eight dollars! You’re crazy! Three dollars!”

This assessment of her sanity from me prompts another smile and a giggle, which is what I really wanted.

“Not three—seven dollars.” I’d already decided to give her five dollars, but the point wasn’t to buy another scarf—I already had about a dozen in my office—the point was to talk to one of this band of street vendors and give them five bucks every time I walked from my base to the larger NATO headquarters, less than a mile away. Five bucks was more than a day’s pay for a laborer in Kabul, and while I had no illusions that the kids would get to keep it, I thought that maybe it would make a difference somewhere in their lives.

“Five dollars, my final offer.” I say, pulling a bill out of my wallet and offering it to her.

At about this time, a small boy walked up to us. He was about nine or ten, equally dirty, and just as innocent in my eyes. He smiled at me as he walked up and stood behind her, observing the transaction. They were clearly part of the same sales team.

"Okay, five dollars. Which one you want?" She seamlessly transitioned from negotiating to delivering, eager to move onto her next mark. She held up the scarves, displaying them, expertly shifting half of them to her other hand while still holding onto the bracelets. I picked out the most colorful design I could see and took it.

"Tasha kir," I said, exhausting my knowledge of Pashtun. Good thing I wasn't selling.

While the little girl and I were completing our transaction, the boy had glanced at my wallet and seen that I had several twenty dollar bills in there. This prompted a rebuke from him, directed at the girl. I didn't know the words, but I understood the message. The sharp tone and rapid-fire of his speech, his extinguished smile that became an accusatory glare, the stance that was now squared against the confused girl all said:

"You idiot! You sold too low! He has hundreds of dollars, and you settle for five!"

If there was any doubt as to his message, he punctuated its end with a beautiful right hook that caught the girl's beautiful face right below her left eye. There was a second's pause (if it was that long) while the girl and I both registered what had just happened, and then she started bawling, like the child she was.

I stood on that dusty street in the Green Zone, wondering what to do. What could I do? Take them home with me? Sit down with them and try to teach them the importance of respecting each other and not solving problems with violence? But I was an Army officer, a manager of violence, so that might be a hard sell. I thought about smacking the boy on the back of his head and explaining to him that you don't hit people smaller than you,

but I quickly realized how ironic that would be. I could pick the little girl up and hold her, rock her in my arms and tell her it would be alright, but I knew it wouldn't be.

The fact was there was nothing I could do or say that would have any effect on these children, so I did nothing. I looked away from the tears streaming down the little girl's dirty cheeks and walked away, carrying my scarf, pretending I couldn't hear her crying. The little boy was already talking to two Dutch soldiers who were coming the other way. He had moved on, but I couldn't.

I thought about what had just happened for the rest of that day, and on many other days since then, trying to make sense of it. I guessed the boy was the supervisor and was just trying to maximize his profits. At the end of every day, he would have to answer to the adult who owned the business. If he hadn't made enough money that day, he'd probably get a smack in the face, too. Shit rolls downhill.

But why were they there at all, when kids their age in America were in school, or playing sports or Xbox? Did they have families, and was this the family business? Were they related? The children's appearance and their presence on the street in the middle of the day suggested that no-one cared about them, so maybe they were orphans and if so, was this the only way for them to get by?

What about the girl? What did her future look like? A marriage not too long from now to a husband much like the little boy: older and with a penchant for making a point with his fists. Rushed into adulthood and motherhood too quickly, she would be old before her time. I doubted if there would be too many spontaneous giggles in her future.

As it turns out, I needn't have worried about her. Two weeks later, a Taliban suicide bomber blew himself up about fifty yards from where our negotiation had taken place, killing her and four other children. He had been targeting soldiers like me, waiting for more than a couple of us to come walking down the street so he could kill us. This was the children's beat, however, not his. They knew every inch of it, and they knew who belonged and who didn't. This guy was out of place, so they pointed him out to an Afghan policeman guarding the entrance to one of the embassies nearby. As the policeman approached the nervous stranger, the children surrounded him and began shouting and pointing at him, preventing him from escaping. The scene ended when the insurgent detonated the vest of explosives, screws and nails that he had strapped to his body.

I was away from Kabul when he murdered those children, but when I returned a week later, I walked down the street where he had committed his heinous, unjustifiable crime. I've seen many explosions during my time in Iraq and Afghanistan, but an amateur could have found this site. Windows were blown out, street signs were gone and chunks of concrete had been etched from the wall running down the street, pointing in a fan to where the blast had originated, to the place where her young life had ended.

There were 88,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan when I was stationed there in 2012, but we couldn't secure much beyond the ground we were actually standing on, so why were we there? This was the Green Zone—supposedly the most secure part of the country—but a Taliban suicide bomber wearing an explosive vest had somehow got past the checkpoints and walked down the street between two NATO bases. If children were at risk because they sold trinkets to soldiers, what chance did we have of creating an environment where they could safely go to school?

Life in Afghanistan is hard. The government is corrupt if it governs at all. There's no justice, human rights, or civil rights. There are few doctors and even less medicine. There's not much to eat, and the winters are brutal. Democracy is a punchline. There's just survival.

It is human instinct to live, despite all hints to give up, and Afghans are survivors in a very primal sense. But, surviving in Afghanistan was not winning; it was just existing so that you could fight another day. Another day struggling against hunger and indignity. For that reason, I was glad the little girl was dead. For her, the struggle was over.

Brittany Ackerman is a writer from Riverdale, New York. She earned her BA in English from Indiana University and graduated from Florida Atlantic University's MFA program in Creative Writing. She teaches Archetypal Psychology and American Literature at AMDA College and Conservatory of the Performing Arts in Hollywood, CA. She was the 2017 Nonfiction Award Winner for Red Hen Press, as well as the AWP Intro Journals Project Award Nominee in 2015. Her work has been featured in *The Los Angeles Review*, *No Tokens*, *Hobart*, *Cosmonauts Ave*, *Fiction Southeast*, and more. Her first collection of essays entitled *The Perpetual Motion Machine* is out now with Red Hen Press, and her debut novel *The Brittany*s will be published with Vintage in 2021.

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