

## Introduction

Hello everyone, welcome to a round-up reading by authors from the publisher Fiction Collective 2, an imprint of the University of Alabama Press. Founded in 1974, Fiction Collective has been publishing artistically adventurous, non-traditional fiction, for the past 46 years, which in the publishing world is about 7 lifetimes. It is, in other words, one of the oldest, and most venerable presses in the U.S., which seems like an oxymoron given its mission of placing literary innovation instead of commercial concerns at the fore of its publishing agenda. Today we are going to be treated to a smorgasbord of 5 exemplary authors who have recently published with the press. I think you'll find that within the press's mission of publishing non-traditional work, there is a wide diversity of literary concerns and aesthetics at play. So let's welcome our first reader, Vi Khi Nao.

Vi Khi Nao is the author of six poetry collections & of the short story collection, [A Brief Alphabet of Torture](#) (winner of the 2016 FC2's Ronald Sukenick Innovative Fiction Prize). She is also the author of the novel, [Fish in Exile](#) (Coffee House Press, 2016). Her work includes poetry, fiction, film and cross-genre collaboration. Her first play, [Waiting for God](#), was published by Apocalypse Party in January 2022. She was the Fall 2019 fellow at the Black Mountain Institute: <https://www.vikhinao.com>

JoAnna Novak's short story collection, *Meaningful Work* (FC2, 2021), won the Ronald Sukenick Innovative Fiction Contest. She is the author of three books of poetry, most recently *New Life* (Black Lawrence Press, 2021), and a novel, *I Must Have You*. Her debut memoir *Contradiction Days* will be published by Catapult in 2023. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The New York Times*, and other publications. She is a co-founder of the literary journal and chapbook publisher, [Tammy](#).

Marc Anthony Richardson is author of *Year of the Rat*, winner of an American Book Award and a Ronald Sukenick Innovative Fiction Prize. He is a recipient of a PEN America grant, a Hurston/Wright fellowship, and a Vermont Studio Center residency. In 2021, he was awarded a Creative Capital Award and a Sachs Program Grant for Arts Innovation for his novel-in-progress, *The Serpent Will Eat Whatever Is in the Belly of the Beast*. His second novel, *Messiahs*, was published the same year. He taught creative writing at Rutgers University, and currently teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. [www.marcanthonyrichardson.com](http://www.marcanthonyrichardson.com)

Kathleen J. Woods earned an M.F.A in Creative Writing from the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she served as Managing Editor for the journal *Timber*. She was a 2018 San Francisco Writers Grotto fellow and is a two-time *Tin House* alum. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Bitch*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Apeiron Review*, and others. *White Wedding* is her first novel.

Steve Tomasula is the author of the novels *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, *The Book of Portraiture*, *TOC: A New-Media Novel*, and *IN&OZ*. His short fiction is collected in *Once Human: Stories*. Most recently, he is the editor of *Conceptualisms: The Anthology of Prose, Poetry, Visual, Found, E- and Other Hybrid Writings as Contemporary Art* (2022). *Ascension*, a novel of nature becoming environment, is forthcoming in 2022. [www.stevetomasula.com](http://www.stevetomasula.com).

JoAnna Novak, Kathleen J. Woods, and Steve Tomasula have provided transcripts of their readings. You can read the Novak and Woods excerpts below. The Tomasula excerpt contains images and is a separate file.

**“Clambering Over Such Rocks”**  
*As appears in Meaningful Work: Stories (FC2, 2021)*

*JoAnna Novak*

Perhaps we three shall only ever have in common the murder of Adler. And white garments, shoes, stockings, sleeves—even the body of the Pemaquid Point Lighthouse is shell-colored, if you ignore her black window.

We confer at the Point, calm ourselves, and consider what we have done, firing thrice into the husband and father we have left in our Oneonta cabin.

I still see his stunned eyes stuck on a hoghead of sardines.

My mother and sister’s hands smell like buckshot.

A fine spray of grayish pink stains my blouse. My father’s last sputum.

Yet even now, they flaunt their them-ness, asserting their alliance against the suspiration of the Atlantic.

I cannot be blamed for growing up untouched.

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The rocks ribbed like roof tiles. Loud water mostly mist. Sky blue as a tepid bath. One rip of sand.

Up the coast is dented. Southward, fjordlike. Islanded. Our state has beachwoods. Artist’s colonies. Shore dinners. Clams. Snowshoes. Watermelon tourmaline old Gepettos string on silk and fix around your neck.

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My mother and sister stand at water’s edge in matching wild berry: my mother’s sweetheart sweater; my sister’s maiden jumper, her billowing mutton sleeves. Flax-haired, fine-profiled, victimisses.

And me, a remove from the shore, arrogating a rather smooth stone. In my Bohemian brow and trousers. A roll of flesh at my elbows.

It is my task to tip the rifle, land it in a chasm of rocks.

Get rid of the foul thing, my mother instructed me, returned to her delicacy, even after our hard travels, past Oshkoshed fishermen and seals bottling, pods of whales whose rubber heads emerge like enormous bowler hats.

Once more, to the court of women's vision, I go uninvited.

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Sometimes, my sister's skirts inflated by the crush of crashing waves, I see my mother smooth her dress, to catch it from flying up.

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It is a tale of a family in the woods: not so special to Maine.

I, for one, have always believed it must be hard for a man to bequeath his virility to women.

What might we do, knit him a cock's cap?

Crochet a sleeve for his casting arm?

I fed my father his tinsel when he tied silver streamers.

Learned the names of artificial lures: Brown hackle. Royal coachman.

I was his spread girl, the best at coating his biscuits with butter.

The best at proportioning a sandwich.

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It is not that I ever disbelieved my mother and sister. Poulticing their thighs would find a disciple in anyone.

And Adler's fingerprints distinguished themselves, left bruises like kidney beans.

Things he announced, daily as grace, even now aim arrows at my mind:

Your apology is but a belated excuse.

You could drive a phaeton through that pie hole.

I wouldn't grope you with my rustiest fishing pole.

Only then did I realize the makeup of some women is more than a matter of pantalettes.

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Other words organized when he took my sister to the spurrier's. When he took her out riding in a red coat. When he took her arm, held her wrist like a hatchling. She had warned me under the counterpane, how he said he wanted to spue inside her, to gild her insides like the dogwood in an ice storm.

He might have found me ready, if he'd ever come looking.

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The coast thinks nothing of a woman helming a rifle. She is a sportsman, clad in smaller clothing.

My legs extend in front of me. The line of my ankle is visible below the hem of my porpoise-blue trousers. It is the thin part, before muscle swells my calf.

The rifle lays long, butting my crotch. It is not much more than a broomstick. Its barrel is black and matte. It has not buckles, but parts that buckle when touched.

In my mother, Adler found a wife and a wet nurse and a whimperer. When he loved her, I could hear her crying like our collie, still tender from the whelping.

A mallet, when pounding veal flat, makes a resounding bluntness. And that was the way my father's gut pummeled her rump.

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"Bring your sulking down to the water," my sister calls, her face tear-wet and shining.

It would be salt to lick her.

It would scald to approach the limits of her love.

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It was only once I was asked to witness.

He filled my tin cup with birch beer and set me in a kitchen chair he'd carried up the stairs to their lofted bedroom.

Midway, he flung a pillow in my lap and, grateful, I reinstated lady legs.

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Unwelcome is not the word I feel for being a sister and daughter in this life. Unwanted is wrong, as well. More, I know I am unusable to either sex, the Adler fathers, the docile mothers, the sisters with hot-combed hair.

(I have always wanted to ask: Do you like me?)

It is for this reason that I reposition the rifle and wedge it between my knees. Nature has engineered me with long arms and I am relieved to finger the trigger. It feels like a latch, a hook, a malformed tack. It has known the flesh of everyone in my family. No wonder Heaven gave me such fortitude to free the shore of my disease.

The gulls overhead fight and scowl.

The black window in the Lighthouse darkens.

And yes the waves roll out, folding over on themselves, thrashing at the sky. It is dim, almost aluminum. Surely, on some other horizon, there is a sun, close and gold.

Kathleen J. Woods  
White Wedding Excerpt

The woman had lied to the caterer, but only by half. At the mansion on the mountain, she'd tended to delicate grooming with her delicate hands. She'd been provided all the right tools, finely made and clean. She'd had a room. A canopy bed and claw-foot bath and rosewood vanity with its oval mirror. Shawls and trinkets imitating clutter. The room didn't bother with clocks or passing light. On her walls, there hung one set of heavy curtains and one grand painting—a white swan in oils, floating on gray. It gazed over the room with a hard, black eye.

The woman heard the chimes, and her bedroom walls were sage. She draped a silk robe over her bare shoulders. Next to the bathtub, she found bottles and jars and small metal instruments arranged on a brass tray. There, too, she found a note card with her instructions. The woman read the neat lines, the fine script. She perched by the taps and ran a hot bath. She sprinkled the basin with salts and oils, anise and heather. The water steamed. She waited.

Another chime, then knocking. “Come in,” she called. “The door is unlocked.”

A girl entered slowly, tall, bronze, and glowing, hair piled in a riotous bun. Her dress skimmed the floor.

“Wait.” The woman spun the taps shut. “Leave your clothing there.”

The girl nodded. She breathed through her nostrils, exhaling little. She removed her slippers. She pulled down her dress. Her breasts, like her limbs, were long and slender. Black hair ran from the spout of her belly button, pooling over her cunt. It coated her knees and calves and ankles. She'd painted her toenails teal. She cracked her knuckles against the floor.

When the girl spoke, her voice was soft. “I shaved my armpits.”

“I didn’t ask,” said the woman.

“They were driving me crazy.”

“I didn’t ask.” The woman rolled up her sleeves. She skated her fingers over the bathwater. “It’s warm.”

The girl stepped one foot into the basin, then the other. The water swayed. She folded her limbs and sank slowly, exhaling. She kept her neck dry.

“No bubbles?” she asked, peering at her floating breasts. Her nipples drifted outward, areolas soft and wide.

“I need to see you.”

“Right. It’s nice anyway.” She hugged her knees. “Thank you.”

The woman pulled the tray to her hip. She tapped a squat tin, then twisted its cap in slow half circles. Its toffee salve smelled like eucalyptus and rosemary.

“Give me your legs. Both of them.”

The girl shifted, hooking her knees over the edge of the tub, careful not to splash. Still steady on the basin’s lip, the woman set the girl’s wet feet in her lap. She massaged both calves with salve. Beneath thick hair, the girl’s skin was soft. A mole poked from her right calf. It was a perfect circle, red and raised. The salve made it glisten. When the woman swiped her hands under the crook of each knee, the girl fidgeted. Water sloshed and spilled.

“Okay,” the girl said. “All right.”

The woman squeezed the girl’s feet, and then her own hips, smearing excess salve on her robe. She lifted a gold razor from the tray. It flipped open with a single snap of her wrist, the blade sharp and square and long as her palm.

She dipped the blade into the bathwater. She lifted it to the girl’s knee.

“Keep your eyes open.”

The girl nodded, her nostrils flaring. The woman ran the razor down the long left calf. She traced the girl’s femur. With each pass, the blade gathered hair and dead skin, a caterpillar of tissue. The woman rinsed residue into the water again and again. She angled the razor up and down each ankle and pivoted over each knee. She cupped the girl’s heels, lifting to reach behind her calves.

As hair fell away, marks on the girl’s skin emerged. Scarce freckles. A waxy scar on her ankle. Stripes faded down inner thighs. A knotted vein behind the left knee, flinching under the razor. The blade hummed along stray lines of stubble. The girl’s chest rose and fell, slower now, nearly silent. A film of hair bobbed around her breasts.

“Stand up,” the woman said. She brushed the blade against her lap as the girl uncoiled from the water. The wet hair on her upper thighs was finer, already soft. Leaning forward, teetering, the woman shaved the spare patches away. Then, she worked salve over the girl’s belly and drew the razor down, stopping when she reached the girl’s mound.

“Okay,” the girl said. The muscles below her ribs tightened. Her kneecaps twitched. The woman looked up at the girl’s face. Steam had melted her mascara, smattering black around her sockets. She blinked and held her body still. Nodding, the woman swapped her razor for a small pair of gold scissors.

“Spread your legs,” she said.

The girl stared at the scissors. She slid her feet apart, opening a dimpled triangle between her thighs. A smell like mulch drifted from her vulva. Dense hair curled over her mound and down her labia. It grew long.



The woman pinched a tuft from the girl's mound and stretched it taut. The roots strained against their follicles. Crouching, she posed the scissors, suspending them a half centimeter from the girl's skin. She snipped downward, slowly. Each cut was measured and precise. Hair fell away. Clumps scattered in the bathwater or clung to the girl's kneecaps. Strands wrapped around the woman's knuckles, slid behind her fingernails. The scissors made the room's only sound.