

New Poetry from Virginia Schnurr: “Touchstone” and “Valentine for Lewis Carroll”



VALENTINES IN ME / *image by Amalie Flynn*

TOUCHSTONE

My child's fairy-tale quilt is frail:
the wizard ripped, the prince bald,
the fairy's wing clipped.
Only the wishing well and frog prince survived

camp, college, the conception of my grandchild.

My eldest daughter wants the irreparable
repaired for her daughter, Maeve Arden,
named after a Shakespearean forest.

No longer willing to stitch painted pomp
I sketch a new quilt: a forest where the snake waits,
the dark trips, death lives behind every mushroom:
reality feelingly persuades me what I am.

My cataracts removed, I have a grander vision for Maeve's
covering.

I add the fool with his
books in running brooks, tongues in trees.

Absolute in my giving
savvy to the darker side of things
my needle pokes the sweet uses of adversity.

VALENTINE FOR LEWIS CARROLL

Purchased by an old woman
for her grandniece
I'm a blue plastic Valentine bag.

I have on me
a rabbit from Wonderland
whose creator liked
little girls without pubic hair.

I sit all year
on a doorknob
awaiting the day of hearts.

I'm singular,
not a carelessly covered box
but reusable.

My child places
her carefully labeled
valentines in me.

Unfortunately, this year
will be my finale.
My rabbit will hop off
offended by the onset
of hair.

New Fiction from Eddie Freeman: “Gideon’s Thesis”

Gideon, a senior majoring in journalism at the University of California, Santa Cruz, fidgeted nervously. He wanted to write a senior thesis that could be turned into a podcast or miniseries. He had researched the criminal conviction of Moses West. West was imprisoned for murder. It wasn’t hard to connect his arresting officer to a far-right group. Gideon had written West, and West had written back. Dr. Sandel spent four minutes reading Gideon’s outline, before placing it aside.

“I don’t think you have the resources to research an investigation that took place in Los Angeles. I strongly encourage you to focus on a local issue,” Dr. Sandel said.

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A few weeks later, Gideon attended a party. He tried and failed to keep the attention of a woman by making up a rap about a feather in her hair. Gideon found a seat on an outside couch which featured unique stains. A man, who introduced himself as Rainbow, inhaled a blunt and passed it to Gideon.

“Have you heard about Tyler Rosenthal?” Rainbow asked.

Gideon shook his head.

“Tyler’s dad is hella fucked up corporate leader. Tyler was going to expose his corruption, and his father had him committed,” Rainbow said.

The two men locked eyes. Rainbow knew that Gideon had been placed on earth to uncover such a story. Rainbow wore a sleeveless black t-shirt, marked with bleach and a pair of green army pants. He smelled as though he had not bathed in weeks. His disregard for surface concerns allowed him to see a person’s true destiny.

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Relative to other campuses, UCSC was not huge. It was easy for Gideon to find Tyler on Instagram. Gideon was unsurprised when he recognized a woman named Drea in a number of Tyler’s pictures. Drea and Gideon had worked on a group project together during Gideon’s freshmen year. Gideon still had her number. She answered the third time he called her.

“Have you heard about Tyler Rosenthal?” Gideon asked.

“I know he took a leave of absence last year, for mental health reasons.”

“I want to bring his story to wide audience. Who should I talk to?” Gideon asked.

“Tyler didn’t go out much, but he lived with a guy named Riccardo.”

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Riccardo agreed to meet in the apartment he once shared with Tyler. He was a tall, skinny, Latino man, with neatly combed wavy hair that stopped at his shoulders. He wore all white.

“At first Tyler was a little socially awkward. Like, he helped a woman on the bus with her bag without saying anything. He thought he was being helpful, but I could tell she was freaked out. He slowly turned into the worst roommate ever. One time he made a steak, and left it untouched in his room for days. Bugs feasted. He would stay up all night talking to himself, saying crazy things, like admonishing Owen Wilson for immoral behavior. I started seeing this woman Sarah. The first night she came over, she said Tyler was too high, and we had to take care of him. I told her it was fine, it was normal for Tyler. Sara stayed awake with him all night. In the morning, she used his phone to call his mom. His mom flew in from the East Coast. I heard he’s getting treatment and doing better,” Ricardo said.

“What do you know about the role corporations, specifically the Divinity Hospital Group, played in poisoning Tyler?” Gideon asked.

“Nothing. I know literally nothing about that,” Ricardo said.

Gideon had been using his phone to record their conversation. He turned it off.

“You can speak to me. I assure you, I know how to keep my sources safe,” Gideon said.

“I agreed to talk to you, because I wanted to encourage people to speak out. I wished I helped him sooner,” Ricardo said.

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Gideon presented Dr. Sandel with a transcript of his conversation with Riccardo, and a summary of the research he had conducted into The Divinity Hospital Group. Gideon had listed dozens of times the group had engaged in questionable corporate practices.

“If you give me enough time, I know I can prove Tyler was

poisoned by his father," Tyler said.

"You can write about Tyler Rosenthal for your thesis project. But don't mention The Divinity Hospital Group. If you have to write about D.H.G, keep it to one paragraph, maximum," Dr. Sandel said.

*

Gideon spent months working on his project. Gideon's older brother, Joseph, had trained as an electrician shortly after graduating high school. Joseph had been working for the state since he was twenty-one. He bought a house when he was twenty-four. Gideon had always thought he was smarter than his brother. Their mother thought Gideon was smarter than Joseph as well. Gideon would use his thesis to prove that he could change the world, even if he never achieved financial stability.

Gideon presented Dr. Sandel with forty-five pages. His work detailed the role The Divinity Hospital Group played in the opioid crisis. He described instances in which doctors working for the D.H.G. had used medical implants which had never completed the proper trails. He told the story of a public hospital owned by the D.H.G. that closed under sketchy circumstances. Bernie Sanders had made a comment. Gideon was proud of the way he argued the C.F.O. of the D.H.G. was not above poisoning his own son. Gideon felt he had done the best he could. Dr. Sandel needed a week to read it. He summoned Gideon to his office.

"I am recommending that you take the senior exam instead of working on a thesis. I am no longer willing to work as your thesis advisor," Dr. Sandel said.

*

Gideon took the senior exam. He graduated. He found a job as a cook and continued to live in Santa Cruz. He was listening. He firmly believed the town had one great story to give him before he moved away.

He attended a party where he drank beer out of plastic cups and hung out in the backyard to avoid the noise projects playing inside. He started talking to a woman, Sophia Turpin, who he vaguely knew from school. She was a journalism student, a senior. She was working on her senior thesis.

“I am focusing on the lives of undocumented college students. These people don’t have financial aid and their parents typically aren’t in positions to help. They have to try and make it the best they can.”

Sophia took out her phone and played some oral testimonies.

“You’re brilliant and your project is brilliant. I know Dr. Sandel, if you need help talking to him,” Gideon said.

“Sandel has approved of my project. Most of the work is done,” Sophia said.

“I want to help you in any way I can. Can I have your phone number and address?” Gideon asked.

Sophia shared her contact information, likely because she was drunk.

*

Gideon visited her apartment the next day. He was eager to express his sober enthusiasm in person. Sophia’s roommate answered the door.

“Sophia isn’t here,” her roommate said.

“I know she is working on her senior thesis, but that is something I need to help her with. I am Gideon.”

“She isn’t here.”

The door closed. It is possible Gideon heard the word weirdo.

Gideon texted Sophia around ten times that week. He rode his bike past her place sometimes, but refrained from knocking on her door. Eventually, Gideon decided that he could share his thoughts on undocumented students without Sophia’s help. He spent two weeks writing twenty-five pages. He listed Sophia Turpin as the first author. Underneath Sophia’s name, he wrote, with special thanks, Gideon White. He printed the work out, visited his old campus, and placed the work in Dr. Sandel’s mailbox.

Two weeks later, Gideon received an email in his student account from Dr. Sandel. Sandel wanted to meet.

Dr. Sandel sat behind his desk. The thesis which Gideon had written, and attributed to Sophia, rested in front of him.

“Your actions constitute plagiarism. If you were working as a journalist you would be fired. If you were still a student, you would be expelled,” Dr. Sandel said.

Sandel talked and talked. He was a bald man in his forties. He wore a dress shirt. He appeared older than he was, maybe from the strain needed to keep a university job combined with his lack of interest in fashion. Gideon realized Dr. Sandel did not know how to change the world either.

For a couple of months, Gideon worked at the restaurant, and spent his free time binging TV shows. He gave some money to a group helping immigrants from Afghanistan. He received an email from his mother about a Santa Cruz woman who helped people volunteer with the elderly. I know you want to change the world, his mother wrote.

The woman’s name was Janis Brown. She had broad shoulders and long gray hair. The first time Gideon and Janis met, he found

her to be a mix between a high school principal and an ex-biker. The Harley lady who wanted to live straight. She arranged for Gideon to visit a woman named Ethel. Ethel no longer recognized the face of her children. They lived far away.

Gideon met Ethel inside of her senior care facility. Everyone in her unit had memory issues. He had to pass through a locked door to enter.

She sat in a room with twenty other seniors. A Lifetime movie played on TV.

"Where are we going?" Ethel asked.

"We're just hanging out," Gideon said.

"It would be nice to go somewhere."

They sat for ten minutes.

"Where are we going?" Ethel asked again.

Gideon texted Janis. He asked if he could give Ethel a ride in his car.

Insurance companies aren't going to dictate how we care for one another, Janis wrote back.

Gideon slowly helped Ethel out of the building. None of the employees stopped him. He had to give her step by step instructions on how to get in the front seat. First her butt went down, then her feet went inside, next the seat belt.



He drove to the down town strip. Families were eating dinner outside. People of all ages were walking around. Ethel stared at the scene and her face lit up. Gideon knew he had changed the world for one person.

**New Poetry from Marc Tretin:
“Justin Alter, Slightly
Drunk, Addresses Maya, Who Is**

In Egypt” and “Maya Ricci Alter After Excavating A Pyramid South Of Zairo”



HOT WIRES SCALD / image by Amalie Flynn

JUSTIN ALTER, SLIGHTLY DRUNK, ADDRESSES MAYA, WHO IS IN EGYPT

Now as I am hungover and queasy
stumping about the tilting house
and sappy as my face is green,
Maya, your sculpture of Qetesh,
that goddess of sex and ecstasy,

whose torso of clear pink plastic
has a heart made of puzzle pieces
dangling from wires that run to an
automated external defibrillator
normally used to shock
a rapid cardiac rhythm
back to normal, stares at me with eyes
filled with both desire and despair.
Though feeling embarrassed
I touch the pink nub you meant
to be her clit and a soft whirr starts, then
puzzle pieces spin so fast they tear, and scatter
and the bare hot wires scald
the insides of her perfect breasts.
I pull the plug, but the smell of burnt plastic
fills our bedroom despite the open windows.
Why do you have to be gone so long?

MAYA RICCI ALTER EXCAVATING A PYRAMID SOUTH OF CAIRO

As I stooped beneath the
standing sun within the
meter-by-meter carefully
measured order of this
archeological dig and
brushed pottery shards
and papyrus crumbs through
a sieve to sift out the sand,
the heat's strong hands
touched me like a half-
wanted lover, whose warmth
is too familiar with my
body to refuse and that's
why when Jamaal, the site
boss said, "You look
overheated.

Cool off in my trailer.”
“Yes,” I said, knowing I
wanted to betray Justin
but not knowing why, so
after we had sex and while
I was thinking how can I
use this experience,
I saw Jamaal shave with
a straight edge then I saw
the dead-on right image for the God Set,
a cave-sized skull made of razor blades,
entered by stepping
over teeth made of sharp knives
into total darkness
except for a weak light
piercing this skull
through one of its eyes
and in that eye is a web
and tangled in its threads
are Zipporah and Justin.
Their faces, formless rags.
Their bodies sucked out hulks.

New Fiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: “Viraj”

Viraj sat in a room behind the motel reception counter, eating a bowl of bhaat with his fingers when the desk bell chimed. He set the bowl down and opened the door. A man in a heavy green coat stood at the counter. His pale blue jeans hung off his waist and he tugged them up. He had a wide, bearded face and smiled easily, but Viraj thought his eyes looked tired. A

small, leashed brown dog stood beside him and sniffed the floor. The man whistled a high, sharp note, and the dog looked at him, ears perked, and sat.

"May I help you?" Viraj asked.

"Do you have a room for the night?"

"Yes," Viraj said.

"Do you allow pets?"

"Yes."

"OK."

"I'll need to see your ID and credit card," Viraj said.

The man reached into a pocket and withdrew a worn leather wallet held together by duct tape. Opening the wallet, he slid his driver's license and a Visa card under a plexiglass sneeze guard that Viraj installed at the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Is your dog a pet, or do you have him for emotional support?"

"What do you mean?"

"If it's for emotional support, I won't charge you a deposit."

"I was in Afghanistan," the man said.

"I see," Viraj said after a moment. "Army?"

"No, I was a contractor. But sometimes there wasn't a difference."

Something in the tone of the man's voice made Viraj uneasy, or perhaps he just felt bad for him. He didn't know.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He examined the driver's license. *Billington, John Donald. Colorado.* He entered the credit card number into a computer.

"Where are you from?" the man asked.

Viraj glanced at him but didn't answer. Was he one of those America First people? Around town he had begun seeing "American Owned" signs in the windows of other motels. Some guests had come into his motel only to leave when they saw him behind the counter. He didn't feel anger as much as contempt. How ignorant some of these Americans are! he thought. He was just an infant when his father, frustrated with the low salary he earned as a history teacher in Hyderabad, India, brought Viraj and his mother here to McAllen, Texas, near the Mexican border. They moved in with his father's older brother, Madhav, who operated a Motel 6. With his contacts, he helped Viraj's father become a manager at the Grand Star, a motel just two blocks away. The family made a home of two rooms on the first floor where they still lived. Viraj's father always wore a dhoti and his mother wrapped herself in a sari, and they continued to speak Hindi to each other and to Viraj but he would answer them in English. After school, Viraj helped his mother clean rooms. He collected bedding and damp towels, and carried them to a laundry room, sometimes tripping on blankets trailing on the ground. His father worked the front desk. In those days, Viraj thought of the Grand Star as a warren of mysterious rooms within which anything was possible.

"Are you from India?" the man asked.

"Yes, I am," Viraj said.

He pushed the driver's license and credit card under the sneeze guard. The man put them in his wallet.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Since I was very small."

When he was a senior in high school, Viraj's father suffered a stroke. Viraj began filling in for him and managing the motel with his mother. As the months passed, the hopes for his father's full recovery faded. Now the family patriarch spent his days in a wheelchair staring out at the parking lot behind the motel, and Viraj's mother had to help him eat. He could speak only a few words. Viraj thought his parents would move back in with Uncle Madhav so he could continue with school. However, Madhav told him this was not possible. It is your job as a son to care for them, not mine, he said. Viraj considered attending college at night but too many guests arrived in the evenings for him to take time off. He considered other options but the routine of managing the day-to-day operations of the motel soon became as much a part of his life as breathing. The plans he had made for school assumed the vagueness of dreams he had difficulty remembering. His mother told him that when he had a family he could fulfill his ambitions through his children, as she and his father had hoped to do with him.

After Viraj turned eighteen, Uncle Madhav introduced him to the daughter of an Indian friend. They married and Viraj brought his new wife whose name was Meera to the motel where they lived in a room next to his parents. She helped his mother clean after guests had checked out. Viraj and Meera tried to have children but she was unable to conceive. He told her it was God's will and she agreed but he knew she felt ashamed. She told him he was wasting his time with her. He took her to a doctor who prescribed antidepressants. She began spending more time away from the motel—where she didn't say, and Viraj didn't ask. Her unhappiness was another trial. He didn't know what to say without burdening himself further so he said nothing. When she didn't come back one night, he wondered if she was at peace and if so, how she had found it.

"I stopped in India on a layover and spent about twenty-four hours in New Delhi," the man said. "Not enough time at all to see it."

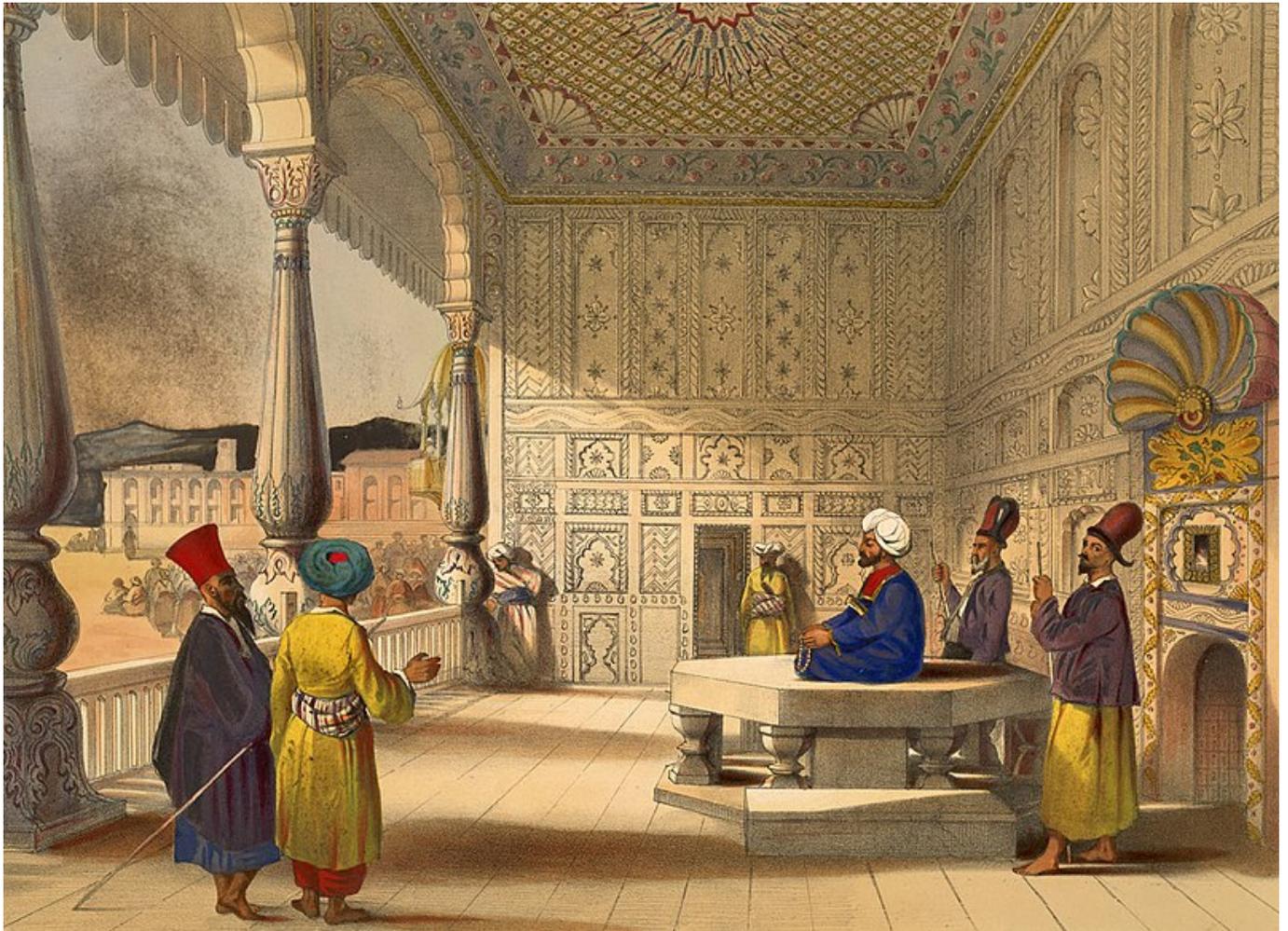
"In New Delhi, no, it would not be," Viraj said.

"Do you go back and visit?"

"No," Viraj said. "I am the manager here now and work all the time."

He printed a receipt for the room and asked the man to review and sign it and to write the make, model, and license plate number of his car in a box next to his signature. He looked out the glass front doors at the heavy, gray sky and saw his mother pulling weeds from a pot that had once held geraniums. Uncle Madhay had scolded him for not replacing the dead flowers. Remove the pots, he told him, or plant something. What would your father think? Viraj agreed but did nothing. He doubted his father would care at this point so what did it matter? Viraj checked-in guests. Let his mother worry about the pots.

Across the street, cars pulled into the Waffle House. Next door, people streamed in and out of the Shell convenience store. A woman and a boy walked from sunlight into shade. On slow days like today, Viraj read books about ancient India that belonged to his father. His mother would check on him and he would feel her beside him peering over his shoulder as he read. He heard his father's labored breathing in the other room. I am fine, mother, he would tell her. After she left, he continued to read until his eyes grew tired. Putting the book down, he stared into space. Sometimes, he would go through his father's closet, change into a dhoti and then return to his chair. He imagined being a physician in the time of the Gupta dynasty, when advances in medicine helped create India's golden age. In another life, Viraj thought, he might have worked with the celebrated fifth-century physician and surgeon Sushruta. In another life he might have been him. Instead, he had this life.



“You’re in room 201, around to the back,” Viraj told the man.

The man nodded, leaned down and patted the dog’s head. Then he straightened up and waited while Viraj put a plastic card key in an envelope.

“Thank you,” he said.

He tugged on the leash and the dog stood.

“Did you know that from the Middle Ages to around 1750 some of eastern Afghanistan was recognized as being a part of India?” Viraj asked.

“No, I didn’t.”

“It was,” Viraj said. “There was an Afghan who died in 1576 on behalf of an Indian king fighting the Mughal Empire. His name was Hakim Khan Sur.”

"I didn't know that either," the man said.

He turned to leave. The dog walked beside him, its nails clicking on the white tile floor. Viraj watched them get into a dented Toyota hatchback checkered with mud, and drive toward the rear of the motel. He looked out the door for a long moment. Then he took a pen and wrote "Hakim Khan Sur" on a Post-it. He put the pen down and walked around to the man's room. The dog barked when he knocked, and the man opened the door without removing the chain lock. Viraj noticed a green duffle bag on the floor and a bottle of water and a vial of pills on the night table. The dog sat bolt upright beside the man and growled. Viraj stepped back. He offered the man the Post-it.

"I wrote down the name of the Afghan who died fighting the Mughals," he said. "Hakim Khan Sur."

The man looked at it and Viraj had the impression he didn't remember their conversation.

"Hakim Khan Sur," he repeated. "In case you want to Google him. You can tell me when you check out what you have learned."

"Thank you."

"I live here with my mother and father," Viraj said, "I like to read history books about India."

"I appreciate your trouble," the man said.

He folded the Post-it.

"Google him. You will see I come from a great country."

The man stared at Viraj.

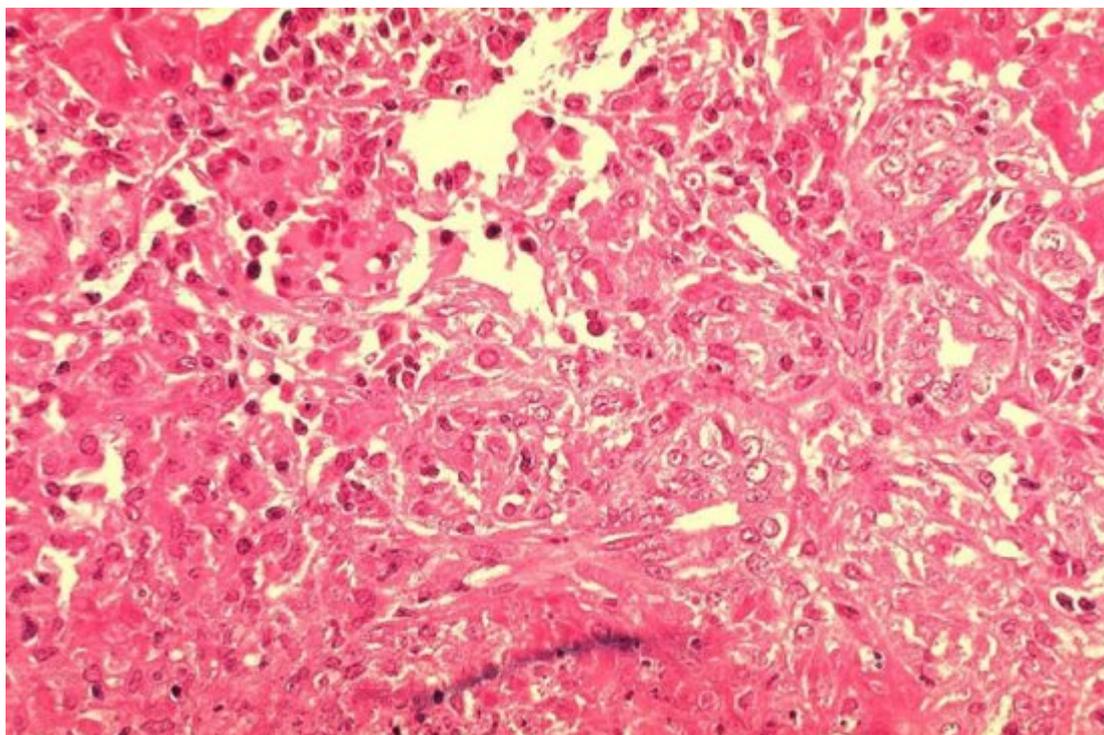
"He was a very important person."

The man nodded. Viraj walked away. He had not gone far when

the man shouted, "I can't help you." Viraj paused but didn't reply or look back. He felt the man staring at him. He had been to Afghanistan. Viraj knew about Hakim Khan Sur. He thought that was interesting. He had assumed the guest would think so too, and would see they had something in common. Now, he felt foolish. He knew he would not see him in the morning.

Viraj returned to his station behind the counter. He wondered if he should read or just go to bed. He knew all there was to know about the golden age of ancient India. He often had dreams of that time as if he had lived in the fifth century, and he would remember them the next morning. He didn't know if that was a good thing. Maybe he read too much. Maybe this evening he would just sit with his mother and father and clear his mind, accept the silence as his own, captive to the slow pace of a quiet night.

New Nonfiction from Fabrizia Faustinella: "Infinitesimal Possibilities"



You are in the stairwell, standing with a few of your fellow medical students, waiting for that door in the basement to be unlocked. The smell of formalin and paraffin emerge from the hallway below, penetrating your nostrils. You take shallow breaths, which adds to your slight anxiety. Your heart rate rises just enough for you to be aware of it and makes you uncomfortable. Your stomach growls. It must be hunger. You decide to eat that fruit bar which you've been keeping, just in case, in your white coat's right-side pocket. The fruit bar is filled with blueberry jam. Maybe not a good choice considering what's waiting for you, but you could not have known. The sweet, artificially flavored concoction melts in your mouth combined with the acrid taste of the preserving chemicals which impregnate the air. Your mouth fills with saliva. You feel somewhat nauseous. You hear the footsteps of the anatomic pathology assistant, the dull thumping sound of his prosthetic leg on the hard floor, unmistakable, accompanied by the jingling of a large ring of keys. He opens the door. The students, alerted by the noise, start walking downstairs with a mix of apprehension and excitement. Someone bumps against your shoulder, and a piece of that fruit bar you're still nibbling on falls. You pick it up with a Kleenex,

the blue jam smearing on the step. You notice the purple undertone of the stain on paper. Your jaw clenches.

Everybody enters the large, windowless, high-ceiling basement room, artificially lit with tubular neon lights. Several metal tables are lined up, each with a white sheet on top. Instruments of dissection and sewing material are neatly placed on movable carts: saws, scalpels, forceps, scissors, knives, bone cutters, needles, thread. Against the walls, to the right and to the left, two large wooden cabinets hold many jars of human body parts.

The students are divided in small groups. You are the only one assigned to go to a certain examining table. You notice that under the white sheet on that table, there isn't much. Usually, you can make out the shape of the corpse, thin, large, tall, short. Occasionally, a hand may stick out, and you are able to guess if that's a woman or a man, young or old. This particular heap seems too small to be of any significance. Is this a joke, a prank? Did the assistant place a tiny pillow under the white sheet just to break the tension, for a change, to make you laugh? Then the sheet is removed.

This is not a joke; this is not a prank; this is not insignificant. This is a corpse. The corpse of a baby. You see a beautiful baby boy lying on the cold steel table, naked, belly up, limbs spread, limp. You are told that it is a newborn. You think you have never seen a newborn that beautiful. A plump little body, with a round little belly. A head full of dark, glistening hair. His eyelids closed and hiding underneath are big, almond-shaped eyes. Thick eyelashes. Peaceful lips. A face so serene and healthy looking, you would have thought he was just sleeping, *un amorino dormiente*, if it wasn't for the strange bluish skin discoloration and the purple bruises on his scalp and on his puffy cheeks. You feel the sour taste of the fruit bar in the back of your throat.

What happened to him?

This is what happened: he was found in a dumpster a few hours earlier, wrapped in a blue blanket after his teenage mom, who had managed to conceal the pregnancy all the way to term, suffocated him with a pillow. The teenage mom apparently gave birth to this baby all alone, by herself. You don't know anything about the life of that young woman or the circumstances of that conception. You are left to speculate all the different case scenarios, but then you realize that it all comes down to two possibilities: young, consensual love or the other option. Either way, a tragic unfolding of events ensued, leading to the suppression of a newborn life and the derailing of the mother's. So many promises, so much potential, all shattered.

It didn't have to end like that.

You wondered what would happen to the girl. Maybe she would be sent to a correctional facility for minors, a reformatory, to be *re-formed*. A word with Latin root, like in *re-shaped*, *formed again*, *changed*. You pray for her to stay sane and keep it together during the process of *re-formation*. You wonder what will happen to the *amorino dormiente*. Who will claim his little body? Will he wake up in heaven? You cringe at the idea that there might not be such a thing.

The autopsy room still haunts your dreams. At night, in your mind, you often walk down those steps with a sense of dread. You get lost in the dark basement hallway, lights flickering, nobody around, the footsteps of the assistant echoing in the distance. He never hears you calling out to him, asking him to wait for you. You don't hear your voice either. It swells up in your chest, but you can't push it out. You want to leave, but you open the wrong door. Inside, you see dreadful, unspeakable things: maimed bodies, severed heads, chopped

limbs, putrefying corpses. You wake up in a sweat, and you are so relieved that it was just a dream.

But was it just a dream? After all, the forensic pathologist took you with him on rounds to teach you how to recognize firsthand the signs of strangulation; a bullet entry wound from an exit wound; a blunt blow to the head; the differences between asphyxiation and a natural death; the various stages of decomposition. The more you think about it, the more you remember, the more you can see those bodies, although, somehow, the faces are often blurred. Victims of violent crimes, their lives abruptly ended. All possibilities disintegrated.

Then you start thinking about the others. Those who died of incurable diseases or curable diseases that went untreated. You remember that young woman, with pink nail polish and masculine features, which got you perplexed. She died of an arrhenoblastoma, a rare type of ovarian cancer in which the tumor cells secrete male sex hormones, causing virilization, the appearance in females of male physical characteristics. She had the only case of arrhenoblastoma you have ever seen throughout your clinical career. You think that it could have been you on that metal table and how unfair it was that she had to die so prematurely and so painfully. You think how terrible it must have been for her to fight the puzzling changes with the pink nail polish and the eye shadow and feminine clothes. You also think how horrible it is that those very organs destined for reproduction, for the survival of the species, can kill you in so many different and ugly ways. Mother Nature betrays you, punishes you, keeps you under her thumb. And yet you still have to show her, if not love, respect. Your rebellions are futile. She has no mercy.

Some of those you saw on the tables died of self-suppression to keep life from happening to them, to stop the thinking and the feeling.

You'll never forget that middle-aged man who jumped off a building, with a problem list that went like this: "anxiety disorder, unspecified; housing problems; economic problems; occupational problems; other unspecified problems related to psychosocial circumstances; problems related to social environment; unavailability and inaccessibility of health-care facilities; post-traumatic stress disorder." You wondered what was the trauma that sent his life spiraling down. Were his parents still alive? Did they witness the demise of their own child? Did they cause it? How many times did they hope things would get better? Did anybody try to help him?

Then again, that twenty-three-year-old girl who died of an overdose, not accidental, whose medical record documented she was a "victim of sexual assault *when young*, marijuana smoker, Chlamydia infection, Gonorrhea infection, Syphilis, major depressive disorder, recurrent, severe, with psychotic features, schizoaffective disorder, foster care when young, problems related to primary support group, legal problems, poverty, homelessness, P3G3A0" (*three pregnancies, three births, no abortions*). You asked yourself what happened to her children, and you thought that the same cycle of destruction must have already been ignited.

Then there are those you didn't see but you heard of. There was that seventeen-year-old boy who hid himself in a cargo container on a ship sailing from a port in North Africa, looking for a better life somewhere in Europe. He was found dead, dehydrated, asphyxiated, when the container was finally opened upon arrival to its destination. Would his loved ones ever learn what happened to him? Would they at least get his body back? You wondered whom and what life he had left behind. You wondered what he was running away from. You wondered how he must have felt when the air started to run out, when the container got too hot, when the water was down to the last drop. Did he ever give up the hope of surviving? Could that

have been you in that predicament? You found yourself holding your breath.

Infinitesimal vs. infinite.

Incalculably, exceedingly, or immeasurably minute; vanishingly small vs. limitless or endless in space, extent, or size; impossible to measure or calculate, countlessly great; immense.

Infinitesimal, like a number that is closer to zero than any standard real number. Infinite, like the infinite mercy of God.

The Infinite-Infinitesimal is the difference between those who are mainstream and those who are at the margins, those for whom the sky is the limit and those who have no sky, those with lives full of promise and those with no promise at all. All ripped away from them sometimes right at the beginning, sometimes early on or barely halfway through.

You find it puzzling that words with an identical root can mean something radically different, even opposite; that a minor change in the letters at the end can cause a catastrophic reversal in meaning. You are unsettled when you realize that life behaves very much the same way; how a shift in circumstances can subvert everything; and how easy it is to be derailed, left behind, forgotten.

You often find yourself thinking of the *amorino dormiente* and his young mother.

You wonder what could have become of her and her little boy if she had help and support, if she was given the chance of

welcoming him with open arms and raising him with love.

She could have been happy and proud of her little boy.

He might have been the one to save her. He might have been the one to save us all.