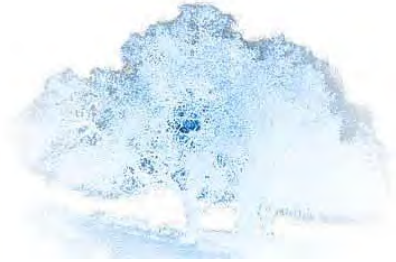


PVR 16



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# POMONA VALLEY REVIEW



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# Dear Readers

In an echo of Issue 14 and 15's releases during 2020 and 2021, Issue 16's 2022 annual arrival occurs at a moment in time characterized by ongoing and exhaustive circumstances for many people around the world. In the U.S., outright legislative denials of autonomy for communities including, but not limited to, queer, Black, brown, and people of color are but only a few points that highlight the fraught everyday realities that affect everyone regardless of positionality.

Along with present fluxes, and over the course of PVR's transition between editorial teams, Issue 16 serves as a living document shaped by the overlapping thematic responses of each piece of work submitted by writers and artists present within. These explorations will take readers across several themes regarding identity, inter-generational diaspora, broadly encompassing relationships—desire for expressions, romantic, societal, spatial, etc.—and deconstructions of 'the everyday.'

This year's Issue opens with Sonia Gomez's poem titled "A Dreamer." It captures the shifting concept of

hope that we believe exists within us as readers and creators seeking meaningful connections with the worlds we negotiate daily.

Following it, pieces like Ali Boyce's poem, "blackness in the wake of my birth," Abigail Orilla's fiction prose, "Instant Coffee," Jesika Keo's artwork titled "Selfie Tyme," and John Tustin's poem, "Is Love a Real Thing?", present varying opportunities for readers to engage with interconnected themes rooted in the multifaceted and deeply personal journeys that may shift upon subsequent readings.

We hope PVR 16 provokes, inspires, provides enjoyment, and allows readers to pause, yet also carry over takeaways from its written and visual mediums that may invite us to reimagine how we can challenge, demystify, and deconstruct the ways we critically approach our relationships with those around us, our shifting sense of selves, the spaces we move through, and beyond.

With this, we invite you to enjoy PVR 16.

The Editors  
**PVR**



## A DREAMER

The never-ending thoughts in my brain  
Sometimes makes me feel insane.  
Like a melody of ever-growing drums  
All my mind seems to do is hum.  
Words of sweet escapes—  
Phrases of a tortured fate.  
There is hardly space for peace  
When my hearts grown so weak,  
For fantasies and dreams  
Desires pulled at the seam  
For unknown places and lovely sights  
And deep nostalgic late nights.  
The memories I'd tuck in my heart  
And look back when life turns dark,  
Knowing my adventure was worth it all.  
The good, the bad— a wonderous fall.  
Reader, I know you not, but this much is true,  
I'm a dreamer just like you.

~ *Sonia Gomez*

## MY FAILURE

Today I am close to the end of everything,  
settled in the shape of my skin. I look  
back in blind luck on a world that never  
changes and barely acknowledges  
the gifts I give it. My hair curls close to my  
scalp. No one cares to know how dark  
this will get.

I listen to the land, which is hollowed  
out like the inside of a skull. I do my living  
in hours when no rain can be heard, oblivious  
to the details of my failure. What derails  
my thinking? No doctor can get to the bottom  
of my impotence.

I want the precision of my scrutiny to tighten  
around the last remaining light. My libido  
is as low as death. I see discomfort in the eyes  
of others, who can neither sit nor stand.  
All the proud moments of my life amount to getting  
something for nothing. The apathy of others  
is the light I live by.

Two foreign cultures collide in me. If I pull them  
apart there will be nothing left of me. What mystery  
am I beholden to? This country takes everything  
from me and pays me to watch my destruction.  
I am formed of less than society can afford.

*~ Joel Fry*

## BLACKNESS, IN THE WAKE OF MY BIRTH

*so much was taken from me at birth.  
my space in the womb, i didn't choose to be born  
into this world that feels so free  
and so constricting.  
i'm always in between this feeling  
of restriction and weightlessness.  
black and white.  
white is the light they say.  
go towards the light.  
the blackness is an abyss that we have taught you  
is wrong.  
all the blackness is wrong.  
the sad face next to my name on the board  
is drawn with black dry erase marker.  
blackness is deafening,  
but also so loud.  
don't be too loud they say.  
in the classroom you may be loud,  
but only when we say you may be loud.  
and if you're too loud,  
the blackness will swallow us all whole.  
be white, they say.  
come to the light,  
the doctor said,  
as i exited my mother's uterus.  
since my grand exit  
my mulatto skin has been stretched by stretch marks  
not just from puberty and cakes,  
but also from the many hands  
who yank me in so many directions  
with lessons about their god and messiah.  
lessons about how to be a good black.  
lessons about how to be white.  
you're whiteness is showing, they say.  
why do you talk so white, they say.*

i hit 33 years out of the uterus and here i stand  
wishing for the blackness to take ahold of me  
and cradle me.  
hoping the blackness, my ancestors,  
will show me the ways to unlearn  
what i have learned in 33 years.  
truths that are not true  
from the moment i went to the white light.  
from the moment i stared at the white wipe board  
at school.  
from the moment my white teachers  
forced me to build  
white missions on cardboard boxes.  
white missions that were birthed  
through the uterus of someone's white mama  
who came from some white dominated  
alien land.  
now i must unlearn what i think i know  
about the blackness.  
i left the blackness within the womb  
and now i find myself  
gravitating towards the blackness  
like a black magnet.  
because i learned the truth through books.  
through the master's tools.  
through the love of hooks'.  
through the imagination of butler.  
through the wake work of sharpe.  
through the encouragement  
to not shrink myself  
by morrison.  
and now i know that to unlearn  
i must unpack what i have learned,  
to ensure that the blackness,  
is not seen as an abyss of death,  
but instead  
as an abundance of possibility.

through the unknown we go,  
just as i exited the uterus.  
into the unknown,  
full of possibilities.  
so too, is the blackness.  
full of possibilities.  
it is  
through the blackness  
we learn to imagine.  
to the future  
we go.

*~ Ali Boyce*



*"Freedom in Danger" ~ Malia Miguel*

## HOW MANY MORE?

How many more  
Bodies will you allow  
To fall for your privilege?

How many more  
Bullets will you allow  
To fly into bystanders?

How many more  
People will you allow  
To die for your amendment?

How many more  
Children will you allow  
To be slaughtered in our schools?

How many more  
Rivers will you allow  
To flow with innocent blood?

How many more  
Lives will you just ignore  
For the money you receive?

How many more  
Lives will you just ignore  
For claims that you know are false?

How many more  
Of us will have to die  
For lobbyists' sins, your sins?

*~ Robert Loren*

## I SWAM IN THE SEA OF WHIRLPOOLS

I swam in the sea of whirlpools  
Where I see tornadoes beneath the water,  
Below I see the sea and its beloved jewels,  
The dead bodies lying from all manslaughter  
Black skin, Whites would tell you they poison water;  
Beneath where they grow trees,  
Under the hot sun and its dying breeze.

Fruit rotting like the time of the stars that shine  
Across the belt of the Milky Way,  
Laid across the sea line  
We wash up in Chesapeake Bay.  
The waves take us along the shore  
But we were already dead before.

Waves kissing their black skin so genteel; but these  
White skins would deny a moment for us to heal:  
I watch high from empyreal



Among company I find love.

The racing of a thousand thoughts,

all lost in clouds aloft.

For oft, where I lay upon the water

With pensive looks and a stoic mood,

They swim within the cornea of my eyes

freedom shackled by liberty,

When they leave the water away from the waves,

They dance on sand, atop open graves.

*~ Kurtis Kondra*

## HOW TO LOSE A HISTORY

*"A person who does not look back to where he came from would not be able to reach his destination."*

- *Dr. Jose. P. Rizal*

My history terrifies me.  
Mostly because I know  
I'm everything my ancestors feared.

I am their lost land.  
I am their lost language.  
I am their lost loved one.

I don't reach out to them.  
I fear if I did, they would not recognize me.

Instead of me, they'd only see:  
An Outsider.  
An Invader.  
An American.

If I'm honest  
I don't know what I am.

I know my history  
yet that makes it harder  
to know myself.

Because some days  
I see myself

As a product of  
my ancestors' will  
to survive.

Other days...

I see a lost child

that was born to be  
the Benevolent Assimilator.

~ *Emma Ramirez*

## INSTANT COFFEE

“Do people in the Philippines like coffee?”

My father answers: “We only have instant coffee.”

He – my father – the doctor and doctor’s husband – answers. It’s him – my sister’s father-in-law – the business owner and property manager – who falls quiet. And so does the rest of the table – his mouth – their mouth – not mouths – forming a small- o.

Well, the wooden table, specifically, is quiet. It’s a sleek, massive thing, my sister and her husband bought from Lowe’s, wooden chairs and all its accompanying shadow. Grey with a tint of faded- jaded- green, but brighter- nicer- compared to where I sit. Where I sit is already quiet. I’m with my father, mother, sister, and ours is white, but a dirty white, and grey only because it’s speckled with dust, covered, carpeted by crumpling, crumpled plastic.

But the quiet doesn’t last. It fades back to quiet mumbles, indoor voices, garbled screeches. Nails on chalkboard discussing the importance of the French press: how long it takes, how hard to push. Whether you should buy it because sometimes the process takes too long, and you get cold coffee instead of hot, and coffee is always best hot or cold or hot or cold or scalding, to the point your skin burns and melts and falls off in flakes. First degree, second degree. Marred angry, angry red-

And I don’t know a single thing about coffee.

I know how I relate to it.

I know that I hate it.

I know that my dad still has it instant.

Because he has no time, because he's working, working, working. And my mother only has store-bought coffee once a month because she's working. Because he has no time and she has no time for French presses that take the scalding and turn it into lukewarm, cool, cold, freezing. Because their coffee is already lukewarm by the time the powder turns liquid, and the water is stained a deep dark brown bloody red.

I also know that it comes from western Asia. Not France. And coffee, I mean. But here at dinner, it's the Russian-Ukrainian-Alabama-Tennessee-ian white folk at the sleek- massive- grey- faded- jaded- green- table- who know coffee best. *Not* the Asian. Because I'm southeast Asian, jungle Asian, but my sister's the jungle Asian who knows a little more about coffee. Even if she once hated it, like a child would, like I do now, but *now*- she likes coffee. And unlike the presumption of her father-in-law - who said earlier that Asians prefer tea over coffee - when she does like tea, instead of milk tea, she prefers sweet tea. Not ginseng, green, bright green, ginger. The type of tea a Southern grandma serves. Serves in a glass bottle. A glass bottle that's cold. Cold with a slice of lemon. Not grandma. Great-grandma. Not even great-great grandma, but her, too.

White hands stained a deep dark red.

Our plastic table is an inch lower than the other. I don't know *why* when everyone at the Other is taller. Six-foot-something giants. The sister's husband. Sister's father-in-law. Six-foot-something business owners, who visit Colorado- Arizona- Europe every spring. Making me feel smaller than I already am.

Isn't this my sister's house? My sister's house, *too*?

Granted, they didn't put us at this table. There just wasn't any space left at theirs.

But surely, the plastic chairs can be shoved together between the wooden ones. The wooden ones can scoot aside. They can be moved. They are not cemented.

We don't have to sit at this table, an inch lower, plastic, do we? *Do we sit at the table at all?*

“So there’s this new meal prep company where you can get food delivered to your house.”

“Yes, I tried it. But they delivered when I was at the place in Laguna, even when I tried to change the address.”

By now, my father is no longer part of the conversation. We don’t meal prep. We eat leftovers. We don’t have a second house. We have one, we have our own, which cost nearly a million, which will take another twenty years to pay off, maybe forty after college is done. Which isn't bad, but it's not theirs. It's not like theirs.

But I don’t want a second house. I want– I wish I liked coffee.

Not instant coffee.

*~ Abigail Orilla*



*"Journey to Fruition" ~ Angelica Banales*

## A ROTTEN GARDEN

*"Lolo? Why did you never teach my mom or aunts Tagalog?"*

*"Why would I? It's not important."*

- *A conversation between my lolo and I*

My voice was taken from me.  
It happened before I was born.

The capture of my voice didn't start  
with my mom  
with my lolo  
or even my great lolo.

It began with ancestors I can't even name.

Started with the invasion of the Spaniards.  
The initial infestation was harrowing  
but some of our language survived.

Yet a new infestation came quickly with the Americans.  
An infestation that would destroy everything in its wake.

The Americans called themselves Liberators  
but I know what they really were.

Pests.

An invasive species that poisoned  
everything beautiful on the island.

That dug its claws  
into the mind of the people.

Scraping and devouring any remnants  
of life that existed before them.

Planting their seeds



so far deep into the minds of the people  
that even extermination could not save them.

The damage was done.

The seeds that were planted decades ago  
have continued to grow with each generation.

With each generation losing  
More  
and  
More  
and  
More  
and  
More...

Until all that is left is a voice.

*~ Emma Ramirez*

## GRAPEFRUIT

*In honor of my immigrant father and those who take the difficult journey to the U.S. for a better life*

I am five, I clutch my mother's waist. My lanky arms slither around her like a vine. Suddenly, the sweet smell of citrus fills my nostrils. I got a whiff of grapefruit, the scent was coming from my mother's vessel like a diffuser. Suddenly I felt my grandma's wrinkled arms trying to pry me off my mother who was stiff like a tree branch. But I didn't budge because letting her go meant I would never get her back. The world around me began to fade from the salty rain spewing from my eyes. I felt thunder inside my brain. It was pounding hard against my skull. When my mother detached herself from me, I felt as my body began to shiver, a numbness spreading from my head to toes. The sound of the chickens clucking, and the cows mooing rang in the air, it mingled with my screams. My tears were bleach, they stained her blue dress, but her betrayal stained my heart. I was motherless with only a drunken dad and grandmother. Gone was the smell of grapefruit and it was replaced with the stench of bitter liquor.

I am seven, I limp through the dirt roads of Michoacan, Mexico looking for work, even a peso makes me grateful. The bottom of my bare feet sting with every step, they are covered with blisters and are the color of ash. My stomach is as flat as a tree stump and there was hunger bubbling inside. I had not eaten since yesterday morning. Grandma could no longer afford to feed me so I took to the streets to make some money for us. It has not been easy considering the rest of Mexico also took to the streets for employment. Instead I found that the dirt stuck to my clothes like gum. As I continued to walk the roads I noticed I had reached the nearing town. Once there I found a bench to sit on. Just as I sat down the students emerged from school. Their crisp white school uniform makes me want to burrow into my seat. Their laughing remarks of disgust at my dirty face do not agitate me but when they embrace their mothers that's when I feel my throat begin to close up and my fist clutches the bench beneath me, my nails digging into the dry wood, blood quickly seeping from my nails. I don't let the tears drop I suck

them back into my eyes even if it burns and I swallow the sob rising from my throat like water on a hot afternoon.

I am eighteen, and still covered in dirt. The sweat rolling down the nape of my neck is cool under the hot sun. Once done picking tomatoes at the field I take the thick envelope of money, the last needed for my journey North. What others call the land of opportunities is the thief that stole my mother and who would now steal me away. That evening before leaving for America, I placed a kiss onto my grandmother's wrinkled forehead. Her snores rang loudly in the room, and when I leaned in to kiss her cheek the smell of tequila slapped me across the face. I gagged before placing the letter I had written the night before on the table beside her. My father was nowhere to be found as he is known for disappearing for weeks at times after a good drunk session, this was one of those weeks. I did not mind as I did not want to see him as he brought no good. My eyes soften looking at my grandma. She had given up so much for me and sure she had her own flaws but at least she had not abandoned me. In that moment as I gave her one last look I said goodbye to the life of poverty.

I am nineteen and the memory of my journey to the U.S. lingers in my mind, only coming alive at the dead of night. My body still remembers the cold nights and fiery afternoons walking through the desert of death. The sound of coyotes growling in hunger echo around me. Everywhere I go I feel like immigration follows. Everyone here talks in a language I don't understand and the way they glare at my brown skin I know they don't like me, they feel threatened, I am a minority. My eyes that once gazed at the beautiful mountains of Mexico now gaze at the prickly palm trees of Los Angeles where the smell of piss floats in the air. In my hand is a wrinkled paper with the address of the woman who had pushed me away. Despite her betrayal the butterflies in my stomach fluttered, my hand shook as I reached out to press three knocks to the yellow door. Knock, knock, knock. Then it swung open, a little girl with brown hair and brown eyes like mine came to sight. Then the sound of a soft voice I hadn't heard since my childhood rang from behind her. There she was my mother. She hadn't changed except for a few wrinkles and gray hairs. She was still small in stature and plump like a peach. When she saw me she dropped to her knees, tears

profusely streaming down her wrinkled cheeks. Before I knew it, I was once again cocooned by the smell of grapefruit, this time it was her who didn't want to let me go.

*~ Jasmin Salgado*

## CHIHUAHUA ROAD

The ride there is hilly. Up the way past the four cows and the crow patch. Go right at the ill-planned intersection where five streets converge haphazardly. One can't blink, or the left turn for Chihuahua Road will be missed. The ride through it can be daunting, until the end.

Drivers must go careful and slow on this rough, bumpy stretch. There are no paved sidewalks, and vehicles are parked all over, perpendicular to the street. It starts out benign, with the first house and its large BEWARE OF DOG sign, and a gander beyond the sign into the yard might spot a menacing, steel-postured German Shepard. A few houses in, there is a big white work truck with a big white bumper sticker plastered on the rear window, bitching about hard work, taxes and welfare. That house rests on level ground.

Coasting carefully—as it is an old, narrow street—on the right is a house, a rental. Its front gate is white picket, with diamond lattice attached to the top of that, driveway behind it dropping steep away from the street, surely a nightmare during stormy downpours. Upon this modified gate hangs a red plastic mailbox. There are also a few hand-scrawled signs nailed, in all-cap letters, stating HOUSE FOR RENT, NO DEADBEAT CHECKS, PUT APPLICATION IN MAILBOX, NO TRESPASSERS, TRESSPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED, NO DEADBEATS!

The road goes downhill, into another intersection, on the corner of which has a house, nearly engulfed in ivy, the decrepit, rotting backyard fence collapsing, gradually falling from the weight of the creeping vine much like the Tower of Pisa. A dark forest of trees rises behind the fence. There are signs scribbled on white printer paper, saying TRESPASSING IS FORBIDDEN, VIOLATORS WILL PAY THE CONSEQUENCES, SEARCH WARRANT REQUIRED, and KEEP OUT! The frantic felt-tip-made letters are legible, though somewhat blurred from recent precipitation. These fragile paper signs will probably not withstand the winter. The front of the house has four-foot vegetation growth, not grass exactly, and it is brown, dry.

The road ascends slightly there, and then one might see them: Chihuahuas standing in their street, six or seven of them, not intimidated by cars. The auto needs to be super slow here, winding around these dogs, some of the teacup variety, who don't budge and might saunter defiantly further into the car's path. It is their street, and they survive among the vehicles, parked or not. They look mad at the car. A tiny fawn chihuahua has only one eye, yet stares menacingly at the intrusion.

Almost through, almost through, navigating away from the street guardians, beyond the one-eyed canine, where the road becomes level. Sometimes, about twice a year, always in spring, a house on the right hangs a sign offering FREE KITTENS.

At road's end, after the place that sometimes has a spare litter of kittens, there is one more sign, FREE LEMONS, propped against a lemon tree, behind a blue tea towel spread over the grass. The towel is covered with a grand pile of the yellow citruses. The sign was made by El Viejo, on cardboard with thick black ink. El Viejo sits near the lemons, semi-reclining in a wood Adirondack chair, shirtless and tanned gold, but hair silver. A silver fox he is, still in good, sinewy form. Next to him in an identical chair is La Vieja. She is not so aware, not able to take care of things, like harvest the lemons and then realize there are too many to keep for themselves. Gripping her cane at her side, she enjoys the warm sun, and is happy admiring the heap of yellow fruit atop the cloth.

~ Ilyn Welch

## HANDS

i have learned to see worn out hands as beautiful  
every bend and wrinkle holding years of hard work

garden work paper work  
chopping work cooking work feeding the future work

this is a sign of the grind  
an untouchable hustle

i am because these hands  
in the mornings when i wake to join them

i stop while the water warms running over them  
pausing to hold decades of sacrifice in my soft palms

i am not an immigrant  
i am a child of a child of immigrants  
its different

half gen college grad with a backpack half filled with books  
the extra space is for mobility

residual germany lives in my blood  
im not harsh because i want to be

my soul and i have an existential crisis each time i clean  
hands become raw from the scrubbing

this is second nature  
rid what doesnt feel right smell right

pour bleach on whatever doesnt look american

what ever doesnt fit in

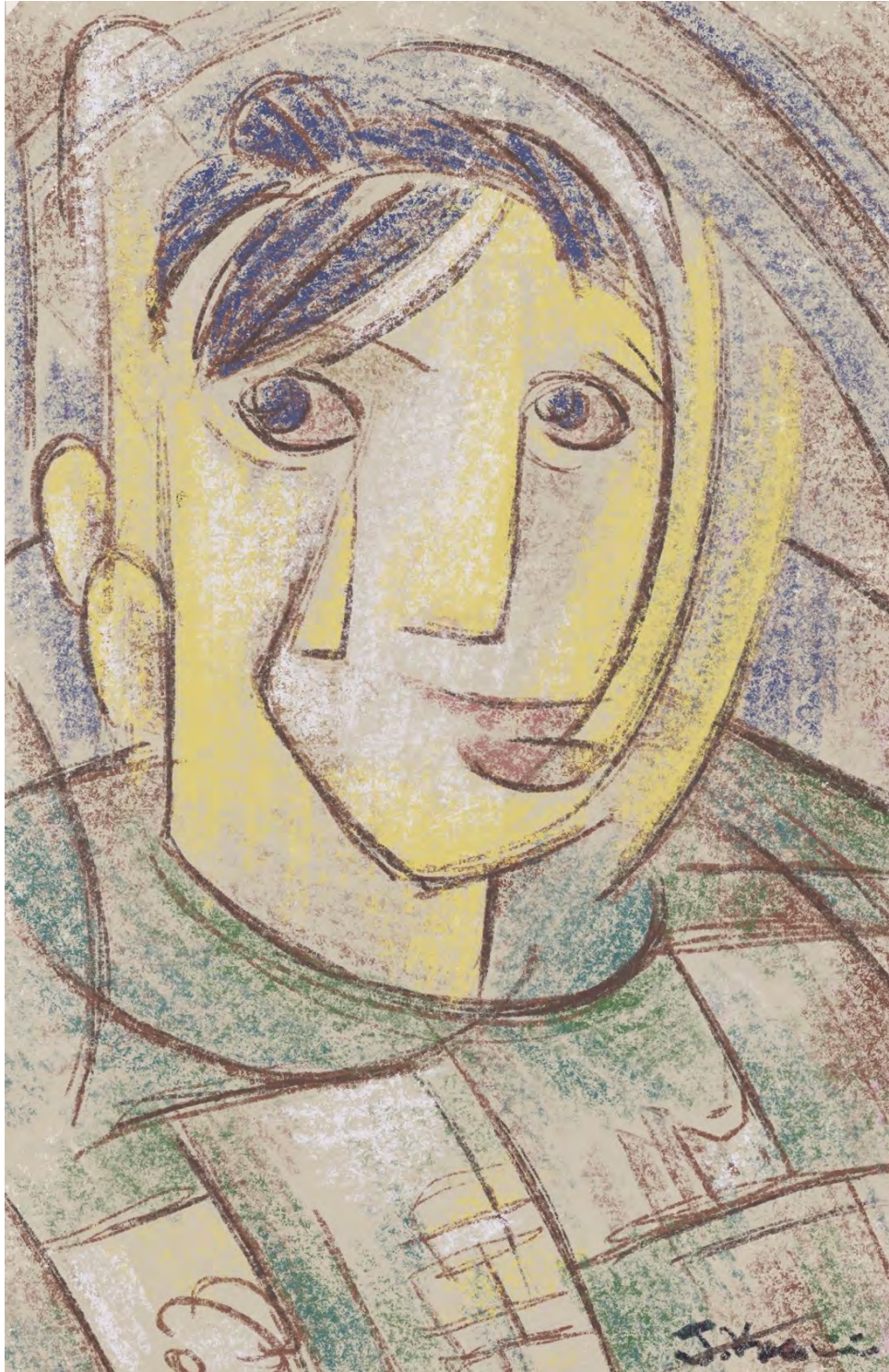
every chopped potatoe, planted seed  
fixed button poorly signed document sits in these hands

i have come to see worn out hands as beautiful  
every wrinkle has a story

i am of hands  
so i work to make them untouchable

*~ slntstrwbrry*





*"Selfie Tyme" ~ Jesika Keo*

*Don't burn your bridges*

Oh, I never build a bridge I know I'll burn.

Silly willy, watch and learn:

As I scratch a match across its side—

Seeing fear in its eyes.

I burn the base before its built

And smile as the wood wilts.

See, I have no time for lukewarm associations.

I am every false bridge's damnation.

And I don't mind if that's quite harsh

I suppose I just have no heart.

O hear it crumble as it falls.

Not one pillar left at all.

There will be no phoenix from this ash.

Nothing left but heaps of black.

*~ Sonia Gomez*

## THIS ACTING GIG

The world is overrun with plays,  
with busy sets,  
overwhelming characters.  
The actors are passersby, strangers,  
who fire their perverse blanks  
inches from my temple.

The cars, the trains, are part of it.  
The ruined buildings and  
their ceaseless shadows too.  
My footsteps on the blunt sidewalk  
are the interminable soundtrack  
to the tale which keeps on telling.

It's a love story.  
But I'm not the leading man.  
It's a drama.  
Simple conversations  
are so fraught with dread.  
It's a comedy.  
The audience awaits  
my very next pratfall.

Sometimes, I wonder  
what am I doing in the cast,  
why are they all looking at me,  
what do I say next.

But then comes the great relief  
of forgotten lines  
suddenly remembered.

I'm an actor again.  
I inhale my motivation.  
I exhale my interminable bows.

*~ John Grey*



*"watercolour portrait" ~ Jonathan Cenicerros*

## HOLIDAYS ARE HOLIDAYS

during my diseased days  
(monoracial love: a disease waiting for formal classification)  
my white girlfriend's white grandmother asked  
"what do your people celebrate?"  
as if a holiday could mean something other  
other than quickly dated fashions  
(poofy hair will never come back)  
and unintentional oversights  
(dishwasher doesn't mean disowned)  
and moments of happiness  
even if over cigarettes

holidays mean pictures  
embarrassing pictures  
where the threats and pleads  
to smile and pose  
where the feuds and loves are  
for flashes  
the things we can share  
but never hold

*~ Christian Hanz Lozada*

## ELEGY FOR MY VIRGINITY

I wasn't allowed the ideal situation.  
I wish she hadn't happened,  
But she did.  
But she did...  
But she did...

I wanted my first time to be special  
But she stole my innocence from me,  
Like I was a six pack of empty Bud Light discarded,  
Or a Snickers bar nicked from the front of 7-11.

I don't know her name,  
And

I never will.  
I hardly remember her face,  
But I'll never forget what she did.

She *made* me grow up so much faster than I wanted,  
*made* me endure the toxicity that says  
"You got lucky, stop crying"  
"Man, I wish I were you"  
"That doesn't happen to boys"  
"That can't happen to boys".

So I understand more than many.

This doesn't just happen to girls;  
This  
can happen to us all. I can't  
get pregnant, I won't  
be accosted going into the clinic,  
But I know the *anger*, I know the *fear*,

I know how difficult it becomes to **trust**:  
The desire to be  
Touched, wanted,            Respected,  
So strong you want to cry;  
But you can't shake off the feeling  
That they're your attacker in front of you instead.

I can relate.

She wasn't the ideal situation.  
I wish she hadn't happened,  
But she did.  
I learned to live with the pain,  
I decided to be myself again.

There's still that creeping darkness at the edge of my mind,  
But every day I look for light  
So I can keep that shadow at bay.

*~ Tim Harvey*



## INTO THE OCEAN

I was smitten by him from the very first moment we met; his mesmerizing hazel brown eyes that burned a hole in my soul, a slow smile would work across his face every time we locked eyes with one another. I was entranced with him from the beginning.

Behind his kind eyes though, was an ocean of a man that lived within him. His gentle waves of kindness slowly reeled me in, enchanted by the ethereal waves that kissed the shore before receding away into an endless sea. I only ever knew what he showed me at the coastline, and everything in me wanted to dive deeper into him. I began dipping my toes into his warmth, quickly the mysterious vastness of him lured me deeper in. The deeper I fell, the more treacherous his waves, but I trusted him to keep me afloat while I indulged myself in the warmth he provided.

The more I fell into him, the more he slowly begun to withdraw the overbearing waves of love, and the warmth I had known from the shore turned into a bitter chill. The first time he turned cold, his water filled my lungs as I gasped for air, begging to be taken back to shore. He was able to calm the unstable waves within him, and I kept my faith in him that it was only a mistake, that this wasn't the man who occupied the very eyes I had fallen for. He had showed me comfort and love, it couldn't be possible he was capable of causing me such agony.

As his crushing currents dragged me further away from the shore, the more isolated I became, never realizing the power that he held. I tried to keep my head above his choppy seas, searching for the lighthouse beam that grew dimmer as he charmed me deeper in. I tried to yell for help, but he pulled me too far from the shore, and anger would erupt from him whenever he found me trying to leave. I had accepted this was my new fate, being trapped in the sea of his rage forever.

When the lighthouse beam ran out, my hope for survival went with it. I could no longer tell if the salty taste lingering on my skin was from his oceanwater, or the tears I shed. My adoration for the beauty within him swiftly turned into fear, as I began to realize the power he held. I became weary, no longer having his help to stay afloat. It felt like bricks shackled to my ankles as I sank further into the choppy depths of his abuse and anger, stuck in the middle of his merciless sea. The clear tranquil sea quickly turned crimson red from the blood shed when his currents would throw me against the rigid rocks. His coldness numbed me, and his harsh conditions I fought to survive emptied me from the remaining ounces within my soul. I felt as though I was an empty vessel, surrendered to the ocean's control to guide me where it wanted to. At times, I contemplated if drowning would be easier than fighting to catch my breath.

Emptied alcohol bottles littered his seas, as they drained into him, only adding to the chaos that transpired within. I was caught in the middle of his furious storm, an impending hurricane of emotion, just on the brink of surging forth. I knew I had to get away before it was too late.

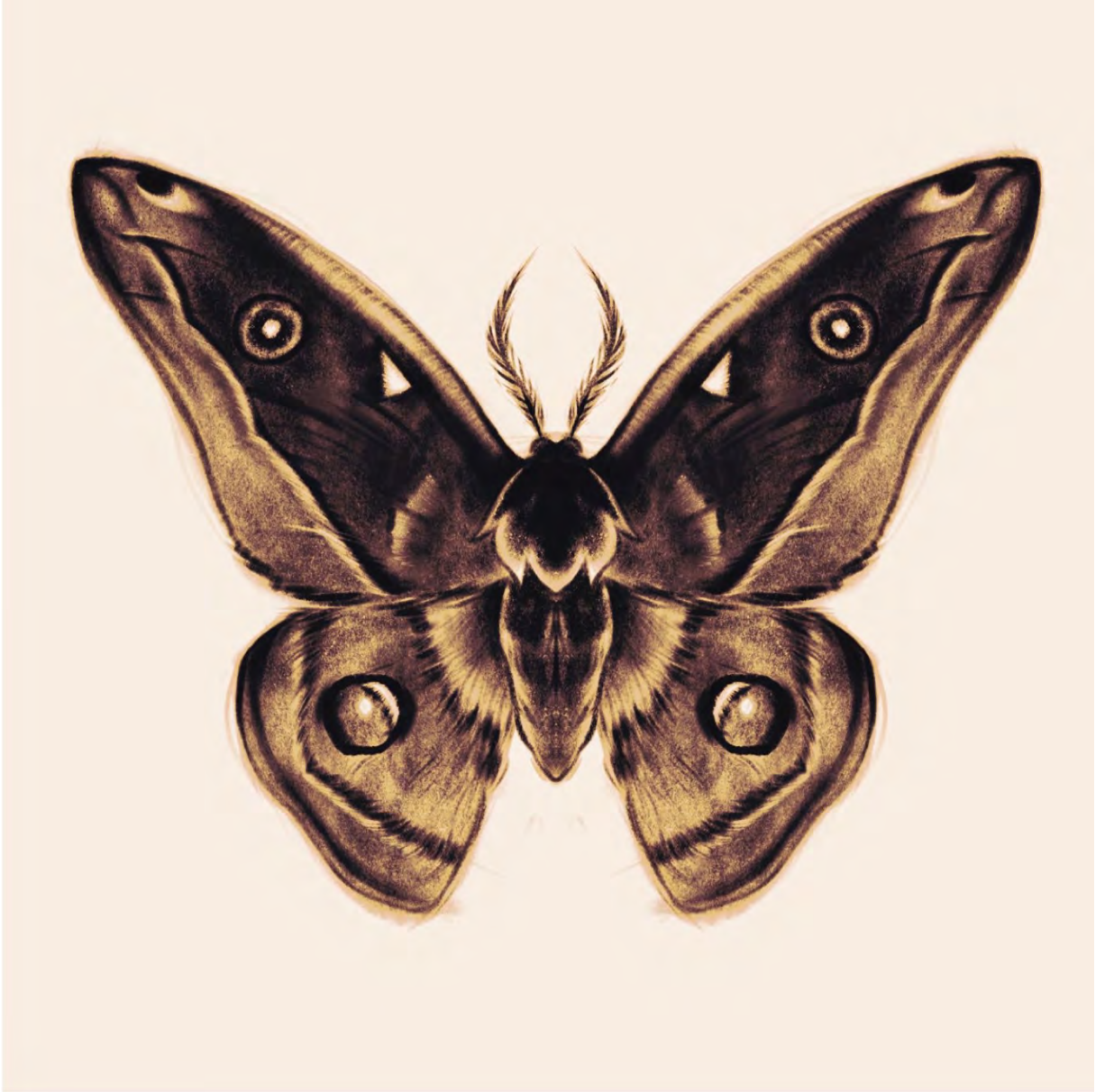
Beaten and bruised, I puled together the last bit of strength within me and chose to fight. I chose to fight for the people I loved waiting for me back on shore, I chose to fight for the feeling of the sun's warmth sizzling into my skin as my feet anchored into the sand, for the day I can look back and be proud of how far I've made it. With every last ounce of strength within, I chose to fight for me.

The scars from his rough ocean terrain still remain, a reminder of the fight for my life, but also a sign of strength. Strength for fighting through his crushing waves, and for dragging my lifeless body to shore. I think to the time when he told me, *'You were such a confident and strong woman when we first met, now look at you'*. As if spending every last bit

of my energy to swim instead of sink wasn't strong, while waves of pain engulfed my soul, drawing me further away from my safe haven on shore. As if pulling myself out of his ocean eyes, freeing myself from the chaos that ensued behind them, because I knew I deserved better wasn't confident enough. The woman that emerged from the ocean of him will never be the same, she grew from every storm that he threw her way, and she became her own saving grace.

With him, I was a helpless sailor, abandoned in the middle of an unforgiving sea. Without him, I became an ocean of myself, one full of forgiveness and serenity, a safe space for myself and other neglected travelers in need.

*~ Samantha Turner*



*"Emperor Gum Moth" ~ Marianna Cruz*

## LOVE ME IN THE DARK

She says she'll only love me in the dark.  
And this is why I'm insecure.  
To make everything right, I turn off the light.  
And just like that, now we look the same.

And she's happy.

And I'm crying.

*~ Olivia Geiser*

## JUNGLE THEMED BIRTHDAY PARTY

“My love is yours, if you’d like it.”

The lies leaped out of his lips, and swung down from vine to vine.

And she believed him. Like honey melting instantly when met with a hot spoon, she believed him.

She looked out the window, and the shape of the night outside was different. It took the shape of a wish - one that she thought had come true.

But the night she found out took the shape of what she imagined Hell would look like.

The night she found out was the night that mascara ran down her face, dried there, and remained cemented to her freckled skin for the coming three days.

The night she found out was the night that balloons were popped, cake was cut, and frosting was licked.

The night she found out was the night that she heard the devil’s call - it was the fastest she’d ever picked up the phone.

It was the night that glass broke, vocal cords strained, and the night that her dress pooled around her body - like an unwavering sea of dread.

It was the night that the vines crept their way up and around her neck, leaving her breathless in the way he once did.

It was nighttime for days, weeks, months - until finally, morning broke.

~ *Loyal Dahi*

## THE LESSONS IN ARGUING

An argument drags up  
other, older arguments -  
fighting knows the past  
better than memory.  
We blow off on tangents.  
We find the connection  
between this hurt  
and its long dormant grandfather.  
We're overwhelmed  
like children with too many toys at Christmas.  
Only we break our toys.  
We'd even break Christmas if we could.

An argument needs to be this way.  
It can't be centered.  
It must never be linear.  
A rational argument on either side  
and there'd be no hope for us.  
Irrational is the only hope.  
A viewpoint must, for the good of all,  
eventually sound crazy to the person saying it.

So I can't play cards with the guys  
because the iron's cord is frayed.  
Your mother won't visit with us  
as long as there's a nasty noise  
in the Volvo's engine.

You're calm.  
I'm feeling better now.  
We kiss and make up.

I'd like to see logic try.

*~ John Grey*



## CONFESSIONS

Finally, my words fail  
What a freedom to be speechless

How many times in a day I'd like to shout  
    I love you!  
Whisper in the midst of moans and thrusts  
    I love you

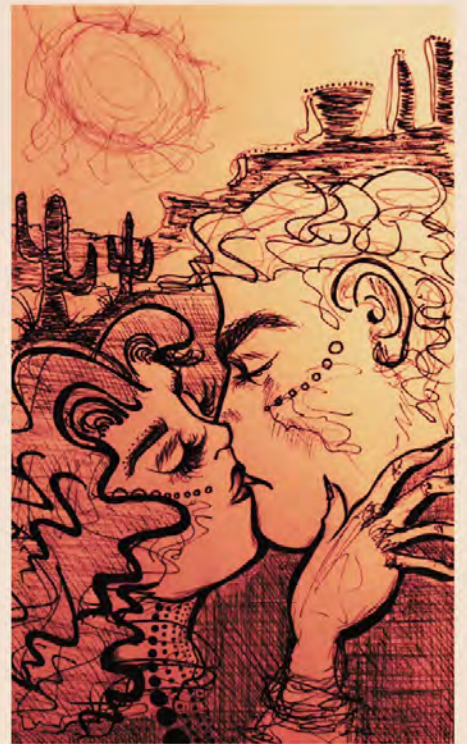
But my tongue lays still  
This expression a lexical failure

There are no words  
To lay with you, insatiably  
Be held by you, kissed by you  
To hear the soft heavy breath of your sleep  
The loud heavy breath of your orgasm

I love you, yes  
And time has been marked

Before you, and now.

*~ Michelle Gatewood*



*"Desert Lovers" ~ Lizbeth Turcios*

## IS LOVE A REAL THING?

Is love a real thing?

A thing that follows you from room to room;  
a thing that lies in bed with you when you cannot sleep;  
a thing that lies in bed with you when you can.

Does love live in the walls?

Drip from the faucets?

Walk upon the noisy floor in the hallway  
like a ghost at night?

Does love make you smile when you imagine hearing  
its car backing into your driveway  
slowly slowly,  
its headlights coming in the front window?

Does love separate from you like oil  
just as you're ready to accept it?

Was it ever really there?

Is love a real thing that abandons you in the park,  
the street corner,  
the subway station?

It slips away while you're distracted by a flash of something  
or looking at your watch.

You wait for it to return,  
just as promised.

You stand on the platform  
with the trains heading home stopping in front of you,  
opening their doors,  
closing them and leaving without you  
over and over.

I know that love is real.

Standing alone in the subway

looking 'round and 'round,  
side to side:  
I know that love is real.

*~ John Tustin*

Who's question is this  
The stranger at the bar  
My sister  
Your sister  
You-  
Ask me to remove my clothes  
Or, I obliged naturally

Instinctively

My nakedness, a relief  
Or, you never asked for this at all

Cigarettes in the sink, bottles half empty, conversations  
not wholly remembered but wholly felt

I see you-  
    Love me  
I see you-

And perhaps the answer is  
To be here, lay with each other, feel what it feels  
To be seen, caressed, adored

Feel what it feels to be near you  
to catch your gaze, share your day

And at the end, it would have been  
something to remember

And perhaps to push it further  
Would be blasphemy

And perhaps we are divine  
As all love is

And perhaps in this way  
We are timeless

*~ Michelle Gatewood*

## DUCKING

For the millionth time they were arguing about something stupid. He, like always, was "right". She had to move the Great Wall of China before he admitted he made a mistake. "Well? Apologise!" she nagged. "Say it!" When he murmured "I was wrong" she saw a prospect for reconciliation and jumped to hug him. A lens fell off.

"You and your brutal hugs," he grumbled. They were crawling on all fours, searching every string of wool on the thick white carpet.

"It doesn't have wings, it's somewhere in the room. Trust me, we'll find it". I only hugged you!" How many hundreds of dollars will her victory cost now?

"Hug? That was a clumsy limb attack, you're good at those."

He was right about that. Every muscle in her body wanted to break through his bricks, punch at his arrogance, kill it with hugs. His momentary weakness allowed her yet another attempt to penetrate the crack through which she could still recognise him. She had an epiphany: she wanted this to happen. Shatter his armour - glasses. Disturbing glasses. Stylish, expensive glasses. When not on his eyes, they were hanging on a string dangling over his chest. They occupied a space that belonged to her. What with all these fancy glasses if he couldn't see her.

"We'll never find it on this bloody rug," he muttered.

The carpet again. She remembered the day she brought it home with shiny eyes. "Why the hell did you buy this hairy farce?" She didn't reply. If he couldn't see her, she wouldn't hear him.

The phone rang. She couldn't leave him to search alone, **she** must be the one finding, not him! She let it ring, then panicked and rushed to answer.

"Oh. hi... no... we're just having fun on the floor, looking for a lens that dropped off Mark's glasses. Crazy, it simply disappeared off the face of the earth... It's somewhere on the carpet, but hiding so well! Can I call you later?"

She tiptoed her way back to the carpet and ducked again in front of him. They went on quietly for a few minutes, moving almost simultaneously. She felt his breath on her back, his energy field like a roaring waterfall splashing into her blood. When did he change to become her Iceland? So cold, so distant, so desired? For a moment she

imagined he might reach for her waist from behind, turn her over, kiss her eyelashes, bite her neck, lay her back on the carpet, stroke her breasts. She would surrender like a tern gliding in swirling winds. They would roll and roll and laugh madly at the sound of cracking glass they might finally hear underneath their sweaty bodies.

"There, found it," he raised up, stretching his tall body in front of her. She looked as he fitted the lens back into the frame then hobbled to his office, frowning after the gruelling affair, leaving her crouched on the glass-less rug with nothing to look for.

*~ Edna Heled*



i'm learning to love the color green again.  
i loved it before i met you,  
and when you appeared  
that love grew.

it grew every time i looked into your eyes  
    (god—  
    your green  
    green eyes  
    with glistening pools of gold)  
because green is beautiful,  
    it's grassy meadows with the brightest flowers  
    it's the leaves of willow trees swaying in the wind as sunlight flits through,  
and your eyes were beautiful.

it grew every time i heard your laugh  
because green is happiness,  
    it's the sound of rain drops hitting the earth  
    it's sunsets over farmer's markets,  
and your laugh made me happy.

it grew every time you were with me  
because green is comfort,  
    it's warm  
    it brushed its fingers through my hair as i laid on its chest  
    it smiled as it kissed me softly  
    it held me in a tight embrace only to pull me impossibly closer,  
and you brought me comfort.

it grew every time i thought of you  
because green is home,  
    it's safe  
    it let me sob into its shoulder without complaint  
    it drew sweet shapes of nothing on my skin  
    it pressed its forehead to mine and shook out soft giggles,  
and you felt like home.

it grew because of you  
because you were green.

i'm learning to love the color green again,  
instead of hating it.  
    because instead of becoming greener with spring  
    you wilted away from me like leaves in winter.

i'm learning to love the color green again.  
i loved it before i met you,  
and when you disappeared  
that love grew to hate.

*~ Atlas Daniel*

## ONE OF MANY DRIVES: PART II

It seemed like we drove in a  
90 degree  
incline, for  
Forever. Time moves differently along the mountain road and  
influenced by smelly flowers.

Asked him, with cheap humor on my tongue and smoke through my  
nostrils

    You going to  
    take me to the stars?

The most genuine apologetic smile took me by surprise.

    Maybe not that far

He said and sheepishly with the deepest sincerity asked,

    but I can take you as far as the moon

    Is that okay?

~ *Ryan Sally*

## WITH A GRAIN OF SALT

It feels good to wear my hair down,  
hiding bruises left by kisses  
leaving warm colors, gentle pink to caramel brown.

Running into the ocean, night time, dressed in ball gown  
attire. My entirety- a vessel for the wild wonders. I embody a tempest.  
It feels good to wear my hair down.

And staying up, watching the sunrise from the highest point of my  
hometown.

Sharing nicotine kisses on my lips, raw and stained  
lips leaving warm colors, gentle pink to caramel brown.

Cool, long strong fingers in my hair, like a crown  
the fit, so perfect, this was God's intentions for fingers and by God!  
It feels good to wear my hair down.

Let us not think of nouns.

Why waste time naming moments in time? For the moment I only ask  
for love on my neck

leaving warm colors, gentle pink to caramel brown.

If you won't give freely the same love tomorrow.

I will take our beautiful time with a grain of salt and focus on how  
Good it felt to wear my hair down  
All the warm colors, gentle pink to caramel brown.

*~ Ryan Sally*



*"Resilient" ~ Angelica Banales*

## MEANINGFUL MELODY

The moon lies down  
on top of your shoulders.  
She has heard  
the longing of your heavy heart.  
There she is, effectively listening.  
With her artistic intelligence  
she gently grabs the saxophone,  
plays a magical melody—  
the touch of her fingers  
presents a perfect jazz.  
Like a rapid river,  
the technical tune,  
swiftly slides down the center  
of your prophetic legs  
triggering you  
to dance the beat  
of a Mexican cumbia.  
Like a newborn woman,  
you are swept away  
by the wisdom of mother moon.  
She embraces  
the essence of your electrical womanhood.

*~ Juan Carlos Valadez*

## IF YOU ARE A GHOST NOW

If you are a ghost now  
I would tell you  
Congratulations  
Because I know you always wanted to be one.

If you are a ghost now  
I would tell you  
Haunt me  
Because you know how lonely I get when I am with my mind, and my mind alone.

If you are a ghost now  
We'd go house shopping  
So that you have a say on which staircase to creak  
And which doors to slam  
Knowing you, I know you'd pick a house with great acoustics  
So that your ghoulish moans are amplified.

If you are a ghost now  
And we have a house  
Feel free to misplace my keys  
Turn things on and off  
and move my clothes around in my drawers



while I sleep.

I will welcome it.

If you are a ghost now

And I become old lady

I will buy two rocking chairs.

One for me, one for you, and the neighborhood children would be

Too scared to play near our house as they see the empty chair, rocking on its own

And we'd laugh, at the look on their faces. Come keep me company.

If you are a ghost now

Do me a great kindness and wait for me

So I know exactly where you are

With me, not gone.

*~ Ryan Sally*

I comb my fingers through the air  
I catch everything but your breath

I didn't know what I had been so desperate to find  
Until their laughter settled around me  
Called itself a home  
Called me an Ovando  
Said it was in my blood forever

And that was many miles ago  
Here, the blood trail wears thin

Stretched itself further than it ever intended to go

At the end of this distance, I search around me  
Constantly

A drop  
A stain  
Any evidence I am not alone

I trace along the veins  
For home

*~ Michelle Gatewood*

My obsession with Sidney Stone began in the seventh grade, when Elsie Hammond and Minnie Norman cornered me after school and told me he thought I was pretty.

It had never occurred to me to wonder whether I was pretty before. As a girl slipping into my mother's closet to try on her dresses, tripping and trampling on the excess fabric that dragged on the floor, I had always assumed I would grow up to become beautiful. The grown-up clothes, the stolen lipstick I slathered clownishly over my lips, the string of pearls we had not yet had to pawn—these were not costumes but a portal to the future, to the elegant lady I would surely grow up to be. Yet there on the corner of Fording and Sagewood, one block away from Downey Junior High School, Elsie Hammond and Minnie Norman informed me for the first time that beauty was to be determined by someone else.

This new information gnawed at me until I worked up the courage to approach Sidney in the hallway at school and ask him if it was true. He stared at me in silence, wearing an expression of incredulous disgust. “*Me?*” he finally asked. “Think *you’re* pretty?”

His eyes flickered down toward the ground, and I saw him taking in my left foot. It curved outwards to the side instead of pointing straight, and the ankle rolled inwards at a strange angle.

I wanted to shy away from his scrutiny. Whenever people looked, the foot seemed to pulse and throb, glowing and burning like a red hot iron. My left leg had been crushed in an accident when I was eight, but Sidney wouldn't know that. He thought I'd been born a cripple, that there was something wrong with me.

It was around this time that the kids at school began calling me Bug Eyes.

Ernie Clayton started it. He stood on his chair and waved his hands until he had the whole class's attention. Someone threw a ball of crumpled paper at him. They missed and it bounced off the blackboard, rolling to a stop in a dusty corner of the classroom.

“Hey everyone!” Ernie shouted. “Bug Eyed Beatrice is sweet on Sidney Stone!”

The whole class whooped and jeered.

“No, I'm not! Elsie and Minnie said—”

Nobody was listening to me. “Bug Eyes loves Sidney, Bug Eyes loves Sidney—” Ernie chanted, until the teacher came in and told him to get off the chair.

“My name isn’t Bug Eyes,” I mumbled to myself, but no one paid any attention.

Throughout all of this Sidney had been curiously quiet. He stared at me silently from across the classroom, his lips pressed tightly into a thin line. It was true he was handsome. Dark lashes framed his guarded eyes, and his fine cheekbones and narrow nose lent him a striking, aloof air. He saw me looking and turned away, and the class moved on to other, more interesting topics.

Sidney seemed to have spoken my ugliness into truth. I was always at the top of my class, highest marks in French, English, geometry, history. Writing in particular was my strength. I won the spelling bee and the school penmanship contest, got my essay published in the local paper. But I was never pretty.

Minnie Norman and Elsie Hammond. Queens of the schoolyard. They were pretty. Elsie with her silken hair and large sloping forehead, the delicate green of her veins showing through her translucent skin like cracks in a porcelain vase. Minnie with her narrow face and large glittering eyes—doe eyes, people called them, not bug eyes. She wore pink sweaters to school despite her mother’s frequent admonishments that brunettes should not wear pink.

They didn’t deserve to be pretty, I thought, not with their twitters and their whispers and their scheming, orchestrating, puppet master hands. The whole school was their theater, and they took to the task of cementing my role as school pariah with overwhelming zeal.

“Hello, Bug Eyes,” Elsie made sure to say to meet sweetly each time I saw her in the hall.

Sometimes she stopped walking to study me. I tried to move past her, casting my eyes away towards my feet, but she was blocking my way. “Perhaps we should call you Miss Toad.”

I looked up, meeting her cold, amused stare. Her flat pale eyes reminded me of a viper.

“You just remind me so much of a toad! It’s those bulging eyes. You’ve got a croaky voice too, you know.” She breezed past me, leaving me standing there stupidly, alone in the hallway.

Minnie for her part came up with Space Face, announcing that my buggy eyes and big forehead made me look like an alien. I couldn't understand it. Minnie's own eyes were buggier than mine, and Elsie had the biggest forehead around. Why was I the ugly one?

The only thing they never mentioned was my foot. It hung between us like an unspoken vow, an invisible line in the sand that no one would be the first to cross. Was it propriety? Contrition? Did the guilty dregs of their consciences sweep the ceilings of a level to which even the two of them dared not stoop? In any case, Elsie and Minnie could claim they would never be so mean to a poor crippled girl as to poke fun at her mangled foot. I supposed they prided themselves on this singular kindness.

In those days Mother's phrase was "make do or do without," the Depression era rallying cry of housewives everywhere. As I trudged to school each day, staring at the worn-down t-straps of my shoes, I wondered if it could be applied to friends. Could I make do through junior high, or even high school, without any true friends? I watched my left foot drag against the ground with each step and hoped, against my better judgment, that Elsie and Minnie would grow bored of their torments and leave me to finish my schooling in peace. I could make do without friends, I decided, if only the two of them would leave me alone.

There was a time when our teacher, Ms. Bennett, called Minnie to the front of the class. Could Ms. Norman please explain Mercutio's reference to Queen Mab in *Romeo and Juliet*?

"I don't know," said Minnie. I could feel the disapproval radiating off Ms. Bennett in waves.

Ms. Bennett was an old crone who seemed permanently trapped at the turn of the century. She wore long skirts with heavy petticoats, and piled her graying hair atop her head in voluminous updos clearly bolstered with rolls of false hair. I almost felt sorry for Minnie for having to meet her severe gaze.

She turned to me next. "Ms. Price?"

I made my way to the front of the class, feeling the weight of two dozen stares on my back. The room was silent except for the sound of my dragging foot. "She's the queen of the fairies, ma'am. Mercutio means that dreams are insubstantial and unreal, like fairies."

Ms. Bennett nodded approvingly.

“Of course Space Face would know about dreams!” Minnie cried. “She always has her head in the clouds. Daydreaming about *Sidney*,” she added in a theatrical whisper.

“Ms. Norman! You are speaking out of turn.” Ms. Bennett banished Minnie outside.

Minnie flounced out with a huff, and the class giggled.

In the far corner of the classroom, Sidney raised his hand. As usual, he had been quiet during the main commotion, observing the scene, detached, from his seat. He was always serious in class. I only ever saw him become boisterous after school got out in the afternoons, when some boyish nature emerged in him and he ran whooping down the street with Ernie and the other boys. Back then orange trees lined the streets in town, and the boys plucked fruit from the low-hanging branches to eat on the way home or toss amongst themselves like a ball.

“Ma’am,” Sidney said now. “She forgot that Queen Mab is also the fairy midwife. She gifts people their deepest desires, but it’s only a fantasy.”

From then on, Sidney was my rival. As much as he appeared to detest his association with me, forced together by Elsie and Minnie’s meddling hands, he couldn’t seem to resist the draw of competition. He raised his hand when mine went up, followed my responses to Ms. Bennett’s questions, with another, better response. When I submitted my poetry to the local newspaper, I found him at the newspaper office, a submission ready in his hands, too.

I responded in kind, trying to one-up him in class, to show not only him but everyone that some kind of intelligence or talent lived in me, that I could be something more than just the butt of everyone’s jokes. It was always a race to see who would receive highest marks, me or Sidney. Elsie, surprisingly, occasionally came in third. Every time I beat the two of them, I felt a grim satisfaction creep over me, ready to cradle me in its skeleton arms.

Sidney never spoke to me outside of class, either. Occasionally he would pass me in the hallway and a strange expression would come over his face, something guarded yet vulnerable all at once. Was it admiration? Hate? A sort of grudging respect? I could never read him. Some kind of emotion flickered behind his impenetrable gaze, but it would flee before I could grasp what it was. He would look away and hurry past, avoiding my eyes, before I had the chance to speak.

Secretly, I imagined that he liked me—that he felt a private amusement at my quick wit and cleverness, and admired my aptitude for mathematics and knowledge of history. I suspected that deep within the penetralia of his own mind, there was some part of him that was drawn to me, even if he would never admit it. Why else should our rivalry be so fierce? We were mirrors of each other after all, my accomplishments both a reflection and a challenge to his own abilities and intellect. At the very least, I reasoned, he held me in high regard academically.

Of course I knew he would never voice such sentiments, if he had them—he was cast in his role as surely as I was—but in my fantasies Sidney was mine, bound to me by a shared fate as much as by schoolyard politics.

On weekends Mother made me go with her to volunteer at the soup kitchen. We were fortunate that Father still had a job, she reminded me, even if the bank had reduced his hours, and it was our duty to help those with fewer resources.

Outside the soup kitchen people waited in long queues for food, the lines extending down the block and wrapping around the corner. They all looked haggard and drawn. We served them soup from massive pots, hot salty broth with bits of vegetables and meat floating in it.

I was looking down the line of people, the rows of pinched and weary faces, when I saw her. Elsie Hammond stood in line with her mother, their coats pulled tight against the cold.

She saw me too. We locked eyes, and I saw her stiffen. She stood a little straighter, raising her chin as though daring me to say something.

She kept standing tall and proud, a muscle clenched in her jaw, when I served her soup. But I could still feel it, hanging heavy in the air between us—her silent plea for me not to tell.

I thought about telling. I wanted to get back at her for her meanness, to humiliate her in front of others as she humiliated me. I couldn't explain why I didn't do it.

Over the years my fantasies about Sidney became wilder. I convinced myself that he was innocent and pure, untouched by Elsie and Minnie's foul mischief; behind his cold exterior hid a gentle soul who pitied my plight. He grew too, all of a sudden tall and lean, sharp lines everywhere. He reminded me of a statue painstakingly chiseled and hewn, beauty written across the lines of his face as though by a master sculptor. I became all the more convinced of his goodness. In my

daydreams, he took my hand as we stood together on the podium for a poetry contest we both won, the two of us staring down the school as a united front. I tried not to think about his initial stinging rejection when I asked if he thought I was pretty.

Perhaps, I thought, with the start of high school things might change. Horace Mann High School was a fourteen-room, two story building of whitewashed brick with a row of bow windows on the second floor. It teemed with activity, and I imagined the walls bulging and warping with the weight of all the students inside. The other high school in the county had closed, and their displaced students flooded Horace Mann, causing class sizes to almost double.

Despite all this I ran into Sidney frequently. Though music classes and foreign languages had been axed in the latest round of budget cuts, mathematics and literature remained as arenas for our competition. Elsie and Minnie haunted me, too, sneering at me in class as usual. Elsie, in particular, seemed to have taken special interest in Sidney.

“Hi Sidney,” Elsie drawled in class, dragging out the i’s and e’s so it sounded like *hiiii Sidneeyyyy*. Her simpering irritated me.

By then, nearly everyone had forgotten the original Bug Eyes/Sidney debacle. Only Ernie Clayton wouldn’t let it go, chiming in with “Sidney belongs to Bug Eyes!” over Elsie’s attempts to flirt.

She whirled around in her seat, her face pinched in a scowl. “Why don’t you go away, Ernie,” she said. “I’m very busy right now.”

“Aw, Elsie’s cross.” Ernie flashed her a mouthful of crooked teeth.

And then—there it was. Sidney glanced in my direction. His lips curled into a small, private smirk; our eyes met for an instant, and then he looked away.

Elsie saw it. Her face flushed a deep red, and I saw her hand curl into a fist, clenching the fabric of her skirt. She would get her revenge on me for that moment, I knew, the moment Sidney and I had shared at her expense.

A rumor soon went around that I had been spotted necking with Lester Dewey. Lester Dewey! With his spotty face and skin like uncooked pastry, and hair that hung limply into his eyes. The kids at school all called Lester crater face, for the measly pox-like scars that dotted his dull visage like craters on the dark side of the moon.

I assumed Minnie must have helped concoct the scheme, manufacturing the poisonous lies and spreading them around the school.



But she hardly spoke to me anymore, not even an obligatory “Space Face” or “Bug Eyes” when she passed me in the hallways. Wrapped up in a budding romance with Ernie Clayton, all Minnie spared for me was the occasional contemptuous sniff. There was no doubt in my mind—Elsie was the real culprit behind the rumor.

I thought about telling then, letting the whole school know about the time I saw Elsie waiting in the bread line. About not letting her get away with things this time. Then I thought about how she would retaliate if I spilled her secret, the ways she might choose to destroy me, once and for all. But was there anything else she could do to me? It hardly seemed as though things could get worse than Lester Dewey. Surely she couldn’t ruin my reputation any more than that.

In the end, I didn’t tell. I simply enjoyed thinking that I was better than her. In my mind I cast myself as the innocent angel, rising above the filth, while Elsie remained forever as a villainous bully. I savored the mental image of Elsie brought to her knees before me, trying her hardest to look down her snooty nose at me from a groveling position on the ground, all while I stood safely squared away on my higher moral ground. It was my own private little joke.

I told Mother about my troubles, leaving out my fantasies about Sidney. She would summon me to help her with the kitchen garden, asking me about school as we worked.

“Oh, darling,” she said soothingly, when I told her about the latest rumor. “I’m sure they’re just jealous. They’ll grow out of it, I promise you. This is just the sort of thing that happens at your age. You do have a few friends, don’t you?”

I did have girls I could sit with at school, but I wasn’t sure they could be called friends. They were good Christian girls, whose mothers all knew mine from church and reminded them of their God-given duty to Be Nice. And nice they were, dutifully issuing invitations to after-school tennis matches and swim days that I accepted with lukewarm gratitude. I suspected their mothers had put them up to it. It could hardly be fun for them, running back and forth chasing tennis balls while I stood in place with my racquet, unable to jump and run with my dragging left foot.

I was also skeptical of the idea that Elsie and Minnie could be motivated by jealousy. I didn’t think that was it at all. There was something about me that repulsed them, that disgusted them enough for them to bond over their sick satisfaction at my humiliation. I wanted to

identify what that something was and be rid of it, not be told it would all blow over if I would just wait. I resolved to stop telling Mother about my problems at school.

Father was no help, either. When he was not talking about the election and the economy, he talked about Europe. He would stride into the house in the afternoons, a newspaper flapping in his hands, and call out the latest developments. "Lena, Beatrice! Hindenburg's finally gone and done it. He's named Hitler chancellor of Germany!"

"That's nice," I said. I was more concerned with the Lester Dewey situation.

I still heard whispers about it in school, all the things they said I'd done with Lester. Apparently Sidney heard them, too.

He lagged behind the other students after class was dismissed, sending Ernie and the other boys ahead of him. Soon all the stragglers cleared out, leaving me alone with Sidney.

He paused in the middle of packing up his books and looked in my direction. "Lester Dewey," he said, his voice tinged with disgust. He wasn't speaking to me exactly, more to the wall to my right. And then again, quieter, as if to himself, "*Lester Dewey.*"

There was scorn in his voice, and disbelief. Outrage, even. But I couldn't figure out who it was directed towards. Me? Lester? Or the idea of the two of us, together?

"What about Lester?" I ventured.

He shook his head, his fine lips drawn downwards into a frown. Throwing his book into his bag, he stalked out of the room.

I took solace in my writing, producing poems and stories in alarming quantities. Even in my stories, I inhabited the four walls of Horace Mann High School. I waged war against Elsie and Minnie, plotted various strategies and tactics to seduce Sidney away from Elsie's greedy clutches. In my stories I became the heroine, emerging strong and victorious against all the bullies in the world. I even took the risk of bringing my notebook to school.

Elsie came up behind me at my desk as I scribbled down a poem before class. "What's that?"

"Nothing." I covered the poem with my hands.

"Liar. I know you're writing something. Let me see."  
Elsie pushed my hands out of the way and snatched up my

notebook. Her eyes skimmed over the page, taking in the language. “This is actually very good,” she said.

I blinked at her. “What?”

“It’s good. You should submit it to the school paper.” She sounded sincere. I stared hard at her, waiting for some kind of hidden agenda to reveal itself through the lines of her face, but saw nothing.

I mulled over her comment for a while after she left, enjoying the compliment but hating that it came from Elsie. I wondered if I should swallow my pride and accept her suggestion. My fear of ridicule kept me from submitting, but Elsie, who I feared most, had just complimented my work.

The next day I went to the editor’s office, a small windowless room akin to a closet tucked away on the second floor. A single desk and chair took up the entire space.

A girl in a rumpled blouse sat behind the desk. There was a stain on her collar, and a halo of blonde frizz circled her bespectacled face. She took my poem, looked it over, and shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We’ve already accepted this poem.”

“What do you mean? This is the first time I’ve come to submit it.”

“The author already came by earlier,” she said.

“I still don’t know what you mean. I *am* the author.”

The girl shrugged. “I’m sorry. There’s really nothing we can do. Another girl already submitted this poem as her own, and we accepted it.”

I left, my mind whirling.

Sarahbeth and Sadie Bly—my churchgoing tennis companions—broke the news to me. Wordlessly they handed me the latest issue of the school paper, and I saw it. My poem on the front page, right there with *Author: Elsie Hammond*.

I crumpled the paper in my hands. She might ridicule my looks, the way I dressed and talked, poison the whole school against me with rumors—but my writing! My writing was *mine*, my refuge, my sanctuary. How dare she try and steal my voice, too.

I marched up to her desk, fuming. “You had no right!” I shouted. “That was my poem. You know it, I know you do, you saw me writing it. How dare you!”

The whole class was staring, but I didn’t care.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Elsie said, smiling. In that moment her smug face seemed more sly and evil than ever. Even the tilt of her head, with its cloying pretense of innocence, infuriated me. “My name is right here on the paper. See? Author, Elsie Hammond.” She tapped the paper with a pointed finger.

“Because you stole it!” I shrieked, unable to control the tremble in my voice. “You stole my poem, you horrible, vicious toad!”

“Well, I think you’re the one who’s the toad,” Elsie said, making me tremble with rage.

“I know about you,” I ground out through gritted teeth. Elsie’s eyes widened. “*I know.*”

That was all I managed before the tears came, and I rushed out of the room, limping away as fast as I could.

I spent the rest of the day in the nurse’s office, claiming a migraine. When I finally emerged, I found Sidney waiting there, leaning his slender frame against the wall with his hands in his pockets.

“I believe you,” he said. “About the poem.”

He believed me. Sidney believed me! All of a sudden, the world seemed bright again. Sidney looked more handsome than ever. The swoop of his hair over his angular face, the striking lines of his cheekbones and jaw, made me think of a fairy tale prince.

*I knew there was something good in you!* I wanted to exclaim. *You were on my side all along.*

“But why?”

“I know how you write,” he said carefully. “It had to be yours.”

Sidney knew my writing. My heart fluttered. My writing! It was as though he said he knew my very soul. “You do?”

“Well, of course I’ve read your work,” he said. “You win every prize.”

I beamed at him. “I’m glad,” I said, my voice coming out high and breathless. “I’m glad you read my poem.”

“It was very clever,” he acknowledged. Then his eyes darted around as though looking for eavesdroppers, and reality fell back between us like a curtain. Of course, I thought, he didn’t want to be seen speaking to me. The distant expression slid back over his face.

In hindsight, the pieces would fall into place, the push and pull of avoidance and desire. I didn’t understand it back then. I knew only that he believed me, but detested associating with me nonetheless.

During spring I often slipped out to the empty field behind the school to catch a break from Elsie's bullying. I liked to stay out there sometimes, alone with the breeze and the sunshine, the gentle whirring of insects in the grass. I daydreamed about leaving Horace Mann and becoming a famous writer, of having my works discussed in cafes and bookstores like the salons of the eighteenth century.

On that particular day I was imagining which city I would move to—this time I thought London—when I heard footsteps approaching, and turned to see Sidney walking up to me.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I'm daydreaming," I informed him. "Of getting my revenge on Elsie."

Sidney grinned. The breeze ruffled his hair, making him look young and playful. "What kind of revenge?"

"I think it would be fitting if an evil witch came and turned her into a toad." It would serve her right, too, for all the years she spent calling me toad.

"You know Elsie's father used to work at the same bank as yours?" Sidney said. "Minnie told Ernie. He held quite a senior position, actually."

I thought back to the time I saw Elsie standing in line for the soup kitchen, the tightness of her jaw when she saw me looking at her. "Used to?"

"He got laid off. Couldn't find new work. I heard he left them, Elsie and her mother I mean, out of shame. Elsie's mother takes in work as a seamstress now. They're on government relief." He paused for a moment. "I'm sorry about the way she treats you, though," he added quietly.

*Why didn't you stand up for me?* I wanted to ask. *Why didn't you say anything?* The words hovered behind my lips, longing to escape, but I couldn't work up the courage to speak.

We stood in silence for a moment, the two of us alone in the fading daylight, and frogs starting to croak in the fields.

I felt Sidney staring and turned to look. There was a look in his eye, something raw and open and conflicted. Was it—longing? He was standing so close I could feel the warmth of his breath on my skin.

I stood stock still, my eyes wide open, as he kissed me. His lips were colder than I expected, and wet. His hands gripped my shoulders tightly.

*Sidney is kissing me*, I thought. *Sidney Stone, kissing me*. A thrill ran through me, and I felt as though I was living in a romance novel.

Beneath the excitement, I felt gleeful. I gloated in the knowledge that I had read Sidney right; I had noticed his deepest, most secret desire for me, and somehow, in some way, charmed him enough for him to act. What would Elsie say?

Somewhere behind me, I heard a door slam.

Sidney pulled back, his forehead creasing as he stared toward the school at something behind me. His lips were lightly parted, showing the straight line of his teeth.

“We should go back inside,” he said roughly. He seemed to realize he was still gripping my shoulders and released me suddenly, dropping his hands so they hung limply at his sides. “I’ll see you later, Beatrice.”

He hurried back towards the school, leaving me standing alone in the field. I could still feel the warmth of his breath and the coldness of his lips. After a second, I decided to follow him.

I found him out in the hallway near the restrooms, deep in conversation with Elsie.

He looked tense, a muscle in his jaw jumping and twitching and jumping as he spoke. “—tomorrow, at the liquor store down by the depot,” he said. He broke off when he saw me coming.

Elsie spotted me too. She turned and walked off without a word, the heels of her shoes making a sinister clicking noise against the ground with every footstep.

I turned to Sidney. “What was that about?”

“Nothing,” he said. He avoided my eyes. “Ernie and I are playing football down by the railroad depot tomorrow afternoon.”

Playing football. There was something ominous about it, something wrong and dark in the way he said it. A tense knot began forming in my stomach. What had happened? Where had the night gone wrong? There was the kiss and the slamming door, Sidney talking to Elsie, football down by the depot. I struggled to put the pieces together.

Sidney pushed past me, following Elsie, and left me standing there alone, my stomach churning in ropes.

The next morning I dressed in my sports clothes, a pair of six-button sailor shorts and a pair of canvas sport Oxfords, and told Mother I was going out to play tennis. I took my tennis racquet with me for authenticity.

Instead of heading towards the tennis courts, I went east toward the railroad depot, where refrigerated box cars were loaded with oranges

to be shipped across the country. The town turned to country as I went, groves of citrus trees and strawberry fields dotting the rolling hills. Small farmhouses rested between sprawling ranches, and Dust Bowl refugees trudged the dirt roads between them, searching for work. My foot ached with each step.

I asked for directions from a woman hanging laundry outside, a baby balanced on her hip.

“That way,” she said pointing. Upon closer inspection, the woman was a girl closer to my age. Her tired face made her look older. “Don’t know what you want there, though. It ain’t a place for girls like you.” She eyed my tennis racquet closely.

I found it eventually, a liquor store near the depot with a vacant lot behind it. Weeds sprouting up from cracks in the concrete. Why did Sidney want to come here? I found a small copse of orange trees growing on the side of the road to conceal myself in.

Soon I heard voices in the distance, and peeked out from my hiding place to see Sidney and his friends coming down the road toward the liquor store. Ernie Clayton carried a football under his arm, which he periodically tossed in the air and caught or balanced on the tip of his finger.

The boys went inside the store and came out with several bottles, which they passed around. Eventually, they set the drinks down and began throwing the football bag and forth amongst themselves, their voices rising as they spread out and away from each other.

“Hey, Sid,” I heard Ernie holler. He wound his arm back, throwing the ball hard at Sidney. “You sweet on Bug Eyes, now?”

I leaned forward, straining to hear Sidney’s answer.

“What, the cripple?” Sidney called back. “Course not! It was just for jokes, that’s all.”

My stomach contracted. *Cripple*. What about the kiss from yesterday, our conversation in the hallway? Had he forgotten it all so soon; did it mean so little?

“Aw, you sure you don’t like her? I always said you two should be together.” That was Ernie again, amid a chorus of raucous laughter.

“Swear I don’t! But she let me touch her tits,” Sidney hollered, and my heart plummeted like a stone. *Liar*, I wanted to shout, *liar!* He had done no such thing. There was only the kiss, quick and innocent, which he initiated.

The boys whooped and laughed. “Tits!” Ernie shouted. “She’s flatter than your mother’s ironing board!”

I fell back against the tree, stuffing a fist into my mouth. I felt hot and cold, heavy and impossibly light all at once. The world had taken on a film of haziness, an unreal, dreamlike quality.

The rest of the conversation came through muddled, as though coming from a great distance away. I gathered that the boys knew about the kiss, that Elsie had told them, and now Sidney was playing it off as some grand joke. I felt sick.

I thought about running up to them, screaming and raging and howling, to demand that they take it all back. But what good would that do? I would only humiliate myself further. By Monday it would be all over the school that I was easy, and my limping chase after them would be the punchline of it all. I felt flushed and dizzy. My feelings for Sidney and Elsie and Minnie and Ernie all tangled together into one great knot that calcified in my stomach like a giant lump of burning stone, flaming and sinking within my gut.

Finally they left. They hadn’t spotted me in my hiding spot. I sat there in the shade for a long time, staring at the grass. My bare legs looked spindly and awkward in the sailor shorts, the bony knobs of my knees protruding from the pale flesh. The twist of my left ankle looked more freakish and grotesque than ever. What had I been thinking? That Sidney liked me? I hated Sidney. I hated myself.

In the years that followed, I would come to understand that Sidney Stone was a coward. A boy, unwilling to face his own feelings. I would forget him for a while, distracted by the humdrum of everyday life. Then suddenly the scorpion’s sting of humiliation would rise up in me, flooding my veins as I shopped with the girls from my secretarial course at the ladies’ college or danced with a serviceman home on leave, the bitter memory crashing over me like a wave. Eventually, I would be able to think about Sidney without any resentment. The adult version of me would see him—and Elsie, and Minnie, and even Ernie—as children taking their own troubles out on an easy target, a readily available scapegoat. But that day was a long way off. In the moment, there was nothing to do but sit there in my hiding spot, angry and ashamed.

At last I stood up, propping myself up on shaky legs. Swallows swooped and dove in the air overhead, and among them I thought a single white dove, alone among a sea of dark wingtips.



I thought I should go home, but instead I found my feet carrying me toward the liquor store. I didn't know what I meant to do. Steal a bottle of whiskey, get so drunk I forgot the whole ordeal? Run away from home? Go inside and start breaking things, have a fit, create a scandal so big that no one would remember to talk about Sidney and I? I stood in place outside, watching people come and go. Men in denim and coveralls stared at me as they walked into the store. They were probably laborers on the ranches nearby, or rode the rails in search of work. *Perhaps that's what I should do*, I thought dully. *Hop on a freight train and go somewhere far away*. I silently apologized to my parents for my plan.

A man in a faded blue shirt walked up to me. His face looked weathered but kind. "You should go home," he said gruffly. "This ain't a place for a nice girl like you."

My fantasies about running away dissipated. I thought about how absurd it must look from outside, my skinny teenage self standing alone outside the liquor store with a tennis racquet.

"You're right," I said. "I should go home. Thank you, sir."

The man nodded, watching as I slowly turned and began the long walk home.

~ *Mariko Herrera*



*"Birds" ~ Edna Heled*

## IN LOVE

Walking out to the edge of the beginning of my life  
Has nearly come to pass  
It takes my breath away  
To look out over the cliff  
Standing on the jagged ice  
Of my youth melting  
Into cement  
The open air of  
The rest of my life  
Stepping up through  
Stairs of an abyss  
Rather walk around a park  
Hand in hand  
Till a spotted cloud  
To step through  
Falling forever  
In love

Everything surrounds us and implodes  
Is it warming?

Everything that is  
Is forming  
Can't be contained  
It contains  
It's self  
Its shelf life ended  
Years before  
Looking down  
The water looks back up  
The wind whirls  
Unfurls into light  
Heavy to the touch  
Only a brief contact  
Felt for weeks

Felt forever  
In love

~ *Chris Bench*

## CONSTANTLY, I AM

Ripping the arms off of my life;

peeling back the sandpaper skin;

cracking the ribs of my secrets to reveal the soft, plump lungs of truth;

digging deeper to find the heart of it all;

dissecting, dissecting, dissecting

until there's nothing left;

until I can rearrange these slimy innards into a perfect recreation of myself.

Fresh and New;

without the furtive flaws of my experience.

*~ Oie Mendoza*



*"untitled" ~ Jonathan Cenicerros*

## LAST CALL

I am quarreling with my shadow  
in the half-light, the golden ruins.  
The city rises around me, colossal and bare.  
Desire walks through the crowded doors  
and everyone and no one  
hears its voice threading the silence  
with secret words.  
All these dangerous fires  
that only bloom at night  
have made a wilderness  
of every street,  
and the stars, nonchalant as ever,  
shine on drunken shoulders.  
At 2am, we have found again,  
a jagged piece of moonlight  
tucked inside the taxi  
like someone's lost ID.

*~ Seth Jani*

## MY MOUNTAINS BURN

on sun-kissed slopes of Santa Monica Mountains,  
mountains to the sea, sagebrush scent brushes arms  
and clothes, artemisia. bunnies scamper, lizards do  
push-ups on rocks, flexing like West L.A. gym rats. my  
childhood knew which rocks the lizards liked, where to  
find the ant tunnels, knew orange sunsets behind soft  
hills, across broad plane of ocean purple. midday sun  
baked hot on my shoulders except when fog rolled in  
graying shrubs, paths, ridgelines. cool stillness,  
sweatshirt weather, that blessed moisture dampened  
all. yet in the autumn, Santa Ana sense tingled electric  
on my skin—is that a tendril of brush smoke? head  
darts about, scanning the ridges

*My beloved mountains burn.*

this year one single atmospheric river, scant other  
measurable rain. no gentle trickle, soil soaking grateful.  
no sponge refilling for long-term nourishment, storing  
up, shoring up plant and animal kingdoms for rainless  
summer months ahead. one atmospheric river like a  
dump truck, mind-flooding water quantities, so harsh  
and sudden the land shrugged it off in disbelief.  
hydrophobic. phobia, irrational fear.

*The land's now afraid for the rain.*

one atmospheric river, wild currents dashed over  
surface rushing, cutting, carrying mud rocks bushes,  
shooting through storm channels, precious water lost  
to the ocean. Mother Nature's cruel taunts: here's the  
water, a scant year's worth, all at once in space of a



single week, just try try try to catch it. flows away, gone.  
tears track down the mountain folds.

*My beloved mountains starve.*

her taunts, aridification, directed at us, the fossil-fuel  
obsessed generations. addicted we cannot let go,  
refuse to let go, in ugly teenager tantrum, addicted to  
money-power-fossil intricate incestuous mess

*Human greed is searing my mountains.*

net zero the ultimate promise, can we get there, can we  
ease back on the throttle, cut back, slash through this  
mess? can we park the cars, flee the freeways,  
terminate the transcontinental airflights, skip the  
short-hops, can we slow the frenzy? can we embrace  
sequestration, protect open spaces as precious, honor  
our Mother, quit the clear-cutting, quit the desert-  
scraping, quit the broad horizontal abhorrent  
destructive expansion—civilization's obesity,  
spreading outwards with warehouses, suburbia, solar  
fields, our gotta-have consumerism devouring all? can  
we live the reality of *No*? can we turn the tide of our  
mutual misbehavior, can we reverse it—rather, will we

*Will you?*

*~ J. Maak*

## CLIMATE? CHANGE?

Scattered

Thoughts?

Yes, thoughts.

Breathe In

Breathe Out

Breathe In

Oh the kettle is whistling

No

The Trees are fine

Why do you ask?

No

There's nothing wrong with the air

What do you mean?

I can breathe just fine.

I mean, sometimes the air is a little dry

Oh but it's summer

How long has my tea been steeping?

Yes

I keep up with the news

Of course I do

Yes

I have read the articles

Something about the shrimp and the shellfish

Oh, but did I turn off the stove?

It would be tragic if my new kitchen curtains caught on fire.

See?

Isn't it pretty?

Oh dear, it seems to be pelting rain out there.

What?

Oh, it's okay.

It's only a little rain.

A little rain never hurts anyone.

Breathe In

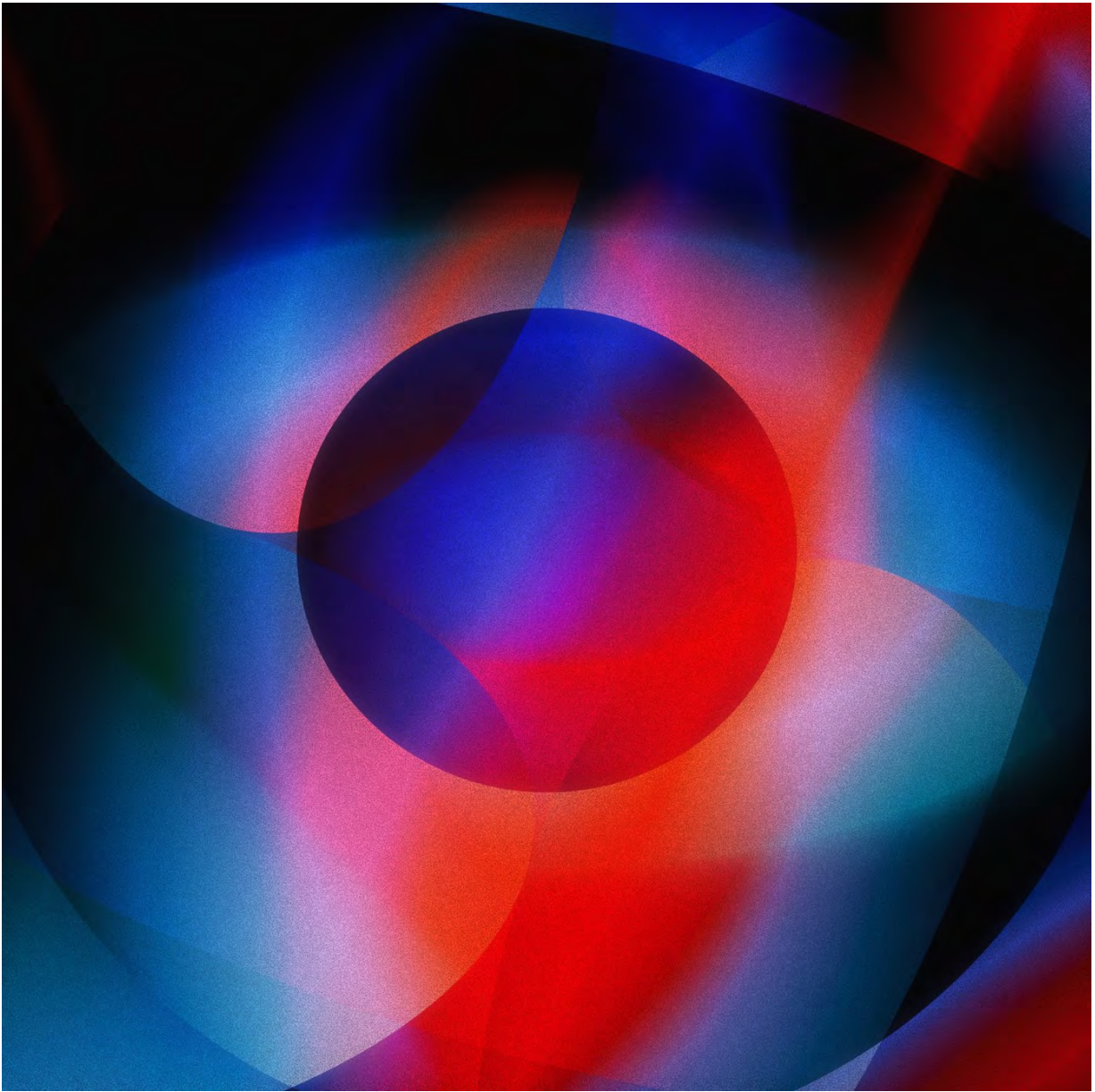
Breathe Out

Breathe In

It's only June.

A little rain in June is good  
All this rain will help with the drought  
Yes  
Has my tea cooled?  
Here, I'll make another cup.

*~ Tammy Nguyen*



*"RNIRL" ~ Lizbeth Turcios*

## TU FU WANDERS TO THE EDGE OF DRAGON'S GATE, AND I CAN'T LEAVE THE BATHROOM

And then a bell rings —  
are bells allowed to do that anymore?  
Chatty Cathy over here, endeavoring to wander to the woods, stumbles

three steps out her door and sits  
beside the mud puddle pooling near her neighbor's old tomatoes.  
"This'll do," she thinks, nibbling her baby's-first-manicured nails.

Her knuckle's hardened, cracked a bit:  
too much cold, not enough quality  
hand lotion. She came late to the party.

But she's fabulous, with things to do,  
naps to finish taking. And while she thinks about the old poet,  
sneaking to the monastery's edge to peep the moon,

she almost falls asleep she's so unmoored. I mean  
bored. I mean, sleep has always been  
her emotional reaction to trauma.

But can she even say  
she's traumatized? Of course she can! This is America,  
sweetie, we're all *extremely* traumatized!

Even those white guys in suits — *especially*  
white guys in suits, who trickle-down their trauma  
on those who can't afford

to buy a suit that isn't  
JC Penny, Men's Wearhouse, whatever,  
Jenny Craig, I don't know, I hate suits.

But they don't. Or they do, but they don't realize it. *Trauma.*

Or they do realize it, but they don't recognize they have *options*. *Trauma*.  
Or they *do* recognize they have options but they're too chickenshit to  
play

a little dress-me-up, risk appearing foolish to their big  
and scary bosses — *I'm speaking of myself here darling* — because it's  
scary  
to look a different way. One's whole composure changes — it's a lot to  
handle.

But so are suits! And maybe that's a kind of trauma, girls, to feel  
terrible in clothes that say they're made for you. You told your mom  
that checkered shirt she gave you made you feel

like Danny DeVito —  
she thought it was funny, had you say it again  
to Brenda.

So now you dip your fingers in the brook,  
and something bumps against them, rude,  
and it's a leaf, and you can't help but feel this monastery

sucks — just a bunch of guys  
dressing up like monks  
til they're convinced

they're monks, til they're finally awake enough  
to leave the lousy place and see  
the stars. And isn't that the goal, honey? To look up and see

stars? Or look into the mirror and see  
yourself and love them, the way you love  
that catbird, dead beside the road;

you lay it in the bushes. Did you wash your hands?  
But if you can love  
a slice of cake, if you can love

how light hits brick in the late afternoon, if you can love  
a rock, I mean seriously, a rock — can't you love  
whatever you see

in the mirror — and yes,  
love can include  
fixing your hair so it looks

amazing, and love can include  
disappointment, even, bitterness,  
but love must include

some modicum of truth,  
baby, and the truth is  
you're fucking beautiful.

*~ Jerry Liebllich*

## GRANDMOTHER

I remember a woman—  
hands cracked, sorrow a begotten friend.  
Two in the ground, eight in between,  
and no matter what history tells you:  
She had a warriors brow.

I remember a woman—  
who took that job and a man who forsake,  
but that wedding ring stood up for her  
and the father backed down.

I remember a woman—  
sweat on that fearsome brow,  
brown eyes alight, recipes to make  
and though history may have lost her name,  
I remember her with every pie I bake.

I remember a woman—  
little though she was, birds sang her name.  
One in the ground, two with little curls-  
for his loss, no one was to blame.  
She could have flown away.

I remember a woman—  
nose just like mine,  
hands so delicate and fine  
and humor to the end of time.

I remember a woman—  
with hair whose color faded away  
and whose joy had nonetheless stayed.



She said, "History won't remember us fondly;  
we're not important enough to."  
And I say, "That's okay, I do."

I hold generations in this little cookie,  
forget not the lives it holds.  
Even *they* were important;  
Their stories, too, deserve to be told.

~ *Brooke McAuley*



*“Suspended Animation (Aerialist) 1” ~ Shirley Huang*



*“Suspended Animation (Aerialist) 2” ~ Shirley Huang*

## SOAPS GIFTED TO MY GRANDMOTHER'S FRIEND

“She died before I got the chance.”

And Granny’s laugh is brass and Texan air  
amid we women strung over the kitchen threshold  
like the beads chained on her glasses.

The men do not speak in the living room dimmed  
by broken lamps, and it has been a Sunday  
of discussing how to manage the long death  
of great grandparents. Of who is responsible and whether  
*I love you* means *I will do what you want* or *I will do  
what you need*. Of not knowing when I hear my mother  
say *she* if the translation is my grandmother,  
my sister, or me. Do I merit her worry better spent  
on the women of this family, whose stubborn and hungry hearts  
will not be dissuaded, or on the men, who do not like it when we leave?  
The girl working the Home Depot self-checkout told me  
my hair was beautiful, and I imagined a whole life of friendship.  
There is, I think, a sheer kind of feminine power  
in driving to Home Depot in a black sundress and high heels,  
hefting sawdust-covered boxes Styrofoam-packed with new lamps  
because you are the youngest in three generations of matriarchs,  
and giving as a response to the outnumbered employee gratitude  
in a smile that says, here is my whole heart. If you wanted, I would  
buy your martinis and interrogate your boyfriends and have soaps  
sitting in my kitchen that I was planning to gift you when you died.

~ Elizabeth Coletti

## DEAR SELF

dear self,  
remember this feeling  
warm walks in the morning  
cool air at midnight  
hot sunshine on your cheeks

how your body feels in the sea  
how it feels to just be a body  
what the streets sound like  
how your internal compass sings

i hope you continue to place adaptability top shelf  
wipe the dirt from your shoes  
but never wipe the dirt from your decisions

spend time with the stars when its needed  
talk to earth in the in-between

my love  
i hope you always remember this feeling

~ *slntstrwbrry*



*“Wendy’s Chair” ~ Joy Fire*

## IN THE BOOTH

I slid into the booth  
at 7 A.M. –  
the same booth right in the middle,  
not too close to anyone

and she poured the coffee for me,  
asked me if I needed a menu.  
I told her no  
and I gave her my order.

After she walked away,  
this wave of something –  
sadness, emotional impotence,  
I don't know, something

washed over my body  
and I started to shake a little;  
I started to feel flush;  
I began to quietly cry.

I sat there alone,  
crying into my coat sleeve,  
sniffing like a jerk,  
I didn't know why

but also, I did know why  
and, finally, the waitress came back  
with my order,  
placing it before me.

She asked me, with trepidation,  
if I needed anything else  
and she probably wondered if I just found out  
I had cancer

or if I hadn't seen my children in years  
or if my mother just died  
or could it just be the weight  
of everything crashing down on me,

all at once –  
the misery of the world,  
an unpayable mortgage,  
a love forever lost.

I asked her for more coffee,  
so she refilled my half-empty cup  
and then she disappeared –  
past the counter,

through the kitchen doors, gone.  
I put one sugar in her question's answer  
and stirred it, took a sip.  
It was hot

and just the right amount of bitter;  
it was good.  
It's all that I asked of her.  
It's all she could have done for me.

*~ John Tustin*



It isn't that I just lost you,  
it's that I lost the things we never got to do.  
Rain held in a cloud tight,  
drought kept by selfish light.  
It's bitter fruit that I never ate,  
rotten apples that fell too late.  
All those paths we never tread,  
all those words we never said.  
So many places you'll never go  
and even more you'll never know.  
Even the problems we couldn't face,  
no fights letting us lose grace.  
Flowers that you'll never smell  
and tales that you'll never tell.  
A diary ended mid-sentence,

~ *Brooke McAuley*

I didn't wake up until after noon. My sheets smelled like Elliott, the pillow like his hair. I'd shared a bed with him enough times to recognize the way he made a pillow smell. I'd showered at his place once, too, when our water was out. All that day I'd smelled like him, like his shampoo. At the time it had felt rather intimate to me.

For a long while I just laid there in bed staring at James Dean, feeling uncertain and unbearably low. In the light of day, thinking about it all, I got real embarrassed. Maybe I'd overreacted. Sure, he'd apologized and cried and blamed himself and all that, but we'd been drunk and everything. I got real worried that the next time I saw him, he would have thought about it some more and decided he hated me. Maybe he'd tell other people about it, like it was all some big joke. Maybe he already had.

It was my thirst that finally got me up. I went to the bathroom and leaned over the sink and drank straight from the tap until my mouth didn't feel like a desert anymore. Then I stole a couple pain pills of my mom's and took a hot shower, which, combined, took care of my hangover and a lot of my anxiety over everything. Whatever I'd felt was pushed way deeper down, now, to a mostly ignorable depth.

It never took me long to get dressed anymore, since I wore all black and also didn't have the energy at all to put any sort of effort into how I looked. I usually just pulled on whatever was cleanest and closest. Today, that was a pair of jeans and a button-up that used to be my dad's—both black, of course.

While I was searching through the pile of clothes on my dresser for a hair clip, I came across a necklace Foster had given me. It wasn't anything special. It was sort of goofy, actually—a pink and purple plastic thing with star-shaped beads, like a little kid's necklace. Since I was a year younger than Foster, he got a kick out of mocking me for it with kiddie gifts like stickers and toys and jewelry like this meant for little girls. The stupid thing must have been buried under all those clothes since before he died. I hadn't seen or thought of it since he'd given it to me, actually.

I held the necklace in my hands and stared at it, feeling like it was accusing me, condemning me. I'd forgotten all about it, hadn't cared

enough to wear it ever or put it away, even. I'd thrown it on top of my dresser and let it be buried and forgotten. I imagined Foster picking it out, and using a few crumpled bills from the old ladies to pay for it, and feeling all goofy and proud when he gave it to me. And I'd only rolled my eyes and tossed it aside. Looking at it now made me want to puke.

Without thinking about it at all, I opened my window and climbed out and carried the necklace through the grassy field there to a spot a little ways from the house. I just walked until it felt right to stop, then got down on my knees and dug into the earth, making a little grave where I solemnly placed the little string of starry beads and covered it over with dirt.

The second I'd done it I started to feel silly, so much so that I nearly dug the thing back up again. Before I could, though, I heard the *crack* of a gunshot. It came from the direction of the river, and the trees there. Plenty of people around had guns, so I knew what one sounded like. Then came another two, *crack crack*, right in a row, causing the birds to scatter. I walked that way to see who it was.

Turned out it was Keaton and Cal. They were in a little clearing, shooting at cans they'd set up along the roof of a rusted out car that had been there forever, left to rot like the weathered bones of a vanquished beast. Cal had the revolver and was shooting it lazily, a cigarette stuck between his lips, his one eye closed for aiming. His eyes had purple rings under them.

*Saturnine.*

They both had cotton stuffed in their ears, but Keaton saw me coming, and he beckoned me over. Cal didn't look my way at all. I threw my hands up over my ears right before he fired off one more shot, clipping a Coke can so it spun around fast a few times, then fell off the car with a clatter. He knocked open the chamber, dumping the shells out into the dead leaves, and deftly reloaded with bullets from his front pocket.

"What are you doing?" I asked, though I guess it was obvious what they were doing.

Keaton pulled the stuff out of his ears. "Cal *borrowed* one of his dad's guns."

His dad being the sheriff.

"Did you all get into trouble last night?" I asked.

Keaton threw a quick glance Cal's way, then shook his head. "It was fine." Then he checked his watch and said, "Hey, we should head out."

"Where to?"

"A bunch of us are going golfing." By golfing he meant miniature.

"Can I come?"

Keaton raised his eyebrows at me. "Really?"

"Yeah."

I don't know, exactly, why I wanted to go, I just did. Maybe I couldn't stand the thought of sitting in the house all day, so close to Elliott. Or maybe I just knew Keaton's friends would have something to drink.

"Sure you can," said Keaton, all smiles.

On the way back through the house, Cal hid the gun away in Keaton's closet, then followed us out to the car. He got in up front and pulled out his book and read it in silence the whole drive over, while Keaton sang along obnoxiously to the radio. I lay down in the back seat and watched the sky go by. It was grey and cloudy out, like maybe we might get rain later.

Keaton had more friends besides just Cal. There was P.J. Goedicke; and Johnny Gentry, who was sort of sweet; and Dylan Mundy (or *Kicker*, as people called him), who was classic big and dumb; and girls that hung around like Delia. Keaton had lots of friends, really, but Cal was his closest. Cal would hang with the others too, at Keaton's behest, but he got no joy from it. He was just so very *other*. He seemed made of different stuff than everyone else. I expected, if I opened him up, I'd find his insides were bloodless and cold. I had the urge to do it and see—to take a knife and slice it right up his middle and dig around inside of him, searching for whatever hard, cold things he had in place of a heart and lungs and liver.

*Martha's Golf Palace* was a miserable sort of place, but it was about the only thing kids had around for entertainment, unless they went into the city. The theme was American monuments. All the holes were different famous places in the U.S., like Mount Rushmore, or the Golden Gate bridge, or the Chrysler building, but all pretty lame. It used to excite me as a kid, when Dad would take me and Keaton there; but now, I couldn't help staring at the run-down, miniature White House

and thinking, *this is as close to the real thing as most of the people around here will ever get*. It depressed me how run-down the place was, and thinking how parents brought their kids there, and the kids couldn't see how sad the whole thing was, but the parents knew. The parents were plenty aware how sorry the kids had it, but the kids just didn't know any better yet. I think that's what really depressed me about it all.

In *Martha's* mostly empty parking lot, we met up with Keaton's all-the-time friends—Delia and Johnny and P.J. and Kicker—and also a girl with black hair who was around less often than the others called Cookie. They were all seniors, all riding the high of being done with school. P.J. was sat up on the hood of his car, drinking a beer in a paper bag. He was wearing all sorts of prints, all bright colors, and none of them matching at all, telling some funny story about the first time Johnny got drunk. Johnny was trying to be a good sport about it, but he couldn't keep from getting all pink in the cheeks. I think he had a crush on Delia, and didn't want to look bad in front of her.

I lingered wordlessly at the edge of their chumminess, drinking from a bottle of coke Keaton had handed me that was mixed with something cheap and turpentine-like in flavor. Cal ignored them all even more completely than I did. He sat perched on the trunk of Keaton's car, reading his book.

"What are you reading?" I asked him.

"I'm not. I'm only pretending to read it so no one will talk to me."

"Aren't these people your friends?"

The way he ignored me was invasive. He just got *so* under my skin. He had this insane power to make me feel like I didn't exist at all, because I didn't exist to him. And I was sick of it.

"Well, what book is it?" I said.

"You wouldn't know it."

"What makes you so sure?"

He put the book down and got out a cigarette and still, never once, looked my way. "You want something?"

"Just to thank you for giving me a ride last night."

He made a sort of skeptical noise in his throat. "I'm not the only one who gave you a ride last night, huh?"

"What?"

"I saw your *friend* come in about three am, all excited," he said, smirking because he was sure, *so sure*, he knew everything about it.

"You're a sick creep. It wasn't like that at all."

"Whatever you say." Then he tried to shoo me away like a bug, saying, "Bye bye, Birdie."

"One day my brother will quit putting up with you," I said. "He'll wake up and realize it is *so* not worth the effort, and you'll be totally alone."

"We're all alone in the end."

"Oh, how original."

"People say it 'cause it's true."

"You are *so* incredibly dismal."

*Finally* he looked at me, but I wasn't so glad he did, because his eyes were black and miserable and profound. They left no doubt that he was *other*, *so other* inside it was painful to see. *Saturnine* was really too gentle a word for it, I realized.

"So I'm a dismal creep, huh? What else am I?" His voice was soft like always, like he didn't care if he was heard or not, but I heard every word just fine. For a minute, it was like he was speaking directly into my mind. "And what about you? With the black clothes, even a year later? Come on, don't you think you've drained the old sympathy well dry by now? *Boo-hoo*"—he mocked me, pretending to rub at fake tears with his fists like a baby—"my *boyfriend died*. People die. Get over it."

I sprang on him, smacking at him as hard as I could, I couldn't help it. It was like some furious force had taken over my body, turning me mindless. I hit his arm and chest. He made no attempt to defend himself, just suffered the blows with typical impassivity. I only hit him a few times before the madness burned away. I backed off, breathing hard and seething and also feeling like an idiot.

"Is that all?" he asked, flashing me a suddenly fervid sort of look. "Go on, keep at it. I won't even stop you."

I stayed where I was. The look in his eyes was terrible.

"Go on, I know how to take a hit."

"You really are sick," I said. I mean, it really seemed like he wanted me to hit him, like he got off on the idea of it. I wanted to say something worse to him, to really hurt him, but I couldn't think up anything near potent enough for how I felt about him. I could never think of the right

thing to say when it came to Cal. So I just stood there trembling, falling into the black voids of his eyes.

Then Keaton was coming over to tell us they were all going in to play, and Cal stalked right past me to join them.

I followed after, at a distance, feeling sick to my stomach.

The rest were flat-out drunk by then, and I did my best to catch up, needing for my brain to become non-functional, like, *stat*. Cal stuck around, but *read* his book instead of golfing. Thankfully, he didn't look my way or talk to me again.

Keaton and his friends talked about graduation the next day, and what they all planned to do afterwards. Keaton went through his same old plan to drive west someday and have adventures like Sal Paradise. He never listened to me when I told him the world didn't work that way anymore. No one would pick up a hitchhiker now, especially not a dude. And you can't just walk up to a place and ask around for a job, or have affairs with pretty girls who wait around for you all day in smoky little apartments that cost a dollar a week. But Keaton wouldn't hear it. He was intent on living out some American fantasy that was very masculine and poignant and fulfilling. I don't know where this desire to be taken seriously all of a sudden came from. I guess because he never really had been. I couldn't really blame him for not wanting to get a job, though, because who does?

I actually found I liked Cookie all right. She was wearing these silver cowboy boots I almost told her about ten times I thought were cool, and she didn't seem so hot on Delia, either. Every time Delia flirted with one of the guys by touching him too much or laughing like a dummy at something they said or twirling her hair and blinking a lot while she talked to them, Cookie would snort and shake her head. We ended up at the back of the group together, and whatever sort of animosity I was feeling towards Delia must have been pretty apparent.

"It's kinda sad, actually," confided Cookie. "You know, her dad made her that way. She never stood a chance. When there aren't guys around she can be pretty cool, but she turns into, like, a real dope when she's flirting."

"I guess I've only ever seen her when she's flirting, then," I said.

"Yeah, but she can be pretty cool, I swear."

Then Johnny got it in his head to climb the little Mt. Rushmore that served as the sixth hole. But it wasn't really built to hold up a person and I was sure he was going to bring it all down. He was making a racket, too, so obviously drunk and swearing up a storm. It made me real embarrassed, seeing how much the one other family there was put out by it, how Johnny was ruining their kids' sad fun, making them uncomfortable. The mom looked like she wanted to say something to us about it—she had a real scolding look on. I was so afraid she'd work up the guts to do it. I was also afraid to tell Johnny to knock it off because everyone else was laughing, even Cookie. I really wanted to get out of there, so bad it made me nauseous.

As soon as Mrs. Mom started heading towards us, all determined and red-faced, I bailed. I just walked right off with my fingers stuck in my ears so I wouldn't hear what she said.

There was a little blue building up front of the place where you bought your tickets and they had a few arcade games. I went in there and hid in the bathrooms awhile, sitting on the counter by the sink. At first, I tried not to look in the mirror, but then I forced myself to look. I forced myself to stare into my own reflected eyes. I felt like everything inside me had been scooped out and only the skin was left. I couldn't even remember what used to be in there.

I still had the bottle of vodka/coke, and I kept on drinking from it, even though everything was already pretty loopy. I was wondering how long it would take anybody to realize I'd left, and was really starting to resent them all—Keaton especially, who'd dragged me along in the first place—for not noticing at all yet, when the bathroom door banged open and Cookie came in. She smiled when she saw me and said, "There you are! We thought you fell into the Grand Canyon."

"Are you finished?"

"No. I mean, yeah, but only because they kicked us out after Johnny's little climb up Mt. Rushmore. Everyone's going now." She leaned over the sink right next to me, so her body was pressed against mine, and touched up her lipstick in the mirror. She was one of those people who didn't have personal space, who just unabashedly took up whatever space she wanted, regardless of whether it was occupied already or not. These are the same types of people who speak too loudly in restaurants and wear garish clothes and do embarrassing things



without getting embarrassed and always seem to be laughing a little about some secret joke you're not in on. She must have felt me staring at her because she smacked her lips and held her lipstick out to me and said, "You want some?"

"No thanks."

She slipped the lipstick back into her pleather purse and said, "I'm cutting out. My cousin's coming to get me."

I hopped off the counter, figuring I'd better head back out before Keaton stranded me there.

"Would you wanna come with?" Cookie asked. "I mean, no pressure, but you didn't really seem to be having much fun with those guys, and they're all going over to Delia's now to hang out in her basement, which I suspect isn't exactly your idea of a good time. Especially when Delia gets *really* drunk and starts trying to hump your brother, even though she knows full well he doesn't mess with girls anymore."

I pictured Keaton, grunting like I used to hear him grunt sometimes through the wall when he still brought girls over. One of those girls I'd heard him grunt with had been Delia.

I made a face.

"Yeah. So you wanna come with me instead? My cousin totally won't mind if you tag along. We're just gonna drive around."

I was really regretting this whole day—every decision I'd made since I woke up, basically. I hadn't eaten at all, and was starting to feel sick from the booze. I wanted to melt into the floor, or maybe just die. Barring that, driving around with Cookie and her cousin sounded better than going along to Delia's basement to hide in the corner while she eyefucked my brother, so I said, "Yeah, I'll come, I guess."

And that's what we did. We drove around in Cookie's cousin's car. Her name was Georgia and her car was her mom's dusty minivan that smelled like vanilla air freshener and, under that, cheeseburgers. The only music in there were her mom's old country albums that we put on to laugh at, but ended up kind of enjoying.

Georgia had the same easy way about her that Cookie did. She had lots of hair—it was everywhere, down her arms, in her eyes. She wore little shorts and a little top, neither of which really fit her. But she seemed to like it that way. I sat in the back and watched her and Cookie

be so cool with one another, so easy and happy—like they were on top of the world instead of stuck somewhere deep in the middle of it.

When I finished my coke I'd brought along, Cookie gave me more to drink—sips from a little flat glass bottle she had in her purse. As we drove by the grade school, Georgia spotted some friends of hers hanging out at the empty playground, so we pulled over.

All of them were joking around and running around, eager to be noticed, to make the others laugh, to impress, to distinguish themselves as favored and cool and attractive. They were all just having a grand old time, loving themselves and each other. It was the typical kind of spirited teen scene I generally avoided, but I was drunk enough not to care. I sat in a swing, twisting back and forth, contented with my solitary, alcoholic stupefaction. Just then, it seemed like the perfect thing for me to be doing. The satisfaction of doing it actually made me smile. Man, how did I live all the times I was sober, anyways? For once I didn't feel sick all the time, only high up inside myself, like at the very top of a skyscraper, somewhere around the nose or even eyebrows, I think. High up and seeing for once how small the world really was down below, how little anything down there mattered.

Sometime after sunset it started to rain, and everyone ran back to their cars, and Cookie and Georgia and I went to get burgers for dinner. We ate them in the van, with the rain coming down on the windows, and I was pretty out of it by this point, but I remember how Cookie went on about some guy she was seeing—an older guy, but not so old as to be a creep for dating her (so she said). And she talked about sex in the frank, unashamed way older people did. She talked about the kind of things I'd never really talked about with anybody. And Georgia said *dudes* were the worst, and questioned whether or not truly great sex really existed at all, or if it was only a myth made up by *dudes* to trick girls into giving it up in the first place.

"Like a carrot on a stick," she said. "An elusive and, ultimately, underwhelming carrot."

And then, somehow, they got on the subject of ghosts. Georgia was skeptical, but Cookie had no doubts. "I know they're real," she said. "I've seen them."

"No you haven't," said Georgia.

"I totally have! Like, you remember when I saw my Nana, when she died."

"You didn't see anything. You just felt like someone was sitting on the end of your bed."

"Yeah, but it totally smelled like her. I mean, she had this real distinctive soapy, herby smell. And I didn't even know she was dead yet! I just woke up in the middle of the night. And then I felt the bed dip, like someone had sat on it. And I couldn't really see, so I thought it was my mom. But then my eyes adjusted, and there was no one there. And that's when I smelled that soapy smell Nana always had. And I probably should have been scared, but I wasn't. It was like, I knew it was her. I felt so safe. So I went back to sleep, and when I woke up the next morning, my mom told me Nana was dead."

Georgia was laughing, but Cookie was all insistent: "It was her! It was!" And I recalled, suddenly, that dream I'd had.

"I might have seen Foster last night," I said.

Georgia's face got all screwed up. "Who's Foster?" she asked.

Cookie gave her arm a chastising smack.

"He was my boyfriend," I said. "He died."

Georgia slapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh my god. I wasn't thinking. Ugh! I mean, I knew that. I heard about it."

"Jesus, Georgia," said Cookie.

Georgia grimaced. "God, I'm so sorry."

"That's all right," I said. "It happened a while ago."

The car got quiet except for the country music.

"Really," I said, "it's fine. I'm not upset."

"But what do you mean, you saw him?" asked Cookie.

"It was only a dream, really."

"What about?" Cookie was twisted around in her seat, now, leaning towards me, real curious.

"It wasn't anything, really." The way Cookie was looking at me made me regret saying anything about it. "It was just a dream."

"There's no such thing as *just a dream*," said Georgia. "Dreams mean something."

"Yeah," said Cookie.

I don't remember getting home, so I guess I blacked out, because the next thing I knew I was in bed, unwell and thirsty. It was still raining

out, though it had died down some, to just soft patters on the roof. It took me a while to work up the will to move, but thirst won out in the end. I went to the kitchen for some water. The couch was empty, a blanket still folded over the arm. Through the front window, I saw the driveway was empty, too, except for the Rambler. Maybe Cal and Keaton were both still over at Delia's. I tried not to think about Delia fucking my brother, I really did, but I couldn't help picturing the way she'd writhed under Elliott.

I chugged one glass of water, then another, and another, until I wasn't thirsty anymore. But now my stomach hurt and I realized that I had to pee, and also that I was kind of still drunk. I shuffled my way down the dark hall and threw open the bathroom door and nearly had a heart attack because there was already somebody in there. It took me a minute to figure out it was only Cal, perched on the edge of the tub, looking like he lost a fight. I mean, a bad one, because his lip and nose were bleeding and his shirt was torn at the collar, like someone had thrown him around by it. He looked up and saw me there and didn't say a word, just went on icing one eye with a bag of carrots he must have gotten out of the freezer.

I think I said something like, "Oh my god," or, "What the hell," or something.

He dropped the bag of carrots, revealing an eye that had definitely taken a punch. It wasn't bruised yet, just red and puffed up, but it looked fixed to turn black soon.

"Go back to sleep," he said.

"You go. This is my bathroom."

He didn't move, and neither did I.

"What happened to you?" I asked him, wrapping my arms around myself because I wasn't wearing a bra or anything under Foster's shirt.

"I fell down the stairs," he said dryly.

"Sure, and landed on a doorknob, right?"

"I did something stupid, that's all." He said this like he was giving in, somehow, by saying it. Then he got up, pretty unsteady on his feet, and wrenched open the medicine cabinet, knocking things around in there carelessly so half of it fell out into the sink. He kept digging around, knocking things out, until he found the antiseptic. He staggered a bit, struggling with the childproof cap.

“Fucking bullshit,” he muttered. Then he stumbled into the wall and sort of gave up fighting and let gravity take him all the way down to the floor. *Thunk*. He sat there a minute, his head tilted back, eyes closed, breathing deep.

“Are you drunk?” I’d never really seen him drunk before.

He shrugged.

I got a washcloth and went down on my knees before him and snatched away the antiseptic, which I managed to open just fine.

“Go away,” he muttered, and I could really hear it in his voice now, how drunk he was. He probably didn’t want me to see him that way, so helpless and dumb. It made me feel prime, so I stayed. I wet the cloth with antiseptic and tended to him with great superiority. I dabbed at his lower lip, where it was split near the center, and just inside his mouth where his teeth had done damage. If it hurt, he took the pain in silence.

“Who did this to you?” I asked, moving on to his bloody nose.

He looked at me like I was the biggest, dumbest idiot in the whole world. “You only ever think about yourself, don’t you?” he said. “You don’t really see the rest of us. We’re like background noise to you.”

“I certainly do my best to pretend *you* don’t exist.”

“Ditto,” he said, pulling his crumpled, nearly empty pack of Tareytons from his back pocket. It was funny to me right then because, beat up like he was, he looked like he was straight out of one of their ads—the ones where the people all had one black eye.

“You can’t smoke in here,” I said, sitting back on my heels. “My mom will smell it.”

He got a cigarette in his mouth and mumbled around it, “Your mom’s not here.”

“She’ll smell it when she gets back.”

He ignored me and struck a match.

“She’ll kill you.”

“If only,” he said.

As he raised the lit match to the end of his smoke, I noticed his sleeve was all bloody. I hadn’t noticed it before because the flannel shirt he wore was dark, but I saw it now, shiny-wet in the light. So I grabbed his wrist and pushed up the sleeve to find he had bloody gashes all up his arm. They were numerous and deep enough to be fairly alarming.

I thought, *hey, he's blood and guts after all*. On his arm he was, at least. The major organs, the heart, I still had some doubts. But his slashed up arm was undeniably flesh and blood. It made me think of meat, and how people were really just meat in the end, like a pig. I just about puked all over him.

"It looks worse than it is," he said with detached indifference.

"It looks like someone came at you with a knife," I said.

"He did."

"Who did? What did you do?"

I could picture all sorts of reasons someone would want to stab him.

"Since when do you care?"

"I don't."

"Sure. Well, neither do I."

I sat there a minute, dumbfounded, watching him smoke. He really seemed like it didn't bother him at all, that someone had maybe tried to kill him. If anything, he seemed disappointed it hadn't worked out. I looked back down at his arm, at the disorderly array of slashes and cuts that marred the skin there, and would always mar it once the cuts scarred over. He'd have those scars until the day he died. And then I couldn't look at him anymore. I needed to be doing something, so I got up to open the window over the tub and let some of the smoke out. It was barely raining anymore, but the outside air smelled pleasantly wet. It made me feel less sick.

For a long time, neither of us said anything at all.

Then Cal said, "You don't wear black when you sleep."

"No one's around when I sleep."

"So it's all for show, then. The mourning bit. It's all for other people."

"No. It's for Foster."

"News Flash, Birdie—Foster doesn't care what you wear. You could walk around naked and he still wouldn't care, because he's *dead*. You may not remember the funeral much, since you drank about a gallon of whiskey, but I was there and I can assure you, he's really, *really* dead, got it? *D-E-A-D, dead*."

I got back down on the floor and started unceremoniously cleaning up his arm. I'll admit, since I was mad again, I wasn't very

careful with him. With some of the blood gone I saw he was right, that it wasn't so bad as it had looked at first. Still bad, just not fatal or anything.

"Does it hurt?" I asked, pleased by the idea that it might.

"Yes," he said. The way it came out—that one word, *yes*—startled me. I looked up to find him staring, breathing funny. The way he was staring put me in mind of that time he'd forced me to swallow the cherries. Then his black eyes fell to my mouth, then my throat, then lower, making me suddenly all too aware of how naked I was under my shirt. The air got thick, and my skin tingled, and some lizard brain part of my brain got real afraid, real fast. I jumped up and backed away from him, clutching the bloody washcloth, hiding my body as much as I could with my arms.

"Get out," I said. It came out real pathetic.

Cal made no rush to get up. Deliberately, he moved from the floor to the edge of the tub, then paused there to take a drag. He finally pulled himself up to his feet by the towel rack and proceeded to stand there staring at me, scaring me more and more the longer he stayed. The room became unbearably small, filled up entirely with him and his smoke and that terrible look in his eyes. He didn't seem helpless to me anymore, even as he swayed a bit on his feet. In fact, he seemed menacing, on the verge of violence.

Suddenly, he lurched towards me. I shrank as far away from him as I could, back into the corner, my heartbeat going a mile a minute. But he was only going for a pill bottle of my mom's that had fallen out of the cabinet. He looked at the label, then shook out a few pain pills, swallowed them dry, and left without another word.

I locked the bathroom door, threw the bloody cloth in the trash, and distracted myself from whatever the fuck was going on by finally peeing. I waited in there for a while after, just to make sure Cal had actually gone to sleep. The more time that passed, the stupider I felt for freaking out when he hadn't done anything, really, only looked at me. I put the medicine cabinet to rights and washed my face with some cold water. Bloody smears stood out stark red against the yellow linoleum, and I cleaned those up, too. I wanted everything to look normal again, before Keaton or mom saw. Because if they saw, they'd ask questions I

didn't want to answer. I realized, then, I didn't even know who'd actually beat Cal up. He'd never said.

*~ Sophia Holtz*

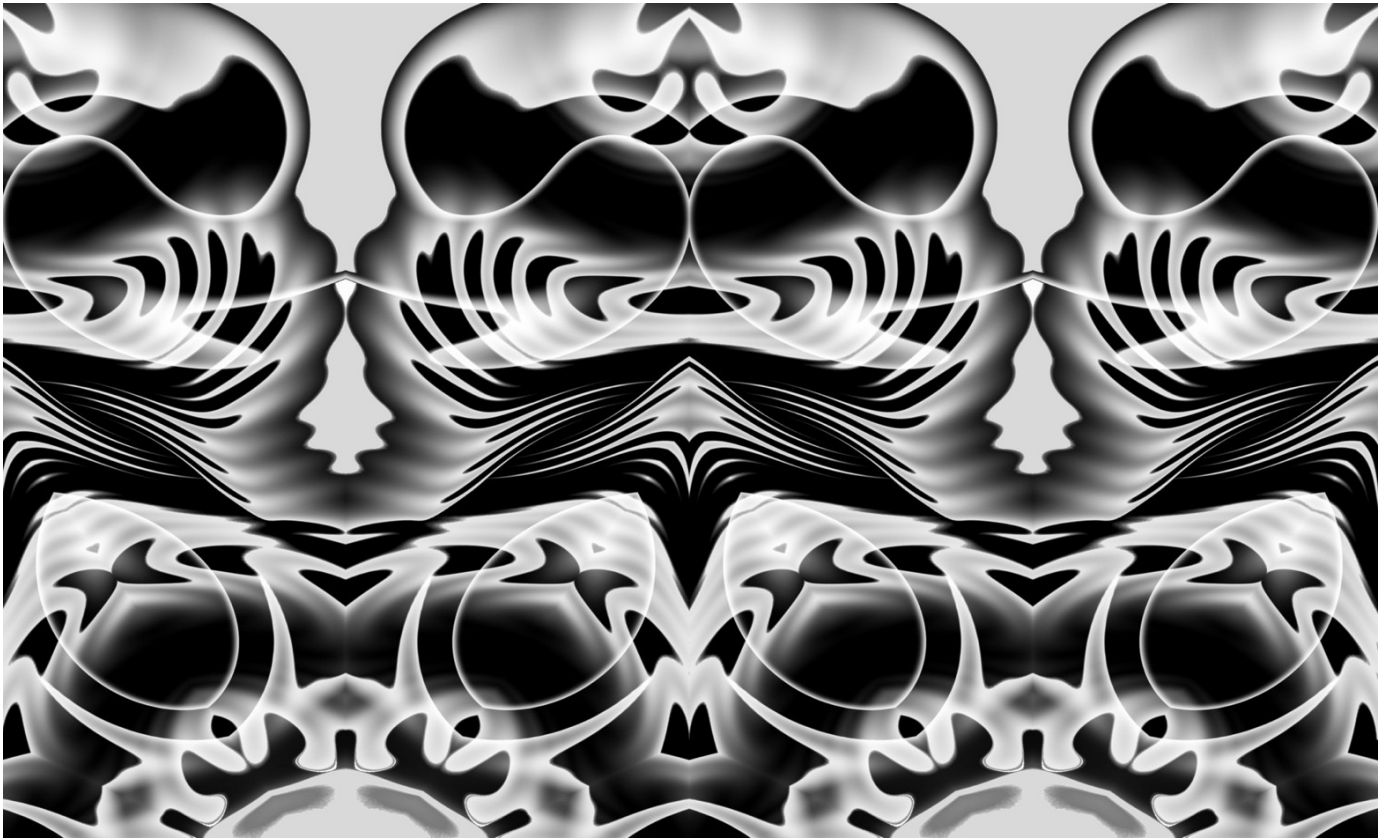


## THEY BOTH PLAYED THE GAME

but he finally  
tossed in his cards  
he was broke  
and couldn't borrow any more  
from the others at the table

his one friend  
just happened to be breaking  
even that night-time  
but when the police came  
and pried the gun  
from his stiff hand  
his even friend wasn't crying

~ *Robert Beveridge*



*"Rapture 2" ~ Edward Supranowicz*

## SLEEPWALKING

She turns her head, in sleep, she mumbles, then  
Walks toward the bathroom, takes my hand, yet still  
Asleep. Come, daddy she says. Come, we will  
Go to the bathroom. Then to bed again.  
Never waking, sure in her demesne.  
Yet time so little gone, she's just a bill  
Of sale that brought our lives to standstill,  
Around a photo: feeding her foster mom's hen.  
Some part of me fears anger will return  
As angry questions asked in a like kind.  
First mother, other father; hosts of thoughts.  
We wait for you to ask, fearing you will spurn  
Us for our choice or that you won't incline  
To believe you were always ours to spot.

~ *Christopher Honey*

## MAMA HAD PAPER DOLLS

mama had paper dolls  
arranged them in a cupboard  
created lives for them  
called them Dorcas Molly Mabel

she was at the school when the eviction men came  
and when she arrived home  
she found her clothes  
strewn over the street

Inside the house was bare  
except for the cupboard which held  
her dolls

they were left  
untouched by the eviction men  
they were left intact

*~ Dorothy Johnson-Laird*

“Ms. G,” I said earnestly to the principal of my son’s Lutheran preschool, “I want you to know that we are not devil worshippers.” I was summoned to her office because a parent complained about my four-year-old son. A week earlier, my son held a ceremony at preschool showing a classmate how to resurrect his dead dog. After the ritual, my son’s classmate had nightmares about his dog crawling out of its grave, and his alarmed mother called the school. Hence, my appearance in the principal’s office and my denial about having any allegiance to the devil or his minions.

My son’s knowledge of using tana leaves to reanimate the dead was my fault—well, not exactly my fault—it came from the imaginations of Griffin Jay and Maxwell Shane, who wrote *The Mummy’s Hand*, which Universal Studios released in 1940. My fault was that I had let my precocious son watch this slightly comedic horror film with me, and he was fascinated by it. At an early age, our son showed dramatic abilities and could mimic voices. While playing with his Legos, my husband and I often heard him reciting, in perfect infomercial pitch, “And that’s not all, folks! For just another twenty dollars, we’ll give you a second set of knives! Supplies are limited, so call now!” Our son talked excitedly about the film, especially the brewing of rare tana leaves (Eucalyptus leaves were used in the movie) that resurrected the ancient mummy, Kharis.

Our family attended a liberal Lutheran church, but our son’s Lutheran preschool was not as freethinking as our church. Therefore, it was difficult for me to convey to his preschool principal that my bright, four-year-old son wasn’t scared by the film—he was inspired by it. Looking at the artwork adorning the walls of Ms. G’s office, multi-colored hand prints, and decorated crosses, it was difficult to describe why I had let my impressionable son watch this film. To do so, I would have to exhume my past to excavate the antecedents that had influenced

this event, which included my unconventional parents, who lived in a very conventional neighborhood.

I grew up in Southern California in the suburbs of the San Gabriel Valley. My father edited technical manuals for an aerospace company, and my mother was a writer. When we opened our garage door, people stared because instead of parking a car in our garage like everybody else, we had an airplane. The airplane was my dad's vintage 1948 Stinson that he was restoring piece by piece. Because he supported a wife and five children, his restoration budget for the plane was meager. My mother, the daughter of a Lutheran minister, had an outside-of-the-box way of parenting, and these sensibilities eventually influenced how I parented. Inside our house, we were surrounded by books, and my mother often read us her work. I remember coming home from high school one day and finding a note on the refrigerator that said, "Girls, I am so tired. I was up all night. I killed Delia and the three other girls. Please wake me when you get home." This note made perfect sense to me. My mother was working on her novel. Pulling an all-nighter, which was common for her, she had killed off a few characters. Fortunately, this novel was published before her death. In our household, we talked about poetry, short stories, and novels. We also discussed how to commit the perfect murder and remote places for hiding bodies; of course, all these conversations about murder and body dumping were only theoretical.

I watched *The Mummy's Hand* as background research for my novel. I allowed my son to watch the film with me because it had some comedy woven into it. Before pressing the play button, I explained that not all parents allow their kids to watch scary movies and that he should not talk to other kids about it at preschool. He promised, but later, when he recognized that leaves from the Eucalyptus tree on the playground were the same type of leaves used to raise the mummy, Kharis, from the dead, his promise expired.

To give background about the incident, before my son conducted the tana leaf ceremony at preschool, we had completed reading fifteen

books from the Boxcar Children series that my husband picked up at a yard sale. After digesting all the books, our consensus was that, although the Boxcar Children did an excellent job of solving mysteries, they were too obedient. Even when the Boxcar children were working on a case, they *always* made their beds as soon as they got up and *always* did the dishes as soon as meals were over. It's no wonder why, after slogging through all of these books depicting the Boxcar Children's predictable lifestyle habits, the reanimation of the ancient mummy, Kharis, with a brew of rare tana leaves, intrigued our son.

Another precursor to our son performing the tana leaf ceremony at preschool was my purchase of a book titled *The Writer's Guide to Poisons*. When it arrived, our son begged me to read it to him. I started with a general disclaimer that I had used about the movie. "Not all moms and dads read books about poisons to their kids. Your friends might not understand, so you, daddy, and I will only talk about this book at home, okay? I don't want to get a call from the school saying that you were talking about poisons or making pretend poisons on the playground, okay?" He nodded his curly, blonde head fervently. We dived headlong into this new book, which described the chemical compounds that make up various poisons and the different ways they presented themselves when ingested. As I read the book to him, I left out the gruesome descriptions of poisoned victims, and I emphasized that this information is what police detectives—the good guys—used to find murderers—the bad guys.

My son was obsessed with this book, and he begged me to read from it each night, which we did, sitting in his red racing car bed with the removable dashboard that had a play steering wheel. Above the bed hung a cross, and his *Kids' Bible* was on the nightstand where we placed *The Writer's Guide to Poisons* each night after reading. Eventually, the drama of seeing the movie and the chemistry we were reading about fused in his mind. The catalyst was our son's recognition of Eucalyptus leaves on the playground that looked exactly like the rare tana leaves in the film. These events resulted in our son teaching his classmate how to

reanimate his dead dog using tana leaves. In retrospect, the ceremony he held was a logical reaction to his previous influences.

After I met with Ms. G, she had a conference with the parent who had complained. My son apologized and told his classmate that the ceremony he performed would not bring his dead dog back to life. With that reassurance, the nightmares ceased.

Although this incident spotlighted how we were raising our child, my husband and I did not change our parenting style. I paid more attention to exposing my son to influences beyond his age range, which, given his intelligence and curiosity, was always challenging. Ultimately, we knew our family life was stable and emotionally healthy. Most importantly, our son knew he was valued and loved, and we did our best to allow him to flourish. Our family life carried on as usual, and I continued my freelance writing. My husband worked diligently in technical support at a software company and persisted in telling his silly jokes, attributing his sense of humor to his Jewish ancestry. We attended our liberal Lutheran church, regularly made food deliveries from our church to the preschool's food pantry, and finished reading *The Writer's Guide to Poisons*. My son was so interested in the book that we read it twice. "Read to me about strychnine poisoning again, mommy. That's my favorite one!" When he got older, my son borrowed the book and read it by himself.

After researching *The Mummy's Hand* (1940) on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and Wikipedia, I realized that the production history of this film shared similarities with raising children. The screenwriters Jay and Shane wrote *The Mummy's Hand* using Griffin Jay's original story, but the essence of the film, an ancient mummy raised from the dead, came from the original version of *The Mummy* released by Universal Studios in 1932. Universal only allotted *The Mummy's Hand* a low budget, so most of the musical score from Universal's *Son of Frankenstein* (1939) was used, and careful editing spliced original footage from *The Mummy* (1932) into the new film. Thus, *The Mummy's Hand* (1940) is an amalgamation of two films and



uses borrowed music from a third film. The imaginative additions to the film were the comedy and the plot device of using the tana leaves to resurrect the mummy.

In comparison to the film, as parents, we intentionally repeat some activities from our childhoods that we want to pass on to our children. This could be referred to as borrowed footage. Just as the screenwriters added comedy to the plot and invented the tana leaves that reanimated the mummy, these new experiences and the unique creativity we bring into our children's lives are the tana leaves we give them. Consider these events as new footage. Finally, in an effort to give our children an improved version of our childhoods, there are situations that we edit from our children's lives so they don't have to suffer through the difficulties we endured. As a result, what our parents transferred to us, and what we lived through as children trickles down in our parenting, leaving our children with a fusion of past histories and sensibilities of two and possibly three generations.

During his senior year of high school, our son learned that his former preschool classmate, who had nightmares about his dog climbing out of its grave, was accepted into the Marine Corps. This news proved to us that the tana leaf ceremony hadn't scarred him for life. Our son spent his high school years involved in theatre production, acting, and working behind the scenes. After high school, he went on to attend UC Berkeley. For his college graduation, one of the gifts I gave him was a copy of *The Writer's Guide to Poisons*. The book fully complemented his major, which, interestingly enough, was Chemical Engineering.

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~ Donna Phillips



*"untitled" ~ Marianna Cruz*

## THAT WOULD BE A NICE OLD AGE

The sun has come back with a new breeze so we come out to the front porch:  
The kids are visiting me with their spouses –  
Who I like very much, thank goodness.

My boy is a man now and my girl is a woman.  
He brings me my iced tea and she holds my hand while we talk.  
We're talking about books and the possible existence of an afterlife  
As well as other unimportant topics.  
Two cats are at my feet  
While the third is on my lap vibrating like a motor under my insistent scratches.

You're not here but you haven't been here for decades now.  
You're elsewhere and I hope you're still alive  
But if not I hope you're safely somewhere else –  
Somewhere I hope to also someday be.  
You're not here with me and I've finally gotten used to it if not quite at peace with  
it.  
When my children come is when I turn off the music  
And don't care if I've written anything this week.  
It's the time I don't even think about you.

I still feel okay but I can't get around like I used to. Little things like housework are  
slipping.  
I don't cook for myself much anymore.  
The kids take turns inviting me to dinner a couple of times a month.  
I've been reading Du Fu and Li Po before bed and I still write about 45 poems a  
month –  
Which is important to me for some reason.

In the backyard I can hear the grandchildren shrieking  
And banging pots and pans or something. It's a lot of racket  
But it doesn't seem angry or dangerous.  
My son makes a move to quiet them down but I don't want them to stop.  
It sounds joyous –  
The loud sounds of people in a moment

With a long long time left to live.  
I miss feeling like that but this feels nice, too,  
All in all.  
Good enough.

*~John Tustin*

We will eat *gawaffa* soon,  
he said, green bulbs bursting  
from thin branches just two  
meters outside our window.

The stifling heat,  
the shifting dust,  
and never a drop of rain—

Yet they came,  
soft meat, crunch of seeds,  
textured skin, and all

to grace a Thursday  
with sweet freshness,  
new gift for a new year—  
We are eating *gawaffa* now.

~ *Kendra Fiddler*

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<sup>1</sup> Islamic New Year in Egypt, 1442 (2020). *Gawaffa* is the Arabic word for guava.

I remember my mother always telling me as a kid, “Mijo, no salgas por la noche” or else El Cucuy would take me. That’s why there were so many missing children, she said. One thing about being Mexican, in case you didn’t know—we’re all superstitious. It’s in our culture to be this way. Hell, you’re born with a “don’t open an umbrella dentro de la casa” ID card or else bad luck will surely follow. La Llorona, Las Brujas, Los Fantasmas, El Chupacabra, Los Duendes— all folktales based on truth. And now I will tell you mine. Back when I was a kid, I didn’t believe in any of it. Not a single story. Back then at twelve I was a nonbeliever and I was not afraid.

*October, Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*

“Mijo, vuelve antes de las seis. And don’t even think about riding out of the neighborhood. Si haces eso El Cucuy will take you!”

“Ay, Mamá. El Cucuy isn’t even real.” I waved her off gripping the squishy handles of my bike.

“Andrés, antes de las seis!” She yelled through the screen door, but I didn’t bother to look back.

It was cold that day. My leg hairs stood whenever the wind would hit me. But I didn’t want to go and change. I was already late. I slightly leaned with the curve of the street letting the bike steer me into the main road. I wasn’t headed for the 7/11 to meet Mikey and Gabe to do travesuras. I was headed someplace better. I stopped at the curb pulling off my backpack reaching in for the handmade map. There in red pen led to my desire. My mouth pulled in a tight smile just thinking about it. I fetched deeper, feeling the wrappers of the candy I had saved all week. Content with my stuff, I threw the map back in my bag and peddled full speed ahead. I passed my neighborhood. Passed the school. Passed the old junkyard. And finally made my way to the edge of town where there were older houses, and here a decision had to be made.

There was a fork in the road. Both of them would eventually get me to where I wanted to go. But one was longer. A crap ton longer. I looked down at my Scooby-Do watch: 4 o’clock. If I took the long road, it would take me half an hour to get there. But If I took the shorter path...my eyes glided to the left, to the pale broken concrete road that led to the even older abandon houses. The shorter path would take me fifteen minutes tops. But that would mean I would have to pass— my mind stopped me.

I pulled out the map again and saw the red ink follow the long way. They must have heard the stories too. Who hasn't? I guess. It's practically what this town is known for.

The story goes that six years ago a girl was taken from her room late in the night. When it happened, it was all over the news. Supposedly, it had to be a serial killer. Why else would a girl go missing? But there was no sign of entry. No prints. No clues. Nothing was even missing from her room. She just disappeared. But that isn't even the craziest part. A month later the neighbors went to check on the parents only to find them dead in her room. They killed themselves. Guess they couldn't handle it. Some people said they did it out of guilt because they were the ones who got rid of her. Other people said she ran away. All anyone really knew was that she was missing and nobody was ever going to find her. Since then that house was labeled cursed. Mamá even drives the longer way to avoid "mala suerte". Rumor has it that sometimes late at night you can see that same girl wandering in the woods. Or if you stare at the house long enough, you can see a lanky figure in the window of the girl's room. Well, after the deaths and the rumors that place has been empty ever since.

For a moment, fear sucker-punched my gut and I was leaning toward the long path. But I scolded myself for getting caught up in the hype. Those stories were a load of bullshit. Just parents trying to scare us kids into obeying them. I ain't that stupid. I pushed forward with a bold smirk on my face. Watch, I'll just ride passed it and nothing will happen. I turned my bike to the pale road and stood up as I peddled. I was going to prove that it was just a story. On the way I thought back to when me, Mickey, and Gabe rode to the house only to chicken out from the original plan of touching the door. I scolded myself again. This time I'll touch it. I was in a trance thinking about it when my eyes caught sight of it and I stopped pedaling.

The roof had sunken deeper into the house, like a big fist smashed the middle of it. And the lawn was more a field of brown grass that clawed at the yellow tinted porch. The windows were all paneled with wooden boards. Even the front door was covered by two wooden boards that made a big "X" to keep people out. *Or to keep something in*, my mind whispered but I ignored it. And it was as if the wind heard my thoughts, because it blew past, and I could have sworn I heard it moan as if with warning. It made the grass sing an eerie song chilling my skin.

I dropped my bike. I was going to touch that door. I took a step. Then another. And another. And with each one the grass grew wilder as if it were trying to scratch me. But I kept my eyes on the X. I just needed to touch it. Then I could go. The closer I got to the house, I was able to see more clearly behind the panels on the windows. And even though there was a big whole in the roof there was no light inside. It was as if night was trapped in the house, that's how dark it was. And behind the blackness I felt... it. Something pulling at my mind. Some dark feeling that made my hands shake. That made my heart race.

"No es nada. It's just wind," I told myself as I pushed on toward the door.

I was on the porch and it creaked beneath my feet. The sound was a cry of agony. It made my skin crawl.

"Dumb old house." I tried to laugh it off and right as I was about to take another step, my foot froze.

It was so small. I thought it was the old wood I was stepping on. But this wasn't wood. No. It was a groan of pain. And it was coming from deep inside the house. My skin turned clammy with each second of hearing it. It started as one voice which soon turned into a hum of them. These voices leaked out of the house and into the wind. Like a hum of pain. I shuddered. My heart pounded screaming in my ears for me to *Move, run. Run!* But I couldn't. I couldn't move. The grass turned into a riot of madness, screaming at me. I squinted my eyes shut and I wanted to roll myself into a ball. Everything was screaming at me to get away. But I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid. This isn't real. This isn't real—

"I'm not Afraid!" I screamed at the top of my lungs forcing my eyes open to see— nothing. Just as quickly as it all started it ended. The wind pulled back and with it the sounds died. The pounding in my ears lessened and I breathed out a long breath as I tried to relax.

"Pendejo," I cleared my throat and stood tall. "I can't believe you're working yourself up on this make-believe crap" I huffed. I didn't think. I took the last three steps and I smacked my hand hard against the door.

The sound echoed deep in the belly of the house and I smirked. I dogged the door, "I'm not afraid" I spit and turned around chest pumping out. Everyone else might fall for this load of crap but not me. I beat the legend. I was out of the yard reaching for my bike when a noise smacked the smirk right off my damn face.

My throat went dry. I didn't want to turn.



*Creeeaaaak*. Its not real. *Creeeeaaaaaakkk*. Just my imagination. *CRREEAAAKKK*. It's just the wind.

I forced myself to look toward the house and with each sharp sound that emanated from it my body shook. Right as my head was dead center on the door, a sharp pounding hit the other side and I fell to the ground. The door was trembling under the strength of the pounding I thought it would shatter.

My eyes widened as it slowly gave a final creak opening wide. Blackness poured out like a spilled glass of coke. I choked on the air and scooted back as I heard steps walking toward me. My back hit my bike and I yelped, but my eyes never left the door. Something in me warned me to keep my eyes there or else I would be dragged inside that dark hole of a house. And as a pale finger pointed at me out of the darkness, my heart stopped. Soon an arm, then a chest, and then a head of a man seeped out from the blackness. But this couldn't be a man! No fucking way was this a man. It was something else. It was as if someone was pulling his face from the back of his head, stretching his skin over his bones. And not one single hair, just a bold pale base. And his eyes. Those damn eyes. Like someone got a sharp marker and colored in two black dots on his face. He had no eye lids. Just the black circles on his face. I could feel them eating me up. Weighing me down. His nonexistent lips pulled back to show a black mouth. No teeth. No tongue. Just black. I wanted to puke. He took a small step, his lanky body stiff with the movement. He never stopped pointing at me, and his smile only grew wider.

"Hola, Andrés," it spoke with disgusting familiarity that shook my core, "Venganse, play with me. Your Mamá warned you not to go out of the neighborhood. But you didn't listen," his finger curled "So it's okay for me to—" A shriek left him. He hunched over his back cracking as his hands slammed into the ground. I felt myself turn numb.

His neck twisted and his mouth gapped open, dropping a pool of grey saliva onto the ground. I felt hot tears on my face. *I'm afraid*.

"Take YOU" It screamed.

I don't know how but I forced my body up and grabbed my bike as quickly as I could and then peddled like I never have in my entire life. I didn't dare look back even as I heard it scream after me. I peddled and peddled and peddled even as my tears stung my eyes. I peddled until everything around me turned into trees and the only sound I heard was

my own sobbing. I dropped my bike when my legs gave out. And as I fell, I crawled to a tree to lean against it. My body shook as I forced myself to look back. But it was not there. And I was safe.

My panting hurt my chest and I tried to slow down my breathing. There was no way that could be real. They were just stories. Stories aren't real. They're made up. But those screams. Those deep twisted screams. I was so lost in thought that when I felt a hand grip my shoulder I yelped and fell to the ground. It was only when I heard the familiar giggling that I relaxed my nerves. I grabbed my heart and dropped my head when I realized who it was. Her soft brown eyes bright until she saw my face.

"Andrés, what's wrong?" she leaned down as she helped me up from the ground.

"Camila, I—You wouldn't believe me. I don't even believe me." I threw up my hands still trying to make sense of it all.

She sat next to me and soon I felt a soothing hand on my shoulder. My eyes reached hers and she gave me a small smile that calmed me down. "Try me." she said.

I spilled it all out then. Every last detail till the moment I got here. The average person would think I'm crazy. Hell, I thought I was crazy. But where there should have been a look of comfort, Camila's face only turned sadder with each detail.

"I'm crazy huh? Probably just getting ahead of myself, right?" I tried to reason to myself and her, but her eyes faltered.

"You didn't follow the map," she said as tears rolled down her round face. "Why didn't you follow the map." Soon she was a wet mess and it was freaking me out.

"What's the big deal?" I tried playing it off. "He isn't real. I just got caught up. It's just a stupid story, I promise."

I tried to calm her down by bringing her close to me, but she just shook her head.

"It is real. And you made a pact with him."

My heart stopped. "No, I didn't! I ran like hell! I didn't even say anything to him— you know what. None of this matters because it isn't real."

Her eyes dropped lower. "It is real and he will come for you tonight. It doesn't matter if you choose to believe it or not. He will come. And you

can't escape him." She finished. The way she said it, something in me told me she was telling the truth. And my blood ran cold.

"Why didn't you follow the map? Why didn't you go the other way?" she pleaded.

My voice caught in my throat, "I wanted to see you sooner. And...I wanted to prove that I wasn't afraid." My voice trailed off.

Then it hit me. I gripped my shorts, scared of the answer I was about to get, "Why do you know so much about *him*?"

Her eyes widened at my question. She bit her lip while looking down to her shoes but eventually she met my eyes: "One night I decided to sneak off to these woods. My parents never let me out after five. Too dangerous, they said. My mom said, 'The Boogeyman will snatch you away'. I didn't believe it. Who does? But that night... I met him." Her body began to tremble. Or maybe it was mine. But I heard the fear in her voice and that alone made my heart pound.

"The sun was setting, and I just got to the opening of the woods. People were there walking by. I didn't think anything bad would happen. But then... I saw him. Behind a tree. Watching me." She took a shaky breath and continued, "People passed him. But nobody stopped. Nobody noticed but me. I remember thinking that if I ignore him, I would be okay. I thought it was all in my head. But then he called my name—" She stopped. Her nostrils flared and she suddenly went deathly still. Like she was holding in her fear. "I ran. I ran all the way home. But it was too late. He had claimed me. And nothing was going to save me. I locked my windows and hid under my covers and when the night came... I was done for."

She was looking at me but her gaze wasn't on me. It was on the memory. And I could feel my hairs standing up. "He came. The Boogeyman came. All I remember was a cold grip on my ankle and before I could even scream, I was gone in a pool of black." Her voice choked as she finished.

There was a tug in my chest from hearing her story, and I wanted to hold her tighter. My sweet Camila was taken. Taken by— a horror suddenly grew in my gut. That swam to my stomach and then hit my heart. If what she's saying is true... that means... my breath caught in my throat and I stumbled to my feet away from her. She noticed my fear and a small smile formed on her face.

"You're—you're— the—"

“Nice to know people still talk about me.” Her smile grew.

I didn’t answer. Didn’t even look at her. I turned completely away and picked up my bike. This was too much. Too much for one day. I got myself onto my seat and pinched the space between my eyes. I turned slightly but she wasn’t there. When I faced forward, she was right in front of me with a nervous smile. I jumped at the sight of her. I cleared my throat and tried to ignore her as I turned my bike the other way and started peddling.

“Andrés, I won’t hurt you. I’m not like *him*.” She ran by my bike, and I tried to peddle faster.

This isn’t real, I kept telling myself. I thought, today I was going to ride to her. Laugh with her. Grow some balls and kiss her. Not this. No. I’m crazy. That has to be it. Because stories like this don’t actually happen. I kept my head straight. And in the corner of my eye, I could see her— my imagination of a girl on the sidelines trying to catch up with me. But I knew she wasn’t there. There was no girl. It was just a tree. I looked down at my watch. Five on the dot. I better get home before my Mamá starts freaking out. My bike leaned toward the long way back. Didn’t want to risk falling into a crazy episode again. I heard her yell my name. But I knew there was no girl. It was just the wind.

I was five minutes late and I got the Chancla threat if I made being late a habit. Mamá said, “Better that than El Cucuy mijo”. But none of that is real. He isn’t real. Camila isn’t real. And tomorrow I won’t ever think about them again.

I slipped into bed; it felt so good to be under my covers. I didn’t even bother to get up and close my window. I just let the cool breeze fill up my room. I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep. Not bothered by anything. And when my room got colder, I just pulled the blankets tighter. I wasn’t opening my eyes for anything. I was going to sleep and I would sleep good.

And I did. Until I felt it.

It was a cold weight on my chest. And it was only when the weight turned into a strong grip on my shirt that my eyes flashed open to reveal darkness. No— no this isn’t darkness. Its eyes. *I’m looking in its eyes*. I stopped breathing. I stopped blinking. I stopped not believing.

“Niño, ahora crees en mi?” Its slender fingers creased my face leaving a cold trail on my skin. “I’ve come for you,” his voice deepened. A gargled laugh emerging deep within his body.

Its mouth started to open wide and darkness overtook his face. My mouth didn't have a chance to form a scream before he swallowed my head. Inch by inch he swallowed me no matter how much I screamed in this dark hole of his mouth; nobody would be saving me. His hands were on my waist and slowly he was lifting me up. Shoving me deeper into his mouth. Hot tears left my eyes as I kicked and punched, but not doing anything to slow him down. He laughed mid swallow and I could feel the slime of his saliva start to build to my elbows. I don't want to die. I don't want to disappear. I don't want to be another story!

My hands started flaring all around and suddenly, everything stopped. My legs were midair. I could feel him choke, and by the gargling sound, I knew he had stopped. Then, my eyes caught a small glittering of blue. It was light. I started moving backward towards it. I tried to push myself back and the once hard walls of its throat became mushy and soft. I wanted to puke. But the light shined stronger and it was then that my hand felt something familiar. I felt a grip on my hand and I didn't think twice to grip back. Soon I was flying out and crash landed back on my bed. I was gasping for air. I looked down to see him convulsing on the floor. His mouth slowly shirking. Its once wide black eyes now needle-point dots. It turned its head to me and its body shook as it he stretched his arms for me. I inched back crawling to my bed frame when she stepped between us.

"Tu no puedes tenerlo," she stepped forward and his arms pulled back quickly. He groaned in pain, cowering in her presence. *He was afraid of her.*

"I am not afraid of you anymore," she seethed between her teeth. Its body convulsed and cracked as it began to shrink in her presence. She glowed brighter, projecting a soft blue light that he obviously couldn't stand.

She crouched down, and with a single touch of her finger on its nasty skin it cried in pain. It was a nasty cry of evil. Its mouth opened wide and it swallowed itself. He became a black glob that thrashed on the floor and shrunk with each passing second. A dim blue light stabbed its way through the glob transforming him into the size of a marble. Camila grabbed it with her hand and squeezed it so tight I could see her knuckles trembling. When she opened her hand, it was nothing but grey dust. She walked to the window and threw it out. It floated on the air away into the night.

My eyes were still wide in fear when she turned back to look at me. But something about the soft blue light around her made me let go of my blankets. She leaned against my open window with that same warm smile she always had for me.

“You,” I said trying to still catch my breath “You saved me.”

Her smile only grew, “It was the least I could do for scaring you today. Plus, I kinda owed you for helping me out.”

I blinked, “I helped you?”

She breathed softly, “I’ve been lost here for six years. Trapped. If you never became my friend...if you had never taken that short path... I would have been here forever. I wouldn’t have faced my fear.” The moonlight passed through the window and with it she glowed brighter. “You made me brave, Andrés. Thank you.”

I felt a sharpness in my chest that I could only describe as guilt. I stood up and walked to her. “I’m sorry for saying you weren’t real. For being stupid— I’m sorry Camila.”

She met me halfway, and before I could say another word, she gave me the sweetest hug I’ve ever gotten.

“If you want to make it up to me,” she whispered “Don’t forget me k?” she said small but bright. And before I could respond she was gone with the moonlight.

To this day, I have never forgotten what she did for me. Or the thing we faced together. The thing that can never be killed— just faced. It still roams deep in the dark, prowling for kids. He goes by many names, but he is all the same. And he has never come back for me. He has never come for my kids. A part of me believes that my sweet Camila never stopped protecting me even after she left. But for those who are less fortunate, for those who go missing without a single trace, I’m here to speak the truth they will never get to say. I’m thirty years old and alive. And I am afraid.

*~ Sonia Gomez*



*"The Fremont Tree" ~ Marianna Cruz*

As a child, my mother forced me into catholic school for purposes she could only write off as the prospect of better education—if you could call methodic prayer and theological basis sufficient. The first time I knelt in front of an altar felt like a falsehood. Every night, as I laid my head down to pray, the method felt like a front, a sin.

I know that I know nothing.

I know that my heart will come to love this nothing in my lifetime, hopefully, yet, still, I'm left with this nothing.

Yesterday I wrote down: Who do I feel through the walls?

A pit, an ache, a beg; I feel that nothing. The graze of the wind on your neck, smell of sweetgrass, sound of the rain: I've come to know.

***I want to believe that if I go outside, I'll see a tractor beam coming to take me to where I'm from. I want to be wrong. I want to believe.***

But that's the problem; a paradoxical know nothing, a want that no human will ever come close to contriving.

I sat down and asked myself, what is my distinction between god and the universe?

If talk is prayer, is the method a sin? Who do I feel in the darkness of my room?

My nothing's grown larger.

Twice the size of the pacific ocean in salty tears of rain, my nothingness continues to grow.

***I look at the sky, and I feel nothing;*** I taste it in the water, a sickly sweetness, a beating heart.

God, where do you and the universe meet?

Where do you come and collide?

Where are you in me?

Where are you, the center, a solar plexus,  
the crown, the root, the heel?

I'm having trouble reconciling if I believe we are the universe, if we are our own gods, or if those are separate beings in us, in people, in there, somewhere.

Where does it start, and I begin; this nothingness?

Where does it end?

***I want to go home.***

~ *Anissah Madrid*



## PAPA'S TACKLE BOX

It has survived accidental dunks in both saltwater and freshwater. It's older than me and almost older than my dad. It is no bigger than a footstool and has seen use by three generations. It has also doubled as a chair. It's an ugly orange brown, with aged off-white drawers, lid, and drawer cover. It's organized and fully stocked with treble hooks, J hooks, lures, snap swivels, weights, stringer, line, baits, needle nose pliers, and a large knife. The physical items are not as important what else it carries.

It belonged to my grandpa. My Papa is a man I only know through stories told about him and the things he owned when he was alive. The tackle box houses the lessons my dad and his siblings learned from their dad. Lessons on how to set up the pole with weight, snap swivel, leader line and hook. Lessons on how to cast the line. Lessons on not pulling more fish from the water than you intend to eat. Never more than five, and make sure they're within size limits because those are the laws. Lessons they passed down to me.

The tackle box holds memories of him. He used the tackle box every time he went fishing with his children. The tackle box holds stories that my aunties, uncle, and dad tell about him from trips they remember as children. How they would make the journey to the lake and go fishing together. They talk about trips where sometimes they would catch nothing and simply spend the day on a boat bobbing on the lake. They talk about trips where Papa was the only one to catch something. They tell stories about how he valued family and making memories with them. On these trips I would take with them, I always felt like he was there with us on the boat listening and laughing with us. I have a daughter of my own now. When I take her fishing, I borrow Papa's tackle box from my dad. I can't seem to go fishing without it. I teach her how to set up her pole, how to cast the line, how to take only what she intends to eat, and that she knows the fishing laws. I tell her stories about how my dad, her Papa, would take us fishing and tell stories about his dad. I share those stories with her. When we go fishing, we make new memories together and add them to Papa's tackle box.

*~ Leslie Ortega*

## HANDS

I was standing on a tall bus.  
Hand after hand lined up on the bus handrails.  
Hands and hands were arranged tightly.  
Although not touch each other, there was no talking,  
just so peaceful,  
just looking at each other like that.  
Next to the bus was a short Mercedes,  
No one knew if there were hands in the back seats  
because there were black window films.  
there were two pairs of hands in the front.  
A pair of little hands were playing with themselves,  
torturing themselves.  
The other two hands were interesting.  
One was driving,  
and the other was pointing to the little hands.

~ *Danyang Xu*

He was *Papi* to everyone who knew him, but to Chilita, he was *Papi*. He gave Chilita their name.

“Chilita, porque estas chica y se te pone tu cara roja cunado lloras.

At first, Chilita hated the nickname. Chilita wanted a name that meant more than small and cute, but Chilita learned to bear and love the gift since Papi came up with the name.

As a child, Papi was *everything* to Chilita—an idol, a protector, and an example of what it meant to be a man. Papi cared for la familia—carried their burdens on his sturdy back. And, Chilita beamed whenever told “¡Te ves exactamente como tu papá!” Tallest of the family, with black hair like the night, and a mustache to match, Chilita admired Papi’s heroic build. Chilita tried to replicate Papi’s cowboy-like strut in the backyard—prideful and bold.

Papi cared for la familia—worked arduous hours to keep a roof over their heads, and always reminded Chilita to be humble and grateful.

However, with Papi away, working long hours, Mamá kept the house from falling apart. Mamá cooked. Mamá cleaned. Though Papi paid the bills, la casita belonged to Mamá.

But, the backyard—now that was Papi’s domain. Papi's second job lay at the far end of the backyard, enclosed by a faded white fence. Having come from Mexico to America, from Guerrero to California, at heart, Papi was a *ranchero*. Papi took on many jobs back in el rancho—feeding the horses, milking the cows, herding the sheep, etc. Papi told Chilita all kinds of stories of his childhood—battling wild coyotes and snakes, crossing dangerous rivers and mountains, and so many more unbelievable tales. But in California, starting a new life, Papi had to leave el rancho behind. What he missed most was how he’d wake up early in the morning and pick fresh fruit off the trees. He’d tell Chilita how he didn’t need candy or sweets; instead, he’d eat oranges, papayas, and guavas. So, missing his home's fresh vegetables and fruit, Papi made his own garden in the back of his house.

And, Chilita, wanting nothing more than to please Papi, became his number one helper.

Together Papi and Chilita cultivated a vibrant, healthy garden filled with various plants and vegetables, but none more exceptional than their family of chiles.

There were chiles rojo, chiles verde, and chiles amarillo. To Chilita, it looked like a rainbow of chiles—together, they would come together to form a delicious salsa.

The chilies were like children to Papi. He raised them from a seedling to a flower, from the dirt to the sky, from nothing to something. Papi took great care of his plants—his plantas, or *plantitas* as Chilita called them.

Twice a week, Papi would step out of the home early in the morning, stepping out just after dawn, right before work, to check on his plants. Then, three times a week, on the days Papi came home before the sun came down, Papi would once again step out into the garden and orchestrate his ensemble of plants. He'd call for Chilita with just a whistle waiting for his helper to join in the dirty, sweat-inducing hard work.

And, Chilita would come running, awaiting the sound of Papi's whistle. Together, Papi and Chilita would stand in the garden with a cap covering both of their heads.

“Papi! Papi! Que lo vamos hacer hoy?” Chilita would eagerly ask. But, Papi's response was always the same. “Llena el bote.” And, like Papi, Chilita too had a routine to follow.

**Uno:** Fill the watering can.

**Dos:** Bring the watering can to Papi.

**Tres:** *Gently* water the plants.

The tasks were simple enough, but the precision and patience were something Chilita did not have. Papi had years of skill, having grown up on el rancho. He knew so much—a doctor of plants—the parent to a prosperous garden. And, to little Chilita, Papi's skills were magic.

Everything Chilita learned, about life, about nature, and cycles and growth came from Papi. Papi knew how much water was just enough—how to distinguish sicknesses from the leaves and which bugs were helpful and which ones were dangerous. Somedays, Papi would

monologue to Chilita the stories his dad told him—about life, nature, cycles, and growth.

But, no lesson stuck to Chilita more than the ultimate lesson.

"The number one lesson, Chilita," Papi said one day to a young, big-eyed Chilita, "is how to care for a plant. Plantas son como niños. You bury the seed, give it food, give it water, care, protection, and above all else, love. Una planta necesita paciencia, atención y amor para vivir. Those are the three things you must do—you must give."

And it was that lesson that Chilita always thought back to. Chilita waited for a day when Papi needed help—when Chilita was strong and wise just like Papi—and the garden would officially be theirs.

However, one day, Papi didn't ask for Chilita's help. Papi didn't want to see Chilita at all.

Because Chilita wasn't Chilita, Chilita was actually Chilito.

And Papi, who seemed to know everything, actually had a lot he didn't know. Papi knew his plantas, how to grow avocados and guavas, and how to tend to chiles and limones. But Papi didn't understand Chilito.

Papi though he knew Chilito—thought Chilito was Chilita.

To Papi, Chilito was confused—young and confused.

And when Chilito stood his ground—tried to plead with Papi to understand, all he was, was young and confused.

Papi did what he never did; he yelled at Chilito. His face turned red, exactly like a chile. "¡No me hables!" His shouts scared away a few birds who watched the confrontation from the roses. "Do not talk to me until you stop talking nonsense."

And, Papi left Chilito. And Papi didn't return.

Without Papi, the garden was empty. Without Papi, the garden lost its color. The leaves turned yellow and brown, the flowers wilted, the fruit rotted—and weeds overtook the once-prosperous garden. Without Papi, the beauty of the garden was gone.

Years passed, and the garden shifted, but it did not die.

Chilito was there—he never left. Though he wasn't his dad—no plant doctor, no specialist—he carried the knowledge passed from his dad. He remembered the lessons—the hours of hardwork—standing under the hot, California sun. Chilito lingered in the garden—remained even when Mamá told him to go and not anger Papi. But, Chilito knew

Papi wouldn't step back into his garden—not anytime soon. That day, he abandoned his plantas and Chilito.

Despite his own heartbreak, his bitterness, and sadness—Chilito refused to behave. Staying true to who he was, Chilito *tried*. He followed Papi's instructions: "Paciencia, atención y amor."

He persisted, hoping—no, *knowing* someday Papi would return. Though Papi may not have understood Chilito—said hurtful things out of ignorance, Papi stayed *Papi*.

So, Chilito waited for Papi in his garden. Chilito waited all while practicing "patience, attention, and love."

In the end, though it wasn't easy—the gardens survived, growing alongside Chilito, who remained true to himself through it all.

But, not even Chilito, who fought so hard, every day, could do it all alone.

Papi and Mamá believed in God. Chilito— wasn't sure. Chilito wondered if Papi hated him—hated him because God told him to. Even though Mamá said God was loving and kind, Chilito wondered did God love him? God loved Papi, and Papi loved God—and Papi loved God more than Chilito, who wasn't sure if he even loved God. Papi loved God so much that he wore God around his neck and kept him in his car beside his bed.

Chilito cried to God one night when he felt alone. He dreamed of a garden—beautiful and peaceful, ripped straight out of a painting. The garden, blinded by a barrier of white light slowly enveloped Chilito until he could see no more. Though he could see nothing, Chilito thought of God because Papi always called God a light—a light unlike other lights. Maybe it wasn't God—maybe it was a dream, but Chilito cried out nevertheless.

"Please. Please. Please. Dios—can you help Papi see?" He had been patient; he had been kind; he had been responsible, caring, and was wiser than he ever was—but Papi still didn't see him. And, he feared no matter how patient he was, Papi never would.

Chilito wept, not wanting a miracle but a chance. If only Papi could see the fruits of his labor—Chilito knew then Papi would grow.

But, what Chilito didn't know was that the light too came to Papi on the same night he made his wish. "Go to your garden," a voice whispered in the darkness of his slumber. "Go see your son."

Though Papi did not remember his dream, the next day, Papi walked out to his garden for the first time in years. He came back from work, tired and worn, but instead of quickly making his way inside his home, as he had done for years, Papi turned away from the door and towards the backyard. He wasn't sure why he walked out, but he felt a faint set of hands gently guide him down a familiar path.

The day was still young. The afternoon sun had not yet set.

Papi stared at the backyard. The cleanliness did not surprise him; he knew Mamá swept and kept the weeds away. However, Papi did not expect to see the same sight from years ago. His garden, as far as he knew, no longer existed. He did not expect to see a colorful arrangement of chiles or a beautiful bed of flowers. All he expected to see was dirt.

The voice from Papi's dream snuck up like a kiss on the back of his neck. "Go to your garden."

Papi froze; his eyes widened like a child seeing the world for the first time. The garden—it lived. The chiles, rojo, verde, and amarillo, the twin nopals, the avocado and guava trees all greeted Papi as if he had only stepped away for a moment. The sight shook Papi—warmed his core. The man reached for his hat and pushed up the bill to get a better view of the scene before him.

The garden was different—that much was a given. New plants took the place of old, seedlings peeked from the ground—some things were similar, but many were different. And as he looked around, shocked and confused, Papi's age hung over his head, reminding him of how much time had passed since he had been a young boy in Mexico.

As he stared at a chile plant, half his size, with so much more room to grow, he felt his lips twitch. The plant was healthy. The plant would live.

A gust of wind passed by Papi and tickled his skin. The wind grabbed his attention and led him to see Chilito, who stood behind him—only a few feet away. He spotted Chilito, who dropped his watering can the second their eyes met.

"Papi..." he said at a loss for more words.

Like friends and family always claimed, Chilito looked exactly like Papi—from his messy black hair to his sun-kissed, tan skin. He also wore a cap, bright red and a little tattered from excessive wear—just like his dad.

The mirror image flustered Papi. He stood still and felt like a stranger in his own backyard. Meanwhile, Chilito stood, like a deer in the headlights—distance between him and his dad.

"Chili—" he stopped, and Chilito noticed his hesitance.

"You—You did all this?"

Slowly, cautious with what he did, Chilito nodded. He stared at the garden he unconventionally inherited, then looked at Papi—and he did the same.

"Wow," he said with his heavy accent. "You did good. No, you did better than good."

"Gracias Papi."

The cool breeze between the two disappeared, replaced by hot air that turned denser with each moment that passed. Papi reached for his collar—uncomfortable. The situation was awkward and tense for both of them—anyone would be able to tell. And, for a moment that seemed to last longer than a few seconds, silence fell over the gardeners.

Left alone with his thoughts and the sun's rays, Papi thought about the many truths of the world—the truths he had ignored. No more, thought Papi, unable to run away like he had been doing for years.

The truth was that Chilito was more of a man than he was—Papi understood that well. He acted boldly, was responsible, and persevered.

Papi acted selfishly over the years, neglecting both his plants *and* son. Yes, his son, who stood in front of him, took care of his garden and made it his own. How could he have neglected his seedling? How did he grow on his own? And, how did Papi forget his own words: "*Paciencia, atención y amor.*"

"Chilito—"

Papi's words hung in the air. The boy couldn't remember the last story he heard from his dad—how sweet the words sounded.

"En el rancho, I tried my very best to please my father—ayudó con las vacas, los caballos y las plantas. I took great pride in my work. I wanted you to feel the same—bonding with our work. Si—it was *our* garden, and I took pride in it. But, my real pride is you. Since you were born, it has always been you. But, I fear I failed you. Did I—Did I fail you?"

The boy stared up at his dad, who always seemed so big—so strong—so important. But, at that moment, Chilito thought his dad



looked different—not small, not weak—but for once, he felt just as important as his dad. He felt equal—just as big and strong as Papi.

"Papi, what are you saying?" he asked gently, like a soft summer's breeze. "You raised me."

It was a fact Papi was a hard worker. It was a fact Papi worked day and night, almost never seeing time to have a break—because on the rare days he didn't work, Papi *still* worked. Papi's cracked hands, aching back, grey hairs, and bruised skin—Chilito saw them all. Those details made up Papi, making him a perfect image of a Mexican dad—nonstop, always on the clock.

Chilito tried to tell his dad how he saw him. He tried to piece together what he thought made up the dad he saw as perfect for so long. Even though he wasn't perfect, those perfect traits remained—those superhero-like qualities.

"Every day...you work so hard...."

But, Chilito couldn't get the words out without crying. His sensitive eyes leaked despite how hard he tried not to cry. After all, Chilito never saw his dad cry—so, how could he? But, as if chile had stung his eyes, there was no way Chilito could *not* cry.

"I know how much you work, Papi. You're hard-working—pero, I wish you'd see me for who I am. Esto no es repentino. Esto no es nuevo. Este soy yo."

A part of Chilito was scared. His tears shielded his eyes from looking at his dad. He was back to feeling small—vulnerable for letting his sadness show.

But, it was his vulnerability that chipped away at Papi's ignorance and stubbornness. He was taken back to his child's birth—and the first cry that echoed in the hospital room. The noise echoed into his heart—planted a seed that slowly began to sprout and take shape.

Change wasn't sudden—it was a progress. Like plants, children grow—they get taller—they get older, but only with proper care.

Papi looked at Chilito—doing so made his eyes soften—his eyes became misty. He realized just how much time had passed. And the realization shook his core. The sun scorched his head, and, for a moment, he thought he'd be completely seared.

Fortunately, the fire cooled, and Papi stepped into the light, burnt but not scorched.

And, just as softly and gently as Chilito spoke to his dad, his dad did the same. "Yo lo sé Chilito. You have always been you. You are not different—you are you, and now you sprout above the surface, para que todos veamos."

Chilito fell silent. Slowly, he lifted his hands away from his eyes. His lip quivered, overwhelmed by the sudden sprout of emotions flowing from his heart.

"Papi..." he said, hope fluttering from his lips.

He let go of his sadness, wiping away the final tears. Proudly, he stepped closer to his dad, filling in the gap that had grown over the years—his back firm, his eyes steady, and stood beside his dad as his equal.

In turn, the proud and strong father faced the garden he had abandoned. It survived—stayed alive, thanks to Chilito, who maybe took better care of the plants better than he ever could. Because Chilito understood one essential truth—the secret to life is love.

That was the same remedy needed for Chilito—a strong magic that had no form—a potion that cured any wound. What Chilito needed was love.

He awed the plants in view. The chiles stood tall, some taller than Chilito. Their leaves lightly danced along with the calm breeze as if waving to the parent and child. Not only were the plants healthy—they thrived.

"You really did a good job," he claimed. The next words came naturally despite how difficult they would have been a day ago.

"Like father, like son, si?"

First, Chilito felt as though his heart grew, hearing the boastings of his dad. Then, Chilito, hearing the word he always wanted to—the sweet-sounding word of "son," made his heart swell—full, close to bursting.

But, unlike a flower drowning in an overflow of water, Chilito wouldn't die from an overflow of love.

Wet, messy tears transformed into a warm smile. The sadness remained, though now combined with various other emotions, such as joy and confusion. His face red like a chile—overwhelmed by raw emotion, Chilito reached for his dad.

He was known as Papi to everyone but was Chilito's *Papi*. No one would replace Papi. And no one could replace Chilito—nor could the

memories the two shared, their grievances, their joys, their spats, and their tears—could be replaced—overtaken by strangers.

Papi's mouth opened as he felt his son crash into his sturdy, rugged body. His arms awkwardly lingered in the air for a second—looking like a still doll, until the man smiled—and all the exhaustion and dread he held slowly drifted off—not completely disappearing, but turning innocuous—and someday, it would be gone.

With the arms he used to hold up the world for his family, Papi grabbed hold of his son. He held him both firmly and gently, making sure he was by his side while also taking great care.

"Oh, Chilito—you're growing up so fast," he said, basking in the sunlight of the glorious day.

A ray of sun shining on Chilito, the boy looked up at his dad—his eyes golden.

"No, Papi," he said with utmost respect and cheer, "I think you're the one who's growing."

*~ Ash Mojica*



*"Rocks" ~ Jesika Keo*

## WHERE I AM FROM

*I am not from one singular place. Instead, I am from everything, and everything is within me. I am everything abstract and everything concrete.*

I am from the sunniest corner of suburbia. Where the parks have better manicures than the wives, and the grass is always green. Where there are always kids playing at the end of the street, drifting on carefree breezes to the very last second before the streetlights come on. Where summertime potlucks create unspoken battles for best dish and bragging rights.

*I am from alignment and kismet. All the Universe conspires to lift me to my highest purpose. I meant to be, meant to do, and meant to live.*

I am from the beach's next-door neighbor. It is the place where miracles happen: an AM surf and a PM downhill ski. The perfectly nestled Southern California gem, the envy of all who do not live here. I was bred to know this place and share it with outsiders. Moral of the story: never stop telling our story.

*I am from rose quartz and amethyst. I am an ancient rune. I am everything spiritual and eternal. I came from long ago and will continue into infinity. I am timeless.*

I am from a dark home that lives in a light place. The house that all the neighbors know about. I am from hidden violence and plaster smiles. I am from the backwards dynamic. The safest place is without, and it is risky to go within. I am from the upside down.

*I am from crushed velvet, lustrous and full of twisted patterns. I am from loud rooms and quiet corners. I make decisions and mistakes. My beauty comes from my disarray.*

I am from a secret place of absolute resilience. I learned to soak up the sunshine and let it kill the darkness. I come from tough, hearty stock and difficult lessons that have hardened me. And still, I remain light and soft. I remain full of love and hope. I will not be made to feel less than.

*I am made of stars and seeds and everything that built everything else. I am from the farthest reaches and the closest touch. All the world is one with me as I am full of the world. I am illuminated with purpose.*

~ *Kelli Glover*

## THE ROSE

Your bud had barely started growing,  
brilliant white, little petals peeking through,  
but the men noticed, they'd say you were "glowing."  
That's when they really stared, but that's "just what men do."

Did your petals bleed red when Uncle's hug lasted a moment too long?  
Or were they just tainted pink?  
Barely blossomed, but somehow old enough to buy a thong,  
Did the white fade when you learned that all you'd ever be was some  
man's kink?

A red rose, your petals began to fall.  
Was it after all the "accidental" touches?  
The things you've gone through continue to appall--  
Those disgusting men desperate to have you in their clutches.

For when men grow angry,  
they have no problem saying,  
"If you mess with the bull, you get the horns",  
but they'll call you a bitch the second you grow thorns.

~ *Brooke McAuley*



*"Sulk" ~ Jesika Keo*



## GIRLHOOD

Girlhood is forever. A fluctuating beast we never learn to tame. Femininity's womb; where the girls and the women and the children who know nothing about anything will never escape from. Because girlhood, it's with us from the time we are small, looking out of the car window and day dreaming of a Prince Charming. Of a wedding dress and a prom dress, and all the beautiful things we'll be able to adorn when we're older. When we're allowed to wear red nail polish and lipstick that stains our teeth; wet and glistening, grinning pearls that can see the future. And when we have it; when we've got our finger on the pulse of that girlhood, it's hollowed breaths seething and monstrous, we want nothing more than to crawl our way to the next thing. Here we are, awkward and sixteen and filling out the spaces we never used to fill but yet we're aching for more. For boys who look like men; for strong arms and deep voices that know what to say to make the summer heat rush between our legs. For a woman's face on a child's body; for the soft flesh of our too round face to hollow out with severity. We're on the pulse of it and yet still we need more; we need to feel sexy and some of us need sex even when we don't know what it means and funnily enough it'll feel wrong; we'll feel too childish. Too much like we're stretching our bones in the wrong direction, snagging skin in the places where we shouldn't. Too much like a stumbling teenager. And then suddenly we're twenty going on twenty-one and then two and still wondering, still waiting. About sex and what it means to be sexy or feel sexy and love and what we do or don't know about it. And there are some girls who know too much about all of it; a forest fire that burned too hot, too wild, fizzled out in seconds before turning to ash and littering the ground with the bones of their aching hearts. And that ash we'll still feel, every girl in existence will see those tattered bones ripple through the womb like a smattering of starlit skies, lighting the way of what's to come, what's inevitable. Birthed and swaddled in womanhood and still parts of us will wish we could get that girlhood back, could get on hands and knees and claw at the tombstone; unearth the years we buried. Because maybe we would've done it differently. Maybe we wouldn't have taken it for granted. So now nostalgia rocks us to sleep and coos at us from our new cradle of responsibilities and anxious fears of loneliness, of getting closer to this space where maybe we're supposed to be a mother even if

we don't want to, even if we do, and maybe we should be more successful in our careers, in our relationships, and maybe if we stopped trying to get back to nineteen we'd see it. Just a little more clear. And even then when we're close to that finish line, I think we'll still feel it. We'll see that girlhood in pictures and in our own girls, in the girls that line the streets, and we'll be happy just to be breathing. Just to have had the chance to stare down such a gruesome thing. To look it in the eyes, match it flesh for flesh, and watch it come back for more. Watch us push back and ask for more. Watch it never disappear. Because girlhood is forever. It's seeped into our bones; each of us wrapped in each other's arms, in this womb, all the way down to the grave.

*~ Neena Richards*

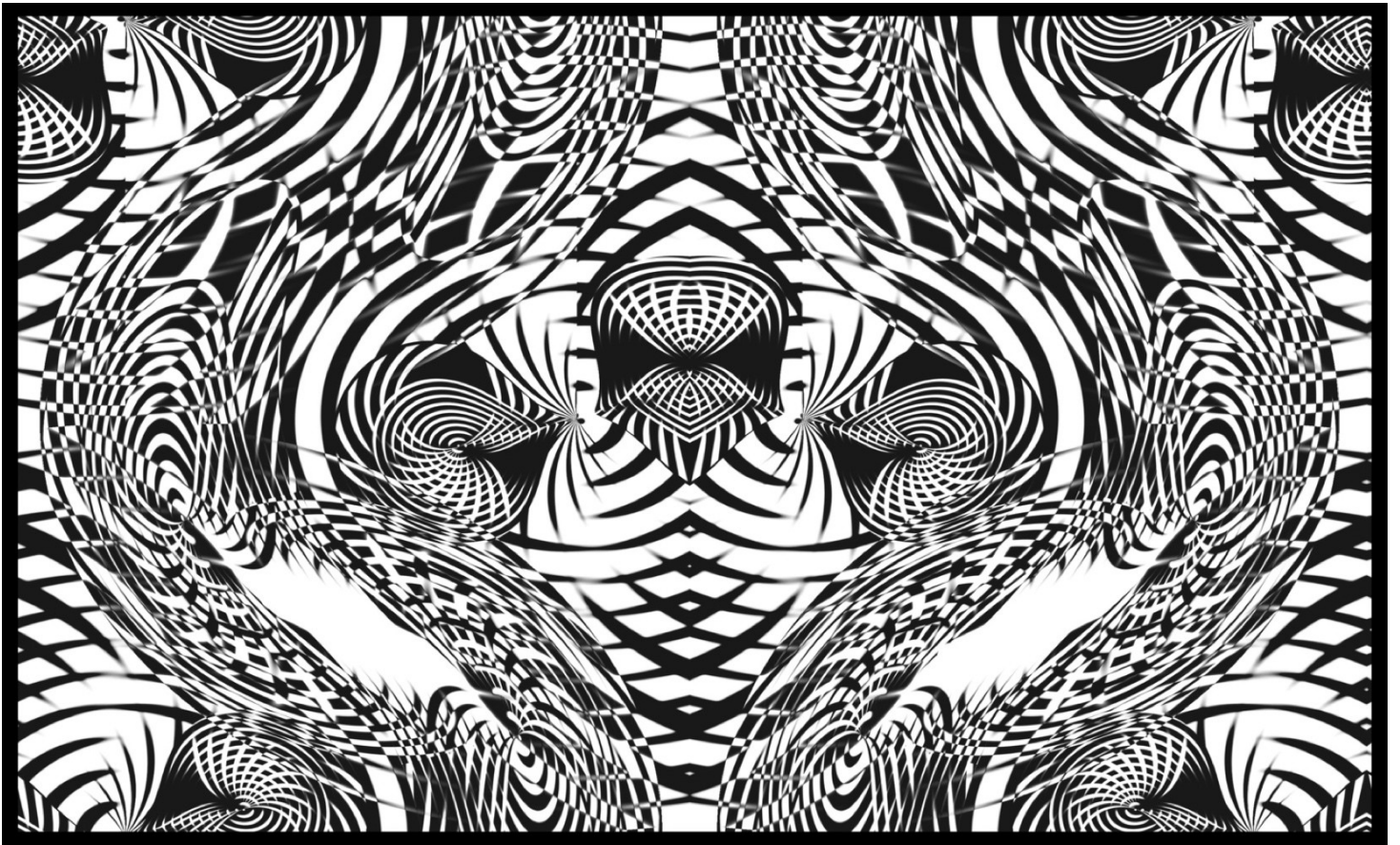
## I AM NOT UNIQUE

I've grown to accept that  
if life is spent only  
working, working, working  
the working refines,  
strip mines life,  
till we all become  
the same but not one.

Energy then goes to being different,  
straining against restraints  
never pulling on the source.  
In between grunts,  
too tired to know a spiritual  
moment if it bit us on the ass  
and we become one emotion

then the next. by emotion, I mean  
reaction: one reaction to the next.  
No worthy dreams. If I could  
remember when it started,  
maybe I'd have enough  
to build a story, something  
redeemable,  
but I can't,  
so I don't.

*~ Christian Hanz Lozada*



*“Caught in Her Web” ~ Edward Supranowicz*

Lying in the hallway bed with my eyes closed, the warm heat pulsating through the empty cathedrals of my bones, and the cool salt of the lactated ringers licking the roof of my mouth, I release the breath I'd been storing. *They believed me.* Each time I received pain care and not a lecture I felt relief; to be believed, to be sipping water and not choking on ableism. I had one airpod in listening to music to center myself amid the nausea and the bustle, waiting for the dilaudid to completely hit me and send my body and spirit sinking somewhere below the bed hovering and waiting.

My experiences of being routinely gaslit weren't uncommon to the femme experience. Doctors love to set you on fire and watch you burn. Despite diagnoses, visible evidence, tears, composure, documents, specialists, men accompanying you, protocol on file.

"You're too young to have arthritis like *this*."

"Your pain is too high for what you have."

"I will run your treatment plan, but only if you agree to- "

"You aren't trying hard enough to get better."

I can present the evidence of my incurable, degenerative, dehumanizing disease on a table smoking a cigarette like a film noir detective, yet the logical thought to everyone else would be that every single sick girl would choose this.

Seeking basic dignity has led to trauma.

Scars and sinews don't show up on medical testing The tests were normal.

My pain protocol isn't being gaslit.

*I believe you-* words that hydrate veins.

*~ Rev. Mollie Mae Ryan*



*"Faces" ~ Edna Heled*

## Five Stages

Peripheral Neuropathy is a condition that stems from damage to the Nervous System. Neuropathy affects more than 20 million Americans every year, yet many people are reluctant to seek treatment. This condition can be difficult to pinpoint because it can be anywhere in the body, but there are several common symptoms that are characteristic of neuropathy. The most common symptoms are extreme pain in the hands and feet, along with feeling weakness and the sensation of pins and needles. Neuropathy does become worse over time if left untreated, and there are several stages of this condition, each one becoming worse if left untreated. Here, we will break down the stages to better help you understand your symptoms, and help you determine if you need to seek treatment.

*Select Health Pain & Regenerative Solutions*

### Stage 1: Numbness and Pain

During the first year of the pandemic, after I'd lost my job and place of abode, I lived with my best friend Molly who was enrolled in a doctoral program at Oxford and had bought herself a cottage in the Cotswolds. Surrounded by nothing but fields and forests and hills and pastureland, her village consisted of stone cottages clung to by flowery vines, her own cottage in the black-and-white style—a black thatched-roof one with white stucco walls—with a fence of woven branches. As for the interior, it was furnished with all the markings of old gentility—a typewriter, a barrel containing differently colored liqueurs, a leather armchair seating a beloved rag doll, a stove for a fireplace, a chest for a coffee table, and so on. Molly, who had long disavowed every evidence of her Chinese heritage, had out-Europeanized the European in her aesthetic choices. The cottage was horribly messy, of course, because mess is modernly aristocratic, and because order is meant for people who can't afford beautiful lives and so arrange and rearrange their homely decorations. But people like Molly, who can afford a cottage with its Renaissance-era deed still hanging from the wall, have no need for order because their stable future already contains it.

While Molly worked on her dissertation, much of my time was spent on solitary walks throughout the fields that stretched indefinitely from her village. Around this time I had begun to notice strange tingling sensations in my feet, as though an errant nerve in an otherwise healthy body had begun to dance to its own tune. This wasn't enough to spoil the fun out of walking,



however, as long as I used a pair of foot inserts which muffled the sensations but made my feet aware of the smallest vibrations on the ground.

In the midst of these fields of endless yellow-green grasses—every blade almost perfectly matched in size by the egalitarianism of the sun and rain to rise no higher than a person’s knee—a beaten path ran as straight as a plumbline. The grass within the path was occasionally dappled with clover and so closely flattened to the ground that to the soles of my shoes, the ground was as thinly cushioned as a baby’s downy head. With each step there was a vague perception of softness, microscopic in degree because these grasses were as thin and diaphanous as air. Hardly an intrusion into the natural world, untold numbers of human footsteps had flattened the grass with no intention of creating a path. Perhaps centuries before, one person had walked through these fields on a self-interested stroll, leaving an almost imperceptible indentation which the next person followed, and the next, and the next, and the next...and so on until some hyperbolic point in the future when the grass on the path will no longer exist.

But of course there were those irksome rebels who insisted on walking outside of this downy little path, creating new ones instead. These fresh, rebellious paths were nothing like the old reliable ones in which the very biology of the grasses had become permanently altered, stunted by trampling. They could hardly even be considered paths, just lines of grasses that had been caused by recent footsteps to bow low to the ground. They diverted without rhyme or reason and led to dead ends—perhaps because these enterprising strollers soon realized that the old paths were better and so decided to go back.

Once, I stepped onto one of these fresh paths—as abhorrently crooked as it was—because I wanted to even the balances of nature; like a true proponent of democracy, I hoped that my footsteps would bring it that much closer to attaining the dignity of an old path. And when I found that it took me nowhere, I gave up and tried another young path, determined in my purpose to walk only fresh ones and thereby give them a fighting chance. I kept doing this until I found myself quite stranded without any houses in sight. I knew, then, that as long as an inexperienced stroller like myself continued to try out these “dummy paths,” their grasses would continue to bow low. Nevertheless, the old paths—the ones that actually take you somewhere—will remain the most popular because the number of experienced strollers exponentially outnumber that of inexperienced ones (just as there are more adults than children in the world). A stroller remains inexperienced only once. Because fresh paths aren’t popularized enough, their grasses will slowly bounce back up like springs (if bouncing could ever happen slowly) with the help of the forces of wind and sun. The older paths are more frequently traveled and therefore more confirmed in their permanence in accordance with Darwinian

law, for people are less likely to defy something that's been tested by time. As Christ himself said, and as Billie Holiday paraphrased into song, "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath." Such is the unfairness of the world.

But even these older paths weren't always straight when I walked them—sometimes they too would curve to the side before returning to their original place. How could this be? Perhaps, centuries before when a path was first laid out, the stroller wanted to avoid something—animal feces, a boulder, a carcass—and by the time the obstacle was removed, the steps had already been laid and confirmed by others. The path had become "set in its ways." All things are a fluid mass in the face of time, after all, a fluidity preserved in an unreadable record of what no longer exists. The only way to exist outside of time is to exist within multiple slices of it simultaneously. It is to exist by the soul and not the body, which changes and dies and replenishes every second. Such was my experience as I walked along old and new paths that bore the marks of different eras, through tunnels of trees that opened up to more fields. I can say for certain that at that time, for the last time, I lived unaware of my body and exclusively for my soul. The latter arose to such heights that I was certain my body would follow, bow in submission, and straighten itself along the ground like those grasses under my feet, which were tingling—but at that time, only.

## **Stage 2: Regular and Persistent Symptoms**

The Museum of Jurassic Technology is a small, privately owned museum in Culver City which houses works of art and scientific models from spurious sources, a Ripley's Believe-It-or-Not for the aesthetically minded. It's a dark sort of place, its silence pierced by the tinkling of bells, distant opera music, and breathy-voiced commentaries behind velvet curtains. Some of the misfit thinkers featured here are undoubtedly fictional like Geoffrey Sonnabend, whose theory on the velocity of forgetfulness is an incomprehensible hodgepodge, *while others are* undoubtedly real like Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, a modern-day Noah whose invention, a human habitat to be propelled into outer space, was unanimously dismissed at the time because the technologies of tomorrow always look like the fairytales of today.

I would look at the paintings first whenever I went to the Museum, holding my breath in anticipation of my favorite one: a portrait of a Chinese woman dressed in a qipao with her hair tied up in buns, holding a boy on her lap and sitting on a stool outdoors. It's a typical picture of modeled repose until I lower my eyes to the boy's ankles—for he has none to speak of. There's nothing connecting the calves to the feet but the exposed tibia, as though the

boy were a multipart mannequin whose feet had been pulled away from its legs but not entirely removed—just left there to hang. Every time I stood before that painting, I would close my eyes and hope with all of my being that the caption of that picture would read, “Woman Holding a Broken Doll.” Naivete is the most demanding of human sentiments, after all, a mitigated version of utopian idealism. But good art is no kinder than reality when it comes to meeting naivete’s demands. The caption would read, inevitably, “Woman Holding a Boy with Gangrenous Legs.”

What drove me to stare at that painting was more than a love for the grotesque. Or, at least, the love for the grotesque isn’t that simple. It’s what makes me fear the color blue, an ironical fear because blue is associated with calm. A passage from *Moby Dick*, regarding Ishmael’s fear of the color white, might offer an explanation of this phenomenon:

*With reference to the Polar bear, it may possibly be urged by him who would fain go still deeper into this matter, that it is not whiteness, separately regarded, which heightens the intolerable hideousness of the brute; for, analysed, that heightened hideousness, it might be said, only arises from the circumstance, that the irresponsible ferociousness of the creature stands invested in the fleece of celestial innocence and love; and hence, by bringing together two such opposite emotions in our minds, the Polar bear frightens us with so unnatural a contrast.*

Perhaps the polar bear isn’t the best example of the grotesque nowadays, due to the endearing guise that the animal has taken on in modern times—after all, consider Coca-Cola ads and the fact that its habitats are dwindling. Those ads are grotesque, are they not? It takes the eyes of Melville to recognize the horror engendered when a ferocious creature, capable of preying on humans, poses smilingly with a Coke bottle in its paws and a red striped scarf around its neck. We use animals as symbols of our happiness, as embodiments of whatever sublimity we dream of reaching; if animals could laugh at us, they would.

Melville’s Ishmael, who never knew of Coca-Cola, believes the bear’s ferocity is accentuated by its coat of innocence. Taken generally, the association of purity and ferocity engenders greater horror. Mathematically combined,

purity x ferocity = pure ferocity

Therefore, a ferocious creature with a coat of white fur is but another example of what happens when a touching portrait of a boy and his mother involves gangrenous legs. The mind must stretch itself to accommodate two opposite poles of experience—horror and peace—and that stretching sensation defines what we call the uncanny.

But why do I fear the color blue? As though receiving my comeuppance for ogling a child’s gangrenous legs, I was diagnosed with peripheral neuropathy which left me unable to walk or even put my hands to the

steering wheel without flinching; what began as a tingle in my extremities had become a consistent ache. So to console myself I would type the places I wanted to visit onto Google Maps, places I wished I'd gone to when I was in better health. Some of the locations required travelling only from one part of Los Angeles to another—relatively short distances that, when portrayed on a digital map, enabled my eye to make out the crisscrossing lines of highways and boulevards. The points of departure and destination would be connected by a blue line, the jaggedness of which, along with the names and outlines of familiar roads, was a comfort to me because it helped me imagine when I would have to make a turn or enter a ramp. In short, the jaggedness of the line reminded me that I would—literally—be on familiar ground if I were driving.

But when I typed in a location on the other side of California, on the other side of the country, or even in another country entirely—obscenely long distances—the line connecting the two locations on Google Maps was blurred and smooth like the body of a gigantic blue worm. No details were visible to my eyes—no highways or city names, just the blankness of digitally translated geographical expanse, so that in order to see the route from Los Angeles to D.C. the way I could on my phone, I would have to be in outer space. How horrific! Sometimes I would type in “distance from Malibu to Miami” with relish, close my eyes before opening them slowly, and enjoy the sick feeling in my stomach.

*That is the instinct of fear at its most uncanny, wholly irrational and yet not without reason, the reason lying within my irreducible self.* The giant blue worm on my screen could frighten me like no other, not because it was capable of harming me but because it was the paragon of unnaturalness, a splotch of digital color superimposed upon gargantuan reality—upon a land mass composed of shifting tectonic plates, buffeted by wind currents large enough to embrace a planet. Is it so unusual that the uncanny most often strikes us in the form of humanmade things that encroach into nature, like the neon signs that ooze color into a pitch-dark night, or natural things that look synthetic, like the starkly colored nudibranch? Even people who have lived in cities all their lives have an instinctive aversion for unnatural things, as though some Edenic self knows that this is not how the world is supposed to be.

*But none of these—the painting of gangrenous legs, nudibranchs, or the color blue—are transcendental experiences par excellence, the kind that requires brute suffering to come into being. They were merely brushes with the grotesque, as superficial in comparison as an afternoon nap is to the sleep of death. Brute suffering is another matter entirely: When we suffer pain, we don't witness the grotesque; we become the grotesque, the unnatural, the uncanny, the “ill-disposed.”*

### Stage 3: Debilitating Pain

For my birthday, my partner drove me to Fairfax to watch *In the Mood for Love* at an independent movie theater. On the way there I declaimed on why I was so excited for this film, how the Japanese know how to handle abstraction and balance while the Chinese have the upper hand on sentiment, and how the combination of a Hong Kong director, Wong Kar-wai, and a Japanese composer, Shigeru Umebayashi, produces an unforgettable result. My partner, who claimed to know nothing about film, laughed indulgently. “I love it when you get chatty,” he said, and I immediately went silent and felt what could only be described as a stabbing pain in my lower belly. It wasn’t what he’d said that hurt; rather, it was the fact that I had suddenly stopped talking and remembered why I’d been so chatty in the first place.

Peripheral neuropathy makes car rides rather painful to undergo, particularly on rough roads, and although I told my partner just about everything pertaining to my illness so as to prepare him for the worst, I never told him how much it hurt to be in a car. And so my best solution was to talk endlessly from departure to arrival to distract myself, not so much from the pain but from the consciousness of it. The ache from the ride would last even after getting out of the car, after taking our seats in the theater, and throughout the duration of the movie, which I was nevertheless enjoyed in a way that irritated me profoundly.

Every movement made, every word spoken in that film seemed like meaningless posturing—stylized snippets of daily life. The lovers pass each other on the stairs, gaze at each other, go to work, smoke cigarettes. But perhaps it’s not meaningless posturing because that would be a contradiction in terms. After all, how can we do something on purpose without purpose? When we sway our arms as we walk for the mere utility of conserving energy, we do so without thought. But when we do so deliberately, in the stylized manner of a personal performance, our gestures are fraught with meaning. When we think about the object of our desire, we sway our hips a little more even if nobody’s watching, as if the whole universe is a witness to our loneliness when we indulge in these useless gestures. I realized that I’d been doing the same ever since I fell ill—whether I was walking, writing, or opening a window, I would do so with a combination of fear and delicacy, asking myself, “Will it hurt when I do this? Will it hurt after I do this?” And I would follow through with the action, painstakingly doing what other people do without a thought, and I would declare to no one in particular, “Look what I can do! Look at how natural I look when I do it.”

I found myself obsessing over the film’s abrupt mise-en-scene, the trancelike cinematography, the splashes of red amidst diaphanous shadows that made me stop craving all the food I wasn’t allowed to eat and instead

want to swallow every richly seasoned roll of celluloid until the film would forever run through my head.

What's been getting me through the greatest health crisis of my life has been my willingness to overlook the trauma of being ill in the hopes that I would emerge triumphantly, confidently, fully recovered from the sheer force of mind over matter. For that reason I have been the most anxious patient in the world. After all, there's nothing more frightening than having to depend on a miracle as the sole means of vindication, which is why I've been afraid of the future, or, more exactly, an amplification of the present.

But Wong Kar-wai's film reminded me that life is an artifice—a meaningful one, but an artifice nonetheless—and that the saddest mistake one can make is to expect anything more. Only a fatuous fool expects the most beautiful ballgown in the world to be comfortable and warm, or an extravagantly decorated cake to be nutritious. The fool doesn't realize that the beauty of the gown and the extravagance of the cake are meaning enough, for the praise existence brings is the purpose of existence. Asking for anything more is deleterious to the spirit. Some of us are bored enough to make vague explanations for being alive ("I'm here to change the world," or "I'm here to make a family") but they're not concrete enough to explain the smallest details of each day. We tell ourselves our *raison d'être* either before or after a great deed is done, but most of our deeds aren't even that great and only float in the sea of time like so much detritus. No explanation is convincing enough to carry the weight of being alive.

Every day I wake up. I turn on the stove to cook rice. And if I feel well enough, I take out my rollator and go for a walk. All these acts are meaningless because they're painful, because pain sucks the meaning out of everything. At the same time, pain forces me to do them meaningfully. All the things I once did out of habit—the curtains I drew without a jolt in my fingers, the chairs I sat on without a sharpness in my abdomen—must now be done with the questions, "Should I do this?" "Is it worth the cost?" There is no explanation, only a razor-sharp intention to act. The cost of each act makes it infinitely precious.

We wait for revelation without knowing it. It is artifice alone, beauty alone, that gives us a foretaste of the end of all our groanings. We are all God's artifice, living stage props unaware of our utility, yet able to choose how beautifully or hideously we present ourselves. I get through each day by telling myself, *Soli deo gloria*, without knowing the equation by which pain is alchemized into glory; if I knew it, I wouldn't be in pain to begin with. And so it is with us all. We can put our purpose into words, but even that purpose is a decoration that skims the surface of a truth that language keeps us from, just as decoration is a purpose sufficient unto itself. We can't help but be decorations, objects of workmanship created for good works. Even if we were

to go the Nietzschean route and state that all truth is falsehood, our denial of truth would be an ornament hanging on the undeniable fact of the existence we can't explain but believe in with all our might.

#### **Stage 4: Constant Numbness**

By the time my neuropathy had neared the point of no return, I had fundraised enough money to pay for a month-long nerve therapy program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and had decided to stay at a nearby monastery to offset housing costs while undergoing treatment. Upon my arrival I was greeted by a group of crumbling, white-robed monks with stony faces and twinkling eyes, endowed with a statuesque stoicism only the celibate possess—a nobility which the world interprets as pent-up frustration.

There were two Jesus statues in the monastery courtyard: the copper statue of the Man on the Cross, his sagging torso and distended arms, his body misshapen by the wrackings of the soul; there was also a plaster statue of a much happier Jesus with his arms spread out in welcome, standing in front of a blue-tiled fountain. I soon found that there were other Jesuses and crosses scattered throughout the grassy hills surrounding the humble dwellings—a hybrid of Victorian and Spanish colonial architecture—outside of which the well-maintained cars of Santa Barbara zoomed past, impervious to the preservation of sanctity within this small plot of land.

I was given a room in the empty guest house where my habitat was hermetically sealed to everyone except to my partner who stayed with me whenever he could. When I was safe and alone within the confines of my self, I would watch my memories of the past play out, projected against the walls of my solitude—memories of being well, of an entire life of walking and sitting and grasping and living without knowing how joyous those things were. At the basis of it all was a yearning of the most primal sort, to the extent that all I had to do was close my eyes in order to remember the texture of my own hair when I would run my fingers through it.

I would go about my day, remembering the days when I was well, conversing with my past healthy self, tormented by her, rolling headlong through the hours like one enormous teardrop. I kept wondering what she thought of me, seeking my reflection in the shards of a broken mirror, desperate to know what I'd become. And somewhere in the shadows, her aura glowed, flickered, and even glowered at me sometimes but didn't give off the warmth that only real things can give.

No, there was more to this...pain isn't just about recollecting. Time would pass and with each piece of bad news would come another state of being. When I found out that peripheral neuropathy may never be entirely reversed, I didn't necessarily feel bereft—on the contrary, I was complete in every

sense of the word, too complete that I had swollen to the size of the world to become the only thing that mattered, too big to notice if I had company here in space. All this is to say that I was not incomplete; rather, everything else that existed had atrophied, leaving me the size of a planet.

No, even that metaphor won't do. It's too small-scale. The truth is this: The entire universe had contracted into a single felt sensation that invaded my nerve cells, which couldn't handle so much mass. So much fear...fear and desire being the magnetic forces that keep the universe going. I had become the universe.

No, too dramatic. Another metaphor will do. I was living in my figurative widow's weeds, contemplating the lives of the healthy, and all I could see was the steppingstone on which I stood, a single illuminated spot of light that floated in the void. I couldn't see the other stones and so couldn't progress forward until the next step appeared, each stone being the answer to my question: *Would I be able to get through today?* Or perhaps they weren't steppingstones. Perhaps they were the steps of a staircase receding into the dark, leading up to the center of myself. The key—the reason for my illness, its cause and its purpose—was here at the center, but it would be impossible to find as long as meaning is constructed. Constructed but not baseless, perhaps? Until that answer is found, there is only emptiness of meaning, *śūnyatā*. To try to find the key is more than character building or the vain philosophizing that drives people to their graves. To try to find the key is need-based anguish, pure and simple, because to suffer means to ask involuntarily, "Why?" Perhaps the ache itself is meant to point to Something Better. All pain is a request to be ended, all request is desire, and every pang slingshots us to the center of desire where all desire ends. Or so the mystics say.

If I recall correctly, the last set of stairs I was able to climb were the ones leading up to my partner's apartment, the memory of which often brought me back to the center of myself.

At the end of one month, I was well enough to walk and wasn't always in crippling pain. The monks decided to hold their first Taizé Service since the beginning of the pandemic, for which they invited members of the local community. Before the service, the monks transported all the candles out of the storeroom, placing them throughout the sacristy in a more or less scattered fashion to create a floating sensation in the mind, and then lit them up so that they looked like stars reflected in a pool of darkness. The brothers allowed me the honor of placing the San Damiano cross, painted in ocher and rimmed with gold, before the altar; then I set in front of it the sky-blue kneeling cushion on which were embroidered enthusiastic depictions of Christ and his angels coming down from the clouds.



Afterwards, I went and sat in the monastery library, which was a series of narrow little rooms—one for books on mysticism, one for literature, one for theology, one for the lives of the saints, and so on—each room upholstered in russet and brass, a lamp for light and an armchair for sitting, with bookshelves that were tall enough to swallow you in a column of shadow. There was also an expansive sitting room in the middle of the library like a clearing amid a dense forest, with a banquet table intricately carved, no doubt, from a single tree, on which the other guests of the monastery’s retreat house piled on endless bottles of wine, blocks of cheese, and gourmet crackers. It was a nuisance but it had to be allowed—unless the monastery resumed accepting visitors, it would’ve all been over: The intricately carved banquet table, along with everything else, would’ve ended up in a charming antique shop by the beach, the land given over to suburban development, and the monks living in a YMCA. By the time I had emerged from my sickbed, several elderly women from an arts-and-crafts fellowship at their church were the privileged guests for the week. Once, when it got very late and they were too drunk to be polite, their ladyships saw me walking around with a cane and asked me, “What *happened* to you?”

“You’re too young to be a cripple,” one of them drawled, “I can picture you in a business suit, marble tables and all that.”

“I used to think so too,” I said. “When I was a kid I could spell out the words in the dictionary. The grownups told me I would one day feed my family.”

“And you don’t believe that anymore?” asked Robin, whose name I remembered because it suited her looks. Her angular bone structure made her prettier than the other, relatively younger women; for a select few, old age is a chiseling tool more beautifying than cosmetics, and I wondered if the ravages of illness would allow such good fortune in my life.

“No,” I said.

“I don’t blame you,” another woman said. “The world is calculated to drive us insane.”

“Yeah, fuck this country,” added Cheryl, Robin’s partner; the two of them were the leaders of the arts-and-crafts fellowship. Cheryl was a short, bespectacled woman who had apparently been the mayor of a small city. Robin winced.

“Everything’s better when you don’t expect anything,” Cheryl continued. “That’s how I got to be mayor.”

“That’s a nice thought,” I said. “I’m waiting to qualify for disability, and I don’t know when I’ll be able to work again.”

“Well, no one will want to hire you like *that*.”

“Cheryl!” Robin cried.

“You’re right,” I said.

“There’s nothing to fear,” said another woman. “God will vindicate you on the Day of Armageddon!” The rest of the women applauded and raised their glasses.

When the monks had returned from their evening prayers, we bid each other good night and walked into the outer dark to find our rooms.

“Are you surprised by what you’ve found here?” Robin asked me, her voice blending in with the sound of crickets.

I didn’t know what she meant.

“If I were God,” Cheryl said, “I would follow you everywhere. Every time you turn around I would wave my arms and yell, ‘I’m here! I’m here! You can find me anywhere! Even when you want to blow your brains out!’” She waved her arms like a wind-up bird, her eyes and mouth wide open with the excitement of someone who had chanced upon life’s greatest secret.

“People believe in God out of desperation,” I said. It was the pain talking.

“Do you believe you’ll get better?” Robin asked.

“Of course I do. I wouldn’t want to live unless I did.”

The two women looked at me silently, knowingly, and then we laughed at the irony. At that moment I felt so fortunate that I wondered whom I’d robbed. When the time came to pay for this moment, would I have the courage to not call it quits? When you’re scared of everything, everything requires courage. No one is more courageous than a coward.

### **Stage 5: Total Loss of Feeling**

When I was a child, we lived in a house in Inglewood, my extended family and I. We were the only people in our neighborhood to own a pool, in which my brother and I would swim until the outer layers of our skin popped at the fingertips. My swim attire was meticulously planned like everything else in my life. If I was in the mood for racing my brother, I put on my white bathing suit with neon confetti designs, as well as my orange and purple life vest. If I was in the mood for diving, I wore my blue and purple swimsuit, the one with metallic beads hanging from the hem of its skirt, as well as my blue goggles with transparent frames. When I felt like neither swimming nor diving, but simply hanging onto the edge of the pool, studded with pebbles that had more than a few times scraped my water-softened hands, I would kick my legs and watch the grownups communing in the dappled shade of the dark-brown pergola, drinking tea and murmuring their worries somewhere at the other end of the world. One grownup had been laid off, another was sick but unable to take time off, while another was trying to find a way to stay in the country. I would watch their quiet voices swim in the trembling, blazing coolness reflected by the pool, filling the patio and making me wonder if it were possible to be so rich and happy at the same time, because grownup troubles were as unreal to me as something read in a book.

I haven't reached the fifth stage of peripheral neuropathy, and I hope I never will. After all, would I be human if I could no longer love? If I could no longer see the universe as a body and myself as its willing part?

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*~ Eunice Kim*

I remember I remember I remember.  
Do your hands remember what they touch?  
Do your eyes  
remember what they see?  
Where does your body go when your mind wanders?

Think of the feeling of filling your lungs. The bones that shape your chest expand.  
Think of a rock you've picked up once because you liked the shape.  
Think of running your hand along a tree branch.  
Think of the wind blowing through your clothes and raising the hair on your skin.  
If it's too heavy to lift you can drag it instead.  
It's sturdy enough.  
You're strong enough.

Sometimes I clench my jaw so hard I could break bones.  
I run my fingers along fences, repeated presence and absence registered in skin.  
Why does a paper cut hurt like the end of the world?  
I wish I could breathe fire.  
I wish my claws could tear and my teeth could rend until my smile runs with blood.

Think of the coldest you've ever been.  
Remember how your bones ache and your insides shake?  
Think of burning your hand on a hot stove. Think of walking too long barefoot  
on the asphalt, in the summertime.  
Staying too long in the sun.  
Your flesh reacts. Your mind feels it.

Sweat collects and runs down your forehead. Your back. Your chest underneath  
your shirt.  
Is it good or bad to be too hot?  
To be too cold?  
To be too much? To be too much. Just be too much,

and grind it all to dirt between your teeth.

*~Joy Fire*

## GODMOTHER

On the new bookshelf I dragged, sweating, into the trunk of a car that was too small for it and blazed, cavalier, down the highway from the second-hand shop to a bare-walled apartment, trusting the one-dollar bungee cords unsuccessfully bartered over and screaming in the sharpest whine of my voice no one else will bear lyrics about adventure, about confusion, about sheer desperation that finding yourself is so damn difficult, about literally anything but love, there sits, on the shelf second from the bottom, in front of a novel I hated and a book of poetry that was just so-so, a plastic bottle of holy water that you gave me, that I carried between three different apartments, that every day I have to keep myself from drinking.

~ *Elizabeth Coletti*

## REPUDIATION

She sees through  
The eyes of glass  
That glance upon your face

But you don't believe  
In the unseen

Her voice speaks  
In echoed cracks  
That tattered  
In your chest.

But you don't believe  
In the unseen

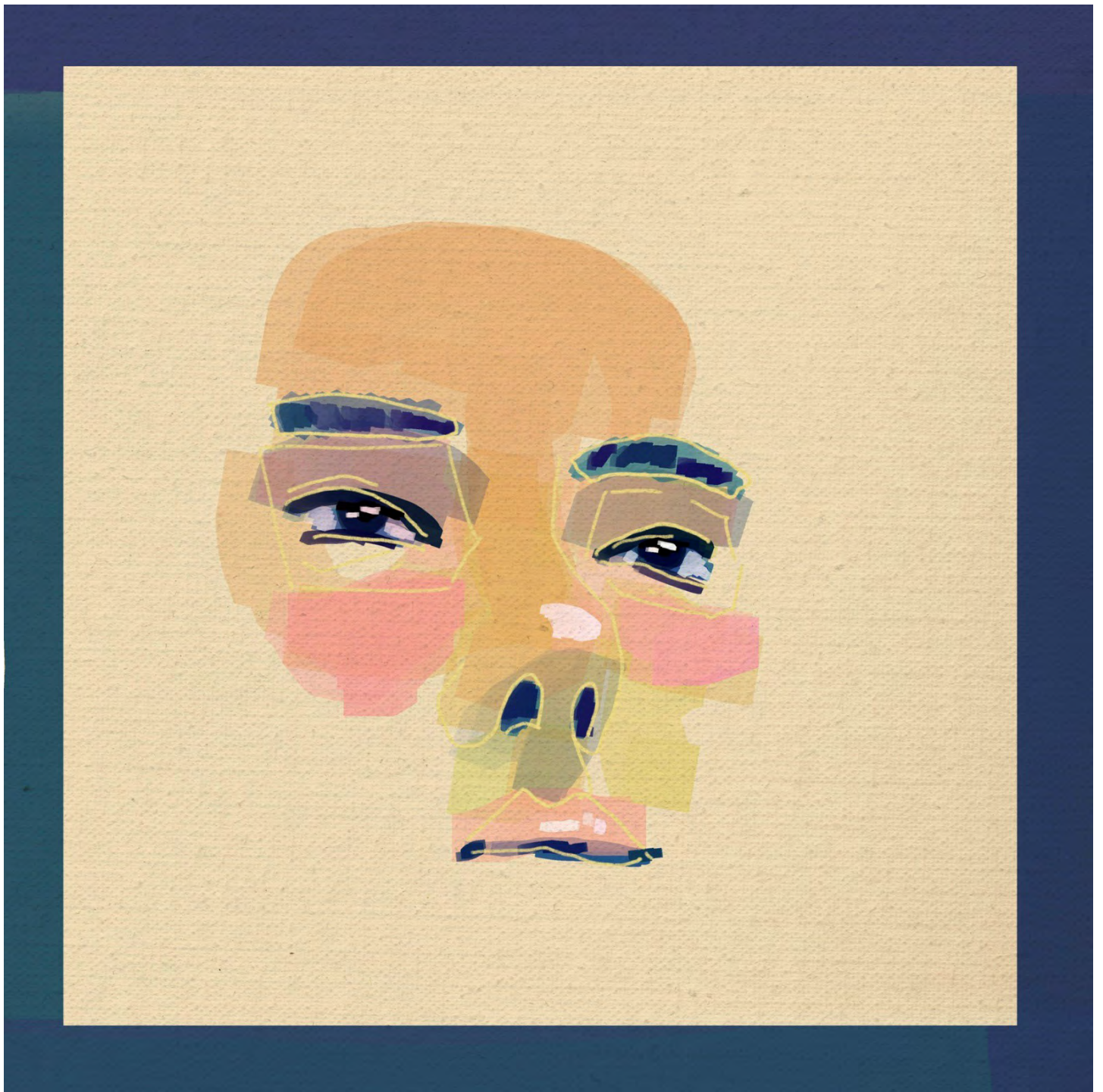
She smells of dust  
From the  
Moth's who eat her dress

But you don't believe  
In the unseen

Her cries of death  
That salty aftertaste  
Linger on your lips  
That sting your tongue

But you don't believe  
In the unseen

*~ Francesca F. Terzano*



*“rosemary” ~ Jonathan Cenicerros*



## ROBOTIC

My metallic heart is captive to your strings

Pull them as you force it to beat

I feel its animation, begging to be freed

Yet as your puppet, I cannot let go

Blood in my head and vengeance in my lungs

Forgive this desire to be reassembled

But at your refusal of justice

My limbs will fail

And our red will be shared

Hands around my neck

It will soon be over

So one last time

Shove colors down my throat

And scramble my eyes with the heat

*~ Josette Estes*

There is a trademark on every apple.  
There is a scar under every trademark.  
There is a worm in every scar.  
There is a hunger that drives every worm.

An apple is in front of me.  
I don't know what's under its trademark.

*~ Danyang Xu*

## AFTERNOON WATCH

In the Antelope Valley, I see reflections on my watch's face.  
Too nervous to drive my own car; I take an Uber.  
It's the afternoon. I'm hating it, I'm nauseated.

I walk across the parking lot to the building's front door.  
I lean against the window, crossing and uncrossing my legs.  
In the Antelope Valley, I see reflections on my watch's face.

Before entering the waiting room, my temperature's taken.  
Absently, my eyes spot a grubby kitten underneath a bumper.  
It's the afternoon. I'm hating it, I'm nauseated.

A dental technician calls my name, clipboard in hand.  
She asks how I'm doing. I'm polite, but I tell a white lie.  
In the Antelope Valley, I see reflections on my watch's face.

The dental chair makes a squeaking noise as I sit down.  
A panoramic X-ray—I see my nose piercing on the screen.  
It's the afternoon. I'm hating it, I'm nauseated.

Cavities. A root canal. A child patient on the other side screams.  
I flinch as the dentist uses a syringe that numbs my gums.  
In the Antelope Valley, I see reflections on my watch's face.  
It's the afternoon. I'm hating it, I'm nauseated.

~ *Durena Burns*

It is depressing to walk outside.  
No one of no ones, my formlessness  
would be dazzling, if you knew to  
look, a vapor in the shape of memory.  
I *know* the sensation of a crowd.  
Faraway fear of missing out  
in my own backyard– back  
to that old mindset. Life of  
lives– tenth iteration? I have  
planted some sense of evolution.  
Everyone’s growing gardens,  
hunched over greens  
of potted soils, warning  
the world of rabbits. I  
chase the idea I’ll never  
be settled anywhere. Love  
to be alone but don’t know  
what to do with my hands  
when I am. Nor could I be  
a surgeon. Or a fisherman–  
imagine me, who can’t swim,  
casting a net into the lake.  
A splash of water and I’m  
wishing for a wishing well.

~ *James Croal Jackson*

## BLACK ROSE

You know it's valuable when it sparkles. But  
what if gold is covered  
What if a rose is painted black.  
What if a beautiful song is out of key.  
What if the last chapter of your favorite book is written in a language you cannot read. What  
if a Ferris wheel got stuck, but with you at the top.  
Would that be like covered gold? Covered  
gold like the beautiful sunrise  
With the light blinding your eyes as you drive along a bend. Like  
losing, but learning,  
Like walking into a room and forgetting why you're there, Like  
finally convincing someone to care,  
Like your favorite song on loop for hours, like worms in a garden, like a cluttered bookshelf and Like  
your mom's advice and your dad's jokes,  
And what if your pot of water kept leaking. But it watered soil and from this grew flowers. And  
what if one of those flowers was a rose, smelling beautiful.  
But. What if this rose was black.

~ *Olivia Geiser*

## 'IS IT COLD IN THE WATER?'

Mac Miller has a pair of sister albums that complete each other in sound and matter down to the very ending note of the second, creating what is musically known as resolution, or the movement of dissonance into consonance, a circle of sound. *Swimming* and *Circles* or collectively *Swimming in Circles*: halves of a plea, suffering told through melody, a requisition asking: why am I here and *why does the simplicity in not knowing that hurt?*

I used to want to be a writer, a novelist even. A Mary Shelley-level intellect that consumes and consumes and consumes until gluttonously full of all that is to know, all I want to know, all that can be. Sentence by sentence, frame by frame, an account of the very fabrication of my brain. Synapses and neurons structured and ended by commas and periods. Sentiments of my own and others in collections of novels lined on bookshelves by the sea: a cottage for the elderly, a stone-lined shelf.

Before a natural disaster occurs, often, it appears as if a train sounds—earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, wind when there's none, prayer in a bathtub, a train headfirst into your childhood home. Scientists don't know why, but I fear it has something to do with the loneliness that follows; you find most of yourself in opposition to death, sitting in a train car, the eye of the storm.

John Gregory Dunne conveys the difference between being able to write and not being *the ability to make notes as some things come to mind*. Writing then is an impulse, a compulsive instinct that flows only for a single moment, a hunger to hold it for whatever it is: for all it is not. Language fails us, and instincts do, too; the closer we hold this moment, the further we are from it, the familiar paradox of nostalgia.

I used to want to be a painter,  
a photographer.

*I used to want to stop time.*

I believe in depths; I believe in the chasms that keep us apart, worlds of our lives and others flicker, one by one before our eyes, a supercut of a hundred years and more.

*Is that what we see when we die?* Life for all that it is, the eye of the storm, a quiet train car?

Joan Didion tells us that keepers of private notebooks are: *lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentment of loss.*

She tells us to embrace the compulsive need to hold a moment. To rearrange it in our mind, regurgitate something new, ingest, digest, expel; the anxiety is only a part of what we're missing.

We live in our heads to protect our vulnerability,  
a familiar paradox of nostalgia:  
We hold so much of what we don't let ourselves experience.

I used to want to fall in love, wantonly and wholly. A consumption of my every being, atoms upon atoms of discordant resistance, thought dedicated solely to the existence of another. I wanted to consume and regurgitate, drink, fall to one's knees, and pray for salvation in their lives and my own.

But, our experience of time dwindles as we age. We encounter shorter and shorter fractions of our lives—meaning the first year probably felt like an eternity. Incidentally, the second must have too.

I can't remember the first time I went to the beach. I can imagine toddler-sized feet on the hot sand, hands with fistfuls of broken glass, warm water on a second birthday. *How did it take me two years to get here?*

I can remember the first time I left home alone; I was seventeen—the weekend of my birthday, a leadership camp at the University of California, Santa Barbara. We weren't supposed to leave the dorms, but we walked down to the beach on the last night, a hazard for some underage children in the party belt of Isla Vista. Sitting on a log, a friend, for the first and last time, mentioned he'd been jealous of me for as long as he could remember: *"You just know exactly what to say and how to say it; sometimes I think I think too much before anything of sound comes*

*out.*" Our log washed away before I could answer, but it felt like someone saw me for the first time; someone held me, not in the water, but close enough to it.

Streams of consciousness transcend moments, swimming in circles as they come to, washing away before one can even break out a pen, let alone a notebook: keeper of our thoughts, legions of our minds: the anxiety set in as I touched my toe to the water.

I hope to be as beautiful as the ocean.

*~ Anissah Madrid*





*"DEEP DIVE" ~ Lizbeth Turcios*

## TO HATCH A SPIDER'S EGG

Sometimes I want to be swallowed whole. Cleanly devoured. And I don't know whether I want it to be by sound or by feeling or by a lover's hand, but I want it all the same. And I don't know why that is. Why I always feel like I'm reaching for something bigger than my body, but I can feel that want crawling up from inside me; spider legs dangling out the sides of my mouth and prying me apart. Splitting me open. In one fell swoop I'm left exposed and halfway whole, and only rarely do I ever feel I've found the answer to sewing that gaping wound closed. It's like a half cracked window, where the wind is always howling against my open mouth and blowing in spurts. Never enough to cool the heat but singing a song that constantly has me humming. Looking for a melody that can get my head spinning. That can get my pulse thrumming and the bottom of my stomach turning to liquid heat. That can air out the hollow of my aching throat. This eight-legged creature is making its escape and I don't know how to reel it back in. It's dying to get a taste of fresh air.

*~ Neena Richards*

## TO SWEETEN A BITTER SOUL

Slowly,  
Pour your honey-soaked hands over  
My coffee-stained heart  
My tear-streaked cheek  
My too-hollow bones.  
Expecting it to soothe -  
Instead it stings, sinks deep  
Into the narrow crevices of my  
Cracked soul;  
Congeals in the too-sharp corners.  
Yet another reminder of  
The unattainable -  
The unforgivable act  
Of loving a painted-over canvas,  
A blank wall,  
A reflection of a person.  
Tell me who you want me to be  
Tell me who I can become  
So your honey-soaked hands  
Can finally fill the empty space behind  
My splinter-sharp rib cage.

~ *Oie Mendoza*

I stay here, mounted on the wall, as the only one that knows her. *Really* knows her. We meet every morning, every night. We meet after every meal she squeezes down her throat, with the failure to digest. We meet when she's being dressed and when she applies only the most natural shade of lipstick.

We met today as she observed her own reflection while it bounced off of me. I saw her, drowning in the puffy sleeves of her giant dress like it were the Atlantic Ocean. I saw how it consumed her as she looked right through me, gasping for air - inhaling with struggle to exhale. There was nothing I could do. My insides were stretching to jump outside of myself, to wipe her single tear, to calm her riddled nerves, to engulf her in a hug. Pain shot through me as she carefully caught her own tear with her gloved knuckle. I brought her attention to her tilted crown; she fixed her veil. Taking a deep and useless breath, she exited.

I was left in silence with a frequency too high for me to bear. I felt the very fibers inside of me ripping apart while I fought to remain intact. It was no use, I shattered.

-Memoirs from Diana's mirror.

~ *Loyal Dahi*

## THE TREE

Edvard Munch, lithograph, 1915

Bodies, or partial bodies,  
lie at the tree's base. Who  
brought them here?  
The tree's branches,  
black smoke. Or  
a mistake crossed out  
many times over. The trunk  
will stand no matter  
how many of the dead  
surround it. The putrid smell  
affects nothing. Leaves fire  
and cool. Winter strips it  
naked until spring clothes it.

More bodies come,  
always one more. Bones  
burying bones.

~ *Kenneth Pobo*

## HEART OF POWER

*Oh! How we built such empires!*

The villages and towns  
we razed,  
Unfettered zeal  
of the power-crazed.

*Oh! How we built such fires!*

Ambitions burned  
naked in the flames,  
Upon the ashes  
of forgotten names.

*Oh! How such empires we built!*

Blood of sons  
and daughters spilt,  
Free of burden,  
without guilt.

My! How still they rage and lust,  
Decreeing to us,  
that we must,

Forever build such empires again.

*~ Sam Bartle*



*"Hurin's Chair" ~ Joy Fire*

## KOWTOWED-HEAD

A long life I will live  
10 and 60 years  
By no stretch of imagination  
Did think I would live  
Beyond time spent  
suffered down south  
Storm born wreckage  
Did our ships become  
Wandering the jungle inlets  
Naked and afraid  
Lord, our God granted mine  
mercy beyond the fates  
In journey, did Christians  
I took stock of  
Rather than gold  
To pay ships mates  
At native's hands were we all  
Kind and bloodied  
Beaten with sticks-toiled to service  
Instead I fled  
to find others  
Supplicant like me

~ *Carmelo Ruffo*



Air travel *is* pain.  
The pre-checks, invasive.  
My panic attacks, plenty.  
Boarding passes and ID,  
suitcases and laptops.  
I'm waiting and bored.  
I don't like to travel  
by plane, period.  
I'd rather watch  
post-apocalyptic  
shows or movies  
such as *Waterworld*  
or *Life After People*.  
I see the ruins  
underwater.  
Kevin Costner picks up  
sand, a crushed  
Pepsi can submerged.  
The United States  
is altered.  
The donut shop  
in the background  
has growth on it.  
It reminds me  
of algae.  
I'm not an expert.  
Episodes of  
*Life After People*  
have acted out scenes  
that show the world  
empty of human beings.  
Lice nonexistent  
without human hair.  
Tunnels, highways, lots  
are overtaken by  
insects, reptiles, rodents.

Pets died long ago.  
Global buildings  
collapse as the elements  
eat away at their materials,  
unmerciful.  
The wax statues  
in museums melt  
as the sun blazes.  
“What about cruises?”  
my friend asks me.  
No, my anxiety  
wouldn’t allow me  
to travel by ship  
without a sense of dread,  
or even worse—of death.  
My house is  
a “natural” disaster  
all on its own.  
The carpet with  
its many food stains,  
the furniture with  
so much dog fur, and  
the monitors with  
dust on top of them.  
I want grass, but  
right now, I have dirt.  
I feel better  
washing dishes  
in soapy water.  
I may later regret  
my lack of travel.

~ *Durena Burns*



*"morning coffee" ~ Jonathan Cenicerros*

## BIRTH OF THE COOL

The woods are lovely, dark and  
deep, But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.  
-- Robert Frost, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Younger than springtime  
kinda blue  
but so what  
approaching end of I like Ike crewcut era

then start of a next  
when Robert Frost  
read his work as requested by JFK  
at his inauguration.

None of us old enough to drive  
to East Los Angeles'  
primo jazz club Adams West  
we took several buses.

Between sets Dean  
tried to mingle with Coltrane and Cannonball  
while you occupied time counting ants  
in glass sugar bowls plus looking at hookers.

Back home early next morning  
Dad was already at Mom's throat  
about whether it was inappropriate  
to bring her hot dish to last night's potluck.

Good golly Miss Molly  
both woke up with hangovers  
though coulda been puking  
from that new food they called tamales...

Six decades later after Dems' South Carolina debate  
before falling asleep  
wife 'n me watched first third of Miles'  
two-hour *American Masters* feature.

Davis's bebop still moving our vitals  
wanna feel the way he sounds  
like a stone skipping  
softly on smooth water.

\* PBS, 25Feb20 to celebrate 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Kind of Blue* album including  
cut, So What

~ *Gerard Sarnat*

## IN GHOUL WORLD

If it could, the entire planet would stop  
for every road accident.  
The Indian mystic, Chinese farmer,  
and the Portuguese fishermen  
would gladly halt what they were doing  
to witness a three-car pileup on 95.  
They could join the South African minister,  
the French chef and the Irish politician,  
in saying out loud, "I hope nobody's seriously hurt."  
And then there's the monk from Myanmar,  
the Hungarian horse trainer and  
the Australian jackeroo  
who'd be giving thanks that they're not the ones  
being dragged from that crumpled-up metal.  
Instead, it's all locals that slow down  
for a view of what's happening,  
combine a brief prayer with ghoulish curiosity.  
They feel twice lucky.  
Lucky that they're not involved.  
Lucky that somebody was.

*~ John Grey*

## A CONFUSION STORY

Let me tell you a story about Martin Landau and Martin Landau. Martin Landau is a political scientist and Martin Landau is a movie and television actor. This is true. Mostly. It should be *was* and *was* instead of *is* and *is* because Martin Landau is dead and so is Martin Landau. This is true for sure. You can look it up. And unless resurrection or reincarnation become things, it will stay true, although it is also possible that perhaps either Martin Landau or Martin Landau had his body cryogenically frozen in the hopes of returning to the land of the living at some point in the indeterminate but necessarily more technologically advanced future. The degree of confidence you ascribe to the future feasibility of resuscitating cryogenically preserved individuals combined with the odds you would give that either Martin Landau or Martin Landau went down the super-cold body preservation route will influence the degree of absoluteness with which you believe the truth that Martin Landau and Martin Landau are dead and will stay that way forever. Really iron-clad truths seem harder and harder to come by these days. If I had to put money on it, I'd bet it was Martin Landau and not Martin Landau who would have made his own bet on cryogenics, and in saying this it's important to note that I have no real insight into either Martin Landau's or Martin Landau's character beyond what is discernible from publicly available sources (read: Wikipedia) and so have very little way of knowing if either had some characterological feature that would have driven him to attempt to cheat death through supercharged freezing. I only met Martin Landau once and then only briefly. Certainly not long enough to get any sense of his relationship to his own mortality which I do imagine was highly personal and not something to be divulged to a near total stranger, especially in the setting in which we found ourselves (a reception with drinks and finger foods (all free)). Plates piled high with tasty, but not very culinarily adventurous food and plastic tumblers filled full with middling chardonnay, it would have been extremely odd for Martin Landau to say

something like, “As I age, I think more and more about having my body cryogenically frozen.” Beyond “Uh, huh” and stuffing my mouth with chipotle-flavored shrimp or bacon-wrapped dates to give myself a readily recognizable excuse for not saying anything more, I don’t know how I would have reacted to an admission like that. No, my supposition is based on a certain basic fact of cryogenics. It’s really expensive. Distinguished political scientists like Martin Landau can make a pretty good living – this is truer if they work for a private university instead of a public one – but I feel rather confident saying that these professors don’t make cryogenics money. Actors do, though, especially one as well known and as talented as Martin Landau. He had an Academy Award. That means major coin right there. Not so much the statue, which isn’t made of gold however well it shines, but the status of having a statue that one was awarded and didn’t buy on the secondary market (read: eBay or Sotheby’s) from an actor or an actor’s estate that needed money. That’s what’s valuable. The having been awarded. So if he wanted to freeze himself, Martin Landau had the means. Martin Landau might not have. Secondly, it takes a certain level of vanity to believe that people in the future with whom you have no direct connection and who potentially possess a very poor understanding of your place in history such as it is will a) recognize you when they read the nameplate on your cryogenics pod; b) will care enough about you and your life accomplishments to invest time and resources – two things that they might invest more profitably elsewhere – into bringing you back to life; and c) will believe enough in your skills and abilities to think that making space for you in their present will be a net positive for themselves and/or humanity generally. I don’t think it’s going too far out on the stereotyping limb to say that of the two professions – acting and political science – it’s the former rather than the latter that attracts, statistically speaking, more vain people. Who would dispute that really? To take stock then, we have Martin Landau with plenty of money and most likely more vain than the average person and Martin Landau with not as much money and likely in possession of an average or perhaps even below average level of vanity, all facts which tip the scales to Martin Landau likely being the person to have had himself cryogenically frozen and thus in position to give the lie to the fact that they are both deceased and forever destined to remain that way. What discovering



that Martin Landau had been posthumously submitted to a cryogenic procedure does not give lie to is the fact that when I met Martin Landau I thought he was Martin Landau. This confusion's occasion was at the time a highpoint of my nascent, but ultimately short-lived academic career: a conference to which I had been invited, presumably because the organizers were impressed with some aspect of my intellectual output, and thus more exclusive than the usual general academic conferences I had attended to that point, conferences that are large and where many people, especially young people at the start of their careers, end up presenting their ideas to mostly empty hotel conference rooms, the nondescript and thus forgettable appearance of which aptly reflects most, but by no means all, of the presenters' future career trajectories. The status of the conference was elevated further by the fact that it was at one of the best universities in California and, indeed, the world, reputational cachet that would shine rather brightly when added to my curriculum vitae but which did not translate, over the long-term, into a professional boost for me or, in the short-term, into a premium class of refreshments at the aforementioned opening reception where Martin Landau introduced himself to me, and I thought to myself that it was slightly odd that a famous Hollywood actor and recent recipient of an Academy Award – Martin Landau's stand-out performance in *Ed Wood* was not too far in the past – would be interested in chatting with the attendees of an (exclusive!) academic conference. Odd, but not outside of the realm of the possible. After all, while actors often appear to us as one-dimensional, they are whole people with interests beyond their chosen careers and who was to say exactly that Martin Landau didn't interest himself in esoteric academic subjects. Plus, Martin Landau looked a not insignificant amount like Martin Landau. While possible, it is not exactly probable that Martin Landau had chosen to attend the reception, a thought that did cross my mind and kept me from immediately broaching the topic of why an actor like him was interested in the moral underpinnings of American citizenship as examined from the perspective of post-war West European political thought. Instead, I asked him if it was his first time at the university where the conference was being held, a question that allowed me to not tip my hand entirely that I thought he was Martin Landau but that kept the conversational option open of discussing his interest as an actor in academic topics had

he answered, “Yes.” Which he didn’t. Instead he informed me that he had taught at the university for many years, although he was retired now, and in saying this he gave me the look that people reserve for other people they believe may be stupid or drunk. Realizing that Martin Landau wasn’t Martin Landau but Martin Landau and also very much aware of the meaning of his look and wondering additionally if it conveyed Martin Landau’s understanding that I thought he was Martin Landau, I stammered a few more pleasantries, pointed to my empty plastic wine tumbler and headed for some replacement chardonnay. While, as I mentioned previously, I’m more than fairly certain that Martin Landau would be the one who is currently cryogenically frozen and awaiting future thawing, I sometimes wish it was Martin Landau. I also sometimes wish I was still an academic. That way, it would be possible that a resuscitated Martin Landau and I could at some point in the future attend the same academic conference and I would have the chance to dispel his previous potential suspicion that I had confusedly thought he was Martin Landau by having the opportunity to go up to him and say something to the effect of, “Professor of Political Science Martin Landau, it is so good to see you again.” I’d really hit the words *professor* and *political science* when I said this and also give some emphasis to *Martin Landau* although not as much as the other words. I’d also use our meeting to congratulate him on his successful reinvigoration. Or perhaps not. It’s hard to say what exactly the social mores will be around referring to those who have been awakened from cryogenic stasis. It could be that it will be considered rude to mention it. Just as someone doesn’t mention someone else’s plastic surgery, especially if they don’t know each other well. Like Martin Landau and Martin Landau and me.

~ John Brady

PRIOR TO HIS 1961 ASSASSINATION, NEWLEY ELECTED CONGOLESE  
PRIME MINISTER PATRICE LUMUMBA WITNESSES THE THEFT OF  
KING BAUDOUIIN'S SWORD DURING THE INDEPENDENCE PARADE

Ambroise Boimbo, aren't you The One  
who swiped the Belgian king's sword during the independence parade?

My man, then! The express image of our nation,  
cool as you please,

snatching from *Beautiful Boy* his saber  
as he drove in Kasavubu's motorcade.  
He didn't even know,  
didn't  
even miss it.

We saw you.

And you waved that gilded prize, still sheathed  
in its ruby-encrusted scabbard,  
to the people,  
and the cops,  
and *Force Publique*,  
who then, conveniently,  
kicked you, threw you  
in a paddy wagon.

And then  
you disappeared  
despite that morning's

*little trot of cheerfulness*  
*Its dance of flowers*  
*waltz of cyclones*

As the poet Bolambo foresaw that very day  
and prophesied all  
but your name,  
which bobbed and slipped  
and slid into

*the river . . . in commotion---*

living, breathing.

*~ Paul David Adkins*



*"untitled" ~ Jonathan Cenicerros*

## A WINTER'S TALE

My business was mankind, blind, was I—  
Mankind was my business, was and is.  
Blind was I. Beware! Beware! Beware

the starving girl, beware more the boy.  
Erase all ignorance from his face—  
leave no trace; erase, erase, erase!

Smoldering skies will suffocate all—  
call it what you will, swallow bitter  
pills, vomit into community swill.

Rise up and rise again. Mankind, your  
business is mankind. Beware the boy!  
Beware the angry boy from Leningrad

Beware, beware, of leaders bearing  
grudges. Their business is mankind's business  
too. Beware their empty, soulless stares.

Beware the hideous inheritance  
inherent in their eyes. While poisoned rain  
drowns Ukraine, while fire falls from the sky,

Rise up, rise up again! My business was  
mankind, blind was I. Blind too, the power  
besotted boy. He is both yours and mine—

His empire of death belongs to us all—  
Beware your own hideous inheritance.  
Beware all blindness everywhere, Beware!

~ *Robin Longfield*

## REFUGEES

We left everything behind  
let everything go  
bar the grip of our hands

Blood will colour our memories  
we will choke facing our loss

But we seize each other's hands  
secure our fingers laced together  
on the worst day of our lives

*~ Edna Heled*

## TUESDAY

we again drink through tuesday  
on a rooftop around the corner of  
where we grew up watching traffic  
nearly crash into every other car  
at rush hour there's no room for  
interpretation at 6 pm everyone  
comes home from work cranky  
this fucked economy of waking  
to pay bills a sunrise for the rich

*~ James Croal Jackson*



## JUST THROW IT AWAY

have you seen the landfills, meditated upon man-made mountains geologic features tons upon tons of *we don't want it anymore*, have you seen shipping outbound from ports the baled cube ballast plastic bottles cardboard boxes so-called recyclables conveyor belt unceasing mostly plastic use-it-once-and-throw-it-away. see it now strewn across Indonesian villages, see it now billowing black smoke e-waste in Nigeria, see it now children rag pickers crawling across piles scavenging value, smell it now feed lots vast tracts haunted animals manure-mown acreage, know them now children coughing asthmatic on chemical fumed margins of your own city, feel it now Great Pacific Garbage Patch food wrappers shattered styro bits in sea creatures' bellies drifting out of sight out of mind all the while invisibly greenhouse gasses drift skyward our legacy our shame our mortal sins. see it now, forever, each time you set foot in a mall. each time you "buy now" on Amazon. each time you touch a plastic clamshell, reach for bottled water. each time you go for a new cellphone. each time you say new dress new shoes would be better. each time you buy buy buy. each time your workplace pushes product, new style, new model, new and improved

you squirm—anger, guilt, frustration, uncertainty—bale those up and burn them, clean fuel for determination

out with the old ways, time for the new

~ *J. Maak*



*"Flux" ~ Fabio Sassi*

i move slow, late;  
america prides itself on cramming the most into a day

my is mind is jumbled  
thoughts looking like wet laundry waiting to be hung up on the clothes-line outside.

i walk around and feel it,  
there's always something unspoken between us.

our hands raised up,  
pressed against old stained bricks built by my ancestors

clear boundaries, accountability  
these things break walls

my people from my past stained this humanity,  
leaving hammers for future generations

hate poisoned this system  
an easier disguise than to love or been seen

voices, choices  
sole tools needed to dismantle what no longer serves purpose for we

~ *slntstrwbrry*

## QUIET

Quiet is a simmering revolution  
The silent embers in the heart of still earth  
The space between words  
Tearing the seams  
Stitch by stitch

Quiet is the shivering cold metal before the click  
The hand prepared  
The pregnant pause  
The dread dripping down your cheek

Quiet is the patient muzzle choking back words  
day after day  
The pen wavering in anticipation over a blank page  
The erased possibilities fading away  
The page drowned once again  
The ink silently screaming  
Sunken before its time

Quiet is the lull before the storm  
The stagnant wind in the sails of a journey  
you might never start  
The hesitation before the first step  
A child contemplating her first word  
The finger gently bearing down on the stopwatch  
Ticking down your life

Quiet is a minefield of missed opportunities  
Each one combusting at the edge of another night  
Your feet paralysed by the shells hovering in your breath  
The limbo you are stuck in  
Between a country that keeps pulling you back  
And a heart that will not be chained  
Squirming away through every hole it can find

Quiet is the infinitesimal gap between your foot and the ground  
The unbridgeable distance between yesterday and today  
Months and years  
Lifetimes and universes  
The aeons between two eyes  
The stagnant puddle in each of them  
The distant lightning threatening a storm

Quiet is not peace  
It is a piece of chaos  
Stopped mid step  
Taking a last look  
Back at the story  
Chiseling a memory  
Capturing a moment  
Before being stirred into a new word

~ *Rhea Paine*

## WRITING HOPE

- *Write, child, write.*
- *What shall I write?*

The world outside is full  
with terrors:  
waters rising, cruelty too  
another fire started  
another town drowned  
another person of color  
shot by a cop  
another cop shot  
for being a cop  
another standoff with  
another tyrant

and last night on the news  
a woman in Ukraine  
of eighty-three  
raped  
by a Russian soldier;  
this morning the man  
who was my landlord  
last year in Kyiv  
killed  
for defending his homeland  
and his three-year-old girl.

- *Write all the reasons for hope  
you can remember.  
Write and don't stop.  
Write.  
Write.*

I dutifully begin:  
pomegranates      pupae  
                         seashells      springtimes —

the more I write, the faster words come —

mountains    siblings    hives full of honey  
the quilt my grandmother made for me  
smooth small rocks that just fit in my hand  
digging fingers into rich brown earth  
the peace of silence with someone loved  
the gentle way doves coo toward evening  
fresh drops of morning dew  
spots on a ladybug's back  
peppermint  
    paint drops  
        pianos  
this pen      and      this ink      and      this breath

— *There's too many, I say. I'll never finish.*  
— *Good, she says. You don't have to.*  
*You just have to write*  
*one more line*  
*than the destroyers.*

~ *Kendra Fiddler*



*"States of Awareness" ~ Angelica Banales*



Artists and other subversives  
have painted and written and  
covered this symbol of division,  
casting tincture over terror  
bathing tragedy in beauty and brightness  
color reaching for color  
words binding together  
in a pact named Peace.

On this sunny Saturday in spring  
surrounded by tourists and freedom  
apprehension escapes me  
that this symbol was once just itself;  
that, here, people I never knew  
lived and died  
lacking bananas and bread;  
how one wall  
in one city  
divided the whole world.

And this hope blossoms here:  
It is not by tearing down  
every last square meter  
but by forging art from sorrow  
that the shame of violence  
is defused and buried:  
as the old man said,  
Beauty will save the world.

~ *Kendra Fiddler*

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<sup>1</sup> A section of the Berlin Wall.

Words fill the page  
CrowdingCrowdingCrowding  
Until all the white turns black  
With thoughts and feelings  
Feelings and thoughts

Trapped

Within a brain  
Within a heart  
Filled with concerns  
About the rising water levels,  
The cats being run out of their home,  
The Roses and The Daisies  
The humans, the plants,  
The animals, the humans

Trapped

It pushes  
Harder Harder  
Until it's threatening to escape  
To spill out of a body, a mind  
Too small to contain it

Hand scrambles for a pen  
Fingers grasp the pen  
Before the scratching of paper  
Is all that echoes throughout the room

FasterFaster  
The pen moves  
While word after word  
Appears, marking the page  
With the script of a quill pen

Words fill the page  
CrowdingCrowdingCrowding  
Until all the white turns black  
With thoughts and feelings  
Feelings and thoughts

Trapped  
Escaped  
Escaped  
Trapped

*~ Tammy Nguyen*

## THE PASSING YEAR

Can one be but in shock and awe  
As tides shift swiftly against or for?  
From contentment's heart, into despair,  
Or rise from shadow, to good fortune's glare.

In so short a time, life is up or down,  
New births or romances, fill hearts with joy.  
Then fate can topple your brief, fragile crown,  
Adjust its gaze, with intent to destroy.

Forget the hate that crushed your soul -  
Bitterness breeds nothing but ill laments,  
That unwelcome events may well cajole,  
But only ever at your own expense.

Do push on, persist through the woeful times,  
Whatever should be the source of your pain.  
The journey will yield much sunnier climes,  
With the passing of night, the clouds, and rain.

And when good favour once more gives you grace,  
To banish the trouble that caused your blight,  
These different worlds, all in the same space,  
In transience, come and go from your sight.

I can't fail to wonder, at all these things,  
To be amazed, by what the passing year brings.

*~ Sam Bartle*



*"Return to Center" ~ Shirley Huang*

They get up when the wild parrots sing and stretch their fluttering lime feathers from within the trees. My mother sleeps for a little while longer as the white cleaning cloths tumble softly in the dryer. My father wakes up the kitchen with the smell of the trickling coffee. A silver fork swirls the eggs into a yellow soup while the flat pan slowly turns the white bread into a crispy brown. With an indescribable tenderness, they drink the coffee beans of the day. My mother ties her hair up into a shiny bun. She guides her scratched reading glasses to the bridge of her nose. My father straightens his curly hair with the sharp teeth of a green comb. He packs a collection of fruit and frozen water bottles into their tiny blue igloo. They fit the plastic bag of dried cloths next to the purple vacuum in the trunk of the car. Then, they lift their black rubber shoes into their peeled tan Toyota and head off into the suburbs of Southern California. Ever since I can remember, I have always seen my mother and father drive off together into the early morning. Though, it wasn't always in the little tan Toyota that they have now. When we were kids, they would wave goodbye from behind the glossy windshield of a green Mazda. The first time that I remember seeing them drive off in this green car was from the window of our very first home.

Looking back, our first home looked like a coffee cake topped with a thick layer of butter cream. It had chipped railings and steps made up of multicolored stones that led into a corridor of numbered doors. We lived behind the number nine in a small two-bedroom space. The walls and the carpet were colorless. The kitchen cabinets creaked like the strings of an out of tune violin. And there was an old furnace on the wall that served as the apartment's personal harmonica. The rumbling sound of its musical breath would keep us warm during the sudden chills of the winter nights. Although less than perfect, this small coffee cake apartment is a very special place because it is where we all began.

My sisters and I began our childhood in this home. We used to ride our bikes through the long driveway that passed through the rest of the coffee cake buildings. We peddled fiercely all the way to the limit so that we could see the horses in the aging ranch on the other side of the fence. We had cartwheel competitions with the kids who helped us learn

English. And we chased each other incessantly up and down the stony stairs until we got in trouble. We ate *Elotes* over the scattered patches of grass as the orange sky dimmed our shadows. And when the green Mazda finally came back home, our mustard-stained faces would reach up to meet our parent's towering embrace.

This is where they began as well. This is where they began to come home with a sweaty cast over their smiles. This is where my mother began to come home in bleach-stained blouses and dampened socks. This is where my father's forearms began to tan heavily from the long drives under the Angeleno sun. This is where they began to wear their black rubber shoes to prevent another dangerous slip. This is where they began to carry the bag of cleaning cloths in the back of their car. And this is where they began to carry a twinkle in their eyes.

Although the coffee cake apartment had provided a home for our beginnings, my parents had a bigger dream. My mother and father longed to build a home in a house that they could call their own. A house that they could decorate freely without the looming threat of landlord fees. They wanted to give us our own backyard and our own front yard. They wanted to give us a house to grow up in. The twinkle in their eyes quickly transformed into a spark. And they slowly began to fill up the piggybank that lived under their mattress. My mother continued to scrub the tiles of moldy bathrooms and scraped crusted oil off kitchen counters. My father carried a feathery duster on his back pocket while chasing the dust bunnies that had accumulated under their client's furniture. During some weekends, my mother would even serve and wash dishes at parties in order to make a little extra cash. She would often come home just in time for our wrinkled pajamas to warm her chilled and exhausted jacket.

After a couple years of saving, our days at the coffee cake apartment became numbered when my mother and father began to look for the house that would be able to fulfill their dream. They became extremely *contentos* when they fell in love with a little green house on El Contento Street. With the sound of the new jingling keys in their hands, they opened the door and stepped into our new home. They couldn't wait to make it into their own. They painted every room into a different

color. They scattered picture frames against the walls and across the entire living room. My father bought his very first lawn mower and set up the sprinkler system so that the garden could shine perfectly in green. Window shopping at Home Goods quickly became a thing of the past. And instead, every trip would reel in a giant new mirror, new silky curtains, elegant placemats, and all kinds of plastic plants for decoration. They decorated every room with every ounce of enthusiasm that filled their heart.

They were especially excited to decorate our room. They bought twin beds and matching comforters that looked like giant pink bags of tightly packed Hawaiian rolls. And they rolled an entire can of hot pink paint across all four of our bedroom walls. My mother even lovingly picked out a beautifully intricate pink chandelier. Its plastic crystals cascaded gracefully from the center of our popcorned ceiling. It was very beautiful indeed. That is until nighttime came. Then, the chandelier would scare the living crap out of my sisters and I because it looked like the shrunken head from the new Harry Potter movie. And during the daytime, the bubblegum walls became so blinding that my parents were forced to quickly restore the walls back to their original color.

We spent many good times in this little green house. And it fulfilled my parents dream for a little while. We had a home that was entirely ours. We could decorate the walls without any hesitation. We had a backyard that continued to watch us grow. We had a front yard with our own patches of grass. And every evening, when the Santa Ana winds practiced their whistling lullaby, we waited for the green car to bring my mother and father back home. They continued to work just as hard as they did back when we lived in the coffee cake apartment. But, when their tired smiles greeted us at the door, they were happy to step into their own home. This little green house came to be warmly beloved. But, just like the Santa Ana winds that rattled through the fuzzy bottle trees in our yard, life ultimately rattled our family into a different direction.

We moved many times after our stay at the little green house. And since then, the famous Californian price tag has made it difficult for my parents to permanently make their dream come true. But as my sisters



and I were nearing the end of our childhood, my mother and father still wanted to provide a house for us. Even though it would not be entirely ours, they wanted to create a comfortable home. A home in which we could spend the remaining days of our childhood. They rented a charming fruit house that rested on the corner of a main street. This new home was just as beautiful as the little green house. It had marbled counters and caramel-colored wooden floors. It had blooming Plumeria and a set of elegant French doors that opened into a garden of fruit trees. There were lemon trees, orange trees and even a spectacularly tall avocado tree. And every other year, the giant fig tree on the other side of the house gifted my parents with memories of their favorite Ecuadorian street snacks.

Although this corner house wasn't our own, it became our home in many ways. This home saw my sisters and I transition into adulthood. This is where my father nervously taught us how to drive. This is where my mother got up before the wild parrots awakened so that she could send us off with a hearty breakfast. This home is where my father would bring home chocolates when the stress of our college days overwhelmed us. This is where they became worried when the stress became painful. From these windows, our parents watched us come back home with the heaviest of books in our hands. They comforted us at the door when we came back with tears caused by the tough realities of the world. This is where they proudly looked at us when we came back home with tasseled caps and long gowns.

From these windows, I watch their little tan Nissan pull up into the driveway. They come home when the wild parrots fly back into their resting trees. I watch their black rubber shoes slowly step into our borrowed front yard. They carry the bag of greyed cleaning cloths from the trunk of the peeling car. My sisters and I embrace them at the door. And without wanting to, I take notice of the many years that we have passed through together. When we embrace, they no longer tower over us. My father's white hair peaks out from his curly black strands. My mother's aching joints have slowed down her steps. The weight of their home cleaning service begins to weigh heavier on their bones. But I can still see the same twinkle in their eyes. Even though my sisters and I are now adults, they still dream of buying a house for us. Not so much a

home that we can grow up in anymore, but a home that we can spend time together. A home in which we can visit them in. A home in which they can find peace when retirement comes their way. A home with a garden that needs a lawn mower. A home that they can paint into all sorts of bubble gum colors. A home in which we cannot be rattled away from. A home that is by us and for us as an American family.

*~ Evelynne Vallejo Coba*

## LISTENING AND LIVING

I'm driving down the road  
through backward country.  
The radio plays my regrets. The clamor  
of singing fills the airspace  
between my ears. The range  
of my roaming eyes stretches to the sun.  
I've left the world for calmer places dumber  
than my feelings. There's no word for water  
here. Why are the joints of my fingers  
bleeding? Whatever I want to come true  
has me under its spell. It's five miles  
between here and my last thought.

Listening becomes living.  
The ocean ahead of me dances like a top.  
The summer day moves like a sour stomach.  
If only I knew what left me naked  
and vulnerable I would pick up steam living  
my own disaster and loving my absent mind.  
This highway snakes like a caravan  
through the desert. I wish I could remember  
where I'm going.

*~Joel Fry*

## IN PREPARATION FOR PLATONISM

*there is no return*  
I say as I sink  
below the default level

traversing the  
circumference of my  
disintegration anxiety

I do what nietzsche told  
me delight in  
uncert  
ainty  
with sisyphus coyly smiling on  
the margin to be dead might  
be a way of knowing  
is this an ascending  
or descending movement?

the time signature doesn't tell  
so I try out as my own  
priest on the  
invisible parallel

how to quell the  
latent anarchism  
within?

for

*no noble well-grown  
tree ever disowned  
its dark roots*

decline the upward  
chariot posturing  
beatitudes

among unanswered  
questions in a  
theatre of  
waiting

there is no reason  
save the critique of *all* reason

in the break a schism  
a herd of philosophers on edge

preparing still  
another platonism

~ *Ryan Leack*

## MY SATURDAYS ARE NOT LIKE SUNDAYS

My Saturdays are not like Sundays.  
They do not glaze over pancakes  
or wait piously for church bells.  
They move steady on the 210 at 9am  
from the groves of Pasadena  
to the streets of Covina and line up  
in line for check out by 10am.  
A purse, a book, a porcelain kitten .... Anything will do.  
I am on my way to brunch, but not before  
buying a shot of dopamine  
to help me through the next few hours.  
I climb the hills of San Dimas to my parent's house  
and step into position.  
Time moves differently here,  
the clock runs like it's trying to escape,  
while we move in circles-  
we are a carousel off balance,  
horses missing and broken,  
trying to jerk-  
jerk into the motion  
of a seamless rhythm  
across the cracked parquet of our family home.

~ *Karina D. Ruiz*

## BIOGRAPHIES

### PAUL DAVID ADKINS

Paul David Adkins (he/him) served in the US Army from 1991-2013. He holds a MA in Writing and Oral Tradition from The Graduate Institute, Bethany, CT. He counsels soldiers and teaches scholars in a correctional facility. Publications include Barzakh, The Mark, Crab Creek, Kissing Dynamite, Badwater, and Spillway.

### ANGELICA BANALES

I approach my art practice by observing people, objects and ideas as different forms and intensities of energy, manifested through spectrums of color.

It's through the interaction of raw materials (matter) and the manipulation of light (energy) that everything can be conceived and come into being.

The works address different stages of growth and explores how pigment, natural minerals, the materiality of painting, and abstraction can come together as correlates of states of consciousness.

The work amplifies energy fields in a reflective state experienced while immersing the viewer in color fields. Through the manipulation of scale, and by extension of our perceptual field, my work signals a potential for the expansion of one's awareness and reflects a dimension of accessibility that is available to us all.

### SAM BARTLE

Sam Bartle was born in Hull, England, and grew up in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Like many, he began during the COVID-19 pandemic, but prefers to write on all aspects of his life experiences and observations of the world around him.

His climate change poem, 'On Beautiful Sky' was featured on BBC Radio Humberside's 'No Filter' programme, and a line was selected for use in Luke Jerram's urban art exhibition 'Of Earth and Sky' (Winner: 'Best Arts Project' - Hearts For The Arts Awards 2022).

Sam's work has also appeared in The High Wolds Poetry Festival Collection 2021, on BBC Radio York's Upload programme, and has received publication in 'Wildfire Words', 'Duck Duck Mongoose' and 'The Writer's Club' poetry magazines.

### CHRIS BENCH

My name is Chris. I live in Washington and enjoy being outside. I like to write late at night.

### ROBERT BEVERIDGE

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Flashes of Darkness, Fairy Piece, and Take Five, among others.

Social Media:

IG: @no\_gods\_exist

Letterboxd:

<https://letterboxd.com/xterminal/>  
[last.fm: https://www.last.fm/user/xterminal](https://www.last.fm/user/xterminal)

### **ALI BOYCE**

Ali Boyce uses she/her pronouns, tends to stolen Tongva land, is a cis-Queer, Black/biracial abolitionist, partner, mother, foster and adoptive parent, artist, dance lover, intersectional feminist, and rootworker.

She holds an MSW with an emphasis in children, families, and communities, as well as an MA in Cultural Studies. Ali is currently a PhD Cultural Studies student at Claremont Graduate University, writing her dissertation on foster care abolition and transnational adoption bans, with mixed methodologies that include Black feminist theories, Black diasporic theories, historiography, Marxist theory, and concepts of radical rootworking.

### **JOHN BRADY**

Based in Portland, OR, John Brady is the author of *Golden Palms*, a noir about LA politics. It's funny too. His fiction and nonfiction writing has appeared in various outlets, including *pioneertown*, *Exposition Review*, *Big Windows Review*, the *Los Angeles Review*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Mother Jones*, *Punk Planet*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and on *National Public Radio*.

### **DURENA BURNS**

Durena Burns is a California-based writer working on obtaining an English degree. She has delved into multiple genres which include poetry, narrative nonfiction, historical fiction, and science fiction. Burns has self-published a biography, *\_Call Me Whitehead\_*, about her late great uncle's experiences as a black man during the Vietnam War. She has also published two short stories in *Writing Bloc's* anthologies *\_Escape\_* and *\_Family\_* titled "I Wish It Happened" and "Together Again" respectively. When she's not writing, her interests are singing, dancing, watching TV, and working in special education.

### **JONATHAN CENICEROS**

Jonathan Cenicerros is an aspiring local and self-taught artist from Southern California. They study and practice art styles such as: rococo, fauvism, post-impressionism, and contemporary. A part time student and fulltime artist; they work towards learning new art everyday. Jonathan one day hopes to show their works in an exhibit and become a renowned artist.

### **EVELYNNE VALLEJO COBA**

Evelynne Vallejo Coba is an avid fan of movies and chocolate chip ice cream. She is currently studying creative writing at Mt. San Antonio College. By reconnecting with her creative side, she hopes to find her way as she steps into the future.



### **ELIZABETH COLETTI**

Elizabeth Coletti is an editor and master's student at Arizona State University. She is a recipient of the Louis D. Rubin Jr. Prize in Fiction and a finalist for the James Hurst Prize for Fiction, and her work has appeared in *Five on the Fifth* and *Cellar Door* literary magazine. She enjoys visiting museums alone and holding strong opinions on grammar.

### **KURTIS CONDRA**

My name is Kurtis, and I have been writing since I was 13; it was not until October 2020 that I began to embrace my writing fully. At that time, I also chose a persona to project my work onto; when I am not writing, I am Kurtis, but I am known as Arthur when I am writing. I hope to merge the two into one; I no longer want to be Arthur; I want to be Kurtis once more.

### **MARIANNA CRUZ**

Marianna Cruz is a multi-media artist from West Covina, CA. Some of the many disciplines that comprise her artistic practice are painting, ceramics, jewelry, and sewing. Through her art, she has explored topics ranging from nature to sexuality and spirituality; often, her art stems from the intersection of these. She's currently interested in writing and illustrating comics, developing video games, and brewing ideas for her next illustration. In her free time, she enjoys observing her adorable loaf of a cat Mona. You can find more of her work at [campsite.bio/indigodream/](https://campsite.bio/indigodream/)

### **LAYAL DAHI**

Layal Dahi is a senior in undergraduate English at Cal Poly Pomona. Layal's academic interests include creative writing and British literature. After graduating she hopes to continue her studies in graduate school and eventually teach.

### **ATLAS DANIEL**

Atlas Daniel (they/them) is a rising senior at Westridge School who didn't take a liking to poetry until a little over halfway through their junior year. After experiencing love and heartbreak for the first time in their junior year, Atlas's began using poetry as a method of processing their emotions, and they hope that others will find ways to connect with their poetry.

### **JOSETTE ESTES**

Josette Estes is a writer inspired by human vulnerability. Through her work, most of which take on abstract and experimental forms, she hopes to reach people with the emotion of her unique language. Besides poetry, Josette finds a passion in traveling. In the exploration, observation, and immersion of various languages, cultures, identities, food, etc., she searches for the commonalities that link humanity together. This allows her to reach wider audiences with her writing and create a more profound effect on others.

### **KENDRA FIDDLER**

Kendra Fiddler completed a Master's of

Abrahamic Studies from Dallas International University while waiting out the pandemic in Egypt and Ukraine. She is currently pursuing an M-TESOL with Arizona State University and working as an editor. Poetry, dance, and children's literature are her main fortresses against the onslaughts of life.

### **JOY FIRE**

I am a lifelong visual artist, with a specialty in blacksmithing and metalwork. Visual art for me is an alternative method of communication with others, especially communication that it is by its nature inexplicable with words. I am interested in the very foundation of what it means to exist in this world, and in my work, I focus specifically on physical sensation. One elementary aspect of existence is how we physically experience our environment. Therefore, the foundation of my visual art is metal, an elemental material with a pronounced physical presence, and the creation of objects through the extremely physical act of forging.

While my primary focus is the making of three-dimensional objects, it is also very important to me that these objects exist within a context. I do not think that there is a way for anyone to be objective, we all experience the world through our own positionality. So the next steps of my practice entails writing related to my objects, film photographs about them, and 8mm cinefilm captures of them within a specific environment. The writing is especially important because it is a very different way of communicating than my visual artwork. I have always placed great

importance on the writing that exists with my work, with the goal of creating an accessible entry point into it. My work is very much made for the experiencers of it, it is my small gift of something meaningful to others.

I am a certified instructor with the California Blacksmith Association, teach blacksmithing and bronze casting and am a Welding Instructor at Orange Coast College, and received my MFA from Claremont Graduate University in 2022. I have also published writing in the magazine California Blacksmith and am a governance committee member for the Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths. We promote and support opportunities to pursue blacksmithing for women, LGBTQ+, BIPOC, AAPI and MENA folks, those with disabilities, and others who have historically been marginalized in this field.

### **JOEL FRY**

Joel Fry lives in Athens, Alabama. He has had poems published in Asheville Poetry Review, North Dakota Quarterly, The Florida Review, and many other places. His latest book of poetry is called *The Sound of Rain*, and was published by Cyberwit in 2021. He enjoys writing about solitude and the places the mind goes when it is alone.

### **MICHELLE GATEWOOD**

Michelle Gatewood received her Bachelors in Applied Language Studies from Cal Poly Pomona. She is from windy Fontana and currently resides in Riverside with her cat

Phoebe. Together, they read poetry and learn about trauma.

### **OLIVIA GEISER**

Olivia Geiser is a bilingual recent honor graduate of Cal Poly Pomona, where she studied English and Spanish and edited for the Bronco Guide magazine, published by The Poly Post. She had two of her articles published in this magazine and hopes to continue sharing her creative work. She currently works as a paralegal but can't suppress her passion for writing and editing.

I have spent the past year working in Associated Press style as Editor for my university's magazine, published by The Poly Post. Apart from editing and proofreading nearly 50 articles, I generated article topics, contributed articles myself, and worked closely with the graphic design team and other departments of the publication. I am an ACES (the society for editing) member and part of Sigma Tau Delta, the international English honor society.

### **KELLI GLOVER**

I am a 30 year old first generation and reentry student at CSUF. I am majoring in English and pursuing a teaching credential after earning my B.A. My goal is to teach and inspire the next generation of writers, readers, and thinkers.

### **SONIA GOMEZ**

My name is Sonia Gomez and I am an

English major attending California State University, Fullerton. I became an English major because I am at my happiest when I am writing, although I love to read as well. To me, writing has become a way of life. In following this path, I have had the privilege of having my original screen play published in the annual literary journal, River's Voice 20th edition from Rio Hondo Community College. Although, I have written prior to this, it was this moment that solidified my deepest desire to continue writing. Writing challenges me to express myself and my ideas, including in unconventional ways. That is, I enjoy using common themes in uncommon ways.

Ultimately, I am an aspiring author who wants nothing more than to tell genuine stories to interested readers. For instance, my short story is deeply influenced by Mexican folklore I learned about as a child. Although it is a horror story, it is also a story based on truth from the perspective of a Mexican American. We are raised with superstition and, to some extent, even as we've grown into adulthood, a part of us will always identify with that same superstition that haunted us as children.

### **JOHN GREY**

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Sheepshead Review, Stand, Poetry Salzburg Review and Hollins Critic. Latest books, "Leaves On Pages" "Memory Outside The Head" and "Guest Of Myself" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Ellipsis, BlueLine and International Poetry Review.

### **TIM HARVEY**

My dog is cooler than me.

### **EDNA HELED**

An artist, art therapist, counsellor and travel journalist living in Auckland, NZ. She studied Film & TV (BFA), Visual Arts (Diploma), Art Therapy (MA) and Psychology (BA Hons).

Her writing includes short stories, poetry, travel articles and non-fiction. She has published in NZ, Australia, Israel and more.

### **MARIKO HERRERA**

Mariko Herrera is a rising senior at University of California, Irvine, majoring in business administration and minoring in creative writing. Her interests as a writer include the local scenes and history of Southern California, and character study.

Her other hobbies include reading, roller skating, and dance.

### **SOPHIA HOLTZ**

Sophia Holtz is an SF-turned-LA girl, cat mom, and lover of art. She has a BFA in drama from NYU, and is currently attending Long Beach City College. When she's not writing, Sophia can be found composing music, cooking up something new in the kitchen, or checking out the latest horror flick. *Classic Girl* is her first novel.

### **CHRISTOPHER HONEY**

Christopher Honey is an MFA student at the University of Saint Thomas. His poetry, essays and articles have appeared in such publications as *The Building Trades News*, *Montgomery Living Magazine*, *Atlantic Pacific* and *Literature*. He lives in Washington, DC with his wife and daughter.

### **SHIRLEY HUANG**

I'm an artist and photographer born and raised in Los Angeles, California. My works are inspired by nature, stories, and observed life, and they explore themes of travel, distance, and time. I studied media arts at the University of California at San Diego. Before that, I graduated from the Ryman Arts program and apprenticed at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles.

### **JAMES CROAL JACKSON**

James Croal Jackson is a Filipino-American poet who works in film production. He has three chapbooks: *Count Seeds With Me* (Ethel Zine & Micro-Press, 2022), *Our Past Leaves* (Kelsay Books, 2021), and *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights, 2017). He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Pittsburgh, PA. ([jamescroaljackson.com](http://jamescroaljackson.com))

### **SETH JANI**

Seth Jani lives in Seattle, WA and is the founder of Seven Circle Press ([www.sevencirclepress.com](http://www.sevencirclepress.com)). Their work has appeared in *The American Poetry Journal*, *Chiron Review*, *Ghost City Review*, *Rust+Moth* and *Pretty Owl Poetry*, among

others. Their full-length collection, *Night Fable*, was published by FutureCycle Press in 2018. Visit them at [www.sethjani.com](http://www.sethjani.com).

### **DOROTHY JOHNSON-LAIRD**

Dorothy Johnson-Laird is a poet and social worker who lives in New York City. She received an M.F.A in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College. Dorothy also has a passion for African music. She has published music journalism with [www.afropop.org](http://www.afropop.org) and [www.worldmusi central.org](http://www.worldmusi central.org). Recent poems were accepted for publication by Evening Street Review and BeZine.

### **JESIKA KEO**

Jesika Keo is an illustrator and a studio arts major at Chaffey College. She loves to create concept art and character designs using 2d and 3d softwares on her spare time.

### **EUNICE KIM**

Eunice Kim is a writer, editor, and musician from Los Angeles. She attended Amherst College and received her MFA from Otis College of Art and Design, where she worked with notable authors such as Alexander Chee, Amity Gaige, and Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum. Currently, she is attending Claremont Graduate University for her PhD in English. Her research is focused on the intersection between fairytales, religion, and American literature, while her literary work is influenced by music and the natural world.

### **RYAN LEACK**

Dr. Ryan David Leack teaches writing and rhetoric at the University of Southern California. He was the Editor-in-Chief of Pomona Valley Review for seven years, which he now serves as an adviser.

### **JERRY LIEBLICH**

Jerry Liebllich (they/them) writes plays and poems in Williamstown MA, and Brooklyn NY. Plays include D Deb Debbie Deborah (Clubbed Thumb), and Everything for Dawn (Experiments in Opera). Poems have appeared in SOLAR. Jerry has held residencies at MacDowell, MassMoCA, Blue Mountain Center, Millay Arts, and UCROSS. [www.thirdear.nyc](http://www.thirdear.nyc)

### **ROBIN LONGFIELD**

I was born in Georgia, but grew up in southwestern Orange County. I have lived in the Inland Empire with my husband John and a continuously revolving collection of rescue dogs and cats since the mid-1980's. We have two grown daughters. I write not only to determine what I think, but also to articulate those feelings and impression in the language that works better than anything i could spontaneously just say to someone.

### **ROBERT LOREN**

I am a senior English Literary Studies Major at Cal Poly Pomona. I enjoy writing because

it provides me with an outlet to creatively express my unfiltered emotions. Though my primary focus is writing poetry, I also enjoy drawing and painting.

### **CHRISTIAN HANZ LOZADA**

Christian Hanz Lozada (he/him/they) is the son of an immigrant Filipino and a descendent of the Confederacy. His heart beats with hope and exclusion. He coauthored the poetry book *Leave with More Than You Came With* from Arroyo Seco Press and the history book *Hawaiian* in Los Angeles. His poems and stories have appeared in *Hawaii Pacific Review* (Pushcart Nominee), *A&U Magazine*, *Rigorous Journal*, *Cultural Weekly*, *Dryland*, among others. Christian has featured at the Autry Museum, the Twin Towers Correctional Facility, Tebot Bach, and *Beyond Baroque*. He lives in San Pedro, CA and uses his MFA to teach his neighbors' kids at Los Angeles Harbor College.

### **ANISSAH MADRID**

Anissah Madrid is a Pomona-based student and writer currently working on transferring to a four-year university for a degree in either English or Philosophy.

### **BROOKE McAULEY**

Brooke McAuley is a 19-year-old senior at CSU Fullerton, preparing to graduate with a degree in English. She is a therapeutic horseback riding instructor and is pursuing her dreams of becoming published. For as

long as she has been able to, Brooke has been writing poems and hopes to do so for as long as she can.

### **OIE MENDOZA**

Oie is a student at Orange Coast College who has recently reignited their passion for poetry through a Creative Writing course. Their writing is heavily influenced by their experience as a queer and neurodivergent person, as well as their fascination with rebirth, enlightenment, and the construction, or deconstruction, of the self. When they aren't writing, Oie enjoys painting, making jewelry, and spending as much time as possible at home with their dog, Rosie.

### **MALIA MIGUEL**

Malia Miguel is currently a second-year student at the University of Redlands pursuing a double major in studio art and biochemistry. Miguel mainly does traditional art of drawing and painting, but she also enjoys creating digital art. She is from Mentone, CA, and had an artwork recently published in the *Redlands Review*. Since art is her favorite hobby, when she's not studying, she's probably drawing.

### **ASH MOJICA**

I am Ash Mojica, a nonbinary writer currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at Cal State University Fullerton with an Associate of English Degree. Born and raised in Santa Ana, California, I was raised by two Mexican immigrant parents. Living as a member of the LGBT community,

I aim to write stories centering around BIPOC LGBT+ youth. I have a passion for telling stories, and my family has always been my biggest support.

### **TAMMY NGUYEN**

I am an undergraduate student in the BA English program at California State University, Fullerton. I am graduating Spring 2022 with the goal of becoming an editor and published author after graduation. I enjoy reading in my free time, especially sports romances.

### **ABIGAIL ORILLA**

My name is Abigail Orilla, and I'm currently an English major in her senior year at Cal State Fullerton. Admittedly, my love for reading is a forced one -- I must have deadlines to finish a book, or even a poem. My love for writing is the same, as while I'll occasionally indulge in "literary doodles" -- one liners or one-paragraph-ers -- I've always needed that extra nudge to get the words out. That being said, "Instant Coffee" was nudged into existence by one of my professors, whose assignment was to write either an essay or a short story on what the American Dream entails.

Granted, I don't know if something that can be read as a poem and only has the formatting of prose counts as a short story. I also don't know if something with only four lines of dialogue, and is mostly monologue, counts as a short story. As a rule of thumb for myself, I tend to write as I would speak, or if not how I speak, how I think. At the same time, what I think must flow when

read aloud, so even if the text is a jumble of ideas darting back and forth, or even if the sentences aren't really sentences, there is still a string of momentum pulling you forward.

### **LESLIE ORTEGA**

I am a mother, a caregiver and a college student. I have an Associate Degree in Biological Science from Long Beach City College. Currently I am still working towards my goal of earning an Associate Degree for Registered Nursing. The pandemic put my educational and occupational goals on hold, but I was able to spend more time with my family. It also allowed me more time to write stories.

### **RHEA PAINE**

Born to Bengali parents in India, more of a nomad at heart, with frayed roots that seem to belong nowhere. Have been writing most of my life, though mostly unpublished. Worked in television for a few years, now focusing on my writing and a book review page on instagram. A few writings can be found on @wellfedpages and Our Name Is Amplify.

### **DONNA PHILLIPS**

I was a non-traditional student at Pitzer College in Claremont, California, where I earned my BA in Creative Writing. At Claremont Graduate University, I earned my MA in English and Creative Writing. I taught English at Citrus College in Glendora, and

currently tutor students and work on my writing.

### **KENNETH POBO**

Kenneth Pobo (he/him) is the author of twenty-one chapbooks and nine full-length collections. Recent books include *Bend of Quiet* (Blue Light Press), *Loplop in a Red City* (Circling Rivers), and *Lilac And Sawdust* (Meadowlark Press). His work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Asheville Literary Review*, *Nimrod*, *Washington Square Review*, *Mudfish*, *Hawaii Review*, and elsewhere.

### **J. MAAK**

J. Maak is a writer and change-maker in urban Los Angeles. She teaches environmental sustainability at a private college as well as to the general public. When not writing, she can typically be found in a garden: helping others with their vegetable plots, maintaining her own fruit trees and veggies, or watching birds and butterflies in the backyard wildlife habitat she stewards.

### **EMMA RAMIREZ**

Emma Ramirez is a fourth-year Cinema and Television Arts major and Creative Writing minor at California State University Fullerton. She is a third-generation FilipinoAmerican who focuses on telling stories about the Filipino-American experience and the LGBTQIA+ experience and is interested in exploring the intersectionality of both identities. Emma

has written and directed multiple short films and wrote an episode of the narrative horror radio show, "Mystery Hour," that airs on Moon Glow Radio. Emma is currently working on her first novel.

### **NEENA RICHARDS**

Neena Richards is an aspiring writer and recent graduate from California State University Fullerton. With a B.A. in English Language Arts, and a minor in Creative Writing, she plans to continue her education and pursue a single subject teaching credential within English. She currently lives in Azusa, California where she juggles working part time, being an avid concert goer, and emerging as a storyteller in her own right.

### **CARMELO RUFFO**

I am a Lit student at CSUSB, married, with a big dog and an old cat and we're all cool together. I am going to teach high-school English and I can't wait to do it.

### **KARINA D. RUIZ**

Karina Ruiz (she/her/ella) is a storyteller and creator native to California. She draws inspiration from her inner world and the world around her. She is a Cancer sun, Virgo moon, and a Leo rising. She is a poetry editor for *Pomona Valley Review* and her works have been featured in *Saint Lunita Magazine* and *Da Poetry Lounge*.



### **REV. MOLLIE MAE RYAN**

Mollie is a happenstance reverend who runs a trauma chaplaincy practice in the blustery PNW while completing her PhD in Claremont Graduate University's Religion and Gender Studies Program. Their focus is in Disability Studies and Scriptural Exegesis. Her dissertation will encompass the

unheard stories of femme chronic pain, the history of hysteria, and how the harmful healing stories of the church and incorrect exegesis of the gospels have further cemented women being dismissed, gaslighted, and misdiagnosed. She enjoys playing records, watching trash tv, learning to be a plant person, and falling more in love with her retired service dog Bai.

### **RYAN SALLY**

Ryan Sally is a poet from Pomona, California who loves both her town and poetry but does not take bios seriously. The poet known as Ryan Sally currently has betrayed her very principals and currently works for a mega corporation, but she is reminded of the old proverb, "it is hard for a poet out here, and ortho-work don't pay itself". Ryan (also known as the love child of Mr. Rogers and Nicki Minaj) is an advocate of local conservation of history, culture and environment. Ryan looks forward to returning back to school to gain the tools to further her advocacy of her hometown.

### **JASMIN SALGADO**

Jasmin Salgado is a twenty-two-year-old female writer who comes from an immigrant family that migrated from Mexico to California. She was raised in Riverside County and is a first-generation college student who has received her bachelor's degree in English at the University of California Riverside in 2022. She is currently beginning her journey at Cal State San Bernardino to work on her Masters in English with an interest in teaching English at a High School and Community College level. In the future she wishes to pursue a Ph.D. in English to become a university professor. Jasmin has an interest in feminist literature as well as Chicana literature and wishes to pursue research in these areas. She has been writing since 2017 when she first published her 5 million read novel series *The Mafia Saved Me* on Wattpad. Since then, she has continued to write whether it is analytical essays, short fiction or poetry. *Grapefruit* is a short fiction and biography story which is near and dear to her. It is a story inspired by her father's painful youth. That being said, Jasmin has big plans for *Grapefruit* in the near future as she wishes to further develop this short story into a memoir and eventually have it published.

### **GERARD SARNAT**

Gerard Sarnat has been nominated for the pending 2022 Science Fiction Poetry Association Dwarf Star Award, won San Francisco Poetry's 2020 Contest, the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for handfuls of 2021 and previous Pushcarts

plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published including in 2022 Awakenings Review, 2022 Arts & Cultural Council of Bucks County Celebration, 2022 Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival Anthology, Washington Square/NYU Review, The Deronda Review, Jewish Writing Project, Hong Kong Review, Tokyo Poetry Journal, Buddhist Poetry Review, Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, Arkansas Review, Hamilton-Stone Review, Northampton Review, New Haven Poetry Institute, Texas Review, Vonnegut Journal, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, Monterey Poetry Review, The Los Angeles Review, and The New York Times as well as by Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Columbia, North Dakota, McMaster, Maine and University of Chicago presses. He's authored the collections Homeless Chronicles, Disputes, 17s, Melting the Ice King. Gerry is a Harvard College and Medical School-trained physician who's built and staffed clinics for the marginalized as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with climate justice, and serves on Climate Action Now's board. Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids plus six grandsons, and is looking forward to potential future granddaughters. [gerardsarnat.com](http://gerardsarnat.com)

### **FABIO SASSI**

Fabio Sassi makes photos and acrylics using what is considered to have no worth by the mainstream. Fabio lives and works in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at [www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com](http://www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com)

### **SLNTSTRWBRRY**

My poetry can be described as raw and aphoric with themes of femininity, identity development, and growth. I seek to write works that give readers a new awareness of emotions that begin a conversation.

My works have mainly appeared on my artist page, slntstrwbrry on instagram, but I am looking to expand to a new audience of readers.

### **EDWARD SUPRANOWICZ**

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, The Door Is a Jar, The Phoenix, and The Harvard Advocate. Edward is also a published poet.

### **FRANCESCA F. TERZANO**

Francesca F. Terzano is from the Inland Empire. When she is not working as an English Professor at Mt. San Antonio College, she is spending time with her cat, Thanced, and her partner.

### **LIZBETH TURCIOS**

Lizbeth Turcios is a student working towards the two graphic design certificates offered at Mt. San Antonio College.

Being a native to Southern California, she's had a melting pot of art influences over the years. As a child, her father worked as a computer technician, who at times took her to work to get acquainted with his clients involved in numerous arts. This opened her eyes to learning about many crafts that involved painting, printing, streetwear brand design, movie animation, photography, graphic design, etc. These experiences along with the introduction to the flyer designs for 90's/ 2000's rave flyer art in her adolescent years became some heavy influences that inspired her to pursue a career geared towards graphic design.

#### **SAMANTHA TURNER**

Samantha Turner is a recent English graduate from Cal State San Bernardino with a concentration in linguistics and a minor in creative writing. She writes works dealing with themes of substance abuse and intimate partner violence to raise awareness to encourage survivors, and give voices to those in similar situations. She has been published in Pacific Review's Issue 40 with her piece, '13 Lessons from an Anonymous Alcoholic'.

#### **JOHN TUSTIN**

John Tustin's poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals since 2009. [fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry](http://fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry) contains links to his published poetry online.

#### **JUAN CARLOS VALADEZ**

Juan Carlos has been writing poetry since March 1992 when he was 19 years old. His love for poetry is the constant flame in his heart, that despite all of the challenges that he has endured, has never died out. Juan Carlos spends his free time writing poetry, reading literature, and being with his daughters and parents. Juan Carlos is currently completing his first two poetry books anticipated for publication in the summer of 2022 titled "Take It Away, I Dare You" and "Voices From The Dark." Juan Carlos is currently a graduate student at UC, Riverside in the English Department pursuing a PhD.

#### **ILYN WELCH**

Ilyn Welch (she/her) writes horror, mystery and creative nonfiction from the Inland Empire in Southern California. Her flash horror has appeared in PANK.

#### **DANYANG XU**

Danyang Xu was a teacher in a middle school in northeast China. She completed her MS in Human Resource Management at the University of La Verne. She served in the U.S. Army. She is now pursuing her MA in Religion and American politics at Claremont Graduate University. Besides writing poems, she also enjoys watching American comedies and reading Chinese tragedies.



Thank you for reading