

# *Midnights*





**a note from the editor.**

Dang, it's finally here! *Midnights: The Mini Issue* is one of the most challenging issues we've published; we received so many great pieces, and selecting just a handful was beyond difficult because you are all so talented. We are honored to review and publish all of you. Thank you all for trusting us with your art.

Some grand changes were introduced during this issue: Heidi Klein has served as our Guest Poetry Editor, and she has decided to become our official Poetry Editor! We've been friends for several years, and she is a fantastic poet, so we're quite honored to have her on staff. We shared many coffees and meals together while reviewing for this issue, creating tons of memories. I am blessed by our friendship and her place at *the evermore review*.

I also added another to our masthead: My sister, Sophia Ryckman, is now our Graphic Designer! She designed our beautiful cover as well as our recent Fiction Reopening announcement. She constantly impresses me, so I am stoked to work with her and to give her the chance to show off her skills.

The following pieces contain the essence of *Midnights*. I hope you all enjoy.

Olivia Ryckman, Editor-in-Chief

the evermore review

*Midnights: The Mini Issue*, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Copyright © 2023 the evermore review

Cover designed by Sophia Ryckman

All elements derived from Canva

*the evermore review* holds first serial rights and electronic rights.

We should be credited as the piece's first publisher upon reprinting.

Content Warnings: The following work involves dark themes including but not limited to: alcohol consumption, drug use, death caused by a drug overdose, sexual situations, and descriptions of blood consumption (in terms of both humans and vampires).

## **masthead.**

**Olivia Ryckman**

Editor-in-Chief

**Heidi Klein**

Poetry Editor

**Sophia Ryckman**

Graphic Designer

**table of contents.**

**Prose**

The Slope	
melissa flores anderson	8
Children of Tiresias	
cassandra whitaker	11
Winner Takes All	
megan jauregui eccles	18
The Thing That Matters	
jodimarie meyer	27
Clavado En Un Bar	
nailea salazar	45

**Poetry**

Promise the moon	
kelsey lister	7
trauma keystone	
jess roses	15
Cul-de-Sac Diss Track	
beatriz seelaender	42
contributors.	52

kelsey lister

**Promise the moon**

Both born on quarters,  
you told me the phases don't control anything.  
I believe in karma and the moon,  
like they could have a hand in everything.  
I've been strung along by a higher power,  
I let myself believe more than could be true.  
When I asked the stars to keep you here you left in the morning,  
I'm an obligation you had to tend to.  
The bitterness that makes me sick,  
is the same feeling that holds me together.  
Who am I if I am not someone you want?  
What do I have left if I recover?  
I've written a letter to every fire since the fall,  
but time only helps those who want to heal.  
I've tried—but I couldn't move past it,  
I got the raw end of our deal.

melissa flores anderson

## **The Slope**

The first slip didn't feel like a slip. The wheels clacked under us as a train circled the perimeter of an amusement park, and he shifted his fingers into mine, his brown skin against my brown skin. I liked him in the way a 15-year-old likes things wholeheartedly and unabashedly. We rode around the tracks once, then twice, then three times, and I leaned my head against his bony shoulder.

My 12-year-old sister caught sight of us as we walked down the concrete steps from the platform and told my mother.

"You need to stop this, Mija," my mother said that night. "A different boy last week, a new boy this week."

The words unspoken lingered in the room. Slut. Easy. Or a dozen others to describe a less-than-virginal women.

"Last week was just my lab partner. And this one's dating my friend," I said. My best friend had claimed him weeks before, but I still let him hold my hand.

My mother dropped me off for confirmation class early the next Sunday.

"You'll meet a nice boy here," she said.

She hoped I would fall for a Catholic boy, one with a Spanish last name and light skin who attended the private school attached to our church. She didn't know when the youth leaders turned their heads, these boys whispered requests for blowjobs and laughed when my face turned as red as the wine we sipped during communion. I pressed my arms against my chest to make it seem smaller and didn't let anyone touch me until college, when I ignored the premarital sex warnings and slept with two boys in one year.

The second slip I didn't know was a slip. I went home with the Irish exchange student who had been flirting with me for a month. He was Catholic so maybe my mother would have approved. We didn't fuck, and I took it as a sign he was a gentleman, respectful. We fell asleep, bodies heavy with liquor, and woke up some time in the middle of the night, when we fumbled around, fully clothed,



mouth to mouth, jean-clad hip-to-hip. My departure in the morning did not go unnoticed by his roommates who spread the rumor that we had fucked.

A week later a girl in one of my hospitality management classes who I suspected also liked the Irishman said, “You know he has a girlfriend back home, right? Nearly engaged.”

She smirked as she said it.

On the third slip, I negotiated with myself the same way I’d negotiated my way into an internship with that fancy circus that has all those shows in Vegas. I worked concessions and smelled of buttered popcorn and cheap beer by the end of each night. The staff photographer snapped my picture on more than one occasion, and the first night we met, he said his girlfriend lived in Los Angeles.

At farewell drinks before I headed home at summer’s end, he told me he liked me and hated to see me go, a hand lingering on my back. We took a taxi to the far end of the strip, and I let him kiss me. I told myself as long as I didn’t let his hands under my shirt, as long as I kept my bra on, it didn’t count. A blip. Nothing for anyone to feel guilty about.

The next time I went to Mass at home, I sat in the third pew from the altar behind one of those rich boys from confirmation class who was home from an Ivy League. He winked at me as he held my hand a little too tight during the sign of the peace.

“Long time, no see, Esther. We should hang out while we’re both home.”

I wiped my hand on my dress, and I waited for the priest to grant general absolution, a salve for all sins without the requirement of a personal confession. I listed all the indiscretions I’d committed in my head. I said my Hail Marys and accepted my forgiveness.

The fourth slip caught me off guard. I didn’t see it coming. My car wouldn’t start in the parking garage after work, and an older, married man who worked on my floor offered me a ride home. His gray hair, the creases when he smiled, the way he looked at me just before I stepped out of his car electrified me before he’d even touched me. I told myself I deserved to feel good. I was single and didn’t owe an allegiance to anyone.

I had stopped going to church by then. But I went back to the married man a second, third, fourth time, without guilt. I counted the times we were together, thinking each time would be the last, and he laughed at the counting. He had twenty years more experience than me, and he knew how to be persuasive.

The fifth slip—I thought long and hard before it happened, premediated on it. Understood the consequences. Said it would just be physical when I knew it could become love. It started with a text, one-to-one, instead of the group messages we sent that included our spouses, and playdate coordinates. A joke about work, about our kids, a mild complaint about married life.

We hadn't really kept in touch after high school, but our kids landed in the same kindergarten class. So I found myself standing in the park in March when the hills were green, the same month we once rode around train tracks together and held hands when we were 15.

I watched him lift a kite up onto a current of air and hand the string off to my daughter. He stood behind me, his hand light on my shoulder, and I asked him then.

“Are you happy with her?”

He looked away, and I knew the answer, no need for confession.

cassandra whitaker

### **Children of Tiresias**

Ball lightning crawled along the field beyond the privet maze; the partygoers did not see the charge spark. The blue light drew them out of the privet, and into the ozone-charged field behind. Manto broke our embrace, purred with curiosity, her lips dark in the halo glow of moonlight and soft solar lamps.

“It’s happening, dollface.” Manto teased.

“What?” I asked, nuzzling her neck, inhaling her scent: a mixture of her body and Obsession, which even today arouses in me a desire to be enlarged by her spell.

Then I heard partygoers moving their feasts out of the maze. Someone called 911.

“What’s going on?” My skin tingled; I could have floated through the night, tethered to Manto’s hand.

“Let’s go see what the universe has brought us!” She squealed and pulled away from our embrace. I followed, holding onto her fingertips.

“Oh my God!” Manto screamed. “We conjured Hermes!”

I didn’t understand, half buzzed with hash and Manto’s kiss.

We entered the field behind thirty or so partygoers, the ball lightning bright and genius against the blue dark night. Behind us, Manto’s house blazed with celebration, the extensions of our hearts at summer’s peak, light.

The ball lightning crawled another five feet before dissipating, leaving the air charged. The partygoers gasped, Manto squeezed my hand, and I squeezed back. I witnessed it vanish; it didn’t start the fire. I don’t care what the rumors are.

Wind changed on a dime, it seemed when I was with Manto, but I did not know that then. There is a trick to being two people, something I won’t ever understand, not with my body, not without magic.

Manto grabbed my head and drew close to kiss me on the cheek. She whispered something, but I didn't catch it—I was too busy kissing her back to care. Her body sparked with energy, and she lifted me off my feet with that kiss. I climbed her body, I remember thinking the air had been on fire and all I could do was kiss my new lover, my skin tuned to fine points of bliss. Her body rippled with strength, my body simply along for the ride. She picked me up, or so it felt. Someone shouted “Darby” and by the time we broke our kiss and looked, the flames had jumped up, suddenly five feet tall among the straw, stacked and baled and dry some fifty feet from us. Had the ball lightning started it? Did someone drop their smoke?

The taste of metal filled in my mouth. The partygoers whipped and shrieked about us. My head cleared. Some of the partygoers at the house began to spill out into the field to see Darby leap atop a John Deere, its enamel gleaming. He jumped into the seat and with a huge flourish turned the tractor on with one hand and whipped his arm about.

Manto did not start the chant but joined in. Ten of them, in a loose circle, faces turned upward, held hands, and swayed back and forth, their tunics a brilliant white in the firelight. “I create like the word, I create like the word, I create like the word, I create like the word, I create.”

Manto's face sharpened; she squeezed my hand as Darby swung the tractor towards the flame and gunned it. The machine moved like a huge animal.

“I've never seen a tractor go so fast!” I whispered.

“I've never seen Darby drive!” Someone behind shouted.

Darby lowered the back plow and began to tear up the ankle-high soybean. I didn't get it at first but soon saw why he drove in wide loops, for he encircled the fire with a line of plowed earth trapping the flames where they burned.

The chanting grew louder, Manto's quickness energized my skin, her muscles charged with excitement.

It wasn't the drugs.

I know this.

Manto's eyes looked into mine through a taller, broader body with wider shoulders, a lean, muscled torso, hair longer and fuller, framing a beautiful male face.

I didn't shout. I did not want to. I knew the man in front of me was her. He had her eyes. And when he leaned in and kissed me, I knew, and that kiss lifted me off my feet and into the air. As Orlando tells it, two feet at least, floating with the magic of Manto's body. And when Manto spun me around and back to my feet, I found myself loving back her leaner curve; her breasts rose up in my hands. I don't know what anyone else saw that night, but I knew two bodies, one spirit, my first love, a shifting body into a body. A body rising out of itself.

What I realize now is that dozens of couples were rippling from body to body as they danced and made love and celebrated their gift, the ball lightning a door, the fire the price of their magic. Darby's tractor shrank against the smoke and flame. By the time the fire company had arrived, Darby had corralled it to the corner of the field behind the house. His picture made the front page.

My parents came for me, so many did, to see for themselves the fire. Spurred by new Facebook friends, they found themselves watching a small patch of earth burn, hypnotized by the scene, as if their witness was part of the cost, the price of such power. They found me holding hands with a dark-haired boy.

I don't remember speaking, but Manto kissed me on the cheek. "I'll Facetime you," and I stumbled a bit, the heat, the way my body had been stirred by drugs and the kissing and Manto's transformation.

All my mother managed was, "Who is that? And where are your shoes?" The field burned for another hour, slowly diminishing into a smolder. Rumors raged on social media. Drugs, arsonists, the fact that Farmer Terry had relapsed again, that Manto and Orlando were occultists. When Manto's parents were sued for negligence, I wasn't surprised, so many beautiful mouths, so much hunger.

Me? I obsessed. Over Manto's body, over the chant, repeating it over and over, at school, in the mirror, wherever, praying for change. "I create like the word, I create like the word, I create like the word, I create like the word, I create." Orlando warned me. Love is not emptiness, but my obsession with Manto was emptiness. I would never fill it. I would never be enough.

A body can behave like a flame, shuddering, enlarging, consuming; how I wanted Manto and her gift, moving between power, grace, beauty.

jess roses

**trauma keystone**

revenge webs and secret heavens  
where we spent  
our precious youth  
basking in the bluelight;  
i was just a lost kitten then, hadn't  
built the karmaweapon yet.

you were my weakness at midnight.  
Skype loading up infinity like a rifle  
i was clutching my knives.

always wanted to be more than i was to  
you, always loved the distance  
and stood too far away.  
i became your poppet, pose me, compose me,  
hold me close  
then throw me away on repeat  
until i end up someone  
who would do anything for love  
even  
that.

wrapped around your finger but you didn't  
wear me like a ring i didn't sing  
under your fingers like the violin i just  
hung there,  
waiting for a promise i'd never find the end of;  
like you were a rainbow over Pololu, effervescent  
in the sun showers, felt like i needed your color  
needed to drink it up, how could i believe  
i was monochrome  
next to your empty cup?

i see you being who i want  
to be these days.  
and it aches in me, breaks  
in me, a little crack

to see you flourishing in the land of milk  
and honey while i eat cactus fruit raw  
juice dribbling down my chin onto the desert sand.  
always been a messy eater, messy liver  
half-artist, god girl, sea goat, lunar rat, got  
so hungry i swallowed the moon and now i am that,  
too.

let me be a part of the world i am ready  
to fire the weapon to shoot straight  
let me be a part of the world i can  
cut fast and clean  
let me be a part of the world my damage  
is nothing against the great wall of time  
but his name is carved small into the concrete.  
no bubble wrap here, he wanted me to feel it  
when the wall fell  
and all the other names came tumbling down  
like a gaslight starter pack.  
he wanted me to remember his name first  
when i shot straight, cut fast and clean  
into the past of me, when the wall fell.

nothing but a keystone  
for the trauma nothing but a weapon, my weakness  
at midnight remains. but i have  
all the names to blame it on, thank you  
for being so easy to destroy, the forgetting of you  
is not the goal. the poem is.  
i may not be a part  
of the world  
like you are  
yet i want no part of it but that of my own design  
i am mine  
i am mine.

cut fast and clean, thank god for the leaving, thank god  
i finally made it home wielding a sword of fire with which  
to cut you down at the knees thank god i am still here despite you  
thank god  
the rage



remains.

a poem  
my own design  
the weapon  
and how it fires: with a keyboard  
and my weakness at midnight  
when the feelings bleed through and i am  
afterglow shining on trauma like a golden spotlight.

megan jauregui eccles

## **Winner Takes All**

You see him across the crowded living room and swear you can hear music swell. It's dark in here—someone's set expensive candles up against all the surfaces, lit the ostentatious fire. There are bodies everywhere—girls in tight dresses and boys in distressed designer jeans—all drinking and mingling and doing that weird hip sway, arms up dancing. You don't care about any of them. You're here for one reason and one reason alone: Josh Dupont.

Even in the half-light he seems to shine. He's that lazy kind of perfect, with mussed hair and jeans that hang low on his hips. His letterman jacket is unthreading at the elbows. He's not just the type who wears it to impress girls at parties. It's something in his closet, something that's part of him. That's not something you usually like—jocks have never been your thing—but something about it endears you to him.

It shouldn't. You're not here for that. You're here to win.

You told Shara you could have any guy. Made a wager, staked your name on it. Winner takes all, you said, smiling with your teeth.

And Shara pointed to him.

Unattainable, completely out of your league Josh Dupont.

You think she expected you to give in and go home, beg for her forgiveness at your hubris. But you cannot unshaken the hands, cannot let Shara have the sweet satisfaction of your humiliation. So you're here instead, in your Doc Marten's and pleated skirt, Revlon's Black Cherry on your lips.

You don't fit in here at all.

Josh tips a beer into that perfect mouth. You trace the liquid as it slides down his pale throat. Just watching him gives you a secondhand buzz. He catches you watching him. His eyes lock on yours and you wonder if he sees a flush in your cheeks in the firelight.

You break eye contact, demure. It's what Shara would do. She's so good at this kind of thing. The boys and the parties and hunt, as she would call it. You've always been better at dark, quiet places.

One-on-one, not the bustle of the crowds and din of voices. But you've made this wager, and you will do all that it requires of you. You can't go home empty-handed.

"Hey."

He's standing right in front of you, leaning in to be heard above No Doubt. It's not playing on a boombox, but through an elaborate speaker system, disguised as something else. Not a mixtape but burned onto a CD. You haven't caught up to this wild technology yet. He's so much taller than he seemed across the room, and somehow lovelier. There's a smattering of freckles across his nose, like a constellation. He holds up a glass bottle.

"Zima?"

You hesitate. You don't want it. But you can't say that you don't drink. That would be like drawing a line in the sand between cool and uncool. And that's the point of all of this, isn't it? You're finally going to be the person you always wanted—a winner. You think of what Shara would say: *Who do you want him to think you are?*

You take the bottle. It's cold against your fingertips. He hands you a pocketknife. There's gold filigree on the handle, not one of those cheap red ones your dad always had. This is quality. Everything here is quality, including him. Especially him. You pop off the cap. It's a gesture of good will: This drink is not drugged, see? This is not your typical be-wary party.

"Not a red cup?" you say, nodding to the sea of red cups in the crowd.

No one seems messy, wild drunk, though. Not like the parties you've been to where everyone fills themselves up with alcohol until they can't remember their pain. They should be drinking out of crystal goblets hand cut by their bored, eccentric grandfathers. This room is made up of golden children. Privilege and power, all the world's future senators and diplomats and their wives all in one room. Even drunk looks classy on these faces.

"I'm a man of taste."

He looks at you like you're what he wants to taste. Good. You take a step closer to him, let him breathe you in.

"I'm Josh."

Like you don't already know. Like he isn't the reason you are here.

"Josh." The name rolls on your tongue, warm as a copper penny. "Come here often?"

He puts out his arms, but something shifts in his eyes, like he was expecting this. "This is my home."

And you're supposed to be impressed. Awed, perhaps. There's a Picasso hanging high up the vaulted ceiling. The modern sculptures are both garish and understated. Each of them is probably worth more than your house. Everything is leather and mahogany, custom and shipped from across the sea. This is the kind of wealth that comes from generations. There are no bills on Josh's kitchen table. He's probably never scrounged the cigarette tray for enough loose change to get a soda. His school uniform didn't come secondhand.

You see the shift in him. You took too long to respond, and he's played this game before. Another girl who sees the money and not the boy. He's disappointed. His eyes rove the room, looking for a way out.

Shit.

You need a way back in. This isn't just a party where a boy meets a girl and then spend seven glorious minutes in the dark. You have a plan, a purpose.

A bet.

And you didn't come here to lose.

The song changes. The opening chords of Taking Back Sunday's "You're So Last Summer" plays. Someone groans, but Josh's eyes sparkle. His pulse beats in rhythm to the beat.

You brush hair from your eyes, smile shyly. "I love this song."

Josh's demeanor changes. He's back, pulled in by a shared love of music. He doesn't know that you watched him put this CD in his car and listen to the whole song before he pulled away too fast. You picked up this cassette today, just in case. You listened to it in your Walkman, the foamy headphones crackling with each thrum of guitar. He shifts his focus back to you.

"This is the part where you tell me who you are."

“Can such a thing be summed up in a single word?” You press the Zima to your lips, touching but never tasting. “What’s in a name?”

“A rose by any other.” Josh scrapes his teeth against his lip.

“A rose is a rose is a rose.”

His face is a light. “Gertrude Stein. Not on most average reading lists.”

You smile. That’s why you chose it. It’s her most famous quote, a low-hanging fruit. But you know he loves it, know that despite his beauty and his cool guy vibe, he’s a sucker for pretentious literature. You prefer Stephen King and Anne Rice, but that’s not the kind of books that pull someone guaranteed an Ivy League education.

“I’m not your average girl.”

And that’s when you know you have him. He’s the kind of boy driven by different and unique, bored with his pampered life. He wants intrigue, maybe a little danger. The fact is, you are exactly like other girls. You’ve never understood that idealist formula some boys apply to girls they see as other. You’ve never met a girl who wasn’t other. A girl who didn’t want or need or hurt or cry in a way that was unique to her.

*Cheerleaders bleed, too*, as Shara likes to say.

But if Josh needs you to be his mysterious, manic-pixie-whatever, you’ll oblige.

You’ll do anything to win.

He asks questions, and you have all the right answers. The conversation flows organically, as far as Josh can tell. You’d probably like him — for real — under different circumstances. He’s easy to like, despite the wealth and the pretentious taste in books. He listens when you talk, not just waiting for his turn to say something cutting or clever. He hasn’t tried to touch you, except once to brush his knuckles against yours. You aren’t used to that. Men like to push the boundaries, to try and take things that aren’t theirs. Shara taught you to play into that, to take control by using their power against them. Maybe that’s why she chose Josh. He’s different, other. You won’t say you’re impressed, but you could be. You feel your guard slip, just a little.

“Hey, do you want to get out of here?” You keep your face open and innocent and nod toward the back door.

“Absolutely. I’ll grab a few more drinks. Meet you outside?”

You set your full Zima next to one of the statues. You cross the room, slow and determined. You know he’s watching you weave through the sea of bodies. You move differently than them, not trying to blend in this time but stand out. You do not walk like you own this place or deserve to be here. You walk like a knife cutting through the bullshit, the flickering candlelight catching every curve of your body. You pause for a minute at the door, cast a look back and him, and step into the dark. Only, it’s brighter out here than it is inside. The moon is so full it drowns out the stars, casting everything in silver. The back end of his estate is wooded. There are a few pairs of people tucked against hedges and sitting on benches, doing whatever young people do in the dark. You lean against the railing of the porch and wait.

Shara would be disappointed in this pause. She would have taken him by the hand and let him into the dark. But you aren’t Shara. The realization hits you harder than you expect.

It only takes one more second. Josh isn’t wasting any time. He holds up a bottle of bourbon—the good shit. He takes a swig and offers it to you.

“Not yet,” you say. You look to the woods and back to him.

For a moment, you think you’ve lost him. He looks at the woods the way a child looks at a monster’s closet, or the underside of a bed. There’s something about those trees he doesn’t like. You imagine him small, weeping and running through the trees in the twilight, trying to get out before dark. You were that child, once. Afraid of everything. Before you met Shara and everything changed. She made you into who you are—whoever that is. You start to think of another place you can go, maybe upstairs, when he takes another drink and weaves his fingers in yours.

“Let’s go.”

Your Doc Martens crunch into the leaf litter, marking the delineation between carefully manicured lawns and the wild dark.

“There’s a clearing just over here,” Josh says.

“Thanks,” you say. “I just needed a little quiet.”

“I get it,” Josh says. “These parties, this whole scene, it just feels like it’s been done.”

“I know what you mean.” Guilt swells in your chest, but not enough to make you turn back.

“There’s always a catch. Everything good comes with a price.”

You think of Shara, even if you don’t mean to.

There’s a mossy log in the clearing. Josh takes off his jacket and lays it down so you can sit without staining your skirt. Thoughtful. You sit down beside him.

“Everyone wants something from me. Everyone expects something from me. My parents, my friends. There are strings attached to every part of my life.”

You don’t know what that’s like. You don’t have anyone anymore—except for Shara. And you’re so tangled up in her strings that you aren’t sure where you end and she begins.

“Sometimes I feel like I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

You open your mouth to speak but can’t find the words. It’s like he’s holding a mirror up to your soul. *Twin flames*, Shara would call it. Except you’ve never felt like her twin, more like her shadow. It’s not that way with Josh. You feel like his equal, sitting here on nearly even ground. You ask him the question you want to ask yourself.

“So then, what do you want, Josh?”

The moon breaks through the trees, enough that you can see his beautiful face in all its earnest, vulnerable beauty. “No one’s asked me that before.”

You take his hand. It’s not as soft as you expected. There are scars on his knuckles, calluses that you suspect come from late nights with fingers against strings. Oh, to have a musician’s soul when you’re meant to run the world. You tighten your hold on him.

“I want to be myself, unencumbered by the name and expectations. I want a chance for freedom and anonymity. I want to be a stranger, simply existing. Even if it’s just for a day.” He tightens his hold on you, turning to face you. “It’s funny, I don’t even know your name, and yet, I feel like I’ve known you my whole life.”

You'd conjured an excellent lie before the party, an elaborate backstory that you could hold and maintain for the night. You want him to see you as a mystery wrapped in a muse, something he has to have. It's part of the game for you and Shara. One more delicious lie. But it doesn't feel right somehow. He was never supposed to know the real you. But his openness is too raw, too genuine. He makes you want to be something more. You have to give him something in return.

"Estie," you say.

"Estie." His smile is so easy. "What do you want?"

A loaded question. Perilous as a knife to the throat.

There's only one answer.

"You."

And then he leans in to kiss you.

And you let him.

His lips are warm and soft and so very eager. He kisses like a drowning man coming up for air. He keeps his hand in yours and threads the other one in your hair. You are his lifeline, the only thing in this world he can hold onto. He smells so good: expensive soap and mahogany and places you can never go. And then there's tongue and the scrape of your teeth on his lip and you would be breathless if you could be breathless.

Oh, there's a world in which you could have this. You could be that girl, and he could be that boy, and everything would be like a movie. The montage with an autumn aesthetic would be next, the two of you hand in hand at the mall, in the park, dancing between parked cars with the radio up too loud. Josh is the kind of boy who could change you.

But you've already been changed.

You break from his mouth and trace a line of kisses down his jaw, down his throat.

You hesitate, only for a moment.

And then you rip into his carotid.



Josh tastes as good as he smells. The heat of him fills you, makes you, undoes you. You taste the bourbon in his blood and enjoy the rush and the buzz. Josh makes these soft little sounds and you grip him tighter. He's still holding your hand, still caught up in your hair.

You release him and untangle yourself.

Josh's eyes are distant. He sways against the fallen oak, slipping down to the leaf littered ground.

"I'm sorry," he says through his ruined throat. "I got blood on your shirt."

You reach for his jacket. That's all you need. That's the proof of the bet won. It's spattered with Josh's blood. It'll go up on the wall in your place. One down, a million to go. Boys you want, and boys you take, and the proof in a thousand stolen coats. Shara was sure you couldn't land this one, sure you couldn't fit in with the prep school crowd. Not you, with your public-school education and slumlord-special apartment you shared with your dad in your life before, barely scraping by. A lifetime ago, a different place, a different girl. The rest has been all fun and games. Blood and sport.

But you wonder, now. What do you truly want? Is it enough to win and win and win and leave behind all these bodies in your wake? Or do you steal a dream? You like the idea of being a stranger. You like the idea of being a stranger with this boy.

Slowly, slowly you lower yourself down to him, your legs around his hips. There's not much time. You smash the bottle of bourbon against a rock and draw a thin line across your wrist. You hold it up to his perfect mouth.

You've never done this before. You've never wanted to. The feel of his mouth on your vein is electric. You're not taking him, you're making him. The skin around his throat knits. There will be no scar, just perfect, touchable, drinkable skin. You pull your wrist away.

"Better?" you say.

Josh is still disoriented, drunk on blood and bourbon and the nearness of his death. He'll never know death again.

You pull him to his feet.

"What have you done to me?"

“I’m giving you a chance to be a stranger.” You lead him to the darkest part of the forest. If he is afraid, he doesn’t show it.

“Wait.” He reaches for his jacket.

“Leave it,” you say. “We’ve got all that we need.”

And you don’t say goodbye to Shara when you leave the city. She’ll find you someday, but until then, you’ll ride the dusk into places you were never supposed to be with Josh. Or maybe not with him, if there’s somewhere else he wants to be. The point is, you both have choices now, strings all cut down.

The point is, you’ve won a game you were meant to lose.

jodimarie meyer

## The Thing That Matters

Huddled against the wall outside Salman's Café, Jez unwrapped the emergency dark chocolate bar she kept in her coat pocket and broke off a piece. She set the chocolate on her tongue and closed her eyes as the rich flavor saturated her mouth. The bite was larger than she was used to eating in one day, and her sensitive vampire stomach would probably get sick from that alone, but she didn't care. She needed something to calm her nerves.

She wanted to hang out with Walt, her human sort-of friend, but not there. Maybe in some parallel universe where nobody cared that a vampire and a human were together, but not in Warlington.

And she didn't expect Walt to understand. If people stared at him, it was only because he looked like the lead singer of The Mavericks—he was tall and solidly built with broad shoulders, warm brown skin, and large, soulful brown eyes. He probably didn't even grasp how his life would implode if it looked like they were on a date.

Sure, in town there were some rumored relationships between vampires and humans, but it was all very hush-hush, not something either party would flaunt in daylight. People tolerated it as long as it wasn't something they saw or had to deal with; yet, here Jez and Walt were, at the top of the department store in the center of town, where people couldn't help but *see*.

Jez wasn't *that* strong, and she hated to admit it, especially to herself.

Why had Walt wanted to do this? Why had she agreed to it? What if she was simply playing into one of his little protests about the way things were? If there was one thing she'd always known about Walt, it was that he liked to be subversive. He had a restless energy that demanded change. For humans. For vampires. For anyone as long as he got to be in the center of it. Damn it, he'd started a 'save the bees' campaign at age seven that led to a school-wide fundraiser and a play for the PTA.

Most people made the mistake of thinking Jez was also subversive because of her dress and her manners and her general attitude towards humans, but they were wrong. Jez didn't have a disruptive

bone in her body; her appearance was all self-preservation. It was a take-the-first-swing-before-she-got-hit type of thing, nothing more.

Take today, for instance. She'd foregone her blood vial necklace and had traded her flashy red coat for her mother's oversized gray one; for once, she wanted something so badly that she was willing to shrink to get it. Today, she wanted to sit in a café with a boy and try chocolate chess pie and not be the most obtrusive person in the room. She didn't want to make a fuss at all; she just wanted to be comfortable in her own skin.

But now, standing outside the glass doors that led into the café, that seemed more impossible by the minute.

If she went in and sat across from Walt, people were bound to notice. People were bound to talk. Maybe not to her face—or, at least, not to *his*—but later, behind closed doors, they'd say things like...like...

Well, Jez wasn't human, so she didn't know what they would say—which was almost worse, as she had to imagine.

She didn't want to imagine.

She wanted to eat her fucking pie.

### THREE YEARS AGO

*The jingle of the little brass bell that hung on the front door of the record store signaled to Walt of an arriving customer. He'd been stocking shelves in the back but hurried to the front, surprised to see who had entered: Jezäl Barkoulis, her usual bright red coat open to reveal her black sweater and plaid skirt—a stark color combination against the paleness of her skin and her snowy blonde hair. Around her neck dangled the crystal vial necklace that she claimed possessed the blood of a dragon and gave her psychic powers. Jez scowled when she saw Walt, though he greeted her as he would any other customer, hoping she didn't catch the waver in his voice.*

*Was it bad of him to say Jez scared him?*

*He generally thought vampires were all right; his grandmother had raised him, and she insisted they were harmless and that all the horror stories surrounding them were government propaganda. She'd*

*lived through the Inquest and had watched several of her friends disappear in the dead of night, some never to return, so Walt tried to see things from her point of view.*

*But sometimes he thought Jez could frighten even his grandmother. He just didn't understand how she and her twin brother James could have such opposite personalities.*

*Staying up front where she couldn't sneak up on him—at their high school, Jez made a sport of frightening people, as though she wanted to get in trouble—he busied himself with putting price tags on some new merchandise that had come in.*

*From time to time, he couldn't help but glance up at her, though; she was pretty in a severe way, like a sculpture cut from ice. She was tall and slender with sharp features, and she had a confident, graceful way of moving; in another life, she might have been a ballerina. But her ethereal beauty was undercut by her chilly stare, perpetual frown, and brusque manner. Sometimes she answered "hello" with "screw you."*

*Suddenly, she looked up at him, and Walt looked away, though not before their eyes met.*

*Shit.*

*"Do you have Carvalho's latest record?"*

*The question, offered tartly, didn't compute for a moment.*

*Record. Carvalho.*

*"Uh, no. We're sold out." Walt trained his eyes on his work.*

*"Hmph."*

*A beat.*

*"We should get more in on Friday," he forced out.*

*Jez didn't reply. She spent a few more minutes up front, thumbing through the vinyls on the two long tables that stretched from the front counter to the middle of the store. Then she wandered past the red velvet curtain to the back room where they kept discount items.*

*Once she was out of sight, Walt felt the air rush back into the room.*

*Outside, it had started raining buckets. Probably, there wouldn't be anyone else entering the store for a while. As distracted as he was, Walt decided this was as good a time as any to eat the sandwich he'd*

*brought for lunch, so he retrieved the ham and cheese on rye and stared out the window as he wolfed it down. The day had been so slow already, and now the rain was going to slow it down even more. Walt was bored out of his skull, and his uncle seemed to think he would take over the record store one day.*

*Walt had no interest in his uncle's store. After he graduated high school, he wanted to go into law or politics, and he wanted to get out of Warlington, even if that only meant moving to the next town over. There were people out there doing important things in the world, and he was stuck in the middle of nowhere in a place where nothing ever changed. He felt like he could do something meaningful if he just got out of there. He didn't know exactly what he wanted to do, but...*

*As soon as he graduated, he was going to be on the first bus out of town.*

\*

Jez stared through the glass doors at Walt. He'd taken a seat at a corner table by one of the floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a bird's-eye view of Main Street. The chocolate chess pie sat in the center of the table, waiting for her.

*Great, Jez thought. He only ordered one slice. Now this will look even more like a date. Unless that slice was for him, but...no, he was setting it on the side of the table meant for Jez. At that moment, Walt glanced towards the doors and noticed her.*

Jez froze.

He waved, and she bolted.

\*

*Walt crammed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth, then glanced at the time on his wristwatch. Jez had been in the back room for ten minutes. Maybe she needed help finding something?*

*Walt was hesitant to engage with her again, but it beat watching the rain. He made his way to the back of the store and found her hunched over a crate of vinyls on the floor.*

*"Can I help you with something?"*

*Jez jumped up.*

*"God, do you always sneak up on customers like that?!"*

*Walt held up his hands in a defensive gesture, half-seriously.*

*“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”*

*“Scare me?” Jez scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Please.”*

*“Right...so...can I help you?” Walt ventured again.*

*“No.” Jez sneered and turned her back. She got down on her knees and continued flipping through her chosen crate. “This record store is trash, you know. You don’t have Carvalho’s latest record. Or Winston’s. Or Kim’s. Or Markov’s.”*

Markov?

*Walt had seen that name somewhere, but he couldn’t remember where.*

*“My uncle probably knows where those records are. I haven’t been working here very long. I can ask him when he gets back, which should be in a few minutes.”*

*Walt’s offer only earned him another dose of silence.*

\*

Jez had thought Walt would be easy to evade, but he found her tucked into a rarely visited corner of the home and bedding section.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” he asked, his forehead creasing with concern.

Jez kept her face towards a shelf of throw pillows.

“Nothing. I just decided I don’t want pie.”

“You came all the way here and then decided that?”

“Well, it’s going to make me sick anyway. Let’s just forget it.” Jez fingered the lacy white fringe on one pillow.

“I thought you’d dreamed about trying it for a long time. You’re going to get this close and then not do it?”

“God, Walt, not everyone follows through on everything they say like you do. Some people change their minds. Some people really don’t care that much.”

“So you changed your mind?”

“Yes.”

“About the pie?”

“Yes.”

“What about me?”

Jez pinched the lacy fabric. Her neck prickled.

“What about you?” she asked, less confidently than she would have liked.

“Will you still come sit with me?”

Jez’s chest tightened. Why should he want to sit with her?

*He likes you*, her mind immediately answered.

Jez swallowed. Maybe that was all it was, but she could be wrong. She’d been wrong before.

“No, thanks,” Jez answered coldly. “I don’t care to be part of your social experiment. I’m not your pet project.”

“What do you mean? Of course, you’re not a project.” Walt touched her arm, and Jez flinched away on instinct.

“I was your project in high school,” she said.

Walt said nothing for a moment. He dropped his hand.

“Sorry if I made you feel like that. I guess I did bother you a lot in high school.”

“I was your project. The school said so.”

Another pause.

“Look, maybe the counselor put us together because they thought I would be a good influence on you, but—”

“Maybe they just wanted you to watch me.”

“Maybe that too,” Walt conceded. “But I really liked talking to you. I liked getting to know you. This is probably stupid of me, but I thought we could be friends one day. That’s why I wanted to go here with you.”

Tears sprung to Jez’s eyes, though she didn’t know why. With her fingertip, she traced the outline of the pillow’s floral design; it grew blurrier by the second as her eyes watered.

“But if you don’t want to go here, we can go somewhere else. Anywhere else. You can pick a place.”



Walt clasped her wrist, and she stared at the blurry outline of his hand for too long until a tear dropped from her eye onto his skin. Immediately, she whipped her head away and dabbed at her eyes.

Attempting to sound indifferent, Jez answered, "Let's go anywhere without people. I don't like people."

"Really?" Walt exclaimed. "Okay, hold on one minute. Just stay there." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him backing away and gesturing energetically. "I'll be right back," he assured her. "Just stay *right there*. Please don't go away."

\*

*Jez still wasn't answering Walt. He'd made several attempts to locate the records she'd inquired about, but it was difficult when she wouldn't give him any further information. Ordinarily, he would have kept things professional and left her alone, but since he had to deal with her crap at school, too, and maybe because he felt like she hated him without reason, without knowing anything about him, he finally snapped at her.*

*"You know, it's polite when you talk back to people who talk to you." Immediately, he wanted to suck the words back in. He felt a temperature shift as Jez craned her head to look at him.*

*"Really?" she answered sarcastically. "Well, in that case, screw you." She smiled tightly and turned back to her crate.*

*"Sorry, did I do something to you?"*

*"You exist."*

*"Noted. Next time, I'll try not to exist in the same room as you, though I think that will be quite difficult seeing as we're in the same classes."*

*"Sounds like a 'you' problem. I'm not going anywhere."*

*"See this? This is why no one at school wants to talk to you. You just blow everyone off."*

*"You think that's why no one talks to me? Don't you want to be a lawyer or some crap? Open your eyes."*

*Walt blinked, surprised she remembered he'd said that in class. Still, she was wrong. Of course people didn't talk to her when she acted like she hated everyone!*

*“No, that is the reason,” he insisted. “Your brother is so...James is so—”*

*“James is so what?” Jez bit out. “Human enough for you? What, he sits on student council and knows more about human history than the lot of you and laughs at all your stupid vampire jokes like he doesn’t know they’re directed at him?”*

*Walt had opened his mouth to reply, but her last phrase drew him up short. He had been going to say that James was friendly, that he was a nice person to hang out with, but he supposed all those other things were also true.*

*Rising to her feet, Jez approached him as she continued pointedly, “I have no interest in being anything for anyone, so if people don’t like the way I am, they don’t need to breathe my air.”*

*Walt froze. He’d never been that close to her before, except on accident. With her face inches from his, he could see how the deep red shade of her coat brought out the crimson in her eyes.*

*“Screw...you...” She breathed out the words, nearly whispered them. Walt swallowed and shivered, though, oddly, not because he was afraid. He had a sudden and ridiculous urge to kiss her. Instead, he let his gaze linger on her face. The bell to the store rang, but it didn’t compute until he heard his uncle’s voice announcing that he was back.*

*Jez looked away first; she crouched back down on the floor and began tearing through the records in a manic fashion.*

\*

“Better?” Walt asked, and Jez nodded.

He sat down next to her on the trunk of his car and handed her a takeout container of chocolate chess pie. His car was an old chrome-laden model he’d fixed up and painted robin egg blue, but it ran smoothly, and Walt kept it as clean and sparkling as if it had just rolled off a sales lot. They’d parked in a clearing next to Lake Sequoia, backed up to the edge of the water.

“Sometimes I go fishing here with my uncle,” he explained, scooping up a bite of his pie.

“Oh,” Jez replied, “I see.”

She opened her takeout container carefully, then inspected the pie just as carefully, her foggy breath billowing over it like smoke. It was freezing out, but the fresh air felt nice after she'd been so claustrophobic inside the store.

"So, what's in this again?" she asked.

"Uh, sugar, butter, some type of dough?" Walt twisted his face uncertainly and shrugged.

"You are utterly unhelpful." Jez stabbed at the pie with her plastic fork. She stuffed a generous bite in her mouth before she could panic about possibly being poisoned.

The pie tasted much sweeter than Jez expected, and she wasn't sure if she liked that, but the inner texture was gooey, and the crust was crispy like a congealed blood tart with ground marrow flour crust. And so much chocolate. There was *so much chocolate...*

"It's good," Jez decided, setting the rest of the pie next to Walt.

"You can have more."

"Oh, no. You can have the rest of it."

"You can have half."

"I'm not even sure how a bite will affect me. It's fine. I satisfied my curiosity."

Walt looked like he might protest more but ultimately shrugged and let it go. Jez leaned back on her elbows, surveying the sunlight gleaming on the water and the cluster of green pine branches hanging overhead. She'd always loved forests, the embrace of the trees and the silence that demanded nothing from her.

"I didn't think about it until later." Walt broke the silence. "How awkward you might feel sitting in the café. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Jez replied. "It was my idea to go. You just hopped on board with it."

"But you didn't want to sit there *with me*, did you?" He gave her a knowing smile.

"I didn't want to sit there *with them*."

"Them?"

"The other people. It would have been okay if it was just you," Jez admitted.

"I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

“Well, don’t let it go to your head. I have plenty of mean things I can say too.”

“I know. You’ve said them. Multiple times.” Walt smiled at her as though they were sharing a secret, and Jez couldn’t help but smile back.

“Wait. Was that a...Did you just smile?” He pointed at her face. “You never smile.” Jez scoffed.

“Just because I don’t smile around you doesn’t mean I *never* smile.”

“How many times a day do you smile? Count them, and report back to me.”

Jez scoffed again. Unfortunately, she also smiled again.

“Aha! See! There’s another one. It’s a miracle. I thought there was a problem with your facial muscles.”

“You did not.”

“I’m serious.”

“You did *not*,” Jez insisted, but a chuckle escaped her. Recovering, she asked, “What are you still doing here anyway? I thought you were going to leave six months ago. Weren’t you supposed to go off to college?” Jez quirked an accusatory eyebrow.

“You say that like you were praying for me to leave.”

“Just answer the question.”

Walt gave her an amused smile.

“I applied for next year. I’m waiting to hear back.”

“Oh? Why the delay?”

“Uh,” Walt pushed his last bite of pie around. “Well, my uncle injured his back a few months ago, so I’ve been helping him with the store while he recovers. Also, my grandmother’s getting...older.”

“Oh, I see.” Jez nodded solemnly. She knew how close Walt was to his grandmother.

She also knew how badly Walt had wanted to leave Warlington; she hoped he didn’t get stuck there like her.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What do you plan on doing now that high school’s over?” Walt had finished his pie, and now she held his full attention.

Unfortunately, the subject of “the future” was not Jez’s favorite. She could barely stomach the past.

“I work in my mother’s vampire apothecary shop. You know that.”

“Yeah, but is there anything else you want to do?”

“No,” Jez answered quickly. Perhaps too quickly. Of course, Walt sensed something was amiss.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. You almost smiled just then. You never smile, remember?”

Jez rolled her eyes. She had a foolish dream that she fed scraps occasionally, just enough to have kept it alive all these years, but she’d never shared it with anyone. She didn’t care to share it now.

“It’s really not that interesting.”

“Try me.”

“No, it’s really silly.”

“Try me,” Walt repeated calmly, his face patient and open. That was the thing about Walt. He was so easygoing while he waited for her to blow him off, and when she inevitably did blow him off, he didn’t even get mad, which made blowing him off unsatisfactory, to be honest.

Perhaps Jez was tired of the whole back-and-forth, or perhaps she felt like she owed him something since he had driven her all the way to the lake and paid for her pie, or perhaps since she knew he’d be leaving town soon, or perhaps because he was *Walt*, he felt like a person she could tell...

“I think it would be cool to be, like...” Jez averted her eyes and concentrated on the pine needles littering the ground. “A band manager, or something. Something to do with music, I don’t know.” Her leg shook uncontrollably.

“That’s cool. Did you ever want to be an artist?”

“Oh god, no. I can’t sing. And I’m not being modest. People scream at me to shut up.”

Walt chuckled.

“That’s cool, though. I hope you get to do something like that one day. I know how much you like music.” When Jez glanced up, Walt’s smile burned into her, warming her chest and making her toes tingle.

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips again, but she didn’t allow it to show on her face. For the past three years, Walt had been such a nuisance, but she couldn’t imagine a Warlington without him. Or, rather, she didn’t want to.

At first, she’d pushed him away because she didn’t trust him. Now she pushed him away because she could breathe easier in his presence, and when he left, as he inevitably would, her lungs would have to toughen up again.

Maybe this hadn’t been a date, but suddenly, Jez wished it had been. It was a stupid wish, as stupid as being a band manager, but there it was, and it frightened her.

Her stomach churned with panic, twisting itself into knots. Or perhaps that was the pie, preparing to expel itself. Sugar and butter and dough and whatever else humans ate that she had no business consuming.

She shouldn’t have eaten such a large bite. She knew her limits.

She shouldn’t be there at all. She knew her limits.

Her gut soured, mocking her. Scolding her.

Jez wretched over the side of Walt’s car.

\*

“I told you not to eat chocolate. How many times did I tell you?”

“I know, *Mamã*.” Jez swung her legs back and forth as she sat atop her mother’s store counter while her mother prepared one of her elixirs for upset stomach. She hadn’t wanted to come there—she’d been sick plenty of times without involving her mother—but Walt had insisted, so there they were. Walt wandered around the store, examining the labels on the glass medicine bottles that contained various elixirs and crushed herbs.

“Here. Drink this.” Jez’s mother handed her a vial of foul-smelling liquid, and Jez gulped it. She gagged when the taste hit her, but by that point, the medicine had gone down her throat. Her mother handed her a blood cider to chase it with, and she gulped that down too.

Wincing at her lingering stomach pains, she jumped down from the counter and was preparing to see Walt out when Walt turned to her mother and asked, with a tone of utmost sincerity, “Do you mind if I try a blood cider?”

Jez gaped at him; she crossed her arms.

“You are aware that blood cider has actual blood, right? It’s not...water with red dye.”

Walt laughed. “Of course.”

“You know, I’ve never served that to a human before,” her mother said, not unkindly. “I don’t make the kind with herbs poisonous to humans, but are you sure it’s okay for you? I don’t think—”

“Humans have blood inside their bodies, same as vampires. I’m not sure how this would be different.” Walt walked over to the counter and sat himself at one of the bar stools. “Besides, I have confidence in you, Mrs. Barkoulis. If I get sick, you can fix me the same way you did Jez.” Jez’s mother glanced from Walt to Jez, who advised, “Honestly, you should probably just give it to him. He doesn’t stop until he gets what he wants.”

“Thank you, Jez.” Walt turned to her with a smile, and she pulled a face.

“Well, all right then. Let’s try it.” Her mother poured a second mug of cider and clacked it down in front of Walt. “One sip.” She held up a finger. “One.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Walt raised the mug to his lips, and Jez couldn’t help but draw closer, curious as to how quickly he would spit the cider out.

To her shock, he didn’t. He screwed his face up immediately, and she could tell he didn’t like it, but he didn’t spit it out. Setting the mug down, he commented, “That is, uh...wow, that is really strong. It’s like alcohol.” He coughed and beat his chest.

“Well, it is fermented,” Jez offered. “Hence the name—”

“Cider. Oh.” Walt laughed. “Yeah, that makes sense.” He licked his lips and thanked her mother, though Jez wasn’t buying the smile on his face.

“Here.” Jez fetched her emergency chocolate from her coat pocket and laid it on the counter. “Have some chocolate. You look like you want to spit out your tongue.”

“Let me get you some water,” her mother offered; she hurried into the back where she had a small kitchen for preparing herbal remedies as well as small treats for her customers, like the blood cider Walt had imbibed.

“You know, you can say that you don’t like it. My mother won’t be offended,” Jez said when her mother had gone. “I thought the pie was too sweet,” she added for good measure.

“Well, I mean, it was...I think it’s...an acquired taste, you know, like—”

“*Walt.*”

“Fine, it was bad. It was really bad. You happy?”

“Supremely.” Jez smiled, leaning on the counter and resting her chin on her knuckles.

“Well, just know I didn’t think I would like it. I only wanted to try it because I was curious.”

“Curious? About the taste of blood?”

“No, about you. I told you. I like getting to know you.”

Walt studied her with an unbridled fondness that made her all too aware of how close their faces were. Fortunately, her mother reappeared, a tall glass of water in hand.

“I’m so sorry about that,” she said, handing the glass to Walt.

“Oh, no, please. I can tell it would taste good if I’d grown up drinking it.” Walt graciously smiled and sipped the water. “Maybe it’s too strong for my human tongue to handle.” He laughed, and Jez’s mother laughed with him.

Walt said something else, and her mother laughed again, a full-bodied chuckle. Sometimes Jez forgot how quickly Walt could set people at ease. People that weren’t her, at least. Most everyone gravitated to Walt at a feverish pace, whereas Jez had been inching towards him so slowly that she hadn’t even realized she was doing it.

Not until she’d gotten this close to him.

Here.

Wherever *here* was.



*I told you. I like getting to know you*, he'd said.

If anyone else had told her that, Jez would have scoffed and called them a liar because *no one* liked getting to know Jez. She made certain of that.

But deep down in her nauseous gut, she knew Walt wasn't lying. He'd probably declare Jez an acquired taste. Like the cider.

She didn't know what that meant for her, exactly, or what she should do about it. Or what she wanted to do about it.

What did she want?

Jez pondered it as she walked Walt to his car some time later. Silence stretched between them, broken only by the crunch of gravel under Jez's heels and the bird caws overhead.

Her cheeks heated. She felt like she needed to say something, but she didn't know what. And now that they'd arrived at Walt's car, he was opening the door to the driver's side...

Before he could get in, Jez caught his hand.

"Walt?" she asked, half-scared of her own voice. It was small and uncertain, the way she never liked to present herself. The way she always felt.

"Yes?" He glanced behind him, and she stared down at their joined hands, unable to meet his eyes.

"Do you..." Jez paused. "Do you think time is moving too fast, or are we just moving too slow?"

Walt tentatively brushed his thumb over her fingers; he maneuvered his hand until it warmly gripped hers.

When he spoke, his voice was soft, but sure and steady.

"I think the only thing that matters is we're moving."

beatriz seelaender

### **Cul-de-Sac Diss Track**

your mind is a cul-de-sac  
part of a gated community  
where a small-town murder may occur in a crime novel  
which is this summer's hottest beach read according to your own mom  
your mind is a cul-de-sac  
that ends in a wall of generic graffiti  
of misspelt cookie-cutter statements  
which you've thought of all by yourself  
and that makes it even sadder to think about  
your mind is a cul-de-sac

perhaps I should not be an author: people-watching to me is torture  
listening is even worse: I love to watch fictional characters

if every poet has an emotion they write from, mine is anger –  
not quite anger, irritation: a perpetual state of annoyance  
at everything I overhear –  
so easily catalogued in the social pyramid  
assigned an archetype with predictable daddy issues  
dressed like a personality quiz result  
some desperately crouching and twisting for the box  
others fitting into it as naturally as air  
but every time my headphones are out  
the rotten smell makes an appearance  
their minds are a cul-de-sac, overpopulated at that

if every poet has an emotion they write from, mine is conceit –  
not quite, though, because then I wouldn't be bothered  
it's frustration: at the barren landscape  
I have to colour all by myself  
with all these inconsequential daydreams  
because real people's minds are cul-de-sacs  
decorated with mass-produced art  
and when that happens in a novel we say the writing is flat

if every poet has an emotion they write from, mine is narcissism –

but is narcissism an emotion? or a consequence of monotony?  
does a narcissist need be admired? or is narcissus his own company?  
is he really ever lonely? narcissus is self-sufficient:  
he knows outwards is inwards  
he can dive into his mind whenever he wants  
and other people are jealous because their minds have no roads  
they're just the one cul-de-sac, claustrophobia street,  
bored cardboard cutouts of trees casting no shadow  
narcissus' mind is a river  
whose mouth drinks in ideas  
but water is not wet because it is that which wets  
whose mouth spits out ideas  
but the mind still thirsts for ideas  
and what should quench the thirst of water itself  
for more water but a river  
spilling and spelling it out when it swells

## Clavado En Un Bar

Jean leaves the voicemail running every time she does inventory, her body bent over the beat-up bar shrouded in loose tips and unfinished drinks left behind by the night's final customers. The drinks always call out to her more than anything else. This was the closing time ritual: figuring out what needed to be done, doing it, and gulping down stray beer bottles and cocktail glasses. As a principle, Jean would only ever take the female patrons' drinks—she trusted their mouths more, and the rims usually had some kind of lipstick on them. Sometimes, the taste reminded her of a time when she was all put together. Sometimes, it reminded her of Peter.

On Friday nights, Jean also had this thing where she would sit in the parking lot of whichever place across town was hosting a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. If she was just tipsy enough, she'd get out of the car and sit next to somebody new. For every week that she made it inside the run-down recreation centers or churches, there'd be a new middle-aged woman asking Jean if this would be the day when she opened up. Every week, the answer would be no, because Jean had never been addicted to anything in her life, unless it was possible to be addicted to love songs, eating Maraschino cherries straight from the jar, and infringing on the privacy of others.

But the truth was that Jean didn't mean to start this habit of sticking her nose into the lives of real people. Driving down to the Topanga Canyon place and listening to Matt talk about his overdose or sitting in the church with Anne's sobs were not things that sat well with her. All she truly wanted was to get a glimpse of Peter's life. To see if he was still out here in Los Angeles, alive. It had been thirteen months since he stopped being her guy who'd come in and fill the restaurant with the smell of fried plantains and beans in the morning and garnachas in the evenings.

Jean flipped through the pages of her worn notebook that she kept nestled behind the register and began to write down very important business things like *More olives. Good on Tequila (for now). Steal limes from neighbor. Ground beef.*

## YOU HAVE TWO NEW MESSAGES

### ***THURSDAY 5:56 PM***

*We're calling to let you know that our carrier missed you today. Your signature-required order is now scheduled for delivery on Friday, December 13th. Please call us if you have any questions.*

Jean liked the sound of somebody saying they missed her, even if they sounded robotic and pissed off that they even had to call her to say it. She went back a few pages—her notebook was also chock-full of reminders to herself, like this week's singular bullet point that said, *Don't forget to sign off on that thing on Thursday.*

As she stood in the aftermath of the message, she scribbled in a new reminder: *Daydrink less.* She paused before adding another one: *Find somebody ASAP so they can miss you in a big, beautiful way (not in the UPS kind of way).* The next message echoed through the empty restaurant.

### ***FRIDAY 12:31 PM***

*Can't come in today, Jean. I might be coming down with something. I thought maybe you could get Peter to fill in. He was out in the parking lot last night. He looked like a lost dog. This is Marta, by the way.*

Jean downed the remainder of a melted margarita, nearly cracking the glass when she miscalculated the depth of the sink. The green pendants flickered as if the sound of Peter's name was enough to bring somebody from beyond the grave. *3 warm lightbulbs*, she wrote at the bottom of the inventory list before throwing the pen down and shoving the notebook into her jacket pocket.

Marta's words floated inside Jean's mind. She would have believed her last December, when she was still sliced right open—she would have patched herself up with whatever news came her way. But Marta drank, and she was lousy at hiding it. Whoever she saw hanging outside of the restaurant most likely was not Peter. There was a better chance that she had too much to drink, and like Jean, Marta was plagued by memory. Maybe she had even seen some kind of apparition. Something like the

one Jean had been conjuring up to keep her company for the past thirteen months, and unlike Real Peter, Invented Peter only lived inside of Jean. Invented Peter was also not addicted to heroin.

\*

During college, Jean had taken over most of the restaurant's responsibilities. Her mother needed time to get Jean's father back from wherever he had run off to. Months before, there had been some fight in the kitchen involving a stack of ceramic dishes. Jean came in for her shift later that evening, a mess of food and broken shards at her feet. Her father's leaving had made it difficult to run the place—not because of money or anything like that. Eventually, her mother decided she needed time to get away from the restaurant, from Los Angeles, and from Jean. She said something about memory being a wound. How it doesn't close until you make sure it does.

Peter had come in one night and ordered a plate of garnachas before Jean had the chance to scribble it out on the menu. Her mother had never taught her how to make them, which was almost offensive to Peter, who decided that her life had to change that very night. He just had to show her how.

"If not now, when?" he asked before hopping behind the bar and laying out the ingredients like this was what his heart had been waiting for him to do. The rain outside and the beating inside their shirts kept them there until three in the morning. Peter had come in soft like the first signs of winter, a fogged-up kitchen window pouring light out into the stragglers on the blackened streets. Jean hired him on the spot.

The years fell away with him there. Jean continued running the show and Peter was always making magic in the kitchen, occasionally taking breaks to pour salt on lime wedges and peel the pulp off with his teeth, or eating a few cherries for every drink he made when he had to cover the bar. Jean would sometimes join him in the limes and syrupy cherries, but she'd grow tired of it. Watching him indulge in endless sugar and salt confused her until it didn't anymore.

\*

It was Invented Peter's idea to go to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting that first month after Real Peter had disappeared. They sat in a bright room one night after work, listening to strangers spill themselves

out to each other. Most of the attendees were in their forties or fifties or were too far along in their sobriety.

“I’m not here,” Invented Peter whispered, scanning the room. Jean didn’t say anything. She was crazy for coming to this place, but she wasn’t far gone enough to start talking to open air.

“Would I ever wear someone else’s face as a mask?” he asked. Even if he ever would, Jean wanted to believe she’d be able to recognize Peter in any shape or form. Right now, he was nowhere in the room.

“Looks like we’ve got a new face here,” a woman at the front of the room said, shaking Jean out of her dream world. She tried to hide behind the bald man sitting in front of her, or jump into Invented Peter and be imagination, too. Jean declined to speak and instead, only spoke when she joined in on the group prayer:

*God, grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.*

“You should be proud of yourself,” the woman said at the end of the meeting when everyone was helping themselves to coffee and small talk. Jean was hanging by the water cooler, making sure to not take anything off the refreshment table and making sure she hadn’t missed Peter. “This is the first step towards the rest of your life.”

\*

“Do you ever use this thing?” Peter asked one night as they picked up beer bottles off the edges of the pool table. It was December again, and his face was flushed.

Jean picked up a cue stick and hit the cue ball straight into a rail, the ball ricocheting back and knocking a solid into a pocket.

“Lucky shot.” His voice was low, and he was smiling wide enough to make Jean know he would have died there for no real reason except to be by her side.

“You know what’s even luckier? Making the 8-ball on the break. You’d win instantly,” she said. “It’s ridiculously rare, though.”

“I want to be lucky,” he said, putting the bottles in the nearest recycling bin and rolling out the pocketed balls onto the green wool. Jean arranged the balls, lifting up the rack and ready for him to break. They both knew he wouldn’t make it, but he still hit the cue like it was right within his reach. He made three stripes in one go, his shoulders falling when the world stopped moving.

“You’re halfway lucky.” Jean put her head on Peter’s shoulder. “Three in one shot isn’t an easy feat.”

“Yeah,” he said. He was there, but he, also, was not.

Peter asked if he could close that day. Jean thanked him. She watched him from her car through the building window, the pendant lights making him look like one of those Edward Hopper paintings, if Hopper painted bewildering Guatemalan men. He spent all night at the pool table, trying to get luckier with every shot and needle.

\*

He left a voicemail on the restaurant’s landline a few months after that evening.

### ***FRIDAY 5:55 AM***

*Jeanie, it’s me. I’m sorry about the other night. I’ve got some shit to take care of. I can’t really come around anymore. Not for a while, at least. Call me soon, alright?*

“Finding constellations?” Jean asked him earlier that week when she walked out into the parking lot, finding him lying on the hood of his car. He was parallel with the windshield, his head near Jean’s waist. She pushed his hair out of his face as he continued looking up at the stars she couldn’t quite name. They didn’t say anything for a long time. Jean didn’t know if there was anything she could do that wouldn’t make the man in her hands break. Sure enough, he did when she asked him if he wanted



to wear her jacket. It was December, and he had his sleeves rolled up. He stayed silent for a minute until she realized he was crying. She wiped his cheeks with her thumbs, leaving them on his face like she was trying to hold him together.

“Fuck off, Jean,” he whispered, shaking her off of him and getting into his car. The following day, Marta asked Jean what she’d said to Peter. They were chopping up uncooked plantains as a way to cover up Peter’s unexpected absence in the restaurant that morning. Marta took the same streets home that Peter did. She said she’d caught him at every stop, his welled-up eyes illuminated by each red light.

Jean never called him back for a reason she couldn’t comprehend. Instead, she envisioned a beautiful life for him—one that was not tied to secrets or even tied to her. Some place calm, where he could make something in a kitchen of his own, the stove heating up his face. She did this until she couldn’t anymore, and instead, she began to force his memory to stay inside the restaurant with her body and her drinks. She spoke to the walls and made shadows with her hands until they came alive and looked a lot like Peter, except more lit up.

Invented Peter would sit on the tattered barstools, in the kitchen, or beside her in the car. Wherever she was, he was there. He was half memory, half imagination until he became pure invention, in the way that a computer with enough information will spit out something between the lines of beautiful and fucked up. Jean realized this when she saw him at the pool table, his hands wrapped around the cue stick, night after night. Invented Peter would sink the 8-ball every time he broke.

\*

In the Catholic church parking lot, Jean had the radio and the heating up as she watched people file into the meeting. She was slinked down in her seat and had her scarf pulled high over her head as if she was important enough to be on the lam.

“You need to stop believing everything you hear,” Invented Peter said when he appeared, his head against the passenger window. “Marta’s a total alcoholic.”

“She drinks *sometimes*,” Jean said. Maybe Marta had reasons for drinking when she shouldn’t have been. One flavored beer a few times a week was different than downing customers’ old drinks.

“She’s still a cunt for telling you about me,” he said, fidgeting with the glovebox.

Jean’s imagination was growing morbid. Every time she got home, she would put on *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* and distract herself with insane amounts of décolletage until she fell asleep to the sounds of women drinking and calling each other different slurs. She’d wonder about the expensive wine she would drink or throw at somebody’s face if she had all the money in the world. Jean figured Invented Peter drifted off on the couch on nights like these, too, absorbing the words the ladies used.

Leaning over his memory, Jean popped the glovebox open with one click, grabbing a handful of miniature vodka bottles that never seemed to run out. Once, when the restaurant was going through a bad rut, Jean rummaged through a hotel dumpster and struck gold. She made sure to shove them all inside her car for future use.

She laid out the bottles in her lap like they were tiny toy soldiers. After she finished the first bottle, she tossed it to the right of her, on the seat where she believed Real Peter could sit again someday. On the second one, she let the liquid sit inside her mouth. When she swallowed, it was warm. It felt like summer, or the possibility of summer. For the first time in months, Jean grew tired of this, and instead of continuing her made-up contest with herself, she fell asleep with the heat hitting her cheeks. She dreamt about reunions.

\*

The restaurant’s busiest night was New Year’s a few years back, when some crowds poured in for warmth, booze, and greasy food right before midnight came. Jean’s old CD burned with Maná’s greatest hits was blasting throughout the room, simultaneously making the middle-aged patrons pine for the days when they were young, and making the twenty-something-year-olds pine for when they were even younger.

“No one’s ordering food anymore,” Jean said to Peter, who had his hands covered in masa and his eyes down while the music and the sounds of laughter floated around. His face had a light sheen to it from standing over the stove the entire evening. They sat by the bar where Jean had a plate of garnachas that Peter had made for her earlier. He always made hers with extra cheese and salsa.

“You’re all hollowed out,” Jean said, holding the side of his face where his cheekbones jutted out more than usual. She pushed the plate towards him. He took a garnacha up to his mouth, his eyes glistening. Whether it was the smoke coming in from the kitchen or if it was tears, neither of them knew.

As the night came down, they continued to sit on the bar stools with each other, unconcerned with whatever time was going to do to them. Peter let his feet sit on the spindle of Jean’s chair, his knees aimed right at her body. It still wasn’t quite midnight when Peter decided to lean in and plant one on Jean, brief and with the sense that the world was about to end. It was as if he wanted to remember that he had a body and that he knew what to do with it.

They spent the rest of the night splitting a giant green bottle of sparkling cider, their stomachs full of carbonation and laughter. At one point, Peter was laughing so hard that he had to lean on Jean’s shoulder to keep himself upright. As his body relaxed, he traced his fingers on the bumps and valleys of her braid, breathing into her black sweater. He hadn’t left yet, and she hadn’t ignored his voicemail yet—that would come years down the line. But at that moment, they decided to forgive each other for whatever they would end up doing to one another.

“I love today,” Peter said as the music finally died down. “Everyone’s saying ‘Tomorrow, I’m gonna be better,’ and it usually never holds. But I don’t know. Right now, I can’t help but think it’s gonna happen for us.”

The room had cleared out into the streets. People were singing and racing off to someplace better. The two of them were left standing in the doorway with the sound of each other’s souls slipping through the restaurant’s foundations. Dried bits of bougainvillea rustled along the sidewalk. Peter turned a pile of magenta leaves into ash with his foot, none of it standing a chance against the blue light of the neon beer sign in the window and how it was holding their bodies up, how it was keeping them there.

## **contributors.**

**melissa flores anderson** is a Latinx Californian and an award-winning journalist, who lives in her hometown with her young son and husband. Her creative work has been published in more than two dozen journals or anthologies, and she received a 2023 Best of the Net nomination for CNF. She is a reader/editor with Roi Fainéant Press. She has a co-authored novelette, “Roadkill,” forthcoming with Emerge Literary Journal. Follow her on Twitter @melissacuisine or IG @theirishmonths. Read her work at [melissafloresandersonwrites.com](http://melissafloresandersonwrites.com).

**megan jauregui eccles** writes dark, speculative fiction for young adults and is represented by Lauren Galit of [LKG Agency](#). Her writing has appeared in Kelp Journal, Coachella Review, Ladies of the Fright, The Lineup, Wild Greens, and Dwarf+Giant. She teaches creative writing at [John Paul the Great Catholic University](#) and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the [University of California Riverside—Palm Desert](#). Find her on [Tiktok](#) and [Instagram](#).

**kelsey lister** is an emerging poet residing in Alberta, Canada. She has work appearing in Maudlin House, Anti-Heroine Chic, Paddler Press, Roi Fainéant Press, Parentheses Journal & others. You can find her on Twitter @stolencoat.

**jodimarie meyer** enjoys toeing the line between the mundane and the magical and exploring the dichotomies of good and evil; she primarily writes love stories, but not always. She is the author of one short story collection: Magic/Madness. You can find her on Instagram @jodimariewrites or at [jodimariemeyer.com](http://jodimariemeyer.com).

**jess roses** (she/they) is a disabled, neurodivergent, emerging writer. Her focus is the transformation of relationships and experiences with pain and the taboo. She explores how these communal experiences form and relate to societal and personal narratives within and without the psyche. She has been published in Bloom Magazine, Coffin Bell Journal, Raven Review, Grub Street Literary Magazine, and more. You can find her work on Instagram at @jessroseswriting.

**nailea salazar** is a writer from California whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in Rejection Letters, Mister Magazine, boats against the current, and antinarrative zine. You can find her on Twitter @girlinthealps.

**beatriz seelaender** is a Brazilian author from São Paulo. Her fiction has appeared in Cagibi, AZURE, Psychopomp, among many others, and essays can be found at websites such as The Collapsar and Guesthouse. Her novellas have earned her both the Sandy Run and the Bottom Drawer Prizes. Seelaender's poetry has been published by Inflections Magazine, VERSION [9], etc.

**cassandra whitaker** (she/they) is a trans writer, and a member of the National Book Critics Circle whose work has been published in Michigan Quarterly Review, Beestung, The Mississippi Review, Foglifter, Conjunctions, and other places.