The Best AMERICAN SHORT STORIES® 2022

Selected from U.S. and Canadian Magazines

by Andrew Sean Greer

with Heidi Pitlor

With an Introduction

by Andrew Sean Greer

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LESLIE BLANCO's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review, PANK, Calyx, Southern Humanities Review,* and *The Coachella Review,* among others. Her story "I Haven't Forgotten You" won Big Muddy's 2019 Wilda Hearne Flash Fiction Prize. "A Ravishing Sun" was selected for publication from among the finalists of the 2020 New Letters Robert Day Award for Fiction. In 2021, "My Wish for You in the Land of the Dead: A Cuban Sandwich" was the winner of the Howard Frank Mosher Short Fiction Prize at Hunger Mountain. Leslie is the recent recipient of a Vermont Studio Center fellowship, a Hedgebrook fellowship, and a Rona Jaffe fellowship. She has an MFA from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and a novel in the closet. She loves travel, the diverse and universal feast of spiritual possibility, and speaking to children through invented characters born when said children press her belly button.

• In August of 2001, I was in a head-on collision with a motorcyclist who died at the scene of the accident. I was getting divorced, I was leaving a legal career to begin an MFA in fiction writing, jumping recklessly off the cliffs of stability into the unknown. No one approved. Old friends and relatives didn't recognize me anymore, some were no longer speaking to me out of their own need to take sides, and I was in a lot of pain. Three weeks after the car accident, some blocks south of the apartment I'd just vacated, planes flew into the Twin Towers. None of the life crisis stuff sunk me, maybe not even the towers, but that car accident was a hard stop, a symbol for everything else. We can't see what's coming. We can't see what threatens us, what's going to happen, where it all ends. I started getting migraines, I understood depression for the first time, the word "PTSD" came up a lot. I went on with my life, the MFA, a new relationship, marriage, kids, a second divorce, but some part of me was still standing on that asphalt, telling a dying man he was going to be okay.

I wrote about it in small bursts of micro-memoir. Memoir has always felt too exposed for me, so I shelved it and started a novel. But the pieces and the details of the story pulled at me like a current, like a tide going out to expose a beach I wanted to walk. Later, when I got semi-accidentally pregnant with triplets and my schedule no longer accommodated the hours my novel needed, I wanted to know how it ended. I took the pieces out, filled in the in-betweens, and turned the whole thing into fiction. "I" took my pain and became someone else. The parents in this story have commonalities with my own, but they became fictional characters, as did the two significant others. Still, it felt too exposed, it didn't feel done. I started a second novel. Finally, when the pandemic made me a Zoom home-school teacher overnight, I took it out again. I edited again. And then I did that terrifying thing and sent it out, since I was probably going to die of COVID anyway. It only took me twenty years to finish it.

YOHANCA DELGADO was raised in New York City by parents from the Dominican Republic and Cuba. She is a graduate of American University's MFA program and a 2022 National Endowment for the Arts fellow. She lives in California, where she is a 2021–2023 Wallace Stegner fellow at Stanford University. Her recent fiction appears in *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2021*, *One Story*, *A Public Space*, and *The Paris Review*.

- This story is inspired by a Latin American nursery rhyme I sang growing up called "Arroz con Leche." Arroz con Leche, a delicious dessert—and apparently also a bachelor—is in search of a wife. The song says the perfect bride will be a little widow from the capital who knows how to sew, who knows how to embroider, and who always puts the needle back in its place. The rhyme sparked my imagination when I was a kid. Who was this mysterious widow and what was so great about her sewing? As an adult, I had a lot of fun finding out.

This story takes the collective first person because nursery rhymes are stories we sing together, retelling and reinforcing them for ourselves and for each other. As I wrote, the story swiftly revealed itself to be an exploration of collective narrative—which we sometimes call gossip and sometimes call history—and its ability to transform and subvert itself, even when we think we've got all the facts. That the story is set entirely in the domestic sphere is no accident; I wanted to celebrate how full of life, magic, and imagination domestic spaces are *because* they are the spaces women have traditionally occupied. This is a story about women talking to each other at home. I wrote it for my mother, the most captivating storyteller I know.

KIM COLEMAN FOOTE grew up in New Jersey, where she penciled her first story at the age of seven(ish). Her writing has appeared most recently in *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and

the *Missouri Review*, and has been recognized by several fellowships, including from the National Endowment for the Arts, Phillips Exeter Academy, the New York Foundation for the Arts, Center for Fiction, MacDowell, and Hedgebrook. She received an MFA from Chicago State University.

• A few years before "Man of the House" came into existence, I started a fiction collection based on my family's experience of the Great Migration, thinking I would feature women's voices only. Then one day, while perusing an anthology of stories and struggling to connect with one about a man on the road, I saw my grandfather on I-95, driving to Florida to meet his uncle. Details of his trip were scant: I'd heard he talked about it often and that his sister couldn't join him at the last minute, and I'd seen the Polaroid. And yet, I found myself urgently starting a story from his very male perspective, moments of toxic masculinity and all.

For one, I'd taken that same trip in 2006 to locate my uncle's grave (in a gray Buick with cousins on the Grimes side). No one at Campbellton's teeny town hall knew his name, so we stopped at a nearby black cemetery. The groundskeeper hadn't heard of any Colemans either, but he recognized the surname on the 1932 letter I'd brought along, salvaged from my great-aunt's hoard. Not long after, my cousins and I stood on the porch of that family. The middle-aged woman who answered the door confirmed her relation and invited us inside, just like that. She stunned me more as she started phoning friends, asking if they remembered my uncle. Then she handed me the receiver: it was the local undertaker who'd buried him.

Drawing from those memorable events, I easily re-created my grandfather's road trip, but something additional was driving me: the recent and very trippy encounter I'd had with an older relative, in whom I'd been subconsciously seeking a road map, in the figurative sense. I had no idea if my grandfather made his journey for the same reason, but his mother's death in the early seventies seemed a fitting and timely impetus. She'd been his anchor, though I suspect her influence in his life limited his autonomy. I envisioned a man at once in mourning and freed from her control. By imagining him contend with his manhood, not only within this racist society but also within a "house of mule-headed women," I was able to process and digest my own experience. I had to reckon as well with the man I'd adored as a little girl—the tall yet awkward and quiet man—and the one I discovered as an adult through oral history—who'd hurt my grandmother, and who'd given his children more in the way of material things than fatherly affection.

After finishing a few drafts of the story, I came across Eudora Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman" and was struck by the broad similarities. I can only hope that my grandfather, like my fictional Jeb and Welty's Bowman, came to acknowledge his shortcomings and express his regrets before his final moments.

LAUREN GROFF is the author of six books, most recently *Matrix, Florida,* and *Fates and Furies,* all of which were finalists for the National Book Award. Her work has won the Story Prize and France's Grand Prix de l'Héroïne, and has been published in thirty-five languages. This is her sixth story in the *Best American Short Stories* anthology.

• There are parts of this story that I have tried and failed to tell for over two decades. Bless my agent, Bill Clegg, for having read perhaps a dozen variations on some of these themes over the years, and each time ever so gently suggesting that I unhook the story and let it swim away to grow for a bit longer. It's impossible to rush a story if it just isn't ready to be finished. In any event, there are two progenitors for this story: one is a stranger in a bar in Philadelphia in 2001, who, stuck in a corner booth and already pretty drunk, told me a harrowing story, the details of which are entirely different from those here; the other is someone deeply beloved to me who will remain anonymous. The story was one of the only things I managed to write during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I was sequestered and single-parenting with my children and dog in the New Hampshire woods. I had to be everything all at once: tech support, tutor, chef, housekeeper, nurse, my boys' only friend inside the house, and the weight of the world was nearly enough to break me. Outside in the world, the pandemic raged, and in the streets, brave people were protesting police violence. This mix of claustrophobic domesticity, the weird compression and wavering of time that we were experiencing, and the passionate resistance to the abuse of police power made this story swim back up to the surface, having at last grown so large it was impossible to ignore.

GREG JACKSON is the author of the story collection *Prodigals*, for which he received the Bard Fiction Prize and the National Book Foundation's 5 Under 35 Award. His stories and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, *Conjunctions*, and *The Point*, among other places, and his nonfiction has been anthologized in *The Best American Essays*. In 2017 *Granta* selected him for their list of Best Young American Novelists. His novel *The Dimensions of a Cave* will be published in 2023.

• I usually have an idea for a story rattling around in my head, which I return to over a period of months, often in those moments just before sleep. If I keep coming back to it, I know there's something to it, a latent energy or bottled meaning. The premise of a house with an unexplained hollow seems, in retrospect, like a literalization of this maxim. (Dario Argento's *giallo* classic *Deep Red*, with its sealed room, may have planted the seed.) Once I had the hollow and Jack, the protagonist, I knew I needed another element to destabilize the static picture. That's when an old story about a college football player who abandoned the sport for painting came back to me. I don't remember what exactly about this collection of odd

parts felt right: just that I could sense the wires touching, sparks coming off. I knew almost nothing else when I started writing—only perhaps that van Gogh, Valente's rather unsophisticated and obvious choice of artistic hero, would play a role. The characters' catalytic volatility blasted the path forward, and slowly the life force in Valente overwhelmed the donnée, the hollow, fastening the story with progressive firmness to his peculiar magnetism. That I didn't anticipate! But it's nice to be surprised.

GISH JEN is the author of nine books—two works of nonfiction, five novels, and two collections of stories—the most recent of which is *Thank You, Mr. Nixon*. The recipient of support from the Radcliffe Institute, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Lannan Foundation, as well as of a Mildred and Harold Strauss Living, Jen is member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. This is her fifth story to appear in *The Best American Stories* series.

• I sat down to write one more story for my collection *Thank You, Mr. Nixon* during the COVID lockdown. I did not strictly speaking need another story for the book. Knopf had already taken it, and I already had ten stories, a nice round number.

But I wanted the arc of the book to limn the fifty years since the opening of China in 1972. Of course, it is impossible to capture all the changes, and finally the stories are just stories. They capture, I hope, a sense of how human experience is shaped by history, but they were never meant to document this half century, much less document it exhaustively. At the same time, to gloss over the current political situation seemed to me a glaring omission.

I had ventured into politically fraught waters before. My nonfiction book *The Girl at the Baggage Claim: Explaining the East-West Culture Gap,* for example, had opened with a photo of the Tiananmen tank man. But up to this point I had largely eschewed writing about Taiwan and Hong Kong as political entities, aware that to do so was to nix my chances of ever returning to the Mainland: the authorities there do not brook even the most casual mention of the T-word, much less public expressions of sympathy for Hong Kong.

I was not anxious to go out of my way to defy them. But neither did I want to write a dishonest book. And so I plunged in. And just as in the story the intensity of quarantine helps Betty Koo face something she'd rather not so, too, in reality, it helped me. In the resounding quiet, I wrote and wrote. Then there it was on the page, through the alchemy of fiction: the unavoidable truth.

CLAIRE LUCHETTE is the author of the novel *Agatha of Little Neon*. A National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 honoree, Luchette has received

grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, MacDowell, Yaddo, Lighthouse Works, and the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing. Their work has appeared in the Pushcart Prize anthology, the *New York Times*, *Ploughshares*, *Granta*, and *The Kenyon Review*.

• I wrote the first draft of "Sugar Island" at a writing residency on a real-world island. It was a time when I had no permanent mailing address—I'd been living at residencies and crashing on friends' couches. Everything I owned was in the trunk of my car. Earlier that year, I was in the throes of a breakup, and I couldn't stop ruminating about throwing things away: the relationship had been reduced to a pile of objects, and I kept asking, about things I'd been given, "What am I to do with these?" In this story I wanted to explore the consequences of receiving—gifts, kindness, love.

ELIZABETH MCCRACKEN is the author of seven books, including *Thunderstruck* (winner of the 2015 Story Prize) and *The Souvenir Museum*. Her eighth book, a novel called *The Hero of this Book*, will be published in October 2022.

• There's a statue at the Glyptotek in Copenhagen that looks like my late father, Samuel McCracken. I saw it on my way to a collection at the back of the museum, of stone noses that had lost their statues; I turned the corner, and there he was, my father, a big old man with a big old beard, weary head propped up on one expressive hand. Immediately I understood that *this* was why I'd come to the museum, why I was in Denmark at all. I was shaken and full of joy.

This short story was written aimed at this sculpture and that emotion. Then it went on a tour of Denmark and never got there.

The older I get the more I think about setting. Or maybe I think less about it: I just know I like to set my short stories in peculiar, particular places, and my imagination isn't good enough to make them up. Therefore, when I travel, I am a kind of short story location scout. I did go with my family to Legoland (we all hated it); Odin's Odense (where I couldn't tell whether a woman was pretending to live in the past or was only dressed that way); Ærø to dabble in smithery; and the Souvenir Museum on Langeland. They are all described pretty accurately in the story. Nothing else is autobiographical, though in college I *did* prop-master a production of *True West* and the director, who I didn't know well, broke all the toasters for dramatic effect in a speech to the actors.

But the impulse was more autobiographical than any short story I've ever written: me in a museum, looking at what seemed to be my father carved in stone twice or three times life-size, wondering how he got there, grateful for and startled at the strange shadow of his company.

ALICE MCDERMOTT has published eight novels and an essay collection, *What About the Baby? Some Thoughts on the Art of Fiction.* Her most recent novel, *The Ninth Hour,* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Kirkus Prize. In 2018 *The Ninth Hour* received France's Prix Femina for a work in translation. *Someone,* a *New York Times* best seller, was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, as well as the National Book Award and the Dublin IMPAC Award. Three of her previous novels, *After This, At Weddings and Wakes,* and *That Night,* were finalists for the Pulitzer Prize. Her fourth novel, *Charming Billy,* won the National Book Award for Fiction. For over two decades, she was the Richard A. Macksey Professor for Distinguished Teaching in the Humanities at Johns Hopkins University and a member of the faculty at the Sewanee Writers Conference. She lives in Bethesda, Maryland.

• I wrote "Post" to pay homage to Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider,* one of the first stories I was moved to reread as the pandemic began to unfold. Porter's brilliant account of two young people falling in love in the midst of the 1918 flu epidemic and the First World War has always struck me as a masterpiece: witty, compassionate, devastating. Rereading it in 2020, I recognized as well how honestly, how brutally, how generously, Porter's story captured our own era's collective confrontation with mortality. A confrontation popular discourse, or perhaps the politics of the moment, seemed reluctant to acknowledge. But how to pay homage to a classic while also making it new? Porter's Miranda and Adam are at the beginning of their romance; I imagined my Mira and Adam as *post.* My son told me that after his bout with the virus, sauvignon blanc tasted like peanut butter. Funny, but I couldn't use it. My daughter told me the sweet smell of pot smoke drifting from New York City balconies struck her, post-COVID, as awful . . . and so my own version of Katherine Anne Porter's magnificent tale began to find its way.

KEVIN MOFFETT is the author of two story collections and co-author of *The Silent History,* a narrative app for mobile devices, as well as a pair of scripted podcasts for Gimlet Media, *Sandra* and most recently *The Final Chapters of Richard Brown Winters.* He teaches at Claremont McKenna College.

• When I was a kid the newspaper published a column called Chatterbox, which was full of local gossip, mostly wedding engagements and job promotions and news that readers probably sent in themselves. Every once in a while, though, there'd be a blind item written in a tantalizingly cryptic code, so only those really in the know would be able to identify the subject. Like, *H.T. lost his keys but not his sense of humor. Must've been some rehearsal dinner!*

I was well into writing a story about the town where I live when I real-

ized I was mimicking the brevity, if not the civic heft, of Chatterbox. More and more, as both a writer and a reader, I'm drawn to short, self-contained pieces, ones that arrive late to the party and leave before they say anything too stupid. Which is surely less reflective of the imperatives of the subject matter than the limitations of this writer's (and reader's) attention span. I've been trying to finish what I begin in a given day, which often means writing stories that are only a few sentences long.

GINA OCHSNER lives in western Oregon. She is the author of the short story collections *The Necessary Grace to Fall* and *People I Wanted to Be*. Her novels include *The Russian Dreambook of Color and Flight* and *The Hidden Letters of Velta B*. She teaches at Corban University and with Seattle Pacific University's low-residency MFA program.

• When I was young, I often visited my grandparents who lived near Astoria, Oregon. The town sits on steep hills overlooking the mouth of the Columbia River. My grandfather told me that over two thousand vessels had been lost in this part of the Columbia. He also told me that water was not my friend. I believed him. Everything about the river and environs—its shifting sandbars, the adjacent tidal flats of Young's Bay, the dense fogs that confused even the most experienced fishers—spoke of treachery. And yet, in that wildness, a raw beauty persists.

Five years ago, when I started work on this story, I was curious about the Finnish population in Astoria. I wondered about their role in the fishing and logging industry. I also wondered about how the sense of Finnish identity would or would not be maintained during the 1930s and '40s, when many people felt pressure to assimilate. I wondered, too, about the stories people tell themselves and how someone might maintain multiple versions of the same story. Writing a letter about an event, for example, seems to allow for squishy self-editing, evasion, reshaping. Initially, I thought I would write about people binding up one another's wounds. I thought I would write a simple love story. The child arrived and I thought I would write about joy. And then the story took a different turn and I decided to let it go where it wanted to.

OKWIRI ODUOR was born in Nairobi, Kenya. Her short story "My Father's Head" won the 2014 Caine Prize for African Writing. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Harper's*, *Granta*, *The New Inquiry*, *Kwani*, and elsewhere. She has been a fellow at MacDowell and Art Omi and a visiting writer at the Lannan Center. Oduor has an MFA in creative writing from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She currently lives in Germany.

• After writing my debut novel, I felt so full of longing for my protagonist. She had been with me for so long, had accompanied me on so many journeys, and quite suddenly she was turning away from me and bidding me goodbye. I was not ready to let go of her. Ayosa Ataraxis Brown. Who

was at once young and old, at once wise and naïve, at once empathetic and terribly mean. I begged her to come with me on one more adventure. She did stay with me, which I was grateful for, but the most unexpected thing that she did was bring someone else along with her. The novel was about the ways in which Ayosa reconciles with her mother's faltering and inadequate love, the ways in which she sought and found herself in other people and places. One of those people was Mbiu, who then became more than a friend to Ayosa. In the novel, they had a sister-making ceremony, and henceforth, were completely, irrevocably, *sisters.* The novel was told from Ayosa's perspective, but in this story ("Mbiu Dash"), Ayosa was demanding that we meet her sister Mbiu and get to know her too. It is an addendum to the novel. It is a postscript from the protagonist, saying goodbye-see-you-later-we-are-all-right-we-have-each-other-okay-then.

ALIX OHLIN is the author of six books, most recently the novel *Dual Citizens* and the story collection *We Want What We Want.* Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker,* the *New York Times,* and on public radio's "Selected Shorts." She lives in Vancouver and teaches at the University of British Columbia.

- This story was written against the backdrop of the wildfires in Australia in 2019–2020 and my constant thrumming worry about climate change. I couldn't stop thinking about how the language used to describe economic systems—health, growth, disruption, expansion—seems fundamentally divorced from the people and places affected by those systems. "The Meeting" is a story about that, and I'm grateful to Allison Wright at *Virginia Quarterly Review* for giving it a home.

KENAN ORHAN'S fiction has appeared in *The Paris Review, Prairie Schooner, Massachusetts Review,* and other publications. He is a 2019 O. Henry Prize recipient, and his collection *I Am My Country and Other Stories* is forthcoming. He lives in Kansas City.

- It was a few years back I'd read a short article about a group of Turkish garbage collectors in Ankara who'd started their own library entirely with books they'd saved out of the trash. This was, if not at the height of the mass detentions and purges and bans after the 2016 coup attempt, certainly still in its throes, and I remember thinking immediately that this story would get all these workers arrested. I'm not sure why, perhaps because I very rarely ever part with any of my own books, but I couldn't think of any reason that people would throw these books away unless they were politically suggestive and dangerous to have on one's bookshelf. I assumed then that these garbage collectors were operating a sort of dissident and clandestine library and now that news had broken of their operation, they would all be arrested and left in prisons awaiting their trials indefinitely (as is unfortunately common for political dissidents in Turkey).

I'd learned later of course that they were generally the most ordinary of books—children's stories, spy novels, gardening guides—most probably they were old and tattered. With the attention, the garbage collectors began receiving scores of book donations for their library so they opened it up to the public. I was struck by this defiance of waste in almost poetic circumstances, just as I was struck in my original misunderstanding of a rogue library. I was working on a novel at the time, but these two proto-concepts whirled about in the back of my head for maybe two years before I finally put pen to paper. Whirling with them was the picture from the article of a few people caked in HiVis and browsing their shelves in what appears to be an underground bunker (surely informing my estimation that it was a dissident library). Sometimes I get an idea for a story and write it quick as I can, other times the idea sits for a long time until its shell is digested and it becomes clear to me. When it's like that, the story almost writes itself. It becomes a bit of writing very much rooted in my obsessions. I guess at the time, I was obsessed with waste and police states.

KAREN RUSSELL is the author of three story collections, most recently *Orange World and Other Stories,* the novella *Sleep Donation,* and the novel *Swamplandia!,* winner of the New York Public Library Young Lions Award and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She has received a MacArthur Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Bard Fiction Prize, and a Shirley Jackson Award. Born and raised in Miami, Florida, she now lives in Portland, Oregon, with her family.

- On the day "The Ghost Birds" was published, the ivory-billed woodpecker was officially declared extinct. For years it had been a rumor in the deep swamp, glimpsed "at the edge of existence"; now a formal obituary had been issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Although this story is set in the future, in many ways I felt like I was writing about our high-stakes present moment on a planet already haunted by the finality of extinction. With "The Ghost Birds," I wanted to channel the retrospective urgency of a ghost story—the terrifying future I've imagined here has not yet come to pass, but it's not hyperbole to say that all life on Earth depends on the actions we take today. "A haunting is a something-to-be-done," writes the sociologist Avery Gordon. One reason I love reading and writing speculative fiction is that it reveals other modes of being, and reminds me that the darkest outcomes are not fixed.

Chapman Elementary is a real school, and the chimney is a locally famous landmark here in Portland, Oregon—the world's largest known roost of Vaux's swifts. We take our children to see them every September, tailgating nightfall. Hundreds of people flock together on a hill outside the school in a sort of gentle bacchanal, cheering for the swifts (and, in some cases, the hawks and falcons). Right at sunset, thousands of birds be-

gin to spiral into the open chimney. It's one of the most incredible things I've ever witnessed. I tried my best in this story, but words in a row really cannot do it justice. For the past two years, "Swift Watch," our big public celebration of their migration, has been canceled due to concerns about wildfire smoke and COVID-19. The good news is that the swifts did return to the chimney last fall. They are very much alive, I'm happy to report.

SANJENA SATHIAN is the author of *Gold Diggers*, which was named a Top 10 Best Book of 2021 by the *Washington Post*, a Best Book of 2021 by NPR and Amazon, and longlisted for the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize. Her short fiction appears in *The Atlantic*, *Conjunctions*, *Boulevard*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *The Masters Review*, and *Joyland*. She's written nonfiction for *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and more. She's a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, from which she received a Michener-Copernicus Fellowship and where she was supported by the Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans.

• When I was living in India in my twenties, I visited the Ajanta and Ellora Caves, two famous historical sites a few hours from my home of Mumbai. I had never seen anything like those caves, which are painted and carved with work dating back to the 2nd century BC. The carvings are particularly astonishing. I felt what I can only describe as a spiritual peace. I was moved not by the gods or Buddhas depicted, but by the enormous human effort of creation, and by the sheer scope of history on display.

The whole experience of moving to India had, for me, been an exercise in unlearning history. In the diaspora, many of us are told that the India of today is an amber-frozen version of the country our parents left—perfect, conservative. This imaginary reshaping of India is what Salman Rushdie called "the India of the mind." The country I moved to was more textured, full of young people smoking hash and wearing miniskirts, as well as devout Hindus. But among Indians, there was a great unlearning happening, too, an act which in its darker moments was more like a forced, false reeducation. India is still shaking off the shame, injury, infuriating indignity, and pillage of British colonialism. I found some aspects of the quest to create a postcolonial identity moving—proof that we can remake a national identity through acts of imagination. But another part of the construction of India's new postcolonial identity is dark. The conservative government hawks a false picture of the country, painting it not as a pluralist society but as a rightfully Hindu nation. This has resulted in the persecution of minorities—and in a fabrication of a new, fantastical history. Hindu nationalists have claimed that Hindu scriptures are fact, and that early Indians invented the internet, reproductive genetics, plastic surgery, and flying machines capable of invisibility and interplanetary travel. (Indians did invent plastic surgery–but the prime minister cites the Hindu myth

of Lord Ganesha's human head being severed from his body and replaced by an elephant head.)

The week I turned "Mr. Ashok's Monument" in to my graduate writing workshop, Reuters published an investigation about a "committee of scholars" gathering, at the conservative government's behest, to rewrite history with a Hindu golden age in mind. The committee's findings were to shape education and policy for years to come. This story is not only fantastical. It is also realist. (Like Gabriel García Márquez, whose work has shaped mine, I was once a journalist.) Dictators love to reimagine history as justification for their evils. As I write this, Russia is ravaging Ukraine, manipulating the past to Putin's own ends. It is the latest incarnation in a perennial story.

History exerts a powerful pull on me, like many people whose origins are in formerly colonized nations. "Mr. Ashok's Monument" is about the complexity of that pull—its seductions, its dangers, and its myriad mysteries.

ERIN SOMERS is the author of the novel *Stay Up with Hugo Best.* Her writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, the *New York Times*, *GQ*, and elsewhere. She lives in Beacon, New York.

• Every story I write starts with a word or phrase I can't get out of my head. In this case, it was the title, "Ten Year Affair." I liked the sound of it; it seemed full of narrative potential. I wondered what a ten year affair would look like, how the conditions could be sustained over the course of a decade, why the parties involved would not simply get divorced from their spouses.

I was lucky the voice was there when I sat down to write. This doesn't always happen. Sometimes I can't catch the voice at all and the project is doomed. The voice of this story suggested itself to me immediately—clean and timeless and middle class, desperate on the buried level, but also humorous and fresh. A sort of neo-Cheever.

The conceit of this story—the double timelines that depart and converge—did not come to me until I wrote the word "multiverse" at the end of the first section. That, for me, is the most exciting part of writing fiction: when the language tells you what to do next. When you figure out how to use the elements that have arisen out of instinct, out of nowhere, out of the ether.

It's all so mysterious. The subconscious, whatever is guiding word choice, makes decisions and then the analytic part of the brain figures out how to incorporate them. The id types "multiverse," the ego thinks "Yes, I can use that." It's almost an assembly line, but also so far from an assembly line that the comparison is laughable. When these two halves work in tandem, I feel as though I am writing above my intelligence. I don't know how that's possible, but it is. It takes a lot of coffee to get there.

I wrote this story in four or five concentrated sittings, and smoothed it out over a second draft. I don't do a lot of drafts because I find overrevision can kill what is alive in the work. I had a sense that this story was special as I was writing it. When that happens, and it's rare, I have no choice but to give it the best of myself, my sharpest and funniest and most humane thoughts. Every bit of guts I can summon. Then I pray to stick the landing.

HÉCTOR TOBAR is the Los Angeles–born author of five books, including the novels *The Tattooed Soldier, The Barbarian Nurseries*, and *The Last Great Road Bum*. His nonfiction *Deep Down Dark* was a *New York Times* best seller. Tobar's fiction has appeared in *Best American Short Stories 2016*, *Zyzzyva*, *Slate*, and elsewhere, and his books have been translated into fifteen languages. He earned his MFA in creative writing from the University of California, Irvine. As a journalist, he has been a foreign correspondent and columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* and has written for the *New York Times, The New Yorker, Harper's*, and others.

• For the longest time, I had been wanting to write a story about immigration detention. It is, after all, one of the defining injustices of the American present, the incarceration of a half-million people, each placed into an existential and legal limbo for the "crime" of trying to provide for their families. But how to approach such a story? One day, as I was taking a long walk through my Los Angeles neighborhood, I noticed a small graffito repeated on the sidewalk again and again: *Weedwolf*. I imagined a Mexican immigrant in his holding cell, contemplating the lawlessness and decay he had seen in the United States. He realizes he is being punished for breaking a rule—by a nation of rampant rule breakers. But the two or three times I tried to actually write the story, it came out too maudlin and too bitter to be interesting.

Some months or years later, I was driving cross-country, alone, listening to a wonderful audiobook reading of *The Trial*. It occurred to me that I could write my detention story as the tale of a man caught up in a bizarre quasi-legal system, à la Kafka. I soon came up with a suitably weird and disturbing premise: a law allowing U.S. citizens to choose immigrants to serve their prison sentences. With that, the story just took off. I was aided, in large measure, by the real-world surrealism of the immigration "justice" system. In Los Angeles, the courtrooms where the undocumented stand before immigration judges are located in an old, downtown bank building much like the one in "The Sins of Others." And across the country there are privately operated immigration detention facilities located in old motels and other unlikely places.

MEGHAN LOUISE WAGNER lives in northeast Ohio. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in such places as *Agni, Hobart, X-R-A-Y, Okay*

Donkey, and *McSweeney's Internet Tendency.* She recently graduated from the Northeast Ohio MFA program.

• The only time I saw the elephant seals was on a quick trip up the California coast. It floored me that these massive creatures hung out on this beach so close to the highway. At the time, I didn't think the experience had much of an effect on me. Yet, this was in the middle of my serious drinking days, back when I got blackout drunk almost every single night. I didn't have much self-awareness.

In my last years of drinking, I became drawn to stories about recovery. I wrote lots of them about Paul, Helen, Hank, and Diana. I worked as a line cook and I used to pester the one sober guy on staff about the twelve steps. I claimed it was just research for my stories. He was especially kind in how he answered all my questions and only occasionally suggested I hit a meeting myself.

Years later, I drank myself into a corner and moved back to Ohio to get sober. It took a couple of years before I could write again. However, once I got back into it, I discovered I didn't know how to tell a cohesive story. So I applied to a local MFA program and, while there, the elephant seals kept creeping into my work. Eventually the other characters did too.

Then the pandemic hit and my MFA program went online and I struggled to stay sober in a world where it perpetually felt like wine o'clock. I spent a lot of time taking long, meandering walks. I must have written five or six different versions of "Elephant Seals" in those weeks—some from Paul's point of view, some from Diana's, some Helen's. I couldn't get any one version right. I worried it was too big for a single story.

On one of these walks, I passed a few of my old haunts. They were all closed for the pandemic and my memories began to feel like trips through alternate realities. A different version of me used to drink at this bar. Another version of me got kicked out of that club. Another version of me was here, stuck.

I walked home and knocked out the first draft in about a day. But in the following months of revisions, I finally came to understand something about these characters that I couldn't when I was still drinking. Recovery isn't always about redemption. There are some doors that will always stay closed. Some places you can never return to. Some people who will never let you back into their lives. But they still live in your bones. And they creak when you move.

BRYAN WASHINGTON is the author of *Memorial* and *Lot.* He's a National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 Honoree, a recipient of the International Dylan Thomas Prize, the New York Public Library's Young Lions Award, the Lambda Literary Award, and an O. Henry Award. He was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, the National Book

Critics Circle John Leonard Prize, the Aspen Literary Award, the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize, the Joyce Carol Oates Prize, the Andrew Carnegie Medal of Excellence, and the PEN/Robert Bingham prize. He is from Houston.

• For the last while, many of my running conversations with friends have revolved around the forms that a queer family can take. And it's a question whose knots get exponentially sharper when we're talking about queer folks of color. A lot of us didn't grow up with accessible models for that. And the ones we're privy to in better-funded media are largely reductive. So those dialogues have made for steady (restless, noisy) companions throughout the pandemic—alongside the uncertainty of whether we'd even *want* such a thing, to say nothing of what it'd actually *look* like.

None of us really came up with an answer. But that feels (right now, at least) like the point. Maybe the relationships in our lives, and the forms that our dalliances take, are simply whatever we make of them, whatever that looks like at the time. Maybe, if we're lucky, these are hardly static designs. Maybe they elude explanation or codification. The protagonist of this story and his boyfriend navigate similar questions—do we ever really let go of the relationships we've carried with us; what can be discovered if we abandon how we've been "told to be" for who we *actually* want to become—and while neither of them finds an answer, I took a lot of solace in their realizing that this nonresolution was totally fine. And that their coupling doesn't have to look like anything they've seen before. One of the tricks of this story was trying to relegate that epiphany into prose, which felt pretty much impossible until the cat came along.

Other Distinguished Stories of 2021

Aguda, Pemi
Imagine Me Carrying You. *Ploughshares,* vol. 47, no. 1.
Atta, Sefi
Plantation Boulevard. *Zoetrope: All-Story,* vol. 25, no. 1.
Awad, Mona
Revere. *Ploughshares,* vol. 47, no. 2.

Baker, Laurie
American Lady. *Alaska Quarterly Review,* vol. 38, nos. 1 & 2.
Ball, Jesse
The Repeat Room. *Granta,* no. 156.
Bass, Rick
The Inside Passage. *The Idaho Review,* no. 19.
Bezmozgis, David
The Test. *Zoetrope: All-Story,* vol. 25, no. 1.
Boyle, T. C.
The Shape of a Teardrop. *The New Yorker,* March 15.
Braunstein, Sarah
Superstition. *The New Yorker,* August 9.
Broker, Scott
Marco Polo. *The Idaho Review,* no. 19.

Buck, Charlie
Preparedness. *Alaska Quarterly Review,* vol. 37, nos. 3 & 4.

Clare, Olivia
Some Agonies Over and Over. *The Yale Review,* vol. 109, no. 1.
Cline, Emma
The Iceman. *The New Yorker,* August 23.
Collins, Whitney
Lush. *Agni,* no. 93.

Dodson, Thomas
Keeping. *The Missouri Review,* vol. 44, no. 1.
Duong, Steven
The Five-Year Plan. *Catapult,* May 14.
DuQue, Jenzo
Village Pets. *BOMB Magazine,* 156.

Eyer, T. N.
Date of Death. *Water-Stone Review,* vol. 24.

Freeman, Eva
In the Aftermath. *Granta,* no. 156.
Frith, Susan
Better Austens. *The Briar Cliff Review,* vol. 33.

Garbus, Cassandra
Hillside Homes. *American Short Fiction,* vol. 24, no. 73.
Goodman, Allegra
A Challenge You Have Overcome. *The New Yorker,* January 25.
Greenfeld, Karl Taro
Womanly Words. *Story,* no. 11.
Griffiths, Rachel Eliza
Miracle River. *Chicago Quarterly Review,* vol. 33.

Harlan, Kathryn
Endangered Animals. *Colorado Review,* vol. 48, no. 1.
Heighton, Steve
Instructions for the Drowning. *The Threepenny Review,* 166.
Heng, Rachel
Before the Valley. *The New Yorker,* June 7.
Hodgen, Christie
Bush v. Gore. *Ploughshares,* vol. 47, nos. 3 & 4.
Holmes, J. M.
Children of the Good Book. *The New Yorker,* May 17.
HolyWhiteMountain, Sterling
Featherweight. *The New Yorker,* April 5.
Howard, Tom
Disappearing Act. *Colorado Review,* vol. 48, no. 2.
Hsieh Chou, Elaine
Skinfolk. *Ploughshares,* vol. 46, no. 4.
Hunt Kivel, Emily
Fook. *Southwest Review,* vol. 106, no. 2.
Hurley, Blaire
The Telepathist. *New Letters,* vol. 87, nos. 1 & 2.

Jacobs, Mark
Billyknuckles. *The Hudson Review,* vol. 74, no. 2.
Jamir, Nahal Suzanne
Pilgrim. *The Cincinnati Review,* vol. 18, no. 2.

Kazmi, Hurmat
Selection Week. *The New Yorker,* August 16.
Kochai, Jamil Jan
The Haunting of Hajji Hotak. *The New Yorker,* November 8.
Kyle, Aryn
Copper Queen. *The Georgia Review,* vol. 75, no. 3.

Labowskie, Mark
Wool. *Zyzzyva,* no. 121.
Langloss, Maureen
I Am in It. *Alaska Quarterly Review,* vol. 37, nos. 3 & 4.
Lansburgh, Matthew
Hasina. *New England Review,* vol. 42, no. 1.
Li, Yiyun
Hello, Goodbye. *The New Yorker,* November 15.
Lim, Bronte
Petite Ceinture. *The Iowa Review,* vol. 50, no. 3.

Majka, Sara
The Riverbend Motel. *Agni,* no. 93.
Mäkinen, Maija
1993. *The Iowa Review,* vol. 50, no. 3.
Makkai, Rebecca
Women Corinne Does Not Actually Know. *Harper's Magazine,* September.
Marburg, Louise
You Have Reached Your Destination. *The Hudson Review,* vol. 74, no. 2.
Marcus, Halimah
The Party Goers. *The Southampton Review,* vol. 15, no. 28.
Markham, Lauren
Vultures. *The Georgia Review,* vol. 75, no. 2.
Mason, Daniel
The Wolves of Circassia. *Zoetrope: All-Story,* vol. 24, no. 4.

McCracken, Elizabeth
The Get-Go. *American Short Fiction,* vol. 24, no. 73.
McDermott, Alice
Half Spent. *The Sewanee Review,* vol. 129, no. 4.
McKenzie
We All Fall Down. *The Paris Review,* no. 238.
Means, David
The Depletion Prompts. *The New Yorker,* November 1.
Lightning Speaks. *Zoetrope: All-Story,* vol. 25, no. 3.
Moffett, Kevin
How Soon Until We're Deadly?. *American Short Fiction,* vol. 24, no. 73.

Nauman, A. D.
The Cat. *Chicago Quarterly Review,* vol. 34.

O'Brien, Michael
Getting the Lead Out. *Salamander,* no. 51.
Ochsner, Gina
Snow Queen. *North American Review,* vol. 306, no. 2.
O'Donoghue, Mary
Safety Advice for Staying Indoors. *The Common,* no. 22.
Ong, Han
The Monkey Who Speaks. *The New Yorker,* September 13.
Orange, Tommy
Sentence. *Zoetrope: All-Story,* vol. 25, no. 1.
Orner, Peter
Ali. *Conjunctions,* no. 76.
Bernice, Rogers Park, 1957. *The Southern Review,* vol. 57, no. 2.
Ozick, Cynthia
The Coast of New Zealand. *The New Yorker,* June 21.

Parvin, Roy
Bottle. *Boulevard,* no. 109.
Pelish, Alyssa
The Presenting Problem. *Conjunctions,* no. 77.
Perabo, Susan
The Seventh Garden. *Oprah Daily,* May 23, 2021.
Pierce, Thomas
Little Eye. *Zoetrope: All-Story,* vol. 25, no. 2.
Pomerantz, Sharon
Three Women. *Story,* no. 12.
Pruneski, Lauren
Mama, Mama. *The Southern Review,* vol. 57, no. 2.
Puente-Lay, Sofia
Vigil. *Ploughshares,* vol. 46, no. 4.

Reed Petty, Kate
Mr. Pink. *Zyzzyva,* no. 120.
Ríos, Leo
Vagabond. *The Georgia Review,* vol. 75, no. 2.
Roe, Eric
Diedrick Dodge. *Story,* no. 11.
Roensch, Rob
Unalaska. *The Greensboro Review,* no. 110.
Row, Jess
Justify Your Existence. *Harvard Review,* no. 57.

Schubach, Alanna
The Man Upstairs. *The Sewanee Review,* vol. 129, no. 3.
Sittenfeld, Curtis
The Richest Babysitter in the World. *The Atlantic,* July.
Steadham Smith, Laura
Underwater. *North American Review,* vol. 306, no. 1.
Stroud, Ben
The Stomp. *Zoetrope: All-Story,* vol. 25, no. 2.
Stumacher, Adam
Exiles. *The Southern Review,* vol. 57, no. 3.

Tallent, Elizabeth
Poets. *The Threepenny Review,* no. 164.
Talty, Morgan
The Gambler. *Narrative,* Story of the Week.
Taylor, Brandon
Colonial Conditions. *The Yale Review,* vol. 109, no. 3.
Honorarium. *The Sewanee Review,* vol. 129, no. 1.
Thien, Madeleine
Lu, Reshaping. *The New Yorker,* December 20.
Thomas-Kennedy, Jackie
Extinction. *One Story,* no. 276.

Urbanski, Debbie
Long May My Land Be Bright. *New England Review,* vol. 42, no. 1.

Valdez-Quade, Kirstin
After Hours at the Acacia Park Pool. *American Short Fiction,* vol. 24, no. 74.
Vallianatos, Corinna
Traveling Light. *Prairie Schooner,* vol. 95, no. 2.
Vasudevan, Lavanya
Wild Geese. *Ploughshares,* vol. 47, no. 2.
Veasna So, Anthony
Generational Differences. *Zyzzyva,* no. 120.
Maly, Maly, Maly. *The Paris Review,* no. 236.
Volynets, Steven
Shaare Emunah. *Paper Brigade,* vol. 5.

Walbert, Kate
Marriage Quarantine. *The New Yorker,* December 6.
Wells, AJ
The Man Who Drove Backward. *The Georgia Review,* vol. 75, no. 3.
Wise, Spencer
Treyf. *Prairie Schooner,* vol. 95, no. 1.
Wolitzer, Hilma
The Great Escape. *Electric Literature,* no. 484.

American and Canadian Magazines Publishing Short Stories

Abandon Journal
Able Muse
About Place Journal
African American Review
Agni
Alaska Quarterly Review
Alta Journal
American Short Fiction
ANMLY
Another Chicago Magazine
The Antigonish Review
Apogee
Appalachian Review
The Arkansas Intergalactic
The Arkansas International
Aster(ix) Journal
The Atlantic
The Baffler
The Baltimore Review
The Bare Life Review
Barrelhouse
Bayou Magazine
Bay to Ocean Journal
Bellevue Literary Review
Belmont Story Review
Bennington Review
Big Muddy
Blackbird
Black Warrior Review
The Boiler
BOMB Magazine
Boston Review
Boulevard
The Briar Cliff Review
The Brooklyn Review
Burningwood Literary Journal
Camas
Capsule Stories
The Carolina Quarterly
Catamaran
Catapult
The Chattahoochee Review
Chautauqua
Chicago Quarterly Review
Cimarron Review
The Cincinnati Review
Colorado Review
The Columbia Journal
The Columbia Review
The Common
The Concrete Desert Review
Conjunctions

Constellations
The Copperfield Review
Coppernickel
Craft
Crazyhorse
Cream City Review
Cutleaf Journal
The Dalhousie Review
Dark Matter
December
Denver Quarterly
The Dillydoun Review
The Drift
Driftwood
Ecotone
805 Lit + Art
Electric Literature
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
Epiphany
Event
Extreme Zeen
Fairy Tale Review
Fantasy and Science Fiction
Faultline
The Fiddlehead
Flash Frog
Florida Review
Foglifter
The Forge
Fractured Lit
Freeman's
Fresh Ink
Gargoyle
The Georgia Review
The Gettysburg Review
Granta
The Gravity of the Thing
Great River Review
Green Mountains Review
Greensboro Review
Grist
Guernica
Gulf Coast
Harper's Magazine
Harvard Review
Hayden's Ferry Review
Hobart
Hobart Pulp
Honolulu Magazine
The Hopper
The Hudson Review
Hypertext Magazine
The Idaho Review
Image
Indiana Review
Into the Void
The Iowa Review
Iron Horse Literary Review
Jabberwock Review
Jewish Fiction
Joyland
The Kenyon Review
KGB Bar Lit
Kweli Journal
Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet
Lake Effect
Lit Mag
Little Patuxent Review
Longleaf Review
Los Angeles Review of Books
Louisiana Literature
The Louisville Review
Lowestoft Chronicle
The Madison Review
The Manifest Station
The Massachusetts Review
McSweeney's
Meridian
Michigan Quarterly Review
Midnight Breakfast
The Minola Review
The Missouri Review
Monkeybicycle
Moon City Review
Mount Hope
Mudroom Magazine
Narrative
Nelle
New Delta Review
New England Review
New Letters
New South

New World Writing
The New Yorker
Ninth Letter
Noon
North American Review
North Dakota Quarterly
n+1
The Ocean State Review
The Offing
Okay Donkey
One Story
Oprah Daily
Orca
Orion
Orion's Belt
Oyez Review
Oyster River Pages
Packingtown Review
PANK
Paper Brigade
The Paris Review
Passages North
Pembroke Magazine
Pithead Chapel
Pleiades
Ploughshares
Ponder Review
Porter House Review
Potomac Review
Prairie Schooner
Prime Number Magazine
Pulphouse Fiction Magazine
Raritan
Reed
Reservoir Road Literary Review
Room
Ruminate
The Rumpus
Salamander
Salmagundi
Salt Hill
Santa Monica Review
Sapiens
The Satirist
Saturday Evening Post
Scoundrel Time
Sequestrum
The Sewanee Review
Shenandoah
The Shoutflower
Socrates on the Beach
Solstice
The Southampton Review
South Carolina Review
South Dakota Review
Southeast Review
Southern Humanities Review
Southern Indiana Review
The Southern Review
South Shore Review
Southwest Review
Sou'wester
Split Lip Magazine
Story
StoryQuarterly
Stranger's Guide
Subtropics
The Sun
Superfroot
Tahoma Literary Review
Terrain
Territory
The Threepenny Review
Tikkun
Tough
Transition Magazine
The Tusculum Review
The Under Review
Upstreet
Valparaiso Fiction Review
Variant Lit
Vida Review
The Vincent Brothers Review
Virginia Quarterly Review
Voyage
Water-Stone Review
West Branch
Western Humanities Review
West Trade Review
Wigleaf
Willow Springs
Witness

World Literature Today
The Worlds Within
The Woven Tale Press
The Wrath-Bearing Tree
X-R-A-Y
The Yale Review
Yellow Medicine Review
Your Impossible Voice
Zoetrope: All-Story
Zone 3
Zyzzyva