

FOUR FRESH STORIES

FOR YOUR WEEK

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HOWLER DAILY

The first time I ever ate dinner at his house was an experience I will not soon forget.

His mother, sole patron of the kitchen, sweats over a pot of sauce. Spices make their way through the air, seemingly guided by an unnatural force. They were made for this purpose, and this purpose only. The sauce simmers while she takes her handmade knives and goes to work on the meat. The knives cost a pretty penny and were made from the finest steel in northern Alaska. Their edges slice through the pork easily as her expert touch coerces slices to separate from the chunk of meat they originated on. No music plays in the kitchen, but her movements are like a dance. A stir here, a new ingredient there, and in my mind, she plies to the sound of a symphony only heard by me. I do not know much of ballet, but watching her cook has been an experience. She is the prima ballerina, and as she finishes her set (and dinner), she takes a bow after setting the table. I sit at the table

# the duality of homes

madison  
summerville

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next to him. I feel as if I should applaud the show, but he urges me not to. This is a regular occurrence in his house. In fact, this is a daily occurrence in his house. With the growling of my stomach imploring me to take the first bite, I dig in with my fork. As soon as the food touches my tongue, I cringe. The masterfully prepared dish was lost to me forever, and replaced with the taste, smell, and repulsion that can only come from a chef using too much salt.

Dinnertime at my house was an experience I try to forget.

My mother, after working ten hours at the hospital, groans as she makes her way to the kitchen, throwing on an '80s rock ballad. I watch in on her, careful not to enter, because the kitchen can only occupy one chef at a time, as per my mother's rules. She would tell me time and time again that too many cooks would lead to her getting overwhelmed. In the kitchen now, rock music blaring, she scrounges frozen meats and processed mashed

potatoes, exclaiming to the house that we would be eating casserole tonight. The house itself seemed to rumble with the displeased moans of my siblings and father, all located in different rooms. My mother throws the casserole in the oven after adding expiring ingredients and vegetables to the beat of raucous drums playing in the background. When the casserole finishes cooking, we all grab plates and serve ourselves. Sitting in the living room with the television playing a crude adult animated series, we eat. We never eat at the table unless it's a holiday. The rock concert, often loud and unintelligible, is a weekly occurrence in my house. On nights when the concert isn't present, we order food. The casserole that night in particular was delicious. To this day, I don't know what made that casserole different than the hundreds of rancid ones we had been forced to eat in the years before.

I enjoy both homes. The chaos of one makes me crave the safety of

the other, but when it comes down to it, my home will always be where I grew up, and I will always return whether the casserole is good or not.

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■ In her free time, **Madison Summerville** loves to write horror and hopes to write her own horror novel someday.

# boardwalk soda fountain shop

lindaAnn loSchiavo

My bare feet warmed to burning from the sand,  
I'd wave to you, obscured by boardwalk crowds.

Did you greet everyone the same as *me*?

I watched as you'd extend a palm beneath  
A ripe banana, tenderly, as if  
To ask permission. Or you'd let me tuck  
Wildflowers into cleavage held aloft,  
Slick, sweaty, suntan oiled, flecked with sand crumbs.

You like it dirty — even though your hands  
Are spotless when you mix strawberry shakes.

You're wondering how sugar hits my lips,  
Eye my reflection showing that pale crack,  
Tanned flesh that's poured inside blue fitted jeans.

Now you're hunched over the cracked countertop,  
Sweeping a butterknife across burnt toast.  
"I'm just so hungry. I'll eat anything!"

Your words and steady gaze have made me blush.  
I drop five dollars in your jar and leave  
Without my shake because I'm staying here  
Two more weeks and imagining how we  
Will taste right after, mixed in with the dark.

■ **LindaAnn LoSchiavo:** New Yorker. Nominated for The Pushcart Prize 4 times. Forthcoming: *Apprenticed to the Night* [Beacon Books, 2023] and *Felones de Se: Poems about Suicide* [Ukiyoto Publishing, 2023].

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# waiting for her

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■ **Elizabeth Rose Wilson** is a New Zealander living in the Detroit Area.

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trickle  
back,  
sad  
sack  
lisa piazza

Late December, the end of another year. Time keeps Rae going. She turns the key. Drives and drives – four freeways, and a grey bridge. She watches the ruddy ducks circle the salt marshes. Follow the western gulls to each onramp: 580 to 280 to 880 to 101. The tires turn a rhyme in her mind: *Black cat, Cadillac...Trickle back, sad sack...* The words don't matter. It isn't a real song, anyway. Just like Rae isn't headed to a real first date, a real person waiting at a trailhead for her. She has decided to keep a part of herself out of it – the main part. She will show up as a simpler version: part shadow, part shade. Unformed, an outline.

Rae agreed by text to meet her date at the marshes on the peninsula side of the bay. Halfway there she regrets her new pair of jeans from the bargain rack at Target. She feels like someone else wearing them. Come summer she will cut them into shorts and hate them still, then discard them at the curb, but tonight, she drives and watches herself watch herself – an old magic – a practiced art – to be

both in the car and above it.

*Birdseye. Side eye. Goodbye.*

She keeps her fingers tight on the wheel. Gray sky, gray gulls, gray road. She drives and lets the sound of the tires guide her: *Black cat, Cadillac...Trickle back, sad sack...*

When Mona was little she sang her a song like this. To pass the time, to change the tone when P.'s rage took hold. Back then, she could still wrap Mona in her arms. She would whisper a made-up thing. A golden net. Always low, always smooth and conspiratorial. She made it sound like magic: an enchanted web that linked them together no matter what tried to pry them apart. It was the only form of protection Rae had as Mona climbed into P.'s black Acura three Saturdays a month as required by the court.

Rae was a gray woman then. Shadow-self. Seldom-felt. Gray night, gray sight. Out the window now she imagines the clouds form a window. A door. She could walk through it if she believed there was anything on the other side.

From the parking lot, Rae texts her date: *I'm here.* He is a decade

younger, has three sons still in elementary school. *I'm the tall one, by the lighthouse,* he texts. *Do you see me?* She feels ridiculous walking toward him. Past due. Overdone in her Target jeans, limp brown hair. What will he notice first: the deep wrinkle between her eyes or the horizontal rows on her forehead like the empty lines on a piece of paper?

She walks the trail near the small Silicon Valley airport. As the sun sets, private jets line up. It is loud and windy, but not unpretty with a colorful sky of blinking lights. *Still up for dinner?* He asks. From a mile up, Rae sees herself nod. The night begs to unfurl into the future. It forces her forward.

*Sure.*

Rae follows his pale blue minivan from the trail to his house. When he speeds through a yellow light, she stops at a red sure he will drive on. But he pulls over on the other side of the intersection and waits. Rae considers being the one to ditch, to turn left onto the onramp, merge from 280 to 880 to 580 home.

But she doesn't. He has a pot of soup on the stove and a warm loaf of bread. He asks Rae to toss the salad. His old black lab clumps along at his side, wary. Aloof. When Rae bends down to pet him, he cowers then growls. Emits a timid cry and her date rubs the dog's ears. Leans in. Looks up at Rae like the stranger she is.

*What? Are you some kind of witch?*

From above, Rae sees her haggard self, her half-here, half-there heart. Her chin hair gray as bath water left too long. After a second, he laughs – a regretful chuckle. Rae laughs, too. A cackle. She almost says: *It's true, I know some magic. Watch me disappear right here*, but she is already doing that - hiding her own mind, tucking a small silence under her tongue to savor on the drive back over the black bay.

This night will fade like the others. Rae will barely be changed by it. Still, the thought gives her an opening, a space. She understands a woman is allowed multiple lives. And a witch? Well, even more.

■ **Lisa Piazza** is a writer and educator from Oakland, California whose work has been nominated for Best Small Fictions, Best of the Net, and the Pushcart Prize.

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# HOWL[er]

the howler project is a CREATIVE COLLECTIVE  
and outreach organization, making space for  
human connection through STORYTELLING.



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