

# SHIRLEY



ISSUE TWELVE  
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FEATURING STORIES BY:

**KAYLA EASON**

**CAITLYN GD**

**RITA HYNES**

**ALISSA HATTMAN**

**NICOLE OQUENDO**

# TO MEMORIZE

by Kayla Eason



N. Rosenthal's Lith. Phila.

TELESCOPIC VIEW OF HALLEY'S COMET, 1835.

The reoccurring dream: his blood tasting like the river.

A train rolls through the forest. Small towns smearing in the windows. Pine knits sky, nimbus heat. They are in outer scrim of imprecise gloss, late afternoon green, steamed cedar. Humidity a slack burning in their lungs.

She's never seen him cry before. She sucks venom from his wound, and his thigh is an animal, sweat cool beneath fur. He writhes, and her concern is for the innocence of the animal, for the anonymity within a thatch. For every thread in the scrim, cicada hum, things she believes others don't notice about him. For the way it's always been, all she's ever known to mean love.

His breathing sticks to her body perspiring. She's sucking river from the enflamed vein. Movement in her mouth, alive, muscular. There, the moment she saves him. When his blood in her mouth becomes ultimate intimacy with the earth.

Sky weaves with water, weaves pine and river rocks. The passengers keep moving. And the dying part is not impossible, as if it happens to us all.

Here, she dreams, he cycles through life in her throat.

*Kayla Eason is writer and photographer based in San Diego, CA. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing, Fiction, from San Francisco State University. Her work has appeared in Vagabond City Literary Journal, Dream Pop Press, The Birds We Piled Loosely, The Elephants, and elsewhere. Find out more about her work at [kaylaeason.com](http://kaylaeason.com).*



# LIVE WOMEN!

by Caitlyn GD

My brother and I hatched from an egg two decades ago. Know the joke, *In dog years I'm dead?* In spider years, I'm primordial.

In my booth at The Toy Box I am born again. This time alone.

It would devastate my twin to know where I am so I don't tell him. The other dancers wave mascara wands, warning, *Family always finds out.* My silence is to repay his protections. In high school, he shook unloaded pistols at anyone he caught gawking. Names that I had heart-scrawled in diaries, mistaking their attention for love. He would say, *Don't kid yourself — they're disgusted.*

Now, The Toy Box prints fliers with my face and stage name. Some hourly-worker spreads them on city streets like scripture, *\$10 for ten minutes! That's all you'll need!* Leaves of the glossies pile in public bathrooms, newspaper-vending boxes, the stairwells of train stations.

The owner wet-whispers to our patrons, *You ever seen anything like it?*

I am it:

five foot one

two hundred ninety-five pounds

eight eyes and six legs.

Flesh like installation over crunchy bones, soft breasts and hips. Mortal design warped like blown glass. I am half-woman/half-spider.

\*

In the dark, folks can't see the all of me from just looking. They feel my skin, the small of my back until — a waist so snatched it looks detachable with new joints cut where they shouldn't, my extra legs tied in fishnet.

My boss couldn't waste me on the floor. He made a private booth in the back, salvaged from the now-outlawed arcade with its glory holes and half-walls. Spit shined it; lit it up bright with spotlights for me. I glisten like a prize in a claw machine. Safe from touch behind Plexiglas.

I never need to leave so I never do.

Inside, I sway to lounge covers and old blues songs. I drape webs like shadow, curl silk from my spinnerets: the holes in my gut that these men would kill to touch (maybe fill?).

*Wanna see me bend backwards? Watch me climb the wall! Can your wife do that?*

Here, I am apex predator.

They adore the monster parts of me. They want to know why-how-what made me like this. I pierce the veil with my fangs. I am their closest to holy. And, what do these men do with my majesty? While I pirouette, shoot hot silk and defy whatever Nature-Science-God they trust(ed)?

They tug their dicks — in confusion? In earnest?

They say, *I'll make you a real woman, baby.*

I bake under the lights. Can't be bothered. Let them stare. I am safe. I have rules. Let them cum.

*Slip the money through the slot, I say and flex all my limbs.*

\*

On our Scorpio birthday my brother sings Morrissey's *November Spawned a Monster*.

*Us versus the world, he says, smiling face lit by trick candles.*

The gall! He passes for human. When he walks at night, too close to strangers, he doesn't share my nagging arachnid fear. No worries that any wayward light could betray an extra eye under bangs, how someone might graze his many knees and out him.

His pointed questions teach me to lie. When he asks where I live I supply changing, fake addresses. Where the money comes from? Fake suitor names. I change the subject.

Hugging goodbye, he slips me bedazzled pepper sprays, self-defense key chains shaped like kittens.

*Men only want one thing. Even from you.*

I know better than to believe that this is how he loves. This is how he keeps.

I nod anyway. Take his offerings and leave.

\*

I am naked when my brother finds me. He breaks open the door with the butt of a gun, pulls a regular from my booth. The man sloughs off his unzipped jeans as he flees.

*What kind of whore are you?* he hollers, waving the pistol.

I let the silence answer him. There is no way through except the cash slot.

*It is my body too, he says.*

I am it. He means me.

I approach, forcing sharp eye contact. He pops four holes in the Plexiglas and misses. He is not aiming to kill. He wants to shoot his way in.

*I'm sorry, I coo.* He drops his arms to his sides.

Maybe I am sorry. Remembering how he had tried hiding my body; the gifts he had made of maxi skirts and oversized sunglasses; his guiding palms as we had bound my spinnerets with gauze; the harsh edge of plea when he would say, *twins are each other's second halves.*

I bend my knees near-backward and crab-crawl to the window. He squats mute and frozen.

*I am so sorry,* I lull and brace my face with one hand. Girlishly wipe at imaginary tears.

My other palm cups a spinneret above my hip. Warm gel crystalizes in the hole. I cloud his view with rows of eyes. We fix in on each other. His face flushes with panic and stuck ego.

The open slot is groin height. I am low, belly-toward-ground, my legs star-sprawled around me.

*You should have known not to come here,* I chide.

He weeps silent. Pathetic. What of that righteous fury now?

I pivot and shoot silk through the slot. He sticks to the bench like flypaper. I finger the bullet holes and rip the Plexiglas from its half-wall. I climb into the room baring fangs and trailing silk.

Before I can stop myself, I bite my brother on the face. Just once.

His cheek bloats around my incisors. I am ugly and sick for it, feel his blood clot between us like curdling milk. When I spit him out, I am lighter.

He won't worry about my venom knowing our shared blood will spare him. I step over him, through the club to the full night outside.

Leave the man alone to his whimpering.

*Caitlyn GD lives, teaches, and rarely calls their parents in south Florida. She is a queer witch, originally from Manhattan. Their work appears or is forthcoming in Passages North, Literary Orphans, Gulf Coast online, SmokeLong Quarterly, and elsewhere. She tweets at @Caitlyn\_GD.*





# WHO IS MY MOTHER? WHAT DOES SHE KNOW?

by Rita Hynes

My mother was dead, or I'd forgotten where she is.

Once she was so small she could curl up in the palm of my hand and tell me what she felt. Her feelings were there but they came out wrong. Like, "*I'm unhappy*" and "*I've done nothing with my life*". Only, they sounded smaller coming from her.

I remember her feelings, not mine, as she told them to me.

My mother wasn't a violent person but she told me violent things. She said she had mouths at the backs of her knees. I put a finger on them once, when I was a little girl, just to feel them wet and shivery.

I thought about my mother's womb and I believed the ovaries in our bellies were worms, eating both of us out from the inside. I found her crying about this once, after she told me. My father said it was hormones, always hormones, with her.

When we got our periods, she kept her blood in a cup to show me how much blood she lost. For her it was a thimbleful, thick and blatant.

She was so small she liked to hide in the folds of jackets. Her friends would visit with their babies and away she'd go. I'd find her two hours later asleep in a front pocket. Tiny threads tangled all up in her hair.

I couldn't sleep at night so she would lie in bed beside me, put a pillow over my head and whisper in my ear, "pretend you're in an igloo." I'd dream of ice palaces between her hot breaths.

My mother was not my mother and then she was. She lost interest in me, or I in her — as she and I got older. I lived alone, and thought of her only sometimes.

Later she called and spat out insults like it meant something. When I asked how she was, her replies were so quiet I mistook them for silences, a crackle on the other end of the phone.

The last time I saw her, she looked smaller than before, pulled in by a withering collar bone, the length of my thumb. Her body was there, but it was a secret.

I suppose she was an anxious, possessive, small woman — in the end — my mother was dead, or I'd forgotten where she is.

*Rita Hynes is a bookseller. Her work has recently appeared in Bloodbath Litzine, Cauldron Anthology and Burning House Press. Find her on Twitter @ritamhynes*



# THE FOX FACE

by Alissa Hattman

Arna had learnt about the fox with the human face from a patron on the night of her art opening.

I want you to paint it, the patron said, eyes gleaming.

But, sir, Arna said. No such fox exists. Besides, I cannot afford travel.

Covered, he said with a wave of his hand. This fox, Arna, you must see it!

The patron showed her a shadowy photo on his phone. A beautiful, shiny white coat with a sleek, fluffy tail, and, yes, a fur-less human-like face, sharp-featured, though she could not make out the eyes.

I will pay you a handsome sum, the patron said.

Arna said, let me think on it.

The next day, Arna did some research. She scrolled through the mass of blurry photos, online forums, and competitions devoted to killing the fox for its fur. Arna felt a chill up her skin. It was decided. She would travel to the fox and she would paint.

As promised, the patron covered all costs. Arna was given a plane ticket, a place to stay, and a guide who had seen the fox with the human face all of three times.

Tell me, Arna asked the guide. What does the face look like?

Mannish and plain, he replied. But still, a startling creature. Come, I will show you.

When they entered the forest, Arna felt like she was walking into summer. The air was lush, and she could breathe in full, easy breaths. The guide led her to the fox hole.

I will leave you, he said. But I will not be far. Dial me, if you feel you are in danger.

Arna thanked her guide and began setting up her easel and paints.

As the warm winds died down, Arna heard a whimper coming from the hole. She crept on all fours toward the sound. As if on instinct, she began humming a mournful tune into the darkness. Inside, something shuffled.

The creature was hurt. Without thought, Arna reached deep into the earth until she felt the thick pelt of fur. She feared, for a moment, that the fox might bite her, but after grazing its soft coat, the same warmth that she had felt upon entering the forest spread from her fingertips and sparkled around her arm like dust particles in sunshine. Arna pulled the fox from its hole.

The fox's fur was sleek, white as fresh snow, except for the red gunshot wound in her hind leg. The fox licked the blood with her pink tongue. Then, she looked up.

Arna gasped. She stared at the fox's round, blue eyes, short nose, high cheekbones, and chapped lips. The face — it was hers! This, Arna realized, was why there were no photos of the creature. The fox's face would shift, depending on its viewer.

Arna dug through her supplies and found a bandage and some ointment. She texted the guide: I will stay tonight. Please come for me tomorrow. Then, she gave the fox water and dried white fish from her pack.

Arna awoke the next morning to her own blue eyes staring back at her.

Why have you helped me? the fox asked in a voice the same as Arna's.

Because, Arna said. I want you to live.

Do you plan to paint me? The fox asked.

Arna thought. The task is impossible, she said. You are constantly changing. What face would I paint? My own? If I were to do that, the patron would be unhappy and refuse to pay my debts. Do I paint his face, though it is not the face that I see? Do I paint the guide's? The very forest itself? Maybe, someday, I will try to paint you, but first you must heal.

The fox curled up next to her. It was decided. Arna would stay with the fox. How could she return home after all that she had seen? She would wait for the fox to heal and either the fox would eat her or they would become dear friends.

With red-rimmed eyes, Arna lay her phone next to the fox hole.

Take me deeper into the forest, she said.

*"The Fox Face" is a retelling of "The Fox Skin" by Guðmundur Gíslason Hagalín (1923). Alissa Hattman's work has appeared in The Rumpus, Gravel, Propeller, Prick of the Spindle, and Voice Catcher, and her short story, "Beyond the Bay," won WORK's fiction of the year contest in 2011. In 2009, she received her MFA in Fiction at Pacific University and, in 2011, she completed a MA in English Literature from Portland State University. Alissa has studied at Charles University in Prague and has been an artist-in-residence at Gullkistan Center for Creativity in Laugarvatn, Iceland. She teaches writing at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon.*



# WE ARE EDGING EVER CLOSER TO THE MOMENT WHEN THE ANTICHRIST CLEAVES THE WORLD

by Nicole Oquendo

I'm afraid to check the news, afraid to turn on the television, but not because of him. No, even now the antichrist lays spread out and diagonal in our bed, barely covered by the sheet. He runs hot.

Soon, I won't have to worry about what will be taken from me. Soon, my identity will no longer be a debate. There won't be anyone left to argue.

Last night, I watched him wiggle his long fingers, deliberate and quick, as if there was a piano there. I wondered then what it will be like after this is all over, whether or not the spirits that were us would find each other, and he looked up at me and paused before pressing his hands together.

Tell me everything, tell me, he says. Tell me who you are.

What comes first, when it all intersects? Disabled. Transgender. A witch — brujx, specifically. Latinx. And it's all important because representation without explicit disclosure doesn't mean much. His. Mine. Fat. A writer. A poet. A painter. Dandelion. The speed at which I would run to him. The tenuous grasp on what is left. A comet. A grain of sand in a palm. Missing heroin. A bellow. A piano. The violin I tried to learn to play last year but grew frustrated every time I broke a string. The book I am writing. The book we met reaching for. The end of the world. The beginning of a breath. The things I hate about sex. The things I love about sex. The thing I love about Michael is that he lets me speak. The roiling in my stomach. The fire under my skin. My mother shutting a car window on my fingers, and yelling at me when I screamed. The children that saw me crying at the bus stop. My father driving his truck through the wall separating our garage from our kitchen. My parents' trinkets, scattered with the broken glass. The broken glass. The broken story. My father begging me to beg him not to kill himself. My father, cancer. No, not let, as if I needed his permission. My mother, cancer. Splitting a single TV dinner between so many of us. Each word off of my lips is something he craves. A whisper. The feeling of a fist, then the blossoming of a bruise. A cry. The noises that make me shiver, like the clanging of dishes. My crooked lower jaw. The bones in my hand that healed diagonally. The lie I tell, that I have never broken a bone. What it's like to feel lost inside your body. How hard it is to look.

And what it's like to be found, here, when we are about to lose so much.

*Nicole Oquendo serves as an Assistant Editor for Sundress Publications, and has most recently volunteered as a special features editor for The Florida Review. They are also the editor of the forthcoming Manticore: Hybrid Writing from Hybrid Identities anthology. Their essays and poetry can be found in CutBank, DIAGRAM, fillingStation, Gulf Stream, and The Southeast Review, among others. They are also the author of five chapbooks, including the most recent, Space Baby: Episodes I-III, as well as the hybrid memoir Telomeres. They are dealing with this prolonged moment of crisis by writing thinly-veiled speculative fanfiction.*



## FROM THE EDITORS

Every year, when we talk about our winter issue we find ourselves talking about darkness, about wanting to bring in sparks of brightness to the dim days and long nights.

While we encourage women and gender non-conforming writers to send us their work year round, in this issue our intent was to open up more space for them, with the absence of cis-gendered male writers. We're thrilled with the response and the submissions we received, and thankful for these stories that boldly peer behind curtains, delve into woods, and probe identities and fears.

We're grateful for these last gifts of 2018, and looking forward to reading more wonderful work in the New Year.