SHIRLEY

FEATURING STORIES BY:
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NO FURY

by Lindsey Anderson

Two detectives stand shoulder to shoulder in the doorway of her mother's home. One is wearing a black sweater, the other a white button-down. Their world, she imagines, is black and white too, devoid of any gray-tinged in-between. She wants to tell them to leave her alone, to stay away until they've got a warrant, but she knows that if she shuts the door she'll throw their suspicions wide open — as wide as Samuel's eyes when he died.

"Reina?" they ask, still standing side by, the same guarded look on both their faces. "We have a few questions for you."

She lets them in and leads them into the living room. Her mother has decorated it like a Valentine's card, in rosy reds and florid florals, each window dripping with enough lace to wrap twice around a body, if that was something you wanted to do. She gestures to the armchairs by the window. They sit on the couch instead.

The couch has guarded the far wall of the living room for so long that the paint is still a bone-bright white behind it, protected from the onslaught of sun and smoke that has turned the rest of the walls the color of coffee-stained teeth. Settling into the badly

stuffed cushions, they introduce themselves, improbably, as Lieutenant Berry and Sergeant Perry.

"We want to talk about your relationship with Casper Simpson," Berry says, his spine as straight as a book's. He has kept his sunglasses on, even though it is nearly six, and the last rays of the day's dying light are no match for the red chintz curtains her mother keeps drawn tight against the windows. "When and where did you meet him?"

"Last Friday," she says with certainty. She met Casper five days after Samuel died. "At the movies."

"You went together?" Sergeant Perry pulls a notebook from one of his pockets. Reina can see that he bites his fingernails. Their edges are red-rimmed and jagged.

"No," she says. "We sat next to each other. He started talking when the lights came up."

These are not lies. She did sit beside him, and he did chat her up while the credits crawled across the screen. She is telling the truth, just not the whole truth part of that solemnly swear business. Just not the part, so help her god, about how she followed him into the nearly empty theater and laughed at every dumb joke he made that night.

"So you started talking," Berry continues. "Then you went back to his place?"

"No," she says, trying to fake a little outrage. "He was a nice guy — he just wanted my number."

"A nice guy," Berry repeats. "Miss Bernal, you are aware, are you not, that Mr. Simpson is wanted for murder?"

Berry seems sure that Casper must have confided in her. So she tells him what she thinks he wants to hear. One, that Casper admitted the cops were looking for him. Two, that they'd made plans to hang out a final time before he went into hiding. Three, that he never showed up.

She remembers — while the detectives angle for more information about where Casper might have gone — a game that she and Samuel used to play. Two Truths and a Lie. Samuel once pretended to die of embarrassment after taking a turn, and she kissed him back to life, whispering a truth of her own against the corner of his upturned mouth.

"So you're telling us he was supposed to come over on Thursday, but didn't?"

"Yes."

She beat Samuel every time they played that game. He could never lie as convincingly as she could.

"Why didn't you call or text him?" Perry asks, running a jagged nail along the underside of his lip. A lamp in the corner of the room is bathing half his face in sickly yellow light.

"What?" Her hands are the same sick yellow. Sick. She feels sick.

"Why didn't you try to get in touch with him when he didn't show? We can see from his phone records that you called him around seven o'clock on Thursday, presumably when you made plans to meet. But you didn't reach out again after that."

"We'd barely been dating a week," she says. "It didn't seem especially strange that he'd just, you know, disappear. Men do that all the time."

Samuel attended every one of her soccer games. Every school play she starred in— he was always the first person to arrive in the auditorium beforehand, the last to leave.

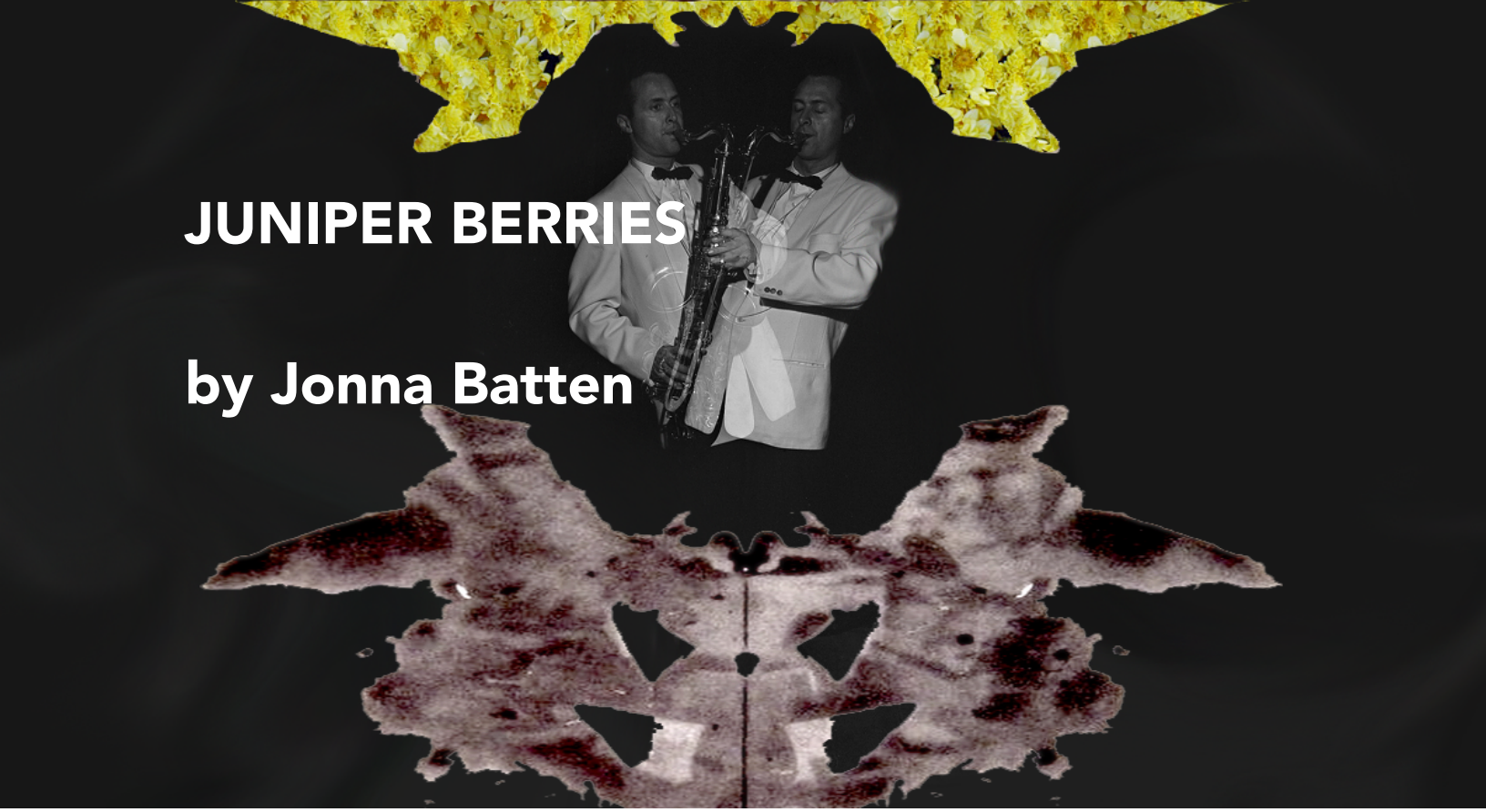
Berry and Perry nod sympathetically, but there is no sympathy in their eyes, or the taut lines of their lips. Neither of them has slept more than four hours a night this week. They've been driving around town, looking for Casper, talking to everyone he knew.

If they'd also been talking to everyone his victim knew, they would have learned that he and Reina attended the same school, that there are no less than six photos of the two of them together in their senior yearbook. They may have even learned that the man Casper gunned down was a warm-hearted, soft-spoken boy who dreamt of becoming a veterinarian and had been dating Reina in secret — because her mother didn't approve — for more than a year.

But they don't know any of that, and Reina won't be telling them. She's a good liar, and she's sure that she convince them that Casper skipped town.

When they have gone, she throws herself headlong against the old couch, digging her knees and elbows into the cushions, bullying them into surrendering their comfort to her. She thought — when she finished boiling the flesh from his bones — she'd find it satisfying to rest on what remained of Casper's earthly remains. But she can only think of Samuel, whose grave is so cold and dark, and the detectives, who live in a bright and easy black and white, unaware that people like Reina and Samuel and even Casper spend their lives in a shadow world of half-truths and broken promises that has never been anything but gray.

Lindsey Anderson is an Ohio-born, Wisconsin-based journalist who covers art and entertainment in her adopted state. In a previous life she was a semi-professional burlesque dancer and roller derby skater. Her fiction appears in Vine Leaves, Litro, and Chicago Literati.



JUNIPER BERRIES

by Jonna Batten

Our hands, at least, are different. Your middle finger is slightly longer, and my thumb is double-jointed; it juts out at an odd angle. I can twist it against the back of my hand and hold it there without feeling any pain. Sometimes I used to do it just to scare you, and you would screw up my face in disgust.

"Can you give it a rest?" You'd ask in my voice.

Do you remember, back when we lived with Mom and Jack, the juniper trees in our front yard? They were a line dividing our house from the Collins', sticking straight up from the ground like teeth. Their bodies pressed against each other and their branches knit them close, but there was a hole near the dirt we used to crawl through to get right up between them. It was the best place for hiding if you didn't mind the needles.

And the berries. There weren't very many, and the trees were so dense it would've been hard to see them even if there were, but every once in a while, you could find a group of them clustered on a single branch, glowing like sapphires in the dark. We picked some once, all on a gnarled twig the shape of a claw, full of fingers of berries the size of our eyes. We must have been awfully young, because I was stupid enough to eat one. You told me to, I remember that much, and you have always been so hard to refuse.

I bring up the juniper trees because I've been thinking a lot lately about the things you used to hide there and the sorts of strange threats you would tell me when the other kids came around to play. It was no secret you were much lovelier than I was, though we wore the same face. People look at you and think of swallows in the spring,

dark-haired and red-cheeked, with a voice that drowns you in sugar. People look at me and all they see is their own reflection in my eyes. It doesn't matter.

I used to be scared of you, sister. We were born together on the coldest day of winter, and we've kept each other warm ever since, but you scared me all the same. I never got accustomed to your mouth or the sharpness of your words, the eagerness with which you used them as weapons against me. Your tongue was barbed wire and your lips were full of venom. You've always known better, you've always done the talking. There's no room for me in a world with you.

Back when we were little, you would make me cry by catching moths and tearing off their wings. There were so many casualties around you. You liked playing God and blaming it on me. It was just your way.

There was a cat called Stockings in our neighborhood. He looted the backyard for rats, which made Mom happy, and was tame enough to pet, which made him mine. He was all black with little white boots on each paw and a teardrop of white on his muzzle. His eyes glowed in the dark like ours do when we look straight at the camera for Fourth-of-July pictures, just two green stars in the night.

I fed him rice and tuna and whatever else I could find in the evenings and he'd curl up in my lap unless he was feeling jumpy. I was careful not to touch his tail or pink button nose since he was inclined to bite, but the rest of his fur was soft and safe to feel. Sometimes he brought his claws out and they dug into my thighs, but it never really hurt, just left a mark. I played with him when you brought my friends over to the house and told me to stay out. They liked you better, anyway. Everyone did. Everyone but Stockings. I think he could sense you were secretly nervous and auspiciously temporary, in a way that even I was ignorant of.

Then he was stiff as a brick on the back porch, just outside the door, where you left him to make sure I'd see. He wasn't a moth, but it still made me cry when I saw his bowl full of pulverized juniper berries.

You keep breathing my air, and it's strangling me. We're both turning blue, our lips are chilled and our lungs ache with wanting. Remember: what befalls me, befalls you. We are the same. Our only difference is our hands. Your middle finger and my thumb are the only things keeping us separate. When we have gloves on, I don't know who I am anymore.

What bothers me most is, even though I finally escaped you, you're still the first thing they ask me when I walk in the room. I might have a perfect day. A day without sisters or lookalikes. A day where I'm me and that's all I've ever been. But then I'll walk into that room and sink into that chair and they'll ask me if I've heard from you lately. They're very concerned because they don't know where you are. You're probably somewhere tearing the wings off of moths and poisoning birds and cats with juniper berries, which is what I tell them, but they never seem to be worried about that.

Sometimes I see your smile in the ceiling of the room. The wallpaper here is cheerful and ugly, with lots of green floral patterns, and it's easy to find people in the leafy folds. I've found Mom, mean Jack, Stockings, the Collins', Jesus Christ, and you. You're the worst of them all. You stole my face and breath from me, and I'll never forgive you.

"Are you happy she's gone?" the woman in glasses asks me in a tricky sort of voice.

I know she thinks I've done something with you, disposed of you in some way or left you Stockings-stiff on the back porch with juniper staining your skin. She couldn't be more wrong. They always blame me for your mistakes.

"Of course I am," I say, because I've always been the honest sister.

They tell me I'm not a sister at all.

Jonna Batten is a writer and world-traveler living in California. She's a lover of chickens, literature (both good and not-so-good), and lucid dreaming. Although she does have two older twin sisters, she is fairly certain that the events of her story are purely fictitious.

BJORN

by Whitney Collins

There had been six doctors in total, but if Bianca's mother had had her way, there would have been twenty, fifty, eighty-three. The only reason her mother stopped with the doctor train was because Bianca's father threatened to leave, with his wallet, if she continued. Still, Bianca's cyst was her mother's whole life, and Bianca's mother's obsession with the cyst was Bianca's whole childhood.

The cyst protruded from Bianca's forehead in a way only noticeable to some people in some light but always noticeable to Bianca's mother in any light.

"It looks like you've run into a door," her mother would say, squinting at Bianca's hairline. "Like you've given yourself a goose egg. I wouldn't want people to think you're clumsy."

Her mother voiced these concerns in a lilting, sing-song voice — one meant to imitate affection and prod Bianca into action — but Bianca knew what it really meant: that her mother was unable to love her until she was perfect.

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Five of the six doctors said the same thing to Bianca and her mother: "It's a dermoid cyst. There's really no reason to remove it."

The sixth doctor said the same plus some. "It's what we call a 'vanished twin.' It never developed in your womb," he pointed to Bianca's mother, "so your forehead absorbed it," he pointed to Bianca. The doctor leaned his face so close to Bianca's as he made this pronouncement that she could smell what he'd had for lunch — Italian sub. "It's nothing to fret over. I see these all the time." He scribbled something on a prescription pad. "There's no need for surgery unless it turns problematic." He handed the prescription to Bianca, not Bianca's mother. "Now…scoot, young lady! Live your life!"

In the car, Bianca's mother wept. Bianca hoped it was because she was blaming herself, but she knew it was because the doctor had deemed neither the cyst, nor Bianca, problematic. Bianca tried to remember a time her mother had looked her in the eye and not at her forehead, but she could not think of a time like that. As they pulled out of the parking lot, Bianca looked down at the prescription. "Get bangs!" was all it said.

That night, Bianca cut her own bangs with kitchen scissors. The next day, she went to the library and read that dermoid cysts produced their own hair and teeth and fingernails. In medical books, she saw pictures of dissected cysts that she knew she would never forget. Some of them looked like pomegranates sliced open and jammed with cat fur and seed pearls. That day, Bianca saw herself for what she really was: the host for a monster.

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Bianca decided to start eating less in an attempt to starve the cyst, but after a few weeks, when she was thinner, the cyst simply appeared larger. So, Bianca ate more. A year later, when Bianca went off to college with her thick bangs and plump face, the cyst was nothing more than her little secret.

College was fast-paced and confusing. There were too many people who were void of monsters and full of confidence, so Bianca resorted to doing the one thing she'd never done, but was now asked often to do.

By Christmas, she'd had sex with twenty-seven boys — in beds, on floors, against walls, under bleachers. In doing so, she was able to forget the hair and the teeth and the fingernails — defiant and hibernating — right next to her skull.

When Bianca went home for the summer, she found that in her hometown she couldn't be who she'd become. That was when the sex stopped and the nightly nightmare began. The dream was that a baby hatched right out of Bianca's temple. The baby was a boy — her long, lost brother — and her father was the happiest she'd ever seen him.

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The second week of her sophomore year, Bianca went to see the school psychologist out of desperation. She went because the therapy was included in her tuition and also because she thought she was going to die. "I have this dream that a baby hatches right out of my temple," Bianca said, quietly and ashamed. "It's a boy — my long, lost brother — and my father is the happiest I've ever seen him."

The counselor put a hand over his mouth and cleared his throat. Both gestures, Bianca could tell, were to hide his amusement, so she never went back — to the counselor or to school. Instead, she went straight from her appointment to an electronics store and purchased a web cam. The next day she rented a furnished apartment, and for the next few months, Bianca made money by undressing for strangers on the Internet. She made no attempt to hide her identity, only her forehead, and with the money she earned, she had necessities delivered to her front stoop: soup and toilet paper and tampons, lipstick and push-up bras and thongs.

Bianca didn't leave her apartment for any reason or person or thing. She kept the blinds drawn and let her skin turn the color of skim milk. She sent her parents a postcard telling them she had left school for a stable job and that she might see them over Christmas. Bianca knew her mother was frantic. Not because she wanted to see Bianca, but because she needed to see the cyst.

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Bianca did not go home for the holidays, but she did send her parents a gift box of twelve Royal Verano pears. They cost her fifty dollars, but they were perfect. On the Internet, Bianca zoomed in on the pears and knew her parents would approve; they were nestled in their padded crates like one dozen flawless foreheads. She had them shipped certified mail so her parents would have to sign for them.

On New Year's Eve, Bianca made a resolution. She found a life coach online and spent three hours messaging about her cyst and her nightmare. The life coach told Bianca that she suffered from a classic case of "survivor's guilt" and she needed to start calling the cyst what it really was: her brother. "Have you even named him?" life coach asked. "Because you need to give him a name."

Bianca thought about this. She thought about what sort of name went with Bianca. Bianca and Ben? Bianca and Brian? Bianca and Bill? "Bjorn," Bianca said at last. "Bianca and Bjorn."

The life coach was quiet for a pause, and Bianca could tell this choice pleased her. "Excellent," the coach said. "Now. Go and write your brother's story. Start a journal. Get to know Bjorn. Get to love him."

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Getting to know Bjorn was harder than the life coach had made it sound. Bianca tried to think of what he might have looked like and what he might have been able to do. She gave him red hair and green eyes and put him in a cowboy outfit. She tried to imagine him firing two cap guns and wearing a coonskin cap. She gave him a toy drum and a bullwhip and other things she had seen little boys use on old-fashioned television shows, but as soon as she'd written these things down, she scribbled through them. Bianca knew the truth. She knew Bjorn was weak, terribly so, because she had overcome him in the womb. Bianca could barely open a new jar of strawberry jelly, so what did that say about her brother? It said that if her brother had been born, he would have worn thick glasses and hearing aids and braces on his legs. He would have been unable to control his saliva, his bowels. He would have garnered the pity of her parents even more than he did now.

Bianca filled two notebooks on this predicament — on Bjorn's endless doctor's appointments and the exorbitant medical bills and the tears her parents shed for him and only him. She wrote all of this at her bedroom window and allowed herself to crack the blinds while she did so. Through the aluminum slit, Bianca could see into the neighbors' backyard. They had a rusted, metal seesaw with faded red-and-white candy stripes, and as she wrote about her brother's condition, she saw herself, and him, on the seesaw. She saw him on one end of it, tiny and malformed and high in the air. And she saw herself on the other end of it, staring up at her brother, his fate in her weight. Every time she looked at the seesaw, Bianca saw this, and then she saw herself getting up and off the seesaw and walking into the woods, while Bjorn crashed and fell.

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What Bianca wrote in the journals must have angered her brother, because the cyst began to grow. It grew so much that Bianca had to order a wig and undress at certain angles for her web cam customers. She lost a dozen subscribers because she wouldn't lay back and moan like she once had. If she did, her bangs fell to one side and she could feel the stale apartment air wafting over her cyst. She knew the men weren't looking at her forehead, but still: knowing it was exposed made her self-conscious and she couldn't do what she had once done as well as she once had.

The nightmare also grew worse. Now it was no longer a baby that hatched right from her temple. Now it was a full-grown man dressed as a Navy pilot. He stepped out of Bianca's head in his shined shoes, and her mother and father ran, tear-stained and rejoicing, to embrace him.

Bianca knew the time had come for action. But action meant leaving the apartment, so she found someone on the Internet who would come to her and do what needed to be done.

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Bianca didn't know if he was a real doctor or not, but he arrived when he said he would and he gave the secret knock that Bianca had insisted he use. He carried a black leather bag that looked expensive and he didn't smell like an Italian sub. In Bianca's living room, he put on latex gloves and a headlamp and asked Bianca to lay on the couch. Then he brought out five giant needles, two Valium, a scalpel, and a CD player. "Vivaldi," he said. "Four Seasons." He handed Bianca a blindfold and she put it on and the doctor did what she had paid him to do. When it was over, he helped Bianca to a seated position and held up a hand mirror so she could look at herself.

"I look like Frankenstein," she said of the stitches.

The doctor snapped off his gloves and smiled. "He's my favorite monster."

At Bianca's request, the doctor let her keep the cyst. He handed her an opaque jar filled with formaldehyde and suggested she not open it. "Dermoid cysts aren't much to look at," he said. "Just put the jar on your bookshelf and use it as a bookend." Bianca nodded and pretended she would. Then she wrote the doctor a check for all the money she had.

That night Bianca slept better than she'd ever slept. She dreamed there was a hole in her head and that a white dove flew into the hole and then the hole closed up like it had never even been there.

*

In the first week after the surgery, Bianca went around her apartment and opened all the blinds. She lay on her bedroom floor in a square of sunshine and smiled as her skin turned from skim milk to heavy cream. In the second week, Bianca went and stood on the front stoop and waved at passing cars. On the third week, she put on a hat to cover her bandage and walked two blocks to the gas station. She bought Fig Newtons and beer and made small talk with the cashier about the weather. When she returned to her apartment, she went inside to put five beers in the refrigerator, then she promptly came back out with one beer and the cookies. She went into the neighbor's backyard and sat on one end of the rusted seesaw. She sat there in the yellow, late winter grass and drank her beer and ate her cookies and looked up at the empty end of the seesaw in the blue sky and was happy.

On the fourth week, Bianca opened the jar in the kitchen sink. She rinsed the cyst under running water and set it out to dry on a tea towel. It looked like a raw chicken

breast but darker — maybe a duck breast — and when Bianca cut into it, she could see the red hair she'd assigned Bjorn, plus a row of tiny teeth, a weak attempt at a smile that she'd taken away. When she was done looking at it, she put it back in the jar and put the jar back on her bookshelf so it could go back to doing its job.

*

Bianca ordered a half dozen Royal Verano pears for herself. When they arrived, she held them up to her face in the mirror and compared them to her new forehead. They were like six little twins and she loved them so much that she ate five of them in one sitting. Afterward, she slept for a long time and dreamed the dream of the dove. When she woke, she went and got the jar from the bookshelf. She opened it in the sink and poured off the formaldehyde and rinsed the cyst as she had before. Then she wrapped it in a tea towel and packed it in the padded Royal Verano crate.

Bianca handled Bjorn's death the same way she would have handled the passing of a pet — like a cat she'd had since childhood who had followed her everywhere. She told the vet as much when she handed him the crate.

"He was born the same day I was," Bianca said.

The vet was solemn. "You must be devastated."

Bianca was anything but. "I don't know how I feel," she said.

The doctor took the crate gently. "Give yourself time," he said.

Bianca said she would. She went back to her apartment and looked at herself in the mirror. She arranged her bangs to hide her stitches, then she turned on her web cam and went back to doing what she'd once done out of desperation but now did in celebration.

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When Bianca went to pick up the ashes from the vet, she realized the urn she'd bought for her parents was too big. The ashes only filled a small envelope, but Bianca took the envelope home anyway and folded it into the urn and glued the urn's lid shut. The urn was painted blue and white and featured a girl and a boy at a wishing well. The boy was just standing there while the girl brought up the pail. Bianca tested the urn's lid to make sure it was secure, then she went to the kitchen and boiled an egg. When it was cool, she placed it on her forehead where the cyst had been. She wrapped a scarf over the egg and around her head, but she wasn't satisfied with how she looked. She wanted the cyst to be bigger. She wanted her mother to be horrified, more defeated than ever. So, Bianca rummaged through the kitchen until she came across the last Royal Verano pear in the back of the refrigerator. She placed the cold twin against her head and wrapped her head with the scarf. Bianca looked in the mirror and approved.

Later that night, when her parents opened their front door and saw Bianca on the stoop, Bianca's mother gave an audible gasp. She put her hands over her mouth and shook her head, left to right.

"Here," Bianca said, holding out the urn. "I brought you something for all your trouble."

Bianca's father took the urn. Her mother cried like she had after the last doctor visit, the one where neither Bianca nor the cyst had been deemed problematic.

"We were just going to eat," her father said. "Won't you join us for dinner?"

Bianca said she would. She came in and set the table and put the urn in the center. They ate in silence while her father stared at his plate and her mother stared at the cyst and Bianca stared at the urn.

When it was time to leave, Bianca put her hand on her forehead and said, "Thank you for dinner, but we really must get going."

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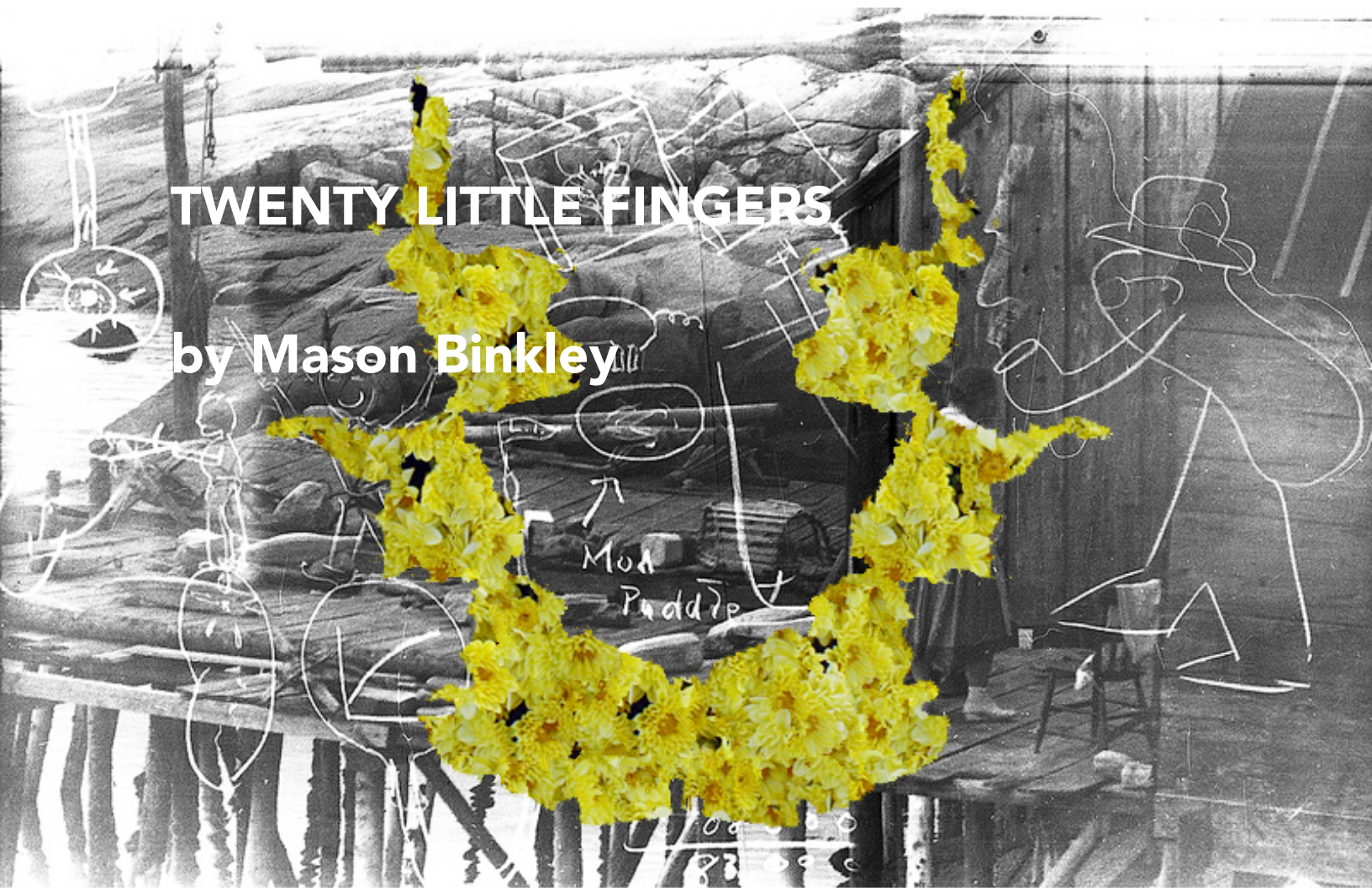
Bianca moved to a new town where she worked as a life coach. She told everyone the same thing, no matter what their problem was: that they felt guilty about being alive and they needed to write letters to the dead. When she went out on dates with men, she always told them the same thing: that she didn't want children because she'd already lost one. Over steak and wine, or duck breast and beer, she would describe the seesaw and the accident and the death. The men never asked her out again, but Bianca didn't care. She wasn't looking for love. She was just looking to tell the story over and over again until it grew larger than herself.

Whitney's fiction has appeared in New Limestone Review, Grist, The Pinch, LUMINA, Pamplemousse, and The Gateway Review and is forthcoming in Moon City Review and Ninth Letter. Her short story, "Daddy-o," earned nominations for a Pushcart Prize and the PEN/Robert J. Dau Prize. She lives in Kentucky and is pursuing her MFA at Spalding University. www.whitneycollins.com



TWENTY LITTLE FINGERS

by Mason Binkley

"The baby won't make it," the surgeon said. "The baby won't make it," another surgeon said. They looked the same in their scrubs and caps, sounded alike with their terrible words.

Now at home, the mother said, "I'm going to the store."

"Take your time," the father said. "Please, take your time."

The mother went to the store to buy diapers and groceries. Hair disheveled. Legs still hairy. Finally, she was gone. She had not left the house in three weeks, since coming home from the hospital.

The father closed the blinds in the living room, took down the full-length mirror and propped it horizontally against the base of the wall. He laid the baby on a pillow in front of the mirror, its skin soft, head soft, blanket soft. Milky-sweet breath flowed upwards. In the mirror, another man stroked a baby's arm.

The father stumbled away and stared at the babies, the other man gone now. Just twenty little fingers reaching up, four eyes shifting side to side, cooing and gurgling.

Rain hammered the old tin roof. The smell of powder and cream filled the air. Soggy diapers overflowed from a trash can while hammers banged the thin glass roof.

The father looked around the spinning room, saw two sets of baby clothes folded on the couch, two pairs of baby shoes next to the door, two baby swings side by side — all identical.

"You're having twins!" many had said. "What a blessing!"

Fortunately, the surgeons were wrong and the mother had finally left the house. Now there were two. Now there were two.

Mason Binkley has published stories and satire in Necessary Fiction, Jellyfish Review, Maudlin House, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, and other places. He lives in Tampa, Florida, and works as an attorney. You can find him on Twitter @Mason_Binkley.

THE SHRINES

by Thea Prieto

The Shrines trudge through the snow with their backs to the forested moon. They follow a single trail of footprints between the trees, a path leading them deeper into the night and further from the warm lights of their home. Their crunching footfalls deepen until their knees are trapped in ice. The wind in the surrounding pines expires and every needled limb freezes in place.

Descending flakes fill the footprints.

The night sky clouds blind.

Bare shrubs gasp under the snowdrifts, but the Shrines stand with their heads high, faces alert. With their eyes squinted, they map the remaining footprints to an outcrop of boulders a short stoning ahead. Hayward Shrine raises his oil lantern and frowns at the rocks hove out of the woods.

"Grant," Ward shouts, "we know you're out here."

The cold deadens his words, swallowing the sound.

Paige Shrine reaches her mittened hands for her scarfed throat, her lips tight. Her cheeks match the fractured faces of the boulders, pale rocks split from crept ice and prying tree roots.

"Grant, can you hear me?" she shouts. "Please answer me."

Frost bristles the forest crust.

The pines are still and deaf.

Beyond the gauze lantern light, cracked branches and black stumps cut the snow banks. With wrinkles carved around his eyes and at the falling corners of his mouth, Ward matches the shredded timber, the snapped twigs.

He secures his gloved fingers into fists and braces his shoulders.

"Grant, I know you want to be alone," he says, "but we need to talk. You can't keep avoiding us."

"Is that you, Grant?" asks Paige.

A smudge, like a dark spill, rests near the boulders. The waned moon shies behind sinking flakes, but it does not stop climbing.

"Grant, we know you need time, but you aren't the only one grieving. We need to talk to you. Your children need to talk to you."

The snowfall dies abruptly.

The moon glares.

"Grant, answer us!"

Moonlight animates the sharp rocks.

Grant's body remains shadowed.

Paige turtles her crumbled mouth into her scarf when Ward's voice cracks.

"We won't get through this if we ignore each other."

In the darkness, Grant's hands are frostbitten purple, his bare stomach gouged open and packed with icy mud. His neck and the boulder face are finger-scratched. His nails are black from all his clawing.

The lantern swings slightly in Ward's hand.

"It hurts you won't talk to us — do you know that? We all feel terrible, but we can't help you, can't if you won't talk to us — "

Paige places her fingers on Ward's sleeve, silencing him as she would a child. Ward lifts the back of his wrist to rub his nose, to wipe his cheeks dry.

"Don't know what to do," he whispers, bowing his head.

Paige squeezes her husband's arm and then knots her hands into one. She shakes the single fist toward the boulders. She points her hands like an aimed prayer.

"Grant, listen to me, you aren't responsible for her accident, you have to understand that by now. You were really sick that day — she wanted to run errands for you."

Sleet covers Grant's body like a shell, the film thickening. His blue ears are hollow pits.

"Please understand," she begs. "You're still so young — you won't feel this way forever."

The tired words snap the frost on Grant's skin, exposing new layers of raw.

"Grant, you have to stop this," she scolds. "It's not your fault, it isn't our fault, that the world isn't safe."

Grant's jaw is frozen shut.

"Grant, do you hear me — you aren't the only one blaming yourself! I told you I didn't want anything for my birthday, you didn't need to send her out to buy me anything, I told you…"

Ward reaches for his wife's defeated shoulders as white mist floats out of the treetops. A dim fog sinks into the forest around the silenced mother and father, and as their creased foreheads bow, the lantern light grows vaporous and thin. The boulders recede into darkness, the trees vanish, leaving only the strain of heavy branches in the wind.

Their shadows dissolve as the moon disappears.

Their clothes sag from their shrunken bodies.

The woods do not blink.

The mother unravels her heavy scarf and lifts her chin over her forehead. She raises her face as one piece, tilting it back until it sits flat atop her head. With the crinkled mouth, nose, and empty eye cavities pointing toward the sky, the scrunched chin juts forward like the brim of a hat. Below this brim is a girl's small face.

The girl's eyes are shaded by the brim, but the lamplight reaches her cheeks, which are the size and shape of apricots. The almond-sized pinch of cold on her nose exaggerates the blueness of her lips.

Gracie Shrine cups a hand to her ear and listens. "Is that you, Dad?"

Ice snaps. In the shadows, Grant's torso cracks upright, his head angled back.

Gracie drops one of her mittens and looks at it lying in the snow.

The father pushes back his wooden face. Under the brim of the old man's chin, a boy's square jaw tapers like a leaf, the downward corners of his mouth slightly creased. His neck is slight and colorless poking out of his coat, but he musters a finger from his soft fist.

Will Shrine points into the swirling dark. "Dad, we know you're out here."

The wind masks the sound of Grant's footsteps, his knees crunching into the layered drifts, his skin crackling as he crawls to his children.

"Dad, I know you're sad," shouts Will, "but why are you out here? What are you trying to hide from us?"

The fog reels, bringing down an empty sky.

"I know you miss Mom, but Gracie's sad all the time. It's not good to be sad and lonely too! How can I make it better? How can I help?"

The boy lifts the oil lantern, staring into its declining brightness. Gracie watches her older brother as she would an adult.

"I want to help," Will says.

He twists the knob that adjusts the glowing wick, accidentally dimming the light. The boy bows his head.

"Don't know what to do," he whispers.

His eyes avoid the lantern as Gracie sucks one of her bare knuckles, her cheeks wet.

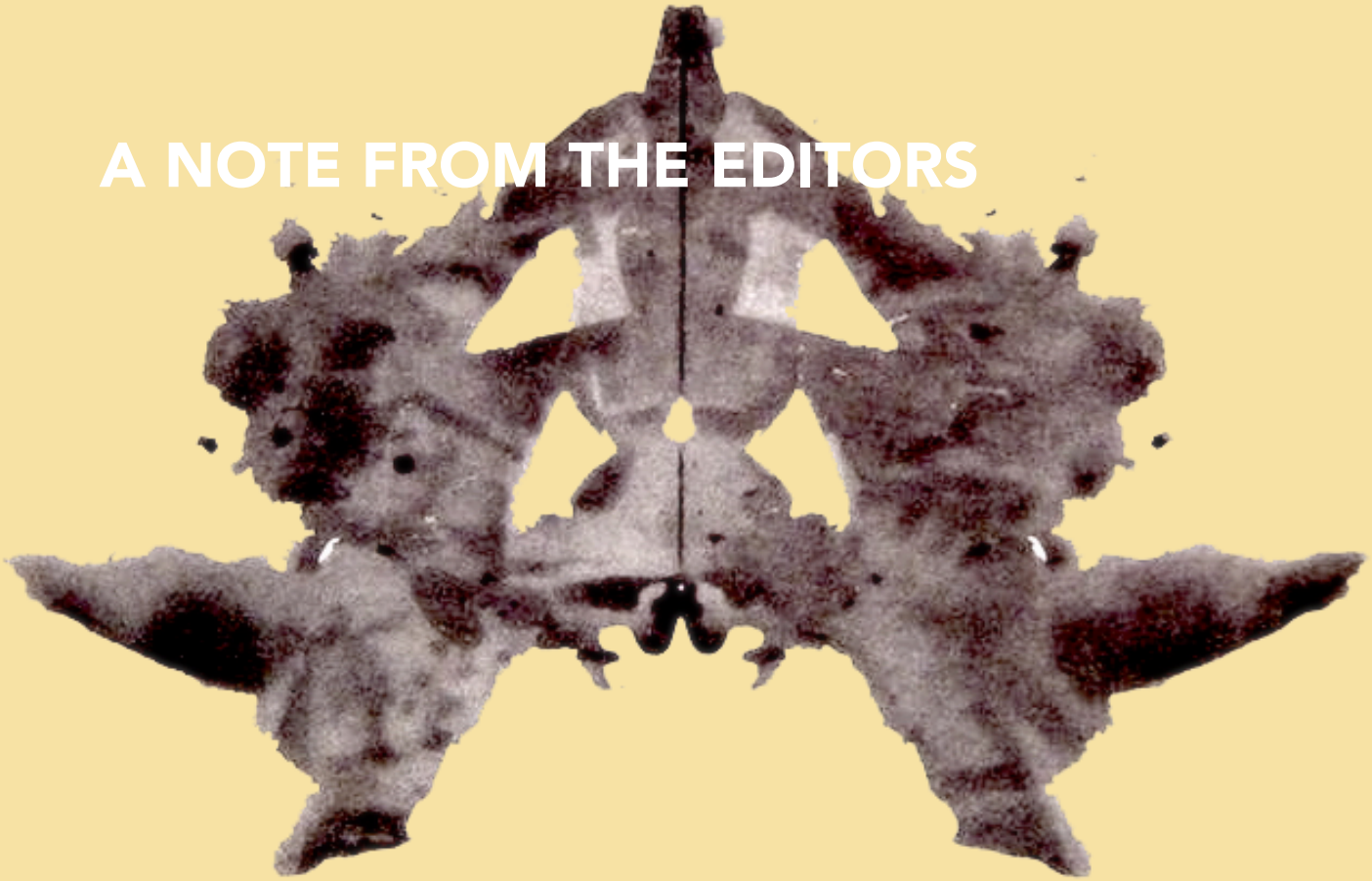
"Dad, I'm sorry I gave you my flu on Grandma's birthday," she says. "I'm sorry!"

Outside the shrinking sphere of lantern light, Grant kneels, his legs buried in the snow, clay pouring from his chest like wax. With his face hanging forward and his arms across his cored stomach, Grant tries to contain his remains and hide the mess from sight, preparing himself for the eyes of his children. He scrapes at the numbing clay — both children turn their ears toward the sound — but the thick mud, his only offering, escapes through stubbed fingers.

Grant's neck arches up, his sunken eyes evading his children's faces now lit with expectancy, even as the lantern wick darkens to a spark. And gazing into the pines, Grant wills himself to blindness. He knows the woods will ignore him, will not speak or remember, but he still fears without the darkness, the fog, and the blind layers of snow, the ice will stare back, and reflect his face like a mirror.

Thea Prieto's writing has appeared in print or online at Poets & Writers, Entropy, Yalobusha Review, Propeller, and The Masters Review, among other journals. She is a recipient of the Laurels Award Fellowship, and a finalist for Glimmer Train's Short Story Award for New Writers. To learn more, visit theaprieto.com.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS



Dear readers,

For the 11th issue of Shirley we were thinking of parallel lines, mirrors, and the dis/comfort of doubles. We wanted to mark the occasion, and the good fortune, of making it to 11 issues by asking writers to send us stories that explore twins, pairs, double exposures, mirror images, and doppelgängers. We're so excited by the incredible stories we get to share with you now, which explore the strange kinship the idea of a double conjures up — be it bodily, familial, or other.

Thank you for reading with us,

CB & LP
editors