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# FICTIVE MATRIARCHIES

MAYA GURANTZ

A few years ago I inherited a library of feminist spiritualist literature from a dying woman, who had long been a follower of Dianic Wicca, a woman's-only offshoot of the neo-pagan movement. I'm afraid I didn't expect much from these stacks. I had never been interested in the sisterhood of new age witchcraft. I was embarrassed by the sincerity, the long jangly necklaces and beads and scarves and Stevie Nicks skirts. The aesthetic seemed frozen in time and place, specifically 1971 Los Angeles, where first Dianic Wiccan group (Susan B. Anthony Coven #1) was founded. I cringed in the shops that sold the accoutrement — as if Tarot Packs and crystals could blow open a door to the divine. I was suspicious of white women creating pagan lineages based in ethnic histories so often not their own.

When I received the books, I was already in the middle of reading *Les Évangiles des Quenouilles* (*The Distaff Gospels*), a popular 15th-century collection of “women's wisdom.” This book resembles a shorter *Decameron*; it isn't set during the Italian plague but during the dead of winter when women would sit together over long, dark evenings spinning wool and exchanging advice, dirty jokes, and folk cures. The text is by turns delightful and painful: it exposes how “witchcraft,” or what we call “witchcraft,” often arose from women's total political powerlessness. For women, control had to remain anchored in the realm of the symbolic, communicated through the use of stories, spells, and rituals fashioned with the items at hand (this is why witches are associated with broomsticks, cauldrons, and other kitchen objects). In *Les Évangiles des Quenouilles*, if you want your husband to love his children beyond all measure, trick him into washing his face with the baby's urine. Warn him that if a pregnant woman's food cravings are not satisfied, the baby might be born without a vital organ. If he kicks you while you're pregnant, find his shoe and drink from it to avoid a damaging birth. Magic reveals

itself to be a tool for the basic survival and human dignity of women and children — defiant, creative, desperate. In my new books, I encountered some of the most radical second-wave feminism I had ever seen outside the *SCUM Manifesto*. It seemed like the spiritual realm allowed what the political realm repeatedly denied: women were free to clearly articulate their hunger to shape an entirely new reality free from male dominance.

One passage that struck me particularly came from Margot Adler's classic *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America*. About ritual, Adler writes: “If dreams are how are unconscious mind speaks to our conscious mind, ritual is how our conscious mind can speak to our unconscious mind.” Ritual establishes, asserts, inculcates values and beliefs, seeds them deeply within us. It may be the only way we can alchemize our instincts and reframe deeply damaging social training. Mid-20th-century female occultist Dion Fortune described magic as the art of changing consciousness at will. In allowing us to transform our most inner selves and believe in new futures, ritual can be magic.

The following pieces are performance scores which represent the imagined rituals of a fictive matriarchy. They were developed with dancers over multiple residencies. In making them, I asked myself: What would the fictive matriarchy choose to commemorate? What values would we enact, as a group, through our bodies? I asked my performers — what did they wish to communicate consciously to their unconscious selves?

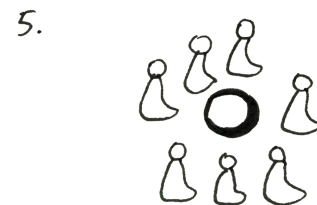
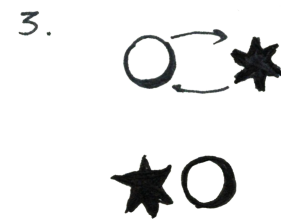
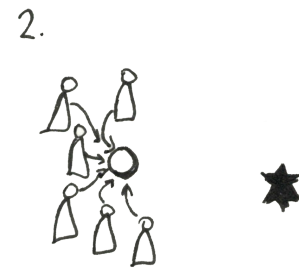
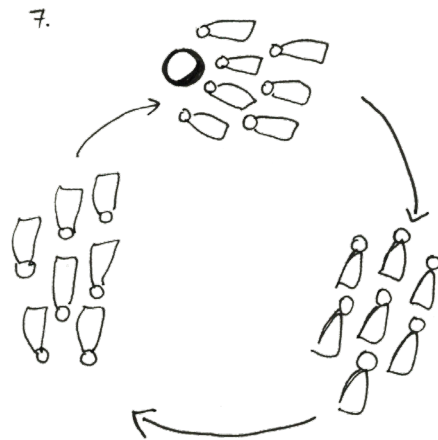
Feel free to learn and perform these scores. Use them to imagine creating your own. The project is ongoing.

*This text is adapted from a chapbook released with the solo gallery show of the video documentation of these rituals at Greenleaf Gallery, Whittier, California, curated by Jenny Herrick. Special thanks to Hothouse Residency at UCLA World Arts and Culture Department, Lisa Channer and the students of the Theater/Dance Department at the University of Minnesota, the dancers of the University of Utah and MoCA Utah, and to Lise Patt and the Institute of Cultural Inquiry, where this project began.*

## Ritual for Accepting Death

*Ritual by which, as a community, we learn not to fear death, but to accept it as a part of life.*

1. Begins with Group in standing circle.
2. Group silently and collectively selects one member (○) to encounter death — all but one walk behind her to signal her selection, except for the one facing her (★), who remains.
3. ○ and ★ embrace, then step back while continuing to hold one another's hands or wrists.
4. ○ falls back into the arms of the group.
5. Group lowers ○ down to the ground and use the palms of their hands to brush her into the ground, until she relaxes entirely, signaled by a long exhale.
6. Once ○ exhales, rest of group lies down around her in a tight cluster, all facing the same direction.
7. The group, remaining in a tight cluster, stands up and lies back down in a rippling wave that continues in a circular pattern, ending in the same initial cluster around ○.
8. Pause.
9. Break.



## Ritual for Honoring the Difficulty of Goodbye

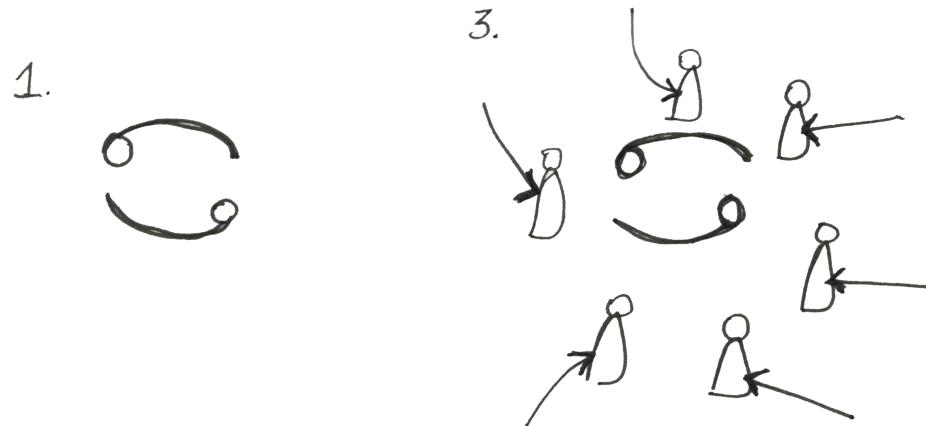
1. Start in group of 16 or eight. Everyone pairs up, embraces, and freezes in the embrace.
2. One member of each pair decides to be "A" and frees herself from the embrace in such a way that allows the other member, now "B," to remain in the frozen position.
3. From her frozen position, B melts into generating small movements based on whatever shape in which she has been left. This lasts until the end of the ritual.
3. All of the remaining "A" members, having freed themselves from their initial embrace, restart the process with one another.
4. They repeat this process of embracing and freeing until the final "freed" member remains.
5. Ritual breaks when final "freed" member walks away.



## Ritual for Public Expression and Sharing of Rage

*The community recognizes an individual member's rage, and shares it, to help her free it from her body and release it into the atmosphere.*

1. Ritual initiated by one group member ☺.
2. ☺ runs to the center of the space, crouches, and begins tapping on a specific spot on the ground with her index finger as if to say, "Here, here, here, this is the problem, here, right here."
3. The rest of group runs in and joins her in a crouch, tapping at the same location, acknowledging the target of her anger.
4. Once everyone is tapping (as if to say, we are all witnessing together), ☺ begins to physically express her rage in a repeated gesture and sound that should not be premeditated.
5. The rest of the group imitates the gesture, repeating it with ☺. The group continues to perform this gesture, infusing it with more and more energy, until ☺ expresses that she's finished.
6. Break.

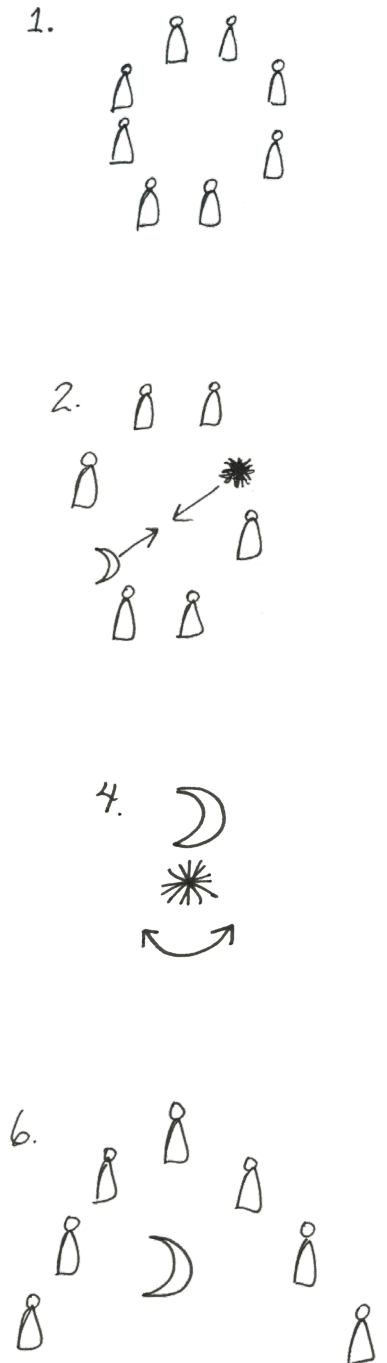


## Ritual Reenacting Female Baby Joining Female Society

*The word "gossip" originates from the term "god's sib," or "god's sibling" — essentially, a godparent — a close friend or family member upon whom one can depend for their child's care. The "gossiping" referred to a social event in which women would gather to attend the birth of a friend or relative, supporting the post-partum mother, sharing care of the new child, and telling stories. Negative connotations of "gossip" grew at times of heightened social misogyny, as a manner of undermining the value of women's speech and heightening the danger of women's speech in community.*

*In this ritual, we elevate the continuity of female community, as the female baby is born and comes into movement and communication with the female cluster.*

1. Begins in standing circle.
2. One member (D) silently decides to lead the ritual by stepping into the circle.
3. Person (★) standing opposite from D steps in, turns around and gets on her hands and knees, creating a "cradle" with her back.
4. D curls up on ★'s back, and is rocked back and forth three times.
5. D rolls off of ★'s back and comes to the ground.
6. The rest of the group (including ★) immediately sits in a V-shape formation and, ignoring D entirely, begins talking at the same time, loudly, enthusiastically: gossip, stories about their days.



7. While the group speaks, ③ takes herself, slowly, through the stages of early physical development — stretching, curling into a ball, rolling over, pushing up on her hands, pushing up onto hands and knees, rocking back and forth.

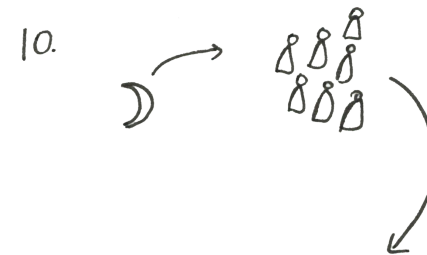
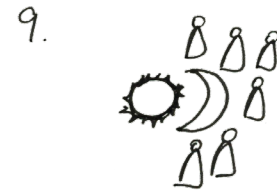
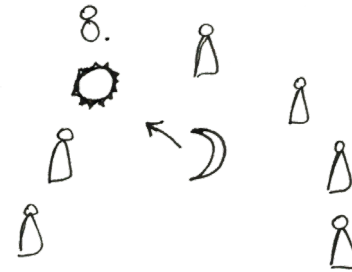
8. When ③ manages to push herself into seated position, the Group falls silent. ③ selects a member of the group (⊛), reaching her arms out to her, as if for an embrace.

9. With the assistance of the Group, ⊛ picks up ③, rocks her, then sets her on the ground, on hands and knees.

10. Group begins to walk in a cluster, circling the space, all talking at the same time again ignoring ③, who crawls after them.

11. When ③ is ready, she shrieks or calls, demanding attention. A member of the Group helps her to standing and she joins the Group.

12. Group continues to walk for a few steps as a tight group, conversing, then Breaks into silence and different directions.



## Beading Ritual

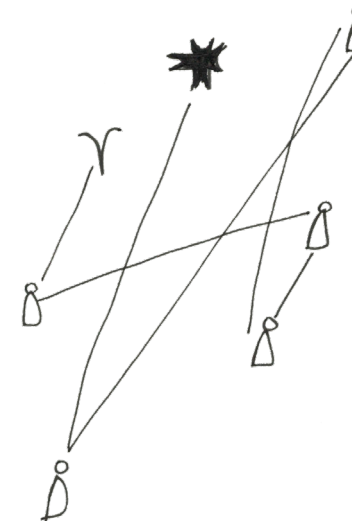
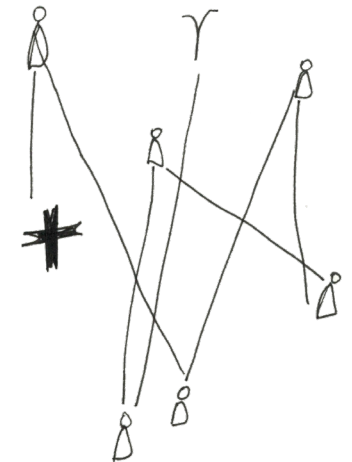
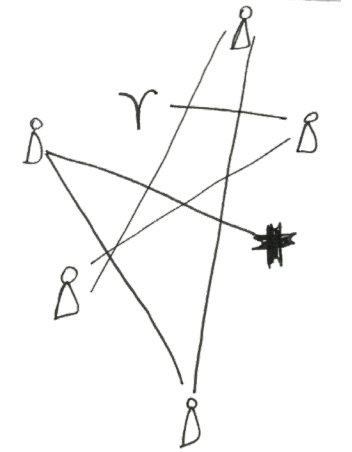
*In this ritual, we bead as a community, to experience how we are connected and all contribute to a larger pattern of creation. Women can share stories while beading, or the beading structure can frame the space for other rituals.*

1. Group creates a shape in the space with the beading string — every member holds the string taut. √ is at the head of the string, \* is at the end of the spool.

2. √ beads. As she beads, other members alternately kneel and stand to allow the bead to travel from one member to the next.

3. Every five to 10 beads, √ hands off the beading role to another member of the group, \* hands off the ending role to another member of the group, the group changes its physical configuration.

4. Repeat.



Rituals of Female Friendship

*The theory of pre-patriarchal matriarchal societies comes from 19th century anthropologists. It was immediately and enthusiastically taken up by first wave suffragists (including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who wrote about it in her 1891 essay “The Matriarchate, or Mother-Age”).*

*In her feminist historical-revisionist The Double Goddess: Women Sharing Power from 2003, Vicki Noble tracks the reiterating figure of the double goddess in ancient artifacts as proof of a matriarchal system, one in which women ruled societies in pairs.*

*Is this actually true? Who knows?*

*Who cares? To me, the idea of women running societies in pairs explains the particular intensity of female friendships: in their passionate closeness, the specificity of sharing lived experience, the close observation of others (socially denigrated as “gossip”). These relationships rehearse the roles women are meant to take — as leaders of society.*

Friendship 1.  
Babyhood: Parallel Play to Cooperative Play

*Babies don’t play with each other, they play next to each other. This is called “parallel play”: toddlers learn through the exploration of their own bodies in their environment, while also having their play partly stimulated and then directed by absorbing the play of the other children around them.*

In celebration of this initiatory phase of female friendship, participants, in pairs, engage in parallel play until their play organically reaches some form of cooperation.

Friendship 2.  
Girlhood: Mirroring to Routines

*We are now at early girlhood. Participants, in pairs, engage in mirroring play and early routines. Laughter is welcome throughout.*

1. In pairs, women spin, holding each other’s hands or wrists. They crouch on the ground, arms draped behind each other’s backs.
2. Pair stands, and with their inner arms connected, reach up to the sky and then bow down to the ground.
3. Pair walks themselves to the floor, lying down on their right side, facing the same direction, knees drawn in. Pair rolls onto their back — then onto their left side, onto their belly, onto their right side, then onto their belly.
4. From that position, pair begins a mirrored gestural rhythm, coming into sitting, then standing facing in the same direction, inner arms pressed into each other.
5. Pair runs across the room, then stops suddenly, facing one another, making a bridge with their arms. Repeats, again running across the room, then stopping suddenly making a bridge with their arms.
6. Pair moves into a simple routine dance with each other that takes them out of the space. This choreography can change depending on the group.

CONTRIBUTORS

**Kristen Arnett** is a queer fiction and essay writer. She was awarded *Ninth Letter's* 2015 Literary Award in Fiction, was runner-up for the 2016 Robert Watson Literary Prize at *The Greensboro Review*, and was a finalist for *Indiana Review's* 2016 Fiction Prize. She's a columnist for *Literary Hub* and her work has appeared or is upcoming at *North American Review*, *The Normal School*, *Gulf Coast*, *TriQuarterly*, *Guernica*, *Electric Literature*, *McSweeney's*, *PBS Newshour*, *Literary Hub*, *Volume 1 Brooklyn*, OSU's *The Journal*, *Catapult*, *Bennington Review*, *Portland Review*, *Tin House Flash Fridays/The Guardian*, *Salon*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. Her debut story collection, *Felt in the Jaw*, was published by Split Lip Press and was awarded the 2017 Coil Book Award. Her most recent novel is *Mostly Dead Things* (Tin House Books).

**Dodie Bellamy** is a novelist, poet, and essayist. She is the author of many books, including *When the Sick Rule the World*, *TV Sutras*, *Cunt Norton* and *Cunt-Ups*.

**William Brewer** is the author of *I Know Your Kind* (Milkweed Editions, 2017), a winner of the National Poetry Series, and *Oxyana*, which was selected for the Poetry Society of America's 30 and Under Chapbook Fellowship. His work has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *New England Review*, *The New Yorker*, *A Public Space*, *The Sewanee Review*, and other journals. Formerly a Stegner Fellow, he is currently a Jones Lecturer at Stanford University.

**Kathryn Davis** is the author of eight novels, the most recent of which is *The Silk Road* (2019). Her other books are *Labrador* (1988), *The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf* (1993), *Hell: A Novel* (1998), *The Walking Tour* (1999), *Versailles* (2002), *The Thin Place* (2006) and *Duplex* (2013). She has received a Kafka Prize for fiction by an American woman, both the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award and the Katherine Anne Porter Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 2006, she won the Lannan Foundation Literary Award. She is the senior fiction writer on the faculty of The Writing Program at Washington University.

**Colin Dickey** is the author of *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places*, along with two other books of nonfiction. He is currently writing a book on conspiracy theories and other delusions, *The Unidentified*, forthcoming in 2020.

**Fernando A. Flores** is the author of *Death to the Bullshit Artists of South Texas* and the novel *Tears of the Trufflepig*. He lives in Austin.

**Maya Gurantz** works in video, performance, installation, social practice, and writing. Selected recent shows include (solo) the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, the Grand Central Art Center, Greenleaf Gallery, Pieter PASD, (group) the Museum of Contemporary Art Utah, the Oakland Museum of California, Beaconsfield Gallery Vauxhall, Art Center College of Design, The Goat Farm Atlanta, The Great Wall of Oakland, High Desert Test Sites, and Movement Research at Judson Church. She recently received the inaugural Pieter Performance Grant for Dancemakers. She has written for *This American Life*, *The Frame* on KPCC, *The Awl*, *Notes on Looking*, *Avidly*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Acid-Free*, *Baumtest Quarterly*, and *RECAPS Magazine*, and co-hosts *The Sauce*, a podcast that dissects the intersections of culture and politics.

**Brenda Hillman** is the author of ten collections of poetry: *White Dress*, *Fortress*, *Death Tractates*, *Bright Existence*, *Loose Sugar*, *Cascadia*, *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, *Practical Water*, for which she won the LA Times Book Award for Poetry, *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire*, which received the 2014 Griffin Poetry Prize and the Northern California Book Award for Poetry; and her most recent *Extra Hidden Life*, *Among the Days*. In 2016 she was named Academy of American Poets Chancellor. Among other awards Hillman has received are the 2012 Academy of American Poets Fellowship, the 2005 William Carlos Williams Prize for poetry, and Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation

**Elisabeth Houston** is a poet and playwright. She teaches in the English Department at Cal-State Los Angeles.

**Anna Journey** is the author of the essay collection *An Arrangement of Skin* (Counterpoint, 2017) and three books of poems: *The Atheist Wore Goat Silk* (LSU Press, 2017), *Vulgar Remedies* (LSU Press, 2013), and *If Birds Gather Your Hair for Nesting* (University of Georgia Press, 2009), which was selected by Thomas Lux for the National Poetry Series. She is an assistant professor of English at the University of Southern California.

CONTRIBUTORS

**Paul La Farge** is the author of *The Night Ocean* (2017) and three other novels; also a book of imaginary dreams, *The Facts of Winter*. He lives in upstate New York.

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**Adam Morris** is the author of *American Messiahs: False Prophets of a Damned Nation* (Liveright, 2019).

**Matt Morton** is the author of *Improvisation without Accompaniment*, winner of the 2018 A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize, forthcoming from BOA Editions. His poetry has appeared in *AGNI*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Tin House Online*, and elsewhere. His work has received support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars, and the University of North Texas, where he is a Robert B. Toulouse Doctoral Fellow in English.

**Sarah Moss** is the author of six novels, a memoir and some essays. Her latest book, *Ghost Wall*, is longlisted for the Women's Prize and shortlisted for the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize. She lives in the English West Midlands, where she is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Warwick.

**Masande Ntshanga** is the author of the novels *The Reactive* and *Triangulum*. He is the winner of the Betty Trask Award in 2018, the inaugural PEN International New Voices Award in 2013, and a finalist for the Caine Prize in 2015. His work has appeared in *The White Review*, *Berlin Quarterly*, *Chimurenga*, *VICE*, *n+1*, and *Rolling Stone Magazine*.

**Emily Ogden** is the author of *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (University of Chicago Press, 2018). She has written for the *New York Times*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Lapham's Quarterly Online*, *The Immanent Frame*, *American Literature*, *J19*, *Public Books*, and *Early American Literature*. Her regular column appears at *3 Quarks Daily*.

**Zoe Tuck** was born in Texas, became a person in California, and now lives in Massachusetts, where she is building the Threshold Academy, a bookstore and non-traditional educational/performance space. She co-curates the But Also house reading series. Zoe is the author of *Terror Matrix* (Timeless, Infinite Light 2014), and is currently working on new poems and a critical book of trans poetics.

**Vanessa Angelica Villarreal** was born in the Rio Grande Valley borderlands to formerly undocumented Mexican

immigrants. She is the author of the collection *Beast Meridian* (Noemi Press, Akrilica Series, 2017), a Kate Tufts Discovery Award finalist and winner of the John A. Robertson Award for Best First Book of Poetry from the Texas Institute of Letters. Her work has been featured in *BuzzFeed*, the *Academy of American Poets* Poem-a-Day, *The Boston Review*, *The Rumpus*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *NBC News*, and elsewhere. She is a CantoMundo Fellow and is currently pursuing her doctorate in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, where she is raising her son with the help of a loyal dog.

**Keziah Weir** is an associate editor at *Vanity Fair*.

**Aaron Winslow** writes fiction, criticism, video games, and screenplays. His recent work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Social Text Online*, and *Full Stop*, among other places. His science fiction novel, *Jobs of the Great Misery*, is available from Skeleton Man Press. He teaches writing at the University of Southern California. Further information and writing can be found at aaron-winslow.com.

**Javier Zamora** was born in El Salvador and migrated to the US when he was nine. He is a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University. Zamora's poetry and prose appear in *Granta*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere. *Unaccompanied*, Copper Canyon Press, is his first collection.

FEATURED ARTISTS

**Reza Shafahi** (b.1940, Iran) is a self-taught artist who first started painting in 2012, at the ripe age of 72. As part of a long-term art project, Daddy Sperm, by his son Mamali Shafahi, both father and son worked on identical subjects and showed them side-by-side in the Daddy Sperm exhibition in Paris. Since then, Reza Shafahi has continued drawing from his own imagination and with his own inspiration.

His work has been exhibited in Magic of Persia (Dubai), Marlborough Chelsea Gallery, New York, SpazioA Gallery in Pistoia and the Erratum Galerie, Berlin. Novels, Khayyam poems, cinema, television, photographs and world news have had a great influence on the formation of his works, but what is actually seen by the viewer seems far removed from the world, and instead seems to encapsulate a hidden life of fantasy and dark eroticism. In 2019 he will be part of "City Prince/sses" at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

**Kenneth Anger**, an underground filmmaker and Hollywood enfant terrible, has been purveyor of shock and awe in a career that has spanned seven decades. Working