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COLLECTION IV
SPRING READING 2021

X-R-A-Y
Collection IV
Spring Reading 2021
Curated by Jennifer Greidus
X-R-A-Y Literary Journal
Edited by Crow Jonah Norlander
Front Cover © Bob Schofield
Illustrations by Kaitlin Hanrahan
Book Design © K KUURRTT
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SCAFFOLDING

by Zac Smith

I went golfing. I hit the ball. It landed in the hole (=hole in one). I walked 227 yards to the green place where the hole was that the ball went in. I looked in the... the golf hole, the hole where the ball goes, where mine went. But I didn't see my ball. It was dark in the ball hole. I lay down on the green stuff around the ball hole, on my stomach, and put my face up to the hole. I thought maybe it was just really deep or something and I could reach in up to my elbow and get it. I remembered that was a thing some places, ball holes that were like a foot and a half deep for some reason. Someone was telling me about that once, at like a party in college maybe. I remember he leaned back and arced his hand up and then down in front of him with his eyes wide in a look of concentration, like he was reaching into a deep ball hole for his ball. I was thinking about his eyes when I saw a pair of eyes looking up at me from the golf hole. They seemed like a man's eyes, like a human man, not a racoon or anything, so, like, there was a guy was under the green zone, looking up at me through the ball hole. I could hear him breathing. We were really close to each other. It felt good but I was confused. I thought it was all dirt and rocks underneath the green stuff but I guessed I didn't really have any good reason to believe that. I imagined a series of intricate tunnels, like, what's that stuff...with the railings... like outside of buildings under construction, or in space ships, like in tv shows... like, rails

and platforms and stuff.. made of metal... I don't know, that stuff, lots of it, like a facility under the green stuff, with guys walking around. I thought about him walking on these like sci-fi pathway things under the golf course, and thought, like, maybe the ball holes were vents, or something. It seemed really complex and I felt tired. He said something but I couldn't really hear. It sounded like "front edges", or something, but that didn't make any sense. I said, "What," and he said it again at the same volume. I was confused. I thought, Runt cages? Brunt ledges? I said "what" again, but he just sighed and slid this, like, little shutter or something over the bottom of the ball hole. The hole looked normal then, like small and normal. I wasn't sure whether to worry about my ball or not, if it was ok to leave it there, with the guy or whatever. I thought it was probably ok because I had other balls with me in my briefcase. I stood up and I realized the green zone was really wet. My shirt was completely soaked through.

CROW JONAH NORLANDER INTERVIEWS ZAC SMITH

CJN: What was the last Big Game you watched (/what toppings were on your pizza)?

ZS: I think the last big game i saw was the 2015 superbowl. i can't think of a single other sporting event that i've seen, either in person or on tv, since 2015, aside from a little league game at the baseball diamond near my old apartment. there was definitely a pizza when i watched the big game...i'm trying to remember the pizza...it might have been plain pizza, like, with just cheese, and it was big...i think it was rectangular. i remember the pizza being from a place i had never had pizza from before; at the time, i generally got pizza from three different places: the pizza hut on the other side of town, the local pizza place that was ~3 bocks from where we watched the big game, and the gas station. there was beer that the host had brewed himself. the host also played saxophone. i went to his apartment maybe four other times for 'parties' that consisted of like six people watching Parks and Recreation and drinking heavily (i have never 'watched' the show and so generally didn't know what was happening, would wander the apartmment alone, etc.). writing about it now, i'm unsure if we watched the big game at the same place...i remember the tv being in a different place...the rooms being different...it must have been one of his

friends' apartments...i have no idea where i was when i watched the 2015 super bowl, actually.

CJN: What's your favorite use (in literature or otherwise) of the explanatory aside?

ZS: i don't know. i'm not sure what an explanatory aside is. i don't think i like explanatory asides. i can say that i don't like parentheticals that are more than a couple words - i generally skim long parentheticals, or read them in a rushed 'voice' in my head, because i don't want to forget what was happening in the main clause. the first hit when you google "explanatory aside" with the quote marks is a blog post from 2011 about a person who is "fiercely both a democrat, and a catholic" talking about someone else's photography blog in an unnerving way. the second hit is a scholarly article about "*The Life and Conduct of Abba Symeon Called the Fool for the Sake of Christ*, written by Leontius, the bishop of Neapolis on Cyprus (modern Limassol) near the middle of the seventh century", where the author references an explanatory aside about a character who likes to shit in public. i think that might be my favorite explanatory aside in literature; i've just enjoyed imagining writing a story with an explanatory aside about a character who shits in public. it feels like something that would fit with some of the writing i've worked on lately.

CJN: Have you disavowed the label "cyber writer" as a ploy to become the first true cyber writer?

ZS: i don't think i am or have been considered a cyber writer by anyone. i don't think the people who liked to talk about cyber writing like or care about me, aside from cory bennet and josh sherman, who i think like and care about me. if anyone considered me a cyberwriter, i would disavow the term.

CJN: If you could put something equally gratuitous in place of a golf course, what would it be?

ZS: i'm not sure...i hadn't thought about golf courses being gratuitous when writing that story. i wrote the first draft of that story at around two in the morning, on my phone, while sitting in a dark room and holding my sleeping toddler, who, for a long time, wouldn't sleep without being held for several hours in the middle of the night, which was a very stressful and prolonged period of time. when i wrote it, i wanted to write about how stupid/improbable it is that you can hit a hole in one when playing golf, and then i became interested in the fact that i didn't know most of the terms for the things that seemed necessary to write about golf. i remember taking breaks while writing it to think about the last time i played miniature golf, which was, i think, in the summer of 2017. i'm not sure the story would make any sense without a golf course, since it's about golf. i think i thought i understood your question, but now maybe i don't understand it.



THAT GIRL **by Sarah Freligh**

we used to laugh at, the girl who walked the hallways head-down,
cold-shouldered by lockers, who blistered her fingers twisting
Kleenex into flowers for homecoming floats the cool girls would
ride on, yeah, that girl

was nobody we knew until she went missing and then we
remembered how in first grade she peed a puddle that spread and
smelled of cheese and fish and scattered the class until the janitor
showed up with a broom and a pail of red dust, remembered the
Show and Tell in fifth grade when she shared the broken glass
she'd found on the street and swore it was amber, remembered
how some guys at our high school spray-painted her name across
the stadium bleachers where they used to fuck her and how they
laughed at her afterward

that girl

who will be winched-up blue and broken from a lake and live on
forever as a yearbook picture on a TV screen, dust of blush, lipstick
pinking her mouth, nobody we remember, that girl was nobody we
knew.

GAURAA SHEKHAR INTERVIEWS SARAH FRELIGH

GS: When did you start writing flash?

SF: Probably 1997. I was struggling to finish a short story collection that was starting to feel like something I'd stuck in the way-back of the refrigerator and forgotten about. It was a collection of linked short stories about a family in Michigan and one day I sat down and wrote a new story using the same characters, a one-page story that felt fresh in a way the old ones didn't. I discovered that I loved painting on a smaller canvas and revising in the same small space, which is probably why I started writing poetry around that time, too.

The collection never did get published as a whole but that story—"Another Thing"—was and it was eventually republished in a couple of anthologies, including *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction*, edited by James Thomas and Robert Scotellaro.

GS: "That Girl" is a single sentence running through, building like a storm—do you feel there's an element of improvisation at play when you write? An implicit trust you put into the language? Is the choice more deliberate?

SF: I do try to banish all the fear and just let it rip in the early drafts. I've learned to trust the process, learned to understand that something will happen if I just sit down and start to type. I start making more deliberate choices when I smell a story brewing, when there's a character or two and some trouble. Once the story's there--or the ghost of one -- I love banging around on the sentence level, the image and word level, making sparks and maybe fire.

GS: Alice Kim once said at a panel, "You should write like your parents are dead... or you're dead...or everyone's dead." Do you have a sense of audience in mind while writing fiction? Or, like Alice, do you tend to write like everyone's dead?

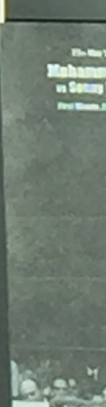
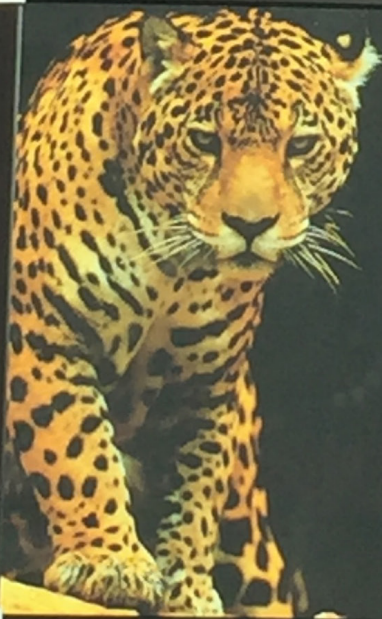
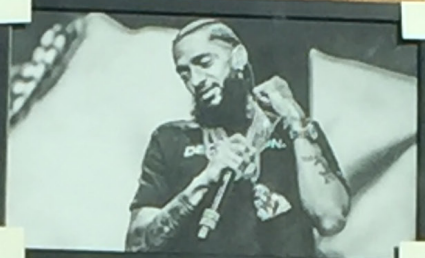
SF: I write like no one's ever going to read anything I write. I'm always surprised when they do.



IT WAS CLOUDS by Caleb Lyons

On my way to his house in Malibu, a song about life and death in Los Angeles played on the radio. At the house, the artist carefully signed his work and handed it to me. I wrapped it in glassine and told him his show in New York looked good in the pictures. He gave me a bag to gather avocados from his trees. We talked about how great Chicago is and why we left.

3 years later, when the artist died, I went back to the house in Malibu to pick up his final piece. It was clouds. *Have a nice day* was the wrong thing to say to his partner.



HEAVEN
IMPORTS

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DOG FOOD MAN

by Caleb Lyons

I loaded the mold of the man made of dog food into my van and drove it to the wolf sanctuary. To gain their trust I had to let the wolves smell and lick my face. They ate the dog food man while the artist videotaped. The owner of the sanctuary wanted to be clear that while she appreciated the financial donation, this was not the wolf image she was trying to promote—wolves eating men, wolves eating dog food, wolves eating dog food men.

Photos by Caleb Lyons.







EILEEN GETS A LITTLE BIT DRUNK

by Natalie Warther

My sons were watching a movie in the living room and I was upstairs, rummaging through their bathroom. I'm not really sure why, I almost never go in there, but there I was, and I'd had some wine, and we hadn't left the house for twelve days, for Christ's sake, so what else was I supposed to do?

I looked in the drawers, looked in the shower, looked in the trash can, looked in the mirror and I looked old.

I stuck my finger out like a cane, pointed it at the mirror, furrowed my eyebrows, and whispered at my reflection, "You pick up this hallway right this instant."

It was odd at first, seeing what my boys see. I thought about leaving, turning off the light, and joining them in the living room. But it felt a little bit good, mi petite performance, so I tried, "You think I like being the bad guy?"

And that felt a little bit more natural, so I kept going; I kept scolding that mirror.

"That's it, no phone for a week."

“Cut the shit, young man.”

“You get your ass back up those stairs, NOW.”

I was getting braver, the boys were in the living room, I was sure they were, so I gave my voice a slightly longer leash, “This is the last time I’m going to tell you to put that mother fucking phone down,” and “Hit your brother again and I’ll give you something to cry about,” and, yelling now, I mean, really pushing it, “You’ll drive me to suicide, Eileen!” Just how my mother used to say it.

And then I turned the light off and left.

But before I did, I used my oldest son’s toothbrush, because I missed him dearly, even though he was there, just down the stairs, watching a movie in the living room.

NATALIE WARTHER INTERVIEWS NATALIE WARTHER

What would you say are the pillars of Eileen's identity?

Renaissance Fair jewelry. Burt's Bees "lipstick." Talbots. White wine with ice cubes. Crocs, but the sandals, the ones that are supposed to not look like Crocs, but everyone knows. Chicken Soup for the Soul. Oprah. The word "blouse."

What do you think now about this early ~*quarantine*~ piece?

It's funny to look back. I think all of us sat at our desk and typed the sentence THEY'D BEEN IN THEIR HOUSE FOR DAYS!!! I cringe a little. But also, I deeply love Eileen, and I think her story works outside of the context of 2020. *shrug emoji.*

What are your nicknames for your very cute dog Banksy?

Smush Face, Floof Butt, Sassy Paw, Banksyboo, Banksybaby, Snarltooth, Un Petite Púpe, then there's your standard, run of the mill, Good Girl, Pretty Girl, and lastly, Bonksy, the name for her evil twin who makes all of the messes and eats all of the treats.



SEALED

by Kathleen Gullion

The day of my baptism, I wear a neon orange swimsuit underneath my white dress. What was I supposed to do, go naked and let everybody see my brand-new nipples? As I wait by the river, bullfrogs jumping from bank to bank and croaking like a choir, the swimsuit keeps finding its way up my butt crack, giving me what Paw-Paw would call the “cowboy’s hello,” a term he coined for what happens to underwear on a saddle. “That’s why cowboys go commando, Darlene,” he always said.

I yank the suit out of my crevice. Mom, perched up on dry land, yells out, “Darlene, God is watching you!” I want to yell back, God gets wedgies too, but before I can, the pastor arrives.

He wades into the water, his eyes bulging from the cold. It’s only April, and the river flows with leftover winter water. He turns to face us, waist-deep, robe billowing up around him like a tutu. There are six of us getting baptized today, including Phoebe, who always makes a big show of praying with her eyes closed in church and saying Amen when she is done. Once I asked her what she prayed about. She said world peace. I pinched her arm and asked what she really prayed for. She cried and said that is what she really prayed for. Then her mama called my mama and I had to stick my nose in the corner of the wall for two hours.

I pray for normal things like chocolate cake with chocolate frosting, to see a butterfly cracking open a chrysalis, and to have my little nasty brother to shrivel up like a prune and get turned into prune juice that will be served at the old folks' home where Paw-Paw lives.

I stick my tongue out at Phoebe, that goody-goody. She gasps as if she hasn't ever seen my red tongue wiggling at her and turns away, blushing like a bride.

"Morning, my children," the pastor says to us, and I can smell fish sticks and liquor on his breath. "Today is the day of your Baptism, the day you accept Christ into your little hearts. When you become submerged in the river, your original sin will be washed away – all that sin that causes lyin', cheatin', stealin', covetin', and adulterin' washed downstream to the sea. When you emerge from the cleansing waters, you will be purified, cleansed, chock full of the Holy Spirit."

I don't know about all that. But before I can even say *Holy Spirit who?* I'm yanked by the pastor and hoisted up into the air like a trophy. "Darlene Harvey, do you take the Lord Jesus Christ into your heart, with love and devotion, in order to be cleansed of original sin?" Without pausing for my answer, he dunks me. The ice water feels like a slap. The pastor's hands dig into my shoulders, keeping me down, making sure I'm getting my cleansing. Soon, I'll pop back up and be purified, a good girl, a child of God.

But I like being a grimy thing. I do the only thing I can think of. I bite the pastor's arm. His hands fly off me and I take my chance at escape, kicking my legs as fast as I can and pulling my body forward with a scooping motion of my arms. I feel movement behind me, but I don't dare look back. I can swim faster than the pastor can wade. The fabric of my white dress has grown heavy, so I wriggle out of it and it floats up to the surface, translucent as a ghost. Just me and my orange swimsuit now. Without the dress's weight, I can swim even faster, so I keep going, swimming farther and farther away from the bank where the congregation is gathered.

Feet fluttering, I follow the current, away from those cursed cleansing waters and Phoebe's prayers for peace and the pastor's stank breath. Something brushes my foot and my heart jumps. It must be the Holy Spirit, coming to get me. But it's not a spirit. It's a catfish. It swims in front of me and looks me in the eyes. Its skin is smooth and perfect, no blemishes or bumps. The sun refracting through the water catches its whiskers, illuminating each one like a pin light. I reach out my hand and scratch it beneath its chin, like I do with the cats that live under our porch. It leans into my hand, letting me scritch-scratch just like one of those kit-kats. My chest starts to feel tight, but I don't want to go back up to the surface and be a member of the church and listen to the pastor's thous and thines and be expected to pray for things that will never happen. I just want to stay down here with this radiant critter. I keep scratching it real good and it purrs, both of us free from damnation and deliverance, enjoying the sharp sting of April river water.

I've already been under for a few minutes now. I just need one

breath, and I can go back under. I resolve to be amphibian. I grab the critter around the middle and propel upwards. I break through the surface of the water and the pale air stings my face. A breath forces itself into my lungs, but the air feels clogged compared to the cool water below. I take another deep breath and prepare to dip back under, then I realize there is no catfish in my hand. What purred at me was a sneaker. A white one caked in pond scum. The whiskers: untied laces. I let the shoe go, let it sink back to the bottom of the river, and swim back to the bank, a child of God, cleansed and alone.

REBECCA GRANSDEN INTERVIEWS KATHLEEN GULLION

RG: There are some beautifully evocative references to the natural world in “Sealed”—with bullfrogs mentioned near the beginning, foreshadowing the end, and also the butterfly, both creatures that go through a metamorphosis to reach adulthood. The appearance of the catfish is particularly arresting. For me, it’s one of the most anthropomorphic fish, and heavy with myth and symbolism. Could you elaborate on why you chose to include these elements?

KG: Darlene’s baptism is a reluctant metamorphosis because it’s not the kind of transformation she wants. She doesn’t want to be a child of God, associated with the fish stick breath pastor. She wants something deeper, stranger, more mysterious. The catfish symbolizes that.

Catfish are as pedestrian as they are mythic. In the south, they’re in every river & every seafood restaurant, yet the myth pervades that at the bottom of every river is a massive, prehistoric catfish eluding the best fishermen. Some see catfish as slimy nasties; I think they’re beautiful. It’s likely Darlene would cross paths with a catfish, but simultaneously it feels like more than pure chance, that maybe she is meeting god herself. Or maybe she’s hallucinating because she’s running out of oxygen. I wanted it to be a mystery. I

wanted all three possibilities to be true at once.

RG: Religion features heavily as a theme. Could you give further insight into its use in this piece and perhaps its significance in your writing more generally?

KG: I grew up Catholic but could never believe, despite how badly I wanted to. I think all my writing reeks of this longing: for transcendence, to make life something more than it is, to connect to a higher power, to connect to anything at all. My characters, like me, are always reaching for this. They brush up against it. But in the end, the mirage is always revealed, leaving them disappointed. Most of my stories follow this arc. This piece does: Darlene brushes up against something holy, but all she's left with is the ugly reality of religion.

The title of this piece comes from the idea that those who are baptised are “sealed” by the Holy Spirit (think of the hand of god, stamping your forehead). This “seal” is your pass to heaven. The word “sealed” also connotes being trapped, stuck. When I hear the word “sealed,” I’m terrified. I wanted to convey this duality, that a baptism could be freeing and suffocating.

RG: One point I took away from the piece is the idea that things with an element of falsity can nonetheless lead to transcendence or transformation. The story leaves room for interpretation. What is your relation to ambiguity in your writing and how do you see its role in “Sealed”?

KG: The catfish is a sign. Maybe not sent from “God,” but sent from a god. By its strange beauty, it could be a portal to a spirituality that is more mysterious, that goes deeper than the pastor’s brand of Christianity. I see its divinity as connected to the mystery of the butterfly cracking open the chrysalis. The supreme, impossible task of our lives is to live with the unexplainable. Why are we here? Who the hell knows. Is the catfish a catfish, a sign from god, or a mirage? I don’t know.

I get frustrated when I’m working on a piece and someone tells me “explain this, explain that.” Not every feeling we have can be explained. Not everything that happens to us can be explained. I think writing is more interesting when you submit to the mystery of it. There’s a gorgeous quote by Mark Strand that I hold as a personal writing philosophy: “We live with mystery, but we don’t like the feeling. I think we should get used to it. We feel we have to know what things mean, to be on top of this and that. I don’t think it’s human... to be that competent at life. That attitude is far from poetry.”



JUST OUTSIDE THE TUNNEL OF LOVE

by Francine Witte

And Benny Jones telling me about Darlene. In other words, he pulled me through to unlove me.

Something about how love is a crispy pepper one minute, but then it goes wilted and soft. I told him I'm not a goddam pepper and get to the goddam point.

Problem is, I gave Benny Jones my heart too fast. My heart is a bristle I keep in my pocket and I can never wait to give it away.

Benny Jones sat in the boat in the Tunnel of Love, all squirm and tangle of words. *Friends*, he was saying, and *didn't mean to*.

Then he pointed to a pin's worth of light right there in front of us. "That's the future," he said. "It gets bigger and brighter the closer we get. All beautiful and warm." I told Benny to shut the hell up. If we're not a thing, we're not a thing, but don't go making a movie out of it.

When we did get outside the Tunnel of Love, into the future Benny Jones had promised would be warm and bright, I didn't see anything. I didn't feel anything. Just thought back to that summer at my grandma's house, when her old dog, Punch, got a fever and she was going to shoot him. How I stroked Punch's tan fur, telling him, *it's okay boy*, when I knew damn well it wasn't. My heart wriggling around in my pocket even then with no damn place for it to go.

FRANCINE WITTE INTERVIEWS FRANCINE WITTE

Question Me: So, tell me, is “Just Outside the Tunnel of Love” based on a true experience?

Answer Me: Well, like most fiction, actually all fiction, this story is part true, part lies. True because I’ve had guys break up with me in very circuitous ways (get to the point, brother!) but there was no actual Benny, and no dog named Punch. If the Punch part of the story has really happened, I wouldn’t be able to write about it. Relationship hurt is one thing. Pet hurt is another.

Question Me: What music do you think might have been playing in the Tunnel?

Answer Me: “Free Bird” comes to mind. Although by the time we get to the “take-off” the trip would be over. That song sure does warm up a lot, but I suppose that’s part of the fun. And also, he is kind of a heel but at least the guy in “Free Bird” is honest.

Maybe something instrumental might work. Something like “Theme from a Summer Place.” All those strings darkly foretelling

about the tragedy of Troy and Sandra. How their love was no match for society's late 50's morals. Yes, that would push the little boat through very nicely.

Question Me: If love is so predictably dangerous, why do people go back and go back and go...

Answer Me: Because love (and by love I mean romantic love) is a very powerful drug. Every time I write about a woman who has been hurt by love, I know very well what got her there. That moment of tingle, that surge of warm syrup that surrounds your heart. It's irresistible. The main character once believed everything Benny told her. Benny probably meant it, too. Trouble is, he started to mean it toward Darlene. Benny calls it a crispy pepper, and says it just wilted. That's what happens. Our main character knows this. She's heard this one too many times before.

But yeah. We go back and she'll go back and the next guy will end it in a tunnel or she'll end it with a text. But love is just a big old carnival ride.



THE COLLAPSE OF A STAR

by Jamie Etheridge

We sit in the van parked on the railroad tracks not knowing if the train is coming, or if you are going. You want to die. You said so and we believe you. Momma cries out, “Bill, please,” over and over and we wait, inhale then hold, for you to decide.

It was always like that. Random moments of drama; life or death, on the side of the road. That time in Texas in the middle of the worst blizzard in thirty years. The truck’s engine exploded and we were stuck, freezing, as semis whooshed past on the highway and the truck rocked in the aftertow. ‘Bill, please,” she pleaded as the baby cried in her lap and we huddled in the back of the cab, fingers crackling in the cold.

The FBI mailed out wanted posters. Later, when I finally got the files: thick black lines redacting my childhood alongside the names of the agents who’d tracked you. I found facsimiles of your face, eyes front, turned to the left, turned to the right, and your aliases, pages and pages of them. You were always a good storyteller, a natural whipsaw with a lie.

There were pills and booze and cons. And days when you could hardly get out of the bed in whatever cheap motel and whatever cheap town we’d drifted to, and Momma had to scratch out

breakfast, lunch and dinner for us on the \$10 she had hidden in her wallet.

There were joys. You driving us through the looming hush of the redwoods of northern California, explaining how the dinosaurs scratched their bellies against the Cretaceous bark. Or the sound of your cowboy boots crunching on the gravel as we followed you to the edge of a cliff in the Cherokee National Forest, your smile wide as the vista over the valley below.

The melancholy of Willie Nelson singing about angels flying too close and your voice, melodic and on key, despondent as a star in an empty universe.

I can still smell the smoke from your Winston King trailing out the open window as we children slept folded against each other like paper bags. The infinite hours, days, weeks, months and years we cruised I-10, each mile bringing us closer to, or taking us further away from, what you couldn't face.

Then the time in Vegas when you disappeared for two or maybe three days, I can't remember. We ate cereal and milk and watched endless episodes of Knight Rider and Three's Company on the small, staticky TV in the motel room. We knew you'd come back. We hoped you'd come back rich or at least with enough money to buy food.

You almost died in Arkansas.

Why do they call it that? I always think of the ark of the Covenant and the followers of Moses. Here are some rules to follow: Never tell anyone your real name (I didn't know mine until I was nine years old.) Help your mother take care of the little ones. Always stay close in case we have to leave in a hurry. Don't sass your father or you'll get a slap. One day when I'm gone, you'll be sorry.

I'm sorry, Daddy.

The heart attack came on so swiftly that your face turned blue with the pain, and your eyes, already bulging, bugged out and scared us all. The nitroglycerin pills weren't working and Momma called the ambulance and they took forever to come. Seven children left behind in the motel room, too terrified to talk, hungry and squabbling over the television because at least that was something we could control. They airlifted you to Tulsa and Momma said there would be an operation. They would slit open your heart, chip away at the blockages the way miners dig for gold.

But in the night you stripped the IV from your arm, ripped out the catheter, painting the ICU floor and walls with your blood until they called security and Momma, and she flew to the hospital with your clothes and boots. We woke up in the morning with you in the bed, in the motel room, smoking, your skin like drain water after a fierce storm. We knew nothing and yet understood that everything, everything, was wrong.

You said you dreamed you would die on that table, an open heart at 5am and so you kept it closed. The doctor yelled after you that you wouldn't live to see tomorrow. 365 tomorrows are what you

got instead.

After that you wouldn't leave the South but circled in a meandering loop between Florida, Georgia and Alabama, between your parents, her parents and other relatives. Life being relative, we knew by then. We stayed close to 'home' in case something happened.

Only you were our home, the blazing, burning sun of our universe and when you collapsed finally, sinking in upon yourself, the morphine dimming the light in your eyes, the doctor shaking his head slowly from the doorway, our world went dark. And like planets long orbiting a dying star, we were freed to float away, off into the silent, empty universe, or to collapse ourselves into the hole at the center of the world.

GAURAA SHEKHAR INTERVIEWS JAMIE ETHERIDGE

GS: “The Collapse of a Star” is part of a memoir that has been thirty years in writing. Where are you now with the book? Could you tell us a little about it?

JE: I’m about half way through the first draft. The memoir will focus on my father, who was a fugitive wanted by the FBI, and my childhood on the road.

GS: The details in your work are precise, and so often sensory. I’m thinking of “the smoke from your Winston King trailing out the open window as we children.” How do you go about collecting and placing detail in your prose?

JE: I have a visceral relationship with detail – especially smells and sounds. I’m prone to migraines and scent/sound-sensitive which makes me very aware of their presence, their aliveness, and also embeds them in my memory. My father has been dead 34 years and I still recall the stinging odor of his lit cigarette or the growly timbre of his voice. In writing the memoir—or essays related to it—the details are integral to the narrative. They are what has

kept him alive in my mind all these years. I couldn't tell this story without them.

GS: What are you reading at the moment?

JE: I have been reading archives of literary magazines, which I think should be considered a national treasure. There is so much incredible writing in literary magazines—so many talented writers and powerful stories. Reading the archives helps me to learn and grow as a writer. Lit mag archives are a window into how modern American literature evolves over time, they are records not only of our literature but also our fascinations and obsessions, our mores and anxieties. Quite often, lit mag stories offer a magnified, close up of these, especially with flash writing.

GS: What do you do when you're not writing?

JE: Go nuts. I have to write to stay balanced. I tried for years to not write as it causes so much heartbreak and can sometimes be so draining. But I cannot *not* write. The longer I go without writing, the more restless and unhappy I feel. So I write daily, even if it's only to journal or to write terrible stuff that I delete later.

For fun, I spend time with my husband and daughters, read, knit, draw or go for walks and before the pandemic, travel and explore.

GS: Texas, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, and Alabama—these settings are of course significant to “The Collapse of a Star,” but they also function as markers for the reader, grounding them both in time and setting. How does place inform your writing?

JE: Most people grow up in one or two places. Their childhood is shaped by their experience of that place. But I grew up on the road. We roamed for years, living in motels and rarely staying in the same town for more than a day or two at a time. My parents were both from the South and so we frequently visited our grandparents there, lived in various southern states and spent considerable time traveling through the region. For that reason, I identify most strongly with the South.

But I have specific childhood memories of places across America. Just to give a few examples:

- In the basement of a lime green house on the Snake River in Jerome, Idaho sits my favorite Curious George doll – or at least that’s where I left him the day we fled. I was seven years old.
- My father had his first heart attack at a motel in Rogers, Arkansas. The TV in the room was terrible, snowy and unclear.
- The carpets in the motel we stayed at in Corpus Christie, Texas smelled like feet, dirt and oil and were so thin that when we laid our sleeping bags on them, we could feel the concrete floor underneath.

- Our miniature schnauzer, Boomer, was killed in a hit and run on the highway next to the motel where we were staying in Provo, Utah.

I feel sometimes bereft that I did not have the hometown experience many children grow up with. But I am grateful for our life on the road. I wasn't then but now I see how it shaped me and how it made possible all these memories of place, even if they are patchwork and strewn across the country.

CONTRIBUTORS

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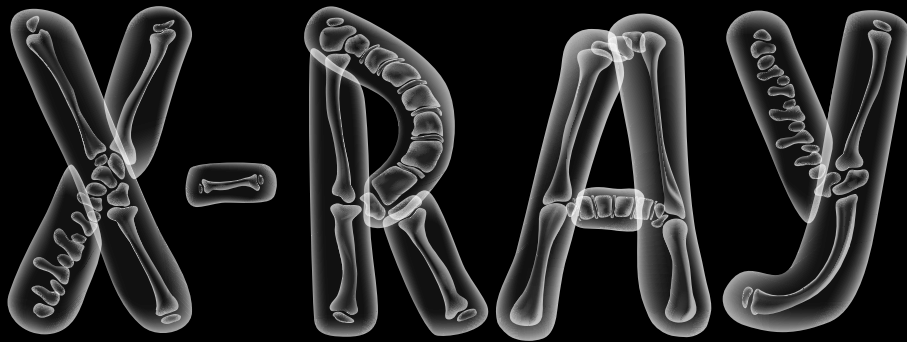
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