

Fall 2025

# The Vagabond





# The Vagabond



Fall 2025

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From Left to Right: Jesus Martinez, Alexis Ramos, Amyrey Artienda,  
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Other Writers Guild Officers

This semester's Vagabond was fully funded by the  
Southwestern Foundation and ASO through Ways and Means.  
We are very thankful for their continued support.

Sorry couldn't be bothered to write an editor's note. I will instead let my Editor-in-Chief handle the rest.

**Gunnar Rash**  
Head Editor

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# Editor's Note

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This is my first semester as Editor-in-Chief, relieving Jose Zuniga of his many years of sole responsibility of the magazine editing process. This semester's Vagabond went through a lot of back and forth between Jose and the new team of editors consisting of myself and our Head Editor Gunnar Rash.

The management of this magazine's creation has been quite an experience. The deadlines and review of so many great pieces I'm glad are included inspired me to write pieces of my own. I myself first submitted to the Vagabond just last semester Spring 2025. I've taken a big leap from submitter to Editor-in-Chief in less than a year. This edition wouldn't have been possible without the guidance and supervision of Jose, to which me and Gunnar are very thankful.

This semester we are publishing submissions from Southwestern College students, Southwestern Donavon students, and unique to this semester we are also publishing pieces from Sweetwater Union High School students.

**Jesus Martinez**  
Vice-President &  
Editor-in-Chief

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Vagabond**

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**The Vagabond editorial staff would like to thank the following people and organizations for their support of the publication of our clubs literary magazine:**

Professor Heather Eudy. She has helped and motivated past and present club members and officers to publish the magazine. She has been one of the biggest advocates of The Vagabond from dealing with issues outside of the club's control to reaching out to other English faculty to encourage students to submit their work to the Vagabond.

Dean of the School of Language and Literature, Antonio Alarcon. He has been a big supporter of the publication of the magazine. He is always looking for ways to help the club and the Vagabond whenever we encounter any issues.

The Southwestern College Foundation. They have funded the past four Vagabond issues as well as this current one. With their help we have been able to get more copies in more students' hands and thus get the voices and stories of our writers to more people.

Associated Student Organization (ASO). The ASO has had a hand in funding almost every publication of the Vagabond since its inception. It is reassuring to see that an organization run by students sees the value in a platform that is for the students by the students.

We are grateful for everyone mentioned as well as many other's support and generosity. It really shows that our school cares about encouraging and nurturing the creativity and strong voices of the students from our school.

Thank you.

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# Blossom

## Andrea Flores

As I sit under a tree  
A cold breeze whispers past me  
It gently caresses my face  
It feels like a soft kiss

A kiss that once brought us close  
A kiss that is now faint  
A kiss that made my heart  
Burst like a cherry blossom tree  
In spring's sweet embrace

With tear-filled eyes,  
I look up at trees  
Now empty  
Just like my heart  
Empty without you

## To Be Misanthrope Jesus Martinez

Every day they push me  
closer to the edge,  
closer to the mirror  
where I see a hateful creature staring back  
with skin a shade too brown,  
brown eyes—  
and a mouth full of words that taste like ash.

They tell me I'm lucky to be here,  
but I walk through halls where education's become a joke,  
professors overworked and disregarded in favor of AI,  
classrooms outdated like the promises of politicians  
who smile while they strip away futures  
like peeling paint from a house  
that was never ours to begin with.

I am a college student  
and a Mexican American  
and I am angry,  
angry at a country that  
celebrates genocide abroad  
and tells me it's not my problem,  
while children in my country  
starve in silence,  
and die in classrooms,  
and politicians pray  
and the poor remain obedient.

We no longer talk about children as the future.  
We talk about profit,  
about borders,  
about who deserves the light  
and who deserves the dark.  
We are the empire.  
We feed on the suffering of others  
and call it safety,  
call it freedom,  
call it God's will.

And still, here I am,  
pushed into hatred  
like it's the only honest response,  
because everywhere I look,  
people only see themselves.  
People who can't imagine a bigger picture  
or care to try.  
People who wish death  
on the brown, the queer, the vulnerable.

I am angry.  
I am tired.  
I am too awake for this world,  
too awake to watch  
the sky burn and the oceans rise  
and the forests fall  
and know  
they will call it progress.

America is a burning house,  
and we are told to stay inside,  
told to smile while the flames lick at our feet,  
told the fire is someone else's problem.  
But I see it,  
I feel it,  
I inhale the smoke  
and I refuse to pretend it isn't my own.

I am not naive.  
I am not soft.  
I am the echo of every lie you fed me,  
the reflection of every injustice  
you thought I'd ignore.  
I am the misanthrope you created  
because every day  
you show me  
what humanity refuses to see in itself.

And I will speak.  
I will rage.  
I will call out your empire  
and count every life it crushed  
and every child you forgot.  
I will not look away.  
I will not forgive.  
I will be louder than your lies,  
sharper than your greed,  
because the world does not deserve my silence,  
and I will not be quiet  
in the face of your empire of glass.

# Are You There?

## Richie Rubio

It's raining.

Are you there?

My socks are wet and my hair is dripping onto the carpet. I'm bleeding from somewhere, I can feel it. The pins and needles crawl up my calves but I can't look. I won't. Not if you're here.

Is the door locked?

My eyes shift quickly to the entrance. Yes. Deadbolted shut. I can hear my heart,

*thud! thud! thud!*

against my chest as my lungs shrivel with the effort to inhale. The pants I bought yesterday are covered in grass and grime, a wet slash runs across the back of my shirt and I'm pretty sure I nicked my ear on a branch on my way uphill. But it doesn't matter. I'm inside. You can't get me. Not if you're following the rules.

A rustling makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The huge panel windows to my right show me only trees bathed in the moon's pale light, everything else is hidden in darkness.

It's my first night alone in this house. Am I paranoid,

or have you lost your touch? I look to the windows again. Glass can shatter, and I have a feeling we're not playing anymore.

I haven't moved in eight minutes. Are you patient, or am I? This is sick. Weren't you ever taught not to play with your food? My keys dangle from my forefinger, every so often clinking together and rattling my insides but I can't afford distraction. I will stand in this godforsaken living room until the sun comes up.

Are you there?

Run, a voice in my head says. I very well could; sprint upstairs, turn on every lamp and flashlight and get into bed, burying myself under the covers, but what good would that do? No cotton on Earth would be a strong enough shield.

Thunder cracks, making me jump.

Just like you to pick weather like this.

The mirror on the opposite wall glistens as the glow from the porchlight across the street hits it in just the right way. My feet are getting tired... should I sit? No. It would be harder to be on alert. No comfort, I decide, only vigilance. I lean a little to the right. If you're behind me, I ought to see you coming. My hands twitch at my sides like I'm in

a standoff

in the wild wild west. Derangement is near, I can feel it. I would laugh if my teeth weren't chattering like an overgrown baby.

A bright glare catches my eye and I instinctively turn to the mirror again. The horns are the first thing I see, black and twisted. The creature staring back at me bares its teeth, cleaning its red-splattered fang with its long sharp tongue.

Inhale. Exhale.

A guttural scream claws its way up my throat, rasping and scratching my esophagus like a claustrophobic porcupine, but it dies on the way down my tongue and comes out like a strange, panicked gurgle. Its enough to break me. My balance plummets and then I'm on the floor, dragging myself away from the living room, bare skin scraping against the tile in the kitchen floor. The back of my head hits something, making me dizzy. The island. I've reached the limit of distance and it knows.

Its black beady eyes watch me hungrily as I cower in a corner, the open wound somewhere on my body burning in pain as if responding to the monster's citrusy gaze. I bring my knees to my chest and rock myself back and forth, as if it would help.

Almost instantly, it loses its patience. I imagine seeing me squirm was appealing for a few moments, now it's time to die. Long, dark, curly hair seeps through the silver mirror and hangs over the carpet as it makes its way through, horns first. Its fingers are short but slender adorned with long, flesh-colored claws designed to tear me apart. Its jaw contorts and cracks out of place, leaving its maw wide open, dribbling onto the carpet.

I brace myself. There's nowhere to go. I can't outrun it.

It is going to eat me alive.

The monster inches forward, slowly, tentatively, as if waiting for the opportunity to pounce. I don't understand. I could not be more helpless if I tried.

Go ahead, my eyes squeeze shut. I don't want to keep running from you.

As I'm waiting for the final blow, the unbearable pain, the bright light, a small hand settles over my knee. It feels uncertain, hesitant to even touch me. Is this what it wants? For its ugly face to be the last thing I see before I go? I won't give in to the cruelty, I can't.

A sniffle.

I squeeze my eyes harder.

"Why are you scared of me?" A little girl's voice asks.

Tears stream down my cheeks as I feel myself crack under the pressure.

My eye opens eeeever so slightly.

The creature is kneeling in front of me, its body no longer disgustingly broken or petrifying, just a little bruised and lanky. Its form has changed slightly, no longer as life-threatening as before but I'm still on edge, waiting for the trick.

She is a young girl; her hair is in tatters and her horns look dirty and battered. Her pupils have shrunk down so the whites of her eyes can be seen but her irises are still as black as the night. My heart is beating in my ears so I almost don't hear it when she says,

"Are you there?"

I stare at her openly now, throwing all caution to the wind. She is so familiar in every way. The curve of her nose, the dip of her neck, the mole below her eye, the crooked tooth on the bottom of her mouth. When I don't answer,

she sits in front of me and pulls her own knees to her chest, mirroring me in all ways.

A long time passes before I finally accept that this child is not here to hurt me. Slowly, her alien features shrink back into her until she is the spitting image of someone I haven't seen looking back at me in a very long time. The wound is closing, I realize, but even stitches ache in the best of times. She is patient, waiting for me to unthaw. My shoulders are still shaking but I reluctantly un-hug my legs and leave my chest unprotected, for better or for worse. She mimics me again, sitting crisscross applesauce and smiling weakly.

I felt ashamed. This was who I had been so desperate to make the villain? The supposed atrocity that would haunt me for the rest of life? A disgruntled, otherworldly being born to make me suffer and never look back.

But I see her now, for what she is.

For there is no me, without her.

“Are you there?” I try, my voice cracking.

She offers her hand.

“I'm here.”

# The Zoo

Rainee Robinson

Waking up was hell, groggy, sick and exhausted. I came to, in a sterile white room, a single unlit light fixed against the wall. No mirrors, no windows, no doors. I'd like to think I wouldn't panic waking up in an unfamiliar place with no recollection of how I got there, but I am a simple woman. I chose to freak the fuck out. Screaming for what felt like hours, banging against the walls, crying, pleading begging. Clawing at anything I could reach till my fingers started to bleed. Could I have been kidnapped? It was cold in the room, I couldn't stop shivering, tucking myself as tight as I could, in the furthest corner of the room from that light. It unnerves me. Something was seriously wrong, innately my skin couldn't stop crawling. My mind and body couldn't stop screaming like something was intrinsically wrong with this stupid room.

I can't recall falling asleep, but I wake up to blankets, food, and water piled neatly in front of me. My hands had been bandaged and the bloody marks scrubbed clean. Someone had been in here. I don't know if I should feel abject horror over the fact someone was here, someone cleaned me up and soundlessly moved my body like a doll. But frankly speaking, I didn't even know I was starving till I saw the tray. Sue me but I ate it, whoever was holding me already sealed me in here. I don't want to think about it, I don't need to, it won't do me any favors but I'm not leaving any time soon. I didn't even wake up to them dumping

this stuff here. And I'll be damned before I starve myself out of spite. I want to be full strength if I need to kick someone in their shit. But- it was off, the orange didn't quite taste like an orange, instead an amalgamation of a variety of different fruits, the bread was the wrong texture, it wasn't even hard, like something they would give when they ran out of wheat. The bread melted like butter, holding it in the warmth of my palm had it pooling through my fingers. The meat? Oh it was foul. It was almost like someone had seen the food, but couldn't taste it. Instead coming up with an idea of what it should've been. The temperature in the room is warmer too, someone is paying attention. Someone is watching me.

Maybe it was days or weeks, but the cycle stayed the same, the unlit light fixture on the wall never changes. But the unseen lights in the room would click off, I wouldn't remember falling asleep but I would wake up to a new tray of shitty knock off food, fresh water and sometimes new self care products. An oddly shaped toothbrush and nasty toothpaste, a hair brush, new clothes. I would do the same thing over and over, scream my lungs out, helplessly claw at the walls, try to break that stupid creepy fuckin light fixed to the wall, beg my captors for a response. All the same over and over. Then they introduce themselves. Horrors are what I call them, monstrous creatures that felt impossible to look out. Alien. They stupidly tried to disguise

themselves as humans, at first. Skin stretched too tight over their faces, limbs too long and oddly shaped, hair a tangled stringy mess, always silent. I don't know what they want. I don't want to know.

When they first showed themselves, I'll admit it was a clusterfuck. The rare time I was awake for their appearance. They come strolling in through a door? Or maybe phased through a wall, it hurts my head to think about it too long. Maybe that contributed to the panic. I must've had super strength, maybe they're weaker than I thought, or maybe it was a mixture of adrenaline and hysteria. But I bit clean through the hand of one handler and ripped what I assumed was an arm off another. A noise I wish I could never hear again emitted from the duo, a mad scramble for the door was made and before I could really stand. Gas filled the small room and I was asleep again, waking up to no blankets, no water, no food. I woke up to kids though, two of them. Small and very real, very frightened, very human children. A boy and a girl no older than ten and six respectively. Seems we all awoke to the same experience, white room, shitty meals, silence, attacking the Horrors, they met each other, then meeting me. The boy, with messy dark hair and big brown eyes, looked up at me first. He didn't speak, but his gaze was full of something I couldn't place—fear, confusion, maybe even a little relief at seeing another human. Maybe relief to see another adult, sorry sport but i'm pretty sure this adult can do as much as anyone else in this situation.

The girl, smaller and with inky black hair that shimmered under the harsh light, clutched a stuffed bear tightly to her chest. She didn't look at me, just kept her head down, rocking back and forth slightly. They had been here longer than I thought. Maybe we had moved rooms, but I had noticed something strange about it almost instantly. The ceiling, while high, wasn't solid. It shimmered and pulsed faintly, almost as if it were alive, responding to their movements. It was unnerving, but it also seemed to suggest that

the room itself was some kind of observation space. But what really caught my attention was the transparent walls that appeared and disappeared in places, almost like they were camouflaged, revealing those Horrors, more of them. Lurking just beyond the limits of the room. They aren't exactly threatening, but they are watching. Always watching.

Liam, the small boy from Wolverhampton, after some quiet prodding tugged at my sleeve. "What are they doing?" Braver than me to talk to a stranger, but as I glance at the shimmering wall, better a strange adult than simply something strange.

I follow his gaze. The beings—creatures, if they could even be called that—were standing motionless on the other side of a shimmering barrier. I couldn't quite make out what they looked like through the shimmer. They were tall, their bodies thin and almost translucent. Their faces were elongated, with large, black eyes that gave off an eerie sense of quiet intelligence. They aren't doing anything that looks remotely hostile. In fact, they seemed more curious than anything. Like scientists studying a new species. I put a hand on Liam's shoulder, shuffling him and the girl Mei Xu from Haicheng, China behind me. (I don't bother to question how we can understand each other. Every murmur from her sets off alarm bells, I know she isn't speaking english and I know next to nothing of mandarin. I have to chock it up to the freaks on the other side.) In some way trying to offer some comfort. "I don't know, but I don't think they want to hurt us. They're studying us. It's like we're in a zoo."

The words sent a chill through me, but they made sense. It was the only explanation that seemed to fit. Maybe the best one I can give to two incredibly frightened and disturbed children. These aliens—if that's what they were—were observing us as if we were specimens in a nature documentary.

Mei looks up at me. "Are we in a zoo? Like animals?"

As a kid I wondered what it was like to be stuck in a cage, figures watching you from the other side of a glass, day in and day out. Observing, prodding, waiting. Time passing, day in and day out, fuzzy figures on the other side of the barrier watching silently. It brought me no comfort, the idea we were the exhibit, the documentary. I offer a shaky smile, “Exactly. Sure enough they’ll see we’re better off home than here and take us back. Mei stares into my eyes hard, for a six year old she looks so forlorn, “but the animals at my zoo never went home.” I couldn’t come up with a response. I look back at the figures— those horrible things watching back. Waiting, Observing. Dread slinks down my spine in an icy feeling. The animals at my zoo never went home either.

# Spirit World: The Hunt for a Necromancer

Edward Briones

The Necromancer was bringing back the dead, empowering them, and leading them to destroy towns and cities in the Human side of Spirit World. The naïve Humans in Spirit World lack the powers that the Spirits have that dwell in the Paradise Side of Spirit World. For said reason, the Spirits are the eternal guardians of Spirit World. The Humans know about their guardians, but they don't pay them much mind, other than helping them when they can with food and other physical merchandise. When they get attacked they try to hold their own until the Spirits eventually show up. And so there is the spirit Foxy, he is a royal spy and assassin for the Black Star Kingdom. King Ares has sent Foxy after the Necromancer since he is the finest Spirit for this exact job.

Inside the United States part of what is Pangea, the Necromancer has targeted two mass death sites; the trail of tears, and the battle on Bunker Hill. Here, he was able to raise undead and convince them to fight for his goal of taking over the human world. The pain they had been put through in the past was enough to get the rage burning inside of their otherwise cold veins. With some guidance, the undead were fast to start attacking and taking over small villages and towns.

Foxy arrived at ground zero before long, and what he saw made him very uneasy. All around, for miles, the

undead were corrupting everything in sight. However, the Necromancer was nowhere to be seen. Foxy drew a long beautiful katana and walked the path of destruction that lay before him. Wearing a long black coat, Foxy blended into the dark night.

Alas, there sat the Necromancer. The tyrant carried on a throne made of bones, in the middle of what seemed to be over ten thousand undead. Foxy sauntered up behind the horde of undead, tapped one on the shoulder and asked with true curiosity, "Hey do you know how I can get to undead Inc.?"

The corpse opened its mouth in attempt to answer. Then realizing, he roared at Foxy although it was too late, with one slash of the blade the zombie turned to ash.

The horde now noticed foxy and the necromancer ordered, "Kill the spirit guardian!" Now!" And as the command left his lips a blast of dark energy simultaneously left his hands toward Foxy.

Foxy began the dance of war, and slash after slash zombies fell to ash. Subsequently, Foxy unleash some of his energy into the horde, and out of the blade a wave of blue energy began to tear the horde down. Things were looking good for Foxy.

The Necromancer, looking displeased, then took some of the undead and created a mesh that would become a super zombie. Standing at 30 feet tall this titan was formidable. Foxy has had his share of fights back in the day but to fight undead can be tricky.

Foxy went after the titan with slash following slice. Yet the creature's fast healing would make it as if Foxy had done no damage at all. 'There has to be a way to hurt this thing' Foxy thought as he was still slashing and dodging attacks. Then he saw an orb inside the core of the body, this was the weak spot.

Taking a moment to ready a spiritual attack, Foxy unleashed his spiritual powers. A blue fox made of pure light emerged from Foxy's body, a spirit animal where Foxy's true power lies. The fox swirls around foxy charging his blade and with one well aimed slash, the titan blows up and the fox goes forth and destroys the orb.

With only the Necromancer and a few undead left, Foxy felt very confident in his abilities here. Sheathing his blade, Foxy brings his spirit animal back to his side and he charges an ultimate attack that will purify the land and strip the Necromancer of his powers. With his yellow eyes turning a shade of blue, Foxy's power grew beyond the power of the Necromancers by a land slide.

"From the spirit, comes all that we know, all of our power. Should we forsake our soul, we are lead into corruption. For I have come to learn, the soul is at the core of all we are. Awaken spirit of the fox!" a blast so powerful leaves his hands fixing all the Necromancer had done.

Walking over to a now powerless human, Foxy declared, "In the name of king Ares, you are under arrest."

# Unnamed Thanks...

## Aaron Falls

I used to walk past poetry  
like a stranger on a crowded  
street—  
catching fragments of color  
through open windows,  
hearing echoes of rhythm  
from passing cars,  
feeling the ghost of meaning  
brush my shoulder—  
a sideways glance, a quick  
smile, then moving on.

But you—  
you didn't hand me poems  
like sealed letters.  
You taught me how to uncurl  
the paper,  
how to trace the watermark  
of feeling,  
how to hear the heartbeat  
under the metaphor.  
Now when I read, the colors  
don't just pass—  
they stay.  
They burn behind my eyes  
like Ferlinghetti's neon  
saints,  
they howl like Ginsberg's  
industrial angels,

they cut clean like Lorde's  
sharpest truth.  
You didn't give us answers.  
You gave us keys—  
to the city of voices,  
to the museums of silence,  
to the quiet power waiting in  
our own throats.

So, this thank you isn't loud.  
It's the kind of quiet that  
comes after real  
understanding.  
it's the space between two  
lines where everything  
changes.  
it's the breath before the first  
words of the rest of my life.

Thank you

for the light,  
for the sound,  
for the courage  
for my voice.

# A Night at the Nut House

## Alexis Ramos

The ██████ Psychiatric Hospital provides 24/7 care for individuals ages 18 and older who are experiencing mental health concerns. The purpose of the Hospital is to assist individuals during a mental health emergency, become stabilized, and move to a less restrictive level of care. Services are provided in a warm, welcoming environment with dedicated medical, nursing, and clinical staff.

the top psychiatrists flounder,  
toddlers testing gravity,  
smashing facedown on their pride.  
psychiatrists smile, rows of veneers  
gleaming to the gods,  
thrilled to dissect an escaped mind.  
*click* . pens poised, eyes dead,  
disorders gnarling, their job to behead  
the nut driver, origin of lost screws,

She recounts the night, roofie-messy,  
blurted heavy,  
“yes.”  
brash as a tom,  
kicked as a snare,  
consumed without a  
slippery care,  
her words slurred,  
the room blurred,  
guts stir,  
drugs purr.  
hammering her sternum,  
branding her dumb,  
life is getting so terrifyingly

exciting.  
as things began to feel normal,  
numb.  
their minds turn,

possibilities are endless ;  
a legal lobotomy,  
prescribed cocaine in a can.  
involuntary 5150 holds  
—i should've ran

her night nurse bears witness,  
her crow's feet developing  
from constant agony,  
her night nurse ripples past  
countless hours &  
“progress reports”  
prodding the riptide  
on her own pollution.  
her night nurse soaks in her gnarled glances, as  
yellow-wallpapered psychosis is brought  
upon his eyes whose primary light  
backroom-ed.

diagnoses #1:  
her pupils pop off heat  
like kernelled shockwaves (Molotovs)  
her, in paralysis, nightmares reside in  
her REM sleep.

diagnoses #2  
under her pillow,  
her sobs are soft supernovas  
schlumped in the dark,  
sulking & seen.

possibilities are endless  
—sheep fear falling asleep

once, her mind stood  
as titanium pillars, a fortress  
glistening over armies,  
a perfect symphony of serotonin,  
a crew frequently visiting  
—unalarmed.

now, the symphony wheezes  
through duct-taped crevices,  
quivering on the edge of a wrap.  
masquerading sanity: her teeth chatter  
under the weight of brass-knuckled  
memories.

now, she surrenders  
to the crimson parasites who  
itch themselves to feel relief,  
those who feed off the blood  
of future-devoured scabs.

for each and every decision  
is of the essence: a trap.

diagnoses #3: this morning,  
her brain defibrillated,  
an electric pulse upbeat.  
She had a suicidal thought today,  
and it reminded her—  
she was still alive,  
incomplete.

# **A Drink of the Heavens Promised by the Devil**

## **Isabella Murillo**

Poison. The sweet allure of a promised pain. Continuous and slow in acting. One that I've become familiar with. Pangs of forgotten promises and past affairs swirl and slowly infect me. I've become numb to such a thing. I'm aware of what it means to drink such a substance, heartache fear, to be with instead of without is what draws me near. What keeps me sipping that bitter, thick poison. I've become addicted to that point that I will always go back. And as we know poison slow or quick is an invitation to lay with the arms of death. Perhaps this poison is the reason for life, a desire to live but with shackles. A sickly-sweet poison.

# I Spoke Her Death

## Orlindo Myles

I spoke her death before it came.  
Sharp tongue cut blood from family name.  
In anger's heart, I sealed her fate,  
Now silence whispers, far too late.  
Her ghost hums low beneath my skin,  
A choir of guilt, a prayer of sin.  
The words I cast, like careless stones,  
Now rattle through my brittle bones.  
"To know my deed, twere best not know myself."  
The hand that struck, the seed I sowed.  
If fate and mouth are one and same,  
What does that make my cursed name?  
No mourning suit, no flowers white,  
Just shadows curling in the night.  
Her absence hum, my sentence clear,  
To live where memory burns too near.  
And though she sleeps beneath the ground,  
Her voice still wraps me, cruelly bound.  
To know myself, to own my breath,  
Is knowing I once spoke her death.

# To Be Loved Is To Be Seen

## Yasmine Stineberg

All I have ever wanted  
was to be loved.  
To experience that *longing*,  
that *passion*, when I'm around them.  
To know it's being reciprocated.

I want to feel the warmth of their hands,  
the crest of their fingers, as they hold me tightly.  
As if we've been deprived of one another for years on end.

I want to watch the *softness* in their gaze  
as they stare into mine.  
Feel as it slowly travels  
over every inch of my skin.  
Almost as though they're trying to engrain the moment,  
the memory, into their mind.

I want to see the flash of relief that floods their system,  
the second our eyes meet.  
To recognize the *adoration* written across their face,  
as they watch me laugh at the most unserious scenes,  
and to be willing to hold me in the vulnerable ones.

I want to feel every bone in my body ignite  
with the overwhelming feeling of *love*,  
and know I'm not alone in this.

I want to be the reason they get up each morning,  
*craving* my touch,  
and the feeling of me in their arms.

I want them to recognize my voice,  
the sound of my laugh,  
the feeling of my presence  
before I've even walked into the room.

I want them to relish being the reason I smile each day.  
To witness that unearthly desire to be near me,  
and know they couldn't bear to live life  
if I wasn't there with them.

I want to be *seen* for more than what's on the surface,  
and to be *valued* despite it.

I want to be *cared* for,  
to be *cherished*,  
to be *appreciated*.

I want to be *loved*.

# The Light (Minutes Inside a Confined State of Mind)

Joshua Palomino

I try and not think of where it is I am at. How small this cell is and how much time I actually spend in a concrete room that may be smaller than an average sized closet or bathroom. It is here that I begin to feel the walls closing in on me, making the space around me feel suffocating. I hate days like this. My mind begins to reel and I know I have no other option then to get ahold of myself. There is no one around to look to for help...I am on my own with these thoughts and emotions that have no place in a sane persons mind. I will not let them beat me, I am too strong. My mind way too sharp and will not be broken! My imagination begins to take hold and starts creating. I see that freedom is within my grasp. I am back home enjoying the feel of affection. Basking in the feeling of unguarded trust and love that is pure of heart. I am part of a family again, what joy to be in the midst of people I can depend on. Here I am free to roam and let my mind leave the safety of its guarded confines. I am free to have peace, to love and be loved. I am free to live life and fulfil my ambitions. I am free of this place...free of this concrete coffin. I breathe, for I have gotten ahold of myself.

For those that do not understand, being mentally imprisoned is like being lost in the catacombs without a light. There is no sense of direction and time itself begins to lose all meaning. One reaches out to find something solid, something to hold on to that can hopefully help guide

the way out. But find nothing. It is like blindly grasping in pitch darkness tripping and falling with every step. You find yourself scraped, bleeding, and hurting but know that you have to keep going. The mind yelling and screaming for you to give up, but that is not possible.

I have been stumbling for decades now. My eyes have adapted to the dark and even when I fall I land on my feet. The cuts and bruises on my body have long since scarred and calloused. No longer am I unequipped for this place! I am running now, for I see the light and nothing is stopping me from reaching it.

“Motivation is energy, and energy is always directional. It can be directed at avoiding what isn’t wanted or at moving toward what is desired. The potential power of both types of motivation is the same – it’s just that the energy involved propels in opposite directions.” - unknown

# Crocodile Skin

## Isabella Valdivia

I remember standing in the sterile hospital room, rotating the coarse paper hospital gown, as my doctor examined every cracked desert landscape of my body. My skin itched, each movement of the gown a harsh, grating sensation against my already irritated flesh. My doctor's voice a low rumble as he asked where it hurt, how long it had been like this, and how many times I'd drowned myself in my Vaseline-esque medicine. 'None,' I thought to myself. I hated the tingling, the stiffness, the heat and prickling. The taste of the medicine in my mouth and the blurriness it brought my eyes. I preferred the familiar pain to that kind of discomfort. "Three times this week," I replied. I could tell he didn't believe me, "See you in two weeks."

§

Not too long after I cried in bed, internally bashing myself for switching positions as heat radiated on my stomach; and where there was heat, you could guarantee the tingling, inching pain followed. *'No one will ever love me. How could they when my skin looks like an alligator's?'* I mourned the life I would never have. I saw a life bathed in sunlight, one without the suffocating heat of the day. A life where I didn't have to cover up my skin to feel confident enough to leave my house. Where I could make plans without having to cancel the day off because I was so exhausted. Where

I could get into a pool and swim with my friends without wincing, afraid of the flare I knew would come. After a while, I stopped making plans at all, staying isolated and drifting away from my friends. I'd rather not be seen at all than be seen any differently. Covering my course but raw skin head-to-toe regardless of the beating sun above me.

§

Even the shame couldn't overcome what felt like an inability to shower. It wasn't just the depression or laziness; it was the overwhelming sensation I felt as water droplets pelted my skin. Even the painkillers in my mother's closet couldn't dull the agony. As the water seared against my skin, I began the process I was more than used to. I started with my fingers, then hands, and arms, holding for a second, accustoming one body part to the pain before moving on. After a minute, the searing went from a family of ants latching on to my skin to the light prick of needles. I averaged about five to ten minutes before I could even wash my hair; Wishing so badly I could shed my skin and rid the pain. On more than a few unlucky days, I couldn't make it past my arms before retracting like a vampire in the sun. I would slam the nozzle in distress, crying out before walking out of the shower still unclothed, falling to the floor, and breaking down. The shame came, a cold, unwelcome

blanket as I stood, putting on my clothes and retreating to my room.

## §

When the breakdowns intensified enough, my mother would appear, her silhouette a shadow outside my door, and ask what was wrong. She would sit against my door, attempting to soothe me with words I couldn't hear over my own thoughts and ask to come in, but that would only make me cry harder. I knew I was hurting her, but I couldn't pull myself together long enough to tell her I was okay; No matter how far from the truth that was. Once it became so intense, I screamed at the top of my lungs, wanting to call 911, but what would they do—sedate me? A wave of despair washed over me. My fingers dug into my skin until rivers of crimson blood flowed and pooled in my fingertips. The world swam in a symphony of raw agony. I felt the urge to grab a carrot peeler and take off the top layer of my skin. I wasn't sure if it would make the pain any better, it would provide a distraction from the agony I so badly wanted to escape. "How's the pain been this week?" my doctor asked me. '*Intolerable.*' I thought to myself. "Fine." I responded, wondering if they could give me enough morphine to never wake up.

Maybe it would be better that way.

# Continuum

## Marlon J. Blacher

It is a continuum;  
The tick of the clock doesn't stop,  
The sun rises and sets,  
Replaced by the moon.

Each day pass as the clock finish its degrees,  
As paint and brush put to the easel.  
Sadly, confined to infinity  
Limits to the art of our days;  
As is said: "Pop goes the weasel."

Round and round spins the Earth;  
Back and forth the pendulum swings.  
Wrinkles and grays become the curse,  
Only it can reveal what the future brings.

Memories capture moments,  
Experience color the passing,  
Regrets bring the torrents;  
Desires and reality ever clashing.

Prevented by none,  
Having only one Master;  
That is He who Create the sun.  
With age run faster and faster,  
Cycling experiences until there's none.

# Destiny's Heart

Peter Garcia

## Scene I

### Characters:

Melissa: 32 years old.

Dr. Alex Garza

Organ Transplant Coordinator, LuCyndi Simpkins

SETTING: Loma Linda Medical Center. Room 4 in the ICU Department. In the background the vitals monitor makes its beeping sound and the respirator continues to breathe for the little girl laying in the bed. The windows are drawn close. The mood is grave.

AT RISE: Destiny lays in bed unresponsive. Melissa, Her mom sits bedside holding her hand.

MELISSA: I can't believe this happened to you? You're so frail.

[Doctor enters room]

DOCTOR: Mrs. Ramirez?

[Stands up and approaches Doctor]

MELISSA: What can you tell me?

DOCTOR: I am truly sorry. The bleed was too severe. Even after we released the pressure. There was just too much internal damage. Each scan shows zero brain activity. We have her on life support, but that's all we can do for her. The machines will continue her body functions, but that's all.

MELISSA: But... There's got to be something you can do. Some drug, test. Something. She was only ten. [Points to Destiny.] Look she's still breathing. My poor baby. (sobs)

DOCTOR: I understand your distress. There is no mistake. The brain wave scans shows zero activity. Her chest rising and falling is because of the ventilator. The machines are what's keeping her body going.

MELISSA: Wait.... (Continues to sob.) Maybe she's just asleep. She could wake up, couldn't she?

DOCTOR: Even when we sleep our brains are active. Without the mind, the body will cease to function. Mrs. Ramirez, we need to talk about the next steps.

MELISSA: What do you mean next steps?

DOCTOR: I have a consultant waiting outside. Will you talk with her?

MELISSA: What about?

DOCTOR: I'll let you talk to the coordinator. (walks towards the door) LuCyndi? Would you come in here?

[Organ Transplant Coordinator, LuCyndi enters room]

LUCYNDI: Mrs. Ramirez, I am sorry for your loss. I work in the hospital as an organ transplant coordinator.

MELISSA: Organ donation? I don't know. What is it exactly? Tell me everything.

LUCYNDI: With your permission. Destiny's life could save other children. There is such a long list of them waiting for organs to be donated that some don't even make it.

MELISSA: By make it you mean die.

LUCYNDI: Yes. (pause) That is what I mean. Most people have a hard time letting go of their child after such a loss. Understandably, it's a hard choice. I try to focus on the lives it could save. The heart, two kidneys, lungs. Every vital organ would be used to possibly save another child's life.

MELISSA: But... Will she feel anything...? (pause) I just don't know.

LUCYNDI: I'm going to explain this as gently as I can. Your daughter, Destiny, is no longer with us. There is nothing more we can do for her. Without the machines keeping her body going....

MELISSA: [emotionally breaks down.]

LUCYNDI: I'll give you a moment. [Steps back from Mrs. Ramirez]

MELISSA: [looks at daughter and goes to hold her hand. Caresses hair.] Sweetheart. Mommy will always love you.

(PAUSE)

LUCYNDI: [Approaches Mrs. Ramirez] We have precious little time Mrs. Ramirez. Will you consent to organ donation?

MELISSA: I... I don't....

## END SCENE

### Scene II

#### Characters:

Michael Roberts: 44 years old

Stephanie Roberts: 39 years old

Dr. Alex Garza

SETTING: Loma Linda Medical Center. A different part of the hospital in the Children's ICU. Alishia languishes away in bed waiting for a miracle. The windows are drawn close. The mood is somber.

AT RISE: In the background the vitals monitor makes its beeping sound and the respirator continues to breathe for her. Stephanie sits in the corner chair sleeping, her hand drapes over the bed. Michael stands at the window looking outside.

MICHAEL: [to himself, but softly] God, I know I don't really talk to you much. Maybe you're there listening when I talk to Amber. [Turns to look at Alishia] We worked so hard to get our family and now this. (pause) Why Lord? Why?

STEPHANIE: [wakes up] Who are you talking to?

MICHAEL: [big sigh] Babe, I don't know what to do. She's been like this for three weeks. If we don't get a donor soon....

STEPHANIE: [stands up and walks to Michael] Neither do I. The Doctor said all we can do is wait.

[The beeping sound from the monitor changes to a single tone. Flat line. An emergency alarm goes off.]

STEPHANIE: Michael? What's going on?

MICHAEL: [quickly runs to the door. Yells out.] HELP! SOMEONE!

[Doctor Garza rushes to the room.]

DOCTOR: I need you out of the way. Now!

MICHAEL: What's going on? What's happening?

STEPHANIE: Michael? [She moves next to Michael.]

[Both exit room, now stand outside the door. Commotion inside room continues, then slowly fades.]

DOCTOR: She's crashing!

STEPHANIE: Oh Michael. I can't.... [Buries head into Michael's shoulder. Begins to cry.]

MICHAEL: Babe? Why is this happening to us?

[Both watch as staff attend to Alishia]

STEPHANIE: We need to have faith.

MICHAEL: Faith? [pulls away] Faith! Are we really going down that road? (anger) Then why did God put us here in the first place? He could have stopped it from happening. My faith is in that room and it lies in that bed. We do everything we're supposed to. We pray, go to church. This is how He repays us. No! He's taken away my faith. Why should I believe in an All-Powerful Being, The Creator of all things, when He robs us of our little girl? AGAIN! No! [turns away and quietly begins to sob]

STEPHANIE: [gently approaches Michael. Whispers] That is when we need God the most. Not to turn us away from him, but to draw us closer to Him. Right now, He is waiting for us to turn to Him and pray. What we do now means everything.

MICHAEL: Babe. We lost Amber. Now....

STEPHANIE: Oh Michael. Who do you think was there with us the whole time? We didn't do that alone. Yes. We lost Amber. And it was devastating. In the beginning I blamed God too, but I realized my error in thinking. God didn't take Amber away from us. That is just the world we live in. After that, I prayed day and night. It brought me closer to Him. That's when I got the inspiration for Amber's corner. THAT WASN'T ME! THAT WAS GOD! He is the one who gave me the strength to do what I did. To make her corner.

MICHEAL: We're going to lose Alishia and there is nothing we do about it. Another daughter. To no fault of our own. How can I not blame God?

STEPHANIE: That is the true test of our faith.

MICHAEL: But....

STEPHANIE: Michael, no. We must believe.

MICHAEL: [looks inside the room.] Lord. What can I do?

DOCTOR: [steps away from Alishia. Receives a page. Out loud.] We have a donor.

**END SCENE**

**Scene III**

**Characters:**

Michael

Stephanie

Alishia: 12 years old

Melissa

SETTING: Loma Linda University Medical Center. Children's Garden. Three months have passed. Alishia is in a wheel chair, Stephanie and Michael sit at a table next to her. The sun is out and it is a warm afternoon.

AT RISE: The Roberts wait to meet the donor family.

ALISHIA: How do I look? Do you think they'll—?

MICHAEL: Babe. Stop right there. Don't even let those thoughts enter your mind.

STEPHANIE: Your father's right. They will love you.

[Melissa walks up]

MELISSA: Mr. and Mrs. Roberts?

MICHAEL: Please call me Michael. This is my wife, Stephanie. This is our daughter, Alishia.

ALISHIA: Hello. [Tries to stand, but can't]

MELISSA: Oh no. Please don't get up. It's very nice to meet you, Alishia. How are you doing?

ALISHIA: I'm getting better.

MELISSA: I am so glad to hear that.

STEPHANIE: It's going to be a long road back. She's getting stronger and stronger every day. The doctor says she should be strong enough to walk soon, but for now it's one day at a time.

MICHAEL: Your daughter, Destiny had a very strong heart.

ALISHIA: Would you like to hear it? Her heart. [Pulls out stethoscope]

MELISSA: Would that... (pause) Would that...? I wouldn't—.

MICHAEL: That's why we brought it. We figured you would.

[Melissa listens to Alishia's new heart. (sounds of beating heart) begins to cry.]

ALISHIA: I am sorry you lost your daughter. I used to lay in bed wondering if I would ever be able to go back to school and see my older sister, my friends. I didn't think I would. But now I have a chance to live and grow up. Thank you.

MELISSA: You seem like a really nice young girl. Destiny would have liked you a lot. You could have been friends.

*Peter Garcia*

ALISHIA: Destiny is a part of me now and will always be with me. I will forever be grateful and take care of your daughter's heart.

**END SCENE**

## Echoes of US Savvy and Unique TRU

Unique:

*"I see the sky through bars, but the horizon stretches inside my mind"*

Savvy:

*"I trace equations in the dust of my cell, and they grow into constellations"*

Unique:

*"They wrote on my lingerie as an escape plan, but I learned to wear courage instead."*

Savvy:

*"They counted my notes as contraband, but I found freedom in the details"*

Together

*"We are letters in flight,  
We are ink and light,  
We are Unique & Savvy,  
Breaking through barriers meant to keep us trapped,  
yet they only honed our resiliency,  
and empowered our pioneering,  
And we thanked them for it."*

Unique:

*"I am the whisper of poetry in the night"*

Savvy:

*"I am the quiet of knowledge that never bows"*

Together:

*"And together we are luminous as stardust"*

*Jesus Martinez*

## **Devotion**

### **Jesus Martinez**

We build love on breathless scaffolds,  
hands still dirty from the wreckage we never left behind.

It does not come easy.  
It is the heat beneath the ice,  
the heartbeat in a flooded room.

We speak in fragments,  
our mouths full of morning light and apology.  
You said "..."  
but still we danced,  
with our knees buckling under everything  
we couldn't say aloud.

Love is not soft.  
It is not the lullaby.  
It is the scream in the corridor  
when the power goes out  
and the silence stretches  
into a shape you don't recognize.

It is the hand that reaches back  
after the door has already shut.

You go wherever you go—  
and I follow in echoes.  
Not for possession.  
Not for pity.  
But because your sorrow  
sings in my bones  
like a song I knew before I was born.

We are the pressure,  
yes—  
but what is pressure  
if not the proof  
that something matters?

So let it crack.  
Let it crumble and rise again.  
Let the weight reshape us  
into something holy.

# Untitled

## Brandon Knight

### Prologue

The ancient Greeks really were genius. Aristotle toward the closing of the 3rd century B.C.E. invented a form of defining factual speech called a syllogism, for example. All men are mortal. I am a man. Therefore, I am mortal.

It's genius, is that by simplified statement of defined fact. There is little to, no room to deny the fact of the statement.

I am the exception!

### CHAPTER ONE

The first indication's I was waking were a sense of a nauseating vibration that resonated deep into my chest, which emanated from the place I was resting my head.

The instant I shifted positions the vibration disappeared leaving only the sounds of my immediate surrounding's. There was a low gurgling drone of an over taxed diesel motor coming from far behind me , the occasional whispered conversations from other people, a cough and a shift of position from the person right next to me! I took a moment to listen to their breaths, deep

relaxed apparently trying to sleep as well. I could hear clinking chains from multiple directions, including my own when I shifted positions again. I was in restraints, there was a chain around my waist. My hands were cuffed in the front of me and tethered to my waist my feet were shackled together.

I knew exactly where I was. I was on a prison transport bus, I just didn't want to wake up, not yet. The best way to recover from an ass whooping, is to sleep it off, the pepper spray was keeping me from getting back to sleep .The right side of my face and neck were livid chemical burns that paired with an equally horrible taste in my mouth. In about an hour the sweat would be dripping down to places that will have me in fits just trying to sits still. I had cuts and gashes from the cuffs and shackles at my wrists and ankles that were stinging now. A few days from now, they will be bone deep bruises too sore to let the shower water hit without a whence. I could feel some more bruises down my right side and back from the beat down the guards issued, once they got the bus pulled over to break up the fight.

I was on a transport bus on the way to pelican bay state prison, from Corcoran state prison. I didn't want to go but I didn't have choice, so about 3 minutes out. I had attacked another convict nick named "animal".

That's when it happened! I had been rearing back to head butt "animal" When the guard in the rear of bus shot me, I was dead the instant the bean bag hit. Right on the side of my face near the temple. It was supposed to be a non-lethal round but from a 12 gauge at that range, I was knocked off my feet, on to the guys in the row of seats behind me! Everything was shimmering like a heat wave coming off hot pavement for a moment. Yet I was able to hear and think lucidly.

Some type of divine voice was asking if I wanted to accept this death. To my surprise I was saying "no not like this, not now" God's reply was fading as I was coming back to life again. He was saying no worry! It's just a slight shift in time away, You should be more careful in the future! That was it, I was back? I was Thinking What the!! What kind of superpower is this? When the beat down came from the guards.

# My Reverence Is My Pain

Isabella Murillo

Silken tresses caress my fingertips, coffee-colored eyes that shimmer like pools of honey in the sun. Alopsided smile that you always seem to wear, one that makes warmth bloom in my very being. The warmth in your features ignites a fire in mine, a voice that I'd drown in again and again if I could, a beauty that owns my very soul. I can't help but reach out to you as you laugh. You're just so bubbly it almost hurts. My adoration that radiates from my being onto your skin, that seeps into your bones and clings to the surface of your heart like viscera. Oh, how my fingers tangle in your locks and my hands caress your face - my hands always did know how to love better than my words - delicate. Reverent. Crack." Hmm?" Crack. Ah yes. I'd almost forgotten. My fingers untangle from my sheets, and my hand rubs the ink pool that lingers on the underside of my eyes. "Michael." I smile staring at the pillow that I fantasize is you. "Michael." I repeat because maybe when I call your name this time you will really be in my bed. I wait as I always do but alas nothing. My fingers tremble subtly and laughter spills from my lips uncontained, my shoulders shake with thinly veiled pain "I must really be crazy." My heart seems to pulsate like an unmanaged machine, except it truly does feel as if it's on a mission to burst through my skeletal system. Urgent laughter turns into choked sobs as I curl up once more, a pity really. How you only seem to exist in my dreams, unbidden, unclaimed and entirely for me to love. Because no

matter how often I cry out to the stars, they seem to mock me in the way they shine in mirth. No matter how deep my nails dig into my skin the vibrant red merely a warning sign to my imploding emotions. And no matter how many times you give me that stupid god damn smile. It never seems to mean what I want it to mean. It's like you don't even care that my veins are wringed around my neck threatening to snap it. Maybe I'll do it myself. I snort. No, but you care for her, don't you? Her fragile frame and doe eyes. Her soft smile and sharp features. Pathetic. Like a lost puppy and its owner. You really love her. But it's okay. It's alright. Because you never will know how sickening it is to see you laughing with her. How revolting it is to see you touching her. Oh if she would just - But when you see me you won't know, I won't let you know. Because all I'll ever be is your best man. Your best friend.

# Fire and Steel

## Richard Teer

Here be a story of this one,  
A tale that begun,  
Upon foundations built of wax.  
Where when heat was applied,  
It dripped inside to fill up the perilous cracks.  
But little by little,  
The flame did whittle away what was once believed real.  
And beneath what was known,  
Were foundations of stone,  
And a gift of misshapen steel.  
Now it came to pass,  
A boy seen, alas!  
The poor state in which he'd been.  
And in anger and rage,  
He broke from his cage,  
To contemplate the truth within.  
Through many stages,  
Of pain and rages,  
Mistakes and struggle, and just a little strife.  
It was seen with clarity,  
And undying disparity,  
That he must build the forge of his life.  
And upon the stones,  
The wall had grown,  
And would hold for the work to be done.  
As the fire was lit in the granite pit,  
The truth had come to this one:  
That the steel he found,  
Was solid and sound,

With a mettle in the highest degree.  
And its purpose to be forged,  
Into the great sword,  
Which is the man he came to be.  
For the steel was the heart of the boy from the start,  
Only awaiting the fire and the smith.  
To forge into being,  
A sword that would sing,  
Songs not overshadowed by myth.  
A boy into man with steel in hand,  
With honor and sight without shroud.  
Who can journey this life,  
Through joy and strife,  
And make on looking forefathers proud...

# Flying High

## Richard Gatica

Although I'm serving life in prison, today I will be free.

I climb out of bed and turn on both light and radio. Linkin Park is playing so I turn it up and make myself some coffee. I'm a morning person. I wash up and wait for breakfast to be served. Both breakfast and lunch meals are served together and in this prison they are served inside of our cells.

Mine arrive at 7:00am.

I select all the items necessary for my escape. I place four slices of bread, two cookies, and Corn Flakes inside a tortilla bag and crumble everything up.

I am considered "Yard Crew". That's a fancy name for my actual job which requires me to collect all the empty food carts and trash from each housing unit after the morning meal is served. After I complete those tasks, I must pick up any trash on the yard and sweep the pathways clean. Then I set out handballs, footballs, and basketballs for those who choose to use them during morning recreation which runs from 9:00am-11:15am.

The best part of my job is that I am allowed out of my cell at a time that no other person is. I have the yard all to myself each morning and that is something that I deeply treasure, far above the sixteen cents an hour that I'm paid.

I love the solitude. I love the vast empty space. I love the bright morning sunlight. I love the chilled fresh morning air. But most of all, I love my sparrows. At first I had only one. Now I have fifty-two.

My cell door opens at exactly 8:15am each morning. I turn off light and radio, grab the bag of crumbs and step out. I like to work quickly because the sooner I finish, the more time I can spend with my sparrows.

I collect all the food carts from each building and take the carts to the back dock where they will be picked up by another person at another time. I then haul all the trash from all the units and deposit it in large dumpsters that smell awful.

By 9:00am I am done and all the doors to all the units are opened for morning recreation. Hundreds of prisoners pour out of each unit full of excitement to see friends, exercise or play sports. My only interest are my sparrows. This is the time that they normally arrive and sure enough, today is no different.

They arrive in one impressive flock and land inside concertina wire that sits atop the twenty-five foot wall that encircles the yard. When I see them my heart feels warm. When they see me, they begin to sing wildly. I open the bag and scatter the crumbs beneath them. I then walk about

twenty feet away, place my back against the wall and watch them.

At first, they simply look down at the crumbs then over at me. Little Sergio is the boldest of all. He has two dark distinctive patches across his chest that sets him apart from all others. I named him after one of my friends.

Little Sergio looks directly at me as if seeking some sign that it is safe to come down. I smile. Then he dives. Four feet from the ground he pulls his chest muscles back, extends his wings, pivots his tail and lands gracefully atop the field of crumbs. I laugh and I clap. He chirps and he hops. He looks at me sideways and then begins to peck away at the bed of crumbs.

The others follow quickly.

First two, then ten, then all.

As their stomachs fill, they fly off for the morning. I select one and I close my eyes. I lean my head against the wall and I imagine that I am that sparrow. I rise and I fly and I'm free. I fly six miles north. I come to a house and land on an open window sill. Inside I see an old woman who sits at a table alone drinking coffee.

I chirp.

She sees me and she beams with delight.

"There you are sweetie," she says warmly. "I thought maybe a cat got ya!" she jokes and lightly smacks the table.

Her eyes seem ancient and are filled with compassion. The valley of wrinkles that cover her face are evidence of years of hard work and wisdom.

"Eat your breakfast!" she lovingly commands, "Go on sweetie."

At my feet lay the crumbs of a toasted bagel covered

with orange marmalade. I don't have the heart to tell her that I have already eaten. Besides, orange marmalade is my favorite. I peck at the crumbs until they are all gone.

She smiles at me and I realize that she needs me just as much as I need her.

I turn my head sideways. I chirp and I hop.

I turn and I fly away. And as I do, I hear her yell out to me, "See you tomorrow sweetie!"

She is one of my favorites.

I open my eyes and I find myself back on the prison yard.

Other prisoners are playing basketball and handball. Some are exercising. Some jogging. Yet others are walking in small groups, pointing and gossiping and giggling like schoolgirls.

None of this interests me.

Other prisoners see what I do. Some mock me. It's silly they say for me to waste so much time feeding the sparrows. But they don't see what I do or feel what I feel.

I select another sparrow. I close my eyes and lean my head back. I rise and I fly and I'm free.

This time I fly two miles east, straight into the beautiful morning sun. I land on a tree in a school playground. Next to the tree, sitting alone there is a chubby eight-year-old kid. He is lonely and he feels sad as he watches the other kids play dodgeball. He was not invited because he is not popular and he is overweight. He has no friends and he often cries when he is alone.

To get his attention, I chirp and I hop.

He looks up and sees me. He smiles and quickly stands.

I chirp again.

“Oh how beautiful you are” he says in a soft voice, nearly a whisper.

I dive off the branch. I spin around the tree. I am fast. Super-fast in fact. I land on the same branch from which I started.

He claps in delight. I chirp and look at him sideways. I see pain in his eyes. Far too much pain for any child to bare alone. I fly to a branch within his reach. He slowly, very slowly reaches up towards me and I let him touch my soft feathers that cover my wings.

His hand is shaking and he almost cries.

I chirp to assure him. He feels his heart swarm with love and for just a brief a moment, he feels peace. The laughter of the other kids at play fade away. At that moment he knows that somehow, someway, everything will be alright.

I will visit him tomorrow and the day after. I will teach him that he is worthy and that he is needed. And perhaps soon, maybe tomorrow, he will reach into his lunch bag and share a Frito with me.

I chirp and I hop and I fly away.

I sense movement next to me and I open my eyes. It is my friend Sergio. I am back on the prison yard. We watch the sparrows together in comfortable silence. He is the only person on the yard who understands me.

I'm a loner, an outcast and an oddball. I can't connect with most people. Sergio is mature enough to know that I'm not crazy. He knows that the sparrows are my way of surviving the horror of prison life and my way doesn't hurt anyone.

That night I turn off my radio and I climb into bed. It's time to be alone with myself. I had a wonderful day and I can't wait for tomorrow.

They serve Fruit Loops and my sparrows love them.

## **a late night plight**

### **Amyrey Artienda**

and yet I'm left afraid,  
                                unattended  
in pressing night  
my dauntless strife  
                                forever unnerved  
                                my burdened hand  
and yet I've hardboiled my spirit,  
                                fervent  
for Cradle Star  
it dare smile  
                                till I wane and wax  
                                to their whim  
and I'll twist in soft shadow,  
                                circulate  
the warmth received  
returns, extends through  
                                my brittle bones  
                                enshrining gold  
and I'll tuck tight, my knees  
                                shelter  
the seam that secures  
my gilded heart  
                                bracing, feigning  
                                weighted doubts  
and yet I dart unsettled eyes,  
                                strained  
turning corners, a page  
flipping tables, a coin  
                                the lurking dusk  
                                rattles its frames  
and I'll sink deeper into my eyebags,  
                                crescent

fallen in creases  
unreached by  
    shadow and light  
    eye and high  
and I'll hide beneath  
    the  
    windowsill  
    of  
    my soul

## **Born to Be a Ho**

### **Orlindo Myles**

I pulled up with good intentions, heart on my sleeve,  
Offered loyalty, dreams, still they don't believe.  
Smile too dangerous, vibe too strong,  
They don't even listen, just assume I'm wrong.  
"He's too fine, he must be a dog,"  
Like I ain't tired of walking through this fog.  
Tried to give love, all they saw was game,  
Tried to be different, still treated the same.  
Tired of explaining, tired of the chase,  
Tired of handing my soul just to get played.  
So, fuck it, why fight what they already know?  
Maybe I'm better off just born to be a ho.  
Not cause I don't feel, not cause I don't care,  
But cause every real move get me nowhere.  
Push me away, label me fast,  
Like real love ain't built to last.  
Deep down, yeah, I'm a lover for sure,  
But a heart unclaimed can't stay pure.  
So, I smile, I flirt, I hit, I go,  
Maybe... Just maybe...  
I was born to be a ho.

# The Chase

## Edward Briones

Inside the darkness of the 12th story office building, Damon the daredevil, listened to the room as he moved carefully through the open office floor. Stepping to the window, he looked out into the large city. Down below, with the sun going down, the city was coming alive with the new host that have taken over in the last three years. The simple undead, zombies. Now you don't earn a name like daredevil by taking on these low class undead. Damon was one of the few that would take on the high class undead known as the hunters. Unlike normal zombies, the hunters came out only at night and couldn't be killed by normal means. With the armories low on ammo, guns are considered useless and now consequently, almost everyone uses close up and mid-range melee weapons.

With the sun now gone, and the moon bright in the sky. Damon's watch began to vibrate, as he hears the roars of hunters. Damon looks down at the small tracking device. "Don't worry princess, I'll find you baby. No matter how many nights it takes", he promises as he hears the stair door open.

Damon turns on the UV light on his chest and it stops the hunter dead in its tracks. They stare at each other and Damon nods at the hunter. "We meet again, hunter. I hope that you have taken care of my daughter for your sake. Unlike the other humans, I'm not scared of your breed, and

I will have my child back." The hunter growls at Damon, eyes turning red. Immediately it begins to grow larger and the veins on its body begin to pop out.

"I can see that you are really excited to try to kill me. So, BRING IT!" he yells as he turns off the UV light. The hunter charges at Damon closing distance quickly. Waiting, the daredevil holds his ground until the hunter is dangerously close. Immediately, Damon uses his melee weapon and strikes the window and with the change of air pressure they both are pulled and sucked out of the window.

The hunter being so much heavier than Damon, plummets to the ground creating a small crater and a large cloud of dust. Damon however, quickly pulls on his parachute cord and glides down the road looking for The Glowing One.

The Glowing One otherwise known as The Holy One amongst hunter gatherings, is the strongest of the hunters and has domain over them all. Many of the humans think of The Glowing One to be the mother of the rest and this is why they respect her so. She may be regarded as a Virgin Mary to them. Bad news for Damon is that she is always protected by hunters, four to six at the minimum. This is a hard target yet she is the key because only she can transport Diana, Damon's daughter.

Landing on a smaller building Damon looks around and sees the horde of zombies on the ground. A moment of silence later and Damon sees a small glow of a bright green light

shining into the night sky. Taking off in that direction, the hunters soon pick up on his scent and the chase beings. In contrast to the usual dull zombie moans, these roars are so loud they bring life and terror throughout the city. Jumping down from the roof and landing on the road, Damon is faced with the large undead thron before him. He rushes towards them, leaping on top of the face of one, then to the next, running on top of the hoard. With Hunters closing in, Damon takes out a large UV glow stick, cracks it, and attaches it onto his backpack. He then leaps onto the closest building as the first hunter appears. Then another and another. Damon looks at them and their glowing red eyes. Focusing deeply, he channels his own infected blood and his eyes glow blood red.

“Bring it!” he whispers.

With the hunters leaping into action, Damon uses their own momentum and grabs one forcing him into the other. In a flash, he takes out his transforming blade, currently a dagger, and cuts down the next hunter before sprinting towards the light before it fades.

The Daredevil jumps from building to building and upon reaching a 15 story structure he makes the climb to the top and looks down from it. The hunters have gathered to their mother.

Currently around the mother are 12 hunters and a giant horde of zombies. He can hardly see Diana in the presence of The Glowing One.

Damon jumps off the building and strikes the ground with a booming soundwave that caries all the way to the hunters and the mother. Out of the smoke a titan appears.

The titans were big, over 12 feet easily. Their strength was unmatched to another with the power to drop a building in a single hit. Damon, whose eyes are still red, has no fear of this titan because only Damon is the true super human. The virus running through his blood has enhanced his natural ability to heal and gain the true power from his body. Throwing a rock at the beast to anger it takes effect as it bounces off the huge chest of this undead. The titan rushes at Damon and throws a huge fist his way. Damon using his true speed dodges out of the way but the building behind them suffers the punch and crumbles down creating an enormous cloud of dust. From the dust cloud Damon now throws his own punch at the titan and connects. A huge amount of energy is discharged from both creatures sending a vicious wave through the city. Braking the titan's armor, they both now stand on even ground in a heated face off.

§

High up in the city sky rise the humans stand out looking at this battle take place. Damon has saved this group on multiple occasions. It was now time for them to return the favor or so thought Daniel the hotels leader.

“Get the UV cannons ready, we must return the favor now that we have the chance! What would you do if that were your daughter out there!? How many of our people and kids

has he saved! Now get to work! NOW!” he said with the true authority of a successful group of survivors in this apocalypse.

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The titan and Damon were destroying the area where the building once was. Damon took a step back to analyze how much damage he had inflicted on the titan. He was

getting the job done, but at a cost. The cost for this battle was time. The Glowing One/Holy Mother would be at her destination in under two hours. It has already been 45 minutes since she began, and once she gets to the cave it will be impossible to get her tonight. Damon, taking out his transforming blade, gets serious with the matter at hand. Slash after slash the titan began taking damage, and Damon, being much faster than the titan, is able to slip right on by without so much as a scratch. The Dare Devil begins to make short work of the titan once the armor is off and within minutes, the titan drops dead, shaking the ground. Thus, Damon went off after The Glowing One.

Climbing over the wall, Damon saw the army of undead and they him. The hunters flocked away from their mother and began the hunt for perfect human. Damon using his powers walked into the horde easily knocking away the low class zombies. As he got closer though, he came across *runners*, *spitters*, *screamers*, and low class titans. This was when the situation gets hectic; still, Damon was able to hold his own against these undead. This small success was not to last however as the hunters snuck up onto Damon, and he was soon over run and pinned to the ground. The hunters picked him up and hauled him captive over to the Holy Mother. This was not his first run in with this holy mother, and unlike most undead she could talk like a normal human and her intelligence was impeccable.

“Oh Damon, try and try, but you always fail. How much longer will you keep this up? You know that I won’t hurt your daughter. But she, having your genetics has the cure for us all. Don’t you want this as well?” she said in a calm manner knowing that her guards have a strong hold on Damon.

“I do, and I would have helped you, but you went after my daughter and you know I can’t let you run whatever experiments you like on her. She’s just a child.” Damon answered, still trying to regain his strength.

“Your right she is just a child, but we need to find this cure now before her cells evolve and she can no longer provide the cure for us. For years now we have tried to work together with the humans but you see us as monsters. We are still humans too! Do you see someone with cancer as a monster?” she said as if she was accusing Damon of doing the very things she was talking about.

“No we don’t because cancer doesn’t make humans eat other humans. Nor does it try to destroy the human race by spreading.”

“You see, even you don’t understand what we go through. You got lucky and didn’t turn into one of us you actually mutated the way it was intended. But your cells have already adapted to the change and can’t be reversed. As where this child is still growing into what you are and her cells can be used for the better of human kind. I will sacrifice this should it mean that we can all become human again.” She said, and with her mind made up nothing not even Damon could stop her.

Damon caught sight of the cage where Diana must be held. He just had to wait until he could get a chance at freeing her and getting away.



Back at the towers, the survivor groups were all looking out at the confrontation that was being held between Damon and the undead. They watch every night as Damon tries to get his daughter back, and every night he fails. The survivor groups have never intervened, for fear of being hunted harder by the undead. Yet Damon has never once failed to help them during the day should they have needed him. War or not, they had to try to help him once and for all. The undead would not be in charge of this territory for much longer.

The UV cannons soon went off and large UV glow sticks tied to a small barrel came crashing down into the hordes of zombies. UV didn't exactly hurt them but it was enough to stop them from coming closer. Then to give Damon more of a fighting chance all of the buildings that had humans in them lit up with purple UV light and soon most of the city was covered in this beautiful zombie stopping light.

"Go get you kid back Damon." Said Daniel holding the lever that turned on all the lights.

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With all the lights now on, the undead took a big hit as they flinched for a moment when the barrels came crashing down. Damon took this chance and fought back against the hunters restraining him. Going for the cage he managed to knock The Glowing One off of her float and into the horde. With the cage in hand he took off into the city making sure to stay close to the UV lights.

The hunters were now really irritated and began chasing him through the city. One block after another they got closer. One managed to knock the cage out of his hands. Damon quickly ended this hunter with a single blow to the rib cage. Turning around he saw another hunter with the cage. This ignited the spark and rage back inside of Damon. He was so close and he wasn't going to give up now. With one leap, cracking the ground behind him, he took down the hunter and caught the cage in mid-air. Heading towards the main hotel Damon made sure to make use of the many traps that were scattered around the city. *Shock traps, bouncers, and the old fashion spiked wall.* They all did their job to slow down the hunters. One block away from

the hotel, Damon came across a high class titan. He was about to set down the cage when he saw a fire trail followed by others as rockets landed and exploded into this

titan. Damon looked up and saw his friends with RPG's at the ready.

*This for sure was going to lead to a war between humans and undead, but that thought was for another day pondered Damon as he ran into the building and activated the UV traps on the ground floor.*

Up on the higher floors Damon had opened the cage and inside was his 4 year old daughter Diana. She had some kind of mask on her face and with its removal she awoke.

"Daddy? Is that really you?" she said with tears in her eyes after not seeing her dad in weeks.

"Yes, it's really me, you're going to be ok now. I won't lose you again." He said holding her tight.

SOMETIME later, Damon went to give his thanks to Daniel. But it seemed that it was too soon for thank yous. Both men standing at the window of Daniel's office saw the future that awaited them.

"You know, they are not going to let this go" said Daniel.

"Then they leave us no choice, I won't lose her again." Damon said with a tough yet meaningful tone

"It looks like we're going to war. Better get ready. Who knows how long it will last." he said looking out at the thousands of undead standing behind The Glowing one. Before turning out the UV lights in the city. All that was heard after was a single roar.

**THE END**

# Family

## Christopher May

My family is vast and unique, some are big and some are small, some are short and some are tall. It doesn't matter who they are because they are family after all.

Some are skinny and some are round, some play or sing music that makes a beautiful sound. Some work hard and some are lazy, some are sane and some are crazy, but it doesn't matter because they are family after all.

Family is not always blood, they are someone who's always there for you even when you're being drug through the mud. Some have light skin and some have dark. Some even have four legs that like to bark. Family is everything to me, it doesn't matter where the roots are for your tree. Because when you call them family, they are family after all.

Family can be nice, and they can be rude, but families are always there for you no matter your mood. Some families are together and some families are apart, but real families will always love you with their everlasting heart. Because that's what families should do after all.

# **Secrets of the Organs**

## **Isabella Murillo**

Spill your guts they say. Tell us what you feel. The words echo within the mind the brain registers, but the mouth fails to respond. Thousands of words, hundreds of unsaid emotions. A chorus of sharp prickling answers and explanations all come spilling out. Not in coherent sentences but in sharp barks of laughter. A song with an unknown melody. The feelings from within come pouring out from the eyes in warm wet streams, speak they say but the truth is strained and harsh, speak but the words are unable to leak without freedom. A voice dying to be heard and yet all that is, is piercing laughter and desperate cries. Spill your guts.

## ABC's: For My Son

### Carlos Ortiz

After you were born, I couldn't imagine life without you. To behold you in my arms and care for you was my greatest joy. I dream of us together again. Envisioning you as you were and fancying you'll look the same when we met again. But you're growing so fast, as apparent in the pictures you send me. I hope I am still your hero. I imagine you growing into my clothes and joke that you'll outgrow me. Even though as my kid, you are destined to have my likeness. If you only knew how much I miss you my mini me. Never forget how much I love you, ever since October 25th when you came into this world. A perfect reflection of my own. Quiet are my nights alone in my cell, trying to be a roll model for you is my aspiration, and support you is my honor. The job of teaching you so that you understand the facts of life is my responsibility. I hope you'll visit soon, I miss you so much. I wonder when I will see you again? Maybe X-mas, to take a picture with you by the Christmas tree. One that zooms in on our smiles, that now stand at the same height.

# Behind Closed Doors

## Yasmine Stineberg

To my schoolmates, I am ruthless. I am violent. I am a liability with a massive danger sign strapped to my back, warning everyone to back off. I am what people fear. And anyone who comes near me will be sorry. Or at least, that's what they will tell you. They don't *know* me. They see a black eye and think, "Who did he fight this time?," when they should be asking "Who did I fight *for* this time?," I am not this vicious monster they make me out to be. I can't be. I refuse to ever turn out like that. I am *not* him. I don't ever want to be *him*.

If I ever turn out like my father, I have failed them. My father is no one to admire. He is a ticking time bomb that has no understanding of the word remorse. He will act out of hatred and try to take it out on the first person in his line of sight. And my siblings are *terrified* of him. I am willingly putting myself in the crossfire. I let him bruise and batter me as I try to fight back because I can't let him near them. I would *hate* myself if they were ever caught on the receiving end of his outbursts. I have to stay here, in this dreadful house, that I can never seem to get away from. I have to protect them from this atrocity we call our lives. The one our mother ran away from.

My mother married him, and gave us life. All four of us. But was it really a life she gave? Or were we always a means to an end. A way for her to get away from this mon-

ster she caged us with. She couldn't handle him anymore, so she fled. She left us with him. The departure of my mother made everything so much worse. I had to step up. I was thirteen years old at the time and I had to step up. My mother couldn't protect us. She chose to leave and now I have to protect them.

I can never seem to grasp the concept of how my mother decided to leave when we were all so young. Did we really mean that little to her? Because even at the age of eighteen, I am *still* here. Even if every part of my body is screaming at me to walk out that door. I physically cannot leave them here without absolute dread and guilt consuming me whole. I don't want to put them through what my own mother forced me to take on five years ago.

I feel trapped in this house, even the mere smell of alcohol makes me sick. It's the one tell that gives away what's about to happen. The source that brings out the worst parts of my father. Not that he was ever a good person to begin with. But it intensifies his anger and hatred to its full capacity. It's a startling realization that they know to block off the door just so he doesn't take out his anger on any of them. And if he tries, I'm the first out the door trying to fight him off. He is the source of my darkest nightmares that I desperately wanted to escape. And *she* was the light who guided me out of the shadows.

Life didn't seem to have any meaning. That was until I met her. She allowed me to momentarily forget everything that's gone on in that house. She was the only thing that kept me from letting go and giving up. She saved me even when I didn't want to be saved. She knows me down to the deepest depths of my soul. I wouldn't know where I'd be right now if she wasn't in my life, holding me at bay. She is my lifeline.

When I walk into school, my eyes are instantly drawn to her like it's their one sole purpose. Her blonde hair practically glimmers in the morning sunlight. Her deep ocean blue eyes that I could get lost in for hours on end, instantaneously collide with mine. Almost as if she could feel my presence before I've even walked into the room. The smile she gives me is absolutely breathtaking. I take a moment to truly marvel in her beauty that could give angels a run for their money. That is until I see her smile waver as it slowly lowers to the mix of bluish purple bruises resting against my cheekbone, ones I didn't have the previous day. I watch as the light dims from her eyes as that same question lingers in the air. I hear it as clear as day, "Why don't you just tell someone?," but I can't. She knows I can't do that. If me and my siblings were separated, I couldn't bear the thought of what could happen if I'm not there to protect them. I wouldn't be able to save them from the cruelty that this world encapsulates.

I could see the reluctant acceptance wash over her and still she makes her way to me, lessening the distance between us. She's not scared of me. She's the only person in this world who accepts me for who I am and doesn't run from me. No matter how much I try to push her away, she stands her ground. I don't think I deserve her. Actually no, I *know* I don't deserve her. But I am selfish and I want to keep her anyway.

Her hand slowly lifts and ever so gently grazes the injury as I watch the worry hover over the defines of her

soft fair skin. The entire hallway falls silent as I drown out the chatter, focusing solely on her existence. "Does it still hurt?," I feel the light breath of her whisper and look into her eyes, slightly tilting my head to its side, giving the answer without ever actually opening my mouth. It pains me that I am the cause of the sadness that seems to constantly surface whenever she sees me. It's a far cry from the relief I feel the second I lay my eyes on her.

One second I'm contemplating whether to hide her from the darkness that my world is drowning in and the next second I feel the cradle of arms wrapping around my waist, stabilizing my heart, encircling me in its warmth. "I *bate* that you have to suffer like this. Sometimes I go days without hearing from you, never knowing if you're alive and it takes everything in me not to drive all the way to your house and bang down the door, taking you with me." I feel as her hands grip me tighter as if she fears that if she lets me go, I'll never come back.

"Promise me one thing, never put yourself in danger just to help me. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if you ever got hurt defending me," I plead, eyes never drifting from hers.

I can see the fight in her body battling with that thought, before she says "I understand why you don't call for help, I do, trust me. But I have this terrible feeling that one day you might not make it out and that thought *terrifies* me." Tears build up in the rim of her eyes as she gazes into mine, nearing the breaking point, as silent drops slowly fall one by one.

I reach my hands to cup her face, dragging my thumbs lightly across her cheeks, wiping the tears from beneath her eyes. A sad smile catches my lips, "I'm strong, remember? And I won't leave you, especially without saying goodbye. He'd have to detach every limb from my body before I'd even acknowledge the thought of abandoning you here.

You know I'll never go down without a fight." I readjust my hands so they're rested against the back of her head.

I feel her head nodding against the palms of my hands like she's trying to convince herself that what I'm saying is true. But even I can feel the hesitation with the statement in my voice because nothing is concrete. I can't promise that tomorrow won't be my last day. That my father won't surpass the limits and manage to beat me down to the point that maybe one day, I won't be able to get back up. I have to try though, not just for her, but for my siblings too.

It's hard for someone like me to see a future. Especially with a life as dark as mine. But what I do know for sure is that I am willing to fight to keep her in my life, just as much as I am fighting to keep my siblings *alive*.

# Untitled #1

## Savvy and Unique TRU

We are walls and windows  
Locked in but seeing out,  
Our names whispered in the margins of cell doors, our feminine clothes folded like secret flags.  
Yet we rise.  
Through paper and pen,  
Through lectures and notes,  
Through each equation solved in the silence of the night.  
Dean's list and honors.  
Not just letters but paper proof  
That a mind, a spirit, a soul,  
Cannot be contained  
We are letters forming words,  
Words forming sentences,  
Sentences forming the bridge  
From who we were told to be  
To who we know ourselves to be  
In each classroom, a small rebellion,  
In each notebook, a quiet triumph.  
We are Unique. We are Savvy  
And we are rising –  
Together unstoppable, until stardust.

# The Winged Victory of Samothrace

## Alexis Ramos

Reyna is the free-spirited dragonfly of the whistling wind,  
The Earth is your base. Natural springs wish for your wavy  
hair to revive paradise, dead matter to fruition, your turn to fly,

jump!

Lucky cloves shaped the octave of my shaky voice, as my  
throat sounded: “You got this!” before you modeled  
courage’s side-profile,

(The exclamation mark is the closing sound of me shoving  
my butterflies into their cage.)  
I always feared heights.

Winged Victory of Samothrace,

Roman is your post-stamp for all messenger pigeons,  
signing: “to love is to dance. flying kills fear, doesn’t it?”  
to us, damselflies down, observing how Icarus, too,  
could’ve landed as agile,

if history had her eyes open.

(you seemed to never really fear the sky  
only the ground, if only then, greatness is bound  
to crash down.)

splash!

# Trust Us

Marlon J. Blacher

## SCENE 1

### CHARACTERS:

Name: **Blunder Woman**      Description: clumsy, untactful, leader.

Name: **Black Man**      Description: reserved, strategic, member.

Name: **Dr. Change**      Description: mystical, eccentric, member.

SETTING: The characters have formed a crime fighting team to protect their home town, Got-Ham city, and are initially meeting to arrange their priorities.

AT RISE: Black Man is standing in front of his home base, i.e. the “Projects”, seeing Blunder Woman walking his way. (both are unaware that the statute there is actually Dr. Change).

**Blunder Woman**

“Black hoodie, black jeans, black tennis shoes, and, to top it off, black batting gloves; in this part of the city?! Are you aiming to be involve in a racial profiling incident?”

**Black Man**

“Always the instrument of tact and discretion, you are...Blunder Woman. I don’t see what your critique...” (Blunder Woman interrupts him)

**Blunder Woman**

“The point is that we don’t want unnecessary attention right now, and especially from those who we need to avoid attracting attention from. I say that as our protocol #1.”

**Black Man**

“Then surely the most tightest fitting, and brightest, outfit ever made is the way to go incognito, right?”

**Dr. Change**

“Actually” (Blunder Woman stumbles forward, almost falling, and Black Man reach toward his belt) “her outfit may serve us superbly in many situations; the distraction it can make for.”

**Blunder Woman**

“What the heck Dr. Change! What’s your game with that kinda crap?”

**Black Man**

“Yeah homie! You almost got yo self a first- hand demonstration, on what I bring to the table, wit dat one.”

**Dr. Change**

“Merely a little experimentation with the latest addition to my toolbox, no need to get yourselves all riled up over it.  
And if I got the drop on you two with it then I know that it works marvelously.”

**Blunder Woman**

(Excited and stuttering) “Sw. swe, Swell. Now let’s get tu. tuh. to why we’re here.”

**Black Man**

“Fo sho. Gentlemen first here, I request. When I was wit da seal team I got gamed up on the importance of intel,  
gatherin it is where we should start.”

**Dr. Change**

“Well! If my say hold any weight, there’s this change machine which, if legend sing true, I can use to enhance all of our respective skills. That! Should lead our agenda.”

**Blunder Woman**

“Those things are important but we know who the Loc-ster is, we know her scheme to steal the entire ham supply to spoil the Christmas holiday for the city. Putting her and her crew in Narcan Reformatory, ASAP, should be priority #1”

**Black Man**

“Sure, you can match the name to the face, but do you know the Loc-ster’s daily routine? Preferences and habits?? Weaknesses??? Catch my drift? Intel puts us on the fast-track to mission accomplished.”

**Dr. Change**

“How can you both miss the urgency for enhancing and perfecting ourselves? Us, at our best, then we go in and ‘BAAASSSHH!’, to borrow a little slang from our friend, the Bulk. It’s! To the change machine we go.”

**Blunder Woman**

“I was late to this meeting because I had to nab a purse snatcher, who did it right in front of my office, and I’m sure he’s a Loc-ster guy. When they get so brazen, we gotta get to work.”

**Dr. Change**

“Jeez!!! Say it, don’t spray it Blunder Woman. But seriously, things have even gotten worse in the hills, by my lair. So, what then? Do we rush in blind...no prep work?”

**Blunder Woman**

“Fate favors the bold and daring. We’re gonna just have to go with what we know.”

**Black Man**

(Puts finger to his ear) “I’m getting word of police incoming, and hot. We betta get ghost, and quickly, before we get that unwanted attention you mentioned.” (Turns and darts off into the night, hopping fences along the way, soon blending in with the darkness of night)

**Dr. Change**

(Moves his finger over his head in quick circles, returning to the statute image he previously was)

**Blunder Woman**

(Does a ballerina like pirouette, gets dizzy and falls to the ground, hearing a low giggle from the statute she flips him the middle finger, stands, does the pirouette again and this time vanishes)

END OF SCENE

*Marlon J. Blacher*

SCENE 2

(The same characters)

SETTING: Having discovered the Loc-ster's plot to monopolize the city's ham supply for the Christmas holiday, the team decides to raid the Loc-ster's warehouse for evidence of the conspiracy.

AT RISE: They made it past the guard booth and are approaching the bay doors of the warehouse.

**Dr. Change**

(In a hushed tone) "Damn it Blunder Woman! That spell makes us unseen, not unheard."

**Blunder Woman**

"Oh, lay off. It's too dark out here. Now, was I supposed to know there'd be a banana in my path?"

**Dr. Change**

"Never mind. Just watch it from now on. Be...other than your usual self; this is serious."

**Black Man**

(Looking down at his hand-held device) “My sensors indicate a lot of activity behind those doors.”

**Blunder Woman**

“Any alternatives available...tactician?”

**Black Man**

“I don’t know, maybe we should look for a window to crawl through.”

**Blunder Woman**

(Glares at Black Man)

**Black Man**

“Just an ole jokey-joke” (She remain stone-faced); “Aight, tough crowd. Let’s keep it pushin; there should be a service door round the other side of the building.”

**Blunder Woman**

“I just happen to have a Lock-Aid device. It’s said that there’s not a lock on this planet which can deny my Lock-Aid.” (She moves more closely to assess the lock [beat] minutes later and she’s still fumbling with the device and lock) “I don’t know why it’s not working.”

*Marlon J. Blacher*

**Black Man**

(Smiles at Dr. Change, then, pushes the door open)

**Blunder Woman**

“Ooohhhh!” (Begins taking up a defensive position)

**Dr. Change**

(Laughing) “Excellent! You...” (Suddenly becoming serious) “Wait. They’re in here partying, yet, we couldn’t hear all this racket outside the door? There’s magic at work here. So that we aren’t detected, I’ll have to disengage my spell.”  
(Mumbles a chant)

**Black Man**

“I would say, ‘Ladies first’, but here I think the gentlemanly thing for me to do is to take the lead.”

(They enter the warehouse)

**Black Man**

(Darting behind some stacked pallets) “Over here! Move!”

**Dr. Change**

“That was close. He almost walked right upon us.”

**Blunder Woman**

“That guy was carrying a tray of drinks and mumbling something about how he wants ‘the temps to hurry up and get here.”

**Dr. Change**

“O.K. And?”

**Blunder Woman**

“Well, we’re the temps...Einstein. What better front for us to move around here unnoticed than as workers with the catering company?”

**Black Man**

“That’s a dope idea; they’ll probably supply us with uniforms and everything. Let’s do it.”

END OF SCENE

*Marlon J. Blacher*

SCENE 3

(The same characters)

SETTING: still at the warehouse party.

AT RISE: the three are outside on a “cigarette break” discussing their findings.

**Blunder Woman**

“Anything new?”

**Black Man**

“Whoa. Ladies first.”

**Dr. Change**

“Yeah. And, you were the one working the main room, where the leader are. So, what did you get?”

**Blunder Woman**

“Well, Black Man, those... you sure there’ no one in earshot?”

**Black Man**

“No worries, I’m on it. There’s no significant heat sources, other than us, visible. My sound-fogging device should eliminate the threat of any potential ear-hustle systems. We should be good.”

**Blunder Woman**

“Those loose-lips capsules you gave me to slip in their drinks worked like a charm. At first, they would clam up anytime I enter the room but after a while they were talking as if only amongst themselves.”

**Black Man**

“Also, did the handheld device I gave you confirm an anchor to all the SIM cards active in the room?”

**Blunder Woman**

“Yep, all anchored. And the stuff they were talking about. Past conspiracies, this ham heist lunacy, future plans; Hardy Cent should have no problems getting them confined to Narcan Reformatory for a vampire’s lifetime. And, to top it all off, I recorded most of what they were saying.”

**Dr. Change**

“Well, what’s left here for us? We have the info. we need to stop the ham heist. Commissioner Hoardin and Hardy Cent will surely put it to good use. The families in Got-Ham will have the ham for Christmas dinner.”

*Marlon J. Blacher*

**Black Man**

“I’d have to agree. I say we head back to my hooptie and call it a rap-sody here.”

**Blunder Woman**

“I see no objections. Job well done team; let’s go.”

END OF PLAY

# Hidden Poison

## Junior Amaya

The electrical sensation never ends, Im tired of this feeling  
Fighting polar two ends, Feels like my soul they're stealing  
I hate all working clocks, the reminders of damned origin  
The birth of neural feedback caused by pain and all things foreign

Took so much not to react, one wrong move and I'd be broken  
I wasn't left intact, yet im alive, guess that's a token  
Corrupted by deep instinct to survive all mortal pain  
Through fear became a monster with a cruel mind in reign

With moral truth I trapped within all hurt that's meant for you  
Cuz the great pain I've felt is only for a select few  
It's not its time, this curse of mine, is trapped inside, it's true  
But if you poke and probe enough you'll taste its poison dew

A good example I was taught to be, without inequity  
Much love and care was shown to me, Yet I wasn't happy  
Unmoving pillar righteous soul, Is what you ought to see  
But out of sight I do invite the enemy in me

Best of both worlds? No, don't want to be crazy  
But deadly poison hides deep inside of me  
An honest mask and righteous key will cover me from you  
But give em reason to withhold, you'll see the darkened hew

Hot coal of burning fire I have manage to contain  
But give polar me reason, I'll let you feel its pain  
Leave me alone, don't tempt me, my will isn't so plain  
By choice I've held a demon, don't make me release its chain

I try for peace and selflessness although I feel great pride  
For surviving many hardships, man, how many times I've cried  
Being patient fair in honest in good nature I reside  
Ye my mind is like a great pest only god knows what I hide

With moral truth I trap within the hurt that comes from you  
Cuz this great pain I feel my love, with zeal I will subdue  
It won't be time, this curse of mine, I won't let out, it's true  
So please don't poke and probe or well all taste its poison dew

# Punzada en el Pecho

## Diario Sáfico

¿Qué me jura que tú volverás?  
¿Veré otra vez tus sonrisas?  
¿Estarás ahí en ese pasillo?  
¿Será que por dentro sabré que te irás?  
¿Me demostrarás todo lo que piensas?  
¿Es esto para ti verdaderamente sencillo?  
Estoy derritiéndome de ideas,  
Buscando si soy culpable.  
Que si tal vez debí ser más cuidadosa,  
Escondiendo las cosas que deseas,  
Hacer esto menos insoportable,  
Y prevenir que ellos crean que soy dudosa.  
¿Creerías que tengo razón?  
¿Estarías del lado de ellos?  
¿Harías todo lo que ellos te piden?  
¿Ignorarías a tu corazón?  
Solo es para mí regresar a tiempos aquellos.  
¿Harás que solo los ojos se despidan?  
No sabrás de mi tormento,  
Pero quédate conmigo en silencio.  
Sí, tengo que fingir olvidar,  
Que alguna vez tuve un sentimiento,  
Controlaría mi corazón necio.  
Dímelo antes, ¿cómo es que me vas abrazar?  
Aunque para mí fue real,  
Lo dejaría porque tú crees que no era idea.

# Challenges

## Albert Rivera

I know Life's challenges can be tough enough to break a person down, but don't panic learn to handle the un-managed unless you're too proud, unravel the scandal with a sense of hope, what was lost is now found, if you need to call someone that actually knows a thing or two you ought to do it now.

**(You're not alone in this, I know it can feel like you are sometimes, but I've been through this.)**

Raging within my myself with no one else around, trying to pick myself up from off the ground, I feel heavy, kind of dizzy, my mind is spinning, my words are slurred, about to black out, somebody calls Issy. It's about to get worse. I'm falling out. My life feels cursed. Everybody's laughing just passing me by, looking at me while I feel like I'm about to die, wacked out of my mind. Just because I wanted to get high, and be accepted and not rejected because the homie said it and I respect him? Is this what is expected? Man, forget it. I instantly regret it I feel like a lame playing with my life like it's a game, adding fuel to this flame stumbling all over can't even walk straight. Nor see straight.

Oh , Hello shame, we met before,

**(You're not alone in this, I know it can feel like you are sometimes, but I've been through this.)**

So what does this life have to offer? That makes people want to go and see a live opera, smiling like there all happy and life is so good,

I'm afraid that the truth is once inside their homes where no one knows it's all drama where no one's understood. Hidden secrets of abuse, neglect, and violence. All addictions at their finest where a sense of ill malice is taking place, and then they wonder why we're so callused, looking at us with the face of disgrace. Unable to handle life's challenges with what society calls "**social norms**", it's funny to me because they ignore what it's like to live in my shoes as young man in a city that chews up the weak. It's true, targeted every time your feet hits the street. I didn't choose the streets, the streets chose me. But, maybe I misunderstood. I made a choice and it wasn't good. No time to think.

**(You're not alone in this, I know it can feel like you are sometimes, but I've been through this.)**

I've seen too much at such a young age, been locked up like a wild animal in a steel cage.

Take a look inside my eyes, see what I see, guarantee you will be amazed, sometimes even for me it's hard to believe. I thank God I'm still here today; I want you to know it's not too late to change because it's possible, to put away all the hate trying to love myself was the hardest part when

I finally figured it out. To stay humble and pay back my due diligence even after I'm out, it's a daily struggle the battle of the mind words echo deep inside stay out of trouble, do what's right it's about that time. Time for what? To grow up.

**(You're not alone in this, I know it can feel like you are sometimes, but I've been through this.)**

So do yourself a favor, and love yourself because when you think you're alone, you're really not, you're surrounded by other men that have walked your path, Men that are willing to help, committed to giving back. What is called living amends trying to bring healing to the wounds that have derailed so many men and women who are unable to grasp what it's like to be self-forgiven. It doesn't excuse what we did, but you are not your crime. You are a fallible human being, one of a kind whose life matters.

**(You're not alone in this, I know it can feel like you are sometimes, but I've been through this.)**

So here, I am standing before you all today to say, don't give up. Live your life because you matter. Whoever can look themselves in the mirror and think you're any better than anyone else, I tell you you're not as different as you may think. Words can be just as powerful as weapons causing extreme emotional distress, so please be kind. Find it in your heart to let the sun shine within you, a light that no darkness can live in. Challenge yourself to think positive although you are physically in prison, it's not impossible. When the day ends, remember a new one is starting on the other side of the world. We are born to love and live, to learn, to grow, to share, to help, to care for one another and co-exist. We are all here together for the better. To change and to have a good day, one day at a time, not just for today, but every day. The time to live is Now.

## **Flavors of the Flesh**

### **Isabella Murillo**

Warm drops of sadness caress the cheeks as one's face contorts in anguish. The vanilla scent wafts through the room as spoonfuls of sugar and ice fill the mouth, a salty sweet mix of pain. Fat situates itself around the hips and stomach like a maggot feeding on the flesh of the dead, the cycle continues. Rounder faces, larger clothes, all leading to a bigger game of self-hatred and remorse. Is this what one believes happens to someone with more mass on the body? Disgust and self-pity? How daft. When one says they eat their feelings it doesn't only mean sorrow and hatred. Complexities befit the entirety of the human experience, yet there's always the assumption that someone who enjoys eating, someone with a larger body hates themselves, why? Because they do not fit what is deemed as beautiful, perfect, and pretty, they must hate themselves because I certainly do. What a small minded mentality. Eat to survive and eat to enjoy. Savory flavors and the hard work put in to create such a dish, warmth floods the body because someone cared enough to spend the time to create this, eat more because joy fills the heart not because of greed. The salty bliss of tears because someone recalled a favorite. Pastel colors and soft candlelight's that led to a wish for further enjoyment, consume the flavors, consume the feelings because now the jolts of pleasure and happiness mix to create a concoction of life. Food is apart of ones entire being, three times a day, seven times a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Flesh blooms and blossoms around the form like silk, caressing one's vital parts and creating a safe blanket for what truly matters, bunching and joining in a dance that fluctuates over time and showcases the joy of living. Eat to thrive and to showcase how much one truly lives out their days. Savor the taste of food for it is the heart that works so diligently to keep us alive. We are alive.

# The Death of a Doe or The Killing of One

## Abel Escobedo Luna

I see it today, like a doe facing death,  
the patches of grass where we once used to lay.  
And the dirt on my legs holding me  
as if it was begging to not disappear,  
as if letting it go proves how fragile it is,  
as if this moment is all it has ever had.

And I see it today like I've seen it before,  
with those white feathered clouds that now cover my eyes,  
those that don't let me see the life before me.  
The willow which waves almost chanting my name,  
the light from the moon and its gleam on my fur,  
things that do not exist, and yet I claim as my own.

And I see it today and I'm sure I can feel  
how the glimmering sun won't take kindly on me.  
It's like I feel it burn way before I have seen it.  
It's the sounds timber makes as it's about to strike,  
its the fletching that cuts air  
and the arrow cutting meat.

And I've seen it, I have, for I know how it ends.  
Its a bickering pain I decided to end,  
its the change that time brings, and the empty that follows.  
And yet there still are those who will look at it wrong,  
as if they don't agree on my way of survival,  
as if this life I own proves to never be mine.  
But what am I to say when I've seen this before.

Today I see it all, and almost as if in response  
all eyes center, surround me, and press against my skin.  
And like a leaf falling gently, I let myself go  
and feel I'm submerged into a freshwater flow,  
my next and last breath would not be that of air,  
and in that breath, a promise:  
that when I'm reborn, I'll see nothing at all.

# How To Build a Monster

## Aaron Falls

*Part IV: The Reckoning,*

*An excerpt from the entire story, "How to Build a Monster"*

### Scene:

#### Café Luxe | Irvine

The air in Café Luxe smelled of burnt sugar and old paper. Alan chose the corner booth, its vinyl bench seats cracked and mended with duct tape. It felt familiar, like a prison bunk. The mug of black coffee in his hands was a comfort-hot, bitter, a small honest pleasure in a world of lies. He watched the rain slick the windows, distorting the passing cars into smears of color. Nine years ago, he'd watched rain from a prison library window, his thumb rubbing the worn face of a saint. Now, the saint was gone, and the only thing he held onto was a carefully constructed plan.

Eli Reyes walked in with the self-assured stride of a man who believed the world was a chessboard and he was one of the white pieces. Deputy District Attorney, climbing the ladder, the kind of guy who saw Alan and saw only a success story- a reformed inmate, a man who'd pulled him-

self up by his bootstraps. Eli saw the book, the Netflix deal, and the nonprofit. He saw a project.

He didn't see the man who'd spent eight years in a cage, cataloging every single one of Leanne's lies like a jeweler inspecting flaws in a diamond.

Eli slid into the booth, his designer suit uncreased, his smile polished.

He held a copy of *How to Build a Monster*, a bookmark tucked into chapter 12. "Chain Coulter, in the flesh," he said, the name sounding foreign and forced coming from his lips.

Alan gave a slow nod, the weight of the name settling on him like a physical burden. "Alan's fine."

"Right. Alan." Eli's eyes lingered on the TRUST NO ONE tattoo on Alan's knuckles, a momentary flicker of judgement before his professional mask slipped back into place. "You're book... it's a hell of a read. My office is buzzing about the coercive control angle. You're a natural born advocate."

"I learned from the best."

Eli laughed, a short, sharp bark that didn't reach his eyes. "So I hear. Leanne's been... less than thrilled with

your new found fame.”

Alan took a slow sip of his coffee. “Reckon that’s the point.”

The smile faltered. “She says you’re stalking her. Sending anonymous mail. The whole deal.”

Alan looked out the window again. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. “Leanne always had a flair for the dramatic. She’d say the sky was falling just to get you to look at her.” He let the line hang in the air, a small, subtle jab. He watched as Eli’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. Eli had seen the Tik Tok video. He’d seen Leanne, the magnolia realtor, crying on campus. The seed of doubt, with a fake return address and a juvie record, was now a sapling, pushing its way through the cracks in Eli’s perfect world.

“Look, I’m not here to talk about her,” Eli said, but his voice was too quick, too defensive. “I’m here because of your work. *The Second Chance Workforce Initiative*. It’s about inspiring. Honestly. I’ve been thinking about the systemic issues that you address in your book... the flawed testimonies, the forged evidence.”

Alan leaned forward, his elbows on the table. He’d been waiting for this. He’d been meticulously planning this moment for years. “The system sees a giant in ink,” he said, quoting his own thesis. “And assumes he’s the monster.”

Eli nodded earnestly. “And that’s the core of it, isn’t it? The presumption of guilt for people with a record. It’s a powerful narrative. It makes it almost impossible to get a fair shake.”

“Harder than you think.”

“Ever consider reopening your own case?” Eli asked, his voice low and conspiratorial. “I mean, with your expertise now... your book is practically a legal brief. It’s full of evidence, context, and psychological profiles. We could take

a look at it. See if we can find any grounds for an appeal.”

Alan’s heart hammered a slow, steady rhythm against his ribs. This was it. The moment the fish bit the hook. He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a manuscript. It wasn’t the full book; it was a dummy copy, a carefully crafted prop. He slid it across the table, the pages crisp and white.

“I’ve considered it,” he said, his voice flat. “But a man doesn’t need to be innocent to know what he’s capable of. The real question is what are you capable of?”

Eli picked up the manuscript. The cover was blank, save for the title: *The Pearl Exhibit*. His eyes fell on the bolded number on the first page: **CHAPTER 12**.

“I don’t follow,” Eli said, but his hands were trembling.

“Chapter 12,” Alan repeated, his voice a low growl. “That’s the one that details how the system is rigged. How a DA, with a new girl on his arm, might be tempted to overlook a few details to get a big win.”

Eli’s eyes narrowed, searching for a deeper meaning. He began to flip through the pages, the rustle of paper loud in the quiet café. He found the page Alan had circled, the one with footnotes. He read the lines, his face draining of color.

The page detailed the day Eli had met with the Public Defender and, with Leanne in the room, had “lost” the file on her juvenile record. It detailed his decision to present the pearls—a gift from Alan to Leanne—as a piece of evidence from a coerced burglary, even though the date of the alleged crime was two years after Alan had given them to her. It detailed his signature on a document that sealed Leanne’s record, and the congratulatory text he had sent her the night of the verdict.

The page was full of carefully sourced, verifiable facts.

It was the scalpel, and it was slicing through Eli's career like a hot knife through butter.

Eli looked up from the page, his face a mask of shock and dawning horror. "This...this can't be right."

"Can't it?" Alan asked, leaning back in the booth. He took another sip of his coffee. He let the silence hang, heavy and thick with implication. He had done his homework. He had studied Eli's career, his ambition, and his weakness: a fierce desire to protect his reputation.

Eli had believed Leanne, or, more accurately, he had chosen to believe Leanne because she was the path to least resistance. She was a church girl with a teardrop tattoo, and Alan was a tattooed biker with a rap sheet. The choice was easy.

"I didn't... I had no idea," Eli stammered, running a hand through his perfectly styled hair. "The public Defender signed off on it. We had a confession from you."

Alan smiled, a mirthless curl of his lips. "Yeah, okay, sure." He said the words that had cost him twenty years of his life. The words that had sounded like an admission of guilt to the jury, but was really a surrender to a game he knew he couldn't win.

Eli's gaze fell to the photograph on the page, the one with the cultured pearls. He recognized them. They were the same pearls Leanne wore on the day he'd taken her to dinner and felt like a hero, a knight in shining armor rescuing a damsel in distress. The same pearls he had bought her a matching bracelet for.

He stared at the photo, at the forensic note, at the dates, and the cold, hard logic of it all finally hit him. He'd been a fool. A pawn. And Alan Coulter, the man he'd helped put behind bars, was the chess master.

"All the evidence is there," Alan said, his voice calm,

almost detached. "Even the DA who convicted me could see it."

Eli's face was ashen. He looked at the manuscript, then at Alan. He saw the man who had a decade in a cage, not broken, but sharpened. He saw the monster he had helped build.

"What do you want?" Eli whispered, his voice barely audible.

Alan leaned forward, his reflection in the café window a ghost of the man he used to be. "I want justice," he said, the word a blade. "But I'm a pragmatist. I want my name cleared. And I want the world to see her for what she is."

HE stood up, leaving the manuscript on the table. "You have a choice, Eli. You can either fight me or lose your career, or you can join me and be the hero of the story-one who righted a terrible wrong."

He turned and walked away, his steps measured and deliberate. The sound of Louboutins clicking like a gun's hammer cocking echoed in his mind. He walked out into the rain, not as a victim, not as a monster, but as a man who knew exactly what he was doing. And for the first time in a long time, the rain felt like a blessing.

## **God Child (For Yonshia)**

**Orlindo Myles**

They say pressure makes diamonds,  
But what they don't tell you,  
Is that pressure breaks mothers too.  
This is for Yonshia,  
Single mother of five,  
Fighting battles with one hand,  
While holding her babies with the other.  
No knight in armor, just a queen with a spine of steel,  
Raising warriors in a world that tried to steal their shine.  
And Antonio,  
Her baby boy.  
The one with the fire in his eyes,  
And too much heart for the cold streets he grew up on.  
The system came for him like a thief in the night,  
Snatched his freedom before his dreams had time to stretch.  
Called him criminal.  
Called him lost.  
But hey never called him child.  
And still he grew,  
Behind bars, behind time,  
Behind every "What if" his mamma cried at night.  
But he ain't fold.  
He ain't break.  
Because his momma and his momma's momma,  
Were God-fearing women.  
Praying warriors,  
Who baptized him in hope,  
And covered him in Psalms when the guards turned their backs.  
See, Antonio ain't institutionalized,

He's internalized the power of survival.  
Turned pain into purpose,  
Isolation into education,  
And confinement into clarity.  
He's a man now,  
A king born of struggle,  
A success not measured by freedom papers,  
But by the strength in his spirit.  
And through it all,  
One woman stayed down,  
Every visit, every call, every letter soaked in love.  
Yonshia...  
The only woman who showed him what unconditional love really means.  
Not just word, but war cries wrapped in lullabies.  
Not just love yous,  
But I got yous.  
And now, from the belly of this beast,  
Antonio speaks:  
"Ma, you did everything right.  
Don't you ever carry guilt for what this world did to me.  
You raised me on faith, on truth, on love, the kind they can't cage.  
If I'm still breathing, still growing, still shining, it's because of you.  
You showed me the kind of love that don't leave when life gets ugly.  
So don't cry for me.  
Hold your head, ma. You a queen. You, my queen.  
And I love you, forever."

# **Left Behind**

## **Marianna Vizcarra Moya**

- A fuzzy blue jacket
- The smell of gum
- A bag from peru
- A Rihanna song on the radio
- A single framed picture
- My birthday jewelry set
- Envelopes with blank pages

Your voice no longer rings and your face is a mix of five others. Time is fading the place you had in my mind. The years we had were shorter than they should have been and longer than some people expected. All I have now are the memories attached to what you left behind for me.

# Scalp

## Jesus Martinez

School starts soon and you know you need a haircut before classes start. You brush your hand through your hair, for a moment you feel your hair part and the hot scalp feels a little too expansive. You hurry to your bathroom trifold mirror and yank and pull at your hair, parting it into sections to examine its thickness. You haven't seen any bald spots, but the paranoia creeps back whenever the thick curls grow too much hiding the scalp.

You knew there was a chance of being bald when you were older. Your father has more hair on his mustache than on his head. You don't remember a time when his hair wasn't buzzed or non-existent. His mother and siblings all still have thick hair. Your Abuelita loves your thick curls, she plays with them and when you wear a headband to visit her you tease her about sharing the same hair stylist. Your father didn't start to bald till his 30's. You've accepted your hairline won't remain the same but at least you still have several more years, and more if you have better luck than your father. Your hair falling out every time you showered wasn't something you were ready for. So many clumps of fallen hair you had to clean the drain every week.

It feels like your hair is no longer yours, as if some invisible hand has taken over the roots and decided which strands will stay and which will betray you. Every brush stroke, every shower, leaves pieces of you tangled in bristles

or clinging to the tile, a trail of evidence that you are losing control. You try to gather the fallen curls in your palm, but they slip away too easily.

You start to notice how the mirror doesn't just reflect your hair, it reflects your confidence, or what's left of it. Every patch that seems thinner, every curl that falls in the shower, makes you question how you look to everyone else. You find yourself planning outfits around hats, hiding under hoodies, tugging at beanies before stepping out the door. School feels like a stage where every glance might be an inspection, maybe they've spotted a new patch before you did. The embarrassment coils in your stomach, heavy and persistent, and you can't help but wonder if anyone sees the hair you've lost before you even do.

After a certain point of cleaning up your strands of hair, your mind races to the worst conclusions. You wonder if this is just Alopecia Areata, or if it's a sign of something far more serious, something your body is quietly warning you about. You run through every possibility you've ever read about, each one darker than the last, and your chest tightens with the weight of uncertainty. You find yourself closing your eyes and praying, silently begging that it's nothing more than a temporary fluke, clinging to hope that your body isn't betraying you in some irreversible way. Every spout of worry makes your stomach tighter until you

finally schedule an appointment with a dermatologist.

The fifth-floor office smelled faintly of antiseptic, and the narrow hallways made your footsteps echo in a way that only heightened your nerves. The reception area was all sterile white walls and stiff chairs, it's the same design you've come to expect from every doctor's office you visit. When you were finally called in, you sank into the leather chair, the back leaning just enough to make you feel exposed. The dermatologist, a calm woman with kind eyes behind clear framed glasses, examined your hair with meticulous care, parting sections and peering at the scalp from multiple angles. She asked question after question, about your family history, your stress levels, your diet, and each one felt like a distraction from the answer you had come for. Ten minutes later, after what felt like a lifetime, she finally said the words you had anticipated: "You have Alopecia Areata."

Relief and justified stress collided in your chest. After your consultation you leave the office and haven't spent more than you would've liked on various products prescribed to you.

You spend the rest of the summer treating your hair with the various products, lotions, sprays, ointments and eventually your hair begins to return to its normal growth. After a while you finally feel comfortable enough to get a haircut again, then proceed to let it grow out for the remainder of the year. But every so often there's a special occasion that calls for a haircut and it sends you into a self-conscious loop of fearing bald patches and examining the partings of your hair. You think you overcame all the issues from that summer until you grow out your beard during summer break. It refuses to grow properly, uneven patches of bare skin in places you remember growing hair before, you keep your jaw shaved as often as possible, waiting again for an end to the bareness. The frustration and anxiety feel eerily familiar, a reminder that even when growth returns, the fear of losing control can linger beneath the surface.

# Life

## Ciriaco Valencia

Fierce road ahead  
leaving breathless  
anyone at the sight  
roundabout  
impossible  
to get off  
physically collapsing  
mentally exhausting  
on and on  
unstoppable  
it goes

# **Thirteen Year Eternity**

**Richard Teer**

Through the dark I have walked,  
And been tortured and stalked,  
From the earliest memory I hold,  
I've been electrocuted and mangled,  
Molested and strangled and locked outside in the cold.  
Before the age of thirteen,  
I lived through this hell, a gift from mother's boyfriend to son,  
Each day seemed a year,  
Slowed by pain and fear,  
Where I had nowhere safe to run.  
For years I withdrew,  
And no one got through,  
To the part of me that couldn't be beat.  
I harbored strength within,  
And resolved to not give in,  
Though beaten I refused defeat.  
At thirteen I left home,  
For the world I would roam,  
To see what truth I could find.  
I found freedom and struggles,  
And a world full of troubles,  
But little truth beyond heart and mind.  
I've seen foul swollen corpses,  
With too many orifices,  
A blue mother and child in trash.  
I've seen O.D.'d junkies,  
And burned-out flunkies,  
And teens selling pussy for cash.

I ducked and dodged bullets,  
And perverts with mullets,  
And found the will to survive.  
I stabbed and I stole,  
Till I was Thirteen years old,  
All just to stay alive.  
Then a new phase begun,  
When my skill with a gun,  
Got noticed by much bigger fish.  
I was steady and quick,  
When put in a fix,  
And could go wherever I wished.  
They showed me a life,  
And promised no strife,  
I thought I found a place at last.  
My loyalty was strong,  
And my love was long,  
I'd have done whatever was asked.  
I was a go'fer at times,  
A tag-along on crimes,  
And seen things I'd rather forget.  
I've went from greyhound to airports,  
In jerseys and gym shorts,  
Looking for "uncles" I've never met.  
To deliver a package,  
Stashed in my baggage,  
Of brass and oiled steel.  
I lived well on my own,  
As if I were grown,  
For a while it was all ideal.  
About halfway through,  
My thirteenth year—I knew,  
That people are rarely what they seem.

When a gun lost and found,  
And a ford with a round,  
Came crashing down upon my dream.  
It took the last half to accept it,  
And that was hectic,  
But at least I knew where I stood.  
I folded my past in,  
With one last loose end,  
And buried it as far as I could.  
There's more to this depiction,  
Than that which is mentioned,  
Something I will never tell.  
Cause despite the betrayal,  
That's one lesson I learned very well

## Untitled #2

### Savvy and Unique TRU

When you see a person alone,  
And they stay to themselves,  
And **THEN** you disturb their peace?  
Silence isn't crazy...

**YOU ARE**

**UNIQUE**

# Free Birds

## Richard Gatica

### The Little Guy:

I spread the word on the yard that if anyone came across a baby sparrow, I'd buy it. Sometimes one would fall from a nest high above, perhaps pushed out by a gust of wind, a hungry sibling, or a careless parent. Today, my bounty paid off. He was about a week old and not fully feathered. A baby is rare so the price was high. I spent \$18 and paid with two bars of Irish Spring soap, one Old Spice deodorant, and a 16oz jar of Folgers coffee.

The baby sparrow served as a birthday present for my cellmate, Ricardo. His birthday was a week ago and I estimated that he and the sparrow were born on about the same day, July 23.

I walked into our cell, handed the sparrow to him and said, "Happy Birthday". When Ricardo seen his present he smiled brightly, gently took the small creature into his hands, looked closely at it with warm eyes, drew it near to his chest and hugged it.

Ricardo fell in love right then and there.

The bird was tiny, about the size of our thumb. Ricardo put soggy bread into a small sandwich bag, nipped a small hole in one corner creating a makeshift baby bird bottle. It didn't work. Ricardo then made smooching

sounds as he brought his hand down from above the baby sparrow. That motion caused the baby to open his tiny beak wide and Ricardo quickly squeezed the food into its mouth. We soon learned the best way to feed him was when he was asleep. We would gently tap his head with our finger and that would cause the tiny sparrow to instantly wake and open his beak wide, perhaps instinctively thinking that it was his mother landing in the nest with a belly full of food for him. He would eat quickly, then fall back asleep. He may have looked like a tiny innocent sparrow but he ate like a pig!

As the days passed we were thrilled to watch feathers sprout and cover his body. I would watch Ricardo delicately hold, feed, care for, and caress the small creature. This was important because I wanted Ricardo to relearn how to take care of a life, to be responsible and to love a creature in a world, such as prison, that is devoid of such emotions because of the lifestyle that we are forced to live. I did not realize until now that I needed the same reminder. Ricardo loves the sparrow and he holds the baby for hours each day. The sparrow takes naps on Ricardo's chest and in his hands.

Ricardo is 42 years of age, and he has spent the last 22 years in prison for robbing a store at age 18 with a gun replica.

The sparrow gives Ricardo peace.

After about ten days, we took the sparrow off the bottle and hand-fed him. Although he has shown us that he can peck crumbs that we set out for him, he, on occasion, will insist that he be hand-fed. He will ignore the field of crumbs that are before him and look at us sideways. He will hop and chirp. We feel sorry for him but he must learn. Although it's a battle of the wills, and our brain is much larger than his, we often lose and end up hand feeding him, one moist crumb of bread after another.

The sparrow is especially attached to Ricardo. Several times a day, Ricardo will clean him with a soft, damp cloth. The sparrow appears to enjoy this pampering. He stands perfectly still with his tiny beak turned upwards while he is groomed.

He is quickly learning how to fly. We first put him in the palms of our hands and quickly lowered them causing him to flap his tiny wings in an effort to maintain altitude. Next, we sat on our bed and tossed him out of our palms a foot or so into the air. He'd flap his wings vigorously only to crash land on the soft blanket. At first he was very clumsy. But after two days of practice, he lands with absolute grace knowing that he is a bird and meant to fly. Now he flies around the cell expertly, landing on us dozens of times each day. We give him a pet each time he does.

The Baby:

I found the second baby sparrow one morning outside of my job in the kitchen. It was dark and cold and still two hours before sunrise. She must have fallen from one of the mud nests about fifteen feet above the pathway. She was also a week old and about the size of your thumb. She felt cold and dead in my hands. Her head and neck were limp. Her eyes were closed, and I detected no sign of life.

Then I see her little stomach move just a bit as if she were taking her last breath in life. I cupped her in my hands and tried to heat her with my own breath. I ran to my cell and gave her to Ricardo and said, "See what you can do." I then ran back to work before my boss noticed that I was gone.

Ricardo was terrified. He didn't know what to do and he found himself asking God to guide him, to show him what to do in order to save this innocent creature. She was too weak to open her tiny beak, so Ricardo used a plastic dental flosser to gently pry it open and squeezed soggy bread inside. Ricardo spent the next three hours warming the sparrow with his own body heat and with each passing hour, life slowly returned.

When I came back from work, Ricardo was lying on the lower bed with her between his arm and his body to maximize body heat transfer. We were both amazed, happy and relieved. She was alive.

Four days later we knew that she was going to make it. She was much fatter and she loved to be held. Ricardo would gently pet her as she looked up at him. She naps often and must be fed every two hours, but she is responding to us well. She came into this world hard and cold but now she is cared for and loved by the man who brought her back to life. I estimate her to have been hatched about August 7th, making her two weeks younger than our other sparrow.

Everything seemed perfect for the first four months. The sparrows ignited our compassion and returned to us our understanding of the innocent. We had been hardened by decades of prison life, but these tiny creatures stripped away the barriers that we had erected. No longer were we confined to the monotony of prison life. We now had something joyful to wake up to, care for, and love.

We referred to them as “The Little Guy” and “The Baby”. We were like a family or flock or something else that signified completeness and closeness and love and happiness. They were like our children. We watched them fuss and fight and grow.

They both can now fly and they thrive with each passing day. We feed them a diverse diet of oranges, apples, sunflower seeds, bread, and bananas. We collect eggshells from the cafeteria because they must eat them for calcium. Because birds swallow their food whole, they must eat tiny pebbles to aid digestion so we filled a shoe box with tiny pebbles and the sparrows spend much time carefully selecting just the right size pebble to swallow. Next to that box we set a dish of water for them to drink from and next to that, we have a bowl for them to bathe. They bathe daily, ungraciously, but cute. The water is only a half inch deep and sits at room temperature. They hop inside and simply stand there for a few seconds as if debating whether bathing is an absolute necessity. Once their decision is made, they start to spin slowly in a tight circle then suddenly begin to flap their wings vigorously. They lower their body into the water, pick up speed and become nothing but a blur. We cover ourselves because water flies in every direction. We spend more time cleaning up the mess than they spend bathing but this is what a family or flock does. We take care of each other. When they are done, they carefully groom themselves, then they hop over to one of us for warmth, pet and nap.

We have researched sparrows and are trying to make

them strong and healthy. We wish to keep them forever but we must be realistic. We fear a cell search and some guards see them as pests. There are very few sympathetic guards. However, because we are polite and respectful to our unit staff, they allow us to keep our sparrows.

We have clearly imprinted on these beautiful creatures. We are all they have ever known. They don't realize that we are separate creatures. They believe that we are, perhaps, a flock. They come to us for comfort, to play, and to be fed, but most of all, they come to us to be loved. They require many hours of close contact each day. They play much like children do, jumping on us countless times a day only to be playfully chased away. They land on our shoulders and chip softly in our ears when we ignore them. They bite our ears playfully and fly off to some corner and look at us sideways. If we continue to ignore them, they will chirp and hop and look at us sideways until we play with them.

Sometimes The Little Guy would pick on The Baby. He'd peck at her viscously for no reason. I have a large pigeon feather that I use to hit him with each time that he does. He would stop what he was doing, hop a foot away and look backwards at me as if in shame. Within 20 seconds he will fly to me, and I will pet him and he will settle down for both seed and snooze.

When we put them down for the night, it's a long process. We must pay attention to how much sunlight is left. When we have about an hour left, we will turn off the bright light in our cell. That seems to trigger something within them and they start to settle down. We wait 30 more minutes before we turn the light completely off. Fading sunlight still trickles through the window and we use that time to reduce our socialization and they fly up to their birdhouses. We had built two of them and they are attached to the wall high next to the window. They select where they want to sleep. Sometimes they fuss and fight over the same birdhouse. Other times, such as tonight, they sleep together

in peace.

#### Freedom:

One day we noticed both sparrows sitting at the window together. It was a bright, sunny day. White clouds moved lazily across a deep blue sky. Off in the distance lay rolling hills. The sparrows sat silent and unmoving. They seem to be mesmerized by the outside world, a world that they could not possibly remember, but we knew deep down inside, instinct was telling them that that is where they belonged and not here with us. Just then, they see a bird fly by and they strained their tiny bodies to keep it in view for as long as possible. Then they slowly, seemingly sadly, turned away from the window and flew to us. The Little Guy flew to Ricardo and The Baby flew to me. They snuggled in and fell into a long deep sleep. It was then that we fully realized that if we truly loved these beautiful life forms then we must put their natural calling before our personal pleasure. We must protect their future by giving them the freedom they deserve. We must give to them what every caged animal desires, including us, and that is freedom. We live in a prison and we deserve to be here. But they did nothing wrong. They were innocent. They simply slipped from a nest when they were a few days old. They were beautiful creations of either God or The Forces of Evolution. We had a moral duty to rescue them from a cold premature death and we were bound by goodness to protect and nurture them, but we had no right to keep them caged. We became family or flock, and we served as witness to the development of their bodies, characters and personalities and we knew what we must do. We must set them free.

The sparrows were given to Project Wildlife in San Diego. There they were examined and set free in a safe manner. We'd like to thank Wendy of the Animal Welfare Institute in Washington, D.C., for her immediate and un-

wavering support. Wendy gave us guidance and education. The global reputation of her organization gave us the protection and the time that we needed to get these sparrows to safety. We'd like to thank our prison-work supervisor Ronald Keyser, who volunteered to mediate a plan between us, Sgt Banuelos, and Lt. Garvey, to get these sparrows to a sanctuary without breaking any rules. We thank the San Diego Department of Animal Services who provided transportation and we are thankful to Project Wildlife for setting them free. But most of all, we are thankful for The Little Guy and The Baby. You changed us in ways entirely unexpected. We hope that you now fly over mountains and through valleys. We hope you fly cross blue skies of your own.

Thank you so very much for your love. We miss you

# MAGAits in the Meat of Democracy

Daniel X. Cohen

Trump is a Soviet agent dismantling democracy. There I said what we are all thinking. “The White House has become an arm of the Kremlin.” A Democrat congressmen recently said. Every real Republican has walked away from whatever this thing is that calls itself the Republican Party. MAGA minions are Soviet pawns, too ignorant to know what a real Republican is, hell, most don’t even know what G.O.P. stands for. Try it, ask one and wait for that dumb stare of vacancy. Grand Ol’ Pawn?

MAGAit. Noun. Definition: 1. All MAGA, all idiot. 2. A blind follower of a modern day Josef Stalin. 3. A willing or unwitting Soviet agent or pawn. It’s the term I’ve coined. “You should’ve never started it.” Trump’s words directed at Ukraine regarding the war with Russia. Meanwhile his MAGAit minions voted with Russia and North Korea against Ukraine at the U.N. In the words of Grimes, from The Simpsons, “I feel like I’m taking crazy pills!”

The Fate of Democracy now falls on Britain and France. America has clearly been compromised by Soviet agents and their sympathizers. This is reminiscent of the German-American Bunds (American Nazi campuses) that sprouted up before the U.S. officially entered WW2.

But now we face a different kind of fascism, a Soviet style of fascism lead by a political party full of traitors and

supported by domestic terrorists (those who were involved with or supported the Jan. 6 attempted coup).

There have been times when I have been mad at my country, times when I have been repulsed by the politics on both sides of our parties; but there has never been a time when I was ashamed to be an American ... until the MAGAit regime handed our country to the Russians.

To have the eyes of Europe and the world upon us, viewing us not as the Allies of WW2, the co-founders of NATO and the U.N., the most politically and financially stable country in the world, an unbreakable model of what a democracy can be -- NO. Now we are seen as the next Soviet satellite state. An untrustworthy and dangerous ally that seeks a deeply personal, intimate relationship with the free world’s enemies. (Soviet) Russia and their North Korean and Chinese proxies.

But even China has been putting some distance with the Russians, whatever version of Communism China is practicing today is ran by a very capable, intelligent, and calculating leadership that understands alienating Europe and free Asia is bad for business. They have the political intelligence to keep their dangerous liaisons behind closed doors.

I was born in 1985 at the tail end of the Cold War, a Reagan baby. I still remember the nuclear drills and being

told by our government that the Soviets were the greatest threat to humanity that the world has ever seen, and they were going to kill us all -- or enslave us. Then 1992 happened, in addition to discovering the music of Nirvana, I got to watch the USSR pretend to collapse. At 7 years old I knew it was a trick, I knew the damn Russians were too crafty, too intelligent to just "collapse". They are a smart enemy, playing a chess game, playing the long game, playing an infinite game. Playing us.

I know that the regular Russian people are subjects of Soviet tyranny who have no say in what their government does to them or anyone else. I know they do not want a Soviet Russia controlled by the old guard KGB of the Iron Curtain. But that is what they've been stuck with during the reign of Vlad and his cronies, which for the first time ever includes a sitting United States President.

A Russian politician recently said, "The United States and Russia have more in common than people think." Yeah, we share presidents, apparently.

As long as those in power who are the old remnants of USSR exist and continue to train their children in the old ways, the innocent majority of the Russian people will never be free, and neither will we.

I never stopped calling them the Soviets, because they never stopped being the Soviets. Now if a 7-year-old can see that, why the hell can't so many adults? My great grandparents on my mother's side fled Soviet controlled Lithuania and headed for New York. I grew up thinking I was Russian on that side of my family because, as grandma said, "It was all the Soviet Union, so we were Russians."

My grandmother's husband, Robert Martin Cohen was a Dutch New York Jew who knew about the genocide of our people in Europe before the U.S. would admit they knew. He signed up to go kill Nazis in the war, unfortunately he got sent to the Pacific. An infantryman, he was even-

tually taken P.O.W. and tortured mercilessly. He escaped, skinny as a rail and minus his fingernails.

He made it home, but his mind never left the war. I would like to think that the sacrifices he (and so many like him) made fighting fascism and tyranny were not in vain. But as these Trumpsonian dystopian days pile together it feels less and less so.

## Little Girl

Amyrey Artienda

Sitting in front of the dented mirror I stare  
and I search for the past.

To try and find the little girl I used to be  
in the reflections, in the glints of light.

Trying to find what remains of *her*.

That funny little girl  
who spread cheer and whimsy to every corner of her bedroom.  
Her untamable imagination, fueled by every knick-knack and stray bead  
to turn them into relics and great seeds.  
They all poured out her head and onto paper.  
The stories she'd weave were like detailed lace  
that could distract one from drowning silence.

So where had that gone? In my mind,  
those unfettered ideals are now monochrome bricks  
that only know how to form walls around my heart.  
And any words I hope to say are drowned in cement,  
never to leave my mouth.  
In my tired eyes, those little trinkets were thrown out  
once their novelty had lost their luster.  
When had I lost her curious gaze? Maybe it never passed on to me.

Maybe it's trapped with that smile of hers,  
when every word she sung was encased in mildew honey  
and her laugh chimed through the wind.  
On that itchy brown carpet of my childhood bedroom, she had hoped  
and dreamed and wondered about what could be.  
What she would be.                    Would she have wanted to be me?  
A woman who had given up her dreams for company,  
A woman who had forgotten what it was like to be worthy,  
A woman who had missed every opportunity to become better.  
She didn't deserve this mess.                    She didn't

understand that her heart was worth as much as those around her,  
if not, maybe more.  
She was had willingly cast herself aside,  
leaving lone heart to drift off to be forgotten.  
But I had no control over their circumstances,  
their parents,  
their homes...  
That desperate little girl,  
she did whatever she could to keep their heads above water.  
They relied on tales to keep themselves afloat,  
to keep them distracted from their houses of angry fists, sorrows, and neglect.  
But she failed to realize that just because her home was more whole  
it didn't mean hers had no cracks.  
Soon those same cracks had begun to spread to what remained of her,  
and she broke.  
Leaving us unrecognizable in the mirror.                    Losing ourselves through others' misery,  
Bearing scars that weren't ours.  
Was that when I began to tether my stories to others' expectations?  
Was that why she felt like nothing more than a background character in her own story?  
Was that how [I/*she/we*] lost [*my/her/our*] spark?

Maybe it's too late.

Maybe those aches will be left unsoothed.

But there are days, when I miss that little girl.

I miss those days when her dreams filled pages and pages of lined paper  
and were carried through the wind, to be seen by the rising sun.

She'd only wanted to share her world with others, and to be cared for in return.

Because who's left to love that broken little girl?

If she's still there at all.

# My Mom is a Pizza

## Luna Prado

My mom needed fixing,  
My patience was ticking.

We were repairing her sight,  
But instead I got a tracking and price.

I waited for my pizza to rise,  
And I was kneed with time.

The screen said she was ready for pickup,  
My pizza said they needed this fix-up.

My mom came out whole-  
Packaged and ready to go.

# The Beauty in Danger

## Yasmine Stineberg

A cloud of darkness *cracks*,  
the soft strokes of purple and pink  
delicately painted  
across the sweet horizon

Shadows *ripple* the land beneath me,  
fighting the harsh winds  
that blow in waves  
As it goes down

down

*down*

Crashing mere inches  
in the stretch before me

The ground rubbles,  
battling the weight  
As I suck in a breath

hold

then *release*

I'm not afraid  
*Startled*,  
But not afraid.

It's *beautiful*  
The cacophony of deep  
almost void black  
scales running up and down  
the expanse of its body,  
a hint of blue  
peeking beneath

A strike of gold rimmed pupils,  
glaring into my soul  
I can feel it down to the depths  
of my bones  
Huffing *boiling* hot,  
steaming my pale skin,  
pushing loose strands  
out of my braid

It tilts its head slightly  
*Studying* me  
Almost as if it knows me,  
without me saying a single word  
I'm not sure where this boldness  
came from  
As I

s l o w l y

step forward,

grass crinkling beneath my toes,  
crying out as I make that final step

I raise my hand,  
not quite touching it  
It's cautious  
as it moves its head back  
in almost shock,  
Before it pushed its head forward  
against my palm

Its snout full of harsh ridges  
coating its scales  
I look up into the eyes  
of what could only be defined as awe  
Then it turns around,  
pushes off the floor,  
leaping into the fading sun  
Moon making its way  
into the sky after its deep sleep

I let my hand fall against my side  
and walk myself back home  
Anticipating tomorrow  
where I will see it again

# Beautiful Life

## Raymond Chen

Setting: Valerie who works late hours at a bar, while roommate Roy concentrates on his study while sharing the rent with Valerie. They are friends/roommate for about 2 years.

Scene 1

Onset: In apartment of Valerie and Roy, Roy sitting waiting for Valerie to come back.

Roy: (*on stage in apartment*) Hmm, when is Valerie coming home? It's getting late...

Valerie: (*enters stage door*) I (*hic*) I am home~

Roy: You were out drinking again? ... you know...

Valerie: (*interrupts Roy*) ~This (*smiles*) is a free bottle from the customers. Aren't you supposed to be studying anyways?

Roy: This is the third time this week... it's not good for you...

Valerie: (*interrupts Roy*) You are not my parent!

Roy: Please...

Valerie: I will do what I want! (*Drinks more*) Ha ha ha (*Walking around losing balance*)

Roy: Here... let me... (*Helps anchoring Valerie*) here, you are completely drunk...

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Valerie: La~ Da De DA~ (*pukes all over Roy*) blurg... urg... heh heh, you smell funny, ha ha ha.

Roy: Come on, almost to your room... urg (*lays Valerie down in her bed*). Okay... hey... you awake?

Valerie: .... Huh?... z z z z.

Roy: Okay, stay here, I will change out then come back... (*Leaves stage while taking off his clothes*)

Valerie: .... Huh? Where am I? (*Stood walks two steps then falls*) OOF!

Roy: (*enters stage*) Huh? You okay? Oh, you are a mess tonight... (*Picks up Valerie to bed*) here, just sleep it off, hopefully you will feel better in the morning.

Valerie: ... huh? ... urg...

Roy: WAIT... WAIT, Here, (*Grabs a nearby trash can*).

Valerie: BLURRRRRRR

Roy: There, take it easy. (*Lightly pats Valerie's back*)

Valerie: ... Urg.... Z z z z z.

Roy: Valerie? You still awake?... oh well. Every time you end up like this, breaks my heart... But don't worry, I will always watch over you.

Scene 1 ends

Scene 2

Onset: Noon next day Roy watching over Valerie sitting in the chair next to bed with a tray in hands. Valerie in bed.

Roy: You feeling better?

Valerie: Yeah, just a big headache, it's hurting really bad... ( *rubs head*)

Roy: Here, I have bought some Tylenols, along with a meal.

Valerie: Urg, I hate that medicine. You secretly trying to poison me?

Roy: You don't need me to do that...

Valerie: Hey, I am not kidding, don't you have any other medicine, some that taste like candy, or whatever...

Roy: This is the strongest stuff I know for a quick recovery... but I did make you a (holds up tray) French toast breakfast...

Valerie: (*knocks over the plate*) Why are you always so nice to me? You are not even my boyfriend!

Roy: I am your roommate, and... I wanted to help you as much as I can for my own reasons. And... you are important to me.

Valerie: Meh, fine... could you bring me a new tray?

Roy: (*Picks up plate*) Give me a minute... (*exits*)

Valerie: (*Talking to herself*) stupid headache... and stupid Roy, always telling me what to do. He is acting like he's my parent or something... (*looks at clock/watch*) oh great, it's almost noon, I have to go back to work at two!

Roy: (*enters with a plate*) You feeling better?

Valerie: Here, just give me the food and the med, I need to get cleaned up, I still have to go to work.

Roy: Okay, let me just make sure you are taking your medicine.

Valerie: Urg, fine, here (*takes medicine*) And here (*takes a bite of toast*) Happy now?

Roy: See? This isn't so bad, right?

Valerie: Just go away, I need to shower and change! (*pushes Roy to the door*)

Roy: Okay, okay. Please just come straight home after, don't linger around partying with the wrong crowd and drink again.

Valerie: Hey, don't tell me what to do. I party when I want to, and there is nothing you can do about it! (Slams door)

Roy: (*Talking toward the door*) Valerie, you are better than that... cough cough... I don't know how long I have with these medicines myself... hopefully just a bit longer (takes out pills and eats them)

Scene 2 ends

Scene 3

Onset: In the apartment, Roy received a phone call from Valerie's work place and went to pick her up, entering apartment.

Roy: (*enter stage helping Valerie walk from the door*) Valerie! Wait wait! Slow down! Someone actually contaminated your drink with illegal drugs this time!

Valerie: BLUR (*pukes all over Roy, then falls to the floor*)

Roy: Valerie! Valerie! Come on! Let me lay you down on the couch.

Valerie: (*weak*) Umm.... Umm... BLUR (*pukes all over the floor*) I am... freezing...

Roy: (*hand over Valerie's forehead*) You are having a fever! Come on... quick... the couch is just a few steps away... cough, cough.... (*sets her on sofa*) There... hold still, don't try to stand up, I am going to get you some tonics. (*Exits stage quickly*)

Valerie: (*weak*) Umm... umm... (*Tossing a turning*) Roy?...I don't feel so well... (*Rolls off sofa*) it's so hot in here... please... it hurts... (*Stayed on the floor without movement*)

Roy: (*enters stage urgently*) Valerie! Hold up! (*Lifts Valerie on to couch*) Don't worry Val. I got you, and I will always watch over you... (*coughs*)

Valerie: (*weak*) Thank you... Roy...

Roy: Here, I got some towels, but I need to take off your shoes and socks.

Valerie: *(says weakly)* Here...*(raises her feet)*

Roy: Okay, you are drenched in your sweat... *(Wipes from head and feet)* Here, *(grabs tonic from nearby)* drink this tonic, it will be a little bitter, but it will help. *(offers tonic to Valerie's mouth)*

Valerie: *(drinks then weakly reply)* I am... sorry Roy... I should have listened to you... thank you for always taking care of me.

Roy: You will be fine, Val, just relax and sleep.

Valerie: *(weakly)* Okay... Funny, only my parents ever called me Val, and they died when I was 10, and now you *(smiles weakly)* also called me Val... thank you...

*(Roy pats Valerie to sleep)*

Scene 3 ends

Scene 4

Stage: Roy waking up sleeping next to the empty couch.

Roy: *(wakes up)* Huh... Val? ...I was asleep all day... *(Picks his pocket for his medication, then saw Valerie's note on the table)* Oh a note from Valerie: "Sorry and thank you Roy for always taking care of me, I will be back right after work. Wait for me, we will eat together. Love Val". *(Smiles weakly)* She is finally taking care of herself... *(Coughs)* I think... I am getting... can't... *(Quickly picks out his pills from pocket, but drops them, and falls over, unconscious)* ...

*(Long pause representing passage of time)*

Valerie: *(enters door with takeout)* I am home~ I got some...*(Drops takeout bags, rush over to Roy)* OH MY GOD! Roy Roy! Are you okay?

Roy: *(weakly)* Umm... Valerie...? *(Coughs)*

Valerie: *(pulls out dials 911 on phone, waits a second)* My roommate... My... boyfriend is unable to walk, and he is coughing up

blood... hurry, he needs help... yeah, that is my address... please save him... 5 minutes? Yeah, sure, please hurry!  
(*Hangs up*) Roy! The paramedics is on their way, is there anything I can do to help you?

Roy: I am happy... that you are finally taking care of yourself... it may be too late for me... (*Cough*)

Valerie: No! No! Not like this (*sob*) we are going to the hospital, come on! (*Picks up Roy*) Come on, I got you this time. Just... don't give up (*sobs*) not like this.

Roy: Val, don't worry about me... just put me down... I have something to tell you...

Valerie: Don't speak, just... just... come on, I'll take you downstairs... (*Sobs*) I am not going to lose you too...

(*Valerie crying and dragging Roy along*)

Roy: Val... please... put me down...

Valerie: (*Sobs*) You will make it Roy! You can't die on me!

Roy: I have... a rare terminal illness... about a year ago... and I didn't want to worry you, so I never told you... (*Cough*)... I have always adored you...

Valerie: (*Sobs*) No... I was so selfish that I never knew... (*Sobs*) I am sorry Roy... I am so sorry... if I had paid more attention to you than out partying everyday...

Roy: No, it's not your fault... it is just... life. (*Sobs*) I am sorry too... I can't keep my promise of watching over you... (*Cough*).

Valerie: (*crying*) No... don't say that... don't you say that...

Roy: (*weakly reach out his hand, and Valerie held it to her face.*) Val, life... is beautiful... we won't understand it until we are near the end... I knew I was going to die, and... I wanted to have existed... by caring for you... (*Cough*)... please... live a beautiful life... for me too... (*slowly dies in Valerie's arms*)

Valerie: (*crying*) No... NO... NO... ROY! ROY! (*Shakes Roy then cries over Roy's cold still body*)

Fin

# My War With My Love

## Orlindo Myles

I hate love,  
The way it creeps in,  
Soft hands on a soul that's built of scars,  
Whisperin' lies in velvet tones,  
Makin' promises like stars.  
But I love love,  
Can't lie, I do.  
The fire, the thrill, the reckless high,  
Like jumpin' off cliffs just to feel alive,  
Even when I know I ain't meant to fly.  
Love never asked to be here,  
But still, it shows up uninvited.  
Knockin' on doors I bolted shut,  
Smilin' sweet like it ain't never lied yet.  
I push it out,  
Fight it like a war I've always known.  
'cause every time it gets too close,  
I lose a piece I once called home.  
I'm tired of the games it plays,  
The way it leaves,  
Then begs to stay.  
But even when I send it runnin',  
My heart be hummin' songs its fingers played.  
See, I hate love,  
For all the times it broke me.  
But I love love,  
'cause deep down, it still hopes me.  
So, I stay in battle,  
Me versus it,

A war that never quits.  
Even when I say I'm done with love,  
I'm just hopin' it won't quit.  
You want a war?  
Love brings the fight.  
Unwanted, unwelcomed,  
But it still feels right.  
And maybe that's what breaks me most,  
Lovin' what I hate the most

# The Flying Raven

## Blue

Finding bones peak interest in me.

I often find myself out in the forest that was behind my house and would spend hours in the dirt until the sky turned dark. I would find some animal heads, they mainly were small ones, probably squirrels. When I was 8, my older brother, Raiden, would come home from school and find me in my room covered in dirt and take me into the bath. My parents really don't mind if I scurried off into the wilderness, but my Mom would shriek of terror from how much dirt I get, regardless how many rocks or little bones would be in my pockets. I was sitting in my room reading a book about animal bones until my Mom came up at my door.

"Hey honey, the bus is here." she gently spoke. Mom has been spending a lot of time in the hospital. She's a pretty nerve-racking woman.

I closed my book without a response and hurried towards the front of my house with my backpack slinging on me. My Mom quickly gave me a smooch on the cheek and I grumbled from it.

"Make some friends, okay Raven?" She said.

"Yeah, sure." I replied back.

I don't have friends if you're wondering. Never did when I started in Elementary. Having a huge interest in skulls wouldn't seem as appealing for a girl like me, but I don't really care. I just like it. My hair is pretty short compared to other girls since most girls wear it long while I look like a boy. My hair is dyed in a kind of auburn hair color but more pinkish, and I really like it.

Riding the bus was sort of comforting. I daydream too much while looking out the window while most people are obnoxious. Headphones always seem to help me a lot whenever things get too much. Getting stuck from home is a lot of isolation and I barely liked to socialize. I have been doing independent studying ever since middle school. My therapist was pretty nice on my part, so it was okay. Getting back into real life high school is a new start to my journey. My older brother is a huge part of my life, though. I would say he's the only friend I had until he went to college. Raiden would listen to me and tell me some advice on not letting other people get to me. I really miss him.

The bus finally came to a halt and now I am at high school as a freshman. I roamed around the campus, watching students meeting up with their friends. There was a lawn just for seniors and others hanging around classrooms. Our schedules were posted online, so my first class was PE which seemed easy as pie. I watch as people talk

and have fun with their friends. All I had was books and myself. I don't really mind, I guess.

Suddenly the bell rang and it was time for the first period. I found the PE area and waited until the teacher came. My teacher seemed strict on the rules for it; having to wear specific clothes for PE and no Crocs whatsoever. We would have to do laps everyday and the amount of groans in the air was amusing. After that, we had time to do free play. I didn't have a reason to play, so I sat on the bleachers and I read a book instead.

I was suddenly interrupted by a ball being slammed hard near me which made me startled. Adjusting my glasses, I stared up to see these girls staring at me. They were burning into me, I couldn't help but feel slightly embarrassed. Was it the way I look? Do I look lousy? I play with my hair as a habit whenever I'm sort of anxious. I continued to read until someone sat beside me. I didn't want to look and stare because I'd make eye contact and make a random conversation without being prepared. With my eyes glued to the book, the person beside me began to talk.

"You wanna skip school?"

I turned my head with a flash at the person. She looked very unique with the amount of makeup she had. Her long hair is dyed with green and black makeup which makes her eyes pop naturally.

"What?" I quickly replied with shock.

"You heard me, girl." The girl said with a mischievous smile.

I blushed with confusion and a lot of things were running in my head. It's my first day back and suddenly I'm gonna lose it.

"Sorry, I'm not sure." I meekly answered.

The girl laughed with amusement and eyed me. "Alright, goody-two shoes, I'm just joking." She grins. "The name's Juni. Juni Park."

"I'm Raven Garcia." I responded.

"Pretty name you got there, Birdie." Juni jokes.

I felt myself redden and I hope I ain't looking like a tomato. This was an interesting start for my first day and making a friend wasn't on my list. Honestly, I wish I could be left alone even if being alone is sort of depressing. At least my Mom would be proud of me for once by making a friend.

"Thanks." I mumbled.

The conversation ended like that and I continued on reading. It felt like Juni was burning holes into my skull with those eyes of hers. Suddenly the bell rang again, dismissing us to the second period. As I slung my backpack on, Juni placed a hand on my shoulders.

"Let's hangout after school, yeah?" Juni said.

I felt myself getting surprised and excited. Was this really happening?

"Oh, uh... sure. I'll just let my Mom know." I answered.

Juni smiled as big and bright as she did with a chuckle and walked past me.

I ended up in 6th period accelerated English as the bell rang. The subject seemed to always interest me a lot since books were a source of entertainment besides movies, so I believe it was the strongest subject I have.

Entering the classroom though, there was a ringing of chatter among the many students who were already there. I decided to make my way to the front since the back was filled. As the bell rang, the teacher, who looked intimidating

and gruff-looking, silenced the class with a barbaric yawp.

“Alright, students.” He said calmly now, “Welcome to accelerated English 9th.”

It surprised me from that sudden volume change, though it was silly of him. My teacher, Mr. Gallagher, passed out these “All About Me” worksheets in order for him to know us well.

“I decided to take the first day as an easy day. Though, expect a quiz next class.” Mr. Gallagher added in, making the whole class groan.

“Quiz about what?” I asked him. He looked at me with such icy eyes that I thought I’d be gone by now.

“What’s your name?”

“Raven. Raven Garcia.”

Mr. Gallagher’s face didn’t seem to have changed from my name. I honestly thought my name was too unusual, given it’s the name of a bird.

“Book related stuff.” He answered my question.

Easy, I thought. I definitely read more books than any other kid in this class. *Fahrenheit 451*, *Night*, *The Great Gatsby*— I read the classic books. If you quizzed me on *The Outsiders*, I’d most likely answer them all right.

Throughout the whole period, I was doodling until the bell dismissed us for today. As I was about to leave, Mr. Gallagher stopped me. He decided to give me a headstart on the book we were reading for class.

“*The Catcher in the Rye*...” I read the title. I heard of the book, but never got to read it myself.

“It’s a good book. A kid like you would enjoy it, I assume.” Mr. Gallagher said, putting his feet on his desk,

crossing his arms.

“Okay. Thanks, Mr. Gallagher.” I said as I left the room, reminding myself I had to meet up with Juni.

I met up with Juni near the front entrance of the school and she took me to this 7-Eleven to get a drink and some snacks. Convenience stores always seemed pleasing to me, especially getting a soft drink or slurpee. The food is honestly good, maybe that’s just me.

“I don’t think I’m getting anything from here.” I said, examining every drink they offer.

“Why not, Birdie?” Juni questioned, filling up her XL cup full of Coke.

“I don’t carry money.” I simply replied.

Juni snorted. “Don’t worry, girl. I got you covered.” She smiled with gleam and made her way to the aisles.

I stared hesitantly at the cups and decided to just get a small one and filled it up with Pepsi. Making my way to where Juni went, I couldn’t help but squeak with shock. She was stuffing loads of snacks into her backpack like it’s nothing.

“Juni!” I whispered and yelled at her with wide eyes. I looked around the place, anxiety creeping up in me like liquid. “What are you doing?” I said looking back at her.

Juni smiled with mischief. “I got you covered, silly.” She said, still having that stupid smirk on her mouth.

“I thought with money!” I squeaked in terror. “My parents are gonna kill me! My brother would probably not even come visit me any more because I’d be in jail!”

Juni rolled her eyes. “You really are such a goody-two shoes, y’know that? Really annoying I’d say.” She chuckled. “Sometimes you gotta just... rebel once in a while.”

The mixture of anxiety and anger simmered in my stomach. I can't believe I got myself caught in this mess.

"I ain't dealing with this, Juni. I just need to cool off right now." I huffed. I gave her my drink, expecting her to actually pay for it and exited the store. I sat down on the curb and rested my head against my hands. I never thought making friends would get exhausting. Maybe being alone ain't so bad after all. I was so lost in thought until a drink appeared in my face. Juni still had that same smirk and I stared at her with annoyance.

"Come on, smarty, I paid for it." She stated.

"Even the snacks?" I mentioned.

Juni sighed with a nod as she sat down next to me and I happily grabbed my drink and sipped as the taste of Pepsi calmed me down. She gave me a bag of chips which I grabbed without hesitation and basically scarfed it down like a stray animal.

"So, tell me about yourself, Birdie." Juni started.

"Are you gonna keep calling me that?" I said.

Juni snickered. "Yeah, why not?" She said.

I sighed. "Okay, Asparagus." I simply replied, ignoring the squabbling of Juni, "I like animal bones."

Juni made a deadpan face. "That ain't interesting." She retorted.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. "I did independent studying in middle school and I go to therapy." I said. I knew I was pretty different from any other kid. I never went to a middle school where I met people my age and felt like I was an ordinary kid. Teachers in elementary would say I was a troubled kid and I didn't know why until now.

Juni took a moment to think. "Now that's interesting."

She grinned.

I shoved her playfully and slightly smiled. "It's whatever." I mumbled. "What about you?" I asked.

Juni thought for a moment. "There's nothing interesting about me." She said matter of factly, taking out a long white stick from her ear and putting it in her mouth.

"You smoke?" I said surprised.

She smirked. "Yeah, I've been smoking ever since I was 10." She sounded so proud of herself that my mind began to combust with a million thoughts. I don't get how kids get to do these types of stuff, it just doesn't seem as appealing.

Juni blew a smoke from the cigarette and the smell of nicotine reeked into my nostrils. I looked up at the sky and it was rendered with hues of pink and orange. The clouds were drifting apart by pieces and it just looked like a painting. Sunsets just hit the spot when you're all blue or need to relax. I recommend it a lot.

"I think you should head home." Juni spoke out of the blue. "It's about to get dark, ain't it?" She said as she also looked up to the sky.

"Yeah, I suppose so." I said.

Juni stood up first and stepped on her cigarette. She offered a hand to pull me up to my feet. We both walked to where my house was and it wasn't far from the 7-Eleven. We didn't talk the whole time, so it was kind of awkward. I was finally home and Juni waved at me and said her place wasn't far from me, so she went the opposite way.

Entering my house, it's always dead quiet since my folks aren't home as often. I sighed as I removed the deadweight from my shoulders and feet and made my way towards the kitchen.

There was food on the stove which was surprising. It was a Filipino stew called kare kare which is one of my favorite dishes, so I helped myself to a huge plate.

Sitting at the dinner table, I found entertainment from the TV and watched anything that seemed interesting. I felt myself scarfing down even after snacking from 7-Eleven, then again I didn't eat as much from school.

Throughout the day I just slouched around like a potato and just read and doodled for the whole day. That was until the doorbell rang and that caught me off guard. Of course it wasn't my mom or my dad, I also wouldn't think it was my brother either. It wasn't as late since it was only 8 P.M., but I just felt on edge.

Curious, I quietly looked through my window and caught a glimpse of a familiar person. I ran down the stairs and opened the door and there was Juni, stained in blood.

My eyes widened. "What happened?" I stammered out. Juni looked like she was out of breath, and her eyes were as wide and sharp as a predator eyeing its prey. She looked like a huge mess.

"Let's run away." She simply said.

My brain ringed furiously. "What? We can't—" I frantically said, then she interrupted me.

"Look, I don't know how much time I have, but I need to go. So I don't care if you don't come, I'm just letting you know you won't see me anymore." She explained sharply, looking away from me.

"Get inside." I said as I pulled her into my house and took her to my room.

"W-what are you doing?" Juni questioned, her voice hoarse.

"If we are running away, then we have to pack." I explained, getting a bag and a few necessities. I wouldn't ever think I'd run away just for the sake of someone else, but if I didn't go for the only friend I had, I'd probably regret it. Despite my own problems, this is the only way to find myself.

I gave Juni my own clothes and told her to wash up before we leave. I ran down the stairs and filled a water bottle and waited until Juni was done. She came down freshly cleaned and stared at me with the same wide eyes from earlier. Making eye contact, I grabbed her by the hand and we exited the house from the backyard, but then I stopped.

"Wait... I gotta do something first. I'll be back." I quickly said and dropped my backpack, getting a pen and paper.

*Hi Mom, Dad, and Raiden. I'm going to explore the world. I'll be okay. See you when I can.*

*Love, Raven*

## **Out of Time**

### **Carlos Ortiz**

The passing of time means that I'm a little older,  
I'm getting closer to seeing my wife and hold her.  
It means that my son has grown up without me,  
Though he still doesn't know what he wants to be.

The passing of time means my stay here is ending,  
That my release date is fast approaching.  
I start reminiscing of all that I've been through  
Is nothing compared to how much I missed you.

I'm thinking of all the missed opportunities,  
Of creating for us positive & influential memories.  
Life lessons and stuff I didn't get to cover  
I wish I could go back and get a do over.

Coming up on the final note of this song,  
I think about my mother and wonder how long  
She has before God takes her from me,  
Where he will keep her for all eternity.

# The Passenger

## Jose Zuniga

Sometimes when I drive  
she gets in the backseat  
quiet                    shy, hides from the mirror

her gaze keeps me  
awake she tells  
me to not drive into

the arroyito its dry  
right now maybe I should wait  
until the rain comes

lay in it                    let it take me  
to her while she mourns  
that its too early

# An Exercise in Honesty

Originally Published in January 2025 in  
reSentencing Journal of Tufts University

Daniel X. Cohen

It's a struggle to remember a time when I was happy and safe. I had to reach far back into my memories; a time when I still had some innocence. Though fragile, it existed. It seems like another lifetime.

I was a young teenager, 14, it was the summer of 1999; I was a football player in summer training camp at Harbor High in Santa Cruz, California. I remember for the first time in a long time I felt happy and free, there was no weight on my shoulders; and I never let anything bother me.

And then it all came crashing down one afternoon when a man tried to abduct me from Harbor High. I got away, but my reality was shattered. Or maybe my illusion was shattered by reality. I'd give anything to get my illusion back. (But we can't go back. Only forward.)

After that I was never the same, that would be the fifth major time that authority figures would let me down. My last bit of trust in coaches, teachers, other people's parents -- disintegrated. None of those people believed me when I told them about the weird man who tried to snatch me. And I would never believe in any of them again.

Being in a place of mind that felt like an open wound, it healed so slow that it never really healed at all. A place of shattered reality, a place of no trust and betrayal

-- all of which helped lead me here... to prison. A place where all of these things are the common fair of daily reality. Irony has been a funny recurring theme in my life.

This place I'm in now, I've earned it. I have no one to blame but myself. But the repercussions for my actions are suffocating, I often think death would have been more merciful than this existence (of life without parole).

I try to do good things, I try to be a better man. I've succeeded, but I am still haunted by those ghosts of my past. And some days I still feel like giving up. Every day is the same, every taste, every smell, every person.

Days drip into months, and those months drip into years. Before you know it decades have gone by, your body has started to fail you, and you wonder if you'd be better off had your mind failed you as well.

But my mind is really the only thing I've got. It's a brilliant mind, but brilliant minds are dangerous to the user. Especially when they are confined to the mundane with little outlet and minimal chance to achieve something better than merely existing.

In this place I have managed to turn darkness into light. I could talk 'till I'm blue in the face about becoming a group facilitator, a community organizer, a dog trainer,

a professional writer, and one of the first members of a pilot program organization called Inmate Peer Health and Education Programs. Trying to change the face of prison culture and show the world outside that we are mostly good-hearted people who made terribly stupid mistakes. But god damn, sometimes I am just so tired I want to lay down and not wake up.

I day dream about having a real life, about having a family and children, about having a girlfriend who'd become my wife. I day dream about getting to write screenplays for living instead of scraping by writing essays and journalistic pieces. I day dream about what might had happened if I had made better choices and had better opportunities.

I day dream because I can't sleep-dream, literally, I don't have dreams anymore. If I'm lucky enough to get any sleep I just wake up to morning; and I think to myself, "Fuck. I have to do this all over again. I just want to lay down for a few more hours and not think." But I can't lay down anymore, and I can't not think. The day is ahead of me, full of groups, and training dogs, and networking healthy relationships with staff for my organization; and doing and being and contributing something of value to this prison community. And if I have any spare time maybe I can finish some writing.

I stay up too late and get up too early. I'm getting old in here, my body betrays me... the one thing I can't stand. Betrayal. My hip hurts, my stomach hurts, my prostate is starting to go; I'm 38, I can't imagine doing this shit still at 50.

These prison-life-turnaround stories always have a nauseating amount of sugary-sweet positivity. To the point of being bullshit of varying degrees. No one has the sand, the audacity of reality, of actually telling the truth of what this life is.

And maybe no one out there in prison-reform-land wants to read it, because it detracts from the message of

second chances, because it's just too fucking honest. To show that broken people are capable of accomplishing great things with minimal resources and still feeling sad and like shit half the time. Just like everyone else out there in the real world.

When you are in this prison writing game, where everyone is acting just super positive and everything is just super great and the bad things that are bad are all in the past... you read enough of these 1-sided stories and you want to vomit. Rule one of journalism: tell the truth. Rule Two: accept the consequences. Those aren't the real rules... those are just the rules I wish were written in stone.

I thought of writing some sugary-sweet bullshit for you to eat, but I wanted you to feel something. To really feel something genuine. And to know that we in here, we are fucked up and imperfect, our 12-steps did not fix us and never will. BUT we are still capable of doing so much good and reaching so much higher than what we are given credit for.

We have the same shitty, hard days -- just like you. We want to call it quits sometimes -- just like you. But, as the great George Clinton said, "Funk it. And keep on push-in'." Just like you do out there. Because we have to, because if we don't we'll die. We'll die inside.

I was once asked to write about utopia. That's not a thing, it's not real, tangible, or achievable. But to get your ass out of bed every morning, even when you don't want to, and to push all day to make yourself a better person, and to make the world, your world (no matter how small it might be) a better place.... Well, that is heroic. That is utterly human. And the will to do that, without violence, without fear of failure; that is what it really means to be rehabilitated. And that is as close as any of us will get to utopia.

I know I ain't winning this contest. But, to me, los-

ing for the truth is better than winning for the lie. I know, I'm a shitty politician, but, since they don't have integrity, someone's got to.

## To a Fictional Older Brother

### Jesus Martinez

Dear Brother,

I wish you'd been here first,  
to show me how to hold the world  
without my hands trembling.  
Some nights I pretend you're real,  
that you'd sit beside me and say,  
it's okay to be unsure.

I try to be that voice now,  
for the two who look at me  
like I have all the answers.  
They don't see how often  
I'm guessing, or how heavy it feels  
to carry everyone's tomorrow  
in the pocket of my chest.

Would you have taught me  
how to ask for help without shame?  
How to stretch a paycheck  
so no one feels the hunger  
I sometimes hide behind jokes?  
I'm learning, but slowly,  
the world doesn't wait for slow men.

I wonder if you'd laugh  
at how I'm still figuring out  
what kind of man I want to be—  
soft, but not weak; strong,

but never cruel.  
Sometimes I think masculinity  
is just a language I never learned  
the grammar for.

Would you have understood  
what it means to love  
like I do—  
to see beauty in a woman's smile  
and still feel my heart stir  
at the warmth in another man's eyes?  
To hold both truths  
and not feel the guilt  
the world tries to hand me?  
Would you have told me  
I'm enough, just like this?

I think I would've liked you,  
Brother. Maybe you'd have reminded me  
that being a good man  
isn't about never falling,  
but about standing up  
with tenderness still intact.

Until I meet you in some other life,  
I'll keep trying to be  
for them  
what you might've been  
for me.  
Your brother who wished he wasn't born first,  
—Jesus

## Threads of Light Savvy and Unique TRU

Two souls move through a landscape of gray:

Steel bars, echoing footsteps, and the faint smell of Cell block 64,

They remember the world outside as if through misted glass.

Their identities questioned, their courage tested, their femininity criminalized.

Yet within these walls, they stitch together threads of light.

A pen becomes a sword, a notebook becomes a shield.

The numbers of math, the gestures of ASL, the rhythm of poetry – all become threads of defiance,

Every day, they learn, they create, they persist.

Savvy traces constellations in the margins of her journal,

Unique folds stories like origami in the corners of notebooks.

Through their minds, freedom blooms.

The walls remain, but light cannot be contained.

They are two, they are many, they are unstoppable – resilient souls threading their way through the deepest darkness into brilliance.

# The Kringle and the Compass

## Aaron Falls

The air in Racine, Wisconsin carried a particular weight in the summer of 1975 – a mixture of freshwater breeze from Lake Michigan and the sweet, yeasty scent of baking that seemed to cling to six year old Aaron Falls' clothing. His small world existed within these familiar smells and the even more familiar embrace of his family's bustling household.

Each afternoon, Aaron would race home from playing with the Kelly boys – Timothy, Tom, and Paul, his unofficial brothers in everything but blood – to find his grandmother Esther already pulling pans of Kringle from the oven. The golden crusted pastry, studded with apples and cinnamon, represented something solid and unchanging in his life. His Grandfather, Harold would sit in his worn armchair, eating pickled herring and nodding approvingly as Aaron washed his hands at the kitchen sink, after lobbing golf balls over the Rhubarb garden with an old pitching wedge. Something Grandpa knew that Aaron loved to do.

The Markus family home felt like a living museum of their complex heritage. Aaron's Russian ancestors had emigrated to Germany generations ago, eventually marrying into both German and Danish families. The Danish side, the Helds' brought their own traditions of warmth and hospitality, while the German-Russian Markus side contributed their sturdy resilience and deep-rooted customs.

Aaron's aunts – Annie, with her quick laugh, Lorie with her endless energy, Joanne with her perfectly styled hair, and Alice with her gentle patience – filled the rooms with conversation and movement that reflected this blended ancestry. Uncle Bill would often arrive smelling of fresh air and hard work, ruffling Aaron's hair with calloused hands.

Yet even surrounded by this loving chaos, Aaron sometimes felt a quiet disconnect. He'd catch his reflection in the glass of the framed family photos – his long wavy curls quite a bit different than the straight blonde of his matriarchy, his skin tones a shade darker than his cousins'. The absence of his father, Thomas, had also created a space in his history that nobody quite knew how to fill or spoke of, so many things went unspoken even more unanswered.

His mother Carol, worked tirelessly as a social worker for the city of Racine, the smell of Jean-Nate perfume and Virginia Slim cigarettes lingering on her hugs when she returned each evening. She built a world of stability for him. Surrounding him with family and their closest family friends like, Tina Segura, whose friendship with Carol went back to grade school, and felt more like sisterhood than friendship, whom Aaron, and Jeffrey referred to as Tia.

The greater world of Racine pressed in at the edges of Aaron's consciousness. He noticed the pattern of school

buses rumbling through their neighborhood and overheard hushed conversations about “busing” and “integration.” The city was trying to become what the newspapers were called “a model for the nation,” though the adults in his family spoke of these changes with cautious uncertainty, their European roots making them value tradition and stability above social experiments.

Then there were the visits from Eddie Lee Davis aka Big em’. A larger than life individual who was well known in the state, by the state, as well as some of the neighboring states, as being a contentious sort of individual who had his fingers in more pies than you could count for these things to have been completely above board. Eddie’s visits were always of importance to those he was visiting, and for those whom he considered his family. His visits were events that rearranged the atmosphere of the home. Eddie would arrive from Kenosha in a Cadillac, all bells and whistles, it would announce itself before it even turned onto their street, music thumping disco beats faintly behind rolled up windows, and all the while Eddie is on the only rotary telephone in a car that anyone in these neighborhoods had ever seen. Even the Mayor, and Police Chief were jealous of Eddie for having one and they didn’t.

Eddie moved with a different energy than most of the people that Aaron could remember, all business, a contagious laughter and smooth confidence. He was contagious, and his presence in a room brought something other than to that space.

Eddie’s wife Pearlle Mae accompanied him, bringing her own quiet warmth, and loving self, full of action, quiet humor, and hugs. While Eddie captivated them all with stories, Pearlle would show Aaron how to bait a hook or let him help roll out the dough for pies that tasted different from Oma’s Kringle but were equally delicious.

To Aaron, Eddie represented something thrilling and

essential. He was the only person in Aaron’s life who may have reflected a missing part of his own identity. When Eddie called him “my boy” and swept him up in bear hugs, Aaron felt seen in a way that went beyond his family’s love.

One cool March evening, well before the fireflies could paint their yellow streaks through the twilight, the two halves of Aaron’s world collided beautifully. The extended family had gathered for his birthday celebration when Eddie’s familiar Cadillac pulled up outside. He entered with his usual flair, but tonight he carried a carefully wrapped package.

After the cake had been served and the adults lingered over coffee, Eddie found Aaron watching the stars appear over the lake through the kitchen window. He knelt down, his baritone voice uncharacteristically soft.

“Your Mama tells me you’ve been watching the stars, and asking about constellations,” Eddie said, handing him the package. “This is so you can see things clearer. Sometimes what looks like tiny specks are actually whole worlds waiting to be discovered,” “Happy Birthday my boy.”

They sat together on the back steps as Eddie showed him how to focus on the moon’s craters. The sounds of his family’s laughter drifted through the back screen door, mingling with a late night Ravens’ call and Eddie’s low, patient instructions.

In that moment, surrounded by the love of his German-Russian-Danish family and the guiding presence of his Godfather, Aaron felt a profound sense of wholeness. The Kringle would always taste like home and heritage, but Eddie gave him a different kind of nourishment – the courage to wonder about his roots and his reach, to appreciate the solid ground of tradition while daring to gaze at his distant possibilities.

# The Opening Line

## Anabelle Gutierrez

Miranda was destined to be a famous author. She could see it now: “Miranda Martinez, the #1 New York Times Bestselling Debut Author.” Yes, this novel would be the first in a successful series of seven, reaching bookstores nationwide, rocketing her to stardom...

But the word count still sat at zero.

The cursor flickered, giving the illusion of motion, yet it remained glued to the top left of the document. The white walls surrounding her bedroom blended into her vision, until all that remained was the intimidation of her monitor. Her desk chair was firm... too firm. She buried her face in her hands. Her writing career would surely end here.

She turned her head back towards the computer. Enough of that talk. All she needed was one line, and then the rest would come to her, like a waterfall. She took a sip of water, letting the excess flow down her mouth like the words on the page. *In the world of Fabula...*

She wiped the water off her face. No, that’s not right. Another sip. *Travis...*

She gave a hard swallow. No, that’s not right either. She tapped her fingers against the desk. How to begin...

Miranda peered at her phone, sitting obediently at the

edge of the desk, taunting her like a sad puppy. Its eyes reflected possibilities, the lights of a big city. After wandering through the unknown for so long, it seemed ever tempting. As she drew near the false light, the obsession consumed her.

“How to start a story.”

“How to start a fantasy novel.”

“How to write an establishing shot.”

“Weather descriptors.”

“Flowers that represent longing.”

“Animals that represent longing.”

The word count sat at zero.

Miranda put down her phone and brought her attention back to the blank document. She had done so much planning to get to this stage. Gone through several character sheets. Maybe all she had to do to find the elusive opening line was look within.

She paid a visit to her imprisoned protagonist, dangling a set of keys in her grasp. She would let him out, but only if he answered one question. “Travis, what would you be

doing on an ordinary day?” she asked.

“Don’t patronize me. You’re the one with all the freedom.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You decide! You decide what I do! I have no control over whether I leave. I can’t leave unless you drag me out!” Defeated, he turned towards the other characters. “They can’t either.”

“How long will you leave us like this, tied to the confines of your mind?” one begged, reaching for the keys.

“Grant us freedom on the page. It’s all we ask,” said another.

The walls of the prison closed in on her. “But I’ve tried! I can’t! I...”

The word count sat at zero.

Miranda decided she couldn’t afford to be picky any longer. She cast her net into the sea, willing to take any scrap of an idea she could get. Behold, a catch! *The but was always-*

An invisible hand sprung up behind her and pressed against her mouth, holding it shut. “What word could you possibly use to describe that?” it whispered. She gasped as it released its grip. She started over. *In the springtime-*

Again, the hand sealed her lips. “You’re getting too excited. Don’t mention the season. It’s not time yet,” said the sinister voice.

When the hand released its grip once again, she flung backward. What was the use? There was no good way to start. There would be no opening line. There would be no story.

The seat underneath her melted like wax, encasing her in the remains of her expectations. The hand returned, monstrous and enlarged, tying her to the floor and shutting her mouth so she could not scream for help. Just like the desk chair, the ground turned to putty and pulled Miranda in. The voices of her prisoners returned, attempting to escape. They could not get far, weeping as they realized they would drown alongside their creator. Her phone fell from the desk, crushing her like a massive domino.

This would be her end. She would be swallowed before she got a word on the page.

“This is the opening line!” a voice called out.

Miranda looked around. Had someone come to rescue her?

“All of this! This is the opening of your story!”

Yes! She understood what the voice was trying to tell her. But the top of the desk was so far up now. If she could just get her hands on the keyboard...

Miranda mustered her strength and pushed the phone away. She tried to reach for the desk, struggling against the sinking floor. But the hand stopped her from stretching her arms high enough. “You can’t possibly make that your opening line...” it lied.

“Let us help you!” said Travis. He, alongside the others, fought off the hand. It squirmed until its excuses withered away alongside it. Now free to move, Miranda lunged for the top of the desk. She had to do this for them. They mattered much more to her than her fear of imperfection.

At last, she gripped the desk, using it to pull herself up. The chair materialized as her fingers reached the keys.

*The weight of expectations threatened to swallow Travis whole.*

It wasn't a bestselling opening line, but it was hers. And for now, that was enough.

# I Forgot My Own Song

## Daniel X. Cohen

I forgot my song today.  
My brain short circuited.  
Forgot how to play.  
I didn't forget the chords.

I forgot the rhythm.  
Oops! Brain schism.  
It happens sometimes.  
Or as Neil said - You started playing retardedly.

Forgot my own song  
Don't talk shit to me dawg.  
Forgot my own song  
Don't talk shit to me dawg.

You started playing retardedly.  
Timing oopsies.  
I forgot that one line too.  
In all fairness I was tired.

# Within

## Albert Rivera

Within the inner depths of my soul, remain words that have never been told. Unexpressed creed, of duels clenched fond.  
Far beyond any reached dawn, mellow sweet mildew lawn.

Unraveling crest, peak of spawn, nurtured web of unheard sobs.

Within my inner self, crystals form and glaze, in a trance of awe struck, amazed.

Within my inner man sees from the heart, it beats and breathes, hurts and bleeds.

Silence entails slightly inner peace, dagger spree, willow-tree.

Impetuous decline intertwine a grappling fist. Hanging on in the dismantled twist. Within my inner soul, the world of emotions bliss.

Cheerful glee of sudden kiss intimate embrace I miss,

Laughter and giggles, wonders and hope. Warmth and love, within my inner being exist and so I cope and continue to hold on. And share with you what's within my inner calm.

What would thou do for a love that will end one day?

How to hold it while it is still there, perceive its goodness and jaded fate.

Whimpers of fools beseech themselves oh silly clowns.

For Love is always there. You cannot hide what is a cruel hickory taste of molten Goo,

Life Is Now! Fastened your belt. Yet the day is upon us...

# Violence to Empathy, a Convict's Road to Recovery

## Manuel Campos

Over 20 years of love, companionship, and responsibilities. In January 2011 I was arrested, and life as I've known it, ended.

I was eventually sentenced to 12 years plus 35 years to life. It was time for me to change my whole persona. I will put my jailhouse mask on. I will put up emotional walls, to make others believe I am someone who needs to be avoided. I had been out of jail for over 15 years, so I regularly raise my hand to volunteer my services on behalf of jail politics while in the county jail to prove I can still hang with the most violent criminals. It was time to forget my old life. There was going to be no more work, a home, family gatherings, vacations, dining out, or retiring. Inside, I am screaming out in pain. Who's going to support my family? Where are they going to live? Who's going to raise my son to be a great man? What about my daughters? Who's going to protect them or walk them down the aisle when they get married? And what about the love of my life, Silvia? She put her whole life in my hands, and I failed her. I lost so much, and because I was hurting so much, I started hurting others. I ultimately caught my life sentence by assaulting another inmate while I was in the county jail.

As soon as I was sentenced, I asked Silvia to visit me before I got transferred out to prison for the rest of my life. When I walked in to the glass window visiting booth,

she was already sitting there waiting for me. When our eyes met, the tears started flowing from both our eyes immediately. I can see, she already knew what I was going say. I had already planned what I wanted to tell her. This is what I said.... Silvia you've always known that I love you with all my heart, and I always will, but today I am releasing and letting you go. You are still so beautiful, with so many years ahead of you. You must move on and find love once again, but with some else. It was my fault for committing my crimes, and you are not going to suffer for my bad decisions. I love you so much that I want you to be happy.

I hurt her and the kids enough. They had the perfect life and I simply snatched that from them. Although I secretly cried without making sounds at night, I can only imagine how often Silvia and the kids cried in each other's arms for their Daddy to come home. In one day, everything was taken from them, and I did not deserve them anymore.

It has been 12 long years, and I still think of Silvia and my kids every day. It has not necessarily been a bad thing, oh yes, I miss them, but all the thoughts of them are happy thoughts. There are times when I replay a moment in my mind of us and the kids and it just leaves me with a peace that is indescribable. You know, some inmates who have been incarcerated for many years who do not have precious memories of spouses or family, ask me, "do you think it

would be easier for you to do your time if you did not have all your wonderful memories”, “doesn’t it make it harder for you to do your time”? My answer is simple I would never want it any other way. I am so happy I have so many good memories. I believe those precious memories help me get through this difficult time in my life. It gives me hope, that one day I might be able to create new memories with my kids, grandchildren, and maybe one day I will also find love once again. But until that day, I will keep those memories alive, and when nobody’s watching, when I’m laying down in my bed at night, I’ll continue to hug my pillow, with a tear falling down my cheek, pretending its Silvia or one of my kids I’m hugging.

Today, there are times when I’m hurting inside, but that doesn’t give me an excuse to hurt others anymore. I understand that I am an emotional being, and it’s okay to hurt or miss my family. I thank GOD that HE opened my eyes to empathy. I am able to place myself in others shoes, so I can better understand them when they are also going through something. I now realize, by hurting others, I was making others hurt. I do not want others to feel the pain I once felt. I will live a life that is violent free, so that one day, I might get another chance of freedom.

## Short. Valeria Rubio

If I jump will my legs grow wings?  
If I leap, will I soar?  
Does it make any difference if my shoes have heels,  
If I can't reach the door?  
Will my nephews grow taller than me,  
By the time they turn four?  
Am I destined to be five foot two,  
And not grow anymore?  
Will I always look up when I speak,  
Lest I look at the floor,  
Or hear "Can I see some ID?"  
As my friends drink the store,  
I hate that I didn't eat enough vegetables when I was a boy,  
Didn't drink enough milk, instead gorged on the thrill—  
Of soccer and not basketball.  
When I'm walking alongside my friends,  
They all lean on my head for support,  
Carry me on their shoulders,  
'Cause I can't see the concert from the twenty-third row.  
I'm angry at nineteen,  
And I bet I'll be angry at twenty-four,  
Because no matter how hard I try,  
I will always,  
    just be...  
        short.

## Some Morning Therapy Sessions

### Alexis Ramos

Hunched, I reached the Doctor's Telemedicine Zoom room.

Desolate is the slate of my schedule outside of these electronic waiting rooms.

*Your Host is Joining...*

She joins the call.

§

*"You know, my body isn't the same as it was, Doctor, nor will it ever be."*

§

Shame is a feeling the body does not forget.

Nor does the impact

of a crater on a clay-bourne body.

Or, a heavy-duty SUV to my aluminum toy car'

§

"My mom has been diagnosed with a tumor in her ear canal, and that's been jarring. I've had multiple surgeries on my ears, losing the same hearing she lost permanently." I say, scratching the hangnails decorating my thumbs.

"I've thought about the pills that my mom is being prescribed for her pain.

Mine doesn't end, ya know?"

§

My girlfriend is someone who has never seen my body with repulsion, a sad reflex to inexperienced irises, or has had her thoughts crossed/laced/intersected on how/why I let myself be in the form of how I simply *am* just in.

Be it known, I *am* here as I am—

I wanna say,

Doc, I got my back blown out by a tacked bell & whistles KIA Telluride. Indeed, the shit stained box mobile, cigarette-ly smoked bombed,

was operated by a lovely lady

named Alena.

She, sacred,  
crafter of my walk,  
is the inventor  
of my  
newfound curse.

I wanna say,

After my accident,  
the snaggle-toothed,

self-proclaimed “driver,”

~~(DOES DRIVING WITHOUT LOOKING  
COUNT AS DRIVING?)~~

riddled the road & ended up liable destroyer  
of the once-full “jelly” sacs in my back.

this, sacred to my spinal cord cushionings, was  
jolly-green  
turned compost.

Thanks! Today, the seeping jelly,

dehydrates my spine from where  
you may ask?

the inside out, and don’t mind the  
dry flakes of saliva decorating the  
sides of my feral mouth.

I crave connection,

I'm a dying dog.  
this  
this pain locked in for a lifetime  
(newlywed),  
my chronic best friend.

§

My therapist says to love yourself. Your body gets confused about whether you want to get better if you think negative thoughts, and you physically wanna get better. **Good!** I can't think about it. I'm tame, no worries.

divorced from the madness!

my neck pain rings to right hand (without my consent). POP! — since— my jelly-sacs that day leak sulfur, or is it just the fact I haven't been able to shower for some days because it's been a consistent 7.5-the past couple of days, Doctor.

§

I keep telling my massage therapist the same truth that's busted into my life, and she looks at me like I'm trying to max the maximum number of sessions possible under the settlement. I swear to God I am trying to heal, but I literally am torn."

§

My therapist says to  
love yourself. I stand in this world, in solitary confinement.

§

"My epidural steroid shot is scheduled next Tuesday."

§

For time, I could not feel my bottom half. I was scared.  
Felt like that day. Tell me,  
Who'd dare punch a sequoia to let her witness her own sap  
sinking? We all gotta go someday,  
*gotta be grateful to*  
*be alive*, I thought,  
with a Joker smile (cheek to cheek)

(as practiced) in the presence of my therapist.  
I wanted to destroy the gazelle trapped in her eyes.  
*you're alive*, I thought, as my jaw bones desired  
to gnash my lockjaw, teeth-chomping  
as my nerves  
my  
brain forgets to regis

§

I started physical therapy yesterday.  
My lip quivered when I said that. I'm growing into a body that feels  
predisposed against me. Every day, a reminder of my fragility, *waking  
up a privilege*, I regurgitate into the vaseline of my running thoughts,  
so, I won't lose myself as a castaway.

§

I've been a caged crow.

My back is empty, and still I am too empty to fly.

# Together We Fall

Sean Scanlan

AT RISE: Craig is in the rest room, looking into the mirror. Bobby is standing outside the restroom next to the door. Mike and Katy are in the warehouse sitting on the chair. Katy is playing on her phone.

CRAIG: [washes face. Looks into the mirror and thinks outloud] Why the hell did we follow that guy into this place out of all places? We could've gone next door to the meat bun place, or even the gas station right next to that.

[Craig washes hands, exits restroom and walks into warehouse.]

BOBBY: [standing next to the bathroom door.] Is everything alright?

CRAIG: I'm alright.

MIKE: [across the way, yells] So, the poor kid finally pissed his pants, huh?

KATY: Stop picking on him, we are all in the same boat.

MIKE: I'm not picking on him. He picks on himself. If it wasn't for him slow draggin' we could have all died.

BOBBY: If it weren't for him figuring out the code to get in this warehouse in the first place, we would all be zombie food.

MIKE: [speaking in a macho manner] I could have broken the door down.

KATY: [still engulfed in her phone] If you broke the door down how would we keep the zombies out?

MIKE: [mumbles] Whatever.

BOBBY: So, here is the plan. We need to micromanage the food supply, gather all we can in this warehouse, and find a steady water supply.

Katy: Urg! This is not cool. I am going to the bathroom. [walks off]

MIKE: Yeah, Boy Scout. I will look in the back, ALONE. [walks off]

CRAIG: Well, I will just stay put and see if I can establish a communication line to the outside. Or maybe something on Katy's phone might function.

BOBBY: Okay, I will go follow Mike, just to be safe. [walks out]

[Craig searches around]

CRAIG: Holy smokes, what the.... Where did this blood stained gauze come from? Did one of us get bitten by the infected?

[Katy walks in]

KATY: Oh, where did everyone go? What do you have over there?

CRAIG: Oh, umm... nothing... I will bring this up when everyone gets back...

KATY: Okay. I will just keep busy on my phone then.

CRAIG: Oh, let me see your phone! See if I can get it to actually work and call for help.

KATY: Okay. Here you go, just don't take too long!

END SCENE 1

SCENE 2

SETTING: Inside warehouse with an accessible restroom.

AT RISE: Bobby and Mike watch as Katy browses through her phone.

BOBBY: Hmm.... This won't do, I don't think we can wait any longer.

MIKE: Yeah, those hotdogs tasted like leather. All the food is just junk. The broken fridge is giving off smells like the Yankee's locker room after the 12th.

KATY: There's still no service on my cell... outside. It looks like there is more infected than yesterday. I could sure use a shower.

BOBBY: Well, Craig said he is searching for a way to get across to the shop next door. And he's been gone for five hours.

MIKE: Ah, finally the shrimp crap't out and ran off on his own. This is why you can't count on...

BOBBY & KATY: Craig!

MIKE: Oh, where have you been smart one?

CRAIG: Yeah, I found a way to travel over to the next building and it's completely vacant of zombies and the living.

BOBBY: Great!

CRAIG: But... there seems to be a problem... I found this... [shows a bloody gauze from the bathroom yesterday.] This was fresh yesterday and it seems to be from one of us.

BOBBY: What does that mean?

CRAIG: Well, it appears... one of us was bitten and now infected.

MIKE: Huh? So what?

KATY: That means, one of us will turn into an infected in no time. And most likely we will have to get rid of him.

MIKE: What do you mean him? It could be you! I say we all strip down and get right to the point.

KATY: Ew, I am not stripping down among you guys and I definitely do not want to see ya'll butt naked.

CRAIG: Well, we don't know how the infection could turn any of us, but at least none of us have shown any signs of dangerous behavior. And I do not wish to risk a possible calamity to the group.

BOBBY: Well, that makes sense. So, how are we going on about finding the bite mark?

MIKE: I will just strip to make things simple.

KATY: Oh yeah, how Macho. Isn't there a more civilized way to do this?

BOBBY: Okay, how about his... [slumps over] Oh, my head. Somehow, I am not feeling so great... I think I had too much to drink last night...

MIKE: What? He's sick. He is the infected! GET' EM!

[Katy & Craig stand blocking Mike]

CRAIG: Wait. Wait. He just had too much to drink.

KATY: Wait. Why are you so fast to accuse him of being infected? Is it because you are the one who is infected?

MIKE: What? No way! You are nuts! I am not bitten...

BOBBY: Okay, no worries. I am just dealing with a hangover, I had a drinking problem and found a few cases of some good stuff in the back.... And, this is a zombie apocalypse and all...

KATY: Well, there will be no killing one another. Specially not you [points to Mike]

MIKE: Oh I see what this is. You are all ganging up on me. Guess what! You guys are all going to die in here. The food is running out. That shrimp found a way. HA! I doubt it. See ya losers!

CRAIG & KATY: No Mike. NO!

[Mike turns around. Then slides a large crate from the door. He unlocks the deadbolt, opens it and walks out. Katy & Craig rush to the now open door and quickly close behind Mike. Katy relocks the deadbolt and Craig pushes back the create.]

KATY: Hmm... Wow. Look at him go... He can sure run the yard.

CRAIG: Yeah, he used to be on the football team.

KATY: Wow? He used to? What happened?

CRAIG: Oh, he twisted his heel and busted his kneecap... oh, okay there... yeah, there he goes.

KATY: Oh, wow. Look at how the zombies ripped off his clothes. Hey, he doesn't have any bite marks... I guess he was right. He wasn't bitten.

CRAIG: Well, that's not the case anymore. Ouch, yeah, umm... I guess the more muscle you have, the more you can feed.

END SCENE 2

SCENE 3

SETTING: Inside warehouse

AT RISE: Craig and Katy are inside an air-duct ventilation shaft in route to the rooftop.

CRAIG: Come on. We are almost there. Just a few more feet.

KATY: Oh God, I don't believe it happened, who knew Bobby was bitten. He seemed like such a good person, and suddenly just ran up to the door and smashed it open.

CRAIG: At least he had the decency of not attacking us. Come on, I don't know how long the door can hold the hoard.

KATY: Ouch! Ouch! I think a rivet pierced my knee cap.

CRAIG: Come on, I've got you. We've only got a few more feet.

KATY: Thanks Craig. You know, you are such a nice guy. I wish I would have met you under different circumstances.

CRAIG: [reaches out hand to help her up] Okay, we are here. Come on.

[enters a doorway. Craig pushes the door closed and fastens it with tools from his backpack. Katy falls to the floor panting.]

KATY: Look Craig. There's a helicopter flying this way. I think its from the military.

CRAIG: Oh nice. Perfect timing. I guess we will just have to wave them down. Quick, find something big to catch their attention.

KATY & CRAIG: [[Jumping up and down yelling toward the sky]

[Split stage – Joey and Jake in helicopter appear. Katy and Craig exits]

JOEY: Hey, look what I found, two stranded zombies.

JAKE: Yeah? Okay, give me a second. I got this.

[pause]

JOEY: Oh, nice one.

JAKE: I felt kind of sad for the skinny one, and the other one gotta be a female. You think they were going out before they turned into zombies?

JOEY: Well, who knows? It's not a question I could answer.

JAKE: Well, there is a question you could answer. There is this new store that opened at the military base. The one that sells those mini meat buns. You want to go after work?

JOEY: Yeah, let's do it. I heard from my friend Craig that it's great. He would eat there all the time!

END SCENE 3

## Unbroken in Light Savvy and Unique TRU

They told us we did not belong. They told us our femininity was a crime, our bras a threat, our identities an illness, our very existence a challenge to the safety and security of the institution itself.

We are Unique

We are Savvy

Two names, two bodies, two hearts

Refusing to be erased.

Inside the California Department of Corrections and retaliation, they counted our hair,

folded our clothes, tried to RVR away the truth of our gender.

They whispered threats, forced cages of fear, and sought to turn us invisible

But we refused.

Every act of harassment endured became a badge of our resilience.

Every false accusation, a mirror reflecting our strength.

Every denied request, a test of our resolution.

Through the shadows we carried our identity like fire – untouchable, unwavering, brilliantly luminous.

Then we stood in the cold, almost blinding light of the law

We filed, we fought, we persisted

Sexual assault, physical assault, retaliation, discrimination – we named them all, every corrupt act, and the cdcr was made to listen. To acknowledge

The fact that our voices indeed made sound

That our identities and our lives

Are worth the protections guaranteed

Through our presence in the courts of judges, we demanded our power

Reclaimed from the system that daily tries to erase us.

Negotiations settling, justice began to become tangible, almost real, and inexplicably ours.

We are prisoners

transgender women

We are survivors

victimhood transcended

We are students, advocates, artists, mentors

We are proof that identity cannot be taken,

No matter how much force is applied.  
That dignity cannot be denied.  
That resilience  
Is a weapon sharper than any metal that confines us  
We rise  
We write  
We live  
We are unique  
We are savvy  
And the world will see us in full light  
Luminous.

# Pabst Soaked Proverbs

## Aaron Falls

I am not a religious person but some love can be as spiritual an experience as seeing a Masters work for the very first time, so I share with you the following passages that speak to “THE GREATEST GIFT,” of all, Love.

*“Love suffers long, and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, “does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails...”*

1st Corinthians 4-11

Sounds kind of corny does it *not*?

Probably the funniest, smartest, most adventurous woman I have ever known.  
She is the type that’ll smoke a cigar and split a bottle of scotch with me,  
or build a Harley Davidson from the parts I picked up

with her in mind

We can talk about anything and everything for hours on end or just sit quietly while reading a book or staring at the stars.

She waited  
for me to shape a longboard, and teach her how to use it.  
We laughed  
every time one of us would dig the nose into the surf and fly  
I ride goofy, and she don’t

I can sit and watch her for hours on end  
in wonder  
over the way she paints her toenails spellbound by the grace in her movements,  
the twinkle of surprise in her eyes, and the way that they always smile  
when she catches me

looking, watching, knowing

I had been capturing still life images on a roll in *memorium*

maybe some of the blush in her cheeks had been embarrassment or  
instant understanding that I had fallen deeply in love with her or  
(maybe it was that smack on her ass when she passed me by.)

Going to museums or the Drive-in movies on Mission Boulevard it is all the same thing,  
a jazz show at Steamers or the Vandals at the Fox.  
I hear Anarchy Burger & Pat Brown in a whole new way, hold the Gov't, held

Loving someone and being in Love is two different animals;  
none of that has been lost on me. I get it, yep  
even though things didn't start out quite so easy

I'm quiet, and introverted-cautious with the words that leave my face  
I'm often the one in the corner of the room wondering at the ease some have  
in-group conversations

No slick tricks from me, The Scrivener says, "I would prefer not to."  
Social Anxiety and I have been pals for some time. Contemptable

Yet after seeing her in the McDonald's parking lot  
a sodium vapor halo glow, at night  
a storm soaking us through because I like to ride in the rain, "too fast"  
something pushed my demons aside, I was still tongue tied, sheesh  
I catch her watching me sleep, while hanging out for a weekend with mutual friends.  
It was one of these moments  
I became a convert to the Church of Christine.

It took time to get through things, to build the trust that we both need; but we chose  
to stay on, keep digging, & lighten up, to see her, in that sodium vapor halo glow

heal me, and grow

when I'm with her, I'm held, together

Like that backbeat at the jazz show, we shared, at Steamers in Fullerton.

It coulda been Ella singing because that's all I could hear with those tears standing in my eyes, smiling inside.

She stood ground for me that night watching her watch over me, letting me "See her" very clearly, through Pabst soaked eyes, "I'm Alive!"

"Gabriel, blow your horn, these here are *my* Proverbs."

*fini*

# Where Do We Go From Here?

Robert Scott

Man has mapped the Human genome, split the atom, visited the moon, sent unmanned probes to the furthest reaches of the solar system, and beyond. We have the capability to house, clothe, and feed every person on earth. We are well aware of the perils associated with the use of petro-chemicals, single use plastics, and atomic energy. Yet we continue on a collision course with destruction as our ultimate destination. The ancestors always acted from a perspective of preserving our environment for posterity, we on the other hand live, and consume as if there is no tomorrow! What will we leave for our progeny in twenty, fifty, one hundred years? Species go extinct at ever-increasing rates. Arctic, and Antarctic ice packs are decreasing, and sea levels are rising. Storms are gaining in severity because of the availability of more water combined with higher water temperatures. Population density is on the rise. Yet housing for the masses is not keeping pace, and affordability is not a consideration. As we continue the trend of urbanization, our separation from our sources of both food, and water is so vast that food insecurity is a way of life. We are also losing touch with a way of life that has served us well for millennia. As we lose touch with the earth, will we lose touch with our humanity? When will we realize that this earth is the only place in the cosmos that our species has ever existed? The diversity of man's ethnic identity is far less important than that of humanities shared necessity to sooth

a troubled world. Heal the sick, feed the poor, and house the homeless. Our stewardship of the planets resources has been judged, and found wanting. The slash and burn paradigm of our recent history cannot be sustained. Soon there will be nothing left to consume. If no one is left on earth who will have won the war? I do not have the answers; I do however have a few good questions the first one being, "where do we go from here"?

## To The SOC. 270 Professor Who Saw Us

### Richard Teer

You stood before us, dry erase marker in hand,  
But what you drew were not just lines and numbers—  
You mapped out hope,  
In symbols that once looked like cages,  
You saw wings.

In a place where walls define our worth,  
You looked beyond the chains and locks,  
And spoke to us like we mattered—  
Not as inmates, but as minds,  
Not as broken, but as becoming.

You didn't just teach us how to find the mean,  
You taught us that we are more than our pasts,  
That even here, within this concrete silence,  
We carry potential—  
Not just probabilities, but possibilities.

You listened.  
You heard the story of the boy,  
Whose father said he was too stupid,  
Even to dig ditches.  
But you handed him a pencil,  
Not a shovel—  
And you said, let's calculate something better.

With every lesson, you challenged the voices  
That told us we weren't enough.  
You made us calculate confidence,  
Not just intervals, but in ourselves.  
You made us believe  
That we were worthy of the future.

You saw scholars where others saw statistics.  
You taught us formulas, yes—  
But also forgiveness, focus, and faith.  
And in your classroom, for a moment,  
We were free.

So thank you Dr. McNeal, for every graph and gentle word,  
For reminding us that even in the darkest data,  
There is light.  
You didn't just change the way we see math—  
You changed the way we see ourselves.

And that...  
Is a lesson we'll never forget.

# Vocal Cord Harp

## Isabella Murillo

Warmth. Soft whispers and reverent promises. A lullaby that caresses the soul and embeds itself into the viscera. The stars in the sky and the clouds in the day melt together to create the nurturing presence that you radiate. As soft as the misty globes that sway overhead and as fierce as the balls of fire that inspire excellence. An eternal glow that won't fade even once you do, treasured memories and days as gentle as the earth is to the moon. Fragmented pieces of time spun together within the mind all marked with the delicate touch of a mother. You're a gently melody in the rain, a small coo in the explosion of pain and peril. A shield of flesh and bones, just as *fragile* as I, just as precious. And yet you fight as if you were made of metal. A titanium wall fully successful in keeping the peace. A soldier, a warrior, and a fighter. Titles you wear on your sleeve and heart as if it's your duty to be so. Vocal cords spout out ballads of praise and yet it's as if you never *hear* them, the pen is mightier than the sword they say, my ink, my words, my grace. My melodies do injustice to my thoughts. Unseen, unheard, *unbidden*. So, I'll allow my fingertips do the talking, like brail to the blind allow me to lead you to the bumps along my heart so that you can truly understand what it is to be thankful. A conglomerate of forgotten tails and psychotic retailing's this being speaks to you, omniscient. a ghost on a page. When all there is to recount are my written words instead of a failing memory, my thanks, my adoration, my love. Forever and always allow the colors in the sky to sing their song for they are what mix with my being. Shades of vibrance that will never fade, even amidst the falling of the stars, gentle colors, gentle words, gentle *love*.

## **Olivia**

### **Ciriaco Valencia**

Tes cheveux rouge, boucles d'or  
yeux couleur brun miel  
peau molle, pale roxy papillon  
tojours drole, quelquefois sage  
joli voix delicate  
chanson a la beaute  
delicate fleur dans l'autum  
delices parfume qui J'adore  
feroce rire, douce musique  
esprit jeune, cheris muse  
reine de mon coeur  
de mon revons deesse  
j'ai poete car vous  
malfaisant ange sur la terre  
des veritable l'amour  
aussi souvenir enivrant  
Divinum vinum, Olivia!  
A bientot

# The Pillars We Built

## Savvy and Unique TRU

Since 2018 when our paths first crossed, our hearts have been entwined in ways the civilian world could never understand. Eight years, more than eight, of quiet revolutions in small gestures, of stolen glances, shared laughter, whispered words in the dark.

We have built a sanctuary within each other, our friendship though criminalized in the halls of confinement, has been the strongest pillar of our survival. It is our shared shield against harassment, our refuge from discrimination, our fire when nights grow cold and cruel.

Laughter has been our rebellion, a sacred energy that cannot be measured or taken. In each embrace, each hand held across a table or through a cell door, we find courage, hope, and the affirmation that we do exist, fully, unapologetically.

We protect one another, not just from harm, but from erasure, from doubt, from despair. We are mirrors of acceptance for each other, reflecting back the strength and beauty within the world tries to convince us to deny.

Each day, we rely on the others heart of stardust to push forward, to study, to dream, to create.

Every assignment completed, every goal achieved, every victory, legal & personal, is sweeter because it is shared, and we carried it all together, lifted together.

Our devotion is not just ours

It is a force

It is survival

It is defiance embodied

It is the quiet unspeakable pulse that keeps us moving forward,

Unique and Savvy, eight years strong, and still,

our hearts rise in tandem, undaunted, luminous, free in the ways we choose to be

# Familiar Vacancy

Rainee Robinson

A vacant expression faces me in the mirror, her eyes traveling across the face in front of her. Glancing over my skin and fixating longer on other features, such as my wide nose or full lips. But her eyes were always roaming, her eyes always seemed to be searching for something. For what, I have zero clue but the longer I face her in the mirror the more reluctant I've become to let her find her answer. I can't get a read on the girl in the mirror on the rare chances that we meet. I can't seem to conjure up a future for her or a past. I see her as she is, a young black girl who doesn't particularly enjoy the face she's met with in front of her. The girl appears so still, some foggy days she's a statuesque beauty. Other days she looks like she's seconds from figuring out the puzzle and it disturbs me. The girl in the mirror seems timeless, every time I see her it's almost like no time has passed. I never know if she's changed or grown, or learned from the same mistakes I made. But I've seen her with a tired look that appears from time to time.

She's my longest companion, someone I can guarantee a date with in the morning and evening. She's seen me age as I her. The girl in the mirror gives me her undivided attention. And on days when I'm not so afraid I can strike up a conversation, though she never talks back. I can tell when whatever I said bounced noiselessly off of her. The girl in the mirror has more of me than anyone and has seen me at my worst. She knows my secrets and I can always tell from

the way her eyes match the wicked glint in mine. Despite knowing her for so long, she feels like a stranger. Out of reach, like we could never be as close as I believed we could be. We aren't friends, it's never been a pleasant meeting, just a begrudging one. I can never run away from her, she's in every glass, dish, cup, window, pool of water, bathroom, and dressing room. The more I tended to avoid the more I saw her everywhere and in everything. She believed it's silly to try and avoid the inevitable.

The girl in the mirror doesn't change, she meets my stare with her own. She challenges everything I throw at her head on. She's far braver than me. Her eyes are always wandering over the room, my body, face, and hair. I can't hear her heartbeats or a breath but I see her chest expand and contract the same as mine. She never smiles, not when she's in a mood, cold and aloof. I feel inclined to ask her some evenings "What are you looking for? What do you see?" The girl in the mirror never has an answer, all she does is echoes the movements from the other side of the reflecting pane. Her lips and mouth are replicas of my speech and language, I try to conjure a voice for her in my head and only silence greets me. Echoes of the thoughts tumbling around in my head, whisper of the perceived contempt she must hold for me as I do her. I wonder if she loathes the constant sight of me everyday as I do her. On frigid days when I stumble upon her, she's looking through me. I can

see the thoughts turning in her mind. When I ask others what they see when they look into the mirror and ask if they have the same meeting with a stranger they don't recognize. I'm met with blank stares, and faces screwed up with confusion. They've always known who their companion in the mirror is. They can recognize them at the drop of a hat. They aren't disturbed when they reach out and can't feel the heartbeat in their companions fingertips when they wipe across the surface. They aren't bothered by how close we can get but can never meet, doomed to be on the other side of the reflection wondering if she's wishes she could know if I was real too. They aren't bothered when touching the cool water and are only met with a distortion. Someone once mentioned that they could see themselves in the mirror. I can't recall a time when I saw an echo of myself in her. The young black girl in the mirror is a stranger to me. I can't reach her through the cold smooth surface of the glass, I don't feel any warmth in her gaze. Everyday I see her and I can't help but be frightened of the fact that she and I share the same absent look on our faces.

## **A Little Water**

### **Carlos Ortiz**

A little water clears me of this deed,  
Which has filled my life with calamity,  
That grows and grows just like a weed.

My sin in constant conflict with my creed,  
has me struggling with adversity.  
A little water clears me of this deed.

I tried to forget by drowning in mead,  
That only led to instability.  
guilt continued growing like a weed.

Because of lessons that I did not heed,  
I experienced great necessity.  
A little water clears me of this deed.

I grabbed a book and I began to read.  
And learned of my unsuitability.  
I learned that Jesus had to bleed.

I got on my knees and began to plead  
God please fill me with humility.  
Your Holy water clears me of this deed  
And rips from my life this stubborn weed.

# Walking to the Lake, Racine, 1976

## Aaron Falls

It's more thrilling than the Schwinn  
stingray  
Dad promised me for my birthday  
or even the J.J. Newberry's candy aisle

this view of Lake Michigan from  
kewaunee Street  
where the water does this trick of being  
both gray and glitter at the same time

I'm seven and the seagulls are cursing  
in their salt-language while I balance  
on the cracked curb counting dead  
alewives  
that smell like Grandpa's old tackle box  
the rhythm of waves is the same as  
the factory whistles but prettier

Mom says *"don't go past the Dr. Pepper sign"*  
but the lake winks at me with a  
thousand  
sunflares like pop-tops pulled from asphalt  
i want to tell someone how the ore  
boats  
look like lonely dinosaurs but Cousin Steve  
Rosenquist  
is smashing bottles behind the A&P  
oh! And the way the afternoon light  
sticks to the breakwall like melted

velveeta  
makes me forget about math  
worksheets  
and the bully on Meachem Street

Lake Michigan doesn't care  
that my socks are mismatched  
it just keeps singing its wet radio song  
about Chicago and fishbones  
and places where sidewalks end

# Taking Responsibility

## Carlos Ortiz

The neighborhood instilled in me false beliefs,  
That for several years caused so many griefs.  
Distorted thinking was the source of my instability,  
It was blinding my obligations and responsibility,  
As well as any sense of accountability.

I thought my suffering excused my selfishness,  
My coping skill for pain was Self-centeredness.  
My warped views were nothing but bogus theories,  
That produced in me indifference when spreading miseries,  
Damaging, ruining countless families and communities.

But by acknowledging the many lives I left in pieces,  
I could begin my journey of amends, my mentor says.  
To begin recovery, all my sins I must confess,  
Yet I know words alone are not enough to express,  
How sorry I am to have caused so much distress.

I have acquired the tools necessary,  
To confidently return back to society,  
Hopeful and filled with humility,  
Ready to rewrite my new destiny,  
With a Bachelors from Irvine University.

# Humble

## Albert Rivera

Never leave and expect the same, what you've saved, has changed to a twist,  
Seeking your own ways from within your depth self-conscious reveals the strangled friction swirling with no common sense,  
Doubting it all because it's a non-acceptable discharge with no steps,  
As the world rotates with no patience, we live to die on the way to make it, lost are our perspectives and blinded are we,  
    living a crazy but worthy life. Loving families, what a beautiful prize, but captured between all savage lies. A decapitated,  
    solo one-time effort in life.

One opportunity to reach completeness, sorrow brings the peace,  
But disillusion beats the best, love strengthens my sacred heart,  
Inside my chest.

# My First Friend

## Ismael Leon

As a boy you'd hold my hand,  
Teach me about life & help me understand.  
You'd explain how life was hard & to do my best,  
That hard work & persistence would lead to success.  
Hearing your sweet words & looking at your beautiful face,  
I knew I was safe in your embrace.

As I grew up I lost my way & would rebel,  
My stupidity made our lives hell.  
You'd pray to God for help & hope,  
I was hurting inside & I couldn't cope.  
You stayed true unlike the rest,  
You never gave up on me even at my lowest.

I'm now a man fully grown,  
Searching for a glimmer of hope to see home.  
I love to see your photos but it tears me apart,  
Seeing how much you've aged breaks my heart.  
I'm doing my best to go home my first try,  
Not knowing if you'll be there makes me want to cry.

I push forward with you in stride,  
In my heart you'll always reside.  
I love you every day until the end,  
Since day one you were my first friend.  
All your teachings I now understand,  
Your love helped me to become this new man.

## **A New American Poem**

### **Aaron Falls**

I used to walk past the canyons of  
commerce, past the shiny cars  
the advertisements screaming at me from  
every corner  
and the world was a dull thing, a flat  
postcard of a thing,  
just a hum of static on a dead radio.

I was deaf to the secret whispered by the  
bus breaks,  
blind to the sudden-wet-yellow sun on the  
fenders of a cab,  
and my own soul was just buying coffee,  
trying to make sense of the news  
with a quiet sigh.

But you, you came like a sudden shout!  
A clear voice from the outside giving voice to those inside!  
You didn't give me answers,  
you gave me a handful of bright  
paintbrushes  
dipped in the raw ochre of an afternoon,  
the cadmium yellow of inspection,  
the ultramarine of a truth so sharp it cuts  
through the fake.

And now the world is no longer this dull thing.  
The siren streak of electric blue across  
my inner eyelid!  
The stranger's shoulder brushing mine is a  
gradient of warm color!  
My soul has woken from its sleep,  
And it's not buying the lies.

Because you provided a canvas, that was  
never blank,  
but was always just waiting for paint!  
providing me the permission to be a quiet  
voice full of loud colorful sounds,  
to focus the image and make it so real  
that it cracks the sidewalk just wide enough,  
to let a flower grow  
up through this cement  
and with a sudden burst of  
improbable color!

## **Roller Rink Psalms, Racine 1982**

### **Aaron Falls**

It's not like Horlick field where we used to steal bases

under the Admiral TV sign buzzing like  
a dying hornet

now its chain-link skin sags and the  
scoreboard bleeds rust

*Home* still lit but nobody's home since  
the layoffs

or the roller rink on Durand-Skate-o-Rama-  
where Carrie Belongia kissed me in the  
shadow of the disco ball while Styx whined  
through blown speakers

her braces caught the neon like cheap  
jewelry

and the floor smelled of wax and weed  
and ambition

but here on Rapids Drive the lake's a  
bruise today

purple at the edges where the

breakwall surrenders  
to November's first

Tommy Junior says *"They're closing the malted milk plant-  
even Horlick's ghost is packing"*

and we skate the potholes on busted  
Kmart boards

past Zahn's Diner where old men nurse regret  
with bottomless coffee  
their eyes fixed on Casa's smokeless  
stacks

at the rink last Friday  
a fight broke out near the snack bar

some Southside kids bleeding rainbow  
sherbet  
onto rental skates

while the manager yelled

*"This ain't fucking Chicago!"*

and outside the parking lot lights  
hummed the same tune as the ore boats  
groaning past Reef point

I miss when the lake tasted like  
adventure

not this salt-grit tang of fish guts and

diesel

that sticks to your teeth

Mom works doubles at the AMC factory now  
and comes home smelling like grease and overtime

*“Don’t you drown in that water, boy”*

she warns

but the lake’s too tired to drown anyone  
just coughs up dead alewives and  
Popov bottles

like memories it can’t digest

tonight at Horlick Field  
we climb the fence where outfield  
grass grows through cracked concrete  
and we spray paint our rage on the dugout wall:

*RACINE EATS ITS YOUNG*

while the wind off the lake carries the  
sound

of roller rink wheels still spinning  
long after the music’s dead

# We Don't Know What You Have

Gunnar Rash

I came out too big. Had to be a c-section, though my mother says it would have been whether I was a behemoth or not.

My lungs caved in, and they stuck a tube down my throat to keep them blown up. I pulled it out and died. The autopsy showed pulmonary hypertension.

My father says he cried. I've never seen him cry.

§

My nose still stinging somewhat, I sat on the faux-leather table with my legs dangling over the side. My mother was seated to my right, the both of us patiently waiting for my cure.

He walked in and told me "We don't know what you have." He told my mother "I found my cousin on Facebook. I always knew she was a dyke." He seemed very eager to share this.

Sent me on my way. My mouth tasted like sick, like my tongue was rotting in its place. Wonder who gave it to me. Wonder if they're still alive.

§

After the initial collapse, I had been moved to the NICU. Most babies go to the NICU because they're born too small – underbaked and doughy – and as such, it wasn't entirely expected when I wrapped my monstrously bloated hands around the tube channeling life into my belly and pulled it out. Without their crutch, my lungs emptied themselves again. I suffocated, and my heart stopped within minutes.

One might imagine a rather dramatic scene: the doctors valiantly trying to revive my lifeless form, my father sobbing for the first and last time. They succeeded, obviously. The doctors. They shoved the tube back down my throat and kept me sedated to prevent another suicide.

As I was kept in the NICU – isolated in my own room, stable, but in no condition to be around other sickly newborns – my parents decided to relieve some stress by going to the movies. Unfortunately, the film they chose to watch was *Revenge of the Sith*, which makes two tragedies in as many days.

§

This was in the days when the plague was certainly heard of, but not exactly heavy on people's minds. Maybe January, or February.

Both my father and I caught it. My mother accredits her own resilience to pot.

I was out of school for a few weeks. My cough wasn't quite as bad as my fathers (at night, his was in fact so intense that my mother was certain he was at death's door), though it was nevertheless the worst cough I had ever had, and I was in the worst condition I had ever been in (excluding, of course, the moments directly following my attempted self-infanticide, in which I was actively *dead*).

We wouldn't put together for a few months that what had assailed us was the very same as what had been whispered about in December, what shut the world down in March, what claimed my grandmother only weeks later, what would go on to claim so many others.

No wonder we felt like we were dying. We were.

§

There is something of an essential trauma that a newborn has to experience. It's a bumpy ride from the womb out the birth canal, but it makes it clear to the baby's body that there is a *transition* occurring. The body's got to get roughed up a little to prepare for the Big Bad world. Gets the juices flowing, like cracking a glowstick.

Being birthed via c-section does make that transition less apparent to the baby's body. One second, you're an aquatic animal, lounging, curled up in your warm little fish-bowl. So sure. So simple. The next, you're suspended high in the sterile atmosphere above your mother's splayed entrails. You, without a towel.

Without the trauma of being squeezed through the birth canal like an Otter Pop, the body doesn't get the memo that the Big Bad world isn't like the womb. This can cause some problems. Problems like PPHN, an ailment of the lungs.

The very nature of my birth predestined my untimely death and resurrection. I didn't pass through the tube in my mother's belly, so I pulled the tube out of mine. I'm sure there's a metaphor there. One that I don't particularly care to explore. At least I didn't have to see *Revenge of the Sith*.

§

I came out too big. Doubled over the couch, my lungs inverted and flopped out of my mouth, hanging down over my bottom lip. I pulled them out and died. But I woke up again.

# Your Eyes My Heart

Isabella Murillo

*Jealousy.* Such an odd feeling, cold or hot, it digs its presence into the depths of our souls. Without proper reason or explanation, it burrows itself in totality and shows itself during moments of vulnerability. A connection within the soul you say? A binding that proceeds even your own offspring, a spark that flared upon you within the first moments of meeting. One that you fail to share with me. Perhaps that is my driving factor in why I shift and change myself to fit your image. Striving towards your ideal view of what I should be to feel truly *fulfilled*. I work not to succeed for myself but instead to feel the satisfaction of seeing you proud. I mold and grow in a manner restricted by the strings of what I believe you'd like. I change the things that make me, me to make them more you. Pieces of my heart dissected and altered to resemble you. I wonder if you take notice of *this*? How I show you the side which I hope will make you most proud, work I've put into over the years and I continue to do. Though I can't connect through being female I wish I could, and perhaps it would have been better if I were born male. To be able to feel the depths of your pain as my own, to be able to truly feel as if I am what makes you most grateful. A sin inflicted upon you by the fates, one in which you fail to understand and one in which you needed another to fulfill the depths of what you wanted out of a successor. I grow alongside you with the intent to someday become what it is that you truly want out of

me, consciously or not I live to serve. To show that I have to alter myself so to match what connection you built within moments of meeting another. Cold. Crushing blue *jealousy*.

# **To the World Beyond the Bars that Imprison US**

## **Savvy and Unique TRU**

A Letter from Unique & Savvy

From Unique:

“I have learned that courage is quiet. It does not shout in the hallways of confinement, rather, it whispers in the turning of a page, in the neat alignment of notes, in the small smile I cannot hide when my name appears on an unlock list. I am more than what was stolen from me, more than the false accusations, more than the world tried to confine my identity. Through education, I reclaim my voice. Through art, I reclaim my soul.”

From Savvy:

“Every equation I solve, every sentence I write,  
Every gesture of learning is my rebellion of hope. They thought they could define me by walls and uniforms, but my mind stretches beyond such trivial borders.  
In every class, I am seen.  
In every assignment, I am heard.  
In every certificate and degree, I am free.  
Together with Unique, we are proof that light finds its way through even the darkest confinement.”

# Beauty Beheld

## Marlon J. Blacher

Motivate with wings as to fly,  
The feeling of wonder without compare.  
The entire being become electrified,  
Mesmerized, invoke a sense next to none.

Manifesting as like water;  
Make a river, fill a cup, nourish roses,  
Beware! Its impact may cause a totter.  
Admired by all, even the turned up noses.

Even mentioned in the Bible  
As an element to hold the mind's eye.  
With power to move even Fivel,  
Its hypnosis won't be denied.

Once met it's best not to fret,  
Nor reject, nor disrespect.  
Many before have made the unwise bet,  
Taking for granted what is set.  
To close, I lend this advice:  
Seek only what is true and righteous throughout life.  
Sometimes met once, no guarantee twice;  
Bitterness bring the chill of ice.

# Gifted

## Joshua Palomino

There comes a point in confined life where one seeks to just live free. The mind yearning to take everything learned, all the hard taught lessons, all the struggle, and laser focus that energy. Focus it on fueling the desire to succeed. This mindset no longer affected negatively by ghosts of the past but rather, it comforts and uplifts the powerhouse I have come to be. I have found myself. This discovery has lifted the veil and revealed the divine...for I have also found GOD. I now see the gifts such a life has bestowed upon me. Many more are also gifted here but are unwilling to lift the veil until something drastic forces the eyes wide open! It is here I see that it takes surviving through struggles in life to develop the skills necessary to use your gift. When this gift is found, do not lose yourself in its power. Use it for the betterment of your brethren, for the betterment of humanity. Use it for the greater good. I will. GOD, The Divine, the UNIVERSE is guiding me in every way. As if steering me in the direction of purpose and fulfillment. This unstoppable energy leading me toward success. I KNOW THIS. I begin to understand what that phrase "GODs favorites have a hard time" means. I believe that one must endure troubles and tribulations to completely understand what those moments are like, so that once the gift is revealed, one uses it to aide others through their torment and help lift their veil so that they too see they are gifted. Imagine a world where all felt gifted, understood

their purpose and had a sense of direction. This is fulfillment at its best for the feeling of being "lost" would be nonexistent. It is the lost that do not see their gift, it is the lost that walk around aimlessly wishing they too had something to offer this world. So I say to you, be brave and look within, find yourself for that is the gift. Once there aide your brethren in this venture of self-discovery and watch the world change course. Envision you as you wish to be and embody that change your vision paints then, revel in the masterpiece you shall begin creating.

There are three classes in this world. Those who see. Those who see when they are shown. Those who do not see. - Leonardo DaVinci

"A teacher effects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops"-Henry Adams

# (An Ode to Quiet Catalyst) A New American Poem

## Aaron Falls

Well here I am walking down the bright canyon  
Or is it the river of traffic? no matter,  
the sun is a wet post-rain yellow on the fenders of cabs  
and I'm not just walking, I'm a  
goddamn symphony!

I look at the fruit stand's pyramids of  
Green & violent red!  
I listen to the bus brakes hissing a  
secret to the asphalt!  
I see! the thousand windows blazing a  
thousand different now's!  
And I feel... oh, I feel the sudden,  
Nonchalant smile  
I give to a stranger who is also,  
suddenly, me,  
a secret sign, a too quick goodbye, a flash  
of teeth in the crowd  
that says, YES I have been infected by  
the color of sound!  
the sound of a siren is now a streak of  
electric blue across my inner eyelid!  
the feel of a stranger's shoulder  
brushing mine is a gradient of warm  
ochre!  
a feeling! A thought! An inclination! That my soul is not asleep!  
it's buying a coffee, it's arguing with the  
news, it's reading old poets on the

rumbling train!  
it's recognizing the significance of this change! this riot!

and all it took was a fresh set of ears,  
and a voice from outside to transform a silent voice  
inside all along!  
you handed me the brushes! not soft  
sable but stiff hog's bristle  
dipped in the raw umber of history,  
cadmium shout of inspection,  
the ultramarine of words not my own  
that are now my only words!

and the canvas, the blank canvas you  
provided!  
which is not blank! it is the safe  
environment of this room!  
the permission to be a quiet voice full  
of loud, colorful sounds!  
To focus the image, to sharpen it into a  
clarity so powerful  
it can crack the sidewalk and let a  
flower grow up through cement!

a flower for you! A thank you! A sudden  
burst of improbable color  
on this bustling street where I finally  
hear the poetry  
in the noise, and the noise in the poetry,  
and it's all one gorgeous, imparted  
thing!

## Contributors

JUNIOR AMAYA, an artist inspired by Japanese Anime and motivated by the lack thereof. It's near impossible to find anime related things in prison unless they are sent from the outside, and it's for that reason that Junior decided to make his my own. He also delves into music, poetry and anything he can use as a heart dump. These works of the imagination are stored in the depths of his prison locker.

AMYREY ARTIENDA is a somewhat seasoned writer from San Diego, attempting to create fantastical worlds and coherent written pieces. Born with the fire to write, but not enough kindling, she aspires to write something that middle school her would be proud of. Then again, it was always her dream to have her work published somewhere so maybe she is.

MARLON J. BLACHER is attending SWC while incarcerated at R.J. Donovan Corr. Fac. He writes: poetry; plays; and non-fiction pieces to share thoughts, feelings, and ideas with others, with the hopes that we can realize and hold that our similarities far outweigh our differences.

BLUE is a student/writer at Sweetwater High School.

EDWARD BRIONES is 23 years old. He goes to Southwestern College and is Majoring in computer science. He is planning to get a masters in computer programming & science and is hoping to run his own computer business. He enjoys writing and is hoping to become a well known novelist at some point in his life.

MANUEL CAMPOS is a student/writer in Southwestern College's Restorative Justice Program.

RAYMOND CHEN is a student/writer in Southwestern College's Restorative Justice Program.

DANIEL X. COHEN is a Senior Writer with the Prison Journalism Project, award-winning essayist, recipient of the Stillwater Award and member of the Society of Professional Journalists. He has also written for Tufts University, Journal X and The Marshall Project.

AARON FALLS is a 56 year old Justice Impacted first year transfer student with the University of California, Irvine. He is currently working on A Bachelors degree in Sociology with an English minor after completing multiple AA/AS degrees with both Southwestern College, and Coastline, with more to come. Aaron is a Certified Paralegal, and has hopes of completing Law School as well.

ANDREA FLORES IS a lover of arts and is writing from San Diego, CA! She is currently on her final year at SWC pursuing her English degree. She work as an English tutor at a local high school & she love to engage with students and wishes to pursue a job as a teacher or librarian in the near future.

RICHARD GATICA has spent 40 of his 57 years incarcerated and has no chance of parole. He is currently serving his time at the R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility located in San Diego, California.

BRANDON FORREST KNIGHT is a 55-year-old creative thinker who enjoys reading great writers. On occasion his creative ideas are tangible long enough for him to write them. This happens to be his first time ever sharing anything with a broader audience. He hopes it is entertaining.

ISMAEL LEON is a man on a road to redemption. He is from Bakersfield, California. He goes to Southwestern College, Majoring in Business and Sociology. He is planning to get his AA in both and eventually move up to getting his bachelors/ Masters at SDSU upon his release. He enjoys writing poetry that pay homage to his upbringing, struggle and ultimately his transformation.

JOSHUA PALOMINO is a talented artist who has created pieces for many nonprofit organizations. His art has acquired interviews from CDCR which you can view online. Aside from studying at SWC as a psychology major, he is also devoted to recovery and helping his fellow incarcerated peers by facilitating recovery groups and passing on the insight he's gained in hopes of inspiring positive life change. Here he endeavors in some inspirational writing that he hopes will resonate with its readers.

PETER GARCIA has been writing since he was twelve years old, however it was only a hobby and he never thought it would go anywhere. When he was arrested, he came to learn he had a talent he never really explored. Seven years later, when he came to prison, he joined Playwrights and hasn't looked back. He enjoys writing narratives as well as plays and plans on continuing to develop his craft when he leaves prison.

ANABELLE GUTIERREZ is a first-year student and professional daydreamer. She is majoring in Business but always wants writing to be a part of her life. She enjoys crafting characters that can speak to the experiences of others. She loves to read and hopes to publish a novel in the near future.

ABEL ESCOBEDO is a writer from Southern California. Their writing mixes memory, identity, grief, and the way nature mirrors humans in a much more beautiful way. They also really like Dr. Pepper.

JESUS MARTINEZ is a student writer from Tijuana, Baja California. He goes to Southwestern Community College as an FTMA and English Major. Jesus aspires to write for film and tv, but also plans to invest time into writing novels. He enjoys anything creative; art, architecture, film, and writing.

CHRISTOPHER MAY is a student/writer in Southwestern College's Restorative Justice Program.

ISABELLA MURILLO is a student/writer at Sweetwater High School.

ORLINDO "NEENO" MYLES is a writer from South Sacramento, California. He began writing while incarcerated at age fifteen and has since developed a powerful voice that blends poetry, realism, and reflection. His first book, *75 Things Not to Do in Prison*, offers raw insight and hard-earned wisdom from life behind the walls. His upcoming second book, *A Ghetto Black Shakespeare: Poems from a Caged Phoenix Risen from the Ashes*, will be released next year, continuing his mission to turn pain into purpose through art. He writes to inspire transformation, resilience, and rebirth.

LUNA PRADO is studying sociology at Southwestern College. They're drawn to ideas that live outside the binary and to moments that don't fit neatly anywhere else.

CARLOS ORTIZ is a student/writer in Southwestern College's Restorative Justice Program.

JOSHUA PALOMINO is a talented artist who has created pieces for many nonprofit organizations. His art has acquired interviews from CDCR which you can view online. Aside from studying at SWC as a psychology major, he is also devoted to recovery and helping his fellow incarcerated peers by facilitating recovery groups and passing on the insight he's gained in hopes of inspiring positive life change. Here he endeavors in some inspirational writing that he hopes will resonate with its readers.

ALEXIS RAMOS is a student at Southwestern College majoring in English Literature, who primarily writes poetry and creative nonfiction.

GUNNAR RASH is a writer from Imperial Beach, California. He attends Southwestern College as an English major. He plans to use his writing skills to publish novellas in Science Fiction magazines and eventually publish full Science Fiction/Horror novels.

ALBERT J. RIVERA is a poet from East Los Angeles California; He first discovered his love for poetry, while he was still a teenager at the age 15. While being court ordered to attend anger management classes, His therapist introduced him to poetry as an outlet of His emotions. Albert Rivera went on to become a three-time, Simi-finalist contestant, in the International Library of Poetry. Awarded "Editor's Choice Award" for outstanding achievement in creative writing in Shakespeare, Three years in a row. (2005, 2006, 2007). He is currently a SWC student at our R. J. Donovan Correctional Facility Site, where he is majoring in Business Administration.

RAINÉE ROBINSON is a writer currently enrolled in Southwestern College is an English major. Her goal is to follow the footsteps of her grandmother and work at the Library of Congress. She pursue riding with the lens of a young black women growing up in the military family. She has a particular interest in flash fiction and social dynamics.

ALONSO RODRIGUEZ is a writer in these times.

RICHIE RUBIO is Mexican-American writer from California. He has been writing since he was six and now attends Southwestern College as a Creative Writing Major in the hopes of becoming a published author. His biggest inspiration is David Bowie and his own wonderfully weird parents.

DIARIO SÁFICO es una lesbiana desafortunadamente perdida entre el intenso cariño, intimidad, y miseria de un amor de preparatoria, escribió poesía como la única salida de ese profundo dolor de un amor en el borde de lo imposible

SAVVY was born in 1993 in San Diego, California. She is a transfeminine writer and scholar who has earned her Associate of Science in Business with an emphasis in Business Marketing, as well as Associates of Arts degrees in Social and Behavioral sciences, American History, and Liberal Arts & Humanities. Savvy is also on track to earn a Certificate of Achievement in American Sign Language, and an Associate of Science degree in Science & Math. Savvy has been incarcerated since 2012, serving a life sentence. Throughout her time in prison, she has pursued education, creative expression, and self-awareness as personal acts of resilience, self-discovery, and advocacy. Savvy hopes to be paroled at her next parole hearing in 2027.

UNIQUE was born in 1988, in the Inland Empire. She is a black trans-woman and an artist whose works have been featured in exhibitions outside of prison, including with the Lavender Rights Project in Seattle, Washington, on CDCR'S News Inside blog, as well as in Matt Cullen's Our Queer Life episodes highlighting both her and Savvy's experiences in prison. Unique earned her GED while incarcerated in 2023, and is currently on track to earn a Certificate of Achievement in American Sign Language, and thereafter to earn her Associate of Science in Business from Southwestern college next year. Born a foster child, Unique has been system-involved her whole life. She is serving an LWOP sentence, incarcerated since 2008. She relentlessly continues to pursue creative expression and education as personal acts of resilience, identity affirmation, and advocacy.

SAVVY and UNIQUE met in 2017 at Salinas Valley State Prison, and have been inseparable ever since. For over eight years, they have shared their lives, always side-by-side, never apart in as much as they could manage... Their names are now spoken in the same sentence as a testament to their unbreakable bond. Together, they have pursued education, supported each other's growth, and advocated for others by founding LGBTQ+ support groups inside the prison system. As transgender women navigating the unimaginable challenges of living authentically while held in prisons for cis-men, they have daily faced adversity with joy, harassment with resilience, and oppression with determination, continually striving to rise above that which the system deems they are bound to, and in doing so create spaces of empowerment for themselves and their trans-community inside prison.

SEAN SCANLAN is a student/writer in Southwestern College's Restorative Justice Program.

ROBERT SCOTT is in the process of completing his Associates Degree at Southwestern whereupon he will transfer to Cal State Los Angeles to pursue his Bachelors in communications. He is a senior citizen, with deep concerns about our misguided efforts to make the world better than it was.

YASMINE STINEBERG is a writer from Imperial Beach, California. She goes to Southwestern College as an English Major. She is planning to become an editor for fictional novels and eventually writing her own book. She enjoys trying all forms of writing and loves reading books within the fantasy and romance genre.

RICHARD TEER is a current incarcerated person at Richard J. Donovan. He is a current student at Southwestern College, where he am working towards achieving his AA in Sociology. Along with furthering his educational goals, he has become a Certified Substance Use Disorder Counselor. He have been both victim and victimizer. He remembers a time when he had no voice and it was during his incarceration he found my voice, through writing. He found a love and passion for writing.

ISABELLA VALDIVIA is an English student from San Diego; studying at SWC with plans on becoming a professor in creative writing.

CIRIACO VALENCIA, out of R.J.D. San Diego, a SWC student going for a master, aspiring to be a youth-mentor counselor. He enjoys painting, calligraphy, playing music and other languages, currently exploring writing poetry inspired on his own personal experiences.

MARIANA VIZCARRA MOYA is a southwestern student that is currently studying architecture. They are a great fan of literature and write recreationally. She hopes to one day publish their own graphic novel.

JOSE ZUNIGA is a writer based in San Diego, California. He is currently attending Southwestern Community College and plans on pursuing an MFA in creative writing. He likes writing fiction with a focus on finding beauty in the mundane.

This literary magazine was brought to you by our Southwestern College's writing club, The Other Writers Guild. The Other Writers Guild was created in the spring semester of 2008 by a group of students who were eager to write and wished to have a forum in which to show their work. The club has been committed to offering an open platform for members to show ideas and work in an environment that is comfortable and that offers positive feedback. Anyone who attends our school and has any interest in creative writing is welcomed and encouraged to join. If you are interested or want more information please contact us at:

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visit us on our official blog

[www.theotherwritersguild.blogspot.com](http://www.theotherwritersguild.blogspot.com)

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Once again thank you for your continued support.



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