

# CARVE

H O N E S T F I C T I O N



Winter 2021 / \$12 US / \$16 CN



## FICTION

Vincent Anioke  
Toby Lloyd  
Stephanie Macias Gibson  
James A. Jordan

## POETRY

Gustavo Hernandez  
Rose Auslander  
Kerry James Evans  
Robert Carr

## NONFICTION

Emily Breese

## PLUS

Illustrations  
Story Statshot  
One to Watch  
Decline/Accept

# CONTENTS

## SHORT STORIES

<i>The Alchemy of His Own Mirror</i> Vincent Anioke.....	06
<i>Further Maths</i> Toby Lloyd.....	18
<i>San Flaca</i> Stephanie Macias Gibson .....	35
<i>What Exposes You</i> James A. Jordan .....	47

## WHAT WE TALK ABOUT

Vincent Anioke.....	11
Toby Lloyd.....	31
Stephanie Macias Gibson.....	42
James A. Jordan .....	52

## DECLINE/ACCEPT

<i>Shelter Break</i> Stacy Trautwein Burns .....	57
--	----

## POETRY

<i>1990/20XX</i> Gustavo Hernandez.....	60
<i>A body among bodies</i> Rose Auslander .....	61
<i>A Little Gristle to Feed the Cat</i> Kerry James Evans .....	62
<i>The Bearer</i> Robert Carr.....	63

## NONFICTION

<i>My Father's Gift</i> Emily Breese .....	66
--	----

## ONE TO WATCH

<i>Interview with Anita Felicelli</i> Sejal H. Patel.....	74
---	----

---

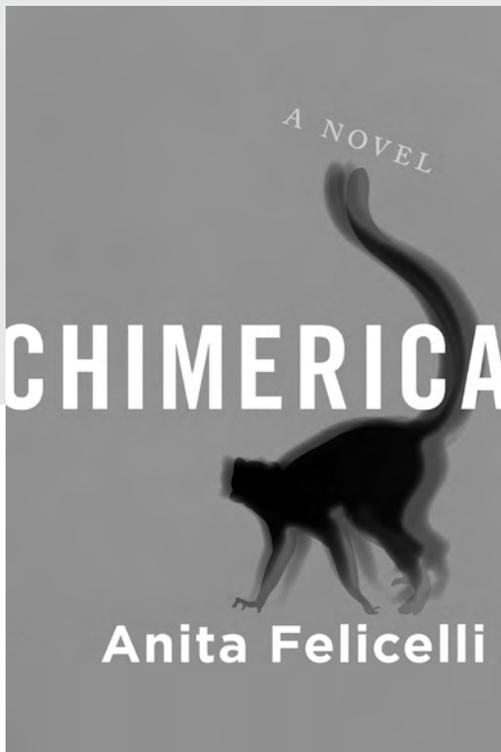
# ONE TO WATCH

What we're watching: literary events for writers, books by former contributors, and interviews with the authors of debut works the *Carve* community is excited to read.

---

*Chimerica*  
by Anita Felicelli

**SEJAL H. PATEL**



**W**HAT I LOVE ABOUT BOOKS IS WHAT I ALSO LOVE ABOUT TRAVEL. WHEN I TRAVEL, I SEARCH FOR THE NEW. That new food. The way script or currency looks. The lilt and lingers in different dialects. When I read, I also look for the new. A place I have not been. People in that place with a different worldview from mine. The infinitesimal ways in which one human connects to another. Or doesn't. But here's the thing I find when I do these interviews for *Carve*. About ten steps into the new, I find myself feeling the familiar. No matter how different a person, place, or situation may seem at first blush, I always find a way to relate. And relating—the act of it—is the beating heart of writing and reading.

Anita Felicelli's book *Chimerica* offers us many new things, starting with this—a talking lemur. The protagonist, a Tamil American trial attorney named Maya Ramesh has lost her family and her job. When a painted lemur escapes a famous mural in Oakland and comes to her for help, she sets out to rescue the lemur—and inadvertently herself—in an adventure taking us from the streets of Oakland to the courtroom to, finally, Madagascar. The book delves into the legal system, divorce and infidelity, ethnic identity, feminism, and ultimately, what it means to find one's sense of home. Felicelli is the author of a short story collection called *Love Songs for a Lost Continent*, which won the 2016 Mary Robert Rinehart Award, and she has published numerous pieces of fiction, essays, and reviews.

**Thank you so much both for your beautiful story and for taking the time to talk to the *Carve* community, Anita. Let's start with the talking lemur. "Lemur" in Latin means "ghost." Can you tell us why you settled on this animal as the subject of the mural and how it (as opposed to any other animal) relates to your protagonist, Maya?**

The lemur arose from a Tamil legend. The story goes that Kumari Kandam, a lost continent of ancient Tamil civilization, a utopian cradle of civilization, was drowned in the Indian Ocean. For a period, Tamil nationalist writers claimed the legend was related to a nineteenth-century zoologist's later-discredited theory that India and Madagascar were once part of the same land mass; Madagascar was thought to be a part of Kumari Kandam that had drifted away. When I visited Madagascar twelve or thirteen years ago, I fell in love with the indri, a kind of lemur, and in particular, its ghostly song. I love that you mention the Latin etymology of "lemur;" that haunts this story as well. I wanted to suggest a shadow self, a ghost of who Maya might have been—her Tamil origins, the story she's told herself about who she is—in the lemur. Why does the lemur show up after her family has left, and why does he, on some level, take the place of her children? Why is his own origin story so suspect? Is he

even real? Are the events of this novel real? I wanted everything in the novel to feel surreal, to feel unsettling, in the same way the indri's song is unsettling. **Much of Maya's story here is about her experiences as a trial lawyer. She is told at the very beginning that she is being fired because she doesn't have "it." She also described her career in law to that point as leaving her a "shriveled, desiccated husk" of her former self. Of course, the lemur starts to deteriorate as well near the end of the book. Tell us how you thought about linking these two concepts together.**

Thank you for this brilliant observation. From the start, I wanted to critique the American legal system. Both Maya's career as a trial attorney and the lemur's physical deterioration mirror a breakdown in society that I associate with a litigation-based approach to problem-solving. Often, the cost of American freedom is that we, as a society, don't address problems prophylactically; we don't provide a social network that would catch us in case of failure, disease, misfortune. Instead, we wait until relationships are completely broken down before trying to find a Band-Aid to put over the wound; that Band-Aid is often money via litigation. Instead of talking differences through in a non-combative way and trying to see other people's points of view as a matter of social norms, our society encourages

everyone to take solipsistic, self-indulgent individualistic stances that eventually result in head-to-head combat in a courtroom. Many litigators love this combat, of course, but it's not clear that placing so much value on it is what is best for society.

**I love this concept of lawyers who love the combat, and I'm familiar with it in my law practice, too. In the novel, Maya's once-mentor is exactly such a character—hungry for the fight. Your story made me consider how that sort of “ready for battle” mentality isn't always available to every character—whether they want it or not. Could a character like Maya ever have had “it?”**

I think Maya did have “it.” She's a shark, even if getting fired by her boss and dismissed by her colleagues have made her second-guess her own abilities at the start of the novel. I'm hoping readers see she has “it” in the second half of the novel where she rises out of her earlier defeated outlook. The thing is, I think you're a little less hungry for the fight if every moment you exist in society involves some sort of fight. In practice, I was always fascinated by male trial attorneys who were readily handed the keys to the castle, even when they were incompetent; there was a presumption of competence because they were men. And they would get so jazzed about going to trial or sports or some other competition. But it's not remotely exciting to need to fight for a place at the table, and then fight some more for your client; it's exhausting. Needing to fight for every scrap of respect doesn't necessarily lead to being liked or even being properly mentored. Yet that's what Maya and what any woman attorney in civil litigation has to do.

**Maya describes very much feeling like an outsider in her law practice, both as a Tamil-American and as a woman. Given your own background as a trial lawyer, did you write her character based on personal experience?**

I developed her character in this book based on my personal observations of many different trial attorneys over eight years—observations about the kind of personalities they tend to have and how they respond to crises and how they work up cases. I've worked for more litigators than most people I know because I never did find a place where I fit within

the law. I've worked for struggling solo practitioners as well as more prestigious firms. Something I noticed quickly was that there were a lot of women of color solo practitioners—there were none in the law firms I worked for—and that in practicing law successfully, the solo women needed to rely more on highly perceptive and acute observations of society than white men in prestigious firms did. I first created Maya more than ten years prior to writing *Chimerica*, and she began as my polar opposite. Her mother's suicide when she was small left her feeling utterly powerless, and she focuses on gaining social status through acute observation in order to make up for that wound. After I left the law, and started outlining *Chimerica*, I thought about what kind of person with my background would find litigation meaningful. The character of Maya from the earlier novel came to mind as someone who'd be able to get into the combat.

**Motherhood runs through the book as something Maya struggles with. She does not feel what she thinks she is supposed to feel for her children. I think many women can relate to what expectations are put upon them as to what sorts of mothers they should be. How does Maya resolve her feelings of guilt and disconnectedness vis-à-vis her children by the end of the book?**

I think Maya's feelings of guilt and disconnection to her children are resolved through her relationship with the lemur. While the relationship starts on questionable utilitarian grounds—Maya wanting to use the lemur to get her job back—it evolves into a genuine caretaker role. Trial work can present particular challenges for women of color, because they face two types of implicit, and sometimes explicit, bias: gender and race bias. In order to be taken seriously as an adversary in litigation, you need to have the capacity to fight harder than a white male would need to fight in the same position. Harvard Law professor Lani Guinier wrote about the traditional mindset in *Becoming Gentlemen*. But, when I worked as a litigator, I could also observe that at its best, legal advocacy was a highly draining form of caregiving. Caregiving requires you to see the vulnerability in others and protect them from attack.

Maya's refusal of her own vulnerability makes it difficult to be the mother and caregiver her children need her to be, but it also, I think, makes her less effective as an attorney. By the end of the novel, however, she feels more connected to her children because she starts to care for the lemur the way he needs, and it cracks her open. Putting his needs first, allowing that care to guide the urgency of her actions, triggers her epiphany. She's forced to think about what she's sacrificed for the ephemeral feeling of winning. What she's sacrificed for the American Dream is her relationship with her family. If she weren't Tamil, this might not be at the forefront of her mind, but the guilt weighs heavily on her because there's such a heavy emphasis placed on motherhood and traditional gender roles in Tamil culture.

**Of course, I know what you mean when you say "motherhood and traditional gender roles in Tamil cultures" because Gujarati culture is quite similar. For the reader who does not know much about India and the importation of Indian culture to America, can you explain what "being Tamil" means and what sorts of expectations you believe there are around motherhood and traditional gender roles? Go ahead and tell them as a bonus where the Gujarat is, too, if you have the appetite for it.**

In Tamil culture, being a mother has been, traditionally, the most important calling for women. Mothers are supposed to sacrifice every last bit of themselves for their children. There's no social tolerance for "bad mothers," for mothers who consider themselves. You are not, in any way, supposed to be an individual with your own needs or interests. Conversely, unlike in American society, where nobody cares about mothers in the slightest, being a mother carries a degree of respect within Tamil society. I should say that my own Tamil mother was extremely focused on her career, and if research is to be believed, it might be from observing her that I'm so interested in my own work and don't conform to a lot of Tamil cultural expectations around motherhood. I observe in my aunts more of the traditional Tamil outlook on motherhood. In keeping with this sense that motherhood is the last stop on

any Tamil woman's train, people feel a lot of pity for you if you struggle with fertility. What on earth would you do if you didn't have a baby? Probably a lot, but it's not perceived that way. Gujarat is midway up the west coast of India, whereas Tamil Nadu is the southernmost state of the country, along the east coast, but I'd be surprised if there weren't commonalities in the value placed on motherhood.

**You introduce a doppelgänger for Maya in the narrative, someone she thinks is her who is trailing her. I loved the idea that we don't ever really see ourselves, something that I think we are feeling now that platforms like Zoom have become increasingly ubiquitous. Why did you choose to include this character—or perhaps this figment of Maya's imagination—in the narrative?**

I'm interested in the dramatic unraveling of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Sometimes, we see the unraveling, sometimes we can't bear to see it. Most of Maya's persona is highly constructed. To me, that implies there's something elemental or original underneath all those masks that's been damaged, perhaps through her mother's suicide, perhaps through racism, perhaps through the practice of law. Maya's doppelgänger is intended to suggest the possibility of other lives she could have lived and to underscore the psychological sense in which she is a construction. She's a person whose sense of powerlessness has led to her living out her life according to the masks and not according to what's underneath them. Who might she be had she made different decisions to act more authentically, more vulnerably, more in line with whatever's underneath those masks? This novel asks whether a woman like this, working within a racist, sexist, xenophobic society, could be a successful trial attorney and still stay real.

**I loved your description of Madagascar. You write "We all have a Madagascar, right? A primeval place that seems so far away, so remote, so vibrant, it simply must be better than our own banal, disenchanting, cookie-cutter lives." Maya talks about Madagascar in this way because she is thinking about wanting freedom from choices she has already made. How do you think that she ultimately reconciles her Madagascar life with her real one?**

I love that you notice this. She can't go back to her disenchanting law firm life after her experience with the lemur and Madagascar. These experiences are incompatible, and it's clear which one she prefers. She goes out on her own and becomes a solo practitioner to make her own luck, and I think she finds inner freedom that way.

**Tell us how you thought about the lemur's character because he has real personality, almost like a sulky teenager at times. How did you go about creating him and what relationship did you want him to have with Maya?**

From the start, I knew the lemur would challenge Maya's myopic ambition, but I felt more like I was a conduit for him than that I was constructing him. I wanted him to serve the role of a Jiminy Cricket—a conscience. I also wanted him to take the place of her children in the sense that she has to take care of him. Maya doesn't have much of a moral compass; she's the embodiment of William Gaddis's line from *A Frolic of His Own*: "Justice? You get justice in the next world, in this world you have the law." The lemur is the opposite, only interested in elemental morality. He came to me fully formed as a character, with some similarities to my sibling, and later I realized he might have been inspired, also, a little bit, by the lemurs in Anna Kavan's novel *Ice*.

**Tell us about the title—*Chimerica*. A "chimera" is something hoped or wished for but is in fact illusory or impossible. And this seems joined to the word "America." How does your novel make a commentary about the American immigrant experience, as we see it in Maya?**

I'm aiming at two meanings with "Chimerica." The first—a portmanteau of "chimera" and "America." Much of my fiction critiques the American dream, for which immigrants so often have upended their lives. In the novel, I'm asking whether that dream, a dream that involves such an enormous amount of work aimed at propping up a soulless system with so many problems of bias and inequality, is worth the degree of sacrifice immigrants make to achieve it. Is it worth it for Maya to sacrifice her family, her cultural background, her personality, to achieve a dream that's largely illusory?

A chimera is also a beast in Greek mythology who is composed of multiple different animals. I was interested in this beast as a figure for America and in creating a secondary layer of meaning for *Chimerica* to be read as an allegory for assimilation. I see America as less a unified melting pot (especially in this particular moment, but also before this moment) than as a composite of things that don't necessarily go together, but somehow must coexist in this single national body. That was the idea I was driving towards with the jury trial that takes place at the end of the novel: how difficult it is to assimilate, what a challenge it is to figure out a single story about America that will appeal to every American. We're less a melting pot to whom a single story can be told, than a set of disparate parts that have been attached together, and demand many different conflicting stories. What is Maya's superpower in the novel, if not the ability to figure out which story to tell?

**Art is central to this book because the lemur that Maya helps has escaped a giant mural in Oakland. What does art mean to a community, and what does its defacement then mean? When we are talking about public art, is defacement part of the art's identity in that community?**

An interesting thing about public art for me is that it's for everyone in a community. It merges with the environment around you, often a kind of beauty that affects you on a daily basis. There are no guards signaling public art has some value, the way there are at a museum. Rather the value comes solely from the one-to-one relationship between the person who interacts with it every day and the art itself. It becomes something that you, as a viewer, think of as yours. Your interpretation of the art, your story about it, is what makes it have any sort of value to you. But what the Visual Artists Rights Act recognizes is that the artist who makes a work of art feels a deep moral claim on that work, regardless of whether that feeling makes sense for the community. It's the artist's story about the work, not the viewer's interpretation, that matters under this law. If someone chooses to deface art, they've taken a proprietary stance towards controlling

how everyone else sees the work. The defacement alters its value, and its position within the community. Suddenly everyone, including the artist from whose imagination the art sprang, has to absorb the defacement as part of what the art is. It's a strange ownership, that this thing that feels like it belongs to everyone can suddenly be ruined by a random interloper, and that the artist can pursue money as a Band-Aid because the art from his perspective is an extension of him, even though all art, all stories, build on other art, other stories.

**What advice would you give writers about how to go about planning the story in their novels-in-progress?**

For me, when planning a novel, it's important to think about how the events the protagonist faces change her (or him). I think it's what I go to fiction for as a reader—to closely observe real changes in a made-up person. In reality, change can appear gradual and disturbingly arbitrary, but in traditional fiction, you clear away some of the complicating thicket of life and and move toward a causal chain. There are many reasons to go to novels, of course; that happens to be my motivation. What chain of events would make that person change deeply, or not? Would a particular character's failure to change be tragic or heroic under the circumstances? Will the world meet that person in their refusal to modify herself? There are highly privileged people in our society who don't need to change to fit what society wants from them; when a novel is about highly privileged characters who don't face significant social pressure, the character changes are often subtler or even nonexistent. Or would the particular person succumb to what's required to play the hand she is dealt, and adapt in order to keep going? More of us in the world, including Maya, are in that category, and the characters that interest me tend to be in this category. I write towards the psychological place I think a particular character living in our complex society would wind up after going through events that pressure him or her to change.

**First love: Can you tell us about the first piece you published and what that meant to you?**

The first pieces I published were in secondary school literary magazines. The earliest one, in seventh grade, was a poem about the tarot card called The Hanged Man. I was fascinated with the occult in elementary and middle school and that's the card I was always drawing for myself. The poem was about a woman's indecision. During the week after the magazine came out, other outsider and misfit kids in school came up to me and told me how much they liked the poem. I'd always made up stories and plays for my best friends, but there was something about strangers choosing to take the time to read this poem by themselves that seemed different. Random people I saw in the breezeway sometimes. I remember feeling a strange thrill I'd never felt before, the thrill of communing with strangers. I wish I could bottle that feeling for myself. 📖

# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

## FICTION

---

Born and raised in Nigeria, **VINCENT ANIOKE** is now a software engineer at Google Canada. His stories and essays have appeared in *MIT Technology Review*, *Callaloo*, and *Literary Orphans*, among others. Follow his stories on Twitter at @AniokeVincent.

**STEPHANIE MACIAS GIBSON** is a writer, artist, and musician living in Austin, TX. She is currently an MFA candidate in the New Writers Project at the University of Texas.

**JAMES A. JORDAN** is pursuing his PhD at Georgia State. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Greensboro Review*, *New South*, *Quarterly West*, among others. He received his MFA from the University of New Orleans.

**TOBY LLOYD** earned his MFA in Fiction from New York University. He has published stories and essays in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Prospect Magazine*, *The Oxonian Review*, and *Publicbooks.org*. He lives in London and is working on a novel.

## POETRY

---

**ROSE AUSLANDER** is the author of *Wild Water Child*, chapbooks *Folding Water*, *Hints*, and *The Dolphin in the Gowanus*, and poems in the *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *RHINO*, *Rumble Fish*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and *Tinderbox*. Her MFA in Poetry is from Warren Wilson.

**ROBERT CARR** is the author of *Amaranth*, published by Indolent Books, and *The Unbuttoned Eye*, from 3: A Taos Press. Recent work has appeared in *The Cortland Review*, *Shenandoah*, and other journals. More information can be found at robertcarr.org.

**KERRY JAMES EVANS** is the author of *Bangalore* (Copper Canyon Press). He lives in Milledgeville, GA, where he teaches in the MFA program at Georgia College & State University.

**GUSTAVO HERNANDEZ** is the author of the micro-chapbook *Form His Arms* (Ghost City Press). His full-length poetry collection, *Flower Grand First*, is forthcoming from Moon Tide Press in March 2021. He was born in Jalisco, Mexico, and lives in California.

## NONFICTION

---

**EMILY BREESE** is a Seattle-based writer taking classes at Hugo House. She is researching her family history and writing a novel about her ancestors. Previously she worked as a counselor for drug offenders and a librarian for technology companies.

## DECLINE/ACCEPT

---

**STACY TRAUTWEIN BURNS** has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of Small Fictions, and Best of the Net. She holds an MFA from Colorado State University and is a member of an international online writing group called The Quills. A full list of her publications and awards can be found at [www.stacytrautweinburns.com](http://www.stacytrautweinburns.com).

## ONE TO WATCH

---

**ANITA FELICELLI's** short story collection *Love Songs for a Lost Continent* won the 2016 Mary Roberts Rinehart Award. Her novel *Chimerica* was published in 2019. Her essays and reviews have appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Slate*, *Catapult*, the *New York Times* (Modern Love), and elsewhere. She lives in the Bay Area, where she grew up, with her spouse and three children.