

# DAY ONE

ISSUE 2.49

Fiction by **Melissa R. Sipin**  
Poetry by **Aricka Foreman**  
Cover Art by **Michael Hirshon**



# In This Issue

Dear Reader,

Obsession and interrogation. This week's writers cite these eerily similar ideas as inspiration for their work. And in this week's story and poem, it shows—each piece is full of compulsive momentum, exploring states of desperation, anxiety, and longing.

*Dead Girl in the Bed* by Melissa R. Sipin is a story obsessed with retelling and remembering. Told in the spiraling and unforgettable voice of its protagonist, Dolores, *Dead Girl in the Bed* is the tale of a US Navy spouse struggling to recall the days of her elopement, her husband's past affair, and what forced her to stay. I was in love with the energy of this story and its poetic language. It's full of rhythm and smart metaphor. As a reader I found myself wondering: Is the dead girl in the bed a decomposing body in a hotel room, or is she the woman who's come between the young couple?

Aricka Foreman's "everything's ask please don't fine me" is sharp and rife with raw emotion. The narrator is stripped down, confessional. And though it centers around moments of deep sadness, of mourning, the poem's honesty and truth made me feel a little less lonely in my own loneliness.

As always, we want to hear from you, and there are several ways to get in touch. You can leave a review on the *Day One* page or on the story's individual page on Amazon. *Day One* stories are available to buy à la carte one week after the issue is released.

E-mail me at [dayone-editor@amazon.com](mailto:dayone-editor@amazon.com) with any comments or questions.

Happy reading!  
Morgan Parker

# Dead Girl in the Bed

By Melissa R. Sipin

*What is to give light must endure burning.*

—Viktor Frankl

Everything seems blurred: my now husband's face, my lola's, my father's, the friend-enemy's. I sit alone in a small boxed apartment in Virginia—or is it South Carolina? I don't know. What did I say, my memories are blurred, am I twenty-four or twenty-six, where I am, why am I still here? The military moves my husband and me every year, and every station becomes the same.

I'm jotting down my memories in a journal. Or is it a short story? An essay? A long-form confession? I tell myself I'm a writer now and that my subject is my memories—no, I correct myself, my obsession is my retrograde amnesia. I ask the lonely, bare apartment, the sad-looking leather couch, the one that has been passed down through my family for years and that my father gifted to me as an ironic pasalubong gift, *Do you know you can get retrograde amnesia from an affair?* It's silly, now that I think of it. I'm always trying to remember what happened. And I always fail.

But let me begin again: I am a twenty-six-year-old writer living in the South.

Since I was young, my father has called me fatal, an insatiable flame. He said I was the Santelmo—this burning bush that men could see for miles, as if all of my suitors were sailors looking at jagged cliffs by the sea.

He said I would be a dalaga who wouldn't marry right. He would laugh and joke later, after I had married my high school sweetheart, Marco, who enlisted in the navy. *A sailor, anak? I knew you were the Santelmo, always wanting, always raging.*

I remember the heat of Los Angeles, the dry air and relentless sun, my father's roach-infested house on Dolores, the street he named me after, and dream of the day Marco and I got hitched in secret. The days after I left home and packed up all my belongings in my father's house and entered Marco's instead. I told myself it was for the sake of survival, sustenance, a ticket out of poverty. I repeat it over and over all the time: I got married because I just didn't want to be poor anymore.

But that meant running away. It meant leaving everything I had ever known and loved dear. The memories always come back, headstrong, in nightmares, in the mirror, in my broken marriage with my newfound husband. I always dream about

my friend-enemy—her shrouded face, her long straight hair, the illuminating sheen of her dark skin, her deep-brown oval eyes. We were each other's inverted mirror: always in the same honors and AP classes, two poor Pinays who made it to Berkeley through grit, relentlessness, and clawing our way out of Carson, even if it took clawing ourselves. I was drawn to her; maybe it was our similar sad eyes, our taste for the arts, our want of something more, something greater than Carson, the poor suburb of Los Angeles we both grew up in. I don't want to say her name. She was my dear friend-enemy, the woman I once thought was a sister, a sister I hated and loved and wanted to be.

This is what I repeat in my head: I had to eventually find out about them; it was more of a matter of time. And when I did, I acted just as my father doomed me to: like a fatal, insatiable flame.

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Weeks before I eloped, my father and I had a fight—I told him I was getting married. Without hesitation, he gave his ironic blessing. I exploded.

Don't you care, I needed to say. My father laughed away my need for his love masqueraded in my accusations: *Don't you care about me at all?* This is what he was: evasive. A small black-haired man with the longest neck, a round belly, and skin like the white of orchid petals, like a hungry ghost, never satisfied.

I was finally finishing my last year at Berkeley. He said, *You're going to that big university up north, and it's like you've changed entirely. You're so puti—always wanting more.* He spread his arms, extending them across the dust-covered, messy room overfilled with his balikbayan boxes and clothes. A mouse or a roach must have scurried by. I don't know. My memories are always fractured. I must have jumped.

He laughed, I just always thought you would marry white. Rich and white. You sure you want to marry for love and not survival, anak?

I must have looked at him, with my pensive glance, my eyes that mirrored his. I asked, Are you at least happy I'm marrying someone like you?

He smiled but was silent. He wanted to make a joke; I could tell by how he moved his body, how his lips curled at the corners and his eyes glinted, pleased. He turned his body and held me for a long time.

I just want you to be happy, anak. He let go and clutched his heart. He continued, I knew Marco ever since my heart surgery. He was there for you when I got the transplant. I didn't like him in the beginning. It was his hair! What kind of man has hair like that, big hair that crowds his whole face?

Like a yakuza, Dad? Asian, poofy Afro hair? I asked, almost laughing.

Yes, but I'm glad he joined the navy. He's becoming a man. Shaved his head. He's going to take care of you. What more can I ask, child? He clutched his heart again.

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This is how the memory replays, how it starts:

I swerved between the red lights, heading toward downtown, where I would meet my future husband. He secretly flew back home without telling his familia he was here. This was the gravity of the situation, how much he did not want them to know that their youngest, their bunso, was getting married against their wishes. *My mother would kill herself*, Marco said.

It was a reunion of sorts. He had left for boot camp three months earlier. I was finishing my last semester. I drove home a few days before he arrived and refused to sleep over at my father's house. Instead, I stayed with caring and distant friends, friends who opened their doors because they loved to gossip, to tsismis, to see who was doing what now, who always asked me, *Are you sure* about this, Dolores? You're only twenty-one—what about all your dreams? Marriage seems, you know, you're nailing your coffin already . . . Like, you know, ending your life, prematurely. No, no, not like abortion, Dolores! Like, you know, you're giving up too soon?

I learned this from my father: I laughed their concerns away. I will be okay, I told them, I'm just doing this to get out. And hey, you like Marco, right?

They periodically gave me this face—a mixture of relief and anxiety. They never understood why I was always so desperate to leave.

Yes, we love him, they said. He's always been so sweet to you—we're actually happy you got back with him after the slew of Berkeley boys. Just make sure you're doing the right thing, okay? Dolores, we just want you to be happy.

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I picked up speed after I passed by Culver City and headed straight down the 405 toward the belly of Los Angeles, rolling down the car's window and taking a drag after every lit billboard. I wore black from head to toe—black heels, black nails, black bag, black dress—and deep-red lips. It was something I was used to—the color black. It was the color my lola loved, something she dressed me in every Sunday morning before church. My grandmother was morbid and fierce. And it was the color that represented life to her: darkness. She used to say: I came from the aswang's hide; it's why the color of my skin is so dark and cracked. You, my daughter, are lucky—look at your skin, like the color of sand.

It was her who always taught me to want more.

Marry for love, I thought. Marry for love *and* survival. That's what my lola taught me, with her whippings and chest beating. But after every storm quelled, she hugged me until she was blue in the face. *Don't leave me*, she'd beg. And how could I? A girl with a father out gambling and a sister out chasing boys—her tempests were all I had.

When she died, I just wanted out. Out of my father's house and the mementos that forced me to remember lola's sad, longing face. Out of the decaying and roach-infested house on Dolores Street that manifested all my fractured memories.

Because I was away at college, my father's two brothers moved in and slowly took over, installing a gambling den in the garage, a poker spot, where all the old Filipino parés could come over after a game of pool. I was ousted out of my childhood bedroom, which I shared with my grandmother and sister. Once, during one of my visits home, I was roused from sleep after napping on the living room couch. Somehow, my shirt had slipped off and my breasts were exposed. I saw my uncle above, cradling his hardness, moaning like a dying calf. I must have wept, I must have cried, I know I turned away in fetal position, I know he stopped, I remember he walked away after he finished, I know I've tried to block this memory out, to stomp it out, but it rushes back when it wants to, always insatiable.

I wanted out.

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I can only remember the hotel. I don't remember the moments before—when I parked my car, what garage I used, or if I left it on the corner of Main and Seventh. The facade was an aged art deco, faded and ominous, a tall, looming building that pierced the sky—the murky, phosphorescent, polluted sheen that blanketed LA. I walked through its tinted golden doors and felt like I had entered a lobby from the Roaring Twenties—albeit, a dying, ghostlike lobby, as if it were frozen in time, forever rotting. There were no other guests. The front desk was large and the wood a dark maple, and I stepped toward the concierge in an eerie silence, as if I were waking up a beast. But the grand chandelier gave off an orange aura that calmed me, that gave me a sense that I was doing something right for once, something that would save me.

The hotel was called the Marienbad. Rumors said it was haunted, that serial killers murdered prostitutes in the bedrooms, their bodies stuck behind the plaster walls—a hotel of numerous suicides and a residence for transients, for those unlucky few who lived on the edges of society.

But for sixty dollars a night, I didn't care. It was a budget hotel. The rumors of the Canadian Chinese girl who disappeared mysteriously and was found in the roof's water tank, shriveled and forlorn, didn't scare me. Not even the videotapes

of her seizures in the elevator pushed me away. I imagine her sometimes, in my dreams—forever searching the endless halls of that empty, quiet hotel like the aswang, wailing for help, to be seen.

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I checked into our budget hotel a night early. I couldn't stand my friends' faces anymore—the furrowed brows, the twitching mouths, but now when I remember them, I can only picture a sea of muted faces, each indistinguishable from the other. Over the years, I've lost touch with my childhood friends. They never understood why I married young, why I couldn't just get a job to get out of Carson, just like they did, just like my friend-enemy did. I never told them about the credit cards my father took out in my name. The mountains of debt that just kept accumulating, how collecting agencies called throughout the night and day, or how on graduation day, I was afraid my father, a tago ng tago, an illegal immigrant, was going to be deported. His white crimes over the years chased up with him, and the courts deemed him dispensable. Marco helped me find my father's lawyer. Marco used his first boot camp paycheck—money he promised to his poor mother—to pay for the consultation fees.

This is what made me return to Marco, no matter how far we drifted. He knew my father. He loved my father. And my father loved him.

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I know that first night alone was lonely, terribly lonely. Do I recall weeping? I must have wept. Like my father said, I was a sensitive, emotional child.

What comes rushing back, like a fire, like the raging Santelmo, is the smell. It hinged between sickly and sweet, between rotting and perfumed wetness. The odor swelled and heightened in the center of the small suite, crescendoed at the focal point of the full-size maroon bed.

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You're finally here, I must have said.

I am, he said back with a smile.

Your hair! Look at your hair! You're so different—you lost that big hair I loved so much. You're no longer a yakuza gangster.

We laughed, we kissed. It felt good. This is what my mind replays: I was happy.

I dressed in white. I wore my black heels. I painted my lips red. I wanted to be stunning. I needed him to lust after me, like a pretty little doll. To be wanted, that's all I wanted.

He must have made me laugh. He was just like my father—silly, disarming with that Filipino charm. He elongated his words for emphasis, he winked when appropriate, he carried me and held me like I was the world and I was his.

He was a tall man for a Filipino, and beautiful. He shaved his head, but his eyebrows were thick and made him look welcoming, and his eyes were a reddish hazel that shone in the light. His mouth was thin and wide, and his skin was the same color as my friend-enemy's—a compelling, illuminating dark sheen. He was born in Torrance, just like I was, a few months after my mother gave birth to me. I sometimes imagine my mother abandoned me the same month my Marco was born. We were even born in the same hospital.

His family always tells me this story: he wasn't supposed to be born. His mother was forty-seven years old, already had four kids before Marco. She had tied her tubes, or so she thought. Because of her passivity—something Marco inherited from her, though she was raised in English-speaking schools in Baguio and came to America wanting to be a teacher—when she realized she was pregnant, yet again, with a fifth child, she didn't complain or speak a word of English to her American doctors. She even pushed out her last son in the hospital room without any doctor or nurse, as Marco's father nervously fiddled his thumbs in wait, in obedience.

They could've sued their American doctors and lived a life of luxury. That's what she always said. But what Christians would do that, sue when they were given a gift, sue despite the fact she could've died but then lived. So instead, they named him their miracle child, their son born of God.

I once asked him: Is this why they consider me your *querida*? I must have laughed, in evasion, as if to protect myself from knowing, *hiya*, shame.

My Marco shook his head. No, Dolores. My mother loves you.

I do not smile.

Then why is she not here? I asked him. Why do we have to keep it a secret?

His face expressed everything his words could not: that furrowed brow, that twitching mouth, the beautiful reddish-brown eyes that carried embarrassment. We are so young, he replied. After I move up in rank, after you move with me to Charleston, after you get a job, after we're finally well off . . . *After, after, after.* Even he was tired of being poor.

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The morning he finally arrived, I woke up early, slicked back my long black hair, and tied it up straight.

I ignored the smell. I needed to get ready. I was getting married.

I powdered my yellow-orange skin with foundation steeped in papaya bleach—my father always wanted me to be as white as him, gifted me with

products from the Philippines that accented our Chinese and hints of Spanish features. My ponytail reached past my shoulder blades, past the tattoo of our names in ancient Filipino script imprinted on my right blade, and when he finally arrived, he touched me there, kissed me there, and breathed the sorries and the promises—I'm back from the South, Dolores, I'm here to save you, Dolores, I'm here to take you away, far away from LA, from Carson, from your father, from that crowded home on that street which bears your name.

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The courthouse was quaint. It was small.

The day was hot and young. My anxiety crept up to my throat.

Are you sure about this? I asked Marco, walking backward.

We stood in front of the courthouse. The Marienbad loomed over the small art-deco municipal building. From across the street, I could see our tiny twentieth-floor room, the odor lingering on my cheap one-shoulder white dress from a boutique shop on Melrose.

What if your family finds out? I kept walking backward.

Marco reached for my arm. Don't worry—they won't, he said. He looked at me. Don't you like your dress?

Of course! I said, pulling at the flowers on the shoulder. I smiled. I must have smiled my best smile. He must have noticed, and he smiled back, cupping my face.

I'm sorry I couldn't afford something nicer, he started. He looked away and grabbed my hand. But I just finished boot camp. I promise: from now on, I can buy you nice things.

I shook my head. It isn't tacky at all, I said. I pulled down the hem of my dress. He tugged on his father's blazer, a loose-fitting blue suit that barely fit his skinny body, and repeated it: I promise. We won't be poor any longer. This is a good thing.

A crowd started to gather in front of the courthouse. Bystanders came up to us, and in their kindness, they smiled at my white dress and his father's suit, something he borrowed without asking. Each one walked slowly toward us and gave their congratulations. We said our thank-yous politely and flushed, ashamed that we were alone, that our families were a few miles away and oblivious to our actions. Or were we ashamed? My emotions always repaint this scene, depending on the day, on the night, or whether I feel guilt or happiness. On some days, I remember that we're ecstatic, intensely happy, jumping on the cemented steps outside the courthouse, going up to every bystander and saying, We're getting married today! We're getting married!

But sometimes I paint this scene: With a weak smile, Marco tapped a passerby's back and asked, Would you mind? He stammered, glancing at me and trying to look his best, Would you mind taking our picture?

The passerby gave us his most merciful smile and said, You two are so young. Yes, we both answered, unsure and loud. He took Marco's phone and snapped a picture. How old are you? We lied, We're actually twenty-five, sir. Oh? He smiled again. We're just Asian, sir, we laughed. We just look young. The kind man took another one just for luck. I held on to Marco tight, smiling the best I could.

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I have this dream again and again: I'm standing beneath red burnt staircases, I breathe in the smog, and I'm falling, I'm watching my body fall.

I walk up thousands of crimson staircases that lead to a raging sun and voluntarily jump off.

My body splits in half. The arms become wings. My skin becomes black and thick as a hide. I remember my grandmother's retellings of that vampire woman-demon. I become the aswang. My tongue is a proboscis. Or am I the Santelmo? Just like my father once told me. Am I on the staircase, shriveled, like a hungry ghost with a long, long neck and an engorged belly? Is this hell or naraka? A voice laughs from afar, and suddenly I look back at the red charred staircase: my legs stand there alone, trembling, and a bat-like woman with long hair urges me to fly. She yells and screeches and shifts into my estranged mother, my dead lola, and then back to the bat-like Manananggal.

I'm the Santelmo again. I'm weeping.

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We stand underneath a limelight and a bare altar with fake vines and white flowers. The room is also white, a dirty white, and the pews are empty. We need a witness, the justice of the peace whispered. My alarmed eyes are big and scared, and my future husband, trying to keep his smile, always pulling on his father's suit jacket, is quiet, unsure, but beautiful. But then the passerby comes in, the stranger who took our picture. He is a sweet black man with glasses and a hooded jacket. I'm here, he said happily. I believe in you two kids. This is like something you see in the movies.

We both laughed a hearty laugh, a laugh that filled the bare room.

We said our vows.

I promise to always take care of you, to never lie to you, to be there for you in sickness and health, to be your protector, your lover, your man. I promise to

become a man for you. I promise, Marco said. His smile always earnest, always wanting.

I promise to wait for you, I said. I promise to love you in sickness and health. I promise to be faithful, to be loving, to be kind. I never wanted to marry a military man, and I broke into tears and laughter. The justice of the peace, a frail older woman with gray hair that reflected the limelight, asked us, Why do you two always laugh? Oh, you two kids, getting hitched without your parents . . . I really bless your marriage, I really do. I see love in your eyes. I see love, she said.

We had no rings.

I was tired, scared, anxiety nervosa.

He said his *I do*.

I was quiet.

He held my hand tighter.

He whispered, Just marry me.

I asked him, Will you hurt me?

He shook his head with a volition I had never seen him possess before.

I gave him my *I do*. In my memories, I hand him my heart, and I collapse into him, like a broken doll, so weary and so wanting, always searching for a home.

We were both fools. We both needed to believe that yes, we were in love, that our wills could make it real, make it last, make it unravel sukob, our tortured luck, the blessing his familia bestowed upon us. Sukob. Bad luck. A curse. Whatever you'd like to call it.

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You've become thinner, he said. He spun me around in my white dress. Like a ghost. A beautiful ghost, he laughed.

The noon light was rising.

But you look great, he added. I always wanted to tell you: you're beautiful.

I did not reply. I evaded his longing.

It was rare for him to call me beautiful. The first time was after we first had sex, a surprising moment in the backseat of my car, in front of his yellow-and-blue house, when we had broken up for the second time. We were a turbulent high school relationship. We were a tempest.

I'm sorry I always avoided telling you how beautiful you are. You were so popular in high school, it scared me. It made me feel lesser. I was so nerdy. C'mon, I played chess for chrissake. I thought if I said you were beautiful, you would never fall for me.

I shook my head. Just stop, I told him. Please. I believe you now, I said.

He kept going, clutching the ends of his borrowed suit jacket, pulling it forward. I'm sorry, he started. I'm sorry for a lot of things. He didn't continue. We walked between another couple and stopped in front of a Mexican storefront. "La Bamba" played on the stereo.

Your favorite song! I said, dancing and cha-chaing like I was in love. I grabbed his hand.

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This is a truth. This is still a truth: I love him. My Marco, my liar.

He held me again, twirled me again, in his boyish love, and sang: I love you. I do.

I love you, too, I said back.

I love you, my wife. He smiled wryly.

I laughed. I love you, my husband? My voiced felt deflated, like a balloon.

The San Gabriel Mountains could be seen in the distance behind a sea of buildings, and the stiff, heated air crowded us as downtown became alive during the lunch hour. We stood outside the courthouse, staring at each other, shocked into silence after what we had just done. I heard music floating from the local liquor stores. The cars honked and the sounds clashed with the crowds chatting and legs walking. The red lights flickered on the streets; the cars and trucks screeched and the bustling crowd became louder.

We're married, we said at the same time. We're actually married.

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When we walked into our empty hotel room, the first thing was the smell.

Marco stood beneath the doorframe, one foot in the hallway and the other in the room.

I didn't notice this, he started. Dolores, did you notice?

He pinched his nose, furrowing his brow. It's . . . it's . . . what is this smell? he asked.

We had wanted to go all out, and this was the first time we'd ever had money to spend and to waste. A few weeks before, I won the undergrad short-story competition at Berkeley. I thought myself a writer and irresponsibly spent the whole award check on renting the hotel room, as cheap as it was.

The sweet, fecal smell of that room took all the joy away.

I looked to Marco. There's something here. I pulled at my cheap white dress. There's something here. I smelled the flowered left shoulder. I can smell it on my dress. Something is here.

Marco sat near the window. This was how he handled conflict: silence.

I started with the closets. It must be coming from the closets. I opened every drawer. I slammed every one shut. I surveyed the desk. I lifted and dusted the sheets. I threw off all the pillows. I took apart the four-sectioned beautifully golden couch. Finally, I pushed Marco aside and opened the curtains, and the view of the crowded, bustling LA street came into view. I hurried to the phone and called the front desk, but I got no answer.

It was a busy weekend—July Fourth—the only weekend Marco could have off. He wasn't supposed to be in LA, two thousand miles away from his duty station and the allotted radius his command bequeathed him. The budget-hotel staff didn't answer. I called again. I called a fourth time. And each time the phone rang, with its incessant, high chiming in my ear, Marco sat by the window, evaded my longing, and stayed quiet.

My anxiety always frightened him. It pushed him away, shifted him into a cold, unemotional being.

But the smell broke me.

I started weeping. I needed him to soothe the raging within. But Marco built a wall between us, like he always did whenever my emotions waded to the surface. He was quiet, he pressed his mouth tightly closed, and his eyes wandered. Distracted. He kept staring at the window. I kept still.

Why are you so quiet, I wanted to ask. Why don't you care about the smell, I whispered. Why aren't you saying anything?

This is what I remember: I needed him to claw at, to yell at, to be angry with. When he was absent, when he was away at boot camp and I was at Berkeley, trying to tie loose ends and finish my final papers and classes, when there was no scapegoat to appease me, I clawed and yelled and raged at myself.

These rages, these quiet moments—they crowded the corners of my mind, like the times when my lola accused me of being a slut and trapped me in my room with a chain lock outside my door. In these silences, I raged.

This is a lie: self-harm and mistakes are the only things I am good at.

This is a lie again: I am in control. The cutting. The pain. I control it. I am controlled.

I finally rushed to him and grabbed his forearms. Don't you smell it? Don't you? He stared at me with love and guilt.

I need to tell you something, he started.

But the smell, I answered. Can't you do something? Go downstairs, tell them to fix this, tell them there's something wrong with this room.

He shook his head. The smell can wait, he said.

The smell isn't that bad, he continued. He kissed me. Let's just try to enjoy this moment. We just got married, Dolores. You'll be following me soon to Charleston. Forget the smell.

The happy reunion was brief. We kissed again, we collapsed into each other, we teared, and we laughed. We are always laughing in my memories. He kept his hand on my thigh and pressed his hardness against me.

What do you have to tell me? I ask.

A month later, I would remember his face near the window of our hotel room, how his face was twisted into guilt, how he wanted to say a truth he had hidden for years, how her name was lodged between his throat and tongue, how he wanted to admit what he did without losing the young, weeping girl in front of him.

Instead, he stayed silent. He kissed me again and again.

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The sex first.

Then the fight.

The asking: Won't you call the bellboy, the front desk?

The smell.

It's not bad, he pleaded. Why bother the people downstairs?

*But we paid for this.*

Doesn't it bother you?

*The smell doesn't smell that bad . . .*

Can't you take care of me? Will you take care of me?

The sex first.

Then the fight.

Then the smell.

The clawing first.

Then the yells.

Then the asking: Why did we get married at all?

Then the bed.

Then the smell at the center of the bed.

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Marco finally called the front desk afterward, and the budget-hotel staff finally answered. The bellboy came. He examined the room. He smelled the lingering odor but shuffled his feet and shrugged.

A lot of rooms smell like this, the bellboy started.

I shook my head in defiance.

This isn't good enough, I replied.

He asked us if we minded the smell.

We mind the smell, I said in annoyance. Such a small girl, such a needy girl. The bellboy evaded her and asked the boy instead: Do you mind the smell, sir?

Marco was silent.

I pointed to the center of the bed.

I smell it here the most, I repeated. Right at the center of the bed. I smelled it last night when I was sleeping, but I was so exhausted I fell asleep immediately. Will you just check, sir? Why does it smell right here? I pressed my palm on the maroon sheets. Is something in the mattress? I beat the middle of the bed. It sounds hollow, I repeated. Is something here?

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We found the smell.

There was a dead girl in the bed.

The bellboy finally conceded and used a knife to cut open the mattress. There she was: twisted in fetal position, her body split at the waist as if she were the aswang. Was she a prostitute? Marco asked, his face aghast and shivering. The bellboy gagged, and I wept. We finally found the smell. It covered and hung to her body like a suffocating haze. Her mouth was hung open, her lips were still the reddish color of life, but it was cold to the touch, shattering. Her arms were crossed, shielding her perfectly painted face. Her eyes were the only things that were peaceful, tightly closed, shut, pressed. I could tell she was once beautiful. I wept, Marco wept, the bellboy ran and called the front desk, and the police were dialed, and I wept. I thought of what Marco wanted to say, before we found the girl hidden between the bed, before we had sex, before I complained about the smell. I pulled myself together. I wept. What luck we had, I said. I thought of his mother, of how she would say it: sukob. Bad luck. Your marriage—how could it be blessed? You weren't married in a church. You didn't marry in front of God. Hiya. Shame.

Marco looked at me with sadness.

Isn't that what your family would say? What luck we have. Sukob, I repeated. Are we doomed?

We're doomed, Marco said with laughter. He tried to smile.

I can still recall the smell—the sweet, subtle, fecal stench of decomposition. The hotel staff claimed she must have died a few days before. They had cleaned our room over and over again, but they claimed nothing could take the smell away. The hotel management swore they had no idea there was a dead prostitute hidden in the mattress, her body perfectly composed and strangled. They comped us for the room. Again: *What luck we had.*

We were sitting downstairs with a pile of our luggage near the front desk, away from the bedroom with the dead girl. That's when we saw the raging fire on the news. Look. I pointed to the television. It's like what my father always said: I'm a fatal flame.

---

A month later, after I had moved to Charleston, after I had left Los Angeles like an ex-lover, an ex-friend, after I had finally packed all of my things from my father's house and shipped them across country to my husband's instead, I received an e-mail from the friend-enemy that detailed every lie and truth my husband had wanted to bury.

I scream and shout at him for the lies, wanting the truth.

He is silent.

What about before we found the dead girl? *Were you with her even then?* I do not weep, I am angry for countless nights, days, and he is what but guilt, spilling over like a wound that begs to heal.

---

It is years later, and I am retelling this story now, so exhausted of the retellings. In my nightmares, the dead girl shifts into my dear, dear friend-enemy, haunting me with her silence.

So I write a story in her voice.

I want to imagine what it felt like to write this e-mail. I try to feel all the silent pangs and loud jealousies we both must have endured to fall in love with the same man, the same miracle boy with the poofy Filipino Afro hair that he shaved and lost, like shedding a skin.

I write:

*You called the girl to tell her of the affair. The lies, the half-truths, the catalogue of details and dates of the love you had with her now husband were true. You paint the picture of Disneyland from four years ago. The blue-and-yellow Mickey Mouse teacups you spun in, him around you, kissing, and the lies that stayed in the belly because you knew he told the girl he was alone at home. These were only happenstance: meeting you at an arranged hotel. Of him only calling you. Of him driving your car. You think of that first midnight meeting on your front porch after a fight they'd had and how he came to you, wanting. You think of dialing her number because of the Facebook photo of the ring that was tiny on her fingers, barely a speckle, and you saw him in his navy dress whites, that Dixie cap you knew your father once wore, the father that left, and you pick up the phone, dial the numbers you remember from years ago, and your heart beats against your tank top, you take off the shirt because of the heat, because the walls feel like they are closing in. You are heated, angry,*

*ready to scream at the girl, but then she answers—Hello, who is this?—with that sweet, chirping, birdlike voice of hers that was always more supple, more fluid than yours, and you picture her standing next to the boy, your once lover, you picture her naked, skin so white, beautiful, skin not like yours, dark, rough, dry, and you want to say hello back, you want to bite, to rage, but the voice stops at an octave higher and nothing comes out, not even a fuck-you. You collapse on the couch in your Berkeley apartment, tie your hair up in a bun, look at your image in the mottled mirror across the room and hang up. Disappointed. Stare at your toes. Unpainted, long, ugly. Hands covering your face.*

*You still have the phone in your palm. You redial. You hear the girl's breath through the white noise. You hear the boy's laugh, the asking, Who is it, my love, honeybutt, pretty girl? That girl muffles the sound, laughs back at your once lover, and you are angry, you want to break the girl, her and her beautiful skin and her perfect relationship with her perfect lover who was once yours. She does not know and you need her to know. You want to reach your arm into the phone, through the white noise, break her ignorance, break her laughter, break her. Destroy the birdlike girl. But you cannot say what you called to say and you begin to say something but you stammer, the chest rising and falling. But you don't cry. The girl is asking, Who is this?*

*You've hung up. Turn on the computer, the limelight's glow flooding the bare room, with a couch as a bed and a desk and books stacked up against the walls. You open the tab to your e-mail and begin to write a letter to the girl and her lover, your once lover. You write and write and profess and erase and fall and begin. Try. Fall.*

---

Today, years later, I write: *Try. Fall. Begin again.*

I don't know if I believe my own words.

I look in the mirror, touch the contours of my face, I ask the blurred face staring back at me: Do I reflect the aswang? Am I my mother, after all these years, a woman with a broken heart, so easily torn, tricked by the lovers she loved?

I can hear my father's voice, No, my daughter, you are not the aswang—you're the Santelmo, the lost one, the one always wandering, the one wailing as the fires consume her; but she is the light that guides the lost home, anak, she compelled Ferdinand Magellan and Miguel López de Legazpi to our shores; she is

burning, like St. Elmo's Fire, but what are you to Marco, my dear one, are you not the light that guides him home?

No, my father wouldn't say that. He would say, But I like Marco for you, anak. Doesn't he make you laugh?

All I can do is remember the odor. I remember how beautiful she was: dark haired, cream skin, red lips, lips like mine, eyes like almonds, mouth left open, agape, a mouth, yes, just like mine. I try to explain to the dead girl why I stayed. I can't. I repeat things, I erase things, I paint my lips red just like hers, and I kiss my husband when he returns from sea, and I call my father and tell him I miss him. I don't think she laughs at me. Instead, I imagine her rousing from her long sleep, sitting on that old leather couch beside me, her skin cold, her skin a mirror, and she holds my hands. She says she understands. I tell her, *I'm crazy*. And she repeats, with her mouth still open, her mouth agape, her mouth, yes, just like mine, *I understand, I understand, I understand.*

# everything's ask please don't fine me

By Aricka Foreman

i wake early to wash the wild dirt  
from my hair instead check my timeline  
to find a country not mine says  
it's legal for everyone to pretend  
at being a little less lonely if they want  
i smoke on my porch swing while  
an ole easy like sunday morning rat  
strolls down the sidewalk of  
my gentrified life it's funny what  
you get used to mid-drag i shut  
the gray day behind me make a fresh  
pot of coffee where are the tweezers  
to pluck wires from my chin which  
wires do i dial at the hrc to ask  
them what they did for shelley  
hilliard's mother if they could identify  
her body burned and hidden in pieces  
amongst uncut grass maybe i'll braid

or two-strand twist into something happy  
forget between shoveled forks of seitan  
most women who want to fuck me are  
white activists who wish i'd just spend  
the night it's friday someone will throw  
a party with more red wine than whiskey  
can i stain my teeth for the summer  
i promise i'm trying to be more happy  
i might pay my rent on time and not think  
about the student loan debt crisis i might  
want to wrangle these roots into something  
respectable for you but this mourning  
keeps getting in my way

# Five Questions with Melissa R. Sipin

## **Tell us about yourself.**

My grandmother used to call me *batibot*, which is the Ilocano phrase for “small but terrible.” I was born in Carson, California, a suburb of Los Angeles, on the morning of April 23—the same day that William Shakespeare was born and died. It’s why, as a young, bookish, nerdy girl who ran to the library during recess, I always wished I would die on my birthday, just so I could follow Shakespeare’s mortal coil. I ended up copying him anyway—I am a writer. I am also a US Navy spouse, a daughter of Filipino immigrants, and a lover of salmon nigiri. I hope to one day travel to Aringay, La Union, in the Philippines, to see my grandmother’s birthplace. I learned all my stubbornness from her: “And though she be but little, she is fierce.”

## **What inspires you to write?**

My obsessions. I’m a neurotic person, so much so that I used to choose the company of books rather than my school friends during recess. But what drives me to write always metamorphoses over time, shifts and changes and mutates. I write because I write. Memory obsesses me; erasure—both colonial amnesia and individual trauma—compels me to write. It’s why I always quote James Baldwin’s famous speech from Horace Ové’s documentary *Baldwin’s Nigger*: “I’m compelled, I’m speaking of myself as a black man, to doubt my history, to examine it; I’m compelled to try to create it. I’m trying to excavate my history from all the rubble that has been buried for so many hundreds of years. And that means I have to question everything.” Writing keeps me asking. It’s a painful but necessary method I’ve grown to love that helps me understand the world, and it only adds more nuance and urgency to my life.

## **What is your writing process?**

As I said, I’m a neurotic person. It takes me years to finish a short story. It usually takes me three to four years to finish penning a short story’s third or fourth draft, and I am compulsive in my revisions—for me, first writing the thing is hard; revision is fun. I like to kill my darlings.

## **What are you working on now?**

I recently finished a very rough draft of an interlinked short-story collection, and now I am working on a “novel,” which is hard for me to say. I want to believe I’m a long-form writer, but who knows. As a child, I began writing as a poet, and when I realized I sucked at poetry, I moved to short stories. But in particular, I am obsessed with confessions, the Marcos regime, and World War II in the Philippines. I’m writing a novel based on my grandmother’s and grandfather’s experiences during the war and martial law. My lola was captured by Japanese soldiers and possibly raped (my family still denies this to this very day), and my grandfather was a major in the US Army in the Philippines—Northern Luzon. He was also a guerrilla fighter. The family rumor goes that my lolo refused to lie for Marcos’s fake war medals, so he was forced into retirement and tried for war crimes, leaving my family so desolate that my eldest aunt had to become a prostitute to feed her siblings. The novel I’m working on recounts and obsesses over this familial origin myth. Eventually, though, I want to work on a speculative fiction novel in which I rewrite Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. I just love monster stories.

### **What’s next for your writing?**

I’m not sure—I hope only good things, but we will see. It’ll take me where it wants to go.

# Six Questions with Aricka Foreman

## **What inspires you to write?**

Whatever gives me pause. I watch too much TV and read too many things on the Internet and can't go through a day without listening to music. I have a thousand questions about so many things. I'm bombarded by language—both subtext and intentional—much of it troubling and problematic. I'm finding more honesty on the page. It's a safe space for me to thrash and press and resist. Laughter and sarcasm creeps in, and I'm surprised. It's a bit of a departure from work I've done in the past, so I'm thankful for the growth. I write poems to make sense of my selves in a world that seems increasingly speculative and absurd. I write to retain some of its beauty.

## **How did you come to write this poem?**

Interrogation. Sure, as writers, artists, and thinkers, we're trying to not only figure out our place in the world but also how we move through it. Which axis points we plant our feet on that dart like hover boards over coordinates. Nothing is permanent. It unfurls me and keeps me up at night. Tucks me in. Where am I in this particular moment, in this body, in this mind, in this geography? What's fraught and what's at peace? Both states are temporary. What am I trying to cleave close to?

## **Who are some of your favorite writers and poets?**

I know *some* poets throw shade at reading their peers, but I feel lucky to read voices in this community, peers and teachers alike: Krista Franklin, Angel Nafis, Phillip B. Williams, Mahogany L. Browne, Aziza Barnes, Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, CM Burroughs, Dawn Lundy Martin, Tracy K. Smith, Traci Brimhall, Suji Kwock Kim, francine j. harris, Tommye Blount, Vievee Francis, Gregory Pardlo, Ed Roberson, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Anne Sexton, Ai, Wisława Szymborska, Lucille Clifton, Angela Jackson, Alice Fulton, Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor. And all the visual artists: Ghada Amer, Carrie Mae Weems, Shirin Neshat, Tylonn J. Sawyer, Angela Davis Fegan, E. Jane, Shantell Martin. Just to name a few.

## **What is your writing process?**

It's compulsive and usually fueled by the beverage trifecta of water, coffee, and whiskey. I'll have a pocket of days, weeks (this latest stretch was two to three months) of hyperproductive writing. I only break hours of work to eat, maybe sit quietly with my face in the sun if the weather allows. It's in large part due to my anxiety. If I go too long without writing, I can't function in other spaces as a whole person. I'm "better" when my practice is active. In the moment, there's a quietude that hovers. I'm journaling, writing letters, and reading obsessively. I just finished *No Map of the Earth Includes Stars* by Christina Olivares and am now looking for a bit more vulnerability with my interrogations of memory, trauma, and kinship.

### **What are you working on now?**

I'm working on a full collection of poems on mental illness, the "Strong Black Woman" mythos and perfectionism. How that plays into the culpability of our sex (both gender and desire). How these tropes have historically played into how we live, work, and love—who we love, who we resist—and how we're socialized to make ourselves "respectable." I have no chill with respectability politics, which miss me with so much of their dogged, antiquated hierarchies. I'm interested in how we see ourselves as fully dimensional humans, while resisting and unpacking the historical erasure we've been subjected to for, well, ever.

### **What's next for your writing?**

A handful of essays intersecting race, gender, sexuality, and what it means to be a "complicated" black woman living in America. Mostly it's origin and memory work, my attempt to get to specific moments where I learned to be "sweet" and "nice" and to "make room." It skewed how I saw the women in my family fight for everything but for themselves. In some ways they did and still do. They are brave and exhausted. But I've learned a great deal from their triumphs and their shortcomings.

I've been flirting with digital and video work here and there throughout the years. Moving to Chicago was a lifesaving, rash decision, and I'm happy I did it. The visual arts community, especially the number of queer artists and artists of color, is astounding. I'd like to learn and build and do some collaborative projects in the near future, once the poems are completed.

# Melissa R. Sipin

Melissa R. Sipin is a writer from Carson, California. She won *Glimmer Train's* Fiction Open and the *Washington Square Review's* Flash Fiction Award. She coedited *Kuwento: Lost Things*, an anthology of Philippine myths (Carayan Press, 2014), and her work has appeared in *Guernica*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Hyphen*, and other publications. She is the cofounder of *TAYO Literary Magazine*, and she has won scholarships or fellowships from Kundiman, VONA/Voices, and Sewanee Writers' Conference and was short-listed for the David T. K. Wong Fellowship at the University of East Anglia. As the *Poets & Writers* McCrindle Fellow in Los Angeles, she is hard at work on a short-story collection and a novel.

# Aricka Foreman

Aricka Foreman's work has appeared in the *Drunken Boat*, *Torch*, the *Minnesota Review*, *Union Station Magazine*, *Vinyl Poetry*, and *Please Excuse This Poem: 100 New Poems for the Next Generation* (Viking, 2015). A Cave Canem and Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop Fellow, she is the enumerate editor for the *Offing*.

# Michael Hirshon

After a nomadic childhood spent doodling, eating, sleeping, and growing, Michael Hirshon ended up in Saint Louis, where he studied illustration and design. He's currently in New York City, in the illustration as visual essay master's program at the School of Visual Arts. His clients include the *New York Times*, American Express, the *Washington Post*, and AARP. His work has been recognized by the Society of Illustrators, *3x3*, *American Illustration*, *Creative Quarterly*, *CMYK*, and AIGA. To learn more about Michael, visit [www.hirshon.net](http://www.hirshon.net).

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