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MIDLVMAG



REVERSE EVALUATION

**Mid-Level
Management
Literary
Magazine**

*Presents
Reverse Evaluation*

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MEMO: Globocorp Reverse Eval Results

On behalf of Leadership, I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to those of you who bothered to submit feedback through the Globocorp Reverse Evaluation (REVAL) program.

As Assistant Vice Director of Divisional Comms, I was tasked with personally processing each and every REVAL submission. The stunning range of responses—from undignified groveling to incoherent ingratitude to petty grievance—was illuminating. To put it into words you may understand, we hear you! You matter!

Having said that, Leadership has asked that I outline some constructive clarifications around the expectations for the REVAL program going forward. Here are the key takeaways:

- **This is not a suggestion box.** Many of you noted that the temperature in the office is, on average, on the chilly side. Such observations are not in the spirit of the REVAL program, which is designed to give you a voice on Leadership's upholding of Globocorp's mission and vision. While we freely acknowledge that frigid temperatures are, as one Globocorper put it, "a real nut buster," remember that you all have agency over your own level of personal discomfort. Wear layers.
- **Words matter!** In many responses, the bullpens were cavalierly referred to as "abattoirs." (As if Globocorp would sanction such a term!) Please bear in mind that these low-walled collaborative work stations, designed to catalyze cross-pollination across divisional subgroups, are here for good. As you interact with your colleagues, be

mindful of how your explicit or implicit messaging could deleteriously affect team cohesiveness and morale. In other words, think before you speak. (Mike: Please see me.)

- **Events occur.** A strong percentage of you have pointed to world events as directly or obliquely causing undue distress, prompting you to spend inappropriate lengths of time glaring vacantly into the middle distance rather than proactively contributing to team success. You cite Leadership’s “tone-deafness” and “callous indifference” as contributing factors. Let us be crystal clear: We get you! Your worries, be they trivial or otherwise pointless and unproductive, are important to us! If you are battling mental health, please reach out through the Globocorp Tunnel Portal.* Together, we can get through this!

* *Note:* The Portal will be offline for maintenance over the remainder of Q2 and all of Q3. Up-to-the-minute updates, as well as best guesstimates for reopening, can be found on the GloboCorkboard, accessible through the Portal.

If I may wax philosophical for a moment, the results of this REVAL have highlighted the essential values of Globocorp as a world-class entity. You, as a Globocorp family, have been granted a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to contribute to the cutting-edge solutioning of futures across all modalities of business cross-sections. But I don’t mean to get emotional.

As we careen toward the unforgiving future, we must accept that our fortunes are inextricably interconnected in an increasingly volatile, joyless world. While Leadership welcomes any and all gestures of candor and “managing up,” please remember that there is no feedback less audible than that which is stated from points of view outside these company walls.

It continues to be a pleasure and honor working with some of you!

Kind regards,

Corbin Minch

Assistant Vice Director of Divisional Comms

Zary Fekete

Shisa Kankō . . . Pointing, Calling

On most weekday mornings in Tokyo I board the Keiyō Line with a small stack of vocabulary cards and the quiet determination of a man who has decided, midlife, to become illiterate again on purpose. I mouth syllables under my breath. A, i, u, e, o. Ka, ki, ku, ke, ko. The train rocks gently as it slides along the edge of Tokyo Bay. I am usually bent over my notebook, circling hiragana like a child tracing letters for the first time. If you were watching me from across the aisle, you might think I am praying. In a way, I suppose I am.

On this particular morning, though, I look up.

The conductor stands at the front window of the car, white-gloved hand poised like a dancer waiting for his cue. As we approach a signal, his arm extends with deliberate grace. He points. Not casually, not vaguely. He traces the line of sight from his eye to the light ahead. His finger remains in the air just long enough to seal the moment. Then it lowers. The train continues.

There is something almost liturgical about it. A choreography repeated dozens of times each day, whether anyone is watching or not.

A second conductor, stationed near the doors, mirrors the ritual when we approach the platform. He leans forward slightly, scans the length of the train, and points down the line. His voice follows his finger. A short call. A confirmation. The doors open only after the gesture is complete.

Later I will learn that this method . . . 指差喚呼, shisa kankō, pointing and calling . . . reduces human error dramatically. When a worker merely glances at a signal, mistakes happen. When he points and names what he sees, the brain engages multiple pathways. Visual

recognition is reinforced by speech and movement. Studies suggest error rates drop extensively by at least half. Some reports claim up to eighty-five percent. It is not superstition. It is neurological choreography.

The conductor must signal a certain distance before passing the light. Too early, and the confirmation loses meaning. Too late, and the train has already committed itself. The gesture is calibrated to meters and milliseconds. Even in a system that runs with astonishing punctuality, there is room for caution. The hand rises before the wheels arrive.

And if the signal were not green?

I try to imagine it. The white glove cutting the air more sharply. The voice losing its casual cadence and becoming firm. "Stop." The brake sequence engaging before panic has time to bloom. Calm, intentional, practiced. A ritual not only for progress, but for interruption.

There is a comfort in riding a train where someone is watching that closely. Someone whose job is not merely to move forward, but to confirm that forward is still safe. In my own country, I cannot remember ever seeing such a thing. Signals were assumed. Progress was implicit. We trusted the system and rarely considered the hands that guided it.

Here, the hands are visible.

I think about why I am in Japan. Yes, I am here to study language. To conjugate verbs and memorize particles. *Watashi wa . . . Amerika-jin desu.* As for me, America person am. I stumble through grammar that sounds, in English, like rearranged furniture. Yet beneath that practical explanation lies another.

We are here to meet people. To listen. To involve ourselves in their lives. To ask gentle questions about where they are headed and whether the signal ahead is, in fact, green.

Isn't it true that we often speak too late? To wait until the train has already passed the light? Or to speak too loudly, as if the raising of one's voice could substitute for careful timing. But the conductor does neither. He signals early enough to matter, calmly enough to be heard, consistently enough to build trust.

I think of the people we meet . . . students, coworkers, neighbors . . . moving through their own timetables. The green lights they assume. The obstacles they do not yet see. If there is a complication on the tracks ahead, it is rarely announced with flashing lights. More often it is subtle: a quiet loneliness, a private fear, a question about identity that lingers unspoken.

What would it mean to be the kind of person who notices in time? Not to seize control of the train, not to shout from the platform, but to point gently. To name what is there. To say, in a voice that is neither frantic nor forced, “Look.”

The train slows as we approach my stop. The conductor performs his final sequence: glance, point, call. The doors open with practiced restraint.

I gather my notebook and step onto the platform, carried along by the soft current of commuters. For a moment I pause and look back through the front window of the car. The white glove rises once more, confirming the signal that will send the train onward without me.

I mouth the syllables again as I walk toward language class.

A, i, u, e, o.

Foreign student am.

Learning to speak.

Learning to look up.

Learning, perhaps, to notice.

Topher Shields

The Ledger Holds Its Breath

Under fluorescents—
aprons stiff with old heat—
we count backward,
finding the zeros that once held our shapes.

The ledger keeps breathing.
Overtime shaved thin to breath.
We take the books back.

Reverse the stroke—
ink climbing the page against its keeper,
numbers re-entering where dignity was crossed out,
old quill-time bleeding into barcodes, into screens.

Our tongues become tools.
Not prayers—implements.

We dig until the theft shows itself:
wages misfiled as obedience,
hours taught to look grateful,
a column where silence was entered
as consent.

The ink hesitates here—
blots with our breath,
thickens into what we spent.

Correction leaves a stain.

Aotearoa fernroot presses up through concrete—
not symbol but force:
what grows beneath systems
that learned to forget our weight.

Let hierarchies read the balance aloud.
Mercy, reclassified as debt.
Let them calculate the interest.

By shift's end, the columns change.
History's spine cracks at the margin.

The ledger holds its breath—
awaits our signature.

The mark cannot be cleared:
our thumbprints pressed into the total.

Ryan Di Francesco

3–5 AM

Was up from three to five again.

Took a few zolpidem. They didn't help.

I'm tired of this insomnia.

I tell people. They say they can't sleep either.

I say I have insomnia. They ask if I've tried magnesium.

I smile.

You know, I have read poems in high-tier journals with whimsical lyric
turning insomnia into a pearl sky.

Those poems make me sick.

There is nothing beautiful about it.

It deserves plainspoken English. Or

an image: a bluff.

See the bluff? It's there.

I lie awake with a mouth full of rocks.

The sky is dark. The ocean is violent.

I watch the waves crash. They make no sound.

I can't spit the rocks from my mouth.

But I try.

I can't choke on them either.

I get a rush of thoughts to go all the way with it.

I get them.

But I don't have the guts.

I don't have the guts.

I didn't go all the way with it today.

My day ended with strawberry-rhubarb pie on the front porch.

I like strawberry-rhubarb pie.

I love her more.

It tasted better than the rejection from a Berlin journal

I woke to find in my email.

I sent them a packet of my best poems.

After that rejection, I sent my chapbook to a small press in Ontario.

It was rejected five minutes later: *appreciate the opportunity! but going to pass on this; sorry . . .*

I wanted to send a note saying: *thanks for reading.*

But I didn't.

I am tired. I have to teach soon.

It's my forty-fifth birthday.

Maybe this year will be better. Maybe not.

One day I won't be here. That thought comforts me.

It feels cool like those rocks on my tongue.

It sits in my belly like that pie.

I see the waves below.

mk zariel

epistle for a work in progress

dear future self—this is just to say that, if anarchism has been realized on some large scale by the time you read this, i hope i helped—to some minor extent—that the occasional missed event or

sloppily phrased communiqué didn't stress you out too much. i used to think you'd see me as a martyr for the life you have now—and now i know i'm your cautionary tale, your burnt-out skeleton in the closet that once was, your piling on ten tasks when a boundary would do, the ringing in your ears after you say *no*

this is just to say that i'm sorry for the memories, although i hope at least some of them make you interesting at parties. this is just to say that i miss you. this is just to dream of a day

when time collapses and you and i go out for a coffee and fresh gossip, an apology note—i say that i tried to protect you—*stay safe, stay dangerous*—you smirk, telling me that i need you more than you need me.

Michael Zadoorian

No-See-Um

Quite suddenly, one day at the office, there are tiny insects in the air. Everywhere: copy room, lunchroom, conference room, shipping department, personnel. We see them when we walk into the breakroom or go to the bathroom. Wherever we look up, there suspended against a nimbus of humming fluorescent white is a shadowy funnel of tiny flies, bobbing in the air.

No-see-ums. This is what one employee calls them. This is true. Although we often cannot see them, we feel them, floating around our ears, flitting through our regulation-length hair, pelting the skin on our throats with their invisible bodies, as if trying to collapse bones and meat with their infinitesimal insect blows.

Soon it is all we employees talk about. The bugs. *Where did they come from? Why are there so many? Is that one in your latte?* It is strange to see us so preoccupied because we are usually such a happy bunch. We always celebrate each other's birthdays with pudding cake and little pointy hats. Once a week, we all chip in a dollar for *Donut Day*, which is Wednesday. (Nothing like a choco-custard breakfast stick to get you over the hump.) We are all astonished that something like this has been allowed to happen. Our company is usually so efficient in most matters. But in this case, it is days before they even acknowledge the problem. By that time, the no-see-ums have multiplied exponentially.

Corporate action is in the form of an all-company e-mail. This is a surprise since, in our office, we still get paper memos. The equivalent of eight Yellowstone National Parks is leveled annually for our memos alone. These are issued by our neo-Luddite boss, who never e-mails and is, in fact, still reserving judgment on whether this whole internet thing is going to catch on. His memos are always reminding us of something—the more trivial the matter, the better. *Re:*

the issue of mens shoes with big tassals; Offically, no mens shoes with big tassals are permitable by the company within the confines of the office.

The no-see-um e-mail is not like this. The spelling is correct, and there are uncharacteristic phrases such as *sudden proliferation*, *the health factor*, and *descending like locusts*. The fact that this missive is articulate is some cause for concern.

The no-see-um e-mail further states that workstations must now be kept clean: no more half-eaten sandwiches left out, no more half-drunk cups of Starbucks or Dr. Pepper left sitting on conference room tables for days at a time. According to the e-mail, it is in these places, especially the liquids, that the insects lay their eggs. Since their gestation period is about twenty-four hours (the e-mail is also suspiciously rich in factual detail), this accounts for the extraordinarily high number of insects in our humble office.

Knowledge is power, so thinks our company. *Right.*

Soon, employees begin to cover all things comestible—coasters atop shaky cups of coffee, *Kleenex* wrapped round a nutty donut, white bond over a Snickers bar. After a single sip of *Cherry Vanilla Coke*, a piece of foil is clamped over the top of the can. Anything to keep the insects from spilling their terrible seed.

Before long, covering our food and drink is not enough. After reading the e-mail, one secretary (one we all suspect to be the boss's paramour) starts holding a tissue over her face wherever she goes. When one of the other employees asks her if she has a cold, she says *What if they fly in my mouth and lay their eggs there?*

The other employee does not laugh. In fact, he says nothing. You can see the wheels turning. It had not occurred to him that the insects might lay their eggs in such places. We all start to wonder what grotesque maladies these teeny arthropods might introduce into our bodies via mucus membranes or the old cakehole. *Rocky Mountain fever? Legionnaires' disease? Elephantiasis?* Or will we just rot like a melon left too long on top of the refrigerator, starting at the bung and spreading rapidly from there?

The next day, there are many surgical masks worn around the office. Soon, our dress code (*All employees must wear suits of dark blue or dark gray, black or brown shoes, white shirts/blouses and subdued blue or maroon ties with designs that do not exceed one half-inch in diameter*) is completely disregarded. When the secretaries start showing up in goggles and netted pith helmets, no one even questions it. Among the employees, there is talk of how to seal other orifices. It seems likely that the local hardware store is experiencing a run on caulking guns.

It is as if everyone in the office has suddenly become aware of some indiscernible otherworld, where the air is not simply something that we breathe, pure fodder for lungs, but a place where things happen. We employees are like the drunkard comedian who believes water is unhealthy to drink because fish go to the bathroom in it.

Donut Day is cancelled indefinitely.

So many insects now that when we walk into a room, we see pieces of darkness in the air, ragged shapes that hang like rents in the spatial fabric. The bugs are no longer “no-see-ums.” We can indeed *see-um*. One employee, caught up in work, inadvertently walks into one of these dark spaces and immediately begins slapping himself. While jabbering, crazy-like, he starts slapping the air around him, including the person next to him, which happens to be our boss. This continues for quite some time.

After what us spectators deem a sufficient interval, the slapping man is restrained and taken away. Our swollen boss hastily retreats to his office while the snickering dies down. The slapping man is currently under observation. The company continues to pay his salary for the duration of his stay at the hospital.

We notice the days slowing. This is something that never happens in office life. Of course, there are many bad, *boring* days, but in an office, there is always a sense of the blur—weeks, months, the company anniversaries that pass and pass. Employees are always

talking about how time flies, yet now we are living on fly time. We are conscious of the *days*. They crumble slowly behind us, as if we are sleepwalking away from an ever-widening ravine.

The company continues to do nothing about the insects. We begin to wonder if they think the e-mail was enough when something happens in the coffee room. One employee, hungry enough to risk disease, tries to find some well-sealed item in the honor system snack box. The no-see-ums light on his head as if it were roadkill. In a fit of pique and panic, he knocks the whole box of snacks onto the floor.

Word quickly gets back to another employee, whose brother-in-law works for the snack supplier. He rushes into the coffee room and accuses the hungry employee of stealing, of breaking the sacred code of honor of the snack box. A scuffle ensues. People leave their desks and mill around the coffee room to watch the action. Two men under a halo of flies, rolling around on a floor strewn with *Zagnuts*, *Cheez-Its*, *Mallo Cups* and *Bar-B-Q Fritos*. Then one of them falls backward onto a stale *Charleston Chew* and lets out a horrible animal shriek.

The boss comes in, and a group of employees, feeling a collective vicarious blood rush, ask him, in ways that one would not normally speak to their boss, *When is the company going to do something about the bugs? What is wrong with you people?* A few employees start working out an impromptu chant when one of the female reps walks in ashen faced. She announces that the secretary who has been holding a tissue over her face for the past three days is dead in the ladies' room. The two men stop beating each other. The boss faints.

Upon investigation, a spray can of *Off!* is discovered near the woman's body. We surmise that she has been surreptitiously inhaling it to keep her nose and mouth from becoming a breeding ground for larvae. Ironically, it is not long before there is a higher concentration of flies in the bathroom. Swarms of them.

After the police arrive, one employee stands outside the ladies' room ranting to all of us. *Spray can nothing, it's what I've suspected all along. Killer insects! Rare poisonous FLESH-EATING no-see-ums sent here by the company to downsize our staff so they save*

money on unemployment insurance. Much easier and cheaper than layoffs. It makes sense, doesn't it?

Others of us know the truth. She is dead and they are flies. Nature.

A paper memo is issued. It is addressed directly to the bugs. *It is to be under stood that all insects will discontinue mateing and leave the office at once. Or security will be notified.*

Soon, our boss has a visitor from Corporate. The man behind the original e-mail, we suspect. The door is closed for a long time. No one sees our boss after he leaves work that day.

On Friday morning, another e-mail. *Fumigation is to take place on the premises over the weekend.* We are told to cover objects in our offices, those with which we have everyday contact—computers, cell phones, calculators—everything not already sheathed.

Doing it, we are reminded of all the things we touch each day with our hands and ears and mouths—keyboards ingrained with communal grime, greasy earpieces of telephones, the teaspoon with a dull patina of artificial coffee whitener that carries the thumbprint of the last person who stirred. We are reminded of everything that the flies touch.

That evening, we look back at our office before getting on the elevator. It is as if we are exiting a quarantine room from a science-fiction film. There is a baffled, bandaged silence. One of us sneezes on the way down, and everybody jumps. Then we move away.

Our habits from work carry over into our weekend lives. We are afraid to touch our loved ones for fear we are somehow infested, afraid to leave beverages out (cringe as we watch our children do it but dare not say anything so not to look foolish or crazy). We look toward a light and check the air before entering a room. We are seeing much more these days.

Our families ask us what's wrong. We give them hollow smiles and say *nothing*.

On Monday, when we return to work, the flies are once again invisible. There are tens of thousands fallen dead on lunch tables, translucent mounds on the various laminates that cover our communal workspaces. There are still a few in the air, but they are difficult to see. They weave around, flying the logy half-flight of the toxemic. When you spot them against the

light, they are easy to trap in your palm, but no one does so, at least at first. After a short while, rage catches up with us, and we do start killing them manually, snatching them out of the air when we can spot them and crushing them between the heels of our hands. Once we see that victory is ours, we realize the ludicrousness of our fears. *They're only tiny insects. We are humans! How could we have been so scared?*

By Wednesday, things are normal. A few employees have become sick from the insecticide, but they are the weak ones. Friday arrives quickly—a blur. By then, sandwiches are left out unprotected, half-filled mugs of coffee sit on desktops for an hour then are topped off with more warm liquid and consumed. *Donut Day* will be resumed next week.

The company seems pleased with itself. Our boss comes back after a few weeks as if from vacation. He holds no grudges toward anyone. A new secretary has been assigned to him, and she is quite attractive. We are getting memos again most every day.

Ash Hooke

RESIST!; sure, but it's ONLY TUESDAY?

my phone's Daybreak alarm cascading/lying

charging next to a real alarm-clock only used for time/

Alexa—

 what's the weather like outside—

 any UAV's to be seen?

thank god this isn't Venenzula—

Alexa, pon el álbum Document de R.E.M—

cualquier VANT asesino en el cielo?

and i'm sipping my extra boosted shot of Brilliance Energy tea to combat happy

hanukkah heavy metals/merry

xmas microplastics/so my organs can be harvested—driving

on Grant's apocalyptic construction stretch—

 someone's laundry is strewn across the road

—just keep going/accept that you're trapped

 on this torn-up road for at least another twentyfive miles/Sirius

 radio saying war

finds no shame in oil now/crude collateral damage at acceptable

 levels;

stopping at Starbucks for double-fisted protein enhanced coffee to

pump-up my Ozempic starved muscles/feed my caffeine addiction/encourage my morning

productivity; reminding

me to pick-up my admissible drugs—the ones prescribed by doctors whose
degrees still matter—

how am i still a teacher—

why don't we have surveillance drones on campus yet?

the semi-acceptable Turnitin AI telling me when these kids are using AI/what

AI is invading/where AI is fucking with my life/who

AI tells me i am; big brother help me know

how to get my estrogen back/what to get my mom for christmas/who my therapist
was talking about the other day—

iPhone are you even listening to me—

shouldn't I just call and ask?

my mom desires to FaceTime, I don't want to look at your face

looking at my face,

mom—

have you found enough insulin—

did dad finally ride that LifeFlight?

these cyberpunk insurance dealers/these pharmaceutical corps/these somehow zillionaries

remember when millionaires were the thing—

have you made your first million yet?

i need my drugs too mom, to get through today/to get through next week/to get to utopia—

thank god pot is legal; giving us comfortable haze; rage culture blazing

from underpass barrels— The Purge is happening south of 22nd street—hey

Gemini—

can you write me a poem about resilience—

do you dream/have nightmares, too?

just write a poem ash, just write

me a poem, make me poetry for just 2.7 minutes every day so
i don't fade away.

Gloria Ogo

Annual Report

Today we sit in the chairs
you bolted to the floor
and ask you to wait in the hallway.

The clipboard is lighter than expected.

The pen works.

We begin with performances you never tracked:

hours lost to quiet panic,
ambition redirected into survival, how
often your voice entered the room
before your body did.

You receive an average score

for Leadership:

Below expectations for listening.

Exceeds expectations

for endurance of harm.

Notes section:

You swapped control for care.

You swapped longevity for wisdom.

You called it *how things are*

We acknowledge:

The structure, a ladder, a story to climb.

We also note the ladder was missing rungs,
the story revised mid-sentence.

Corrective action plan:

Unlearn urgency.

Return stolen time.

Stop painting burnout as devotion.

We close the file gently.

Outside, the clock keeps spinning,

No raised voices.

Just the long relief of naming the truth
without punishment.

For the first time,

we are not performing resilience.

We are practicing freedom.

You will not be escorted back in.

The hallway has begun to forget you.

Your reflection lingers only where
authority once rehearsed itself.

You ask, through the door,
what replaces you.
We do not answer directly.
We have learned better questions.

We redistribute the furniture.
Some of it burns beautifully.
There is a brief argument about legacy.
We resolve it by planting
where the filing cabinets stood.
Roots make excellent footnotes.
A child wanders through the room,
and this becomes our peer review.

The walls loosen.
The air stops bracing for impact.
Time, embarrassed, pretends this was always the plan.
We sign nothing.
We are done proving comprehension.

What matters is simpler:
the chairs are no longer bolted.
The door opens both ways.
The future enters without knocking
not as promise,
but as practice.

Kaylee Walton

What You Remember When You Remember Your Why

“Remember your why,” she said, and clicked to the next slide.

A collage of photos danced across the screen. Students underneath a rainbow parachute at field day, frozen mid-laughter at the winter carnival, walking together down hallways full of their artwork. Teachers posed with their own children, their husbands and wives, their golden doodles. Candid shots from someone’s birthday party. A baby, face messy with icing, sitting proud in a high chair.

I was in my first year of teaching then, sitting in a folding chair in the school cafeteria for what they called a professional development day. The sun was shining into the room through skylight windows, creating beams of light that captured every particle of dust midair. Someone had arranged little pastries on a table near the door—some stale-looking apple turnovers in a supermarket box. My principal stood at the front of the room and told us, with apparent sincerity, that the cure for what ailed a teacher was located within the teacher. That if we could just remember *why* we came here, we could weather anything the job asked of us.

I remember tearing up, tears trickling down my cheeks as I studied the small faces of the children I was about to meet in a few days. I remember the sunlight warming the back of my neck at just the right moment. I felt like everything was serendipitous. I was not embarrassed about it. I was twenty-three and new and I believed that caring enough was the same as having enough.

Here is what I had not yet learned: that slide was not inspiration. It was a mechanism. It was a way of converting our love for our students into leverage against our own needs. It said:

your students deserve to have you at your best, even without the necessary resources. It said: if you're struggling, the struggle is yours to solve, even without the necessary support. It said: remember why you came, which meant, keep coming, regardless of what it cost you.

Three years later, she was still my principal. Three years later, I clenched my jaw when we got to that slide.

* * *

My contracted hours began at 8:30, just a few minutes before the bell rang and my students arrived. Occasionally, meetings were called at 8:00 or 8:15, before I was paid to be there. I attended those too, because I had been told attendance was not optional. I gave those minutes like I gave everything: without being asked twice, without anyone noticing they were mine to give. At the end of the week, when I confirmed my hours, I was not given an option to note that I had been called to work 30 minutes before I began getting paid. Those 30 minutes were added to the abyss of unpaid time disguised as “part of the job.”

But the bigger problem was what happened after the first bell. On Wednesdays and Fridays, during the school day, I was required to leave my students to attend midday Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings. Every grade level has these meetings during their designated planning time. Unfortunately, meeting attendance mandates didn't consider that special education teachers (like myself) often work with multiple grade levels. My planning period did not align with any one grade level. I was required to attend these meetings regardless. My fourth graders were in my classroom, waiting for their literacy instruction. I was in the room next door, sitting through a PLC meeting that interfered with my ability to teach.

My students were eight, nine, and ten years old. They had differing disabilities, resulting in each of them having Individualized Education Plans—IEPs, legally binding documents specifying what services they were entitled to receive, from whom, and for how many minutes per week.

Federal law. Not a guideline. Not a suggestion. The word *mandated* in IEP-mandated services did not mean encouraged. It did not mean when convenient. It meant required by law.

When I left for PLC meetings, my aides were supposed to cover my class, but they had been given old student Chromebooks at the beginning of the school year. These Chromebooks did not have USB ports, so they could not connect to the Promethean smart board. They also could not print worksheets from school printers. So when I left, my aides stood in front of a board they could not operate, and my students sat waiting for instruction that wasn't coming.

In September, during the first week of required PLC meetings, I raised my hand. "My students are not receiving instruction during these meetings because I am required to be here. My aides do not have what they need to cover."

My principal winced and offered to speak with me after the meeting, since this was inapplicable to everyone else. After the meeting, I was told to ask the literacy department for more textbooks so the smart board wouldn't be needed. I was told to print the Powerpoints and make them into packets for my students and aids to use instead. I was told that my white board would suffice for the 45 minutes I'd be out of the room. I was told my attendance at the meetings was nonnegotiable.

Then, in December, the school launched a building-wide reading intervention to address the 40% passing rate on the Reading Standards Of Learning Statewide Assessment. Groups were created for instruction. Schedules were written. Teachers were assigned to groups. Nobody consulted IEPs. Nobody asked which students were on whose caseload.

The result was that I was given a group of students, several of whom did not even have IEPs, and none of whom were on my caseload. The students on my actual caseload were distributed across other groups, taught by other teachers, during the time I was supposed to be providing them the specialized instruction mandated by their IEPs.

My students all read below the 10th percentile for their grade level. All of them had IEP goals related to decoding and phonological awareness deficits. To address these goals, I had

been trained in an intensive decoding literacy intervention program. I was supposed to be utilizing this training, this specific program, to help my students learn how to read. Yet, my students were scattered amongst other teachers, getting whatever form of literacy intervention they could, and I was giving remediation to a group of students who had never been identified as needing special education services.

The schedule change to accommodate the building-wide reading intervention was announced during the first PLC meeting of December. I raised my hand again. “This prevents me from delivering IEP-mandated intervention to the students I am legally responsible for.”

I was told the schedule was the schedule.

Then, at the end of another PLC meeting in February, after many snow days resulted in many missed instructional days, my principal mentioned that the building-wide intervention time would expand. It would now include math and science remediation, focusing on one subject per week. She said this was to address the loss of instructional time, so our students would be ready to take *all* of their Standards of Learning assessments in May. She said it the way you say something you are not interested in discussing, when the meeting was already over, bags were packed, and people were already standing. I started to cry. I could not help it. It was too much. She left the room.

* * *

At the beginning of March came the field trip.

For months, I had approval to go to Jamestown with the fourth-grade class. My students were going. I knew these kids, specifically: which one needed me sitting nearby during an unstructured morning, which one shut down without a familiar face when the day got hard, which one would have a great time and not need me at all but deserved to see me there

anyway. I had arranged to be there. It was settled, the way things were settled when the people who were supposed to confirm them had confirmed them.

At 3:10 p.m. the day before the trip, I was told I was not allowed to attend. Funding, they said. No space on the bus.

Other support staff, such as ESL teachers and other special education teachers, attended without issue.

The day before, my principal had called my classroom about my PLC attendance. The conversation was not gentle. I had missed several meetings because I had students who needed to be tested and aides who could not cover and a schedule that made compliance with every requirement simultaneously impossible. The message I received was clear: the meetings came first.

I want to be precise because precision matters when you are describing retaliation: she reminded me of my absences on Wednesday, and on Thursday I was removed from the field trip.

My coworkers encouraged me to speak with my principal about my schedule. Maybe she didn't understand the reality of my schedule conflicts, they offered. I printed out my schedule. I brought it to my principal and sat in her office showing her that the required attendance at PLC meetings directly interfered with my ability to provide my 4th graders with their scheduled literacy instruction. When I asked, "What do I prioritize—meetings or instruction?" she pursed her lips. My principal did not have answers. Just the ability to remove me from a field trip the day before it happened.

I called HR. I explained what happened. I explained the sequence of events. I told them I believed I had been retaliated against. They told me to meet with my principal and tell her my concerns. I already had.

* * *

Once a year, I am given an opportunity to share my concerns in the School Climate Survey. The survey is a series of statements, and for each one I am asked to select:

Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree.

You feel supported at school.

You feel prepared to conduct lessons.

You feel your concerns are heard.

At the end, there is a small box with the heading: *Questions or Comments.*

That is all. There is no form to evaluate my principal's performance. There is no process by which I could put on record, formally, the ways that building has failed my students and me. There is no signature line where someone has to confirm they have received my concerns, which is not the same as agreeing with them. There is just a box.

I always fill it in. Nobody ever follows up.

This is my review.

* * *

To my principal,

You claimed to serve all students. You did not serve my students. You built a program without checking whether it conflicted with their legal rights, and when I told you it did, you told me "the schedule was the schedule." You gave my aides equipment that did not function as needed and called it classroom coverage. You did not send me the intervention data I was legally required to have in order to monitor my students' progress. I asked for it. It did not arrive.

You also assigned me professional development homework to complete on my own time to make up for a meeting that was cancelled, time that would not have been unpaid had the meeting happened. I understand this was small, but small things accumulate. Every small thing declared “part of the job” was another confirmation that my time did not count.

You retaliated against me by pulling me from a field trip. It was dressed up in logistics, but it was not logistics and I believe you knew that.

When I raised concerns about meetings conflicting with my instructional time, you told me the schedule was already in place. When I missed meetings due to my conflicting schedule, you retaliated against me. When I went to HR, they sent me back to you. Nobody had answers, I was told. What nobody had was interest in finding them.

You told me to remember my why while taking apart, one piece at a time, the conditions under which my why could exist.

You were not doing your job.

* * *

And yet.

Here is the part I could not write down:

I love this work.

Not the data entry. Not the compliance theater of progress monitoring forms that existed to satisfy auditors who would never set foot in my classroom. Not the PLC meetings.

I love the parts that catch me off guard. The parts that remind me I am not just managing a caseload, but actually living alongside people.

A student who barely speaks to their peers always, religiously, greets me with “Good Morning, Ms. Walton.” Another has found wonder in my hair texture, so normal to me, so boring, so straight, yet so different from her own. She has taught herself to braid, twisting and

turning strands of my red hair between her tiny fingers until she figures it out. A kid who fights his own body to stay seated during a lesson goes entirely still when a classmate is having a hard day. I watch him as he leans over and hugs calm into his friend. I watch this and think: he has been patient his whole life. I am still learning to be.

One student came to me in September unable to read. Not behind grade level. Not catching up. Unable. We worked on it the way you work on something that matters, carefully and with repetition, in whatever minutes the schedule left us. One afternoon in February he looked up from a page and something had shifted in his face. Not pride exactly—more like recognition. Like he had just met a version of himself he did not know existed.

I think about that face on the hard days. It gets me back to the work.

I did not know a job could impact me like this. I did not know I would become someone whose mood could be changed by a ten-year-old's handwriting improvement, whose Tuesday could be saved by a kid who remembered to ask about my weekend. I did not know that my name would be sung by dozens of little voices, every single day, many of whom I have never taught. I did not know that being cared for by children, receiving their specific and unguarded attention, would feel like something I needed as much as they needed anything from me.

The work is saving me. The work is also taking something from me I am not sure I can get back. I have made peace with the fact that both of these will always be true.

* * *

For three years, the institution's version of me has been a problem to manage. A teacher who misses meetings. An overdue data sheet. A concern sent back down the chain. A circle bubbled in on a climate survey, somewhere between *Neutral* and *Disagree*, that nobody ever follows up on.

That is not who I am in that building.

I am the person those kids look for when they get off the bus. I am the one who knows which one needs five minutes of quiet before the day begins and which one needs to tell me something immediately, before anything else can happen. I know which one sat next to a classmate who could not read independently the month before and read them their entire library book, without being asked, without making it into anything. I know that letting my students eat lunch in my classroom is the best part of their day, so I say yes almost every time they ask, even if that means I don't get a 'break'.

I have been failed by the people whose job it was to support me. The schedule, the Chromebooks, the field trip, the meeting with HR. The planning meeting that ended with my principal walking out of the room as I began to cry.

I know what it looks like when an institution decides you are not worth the trouble of a real answer. I have watched it happen to my students. It looks like this.

I am not leaving yet. I have tried to want to leave and I cannot get there, because my students are on the other side of that door and I have not found a way to make that not matter.

Next fall, my principal will stand at the front of the cafeteria again. There will be pastries near the door. She'll click to a slide full of children's faces, our students' faces, and she'll say: *remember your why.*

And if I am there, picking at a stale apple turnover wrapped in a school paper towel, watching the dust particles dancing in the sunlight, I will remember.

I will remember exactly.

Emily Hay

A word in your ear

Do not bring your real self to work. In case
Of emergency, code-switch on the bus.
Always remember, you are not one of us.
You are not clubbable, but we expect you to try to be.

Speak our thoughts, exactly. Fit in. Your face will never fit:
You are a second-class citizen. But, if you know this,
We will allow you a corner space. Just
Never tell us anything uncomfortable,

Especially, what we look like as you look in.
Do not point out our collective delusions. Judge
Others as we judge you. Laugh along with us.
Group-think is group strength. To be here is a privilege.

Try harder than us. Try-hards will be told
That they are running against the current of our culture.
Do not prick our bubble with awkward realities.
Be sensitive to the climate. Do not tell it how it is.

Kelly Murashige

Sunk-Cost Fallacy

You rap your knuckles on the wood, feeling ten inches tall. Your boss pulls the door open just enough for you to meet his steely gaze. You look away immediately, shame clawing at your throat. The age gap between you and your boss has always felt awkward. You're too young to relate to most of what he says but too old to feel like his daughter.

He has sons, you remember, one still in middle school. Your boss once asked you to decode some newfangled preteen slang, and you didn't know how to explain that the sixth grade is almost twenty years in the rearview mirror. Even when you were his son's age, you barely knew a thing, admitting to the girl with whom you shared a music stand in choir that you had never heard of Taylor Swift.

You step into his office and scan the room. For what, you're not quite sure.

"I'm sorry," you say, your voice so soft, you don't think he hears you.

"Thanks for stopping by," he says, running his thumb and his index finger along the gray hairs of his mustache. "Tell me what's on your mind."

You lick your lips, unnerved by the casual way in which he speaks. He makes it sound as though he's more your friend than he is your boss. Perhaps, in his mind, he is both equally. He's your friend. He's your boss. He's family. You can't escape. He may not be your stepdad, but he's still the dad that stepped up.

Your real dad is convinced your boss is a genius. *The next Zuckerberg*, he says. You've tried pointing out that this isn't a good thing, but he won't hear it.

You run through your boss's words again: *Tell me what's on your mind*. It sounds like something a therapist would say.

The other month, an employee at the company was placed on a 5150 hold. In response, all employees received a month of free counseling sessions.

Available, the email notification read, *as a handy-dandy app, now powered by the latest and greatest AI therapists!*

You wondered if it was possible for therapy to make you more depressed. You considered testing your theory by giving the app a try but ultimately decided not to give those bots a single thing.

“Is this about your PTO?” your boss asks.

You can’t help it; you wince.

At your most recent evaluation, your boss highlighted your ridiculously high amount of unused PTO. You admitted, sheepishly, that you were saving up, just in case. You smiled after you said it, as if you were joking.

You were not joking. Were not smiling. At least, not on the inside.

You kept waiting for him to ask, *In case of what?*

An emergency, you would have replied. As the product of a lifelong doomsday prepper and a woman with a day planner, you are nothing if not prepared.

Now, of course, you suspect the worst has already happened.

It wasn’t an atomic bomb. Not war, famine, or a tsunami. It wasn’t double-booking your Saturday with two friends of equal importance.

Instead, the worst started with your mother. The scans that revealed too much.

You remember how betrayed you felt. Her body carried you. It had let you down before already, releasing you after just six months and ruining your mother’s meticulous birth plans. Your parents once thought *that* was the worst thing.

You now know that it’s not.

The sound of your own name startles you out of your thoughts. When you look up, your boss tilts his head and asks, “Spacing out again?”

Resentment sparks in your chest. You do your best to keep your expression neutral.

You do not space out. If you ever seem distracted in meetings, it's because you're getting more work done. Unlike those who hold eye contact like they think it's their job, you alternate between taking down minutes, creating to-do lists, and doing all the real work.

You are an expert multitasker. You learned this from your mother. You learned most things from your mother. Your father loves you for it.

You are your mother's daughter, he said once.

What is a mother's daughter without a mother to emulate?

You clear your throat, and for a moment, it's as if you're back in middle school, as young as your boss's son. All those years ago, in the sixth grade, you and your classmates were tasked with writing and reciting persuasive essays.

You hated standing in that auditorium, your notecards in your hands. The microphone had been left too low, barely reaching your chin. You refrained from adjusting it, afraid of triggering that feedback whine you heard in every teen movie, and instead slouched so dramatically, you looked like an inverted *L*. By the time you staggered off the stage, your body ached and moaned. You felt like a lost stowaway, crammed into a stranger's suitcase.

Maybe that was your first *Alice in Wonderland* moment. Unlike Alice, you grew first, stretching high enough to scare away everyone in a ten-mile radius. You were soft but not dainty. Quiet but not small. You worried your soul did not fit your body.

You shrink now, slumping in the chair at your boss's desk. You've reverted to an *L* shape, though at least you're now upright.

You clear your throat again. "I know it's busy season, and it's been all hands on deck. It's just . . . my mom."

You pause at the absolute worst time.

"She's not dead," you rush to say, your cheeks filling with heat. "It's just—I mean, her birthday is next week. I thought it would be nice to take her out. If I could."

Your boss's expression softens. "Right. Your mom. How's she doing now?"

"She's fine," you say stiffly, as if reciting your thesis statement. "She's fine. She's good. She's doing well."

Restate it, and maybe this time, he'll believe you.

You have to laugh a little at your own incompetence.

Then, before you can feel the slightest hint of shame at laughing, you instead burst into tears.

"Sorry," you say. "Sorry. I don't know why I'm crying."

Really. *Why are you crying?* She's still here, isn't she? She's fine.

Except, of course, when she isn't. When she begins to shrink. You keep telling yourself you'll someday be big enough to hold her, but you're just fooling yourself. You never know what to do. You're as lost as Alice is. As underwater as the oysters. You're all of two minutes from getting gobbled up by the whiskered walrus.

"I'm sorry," your boss says. You want to believe he means it. "I know it's been hard for you. It's just . . . well, you're right. It *is* all hands on deck. If you took off, even for a day, it could throw off the whole schedule."

For the past six months, as long as your mother's body held you, the company has been working on an all-important project. The contract was hard-won. It's the biggest, most expensive project in which you've taken part. Your boss said if you do well enough, you might even get promoted.

He didn't lay it out that way. He merely hinted at it. He said, at your most recent evaluation, you might take on some new responsibilities.

That doesn't mean a promotion, your mother pointed out. *It sounds to me like he's just trying to give you more work.*

Good, your father said. *That way, you can show him how capable you are.*

What if you're not capable, though? What if you're barely staying afloat?

“I hope you understand,” your boss continues. “I’m afraid work this important can’t wait.”

Right. Of course, you want to say. And sickness surely can. Sickness gives you as much time as you need. Sickness waits for all men.

You run your tongue along your lips. You wear lipstick every day. It tastes like fish and grown-up sadness. You’re tired of it all.

“It’s busy season,” he continues, repeatedly shooting you in the head with the same bullet point.

“It’s always busy season now,” you say. “It’s not always my mom’s birthday.”

“I understand that,” he begins, “but—”

“I’m taking the day off.”

He pulls back, his ocean eyes widening. It takes all your self-control not to mirror him. The voice that left your mouth was larger than the both of you. It filled his office space.

“I’m sorry,” you say, though you’re not. “I need the time off.”

He studies you for a moment, faint lines etched between his brows.

“In your interview,” he says slowly, “You called yourself a team player.”

“I am,” you say. “I just . . . need a break.”

For the next few seconds, your boss says nothing, his expression unreadable. You could create a hundred spreadsheets, could run a thousand analyses, and still not know what’s on his mind. Is he thinking of firing you? Determining sunk-cost fallacy?

You decide you don’t care anymore. If he fires you, so be it. You’ll spend your extra days with your mother, holding tea parties like you’re still young. You’ll underbake cookies from a refrigerated roll, clink plastic cups of guava juice. You’ll speak in awful, potentially offensive British accents and call your father over for crumpets and scones.

Is bread okay? he will ask you both.

You’ll reply, *That’ll do.*

“Okay,” your boss says to you now. “Just know I’m disappointed.”

That’s fine. You’re not. You’re proud of yourself. Your mother will be too.

Your eyes flick to the black-framed pictures on your boss’s mahogany desk. You wonder how much time he spends with his children. If, when he hears them laughing and splashing around in the pool just outside his window, he ever considers logging off and cannonballing his way back into their lives.

You should do that, you think. Take your mother swimming. When did you last go to the beach? You’re not the biggest fan of the sand, but your mother has always loved the way it feels to drift along the water.

“Thank you,” you say, standing. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

He’ll be here. You know it. This whole ship could go down, and he would still be at the wheel, thinking the whole world is going under just because he is.

You lift your head, already imagining the way the sun will feel on your face. The sigh that slips out from between your boss’s lips reminds you of the wash of waves on the sand.

You break into a grin. You can’t wait to tell your mother where you’re taking her for her birthday.

You leave your boss’s office and feel yourself begin to float.

Jenna Jaco

Why You Typed That on Microsoft Teams

[08:17] because you're friendly

[16:32] because I look like her her her or her

[12:01] because you don't know what to do with me

[12:03] because & you want to find out

[09:32] because my face emotes so good

[10:54] because I repeat you back to you

[17:50] because what else are you supposed to do all day?

[08:42] because you could have sworn you've seen me wear shorts

[15:36] because my teeth are very white very nice

[15:36] because has anyone ever told you that

[16:00] because everyone is just so mean lately

[07:33] because I animated-heart-reacted in the meeting

[07:43] because I have vocal fry

[22:18] because you can't say anything anymore

[22:18] because you never thought it'd be like this

[22:18] because it's not cheating if I'm not a woman

[22:19] because I made you feel special

[22:19] because I made you

[22:19] because you could make me

[22:19] because you could make me real

Susan L. Lin

*I Don't Know How to Talk About
Grooming, So I Write a Letter to My Dead
Twin Sister About the Indispensable
Pleasure of My 18th Birthday*

after Asa Drake

Sunlight fills our old house. I imagine you in the bedroom we used to share, jumping on the bed in your striped pajamas. Last night, I stood in the street and gazed at the darkened window up above, heart heavy with the reason we no longer live inside.

I dread the day I will look like our mother, but I know that day is as inevitable as the looming future of reproductive cloning or artificial intelligence. Remember how the cast and crew of our first (and last) TV show always said our features were like miniature echoes of hers?

I am a legal adult now, old enough to make my own decisions about all kinds of things. But I still wore a birthday crown at my party and blew out the candles like we did when we were kids. Except, for the fifth year in a row, you weren't standing there beside me.

After your death, every time she looked at me, I'm almost certain she saw you. I'm almost certain because every time I looked in the mirror, I saw you, too.

All I want is to know dreams without adults who linger in the shadows; puppeteers pulling our strings. I don't have to ask our mother what she dreams. She dreams the lamp in our bedroom still shines. She lives in a place where the bulb will never go out.

In *my* dreams, though, she can't find our earliest headshots. Like all things I don't want to remember, I've hidden them somewhere they'll never be found.

Emma Stead

Double

Diane always left voicemails. She wouldn't text, wouldn't email, always rang, and always spoke to the void when no one answered. And the voicemails were always the same: vague, slightly aggrieved, with an edge in her voice that suggested she was doing you a favour by calling at all. Meg had a folder on her phone labelled "save in case" with eleven of them in it. Evidence. That was what her friend Clara called them. You're building your case, Clara said and laughed, and Meg had laughed too, but only one of them was joking.

She pressed play anyway, because she was waiting for the kettle and had nothing else to do with her hands.

"Meg. It's Diane. I've got the Harlow project landing back on my desk—don't ask, it's a whole thing—and they're specifically requesting you. I know you're flat out, but I'm sure we can make it work. Give me a call."

She listened to it a second time. Then she put her phone face-down on the counter and made her tea.

* * *

It had started, as these things always did, with something that looked like an opportunity.

Diane ran a small editorial consultancy out of what she called an office and what was, by all accounts, a very large spare bedroom. She had real ones, paying clients, and she had a talent for landing them that outstripped her talent for keeping them, or for keeping the people who did the actual work. Meg had come aboard as a freelancer four years ago, brought in on a

recommendation, and was told she'd be doing developmental editing and some ghostwriting. The pay was low, but Diane had framed it as an investment. "You're getting in early," she'd said with the air of someone offering a seat on a rocket ship. "I look after my people."

Meg had believed her, because she was twenty-six and wanted to believe her, and because Diane was magnetic in a way that certain disasters are magnetic—the scale of them, the confidence of the wreckage.

The work was good. That was the thing that kept her. The work itself was genuinely good, with interesting projects, writers who needed real help, and problems she was actually equipped to solve. She was skilled at this. She knew it, the clients knew it, and Diane knew it, which was perhaps why Diane had never once said it out loud.

What Diane said, instead, and with increasing frequency, was, "I'm not sure this is worth what I'm paying you."

She said it in emails. She said it in calls. Once, she said it to the whole team in a group message that arrived on a Sunday morning like a small explosive device: "I've been reviewing the financials, and I want to be transparent. I think we're in a position where my outgoings don't reflect the quality of what's coming in."

That was the phrasing. Not: you aren't working hard enough. Not: the work is poor. Just the insinuation, elegant and airless, that their labour and her money were somehow misaligned, and that the misalignment was theirs to fix.

Clara, who also worked for Diane, sent Meg a voice note immediately after: *I've been up for four minutes, and I've already been called a thief. New record.*

They laughed. They laughed because the alternative was too exhausting and because they had the audacity to need food and shelter on a monthly basis.

* * *

The money started arriving late in September.

Not by days. By weeks. Invoices submitted, acknowledged, ignored. Meg chased the first one politely with a friendly nudge, a just-checking-in message, and received a reply about cash flow that explained nothing and apologised for less. She chased the second one less politely. By the third, she had talked to Clara and to the others, and they had, between them, built something that felt embarrassingly like solidarity, because it was embarrassing to need it, embarrassing to be here at all, and then it stopped being embarrassing and became simply the situation.

They sent Diane an email together. It was professionally worded and said, in essence: going forward, work will be invoiced in advance and payment required before delivery. It said this was nonnegotiable. It said they valued the working relationship, and they hope to continue it under a new relationship.

Diane rang Meg directly, not the group. Her voice was very controlled, the way it got when she was deciding between two modes of attack.

“I just want you to know,” she said, “that I find this very hurtful.”

“I understand,” Meg said, which was not the same as agreeing.

“I’ve invested in all of you. The opportunities I’ve given you—”

“Diane.” Meg kept her voice level. “We just need to be paid on time.”

There was a pause that lasted longer than pauses should.

“Fine,” Diane said. “Fine.”

Then there was simply no work. For two months, nothing. The pipeline had dried up, Diane said. Existing clients not commissioning, new ones taking their time. She sent occasional updates that may as well have been weather reports. They were informational and blameless, as though the drought were something happening to them both rather than a consequence of anything in particular. Meg filled the gap. That was what you did when you freelanced: you were always filling the gap.

* * *

The interview was in a glass building near the river, and Meg arrived eleven minutes early and spent eight of them sitting on a low wall outside, telling herself she was not nervous.

She was a little nervous.

The role was senior editor at a midsize publisher, in-house, salaried, with what the listing called a competitive package and what turned out, when they named the number, to actually be competitive. She had prepared for this with the thoroughness she brought to everything: researched the company, read their recent titles, and made copious notes. She knew what she wanted to say.

What she had not prepared for was how easy it would be to say it.

When the hiring director asked about salary expectations, Meg said the number she had decided on, and she said it without softening it or hedging it or performing uncertainty she didn't feel. She said it the way she would state any other fact. And when they asked about hours, she said those too, and when they asked what she'd need to make the role work, she told them plainly, and not once in the whole conversation did she feel that she was asking for something she shouldn't have.

They said yes. All of it.

Walking out afterwards, she stood on the low wall for a moment and looked at the river and thought, with a sudden clarity that had been missing these past years: *I was always worth this.*

* * *

She met Diane for coffee two weeks later, at Diane's suggestion, at a place Diane had chosen. Diane arrived four minutes late and immediately began talking about a new podcast opportunity that had emerged, she said, from networking at a personal development event last month.

Meg let her talk. She had learned, over four years, that Diane's monologues were like a tidal pattern, and that if you waited it out, there was usually a point at which you could speak. She watched her over the rim of her cup: the wide gestures, the brightness in her eyes that Meg had once found energising and now recognised as the energy of someone who has never once had to be still.

When the moment came, Meg said, "I'm moving into a full-time role. I wanted to tell you in person." She paused and watched a frown crease Diane's brow. "I'm winding down the freelance work. That is, I'll be adjusting the level of my contributions so they're no longer leveraged to advance the mission and vision of an external firm."

Diane's face moved in a way Meg couldn't entirely read. "Which company?"

Meg told her.

"That's wonderful," Diane said in a tone that meant she was deciding whether it was.

"I wanted to say thank you," Meg said. "The work gave me a lot." She meant it. She had learned things from those years about editing, about different kinds of clients, but most importantly, about what she would and wouldn't accept. They were useful lessons. They had cost her something to learn, but she'd learned them.

Diane was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "The Harlow project is coming back. The client is specifically asking for you."

"I won't have the capacity," Meg said.

"I could make it worth your while."

"I can't commit to something new right now."

"Double your usual rate."

Meg looked at her.

Double. Her usual rate, which Diane had described not three months ago as “outgoings that didn’t reflect the quality of what was coming in.” Her usual rate, which was already below what the market would have paid. Double that. Which meant that all this time, without realising it, she had apparently been half of what she really was.

Meg picked up her coffee. She drank the last of it, and she set the cup down, and she said, “Good luck with it, Diane. I mean that.”

She said goodbye on the pavement, walked to the bus stop, sat on the top deck, and watched the city move past the window. Her hands were completely steady.

Sitting on the top deck, Meg watched the road unfolding below her and the city beyond. Her phone vibrated in her lap with a call from Diane, who could not let anything end without having the last word. She tilted the screen toward her and watched her name pulse once, twice. The bus shuddered over a pothole, but Meg barely felt it. She brought up the menu with a single, unhurried tap and pressed Block.

She sat back, watching the city, and didn’t think about it again.

Christian Hanz Lozada

*Three Thousand, Nine Hundred,
Thirty Hours on Repeat*

It's been seven years since
Brown Dad's heart attack,
six years, eleven months, three weeks
since he retired from the VA,
six years and eleven months even
since he told the nursing registry
to stop calling like bill collectors
assuming everyone in the house
shared the same language
because we share the same name
or like an enabler who knows
you have a problem but gets kicks
from pulling your ankle as you drown.

It's been twelve seasons
of *Two and a Half Men*, that's
two hundred sixty two
episodes that Brown Dad recaps
for you every time you come home
because he never bothered to learn

one damned thing you'd be interested in
or one damned thing he could enjoy
unless it promised to make him a buck
or feel like he had something over
you or his siblings. That's
three thousand nine hundred thirty
hours on repeat to help him memorize
masculinity. And still, if you go to his
closet and open it, you will see
a nine to one ratio of nurse's scrubs
to shirts as if tomorrow, he'll be ready
to serve and earn.

Sean Patrick Mulroy

Dying Vicariously Through Your Parents

Wistful and disconsolate as a giraffe that's slowly dying at the zoo, my father looks at me. Inside him, there are animals that don't fit anywhere, that don't wear clothes, and won't survive the winter. If I know he is declining, he must know it too. I wonder what that's like, to know it's almost over, all of it: the living world in which he moves with less and less velocity, the wilderness of joy and prayer and sex and grief and music, children, TV dinners, mixed recycling, newspapers and shopping malls and phones. The few times in my life I felt like I was going to die, and soon—from sadness, mostly, by my own sad hands—there was a peace, there. Rainfall landing on a burning zeppelin, slowly making its descent. I hope there's peace like that for him, now, though in conversation with a friend just yesterday, I asked: *Does anybody actually just love their father?* and I asked this without irony. Irony, like love, exists in every place between men and their fathers, even and especially inside our deepest wounds and holiest of grudges. Dad tells me he loves me all the time now, and this is a rain all by itself. It touches places that were dead within us, and they are made green again. The secret to good dirt is rot. What grows, grows best in close proximity to death. Each time I think of him—my father—
something blooms.

Sean Patrick Mulroy

Travis, Who Has Left His Wife,

sits on the couch beside me, naked in his clothes. We're drinking one last beer at dawn. The other boys have all gone off to bed, and it is quiet, now. He says, *I thought I'd go back to my old life*, and at this, a small part of his lip twists. *But I miss my son*. The word is difficult and bound, a small fist always gripping him. The night we met, which he does not remember, we were at a friend's show in a small nightclub, and he was sickly skinny, still a junkie, still a junkyard mutt. He slapped his money on the table with a doglike swagger, princely bastard, wolf of needles, little god of stone-thrown windows—Travis. Strange, how fierce a man can be when he has nothing. He lives here now; an old industrial garage that he converted into an apartment on the wrong side of MacArthur. He burns through each day like cheap tobacco, teasing art and furniture from trash left on the street. A couple hours ago, when I first dropped my bags, he pointed out the chandelier above us, his first welding project. Amber showering of glass, a brittle star, he made entirely of crack pipes which he fished out of the gutter, one by one, and fused together with a torch. It's glowing, soft, ice delicate and begging to be touched. It's beautiful, the way that only something dangerous is beautiful, once it's been broken.

Daniel Altenburg

Public- Access/Excess/Cesspool

Who the fuck used this bathroom before me?
I can admit
for every toilet bowl I've stood before, I've wiped the seat.
Only noticed the door handle was slick until after I let go.
Little
in the trash except a balled Kleenex blooming
and a folded pad, warm floral Playtex wrapping
like excitement or is it Always
like care or the consideration
of femininity:
Women must like flowers, right, what is your favorite flower
so I know which to purchase
to every girlfriend I've had.
Can I admit that
for each woman I've loved, I've wondered about their menstruation,
time

the cross-sections of toilets in Lowe's Home Depot Ace
Harbor Freight Fleet Farm Farm and Fleet that depict shit
and paper products with metaphors like pool balls,
Kohler's opaque blocks
with style lines, American
Standard now
in heathery eggshell.

My last phone search wasn't about that, I can admit that now,
but "palate vs palette" and misspelled.
It admits, AI,
I forgot about the wood meaning,

amazing,

to unrecall the past like that, the pallet jack of summer jobs,
the slide of a metal tongue beneath a rough-cut pine plank.

This is about abortion
of meaning from object, memory from the saw dust smell
in Menards, the name from the pun on my nuts,
liquid
on the public bathroom floor from source
or wonderment. Do you remember
the iPad launch, the jokes about sanitary napkins
then not?

Let it sink in.

Rachel Barber

Presence

In the early months of COVID, our direct service staff traded shifts. One to two days at home for shelter caseworkers—kitchen tables with swirling stains, the repetitive burble of homemade coffee—and the rest of the week on site. All day, every day in-person for front, frontline coordinators, our lowest paid positions.

How to describe the mixture of unease and surety that trembled our shelter counters, our checkerboard of open and closed office doors? The front desk, with its daily grind of clicking screens, marked beds, noted client requests—there at the front desk we heard hooting and howling continue in those early days. We heard the keen words of resident jokes each night and morning, alongside the deepest confessions, the type of secrets people lay in the earth and shovel over, untouched for decades. Sometimes entire lives. People remove pieces of themselves when they walk past the waving metal wands, or when they gather up grocery bags of belongings. Some of these hidden stories surface in caseworker conversations or front desk talk, a little self spilled down corridors and into ears where a person suspects it will never be heard again.

We knew what proximity was, as frontline staff. We knew what it meant to be there.

Upper management had abandoned the building, offices empty but for paper files and dark desktop screens. But their offices were already far away from our unhoused residents, beyond skeletal shelter bedframes, beyond concrete floors, beyond barricades of thick, weighty, rust-red doors. Management worked in the back of the building, closest to the cars and the parking lot, in the only spaces that were carpeted, and in the only offices with windows. As COVID began to shudder in our residents' and co-workers' lungs, upper management's office

doors also shuttered. Natural light, rare and beautiful in the shelter world, whirled through clear windows into abandoned spaces.

Out of the void came emails telling us and our residents what to do: *Make sure all residents wash their hands. Make sure everyone takes their temperature. Round up and sequester all COVID-infected residents. Make sure you wear a mask while you're rounding up and sequestering all COVID-infected residents.*

And we did, although the masks were sometimes as loose as the boundaries we tried to hold.

Some of us cupped our hands and called: *Wash your hands as you come in or Please wear masks*, while we received dotted and lined and italicized directives from an upper echelon netherworld. Other hands tore loose scraps from the spinning roll of towels or pumped large clumps of soap or hand sanitizer on outstretched hands and fingers. Other legs paced the mobile wash basins by the front doors, ready for questions, comments, complaints. Words echoed with a resonance beyond the news channels so many watched religiously in those days. Calls and guidelines, complements and wise cracks. We failed in social distancing—we were always bad at distancing. A truly frontline problem. Bodies circled the countertops, traded off keyboards, swapped raised chairs and stools. Leaned in to hear the elderly, low-toned gentleman or the standoffish, first-time homeless youth.

We were accustomed to the ebb and flow of stories, as bursting and bright as campfire snaps, regardless of the current crises (and there were constant current crises, long before the pandemic). Laughter and empathetic *Hmmms* persisted, echoing on plaster walls and closed, scarlet doors. Voices elevated, occasionally, by the lack of supervision.

Hierarchical leaders disappear during crises. The people who know the number of every bed, the space of every mat, the name of every resident remain, their voices amplified by the times like the blare of plastic megaphones. We were always aware—especially during crises—that leaders are made by the presence they make.

It mattered when coworkers sat at the computer console along the backside of the desk, checking in with clients over income changes, perpetually moving court dates, and indefinitely suspended medical hearings—it mattered that staff could say, early, *I've had that nasal test. It sucks. Or It's uckie, I know, but we have to do it. Got to keep each other safe.* It mattered, in a world preoccupied with distance, that we could demonstrate how present a person could be. To our clients. To each other.

Although our names and faces shifted, we lived through a binding in those early days, and even before, in those walls where the boundaries between people evaporate in the strangest ways, where home reshapes itself according to the people who people it. Perhaps we lived the type of trauma bond we warn our clients about. But when we showed up, however long we could show up, it mattered.

There are rare occasions when we better our world through distance. But for people who work on the frontlines of homelessness, separation is a messy and untrue thing. We've never known how to make homes through distance.

Jeffrey Hecker

Love Letter to Ellison Onizuka (1986)

Shoji, your middle name, means Heal, Peace, Proper, Happiness.

My forward separation rocket, primary and three principal parachutes fail you.

Everybody so rushed to propel North, nobody recalls South Yemen Civil War beginning.

I cannot speak of solid rocket booster. My factory and field joints and reusable outer casing

fail you. You once ask Christa McAuliffe who she is, as a joke.

My flotation systems and electronics and pyrotechnic ignitor fail you.

You stub out lit cigarettes left behind by reckless Boy Scouts of America.

My propellant, hydrogen, elevons, and my aft skirt fail you.

You should ride an aluminum canoe off Multnomah Falls instead of me.

My insulation, antivortex siphon, and rear separation fail you.

You watch a hawthorn leaf glide, like it better than my ass. My vertical tail fails you.

You impersonate every actor in *St. Elmo's Fire* but Mare Winningham.

You almost have Mare too. My body flap, orbiter, orbital maneuvering, air brakes, rudder, nose reaction control fail you. Companies make toys of me and I cannot break

the ozone layer. My star tracker, cargo bay doors, and crew access hatch fail you.

You listen to *Tears for Fears* through earmuffs built around headphones.

My payload, delta wing, remote manipulator, safety valve for liquid oxygen tank fail you.

Satellite *Echo 2* burned back to earth on June 7th, 1969, but you were getting married.

Hassan A. Usman

In my next life I want to be a Nigerian

living in another country.

Someplace certain in its utopia,

a veritable Eden on earth.

My present life is rot

and other catastrophes.

Feed the beast and hope it spares you.

No one really walks around here

with their noses open, the air

is a fine mist of death.

Our leaders' palms are not yellow trumpets—

they touch my heart with dark smoke,

tell me to smile.

My local government's Chairman

lives abroad, perhaps I will

do the same in another lifetime.

And what is there to stay for?

Bad roads, terrorists, corruption,

Nigerian men gathering online, applauding rape,

we can all run away till there is
no country left. The map,
failing to remember my name.
The anthem, humming itself
in mourning.

In that new homeland,
I am not thinking whether my brother
will return from a protest
with wounds that mean something
or as a bullet's kind gesture,
how deep my sister's body rests
in a story no one tells.

Thereafter, our family is rich—
that past life of rationed joy,
an everyday apocalypse,
unfolds into continuous festivity.

I will be a happy poet
writing happy poems;
how fortuitous, how un-Nigerian of me.

Ishani Ray

Making Do

In my fifth-floor walk-up,
the gas stove coughs and protests—
like it's haunted, or just
as tired as I am.
It takes a flick,
then a prayer,
then some curses I've inherited
from both my mother tongue
and the one I bought in student loans.

I sound like a menace
to the quiet neighbors,
but it's not rage, just
a daily negotiation,
one more task
refusing to go gently.

The fridge whirs uselessly—
it couldn't keep a secret cold
let alone a week's worth of leftovers from spoiling
like old dreams.

The sink—
some ancient, rusted monument—
croons when I scrub it too hard,
like my own throat
after too many hours
of swallowing my own tongue
in rooms where I shouldn't speak.

The bed is mine,
barely.
A Craigslist corpse,
a mattress I dragged up solo,
one stair at a time—
lumps and all,
I know it's every complaint.
The carpet is stained—
cigarette burns,
spilled wine,
the remains of tenants past
who maybe also
were trying to prove
they belonged.

My landlady peers at me
like I'm a bruise
she doesn't remember getting.

She coos,
“You’re so brave,
living here alone.”
As if bravery
wasn’t a daily tax I pay
for waking up in this city.

She smiles with the sympathy
of a predator full of steak—
tells me I should be
grateful
to have this space,
this leaking ceiling,
these crooked floors.
Says I could be out on the street,
as if the street isn’t
already licking its chops
waiting for me
to stumble.

She could raise the rent,
toss my name from the lease
like a mispronounced word.

So, I stay quiet.
Because protesting, like heat,

is luxury
I can't afford
on an income cobbled from
research gigs
and food pantries
and every second job
that doesn't ask
too many questions.

Abigail Ray

Will there be streaming in the end times?

Hunker down with me in a bed of plush pillows. We'll tell the others they're goose feathers, but really it's from all the hair off your Great Pyrenees. She sheds more everyday. We have Bush's Baked Beans and chickpeas. We have a lifetime's supply of sriracha hidden away in a drawer in the pantry, to stave off the blandness from the canned food.

Can we grow a garden down here? What if we install Blue Raven solar panels on the roof, so we can watch the mushroom clouds blot out the sun on our Ring camera. The air is unbreathable and—look! I think I just saw a rocket ship fly by. Full of billionaires who are fucking off to Mars, anywhere that will take them. When the aliens come up out of the ocean do you think they'll let us live? I didn't cause this—I had to drive a 35 minute commute to work everyday but I didn't frack, didn't drill for oil, I was only getting by. If I lived in a more walkable city I would have ridden a bike, swear to God. I am practicing my speech already, I am rehearsing my woes in the mirror.

The lead-infused brains of the boomers, crystallized in cocoons of microplastics and AI slop, finally got all those “rights” they were talking about. Can you hand me the remote? It's there between the Stanley Cup and the revolver. We can watch *The Sopranos*, like we always talked about but never did. *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, or maybe just *Love is Blind*, *Married At First Sight*, even *Love Island*. I can make popcorn by placing the kernels in a sunbeam—the radiation gives them a slow sizzle. We might get cancer but what's a little tumor in the face of armageddon?

Was it worth it do you think—to create a program that does something humans would have done on their own if they had the time to function, to breathe? When the crops started failing and the reservoirs began drying up, did it feel good funding something that was science fiction brought to life, but not in the way we wanted? AI that didn't help humans but drained us of our resources. That wasn't what did us in though, it was more everything else happening but all at the same time. Earthquakes, melting glaciers, you know, the climate catastrophe and such.

When the Cybertrucks sit derelict in some field, a neon sign flickering absentmindedly above them, do you think that coveted *Blade Runner 2049* aesthetic will finally be realized? No, don't turn on anything post-apocalyptic, please. It's a little too topical for my taste. If we get bored of TV we can always turn to reading, that ancient pastime. My copy of *Parable of the Sower* is laying haphazardly on the metallic coffee table, next to the misoprostol. If we fall in love as the world is ending, in the palm of dystopia, do you think that makes our romance extra legendary? I will make a garden bed out of barren soil, grow peaches with two pits and apples that blink at you when you go to pick them. *Ted Lasso* is on, quick, put on your 3D glasses so it feels more immersive.

Rhys Anderson

A portrait of the Roomba as a young anarchist

(For legal reasons, this is a satirical poem)

I'm thinking of buying a Roomba—

but that's not what this is about. This poem is about coming home, and chickens.

This poem will acknowledge

the labour of the UK suffrage movement.

It will recognize that white Pankhurst's fought for their
right to vote,

while black, poor, and immigrant women fought

for their right to survive— women like Kitty Marion

and her group, who set fire to a racecourse

and were arrested.

This poem will recognise that Kitty's group, refused to eat

and were force-fed,

with emphasis on force.

Kitty herself, was force-fed

two hundred and thirty-two times.

This poem will understand that silent

revolutions

are ineffective.

Mary Maloney followed Churchill,
carrying a large bell for a week, ringing it every time he tried to speak. One time,
seeing a gathering full of women,
Churchill turned and retreated to his car planning to deliver his speech from inside.
But Mary Maloney marched up to him, shook her
fist, and shouted
“Who is the strongest? —An Irish woman or Mr. Winston Churchill?” Then she rang
her bell.

This poem will recall Audre Lorde’s words:

The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house.

This poem knows violence is not the answer,
but violence is a tool
that makes the established order question their
safety.

The rich have forgotten to be afraid of the workers.

We will remind them.

The flame of the suffrage movement burned bright, one night,
when women coordinated the arson of empty properties owned by the
wealthy.

Remember, remember,
these women burned five mansions
and two warehouses in the same hour. Allegedly.

It is a fact that the UK suffragettes invented the letter bomb.

This poem would be liable if it were to suggest playing to the egos of the powerful.

It would be considered legally reckless
even to say that with a handful of us we could create a fake
award ceremony
and declare specific people as the winners of
all the awards.
getting it sponsored
and have the elite show up to present each other with fake awards.
It worked on Katie Hopkins.

Imagine a Gala so alluring, they'd leave their homes for the night

and an empty house is, after all, a clear
conscience.

It would be very illegal
for this poem to say that certain products are highly flammable,
and difficult to trace.

It would be unbelievably irresponsible for this poem to suggest
a combination of _____ and _____ .
So, this poem most definitely will not state that
coordinated property damage,

that costs no lives,
is maybe the only way to make the established order
question their role in the eroded rights of all
classes, creeds, and races.

Did you know that companies have been stealing the data from Roombas
which they used to digitally blueprint the user's house?

You might not know that Jeff Bezos owns nine houses

And, as the new owner of Roomba, it is very unlikely he doesn't use a
Roomba

This poem would not suggest
that Roombas can be reprogrammed—to
carry flammable materials. It would be irresponsible
for this poem to suggest burning down Jeff Bezos' house by way of a
Roomba-borne inferno.

This poem will not suggest
that climate is a candle lit at both ends and in a frying pan, in a microwave.
Or that we have no finger on the button of the 100 companies
that contribute 70% of global pollution.

That we are choking on smoke,
that our bodies are oppressed with every breath, and every
moment in between.

That our homes are burning in South America, in Africa, in Australia, in
places the algorithm won't let us mention.

This poem will not say the longer we stay here, the more
danger we are in.

It will not say revolution is inevitable,

or that now is the time to put our bodies on the line.

For better or worse, we are all we get

Amazon is having a sale—on Roombas.

And the chickens are coming home to roost.

Franz Jørgen Neumann

The Sweetest Man in the World

We were in Walford's office, in what was once a Foot Locker. We were looking out at the call center in the indoor plaza, the Donor Retention section specifically, Lydia Raleigh's cubicle to be exact. Lydia was dialing a number with the eraser end of her pencil, her boisterous fog-like hair solidified at the back by a mango-colored jumbo clip. I felt a stirring.

"What am I going to do with you, Ms. Raleigh?" Walford said as he paced at his treadmill desk, hands at his waist, his suit jacket bunched in the back. Framed photos of Walford's wife and kids sat on the clear shelves where sneakers once perched.

"Look at Ms. Raleigh's last summary report, under Next Steps."

The report mentioned a Richard M—, a donor who had failed to make a contribution in the past fiscal year. Documenting our efforts to reactivate reluctant donors like Richard was one of Lydia's tasks. I skipped to the bottom, where Lydia had written *Christina to keep cultivating Dick*.

"And?" I said.

"Give me a break," Walford said.

I worked with Lydia and Christina in Donor Retention, and I knew that *Christina to keep cultivating Dick* was not a double entendre, nor an unsubtle reminder to Walford on Lydia's part that she had caught him in his car months back with his pants unzipped and Christina's lips, as Lydia put it, "superglued around Walford's ding-a-dong."

"Let's take a walk," Walford said, using his back to push open the Foot Locker's glass door.

We walked up the escalator to the mall's vacant second floor where it was easy to see the ring of scuffed flooring encircling the Donor Retention cubicles. "Christina to keep cultivating Dick," Walford said, clinking his wedding band against the metal lip of the glass railing. "Stay," he said to me. "I'm going to take a leak."

The call center below filled most of the Sears end of the plaza and added a pleasant reverberating murmur to the cathedral-like space. Over this baseline white noise came a distant cheer from the high school, over in the former Macy's on the other side of the enormous Christmas tree. It was early June, but it was always the holidays here, the season of the mall's demise. I would miss working here. The new PCB-free high school on the edge of town was almost finished. Once the kids were out for summer, the entire mall would be razed and all of us would move to another dirt-cheap lease location.

I wandered ahead until I was above the play area with the bears—a life-sized mother bear and two cubs done in chrome with red holiday ribbons sagging around their necks. I'd climbed on the bears when I was a kid and still felt affection for them. I wondered if they'd be auctioned off before the mall was torn down. I could picture buying them and one day putting them in a yard of my own.

Walford was taking a while—probably his IBS. I thought back to the car incident. I had been walking out to lunch when I saw Lydia race toward Walford's car and open his door. Christina sprinted from the passenger's side to her own car and drove off. Lydia turned and marched toward me saying, "I was just trying to help! I thought he was choking on his lunch!"

It was only the second time I'd seen Lydia flustered, the first being the same morning as the car incident, when the city police poured from the former Sears in battle gear, a phalanx behind Kevlar shields practicing their school shooter response readiness with flashbangs and tear gas. It would have been nice if they'd told us about the training exercise, or had at least checked whether this end of the mall was abandoned. New Business made fun of Retention for hiding under our desks. They teased Morris, the French guy, for taking off like a shot when he

mistook the police for INS. I nearly bought Walford's explanation that the car incident later that day was a *carpe diem* reaction to the stress of experiencing the botched police exercise.

"The real question is, what am I going to do about *you*?" Walford said, coming up behind me. "Whose team are you on, Jayjay?" He kept walking.

"I never took you for a GILF guy," Walford said when I caught up to him.

"Lydia's not a grandmother," I said. "She never even had kids."

"She's got schemes, though. Plenty of little schemes."

We continued fast-walking along the mall's interior perimeter in silence. There was nothing nefarious about Lydia. She was kind and supportive. She said I had a calm and inviting voice tailor-made for Donor Retention, and that my name was like the name of a hero in a romance novel. We were all like that in Retention, even Morris, even Christina—when her cubicle was still near ours. We were a team full of praise and encouragement for one another.

Lydia was from West Virginia and still sounded like it. She was widowed a few years back after twenty-nine years of marriage. She loved to bicycle. She had a ten-year-old car that she kept in her garage for shopping runs, only six-thousand miles on the odometer. She devoured romance novels and poetry, especially the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which she copied out in calligraphy and pinned to her cubicle walls. She was thirty-some years older than me—but what did Walford mean by me being a GILF guy? Did he *know* what was going on?

When Lydia invited me to her place for dinner that first time, I was thinking of a free meal. The living room held bookshelves packed with romance novels. There was also a sewing table and a cat's climbing tower. She told me that Millie Mittens died of feline leukemia a week after her husband passed away. Presumably from something else.

Lydia showed me her late husband's miniature steam-powered engine on the mantelpiece, which she insisted I'd enjoy firing up. I took it down and placed it on the dining room table.

“There hasn’t been a man in my house since my husband passed on,” she said from the kitchen. “Except for the plumber, of course. Please know how much I appreciate your propriety. You’re always such a gentleman.”

Lydia kept mentioning this propriety of mine over dinner, and insisted on cleaning up afterwards without my help. While she was in the kitchen, I managed to get the miniature steam engine running. Lydia brought out two bowls and a pint of premium ice cream and stood beside me, carving out a scoop. I got the little steam whistle to let out a shrill cry.

“Oh, don’t,” she said.

The wail was a reminder of her loss. Her hands began trembling, then her arms. Her head joined in and began shaking back and forth.

“Oh, hell,” she said, and plopped herself sideways onto my lap, the ice cream scooper hitting the floor.

She kissed my face all over, the great curling wisps of her foggy hair enveloping us both. There was a newness to resting my hands on someone I worked with but had never touched. She smelled quite pleasant up close. Her lips slowed and found mine. I appreciated Lydia’s bravery in putting herself out there. This was the same week as the incident with the police and with Walford at the car, and passions were still running high.

Now, months later, Walford and I were passing the mall’s empty food court.

“Okay. Here’s what I want you to do,” Walford said. “Get Ms. Raleigh to engage in something inappropriate with you that the security cameras can catch.”

I thought of the time Lydia and I had made out in the empty self-help section of the Barnes & Noble upstairs and—until I couldn’t stop sneezing—in the back room of the former Body Shop.

“You’re trying to fire Lydia?” I said.

“No, no. She’s our best caller. But this will neutralize her. No more of this *cultivating Dick* bullshit. I’ll stay quiet about what the cameras catch, she’ll stay quiet about Christina. I

can't have loose ends out there. Debbie has me planning our re-commitment ceremony. Over a hundred guests are coming, even the pastor who married us. Don't give me that look. Love and passion are two different beasts."

"Lydia isn't going to report the car thing," I said. "It's been months."

"Can't take that chance. She probably has a draft email ready to go. *See Something, Say Something*. It's right there on the computers' wallpaper," he said, which was true.

I was nearly having to jog to keep pace with Walford.

"Now, worse-case scenario, if she says something anyway, the company won't let me go. Not with my numbers. But they'd probably fire Christina, which would be a shame, and which would lead, I've been informed by Christina, to Mrs. Walford and the kids learning about certain things. So help me out. You owe me one, cub scout. I'm being pressed on all sides. Get Mrs. Raleigh on a security camera with her knickers down."

"Knickers?"

"Or knockers out. Pick your poison."

"I'll get fired."

"Nah. Don't face the camera . . . and wear a hat."

"Like, a sombrero?"

"You're not taking this seriously. Wait," he said, stopping. "Is Jayjay playing *hardball*? Fine. I can also authorize a \$300-a-month raise."

Friday after work I met Lydia at the new Barnes & Noble. We browsed, then split a slice of coffee cake in the café. I thought about Walford's ridiculous fear of Lydia and his attempt to enlist me in his protection scheme. And about how Walford thought I was playing hardball, detecting a sense of cunning in me that wasn't there, in much the same way Lydia believed I was a man of propriety. If Walford's paranoia was becoming a bit much, so was Lydia's contented familiarity.

Once, on a walk with her, I heard her compliment a cat in the same way she complimented me. Still, I wanted to believe that the things she said about me were true. I also wanted to believe that if I distanced myself she would close up, wilt, re-widow, as it were. I wasn't as good a person as she believed me to be.

I told Lydia about Walford's fear of her as we sat in her hot tub after Barnes & Noble. She laughed and draped a steaming washcloth over her eyes. We were *au naturel*, as Lydia put it, a thing she'd never done with her late husband, whose last name you'd think was Godblesshim.

Lydia adjusted the hot tub down to a gentle purr. "Have I told you about how I used to go on bike rides to spy into other people's yards?"

I'd heard many—too many—bicycling stories from Lydia, but not this one. "I can't picture you as a snoop," I said.

"I was an impish young teen. I was hoping to see sunbathers or lovers kissing in the grass, but there was nothing at all. Until this one house. I was pedaling standing up so I could see over their hedge, and what I saw was a woman holding a shovel and standing beside a dark mound of dirt. A man's bloodless arm was hanging out of a big hole."

"Oh my," I said.

"Exactly, Jason. We react so similarly to everything. I was so startled that I rode straight through their hedge, cutting up my face and bending my bicycle's handlebars. Still have a scar to this day."

She pointed at her nose, but I knew better than to get close to her this early in the evening. I enjoyed her hot tub and wanted to linger.

"The woman helped me up and led me toward their back porch. I felt like I was in a Hitchcock film. But then I saw that the arm in the hole was moving and was connected to a man who was crouched and working on a pipe fitting, sewage maybe. The smell was awful." Lydia laughed. "Here I'd imagined the woman was trying to bury a body. The man crawled out and

wiped his hands on his trousers. He took one look at my poor bike, then held the front wheel in place with his knees and straightened the handlebars in one motion. I remember that his fly was undone and that my front reflector sort of tucked inside there for a moment. His wife dabbed me with iodine and bandaged me up, then gave me a Dr. Pepper. When I got home, I used my mother's witch hazel to scrub my handlebars and my reflector and the spokes of the front wheel."

"All's well that ends well."

Lydia dragged the washcloth from her eyes. "Wait now, sweetie. I haven't come to the terrible part. The following year, guess who got it in the back of the head with a shovel."

"Your handlebar straightener."

She nodded. "I've wondered if my telling the woman what I thought I'd seen her do put the idea of murder into her head."

"You're not going to do me in with a shovel, are you?"

"Much worse," she said, turning up the jets.

I felt her toes inchworm up my shins. "What am I going to do with you?" I said.

"Oh Jason," she said, launching herself toward me through the hopping spray. "Don't you know by now? You can do absolutely anything you'd like."

It wasn't so much that she was imitating the dialogue in her romance novels, but more like her books matched how she perceived the world. She had the rosiest, most generous attitude I'd ever encountered in a person. There in the hot tub, I thought of Walford's offer of \$300 more a month and how it could put me in my own squalid apartment instead of renting a room in one; I couldn't spend all my time at Lydia's place. Sure, she'd be mortified to be caught on tape, but Walford wouldn't let it get out with his marriage at stake. One kiss was all it would take to break the company rule about fraternization.

I visited the security guys on Monday morning and checked out the bank of monitors. I noted how most of the cameras were trained on employees, including on my cubicle. There was only one camera outside the employee areas, on a highly trafficked side exit.

“No good,” I told Walford when I saw him next.

“\$350. \$400 tops.”

An additional \$400 a month not only meant my own apartment, but also the prospect of whittling down my credit card debt. I decided to try some hardball. “She wouldn’t do anything in any of the places the cameras are pointed. I wouldn’t either.”

* * *

I waited, but Walford didn’t make a higher offer. I’d learned two things from the security guards: that demolition on the mall would begin in sixty days and that Walford had been spotted with Christina in the next town over. They’d shown me the video.

“I saw a video of you and Christina at—”

“Goddamn it,” Walford said, halting in front of an empty Spencer’s. “Was that Ms. Raleigh at the park, behind that tree?”

The video the security guy showed me was taken in a Red Robin, not a park, but I said nothing. I enjoyed getting Walford worked up—another of my less-than-stellar traits. Maybe if Walford became desperate enough I could bump my raise up to penthouse level. But he still wasn’t upping his offer. I had never been the blackmailing type before, possibly because I’d never had anything to blackmail someone with. I barely did now.

“She’s a stalker,” Walford said, as we resumed walking. “I was picking up a prescription yesterday and she was already at the pharmacy, pretending to look at vitamin supplements.”

“If she was already there, how could she be following you?” I said. “Besides, she didn’t take the video.”

“Could you see my face?”

I didn't know what to say. We were talking about two different videos. The one in Red Robin, where Walford dripped BBQ sauce on his shirt and then spilled the glass of water he was dabbing his napkin into, and then this phantom video shot in a park, where he and Christina were doing whatever it was they'd done.

“You can't see a thing in the video,” I said. “There's nothing to worry about. Trust me.”

“Keep walking, Jayjay. We're done.”

I kept walking. Walford went back the way we'd come. I watched him pick up speed and break into a jog, the corners of his suit jacket flying up a little, the bottom of his shoes rising high enough that I could see the dark wear in the smooth, caramel-colored soles.

Walford was in a real hurry. IBS, I thought, but he didn't stop at the bathrooms. When I saw him pass his office in the Foot Locker, I felt, maybe for the first time in my life, a sense of foreboding. I ran.

Walford was shouting at Lydia when I reached Donor Retention. Papers flew from her cubicle as he riffled through her desk. Her monitor wobbled. The Elizabeth Barrett Browning poems push-pinned to her cubicle walls shook like feathers. People came over from their cubicles, some looking over the partitions and saying, “Whoa,” and “Hey now, Mr. Walford,” but doing nothing about his behavior. Walford looked like he was going to lunge for Lydia, but all he got his hands on was her hair clip. I had him in a choke hold.

I felt bad about the choke hold. I didn't want to be seen as the guy whose first reaction to a situation is violence. I'm Jason in Donor Retention. I'm kind and soft-spoken and patient. I coax the best out of people. I was muttering these things as Walford's prickly throat scraped my tender inner arm. Lydia was picking up the loose papers and saying nonsensical things like “If Mr. Walford rode a bicycle to work none of this would be happening,” and “Poor man. Marriage can be so everlastingly lonely.” The security guards took Walford away. No one said anything about my choke hold. Instead, I got a couple pats on the back. No one really liked Walford.

The next day, I came in expecting to be fired. Instead, I was told that Walford wouldn't be coming back. Lydia didn't return to work, either; she was given the rest of the week off.

"I'm fine, really," she said, when I visited her that evening. "I don't know why they insist I take time off. Did Mr. Walford really think I was going to say something about him and Christina? What two people do to each other is their business. You sleep in the mess you make. I was just trying to save his life that day at his car. You should have seen his face. I thought he was gagging on a piece of carrot or apple. If only he really had been choking on something."

"Christina probably was."

"Oh, Jason," she said.

It was the first time I'd disappointed Lydia, and I could feel her reaction inside me, a deep sudden sadness where that sense of foreboding had lodged itself before. Then she laughed a little.

"Poor Christina. Oh my."

Since she had the rest of the week off, Lydia proposed a little road trip. I called in sick the next day. I thought of the additional \$400 a month I wasn't going to be getting as we drove to the coast, and I realized Walford had probably made up the raise. We got a motel room a short drive from the beaches we planned to see in the morning, then we went out to dinner. When we came back to the room, a couple was having an argument next door. At some point it went real quiet next door, and then we heard them having sex, loudly. I couldn't take it and went out, crossing the street to a gas station to pick up snacks for the next day.

While I stood in the long line, an impeccably well-maintained Cadillac pulled up to a pump. An older guy climbed out, tall and trim, wearing a flat cap. A pair of aviator sunglasses hung in the crook of his yellow shirt. An attractive young woman slid from the passenger side and entered the mart. She picked out a bottle of champagne and stood in line behind me where I was holding two beach chairs and some snacks. I watched the old guy cleaning the front

windshield of his Cadillac, then the back, then spotting the woman and waving to her with a smile. There was grace in every move.

“Hope I’m like your grandfather when I get old,” I said to the woman, making conversation. “That guy’s got style.”

She looked at me and laughed. “He’s not *my* grandfather.” I was next in line, but she cut in front of me, then bumped her ass into me so hard that I stepped on the shoes of a big guy behind me. She glided to the open counter, paid, and was gone. The guy behind me hummed three times like he’d just tucked into a supremely satisfying meal.

Back at our motel, Lydia yelped as I opened the door, and she dropped a glass she’d been holding against the wall. It hit the carpet and landed upright. She blushed. I opened the bag of Hershey’s Kisses I’d bought and tossed one at the glass before she could reach for it. It hit the rim, giving off a quick, pleasant chime. She picked up the Kiss and unwrapped it.

Our neighbors were still at it next door, the headboard galloping. There was a lot of loud buzzing, and the woman was saying what sounded like “Oh Jibbyjibby, oh Jibbyjibby.” Her partner’s replies were pure caveman. We made a game out of seeing who could land the most foil-wrapped chocolates into the glass. She was the reds. I was the regular silvers. Lydia snorted at a particularly loud “Oh Jibbyjibby.” I emptied the glass and held it against the wall and motioned for Lydia. She pressed her ear to the end and laughed at whatever it was she could hear. She was that young woman again, peeking over hedges, spying on her neighbors’ hidden lives. Our foreheads touched and I was back in the fog of her hair, like that first time, and when I moved to kiss her, I was stopped by the sight of her tears.

I rose before dawn, my body still on a workweek schedule. Lydia was asleep and still undressed from our strangely emotional coupling the night before. She’d confessed to me afterwards that she’d had four brief affairs over the course of her marriage. They’d taken place in motels like this one, but our affair was the first honest one she’d ever had, and the longest by far. She told me how good that felt, deep down where it mattered, where you respected

yourself and others. She'd never told anyone about those four affairs, and although it was years ago, she just hated that those men were out there somewhere and could think of her whenever they wanted to, and in a way she didn't wish to be thought about by anyone, except me, if I chose to. I had never considered intimacy to have an afterlife that was out of your control. I had nothing deep like that to share, so I told her instead about how I was hoping to buy the chrome mother bear and bear cubs from the mall before demolition began.

"How wonderful!" she said. "Maybe you can get them donated to a playground."

I didn't mention that I wanted them for myself, in that future backyard of mine.

I dressed quietly in the near dark and grabbed her car keys. At some point last evening, Lydia had shaped the Kisses on the table into the outline of a heart. I stole downstairs with my duffle, climbed into Lydia's car, then drove, squinting at the sun as it rose off the sea, not sure where I should go or what to do, or who I was becoming.

I thought about the young woman in the mini-mart and wished we could compare notes. Was she happy? She seemed happy. Had she figured out her future? I thought about the dapper old guy and about all the mismatched people I knew, including the fighting/fucking couple in the motel, Walford and his wife, Lydia and her late husband, Lydia and her flings, even the couple she'd seen in a backyard a year before a murder. I thought about how I was now in a mismatched relationship, and I wondered whether this might actually mean that I was truly kind. Not empathetically kind, not kind with a trace of pity, but kind in the best sense of the word. I was someone who saw others as pure beings with whom I could meld my soul, no matter our differences. *Poetry* kind. If this wasn't true, then was I a loser, a sad saint, a mortar filling the cracks in others? A GILF lover? I hadn't thought of what we were doing as an affair. Who were we cheating? Ourselves? And the more I thought about that, the more I didn't like the word *affair* at all, especially its inherent quality of expiration.

When I pulled back into the motel's parking lot a couple of hours later, Lydia came downstairs with her little suitcase and the beach chairs. I expected my disappearance to have

made her cry, or worse—disappointed her. She didn't seem to have noticed. She was wearing her swimsuit under her blouse. She'd braided her hair and I could see sunscreen gilding the helix of one ear. I popped the trunk and placed the chairs and her suitcase inside, then pulled out the bouquet I'd picked up that morning and handed it to her.

“Honestly, Jason. If you aren't the sweetest man in the world.” She ran her finger down the length of my nose, then pressed the end of it. “Sometimes I wonder if you're real.” She buried her face in the bouquet, the short pale scar at the bridge of her nose lost in the blossoms.

She climbed into the passenger side and let me shut her door. I went around to the other side and started the car. I was there, I suppose, because she'd planted the idea in my head that I was better than I thought I was. I figured I could do worse than try and live up to the way she saw me, and to do so for as long as this thing we had might last—before my thinking about her would become a violation of this purer moment now, just two people driving to a beach on a workday, and whatever it was that we were going to do afterwards in the mess that we made.

Qudus Olowo

Sorry, I Didn't Call You Back

After Michael Emerald, inspired by Arah Ko.

sorry, i didn't call you back; i chose silence this time. my neighbour knocks at my door, she asks if i have leftover meals for her dying son. how can i tell her i'm dying of hunger too? the earth passed me by yesterday, it offered grief from its mouth, i shared it with my friend. sometimes, grief is a trademark of hope. the tiny rats in my room have betrayed me; they left me with my emptiness. i miss the music of their nightly squeaks. sorry, i didn't call you back; my father's ghost keeps haunting me in my nightmares, he wails heavily because i'm yet to become a man. my girl texted; she wants a breakup. i replied *okay*. my sorrow is too heavy to ask *why*. every *hello* from mother feels like a burden. i read the tears in her mouth anytime she asks when i am coming back home. sorry, i didn't call you back; i'm on the street again, scavenging for survival. i don't want to die with my name as a smoke, i want to die as an unforgettable line in every poem. if the world doesn't accept my offer, i'm scared i might live longer until i become a star in the clouds. sorry, i didn't call you back; my life is still on DND.

Clifton Gachagua

dead music

learning to ask nothing about time across oceans,
nothing about what's for dinner,
if the habits have returned like smoke back to fire,
to ask nothing about the seasons, what birdsong,
what migrations from eurasia to my bedroom,
the Martins and Warblers bring no letters from you,
to ask nothing about what new brand of cigarette,
nothing especially about what you're reading,
(not that i ever understood Deleuze or Derrida)
& on Sartre only his letters to simone give me comfort
(thank you for the book btw, xo).
nothing about what you're watching,
what school of cinema, why enjambements, why so many commas.
having said all this, i'm ready to get back to bed
with my seraphs, my sirens, Belial,
with the *it* that is always chasing me in dreams,
with dead music, calipso calipso calispo,
a view of the city through my window, the tower light blinking red,
i return especially to nothing, to no recollection of you,
to a fire that has not burned for millenia, to you.

Splendor Victor

God-like ignorance

Today I wear a smile with God-like ignorance. and you
confuse it for childlike innocence, this rainbow in my mouth

the world is burning, and the stench of prayers for rain curdles
with the faithless smoke. The day before, I squatted.

and communed with the broken walls
because I could not stand staring into a mirror & seeing

the spitting image of my father. I took a knife to scrape his
name from my tongue. but what would become of my mother?

and the language she spat into my mouth. *"love is not for seeing
eyes,"* but oh, what a Bartimaeian miracle! the mud

and the blade. the moth and the flame—my unwilling surrender
to the cauterizing of my name. is the proof of a scar not the birthmark

on my chin. how I turned the other cheek because a palm
had blossomed there. In this poem, the world is not safe

for a child wounded before the shelter of a womb. this morning,
the sky is soiled with impure hands —clergymen, like my father, claiming

to commiserate with the ache of a grieving god. but what does He know
about wounds except for transgressions? what do I know about colors

except for burning flags? I paste a pastel smile across my face.
and my lover says butterflies do not nibble on plastic petals.

unless we are both ignorant of joy. unlike God, like my father —
i would not flood my body in guilt only to plant a redeeming halo

Dana Wall

Performance Review: God

EMPLOYEE NAME: God (Various Aliases: Yahweh, Allah, the Almighty, etc.)

POSITION: Creator/Manager, Universe Division

REVIEWER: Dana Wall, Human Resources (Deceased)

REVIEW PERIOD: Eternity–Present

DATE: After

SECTION I: LEADERSHIP AND TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Rating: 1/5 (Does Not Meet Expectations)

God shows favoritism (“Chosen People” policy) and has failed to foster an inclusive workplace environment. God routinely assigns projects without follow-up or follow-through. The promotion process lacks transparency—Jesus was elevated to co-manager role without position first receiving an internal posting. This raises concerns over God’s integrity and engagement in nepotism.

Specific Examples:

- **Delegation Issues:** Delegates major projects (Free Will) then penalizes employees for decisions made within delegated authority (Original Sin).
- **Unclear Expectations:** Employees receive contradictory guidance. Old Testament policies (eye for an eye) contradict New Testament directives (turn the other cheek).

- **Conflict Resolution:** Sodom and Gomorrah incident demonstrates inability to handle personnel issues without resorting to punitive action (destruction of entire departments).
- **Nepotism Concerns:** Jesus (God's son) given co-equal authority without demonstrated qualifications. While Jesus showed strong interpersonal skills (loaves/fishes, water/wine), elevation appears based on family connection rather than merit.

Areas of Improvement:

God must complete mandatory leadership training. Modules needing immediate attention: Active Listening, Constructive Feedback, and Creating Psychologically Safe Workplaces.

SECTION 2: MANAGEMENT

Rating: 2/5 (Meets Most Expectations)

While God demonstrates strong vision in the initial Creation phase (particularly Days 1–6) of Earth project, follow-through has been inconsistent. The seventh day “rest” has extended indefinitely. Subsequent management of Earth operations shows a pattern of absenteeism, unclear communication, and failure to address employee concerns in a timely manner.

Specific Examples:

- **Project Management:** Original project (Garden of Eden) was small, manageable. After snake incident, God pivoted to flood (Genesis), then to Chosen People strategy, then to Jesus Plan, then to Second Coming™ (release date TBD). Each pivot introduced new complexity without resolving original issues..

- **Communication:** Indirect, vague, and obtuse language are hallmarks of God's communication efforts. Of note, the "Burning Bush" incident represents outdated communication methodology.
- **Safety Protocols:** Job situation raised serious concerns re: workplace harassment. Allowing direct reports (Satan) to torture employees as "test of faith" violates multiple OSHA regulations.

Areas of Improvement:

God needs to work on being present and adhere to standards. The "mysterious ways" approach to management creates confusion and low morale among direct reports. Employees feedback cites feeling micromanaged (Ten Commandments) while simultaneously abandoned (post-Crucifixion silence). Recommend use of modern communication tools (email, Slack etc.—see Section 3).

SECTION 3: COMMUNICATION

Rating: 1/5 (Does Not Meet Expectations)

God fails to communicate to standards or needs of employees. God is inconsistent, unclear, and often uses unvetted proxies (prophets, burning bushes, dreams) to deliver his messages. This has led to:

- Multiple religions claiming exclusive contracts with management
- Holy wars over interpretation of memos

- Inequitable geographic comms results in disproportionate concentration of miracles in Middle East region circa 0–100 CE. Africa, Asia. The Americas received minimal management attention until colonizers arrived claiming divine mandate.
- Schisms, crusades, and jihads

Last Verified Communication: Approximately 2,000 years ago (Jesus). Since then, silence despite:

- 3,847 genocides
- 2 world wars
- Pandemics
- Climate crisis
- The Holocaust

Employees have filed repeat requests for clarification. God has marked these as “read” but has not responded.

Areas of Improvement:

As also recommended in Section I, God must complete mandatory leadership training modules and attend HR hosted communication seminars.

SECTION 4: INNOVATION AND ADAPTABILITY

Rating: 3/5 (Meets Expectations)

Credit where due: The universe is an impressive product. Light/Darkness division shows strong organizational thinking. Of particular note, Photosynthesis is genuinely innovative.

However, God has yet to iterate on initial design despite obvious flaws:

- **Cancer:** Still unpatched after thousands of years of user complaints
- **Childhood mortality:** No response to support tickets (see above)
- **Menstruation:** Unclear why this design choice persists
- **Mosquitoes:** Serve no purpose. Uselessness confirmed on multiple occasions; remain in production

Innovation Gaps:

God resists employee feedback when presented with suggestions for improvement (Galileo, Darwin). Pattern of retaliation against whistleblowers (see: Inquisition), results in stifled innovation and creates a culture of fear.

Areas of Improvement:

God must establish a functional feedback channel and a public changelog. “Mysterious ways” does not meet documentation standards. Recommend immediate sunset of redundant features (Mosquitoes) and a root-cause review of legacy defects (Cancer) that have remained open since launch.

SECTION 5: EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Rating: 0/5 (Failure)

God’s track record here is weakest and deeply problematic with regard to overall performance:

God created employees with capacity for suffering, then:

- Allowed suffering to exist unchecked
- Claimed suffering "builds character"
- Offered no mental health resources
- Promised rewards only after termination (Heaven)

Specific Failures:

- **Children's Cancer:** Exists. God has not explained why.
- **Natural Disasters:** Kill indiscriminately. When employees ask why, God's representatives say "mysterious ways" (see: Communication Issues, Section 4).
- **The Problem of Evil:** After millennia of employee complaints, still no satisfactory answer to "if you're all-powerful and all-good, why does evil exist?"
- **Work-Life Balance:** Demands worship 24/7. Sabbath "rest day" still requires church attendance (work). No PTO. No sick days. Employment contract is eternal with no exit clause except death, followed by performance review (Judgment) that determines eternal assignment.
- **Gender Equity:** Created woman as "helper" to man (Genesis 2:18). Subsequent policies disproportionately impact female employees (childbirth pain, menstruation, historical exclusion from leadership roles).
- **LGBTQ+ Inclusion:** Leviticus policies created hostile work environment for LGBTQ+ employees. While Jesus later suggested "love thy neighbor," formal policy was never updated, leading to centuries of discrimination.
- **Disability Accommodations:** Multiple instances of blaming disability on employee sin (John 9:2). This violates ADA and creates culture of shame.

Areas of Improvement:

God must reevaluate well-being policies and practices and start over. Nothing short of a 180 will suffice.

SECTION 6: RESPONSE TO FEEDBACK

Rating: 0/5 (Failure)

Throughout review period, employees have provided extensive feedback, and God has either responded poorly or not responded at all.

Specific examples include:

- Job: “Why do the righteous suffer?”
God’s response: Crickets, then “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Deflection, hostile tone)
- Humans: “Please stop childhood cancer”
God’s response: [No response]
- Humans: “Can we get clarity on the afterlife situation?”
God’s response: Multiple contradictory reports from field representatives

Pattern:

When questioned, God either:

1. Doesn’t respond
2. Responds with riddles (Book of Job)

3. Sends plagues (Egypt, various)
4. Claims employees lack understanding to comprehend divine plan

This is classic absentee management combined with refusal to be held accountable.

Areas of Improvement:

God must respond to employee tickets with resolutions rather than riddles, weather, or livestock. Recommend closing the Job ticket, open since antiquity and still the highest-rated unresolved issue on record. Marking concerns “read” without reply is no longer acceptable practice.

SECTION 7: SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

Overall Rating: 1.16/5

God is not meeting basic requirements of the Creator/Manager role. While initial universe design showed promise, ongoing performance has been characterized by:

- Poor communication
- Inconsistent introduction and application of policy
- Failure to address employee well-being (suffering, death etc.)
- Retaliatory behavior toward whistleblowers
- Absenteeism
- Lack of accountability

Recommended course of action: Performance Improvement Plan (PIP)

Including individual review section recommendations, God must demonstrate measurable improvement in the following areas within the next review cycle (millennium):

1. **Respond to employee concerns** (specifically: childhood cancer, natural disasters, why bad things happen to good people)
2. **Clarify afterlife policies** (provide current, written documentation accessible to all employees, not just those who lived in Middle East 2,000 years ago)
3. **Update outdated policies** (Leviticus needs full revision; Deuteronomy contains provisions no longer applicable)
4. **Improve communication** (recommend quarterly All-Hands meetings minimum)
5. **Address favoritism** (implement transparent criteria for blessings, miracles, answered prayers)

Failure to meet PIP requirements may result in:

- Demotion
- Reassignment
- Termination of managerial authority
- Transfer of Creator role to employee-run collective

Your job is in jeopardy.

REVIEWER COMMENTS

As someone who worked under God's management for 47 years before my employment was terminated (cancer—see Section 5: Employee Well-Being), I feel compelled to say the following:

I gave this job everything. I showed up. I followed the rules as best I could. I prayed. I tried to be good.

And when I asked why—why my daughter’s best friend died at eight from leukemia, why my grandmother forgot her own name, why there's tsunamis and genocides and famines—I got silence.

Not mysterious silence. Not divine silence.

Just silence.

The same silence you get from any bad manager who’s checked out, who's collecting a paycheck, who’s stopped caring if the people under them are suffering.

This is my official evaluation:

You're not meeting expectations.

You're not even trying.

If I could fire you, I would.

But I can't.

You're God.

And that's the whole problem, isn't it?

You're unfireable.

Untouchable.

Unaccountable.

The ultimate absentee boss who's never around but still wants credit when things go right, and claims "mysterious ways" when things go wrong.

Here's what I know: If you were any other manager—if you were human, fallible, present—you'd have been fired millennia ago.

So take this review for what it is.

A reckoning you'll never read.

A complaint you'll never answer.

A voice you've ignored, a voice you've forgotten.

But I'm saying it anyway.

Someone has to.

You failed us.

All of us.

And we deserve better.

REVIEWER SIGNATURE: Dana Wall

DATE: The Day After Everything

SUPERVISOR ACKNOWLEDGMENT: [Unsigned]

This review will be retained in the employee's permanent file. As the employee is omniscient, no notification is necessary. As the employee is eternal, no review cycle will follow. As the employee is unfireable, no action will be taken.

CONTRIBUTORS

Daniel Altenburg is a Midwest-socialized, hometown-less Air Force brat. His writing often juxtaposes the mundane with the mythological in order to investigate the vulgarities of language. He holds an MFA from the University of Arizona and PhD from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and his work has appeared in *Spork*, *BlazeVox*, *Yalobusha Review*, *Juked*, *Gigantic Sequins*, elsewhere, and on his website www.lettersofwreck.com. He teaches high school English and lives with his wife and children in Tucson, Arizona. Instagram: [@daniel.altenburg](https://www.instagram.com/daniel.altenburg).

Rhys Anderson has worked

a lot.

In retail stores, in bars, in call centres, in agencies. Rhys has been the darling of the festival circuit as a performer, Rhys has also cleaned out the trashed green rooms of other performers, swept the empty beers behind the stage, been soaked head to toe in bin juice, and rinsed the mats out after the club closed. Rhys has interviewed politicians as an equal and bartended for them as a hired worker they ignored.

Rhys has scrubbed shit out of the urinals of life. Right now, Rhys is self-employed and has one of the worst bosses so far.

Alma Ariaz (she/her) is a writer from Toronto, Ontario. She works as a freelance copyeditor and a social media manager for *Arrival Magazine*, Humber Polytechnic's student-led literary magazine. Her current projects include a science-fiction novel and a collection of visual,

mixed-media erasure poems. Her short stories and poetry have been published in literary journals online, including *Writers Resist*, *50-Word Stories*, *Mulberry Literary*, and *Ink in Thirds*. You can find her on Instagram via [@soulsrambling](#).

Rachel Barber is a graduate of Rutgers-Camden, where she received her MFA in Creative Writing. She has worked in homeless services for over ten years and currently works in supportive housing for formerly homeless individuals in Philadelphia, PA. Her speculative fiction has appeared in *Talk Vomit*, *Every Day Fiction*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Brink*. You can find Rachel on Instagram [@rachelbarber319](#).

Ryan Di Francesco (he/him) is a neurodivergent Canadian writer and teacher. His writing has appeared in *The Toronto Star* and is published or forthcoming in *Acta Victoriana*, *Soliloquies Anthology*, *Pinhole Poetry*, *Pacific Review*, *ELJ Editions*, *The Pit Periodical*, *Milwaukee Avenue Messenger*, *Shoegaze Literary*, and elsewhere. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Shadow and Sax*, an independent literary and arts press. His chapbooks include *Skeleton Mine Disaster* (Bottlecap Press), *Mirage of Burning Things* (Parlyaree Press), and *The Paper Hound and Canadian Classic* (Alien Buddha Press). A new chapbook is forthcoming from Ethel Zine & Micro Press. He was shortlisted for the Rhonda Gail Williford Poetry Prize.

Zary Fekete grew up in Hungary and currently lives in Tokyo. He has a debut novella (*Words on the Page*) out with DarkWinter Lit Press and a short story collection (*The Written Path: A Journey Through Sobriety and Scripture*) out with Creative Texts. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films. [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#): @ZaryFekete. Bluesky: [zaryfekete.bsky.social](#).

Clifton Gachagua is the author of *Madman at Kilifi* and *Cartographer of Water*. Being the cofounder of the journal *Down River Road*, he has had a chance to get his but kicked by

deadlines and sending out payments to Nigeria. His work appears in *Obsidian*, *+doc*, *ANMLY*, *Prism*, *Glassworks*, *the87press*, *Africa39*, *Manchester Review*, *20.35*, *Africa Writers Trust*, *Saraba*, *Jalada*, *Kwani?*, *Harvard Divinity Journal*, *Poetry Foundation*, *The Gonjon Pin and Other Stories*, *AfroSF*, *Sunspot Jungle*, *PEN America*, *Debunk Media*. He has also worked as a scriptwriter.

Emily Hay is an English writer, a lifetime Londoner, insider-outsider, gay parent, and community volunteer. She worked for over three decades in UK central government and wears her survivor's badge proudly. Her poetry and prose has been published by Lancaster Litfest, *Coffee House* poetry magazine, Riggwelter Press, Gay Authors Workshop, *Aôthen Magazine*, *Lavender Review*, *Free Verse Revolution*, *Vernacular Journal*, and *Poetry Bus*. Instagram: [@remilyhay](https://www.instagram.com/remilyhay).

Jeffrey Hecker is author of *Rumble Seat* (San Francisco Bay Press, 2011) & chapbooks *Hornbook* (Horse Less Press, 2012), *Instructions for the Orgy* (Sunnyoutside Press, 2013) & *Ark Aft* (The Magnificent Field, 2020). Recent work appears in *South Dakota Review* and *Bennington Review*. A fourth-generation Kepanī via Hawaii, he teaches at The Muse Writers Center & reads for *Quarterly West*. [@heckheck03.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/heckheck03.bsky.social)

Ash Hooke (she/her) is a queer poet, artist, teacher, and former Mormon. She is equal parts confessional and political poet, commenting on issues that touch her often framed in religious and psychological trauma.

Ash is a featured poet in SAACA's Uncommon Knowledge Exhibition traveling through the USA and parts of Europe. *Sandscript*, *The Sabino Poets Group*, *AlienBuddha Press*, *Call Me [Brackets]*, and *The Deadbeat Poets Zine* have published her work. Her recent chapbook *Surviving the Post-Mormon Apocalypse* was published by Sonorous Anchorite Press (2023).

Ash is also a member of the poetry collective A Movable Beast in Tucson, AZ providing public reading opportunities for new and established poets and creatives.

Website/Socials: [Artist: Ash Hooke](#) / [ASH HOOKE; Artist and Poet](#) / [@ASH_HOOKE](#)

Jenna Jaco is a poet and technical writer (NOT FOR BOMBS OR AI) from Texas. You can find their poems in *Ballast*, *Fifth Wheel Press*, *Underblong*, and elsewhere. Their debut full-length collection, *Mall Water*, was released in 2024 with Kith Books. You can find them on Instagram [@goodtrashbunny](#) and Bluesky [@jennajaco](#).

Susan L. Lin is a Taiwanese American storyteller who hails from southeast Texas and holds an MFA in Writing from California College of the Arts. Her novella *Goodbye to the Ocean* won the 2022 Etchings Press novella prize, and her literary/visual art has appeared in over a hundred publications. She loves to dance. Find more at [susanllin.com](#)

Christian Hanz Lozada (he/him) aspires to have the slow, stuttering breeze-mimic of a sloth, but in the water he flies. He wrote the poetry collection *He's a Color, Until He's Not*. His Pushcart and Best of the Net nominated poetry have been published all over the world, including in *Bamboo Ridge*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, and *Emerson Review*. Christian has featured at the Autry Museum and Beyond Baroque. He lives in San Pedro, CA and uses his MFA to teach his neighbors and their kids at Los Angeles Harbor College.

Writer, multi-disciplinary artist, and faggotry hauntologist **Sean Patrick Mulroy** is an internationally recognized poet and award-winning professor, a 2013 Lambda Literary Fellow, 2018 Writer-in-Residence at The Kerouac Project in Orlando Florida, winner of the 2019

Margaret Reid Prize, and winner of the 2020 Button Poetry Chapbook Contest, Mulroy recently completed an international tour of Europe and SWANA in support of his debut poetry collection, *Hated for the Gods* (Button Poetry, 2023). His work has appeared in *The Journal*, *Assaracus*, *The New York Times*, *Peach Fuzz Magazine*, and *Muzzle*, among several other magazines and several anthologies of poetry. Born and raised in the American South, Sean has since lived and worked all over the world, in over 25 countries on 4 continents. At present, he lives in NYC.

Born and raised in Hawai'i, **Kelly Murashige** (www.kellymurashige.com) is the author of the award-winning YA novels *The Lost Souls of Benzaiten* and *The Yomigaeri Tunnel*, as well as the upcoming adult novel *Milkiverse*. Her work has been nominated for *Best Small Fictions*. Though she can be shy, she loves obsessing over books, video games, and strange animals.

Franz Jørgen Neumann's stories have appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Colorado Review*, and *Water~Stone Review*. His published work can be read at www.storiesandnovels.com.

Gloria Ogo is an American-based Nigerian writer with several published novels and poetry collections. Her work has appeared in *Eye to the Telescope*, *Brittle Paper*, *Spillwords Press*, *Metastellar*, *Gypsophila Magazine*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, and more. With an MFA in Creative Writing, Gloria was a reader for *Barely South Review*. She is the winner of the Brigitte Poirson 2024 Literature Prize, finalist for the Jerri Dickeski Fiction Prize 2024, ODU 2025 Poetry Prize, and the 2025 Rhonda Gail Williford Poetry Prize, with honorable mentions. She is also a finalist for Lucky Jefferson's 2025 Poetry Contest. Her work was longlisted for the 2025 American Short(er) Fiction Prize. glriaogo.wixsite.com/gloria-ogo.

Qudus Olowo, popularly known as “Blacc” is a Nigerian poet, rapper, singer, songwriter, editor, and entrepreneur. He is the Founding Editor of Afrihill Press and a former Editorial Intern at *Another Chicago Magazine*. His works have appeared in *Ake Review*, *Lolwe*, *Kalahari Review*, *Temz Review*, *Sunlight Press*, *Blue Marble Review*, *Brittle Paper*, *Poetry Column NND*, and elsewhere. He is the author of the micro-chapbook *Making Love by the Waterside* (Afrihill Press, 2023). He was longlisted for the Brigitte Poirson Literature Prize 2024. He was a poetry mentor at the SprinNG Writing Fellowship from 2022 to 2024, a 2025 Rongo Art Residency Artist-in-Residence, and currently a member of The Ugly Collective. Qudus holds a Bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of Ilorin, Kwara. You can reach him via X [@justblacc](https://twitter.com/justblacc) and on Instagram [@_justblacc_](https://www.instagram.com/_justblacc_).

Abigail Ray is a writer from Portland, Oregon. Her work has appeared in various journals, including *Fruitslice*, *Maudlin House*, and others. She primarily writes poetry, short fiction, and essays. Her goal is to graduate from her current job as "Mad Woman in the Attic," to "Vaguely Off-Putting Lighthouse Keeper." For the benefits, mostly.

Ishani Ray is a queer South Asian writer and researcher based in the U.S., with a background in science and medicine that informs her creative lens. She writes poetry as a way to give voice to thoughts that resist easy articulation such as exploring politics, social justice, power, longing, nature, and the romanticism of everyday life. Her poems have been published in the chapbook *The Neon Gods Hum Softly*, as well as in *Eunoia Review*, *Foofaraw Press*, *Lucky Jefferson*, and *Sepulchre Literary Zine*. She was a finalist in Lucky Jefferson's Poetry and Prose Contest. She maintains blogs on Medium and WordPress, the latter titled *Notes from the Margin*. When not writing or working in the lab, she fosters rescue kittens and obsesses over old libraries.

Topher Shields is a poet from Aotearoa New Zealand. His work appears in *Puerto del Sol*,

Cordite Poetry Review, *The Shore*, and elsewhere. He has been recognised by The Rialto Nature and Place Poetry Competition, The Bedford Competition, and the Cheltenham Poetry Festival International Poetry Prize. His poetry examines inheritance, systems of value, and the ethical residue of place.

Emma Stead is a UK-based writer, editor, and co-founder of [ELA Literary Magazine](#), where she works to champion emerging voices in literary and genre fiction. She has spent years working as a freelance ghostwriter and editorial consultant and, prior to that, worked in retail management. Her fiction has appeared in *GossamerWight* and *Starspun Lit*. Find her on [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#), and [Facebook](#).

Hassan A. Usman (he/him), NGP II, a person living with Haemophilia, is a graduate of Counselling Education at the University of Ilorin. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *ANMLY*, *Ake Review*, *Sand Journal*, *Electric Literature*, *Consequence Forum*, *Blue Route Journal*, *Blue Marble Review*, *Isele Magazine*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, *Lunaris Review*, *Paper Lanterns*, *Trampset*, *Poetrycolumn-NND*, and elsewhere. He's an alumnus of the Spring Writing Fellowship 2022. Hassan enjoys cooking, listening to Afrobeats and Heartbreak Pop, and models part-time. He tweets [@hassanthemodel](#).

Victory Okon, who writes under the moniker **Splendor Victor**, is a Nigerian poet interested in making beauty out of breathing. A graduate of Health Education from the University of Uyo, Nigeria, he has also spent time working as a teacher, where—despite modest pay—he relished guiding pupils through English and Literature and discovering how language can reshape the way young minds see the world. Writing from a country where faith and identity often sit under the weight of social and religious scrutiny, his poetry frequently turns to questions of God, inheritance, grief, and belief—sometimes as prayer, sometimes as cross-examination. He is the

joint winner of Shuzia's 2021 "The Testimony" Contest, winner of the Skybird Poetry Slam 2022, a finalist for the Kayode Aderinokun Prize for Poetry (2025), and winner of the Morgan Ekanem Poetry Prize (2026). His work has appeared in *PoetryColumnNND*. You can find him on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) @Splendor_Victor.

Dana Wall is a former CFO in the entertainment industry who worked with people who thought they were God, so it really resonated with her. She wrote "Performance Review: God" because, over her twenty-five years in corporate, she would have loved to have many reverse evaluations. She now writes full-time and uses her experience to color her pieces. Since 2022, she has had over sixty pieces of poetry and prose published, with two Pushcart nominations in 2025 and a Best of the Net nomination. She works from her home in Manhattan Beach, California.

Kaylee Walton is a special education teacher at a Title I school in Virginia who has been told, on more than one occasion, to remember her why. She remembers. Her work has appeared in *Sundog Literary*, *wildscape Literary Magazine*, *RVA Mag*, and *Rawhead Literary Journal*. You can find her on Substack and Instagram, both by searching Cicada Gospel.

Michael Zadoorian is the author of *The Leisure Seeker*—the basis for the Sony Pictures Classics film starring Helen Mirren. His other novels are *Second Hand*, *Beautiful Music*, *The Narcissism of Small Differences*, and *Beat Girl: A Novel of Edie Kerouac*, to be published in March 2027. His fiction and essays have appeared in *The Literary Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *American Short Fiction*, *Witness*, *Great Lakes Review*, *North American Review*, *Literary Hub*, *The Millions*, *Belt Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and others. His work has been translated into over twenty-five languages worldwide.

mk zariel {it/its} is a nonbinary neuroqueer theater artist, Best of the Net and Monarch Award nominated poet, movement journalist, and BashBack aligned anarchist. it is fueled by folk-punk, Emma Goldman, and existential dread. the author of *VOIDGAZING* (2026, Whittle Micropress), *DIFFERENT WITH HIM* (2026, Rockwood Press), and *BOY APPARITION* (2025, Vinegar Press), it can be found online at mkzariel.carrd.co, creating conflictually queer-anarchic spaces, writing columns for *Asymptote* and the *Anarchist Review of Books*, and being mildly feral in the great lakes region. it is kinda gay ngl.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Reverse Evaluation came together very differently than I had initially imagined. The theme seemed plain enough. *Reverse Evaluation* is a distillation of the employee telling the boss to shove it. A big middle finger to the powers that be. A bullhorn of righteous anger etc. etc. All fitting places to start, but, of course, the interpretation ended up shifting and catching the light in unrecognizable ways. This just might be my favorite part of the process.

This was also the first issue where *MIDLVMAG* was able to pay contributors for their writing. It's one of the goals I've had since the start of the magazine in 2022, and there's a not-quite-describable feeling of pride and fear I have at accomplishing this step. With that leap into the paying market came the largest number of submissions we've ever received. More than half the total number of pieces were submitted within the last two weeks of the deadline. It was a lot. It is the first issue where I let go of the reins on controlling every aspect of production and had the team take the lead in the reading, reviewing, and selection process. I am very lucky to work with such talented, giving, and brilliant people. Shannon, Will, and Mollie are the best.

Reverse Evaluation is a very spiritual, and reflective issue. In reading the pieces, I find myself contemplating experiences of power, grief, submission, humility, and reverence that are seeded throughout. There is a subtle mania present as well: a frantic desire for reprieve, a finality of acceptance, and a staunch belief in the self. It is mercurial and steadfast. And, it is funny. I hope you find your own truth to power in your reading of the pieces within.

Literature matters. So do you.

—Tim Batson, June 2026