

SLICE

ISSUE 25 FALL '19/WINTER '20

FICTION + NONFICTION + POETRY



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US/Canada \$15.00



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CIRCLING BACK

LAUREN FRIEDLANDER

The woman in the northeast office emailed her colleague at the southwest branch:

Hi there Adelaide!

Sorry to nudge! Just following up here! Did you have a chance to read my email above? My apologies! Don't mean to be a bother!

Best,

Fern in Shipping

She thought better of it and deleted *Best*, replaced it with *Happy Friday!* After all, it was a Friday—who troubled themselves with emails right before the weekend? And after all, she had sent the original email on a Thursday, which was so close to Friday and therefore also the weekend—who needs the hassle? Fern felt a little guilty now as she clicked into her Sent folder and reread her follow-up, convinced it was unduly brusque. She fished a paper clip from a magnet covered in paper clips and unraveled it, thinking of nothing but her own shame. She picked off the plastic coating and jammed the metal end under her thumbnail through to the yellowy crescent, counting to seven. The radio had said that when it came to shame, you ought to think on it for no more

than seven seconds, and in those seven seconds think on it *very* hard, but never again. She stanchd her bloody thumb with an invoice and hastened to the break room to run it under the tap. Coming the opposite way was the thin-eyebrowed kid from the executive office—they stopped just short of collision. Sorry! she said, and tried to step past him. Whoa-ho-ho, he said, and stepped in the same direction. Ack, sorry! she said again. That's two bucks for the Sorry Jar, my good woman, he said, and cocked his thinner eyebrow toward the shelf. Oh, cripes, Fern said. From her purse she unrumped two dollar bills, incidentally bloodied, and threw them into the Sorry Jar. It was filled mostly with her own earnings over the last year or so, no small sum of it, in fact, certainly enough to rival the meager pension awaiting her in ten years' time. After scouring herself in the break room sink, she returned to her desk with a vow to temper the tersity of her earlier email with a fresh casualosity:

Hi Addy, she typed. Then deleted, retyped:

Adelaide!

On second thought, how's about never you mind re: the previous email! Time's not of the essence :-)

Sorry for the barrage, ha ha! I hope you have a splendid tremendous excellent weekend!

Yay!

Fern in Shipping

She removed a rubber band from her rubber band ball and wrapped her thumb many times as it turned purple and bled anew. The men of the northeast office shuffled past waving meager good weekends. When the floor had emptied, Fern crept into the office of the thin-eyebrowed kid and swiped his restroom key—engraved FOR EXECs ONLY—then squatted atop the executive throne and struggled. The resulting shit resembled a nest, the nest of a predatory bird. She spoke aloud, for the radio had also suggested a practice of gratitude: My finest efforts occur at this hour, in this room, with no one else around.

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Upon receiving Fern's messages, Adelaide at the

southwest branch was in a frenzy of genuflection. Sweat spurted instantaneously from the hidden folds of her body, despite the prescription antiperspirant with which they were slathered and tissue with which they were lined. She read the follow-up to the follow-up through the slits of her fingers, unable to bear its thinly veiled sarcasm:

Adelaide! (She deciphered: Recidivist cunt!)

On second thought (if you ever had a first), *how's about never you mind* (how's about you commit suicide posthaste) *re: the previous email! Time's not of the essence :-)* (Since it's not a concept you seem to understand, along with probably gravity.) *Sorry for the barrage, ha ha! I hope you have an excellent weekend.* (I pray God lines your uterus with teeth that devour you from the inside out.)

Yay! (Fuck you most deeply.)

Fern in Shipping

What guilt consumed Adelaide as she realized her idiocy! Father Rick had been right after all! She made her escape to the supply closet. Carefully she ducked past her manager, who had recently professed his love for her but in a polite way that did her no harm and allowed him to

lay down his burden. Inside the closet, she unbuttoned her blouse and prayed for repentance while thrashing at her shoulders with the industrial three-hole punch. She craned her arm to capture photographic evidence of the gruesome slab blackening her upper back, punctured by three equidistant circles. She uploaded and attached her best efforts in a follow-up to the follow-up's follow-up, typing:

Fern, Angel of Patience!!

Apt language has not been invented to appropriately convey my deepest sorries for this unconscionably late reply!! Certainly you must despise me!! (You and Father Rick would have that in common!!) Before attending to your initial request, I wanted to send proof that I have punished myself and will continue to do so at your discretion. Please see attached!!

Humiliatedly yours,

Adelaide in Operations

When she did see attached, Fern could not stem her weeping. How could she have inspired such brutality? She felt as if she had thrashed her young colleague with her own hands. Hands! she scolded them, and administered some drawer slams, Have you drugged me and done this without my knowing? It would not be the first time, nor the second! They had nothing to say to that. Still, were they not complicit in typing the words that had pained her so? They were indeed! They would regret their silence now. Fern searched Adelaide's address in the company directory and printed out an overnight label to affix to a small box. With the paper cutter she attempted to disburden herself of her left thumb, but the blade was unsharpened, and the slicing rough work, so several violent jams were required to hack it off in full. She filmed herself gently depositing the thumb onto a cradle of foam peanuts.

Sorry for delay!!!—she hazarded in a follow-up to Adelaide—*as my typings been hamperd by loss of thumbbb !!! I am sorry too for this s orry excuse!! !*

Southwestward, Adelaide picked at her supper of dry crackers as she opened the video file and pressed Play. To look upon the jagged meat of Fern's thumb, the blood that

drenched the peanuts, made Adelaide purge her half-digested crackers into the trash. Dizzy with guilt, she then excavated and re-swallowed the pile, for she knew it was all she deserved.

Eventually she managed to type, *Fern!!!! I—*

An error message sprung onto Adelaide's screen with an ominous donk:

You have expended the company's monthly quota of exclamation points. Please allow 3–12 business weeks for replenishment.

NOW HOW THE HECK, shrieked Adelaide, SHALL I RELAY MY EFFUSIVE BUT SINCERE INTENTIONS? She dialed the extension listed in the signature of Fern's email, and after half a ring, Fern answered. Her voice was thin as worn silk, much like her own. Their shuddering breaths, the same.

They both spoke at once: I BEG FORGIVENESS.

Adelaide slid to the floor with the phone cord curled around her throat. PRAY GOD IMPREGNATE ME BEFORE HE LINES MY UTERUS WITH TEETH SO THAT MY FIRSTBORN MIGHT BE SENT PRIORITY EXPRESS TO FERN IN SHIPPING.

A PRINCE, said Fern, WHOM WE'D WEAN TOGETHER.

ABSOLUTELY NOT. YOU MUST DASH HIS BRAINS OUT ASAP. RATHER MY OWN.

Adelaide grabbed the janitor's vat of disinfectant from a neighboring cubicle and gamely chugged. On the other end, Fern eyed a large laminator to see if she might be able to squish herself through the rollers, thus ending her suffering inside a cocoon of hot plastic.

SWEET ADELAIDE IN OPERATIONS, Fern continued, A THUMB IS NOT SACRIFICE ENOUGH. IF I WORK QUICKLY, I CAN MANAGE A HAND, AN EAR. I SHALL DO WITHOUT TOES. AND HOLE-PUNCH MY NIPPLES FOR YOU TO WEAR AS EARRINGS.

AND WHO AMONG US IS FIT TO ADMIRE THEM? Adelaide cried with a chemical belch. MY SCROTE OF A BOSS? She knuckled her mouth—she could not believe she had said it. If Father Rick could hear . . . But saying was a salve and prompted more sayings, like HALITOTIC GOBLIN and ASS-GOON.

Fern found sayings brimmed in her, too, such as, THAT EYEBROWLESS EXECU-TURD. I'D LIKE TO TAKE THE SORRY JAR AND PLUG HIS RANCID HOLE.

Adelaide said, ARE THESE OUR LIVES' GREATEST LOVES? HA, WE DESERVE NO BETTER.

TO RELEASE OUR SINS, said Adelaide, TO GO TO GOD. WOULD IT BE SO TERRIBLE?

THE RADIO SAYS THE AVERAGE PERSON DOES NOT GET ENOUGH SLEEP, said Fern. SO WHAT COULD BEAT THE ETERNAL ONE?

Adelaide choked, snorting, then cheersed Fern with disinfectant and took another swig. Laughter brayed loud and ugly through their hallways, all those many miles apart. It was a joyous spitting and retching, and it contorted their faces into unpleasant shapes. But the women weren't ashamed, for there was no one to witness their unpleasantnesses but each other.

At once, they put their phones on speaker as they went about their final business.

Fern drowned herself in the twelfth-floor toilet, connected to the main sewer line. The clog of her head soon backed up the building's plumbing system—torrents of waste gushed from every pipe, drenching the northeast office with a fetid stink it would never shed. Adelaide unlatched her building's circuit breaker and doused the cables with the last of the disinfectant, shorting out the entirety of the southwest branch. Sparks rained upon the disinfectant pooled around her electrocuted body, starting a fire that quickly spread from the room throughout the wing.

At last the women's blood had stilled, their bodies quiet.

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They meet at last in the other world outside this

one. No towering complexes, nor parking garages, nor telephone poles. Nothing but vast red plains in all directions, and an edgeless sky. Though they haven't speech, they know each other instantly. Adelaide sees the woman with silvering hair and hands unscathed. Fern sees the ruddy girl, head bowed, a bruiseless back. They fall upon each other—they are softnesses on softnesses. They look down, and there, too, is the restless cooing thing, cradled in a nest of cotton and hungering for their milk. They kneel together so it may drink. **LF**

EXCERPTS

“Why do people have to die?”—it’s a question many people begin asking as children and ask all their lives. If we all have to die, why are we here in the first place?”

AN INTERVIEW WITH SIGRID NUNEZ PAUL FLOREZ-TAYLOR

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“Before long, through our bedroom walls, I heard a hard knock at the front door to our shabby, popcorn-ceilinged apartment. There was the murmur of crisp, official, unaccented American voices—white people voices. I heard the static and chirps of a police radio. Umma began babbling in Korean, stuff I couldn’t understand, shrill and tense.”

WE WERE TAKEN IN THE NIGHT HANNAH BAE

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“Marc’s swallows shifted the muscles of his neck. His body odor almost fragrant, like cumin. He whapped his knees out and in. Once his knee grazed mine, I forgot about the television or why I’d come over in the first place, waiting for its bony return.”

GENERAL HELPER THOMAS GRATTAN

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“[My mom] was my first writing and reading teacher. She also was the person I lied to the most, and the one who lied to me most frequently. So I really had to. And in this weird way, she had to collaborate. We both knew this had to get done. The question was how public would we make it.” —Kiese Laymon

AUTHORS IN CONVERSATION BRIAN GRESKO

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“She fished a paper clip from a magnet covered in paper clips and unraveled it, thinking of nothing but her own shame. She picked off the plastic coating and jammed the metal end under her thumbnail through to the yellowy crescent, counting to seven. The radio had said that when it came to shame, you ought to think on it for no more than seven seconds, and in those seven seconds think on it very hard, but never again.”

CIRCLING BACK LAUREN FRIEDLANDER

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