

Clerestory

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Neidin Hernandez

# Alterations

The dresses, we ordered from China. They came in cardboard boxes, gone soft at the corners, their edges bent. My mother had found a sale online, had placed a bid, had waited and baited and won. She was deft with these things, ruthless in those places she moved unseen.

They were wrapped, gingerly, in white tissue paper, folded, we liked to think, by nimble women with long necks who worked in the dress shop. But these were knock-off dresses, and they were cheap, but, oh, how beautiful they looked when we them to our chests, the crude white lace cutouts against our skin, that gold which had deepened with the sun and the years and especially the years we had spent in the sun. It wasn't all darkness, she reminded me.

Alterations weren't necessary. The dresses fit perfectly, or rather, our bodies changed to perfectly fit the contours of the dresses, the seams that puckered, the zippers that pinched, those unwavering lines that dipped in sharply and jutted out again here marking hip, here breast, here waist. We were remade, seam-sown women, in those sleeves that exposed our throats, our shoulders, the hemlines that came down just below the knees. We walked on our tip-toes and did not speak of how I used to go into her closet, come out wearing her heels, and all the times I fell forward into the floor. We talked about Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, that woman and her ratted hair, how we still

had a bottle of AquaNet in the cabinet beneath the sink, a relic like the Mesoamerican art she bought from a roadside man in Tulancingo.

We walked up the mountain, hips swaying like I had learned from her when she wasn't watching, with arms linked as if we had gone to high school together, sat next to one another in homeroom, graduated in 1986. The bearded dragons hissed at our feet, and we laughed, we danced, light on our toes. Her grandmother had taught her to run uphill when the snakes shook their rattles. She walked ahead, growing younger until she stepped back into seventeen. She had never been moon-eyed and naïve. I followed her, watching, all animal love and bared teeth.

We never talked about the blood that filled my mouth when I bit my tongue, teeth like wine stains and that minced-word muscle like butchered meat wrapped in aluminum foil. We let ourselves be foolish, pose for photos with our chests puffed out in the wind, our tissue paper veils flowing out still behind us. We threw buckets of ice down at the revelers below, drinking light beer on their jet skis and inner tubes, floating farther and farther away from a center that gave. Strangers complimented us, and how beautiful we were together, there in those white dresses we bought from China.



Rachel Hahn

# Strawberry Milk



It's five a.m., and I am walking home. I am thinking about the cool air in my nostrils and on my arms. It smells like tea and flowers, a soft crispness. This is unlike the fall crispness in the early morning, when my joints are creaky and I can smell death in the lingering fog, and the dew is heavier and heavier each lowering degree of temperature. Now it is getting lighter and lighter as the plants suck up the dew into their spines and sit taller and taller. They suck up the cool air, and it gets hotter and lighter. They absorb the darkness into their tiny seeds and buds and shoots.

I smell the pop of each opening bud. When I walk under the dark shape of that tree that arches its body out over the sidewalk, I can smell all three thousand and sixty two of its falling petals. They are falling all at once in that moment, and I catch and count each one up my nose. I smell their soft, translucent flesh. The pink of the skin smells like the baby inside the mother's protruding stomach. It is not the powdery clean smell of a born baby, and it is not the clinical, paranoid smell of a mother's hormones, but it is the darker and earthier smell of limbo. It is the smell of deep, clear blue lightening slowly and softly.

By now my nose is full of these petals, tiny heart shapes that get cut out from some big piece somewhere, like a million valentine hearts for a million lovers' nostrils. The pollen is their one fatal flaw, one calling card of imperfection, and I sneeze them out onto my arm. Twenty six

splayed down the length of my arm. Each one is a letter somehow I know, and they spell out the plane of limbo.

On this alphabet map, I've spotted myself. I'm in the midst of the uncut petals, when they are still one giant fabric. It ripples lightly under my weight, like a liquid trampoline. Everything is the color of the strawberry milk that my mom used to keep in the fridge. Well, not as strawberry milk. It's only after I would squeeze out three tablespoons of the neon syrup into the nine ounces of semi rich one percent white milk, then stirred the cup frantically for forty three seconds would the strawberry milk fabric be ready for expansion and exploration. But first, the Mickey Mouse curly straw is ceremoniously pulled out of the dingy white drawer by the cup cabinet, and, while he is not my favorite curly straw character, he's the only one I remember, so it gets dipped into the strawberry milk. As the pink liquid turns purple in the translucent blue straw, Mickey waves his chunky white gloves in the ancient incantation of transformation. Both the strawberry milk and I ready for communion. Finally I travel down the curly plastic straw, gradually forgetting how to count the bubbles and how to measure the volume of displacement of my submerging body. I remember only of the soft current swirling in the milk, pulling me along with the clockwise stir of the spoon around the pink plane.

I inhale as much of the soft pink as possible, until I feel my body so full and round, it starts to sink deeper into the fabric plane. With such similar materiality between me and the milk, I'm barely corporeal anymore, except for the smell of strawberry milk and the soft whitish pink that it gives to my skin now. But I cannot tell where my skin starts and stops really. I just know it's got this lush pinkishness, and it's soft and it flows in tiny ripples along the plane of limbo.

The plane of limbo goes on forever, goes as deep as forever, until it does not. Until it is forgotten, and the white drawer with the metal handle that housed the curly straws gets stuck shut with the humid expansion of time, and one percent milk is one percent too many. Until I feel myself being contained by the faceted glass cup, and my pink flesh of limbo gets assigned to word and measure.

The milky plane gets assigned to different body parts. It forms two small breasts under a striped shirt that I notice for the first time, and I feel the plane of limbo congeal into fat and hair and substantiated existence. I can't fit in the cup in this new solid form, so it breaks into shards, and I have to carefully spill over them and into the forgetful present. For fifteen years I learn to count the ounces of milk and the volume of syrup that make strawberry milk. I learn to spell new words to demarcate one body against another, and I eventually forget what strawberry milk tastes like.

It's five o'five a.m., years and minutes later, and the falling petals fill my nose with the taste of strawberry milk. I'm laughing at some point in the past, and the milk is oozing out my nose from the pink bowels of an unborn me. The demarcated parts of my body start getting snipped up into the tiny petal hearts by the cool spring air. My feet are dissolving into the petals on the sidewalks. Then I feel my shins start to go, then the rest of my legs, then up up up my body I fall apart. I smell myself filling my nostrils, and I fill my senses with deep, clear blue slowly, softly lightening into milky pink.



Jeffrey Katz

Palimpsest/  
Untitled/  
ecce!

## Palimpsest

Between the trees of the garden  
As water in the fountain turned a deeper brown,  
she wandered, dripping dry from her dip  
bacteria and detritus swirled up  
in the pebbly creek. She shone  
from the bottom -- the good kind,  
in the dappled light, like a tree herself.  
the kind that nourish and digest  
She popped botuliform pods under the  
for the good of the microcosm. He  
pads of her feet, releasing seeds from which  
felt glad to be a witness to the tiny  
more trees would grow and overlay themselves.  
shapes from which new life would emerge.

## Untitled

By the end of Heart of Darkness,  
The duality was clear.  
The contradictions were plain,  
And were rearing their ugly heads, longhorns  
blazing.  
Hooves raking the dirt, they were charging.

By the end of Their Eyes Were Watching God,  
A gentle look, a soothing caress  
Would have them docile,  
And me crosslegged on the ground beside them,  
My hand numb in their mane.

By the end of Crime and Punishment,  
I was watching others grappling and wrestling,  
Kicking up dust, their knuckles white,  
Their hair windswept, their eyes alive.  
And I wondered if endangered was the same as  
extinct.



ecce!

Cornelia lives in a castle.

The castle lies across the ocean and I can see her through my spyglass.

On some days I watch her blacksmith and on others I see her dragonslay.

Sometimes, she sees me. We make eye contact and I wonder what she'd think of me.

"It's ok," I call across, "I'm a homosexual."

She continues staring blankly. Does she know what that is?

"That means I only like boys."

She keeps her eyes locked. Does she know my language?

And sometimes she'll slip her hand into mine and whisper into my ear,

Get off your fucking iphone, go out and see the world.

Soon she returns to her castle and I can breathe a sigh of relief, guilt, longing, anticipation to be on the other side of that spyglass.

Raina Wellman

# One Step Into the Cubicle Reality

A cubicle itself is nothing but an essence. It is a segment of reality, a dull grey, a space to hide while being watched. A cubicle is bright lights and a headache by the end of the day. A cubicle is an island.

Existing within a cubicle is, in many ways, like taking a nap that is so restless that is exhausting. It feels like a deep and unrewarding sleep, one that seems to last forever.

Ask yourself; if frustration were a physical space what would it look like? What is the number one place I would love to physically destroy, a sledgehammer in hand? Where do I feel most at comfortable, yet simultaneously at unease?

Her cubicle, amidst many others in the basement of building 0002-3040, was empty and spectacularly lifeless, because Maria knew she would leave soon. Leave to where? The others had all recently evacuated the space which left only her and a few others mindlessly aiming to fill their time. She filled her time with quick, frequent Facebook wall maneuvers, long trips to the bathroom, and lunch breaks that filled the full-allotted hour.

During her “smoke break”, a break Maria took in order to maintain her sanity and keep in touch with her boyfriend, she dropped details from her day. She assumed he was currently

spending his time in a much more vibrant place, gardening probably. While his hand probably cupped a rose, she told him of the janitor who insisted on calling her good girl, an equally uncomfortable encounter on her commute, and the bathroom that was fully stocked with Aveeno hand lotion (and menstrual pads). She plodded through her work diligently, until, on Tuesday at 2:17 she heard a low moan. The woman behind her was definitely moaning. Like perhaps she had chosen to spend the rest of her designated time under their current employment masturbating? Maria averted her eyes from one segment of her blank grey wall to the other. The moaning came and went, inconsistent.

The woman behind her was certainly working on more important work. For instance, Maria had overheard her discussing a presentation she was creating for later this week. This woman was making Excel spreadsheets that meant something. Additionally, the woman had mentioned multiple data processing systems that Maria did not recognize. Maria awkwardly adjusted her chair. Yes, the moaning had to be masturbation.

I feel that, Maria thought. But I also hate her.

There had to be some other explanation. Groans of frustration... not pleasure. Of course, but she would never know unless she peaked over.



Raina Wellman

# I'm Sorry for the Bug in Your Yarn

I'm sorry for putting a bug in your knitting. To this day, I am still not sure why I put that little bug, bright green and six wiggling legs into that area of your desk. The place where you kept a tangled mass of yarn, two hand-made, sandpapered, and stained knitting needles, just like mine in the desk a few over.

It was that year that I had my first boyfriend and my first kiss. A little one on the lips and on the cheek, both of us still with baby fat, leaving our faces slightly rounded. The first letters of his name and mine were next to each other in the alphabet. I remember pretending to be a cat underneath the slide with a girl who's name I have never been able to recall and I remember announcing, to anyone who would listen, that he had kissed me. He stood up for me when somebody told me the roses I drew were ugly. And it was that year that I was most often picked to play mom when we were playing house. With two kids and wooden stove completely stocked with all the un-edible essentials.

I remember going to your house and accidentally leaving your blonde-looks-just-like-me American Girl doll on top of the white metal heater. Her hair got burnt. I'm sorry for that too. After that, you cut her hair just like yours. "It's okay," you said, "Now we really do look alike." Second grade marked my first school year in public school, and I am sorry for not standing

up for myself when all the girls said they hated pink. You liked pink. I still like pink. That was the year I began to wear long machine sewed skirts and collared shirts, which my mother had made sure fit the dress code. The biggest thing I'm sorry about is that in sixth and seventh grade I subjected myself to wearing tight skinny jeans. You seem to like them.

I saw you at Flying Star and we looked at each other really quick, but we both realized that even though we are friends on Facebook we are not friends in real life. I'm sorry for not talking to you, for not making sure that you did remember me. Maybe I will next time. Recently I noticed that you have uploaded a picture of yourself smoking weed in a parking garage. Your eyes are dilated and the smoke covers half of your face like a shimmering, ghostly mask.





Amanda Morton

# Mercutio's Ghost

Mercutio sits atop a wide-open church door  
(‘tis not so deep as a well)  
silent, fingers laced  
with that handsome face  
and blood blooming on his side.

He sits – hanging in the air like smoke  
after a cigarette has passed; not yet dissipated  
And isn't that just like him;  
bitter and acrid in the back of the throat  
(so wide as a church door)  
a hoarse and tender love song,  
like the best part of a campfire, stinging the  
nostrils,  
The dancing warmth of a flame.

It is said to be a tragedy;  
It is not that he minds death, so much, but to  
have life ripped,  
to watch it drain away, before he got a chance –  
there was so much  
(‘tis enough, ‘twill serve)  
but it was only folly, only love that betrayed  
him.

Mercutio watches the people who walk  
in the street, who pass beneath him  
Heads bowed, penitent,  
(they have made worms' meat of me)  
And those who pass with furtive glances,  
Those who say god is not real  
And fear that they are wrong.  
There is only one way of finding out, after all.

Remember the day you walked in the street?  
And each footfall was your own flesh,  
The heat of your blood beneath your skin,  
(ask for me tomorrow)  
and you laughed: Today I am mine, my own.

You thought then that you were immortal.  
How beautiful, how wretched, to find that you  
were wrong.

To scorn love, but to carry it all around you,  
between your skin and your clothes –  
only to find that  
the grave is not cold. It is empty

– and your hands are not your own, and your  
eyes still remember  
with laughter, with a spark,  
the colors surrounding his face when he smiled,  
to be alive  
(you shall find me a grave man)

The best intentions lead good men astray, they  
say

when all we have are words, inadequate, inept  
Three plagues on three houses –  
But look how much more was done,  
and how much is gone, untouchable now,  
ashes and smoke.

Look at that beautiful mind, silenced forever  
with a spit and a smile,  
Not by will  
But (marry, 'tis enough)

Mercutio sits atop a wide-open church door  
that he has never stepped through.  
He has wisdom enough, but he will not share it,  
not anymore;  
He has seen what sharing wisdom can do.

Kelton Ellis

# Yellowblues

Sawyer needed to drown his grief to get this woman out of his mind, so he would visit Logan's saloon before the night's end.

He went to the shack three hours after sunset. It was a short brown box of a building, obscured by pine trees and in the middle of a clearing near the still. He knew it was near the still from the smell of the area, which was just as he imagined the scent of a controlled rot.

He had never been there before. When he walked in the door the stench of tobacco came as a shock to his nostrils and he coughed loudly before he acclimated himself to the smoke. A single swinging bulb hung from the low ceiling that suffused the room's haze with a dim yellow glow: a nauseous hue. He looked at old Logan standing at the makeshift bar, in front of thirty rotund jugs of moonshine on a shelf. Sawyer thought the tiny head sitting atop Logan's plump body made him look curiously like one of his jugs. Before this, Sawyer was never courageous enough to break the law for a drink of liquor, but he knew what to do. He would sit at the bar, he would get some of that moonshine from Logan, he would drink it, and he would know at last the singular thrill of flushing bliss down to his gizzard until it drowned whatever was living there right now.

The band in the corner across from Logan's bar played the same three tunes in shifting tempos and volumes, without taking a break and without any skill. The drummer and the bassman fought over the rhythm; the bassman

saying Come on now It's time to speed this one up and the drummer saying No no no slow it down easy like. A guitarman blind as Tiresias sat on a stool, a big twelve-string slung over his shoulder and lying on his lap. He in duet with his guitar shouted some ached song or other—they were all identical—about a lost lover.

*I gave my love to this woman  
Tried to treat her real kind.  
I gave myself to this woman  
But she don't pay me no mind.*

Sawyer sat down at the bar and asked Logan for something to drink. There was no need to specify what; moonshine would be the only beverage.

Sawyer raised his spirits to his mouth and took long, loud swallows from the mason jar. The moonshine gave his throat an unrelenting burn—he figured it odd that such a chilly liquid could leave a crying sear in his neck as he drank it. But that was good. Strong drink makes for a strong man. Sawyer slowed his gulping to a sip and moved his tongue searching for the vaguest taste of sweet cornmash that had become his acrid liquor.

And now they are a summertime frolic in the cornfield, his body meshed into hers. They come here when they have the time, and the time they always find for the other. Here they can be their own secret, hiding in the stalks; they can evade human, hearing ears to tryst



instead among deaf ones in this place that is theirs and theirs alone.

She is tall. She is a giantess, much taller than him. Even as they lie on the ground, he supine and she riding him, her body seems comically large, as if she is reaching her head far into the sky lying above the cornstalks. It is a marvel she does not smash his pelvis under her weight. He is wondering if perhaps she is so tall that her husband might look out over the field and see her great yellow head with its blackened curls bobbing up and down and up and down in the jungle of stalks. And if she fell! If she were to fall off of him during a misplaced thrust a seismic happening would tell any person within ten miles where they were and what sin they were committing. He always has the peculiar sensation that she is getting larger and larger each time they meet here but the grand scale of her does not intimidate him as with other women. Her height makes her vaguely otherworldly: borrowed from a dreamscape or myth. The sensation is enhanced by her position directly in front of the sun. Linear streaks of sunlight hit her back and curl around to his eyes which makes her goldenness impossibly radiant. She leans down to kiss him and he is quickly intoxicated, as if his brain itself had inhaled her noxious breaths. She runs her finger down that jagged scar on the left side of his chest; it is a surprising rip of tan in his dark brown flesh. Like usual she asks him where it comes from. Like usual he gives her a

false answer: I forgot because I was too young when I got it, it's really a birthmark, a shard of glass cut me there and made a real bad wound, don't worry about it sweetheart. In truth a man had tried to stab him to death with a dagger to the chest.

For a moment his palsied heart feels suspended as if it has lost its pulse.

*When are you gonna leave him you know he ain't good for you?*

*Sawyer that is my husband I have told you and I have told you I am a Christian woman.*

*You a Christian woman is any of this Christian fucking in a cornfield waiting for somebody anybody come find me with the preacher's wife what if it's your husband and he kill us dead?*

*Kill us dead maybe you but not me.*

*You trust his love too much.*

As they put on their clothes a newly burgeoned grey cloud in the sky lets loose its torrent of rain. They hurry to dress themselves and run about the field while they fasten and tie and button. He falls trying to push legs down his trousers while running out of the field at the same time. He has fallen forward onto his face with the pant legs half-way on so that his bare ass is up in the air forming the summit of the hill his body makes. She is ahead of him but stops to look back and laugh at the slapstick scenery he has unwittingly made. *You done fell flat square on your face!* He thinks how impossible it seems that the prettiest woman can have a cackle so nasty like that. She quits

her japing and goes back to help him up. She throws him a subtle grin as if to make a gift to him in penance. He notes the kind manner in which she suddenly treats him yet he knows that she does not want this, any of *this*, anymore. She is coming to know it and she will say so soon; next time. Her husband cannot give her love but he gives her everything else so well; she will stay with him as a wife does. What does Sawyer have for her? Taut body and rectangle jaw.

They are soaked to their bones when the rain stops after ten minutes. This was but the storm of a Georgia summer, fierce and ephemeral as the sting of a paper wasp upon bare legs.

Sawyer was thoroughly drunk by this point, no longer mindful enough to be averse to the sting of moonshine in his mouth. He watched the loud band with the dancing crowd by it and thought he might like to dance with a woman. It had been three weeks and for a moment he felt ready to share himself again. As he left his barstool he felt a glowing lightsomeness rise from deep in his belly. He was starting to walk toward a young brown girl when he saw her, *her*, dancing in the yellow smoke, and he sat back down at the bar as he realized he would need more of Logan's corn liquor. She was dancing with no one in particular, completely absorbed in herself. She wore the subtle grin that had seduced him long before but the thick gold air kept blending

her in, blurring her yellow form until Sawyer was not certain whether that was her flashing those glances at him. If it was her there, he was sure of his earlier suspicion: it seemed as if her dancing and blazing joy magnified her height. He watched her, intently, wanting to vanish and yet needing her to notice him. For all her beauty and size he was the sole person in the saloon who watched her twirl with a stomp and a clap. He swallowed it. She never not once wore that dress for him. She looked beautiful wearing it and so supremely satisfied. He swallowed more until he felt a witch's cauldron boiling in his stomach. Then Sawyer knew he needed to leave, and he rushed out of the door, vomiting and weeping as he stumbled home in the forest's vast dark.



Julia Shack Sackler

I thought I  
was in love  
when I was  
fourteen  
years old

I thought I was in love when I was fourteen years old. The simplicity of those times ... When a stolen glance sent hearts a flutter, when new and unfamiliar licentiousness trickled down our tongues, when our breaths were soft and quick as we struggled for air in the suspended anoxic heat of summer.

I do not remember how we began, but I remember fleeting mirage memories of that summer ... that summer when he lived by the ocean ... when his stringy hair was sticky with salt and smelled of aerosol sunscreen. (My mother always told me never to breath around that).

That summer was a listless echo of sprawling on the boat like cats as the heat declared us immobile. During those dreamy blistering days, friends filed in and out of the marina ... but never him. I only ever saw him after the sun had kissed the sky goodnight and the moon cast its shadow on all of the earths secrets. I still do not know what he looks like in the light. To me, he will always be the shadow of the older boy with blurred lips and eyes that seeped into the fadedness of his blue freckled face.

Then the crisp fall breeze swept August away like dust. We shed the freckled skin and reveries of summer. He got a new car. And I gained a new hope with the new season.

Sometimes he drove to me and whispered tiny absences in my ear. He brushed his saline lips against my collarbone, softly slipped down

to kiss the supple flesh below my bellybutton. I trembled not knowing if in fear or longing. He pressed his index finger to the fear and said shhh. Tangling one hand in my curls and pressing between my legs with the other, he dug in me as if scooping the last drop of honey. “Don’t worry, it’s ok”, he said. The smell of starvation seeped from his lips.

A cold numbness slowed the flow of my blood and I could not utter a word. He then pressed both of my legs down and pulled me in. Pressed, and pulled.

Saltiness beaded down his face ... spilled mutely from my eyes.

Then two weeks later his friend told me he slept with the beautiful senior blonde. I called him and he confirmed. He sounded distantly proud.

And there I was looking down on the little de-floured fourteen-year-old girl fucked wet and left to dry.

Six years later his name lit up my phone as I was falling asleep. I answered and held my breath.

“Julia?”

“Hi, what’s up?”

“Not much, not much I uh...”, he was speaking with a nervous excited haste as if he had just killed a man. “I just, well, I’m graduating in two days and I’m really very drunk and I took acid not too long ago and I



can't stop thinking of you and I just... I can't ...  
I need ...I want you ... to know how much you  
meant to me and how much you changed me  
and ... I need to know ... I mean, god! I really  
hope I didn't rush you or hurt you in any way I  
just, I need to know”

I paused – allowing his words to sink  
into my skin one last time. They slipped off like  
drops of sweat on plastic.

“You meant a lot to me too.”



Clerestory Journal of the Arts is a literary and arts journal that curates submissions from undergraduate students at Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design. By offering students an opportunity for publication, Clerestory hopes to inspire young artists to continue their creative pursuits, help maintain a high bar of quality for the arts at both campuses, stimulate conversation about student work throughout each school and beyond, and foster engagement between student artists and the wider community.

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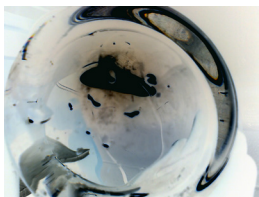
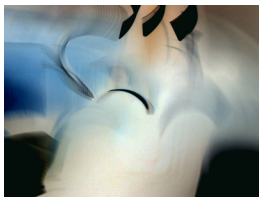
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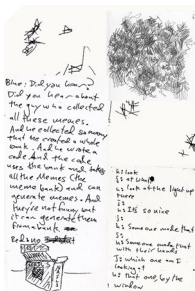
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