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REGARDING NARRATIVE JUSTICE, WOMXN

Geeta Tewari[★]

INTRODUCTION¹

“I am free, no matter what rules surround me. If I find them tolerable, I tolerate them; if I find them too obnoxious, I break them. I am free because I know that I alone am morally responsible for everything I do.” Robert A. Heinlein

There is significant legal scholarship addressing employment issues such as discrimination, disparity, and harassment. However, the human voice in these battles—their stories, their emotional, cultural, individual journeys—are sometimes displaced, for reasons of logic, practicality, or purported irrelevance. How can we examine the law, its complex rules, terminologies, and traditions in a way that includes their histories? More-

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1. I understand that the work I present here is atypical from the traditional legal research and articles presented at a law scholarship workshop and in a law journal. However, to embody the world we seek to live in, we must create it. I dedicate this article to Fordham Law School Professor Deborah Denno and Columbia University School of Arts Professor Alan Ziegler.

over, why, some may ask, does their worldview belong in the space of law?

In *Hearing the Call of Stories*, 79 Cal. L. Rev. 971, 982 (1991), Kathryn Abrams cited feminist narrative scholarship as a “distinctive form of legal argument.”² And in *Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative*, 87 Mich. L. Rev. 2411, 2414 (1989), Richard Delgado further explains that “[c]ounterstories, which challenge . . . received wisdom . . . show[] us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live.”³

The story within this article explores how narrative justice can be applied as a form of advocacy for persons seeking access to justice. The questions—what is narrative justice? How do we define it?—deserve a separate space, which will be shared in a forthcoming article. Meanwhile, in short, narrative justice is the power of the word—written, spoken, articulated with the emotion or experience of an individual or collective, to shape or express reaction to law and policy.

“Narratives wield power because they use writer’s tools to raise consciousness, and consciousness-raising is the key to establishing rights for women.”⁴ Let us carry this a step further and consider applying narrative justice as a tool for lawyers, judges, activists, teachers, and artists to engage with each other and to extend arms not only to women, but to all marginalized groups seeking to build their rightful belonging in the legal landscape.

It is my hope that narrative justice can begin in law school, with construction of new law and literature courses to assist students in “communicat[ing] better through the written word and to develop the . . . oratorical skills . . .” previous legal scholars have held necessary.⁵ We should teach students how to analyze laws and regulations with a narrative justice pedagogy, encouraging in-class presentation of students’ findings with respect to social justice issues. In turn, these new lawyers will be better prepared to listen to and articulate their clients’ stories.⁶

2. Kathryn Abrams, *Hearing the Call of Stories*, 79 CAL. L. REV. 971, 982 (1991).

3. Richard Delgado, *Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative* [hereinafter *Storytelling*], 87 Mich. L. Rev. 2411, 2414 (1989).

4. Lindsey Martin-Bowen, *Words from A Teller of Tales: Can Storytelling Play an Effective Role in Feminist Jurisprudence?*, 66 UMKC L. REV. 95, 105 (1997); see also CATHARINE A. MACKINNON, TOWARD A FEMINIST THEORY OF THE STATE 83-105 (Harvard Univ. 1989).

5. Elizabeth Villiers Gemmette, *Intersecting Law and Literature Symposium on Legal Education: Law and Literature: Joining the Class Action*, 29 VAL. U.L. REV. 665, 673 (1995).

6. In *Confronting “Unwelcomeness” from the Outside: Using Case Theory to Tell the Stories of Sexually-Harassed Women*, Margaret Moore Jackson proposes that lawyers should use “outsider client narratives as a means of achieving client goals and promoting legal and cultural change.” Margaret Moore Jackson, *Confronting “Unwelcomeness,”* 14 CARDOZO

Examples of law and policy issues to be analyzed from a narrative justice approach might include gender equity, and specifically, government regulation of marriage and surnames⁷ or laws prohibiting certain job interview questions pertaining to a person's life status, present income, or identity. Other issues, such as environment, transportation, finance, and education also hold narratives that could change the path for reform. Ultimately, one of the key goals of this interdisciplinary pedagogical approach is for students to exit law school primed for more empathic, successful, and grounded careers in the law.

In recent years, law and literature scholars and activists have tried to make personal gender pronouns more inclusive, in order to account for those who are gender fluid, or do not identify with their perceived gender. This article, in part, critically examines societal progress from an interdisciplinary lens, through the reader's reaction to a story about a lawyer.

According to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, "[a] gender neutral or gender inclusive pronoun is a pronoun which does not associate a gender with the individual who is being discussed. Some languages, such as English, do not have a gender neutral or third gender pronoun available, and this has been criticized, since in many instances, writers, speakers, etc. use 'he/his' when referring to a generic individual in the third person. Also, the dichotomy of 'he and she' in English does not leave room for other gender identities, which is a source of frustration to transgender and gender queer communities. People who are limited by languages which do not include gender neutral pronouns have attempted to create them, in the interest of greater equality."⁸

Of additional note, the American Dialect Society anointed "they" the 2015 Word of the Year, as a pronoun confining itself neither to "he" nor "she." The law is beginning to follow suit to legitimize non-binary pronouns. For example, "[i]n New York City, new clarifications to the city's human rights guidelines make clear that the intentional misidentification of a person's preferred name, pronoun or title is violation of the city's anti-discrimination law."⁹ While some progress has been made,

J.L. & GENDER 61, 62 (2007). She suggests that outsider narratives, such as narratives from marginalized voices, may help counter inappropriate norms or stereotypes that prevent the law from providing them with justice. *Id.* at 79.

7. "[T]he name is said to inhere in or stick to a man's bones. See Peter Goodrich, *The Omen in Nomen: An Exemplary Dictionary of Legal Names*, 24 CARDOZO L. REV. 1309 (2003).

8. University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, *Gender Pronouns*, UWM.edu, <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/> (last visited Aug. 19, 2019).

9. Jessica Bennett, *She? Ze? They? What's in a Gender Pronoun; Command Z*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 30, 2016).

more can be done and arguably, narrative justice may be an effective way to achieve meaningful or tangible acceptance of unfamiliar pronouns.

In accordance, the following story is a legal and literary experiment in narrative justice. Teachers and scholars are encouraged to use the several legal, social, and cultural issues addressed therein as a catalyst for discussion and debate.¹⁰ Perhaps consider this narrative to be the client's voice, or even that of a student who is against university or school district policy. The narrator could also be a current or former law firm associate who refused to adopt the universal spellings of female pronouns because of their identity. Or possibly, because of their own personal underlying reasons of sensitivity, they are demanding to create new pronouns for themselves. What, if any, is their case? And on the other side?¹¹

In *Storytelling*, Delgado provides an initial “stock” story related to employment and then tells us this same story through additional views. In this approach, he shows how one account can show a positive, unbiased outlook on what happened to a job candidate, while the story told from the “out group” perspective shows “how different ‘neutrality’ can feel from the perspective of an outsider.”¹² The story within this article attempts a one-version story, of an “out group” perspective. It addresses gender pronouns, and also demonstrates effects of neurological issues such as depression, trauma, and surviving abuse. The narrator has gone through divorce, unemployment, depression, and domestic abuse, and as evidenced by her actions and imagination, it has severely affected her life.¹³ How can society reshape the way a person experiencing issues like these is treated or supported? What is the option or hope for their future? How do we balance kindness and empathy with fairness for all? It is these questions that weigh great purpose and responsibility on the law; ethics, critical thinking, daily work.

Effective teachers not only encourage students to think in constructive ways, but also to incorporate innovation into their practice. “[N]arratives that do not otherwise make it into the court system—for a

10. “That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance. Law too often seeks to avoid this truth by making up its own breed of narrower, simpler, but hypnotically powerful rhetorical truths.” See PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS, *THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS* 10–11 (1991).

11. For those that believe gender pronoun preference is no longer an issue, I relay here that someone I turned to for comment on an earlier draft of this story declared the new pronoun spellings “moronic.”

12. Delgado, *supra* note 3, at 2421–25.

13. See Deborah W. Denno, *How Courts In Criminal Cases Respond to Childhood Trauma*, 103 *MARQUETTE LAW REVIEW* 301, 308 (forthcoming, 2020) (“The link between early trauma and long-term negative consequences such as intellectual, psychological, or neurological dysfunction has substantial support in a vast array of research.”)

variety of reasons—can still influence the justice system.”¹⁴ So let us be daring. Let us prepare our students for the risks they must take to embody reform. And finally, let us think critically about what narratives we include and listen to, and why. Only by acknowledging our programmed biases and subconscious conclusions with openness to new constitutions of law can we accept stories as lessons for change.

Story

Glossary of terms:

Sxe – she

Motxer – mother

Womx – woman/women

Xer – her

This time, when sxe wakes up, it is 2017. Sxe did not vote. Sxe wishes sxe had. The new president has Orange Tang™ colored hair. Nobody will admit they voted for him. Sxe reads that 62,979,879 people voted for him.

Sxe sits down now at the sticky kitchen table—honey, orange juice, congealed butter, all pooled in nooks of stale bread underneath. Sxe tries to write the story where a womxn corrals courage to leave the spot sxe is in, but just like last year, and the year before that, and the year before that, sxe is too afraid to mark paper with what sxe truly thinks.

It is tough to see fearlessness as a feasible option when you have no money of your own, when in order to give your children food and shelter, you are dependent on payment from a person you once believed would be your best friend for the rest of life, a person who now calls you leech or whore or *Bihari*, the last term most painful of all because it insults not only you but your entire family ancestry, as if being from one of the poorest states in India automatically means you must be dumb.

+

The night before, another rejection note, typed on a tiny cream sheet, in an envelope sxe sent, was returned to xer old mailbox, waiting in its dark pit, bearing the stamp sxe had licked one year before.

“You mailed yourself a letter?” xer ex-husband had asked, bringing it to xer. Much of xer mail still goes to the old apartment. And sxe is still in constant contact with xer ex, the way divorced couples with children often are—too expensive and emotionally destructive for the children to separate completely, or at least, this is what he insists. He holds the key to

14. See Anne E. Ralph, *Narrative-Erasing Procedure*, 18 NEV. L.J. 573, 626 (2018).

xer new apartment in his other hand. “For safety, or emergencies,” he says he must keep this key, and pay visits—this as well, he insists.

Sxe’d taken the letter to the bathroom to read, because somehow reading in the open, in front of him and xer children, felt like being naked, as if then, the impending rejection of xer story would require an inspection and mockery of xer work.

“We appreciated the life, the reality, the danger your character faces, but she’s not believable.”

Is anything believable

anymore?

Sxe’d tucked it in the plastic waste bin, closed the lid.

+

There are three children in the apartment today. Talking, laughing, screaming, sneezing, mucus hanging from their noses like tree sap, eating, smiling, crying, running, laughing some more, until they have lost their breath, commandeering the womxn from the moment their enormous sparkling eyes open this morning, every morning. “I want a horse, mommy; I want a star, mommy; hey, mommy, buy me a trampoline.”

Close to noon, the oldest approaches xer at that table, and takes xer pen. “Excuse me,” the womxn says.

“Remember when you were a hermit crab, mommy?” the oldest asks. “That was so cool, can you do it again? Teach me how to hide my face.”

“Why would you want to hide your face?”

“To be like you.”

“No, baby,” the womxn says. “You have a beautiful face.” Sxe worries whether xer children are actually learning anything of true value.

“Why did you hide yours?”

“It was the animal I became that day. I was afraid of your father, and instead of standing up for myself, I hid. It was wrong,” sxe says, with the gravity of a parent attempting to instill a useful trait in their offspring. “I will not do it again.”

“What will you be today, mommy?”

“I am not sure yet. But it will be different, more powerful and strong.”

The oldest is quiet for a moment. “But you don’t matter enough to be powerful or strong.”

“I do not matter?” the womxn repeats, as sxe repeats most of what anyone says to xer to acknowledge that sxe heard it, the easiest way of

communication when your brain has gone numb managing abuse, depression, failure to live up to the person you could have been.

The oldest smiles. “Only daddy matters,” sxe sings. “Only daddy matters because d-a-d-d-y has a J-O-B!” The child repeats xer little song again as if sxe is practicing for a recital.

The womxn opens xer mouth to scold xer child, or at least, to contest, but instead metallic pink bubbles escape, and inside them—xer anger and despair are dressed as rag dolls, bopping leg to leg. Sxe stands, xer feet bare on the old hardwood floor now. It is not the child’s fault, sxe has to be taught.

“I do matter,” the womxn says. “Everyone matters.”

“How can everyone matter?”

“Because we fight for them to,” sxe says. “This is what your mommy used to do.” The middle child picks up her head from her magna-tiles on the floor and stares, as if cognizant that something profound might transpire. “I used to fight for everyone to matter. That was my job.” The child resumes her play.

“But you don’t do that anymore,” the oldest points out.

“Not right now, but I can,” sxe says.

“When?”

“Today,” sxe says. “I’ll begin preparing today.”

“Preparing for what?” the middle asks. “School?”

“No, it’s summer,” the oldest one corrects.

“To go back to work,” the womxn says. “To read the paper again, today is the day. To ask the Internet who our Vice President is. The Secretary of State. How do I not know this? How lost have I been! No liquor today,” sxe decides out loud. “No liquor, ever again!”

“Hooray!” the oldest shouts, as if the declaration has added a year back to the child’s youth. “No liquor!” Perhaps it has.

How long have I been asleep? How much damage have I done to these children?

“No liquor!” the middle one repeats, trying xer best to copy the oldest’s demeanor.

“What is a G.O.P.?” the womxn asks the children.

“Gop!” the oldest shouts. “Goop?”

I used to know this when I was human. What will people think if they knew how little I know now? Sxe makes a note to look up G.O.P., and decides that before sxe forgets, sxe must run to the bathroom and do it. Inside, sxe closes the toilet seat’s lid, sits down, and turns on xer computer. Sxe declines all of the update requests, and finally, is relieved to find that on one website’s forum, twenty-four other people typed the same question.

Grand Old Party. *Wasn't that what this was supposed to be—the husband, the kids, the stay-at-home motxer/writer debut? When did I stop enjoying life, believing in myself, trying to make a difference in the world?*

The phone rings. Sxe runs to the kitchen and finds it in the breadbasket underneath shin guards, faded receipts, mold-spotted corn muffins, cocktail napkins, chopsticks, words scratched on a mauve-colored post-it:

geopolitical
neoliberal
freedom
human
capital
right
where how
now
think.

Sxe knows sxe will never be a poet, but at least in words sxe can dream and breathe and find a way to use xer degrees. It is embarrassing, how lost sxe has become, receiving zero interviews for any of the jobs sxe has applied for, even entry-level litigation.

“Maybe you should take J.D. off of your resume?” xer ex had suggested. “People are confused. Why is an educated woman doing nothing?”

“This is not nothing,” sxe had said. “Taking care of children, raising them to be kind human beings.”

“That’s nothing,” he’d said. “To a person working, at a real job, it’s nothing.”

nothing

Sxe wrote the word last night, on the back of the rejection letter’s envelope, studying how *nothing* it made xer feel.

+

The person on the other end of the phone’s line is a recruiter who a kind friend had referred xer to.

“I’m sorry,” the recruiter says. “You haven’t worked in over ten years now. Your skills are rust.”

Sxe remembers the orange-brown rust shimmering along the sides of xer parents’ first American car—a used Subaru. It was a white station wagon. Sxe cannot think of the car without visualizing xer father inside of it: tight, bell-bottomed mustard colored pants, and a black, shiny moustache matching his black, shiny hair, his Indian accent so heavy and thick that it was as if it was separate from his body, like a brick annexed

itself to his lips every time he spoke. This was Massachusetts. 1976. The neighbors and most of the people he worked with thought he could not even speak English, that when he was speaking English he was, in fact, speaking “Indian” because back then, Hindi, Arabic, Farsi, Punjabi were all too far removed for the average “American” New Englander to understand, all too similarly foreign to differentiate, for those who did not need to in order to fit in. How desperate xer father had looked, carrying his belongings out of this car and into their home, the first time he lost his job.

The recruiter is still talking. Sxe does not ask him to continue, and yet he does. “I don’t have time to help you. I’ve got people working already, at top companies, that are asking for my help, and frankly, ma’am, it’s a lot easier to get a job if you already have a job.”

“I know that,” sxe says. “This is why I reached out to you.

“I’m sorry. I can’t help you,” he repeats.

Xer baby begins to cry in the background. Sxe has pooped, the air smells of it.

“I want to eat something,” the middle one tugs on the womxn’s bare leg to say.

“Would you like a sandwich?” the oldest offers. “Let’s make honey sandwiches.”

The man is silent for a moment, and then he adds, “Listen, I wish you luck. Really, I do. But would you mind if I tell you something honestly?”

“I would mind if you do not tell me something honestly,” sxe says.

“Right,” he chuckles. “May I?”

“Fine?” the womxn half says, half asks.

“If you do get an interview, don’t mention you have children. Don’t mention anything about your children. If they ask, say you have a live-in.”

Sxe laughs, xer head thrown back. “A live-in named *me*?”

His voice is still going when sxe hangs up.

Sxe looks around at the mess: the toys, the papers, the crumbs, the socks, underwear, dirty clothes all strewn across the carpet mixed with the clean. “How did I get here?” sxe asks the children.

“You came out of your motxer’s belly,” the oldest says.

+

Sxe pours xerself amaretto and a splash of the morning’s coffee for self-respect, and decides this does not have to be the day sxe stops drinking, and why does sxe need to stop drinking completely, anyway? Could not sxe stop for a day? Could not that be tomorrow?

Sxe chugs and feels xer insides erasing themselves like equations on a blackboard. Sxe puts on jean shorts and the electric green bra sxe bought four years before, thinking that would be the day sxe would break away from xer depression and fear.

“Babysit, please?” sxe asks the oldest.

“No, I’m coming with you,” the oldest replies.

“No,” sxe says. “Remember, sometimes mommy needs Mommy-Time? May I take my Mommy-Time now?” The oldest nods, xer chin turned down. Sxe takes the smallest step back from xer motxer. The womxn stares at the middle one at the table, silently eating xer sandwich. How different each child is! How much potential each has, if granted affection, love, opportunity. Are not these basic human rights? Sxe prays to will xerself out of xer frozen state, to stay awake long enough for a meaningful impact on their lives.

“I will return soon,” sxe tells the oldest. “And I love you.”

“I love you more!” the oldest shouts.

“Be safe!” the womxn shouts back. “Please do not answer the door!” Sxe wonders as sxe climbs the stairwell, how sxe created a child so brave. Sxe reminds xerself that when sxe returns, she must look this child in the eyes and tell xer how special sxe is.

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On the roof, the womxn stands on a tin chair. The sun is directly above xer, burning the top of xer mane. Sxe takes one deep breath, and then screams at the top of xer lungs for as long as xer voice can go, until the pieces of hurt sxe has accumulated, all gush out of xer mouth like spare mechanical parts.

The superintendent enters the roof. He walks up to xer and asks, “Are you alright?”

“No,” sxe says. “I don’t think I am.”

He walks around xer in a circle. He asks, “Where are your children, Mrs. B?”

Sxe steps off the chair. “They’re downstairs, my beautiful children. They’re fine. They have years of happiness and life ahead.” Sxe pauses for a moment, and asks, “Why is everyone always asking about my children?”

He takes a step towards xer, because unlike xer daughters, he is grown enough to understand the complicated severity of human suffering. And he is a good man, the type of person unafraid to help another, who does not hesitate to contemplate what he will lose by the other’s gain. It was this trait that sxe sensed when sxe first signed the lease and moved xer children to this modest walk-up after the divorce.

Sxe feels selfish for xer flippant reply to him now, the one person who supports xer, and sxe wishes sxe could tuck xer head in the crook of his neck. He takes another step, and sxe steps back towards the ledge. *Stop the fear*, sxe says to herself. Sxe crushes xer eyes closed so tight that the goop sxe tells xer children is fairy dust, which only comes if you sleep for an exceptionally long time, squishes out of the corners of xer tear ducts. Suddenly, wings—long, wide white wings—grow on xer back. Sxe runs past the superintendent, to the ledge, and he reaches his arms to restrain xer, but, instead, he catches a whitish-grey feather.

“Stop!” he yells. “You can’t!”

Sxe hoists xerself up, over the ledge, as he grabs for xer ankles without luck. “Don’t worry,” sxe says. “I am not going to kill myself. I am a dove now. I am going to fly.”

Sxe falls for a second before xer wings spread open. The tips are black, like xer hair, both with flecks of grey mixed in. Sxe soars over the city, down to Washington Square Park, to the fountain where sxe was content, or pretending to be content, ten years before, rolling the cuffs of xer jeans, traipsing in the pool of collected water, xer firstborn hoisted on xer hip, xer ex-husband snorting, telling xer sxe looked like a cleaning lady. “Aren’t I a cleaning lady?” sxe had laughed and said. And inside, how sxe felt like screaming, “What is wrong with looking like I clean?”

In the self-help section of a bookstore, sxe had once read that if you pretend to be happy, you can trick yourself into thinking you really are happy. That day by the fountain, sxe’d thought—*What a manipulative devil that author was.*

Sxe wets xer eyes, xer skin, xer wings. Sxe cups the water in the palms of xer hands and drinks. How thirsty sxe is. Sxe had forgotten to drink water for months. The water is cold, and it re-energizes xer. Sxe springs up again, to the sky, and flies away from New York, above New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, all along the Delaware River, catching the sun reflecting off the river and onto xer, as if it is healing, giving xer a piece of the person sxe used to be, a human rights activist and lawyer, representing people discriminated against because of their color or age, gender, sexuality, status in life. How useful sxe felt, before sxe let loss consume her. The world is not fair for womxn. Once sxe accepted this, sxe should have continued xer work with even more force.

+

By the time sxe reaches Washington, D.C., it is approaching evening, and the sun is glowing in a heaven-pink sky over the mass of buildings, all white brick and tinted glass. Sxe circles above the President’s house, takes a deep breath, and soars down from the sky, landing onto the back porch, in the rose garden. The preceding President, eight years

before, had offered xer a job as his legal counsel, to address the wage disparity between womxn and men. How lucky sxe had been for that phone call, a fact sxe recognized only in hindsight, years too late—sxe received this call shortly after sxe had decided to abandon the law to raise xer children and write stories, which would have been fine, but sxe failed at both, and xer husband disrespected xer severely for xer choice to quit law, as well. It was as if xer husband forgot who sxe was, how smart and strong and passionate a life-partner he had, when sxe stopped working.

“It is too painful, this work,” sxe had said to a colleague.

“That’s why you can’t quit. Who else will acknowledge this pain? Who else can make pain matter in this world?”

Manavata – the Hindi word for humanity, a word xer ex should have been taught.

Sxe never returned that president’s call. *I’m keeping my options open*, sxe told xerself. Why do stupid choices always sound logical in the moment of? At that time, sxe was a slug, barely keeping up with hygiene, let alone thinking about the future.

There is a light breeze, drying the sweat underneath xer wings, and along xer tummy and upper lip. Sxe looks up, the sun is still bright above the pink. Sxe blinks at the brightness of its core.

The President walks up to xer and stops at arms distance by a row of rose bushes in his garden. He stands, silent, arms crossed, as if he’s been waiting for xer to arrive.

“President Tang™,” sxe says, extending xer hand. Sxe breathes in deep, like sxe is about to hold xerself under water. “Your predecessor had offered me a job as legal counsel, in the area of employment matters, wage discrimination, specifically, and I am here to request renewal of that offer.”

“Offer?” he scoffs. “Ha! He gave you an offer? You look like a bird!”

“Actually,” sxe says, “I am a lawyer, and a writer.”

“A writer?” He laughs at that, too. “What have you published? Mommy Diary?” He continues to laugh at his insensitive joke, and sxe wonders how he knows that sxe is a motxer. As if he can read xer mind, and perhaps, sxe thinks to xerself, xer mind has decayed to such a predictability that he *can* read xer mind, he points to xer chest to explain. For a moment, sxe is offended, perceiving him to be commenting on xer low, lopsided breasts, the product of breastfeeding on and off for so many years, but sxe looks down and sees, unbelievably, that the baby Bjorn carrier has been harnessed over xer shirt, the sides tucked neatly underneath xer wings.

A man in a suit arrives, with a broom to shoo xer away. “Wait a minute,” the President says, raising his hand. He takes a step closer and looks at xer sweaty face. “I know you.”

Hope rises from xer heart. Maybe the old President had kept xer resume on file, or maybe this one had read about xer in the news eleven years before when sxe had won a sexual harassment case worth sixteen million dollars, or maybe, even, he's read one of xer short stories online. "You do?" sxe asks.

"No," he scoffs. "I know who you are supposed to be, silly."

Silly – her ex-husband's term of affection for xer during the marriage. Why had sxe not realized then that it was not a sincere term of endearment, but rather, a mechanism to demean xer?

It begins to rain, the torrential buckets sort that commences as abruptly as it ends. Sxe watches xerself in this rain, transforming against xer will, from bird, back into womxn, except this time, a womxn whose hair is combed and dyed, set in a chignon. Sxe is wearing a tweed suit, now, with hot pink pumps. A gin and tonic magically appears in xer right hand, a quarter lime at the bottom of the glass. The rain halts.

"Oh, wait," President Tang™ says. He blinks, and a little crystal glass filled with liquid not so dissimilar from the color of his hair is fisted in his right hand. "Cheers," he says, clinking his glass against xers.

"Cheers? What happened? Why am I dressed like this?"

He ignores xer confusion, taking a swig of his drink, as if acting like nothing abnormal happened would mean that nothing abnormal actually happened. Sxe remarks to xerself that this trick is how men have come to rule the world.

"So now, Ms. Uh—"

"Mx. Bird," sxe corrects.

"Ms. Bird. Well, you look the part now, so tell me, what is it you want to do here?"

"I want to work as your legal counsel," sxe says. "To address the wage disparity between different groups of people, marginalized peoples, men and womxn. The job I had applied for." Sxe holds xer breath here, worried sxe has crossed a line.

"I see," Tang™ says, taking a sip of his drink. "Are you married?"

"What does that have to do with the job, Mx. President?"

"Mx. President? Am I a hamburger now?"

"That is not what I meant."

"Whatever you meant," he says, waiving his free hand to dismiss xer, "your husband must be worried about you, flying so far from home."

The President assumes sxe is stupid, of this sxe is sure now, by how he refuses to make eye contact when sxe speaks. "Actually, I am divorced," sxe says. "Which is irrelevant to whether I am competent to fulfill the position."

"There is no position," he says.

"Has it been filled?"

“Wage disparity is not an issue my office is financed to manage,” he says. “We are overbooked.”

“Overbooked?” sxe repeats, biting her lip at the repetition.

“Yes, we have many other orders to fulfill. What other areas are you interested in?”

“Gender bias, enforcing fair hiring and promotion practices, addressing work-life balance for families, creating safe spaces for domestic violence victims . . .”

“No, we are not able to accommodate any of those items at this time,” he says. “All resources must be reserved for implementation of the mass cubicle partitions, border walls, and the robotic manipulations we’re building.”

Sxe untangles xer hair from its chignon and lifts xer feet out of the pumps. “I see,” sxe says.

It is a moment of stillness now, black casting further across the lawn. Sxe knows sxe is alone in xer fight, to preserve the womxn sxe should be, to protect and raise xer children, to survive, to contribute, to matter. If sxe gives up, there will be no one telling xer sxe shouldn’t have given up.

“What are you doing?”

“Well, there is no work for me here,” sxe says. “I am leaving.”

“Ha! You give up that quick?” he snarls. A guard comes out with a lantern, and holds it by President Tang’s™ frame.

“No,” sxe says. “I am facing reality. I am facing my duties and obligations. I must work on these issues of fairness and justice. I will find a new way. But, first,” sxe says, xer wings bursting out from the sides of xer suit, “I need to go home to my children, to tell them I believe in them, that they can do anything, anything at all that they desire with their lives.”

“You’re upset,” he says.

“I am not upset. You want me to be upset, but I am not. You are of no help and there is too much to do. I cannot waste any more time.”

“Well, you’re not leaving,” he says, grabbing xer arm now.

“Are you going to stop me?”

“I can if I want,” he says.

His fist around her forearm, sxe remembers xer ex-husband, how when they disagreed, he would push xer, neither lightly nor roughly, but enough to leave a purplish bruise; how sxe would stand still, frigid because they were still married, and physically, he was stronger. Sxe was not yet brave enough to leave him. Sled dog – the animal sxe had become, the day sxe packed as much as sxe could, took xer children, and fled.

Sxe tries to shake his hand off of xer, but sxe cannot. Without the sun’s light, sxe can barely see, and there is no one here to help. His secu-

rity guard approaches. Sxe breathes in and reaches down with her beak to bite the President's hand, hard, hard enough to create an opening, and a collection of blood. Sxe holds xer beak there for a few moments as he screams and tries to kick her. Sxe jumps, hovering in the air.

"You cannot stop me," sxe says.

The cut is not that bad, but he is worried about disease, and cries hysterically as sxe flutters her wings in the air, a full moon now taking over the night.

At once, his guard shoots xer. The bullet – through xer chest. Xer oldest flies towards xer as sxe collapses onto grass.

"Mommy," the child screams.

"Where are your sisters?" sxe asks.

"Mx. Superintendent is watching them," the child says. I had a feeling you needed me." Sxe hoists xer motxer onto xer back, and with great difficulty, lifts back up into the night, in search of George Washington, the hospital where sxe was born.

"You are special," the motxer says. "You are brave, and kind, and special."

The child pets xer motxer's feathers. The weight of being the oldest child, the burden of caring for xer younger siblings and a motxer managing traumas the child is now starting to comprehend, all of this requires xer muscles to work harder to stay afloat in the sky. Despite the exertion, sxe feels cold, and worries for xer motxer. Sxe does not know what ensued, but sxe is certain xer motxer needs xer, now, more than ever before.

