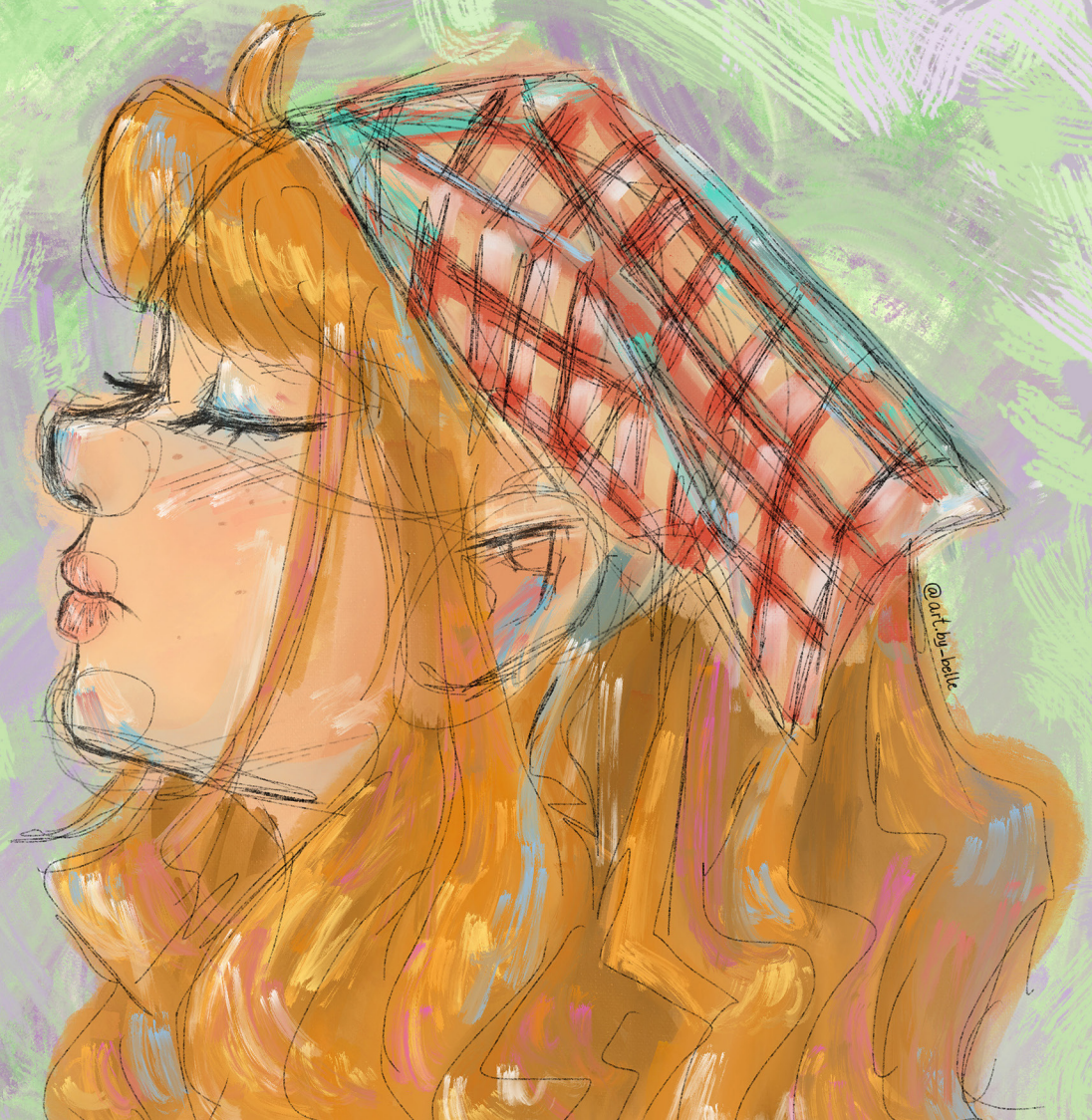
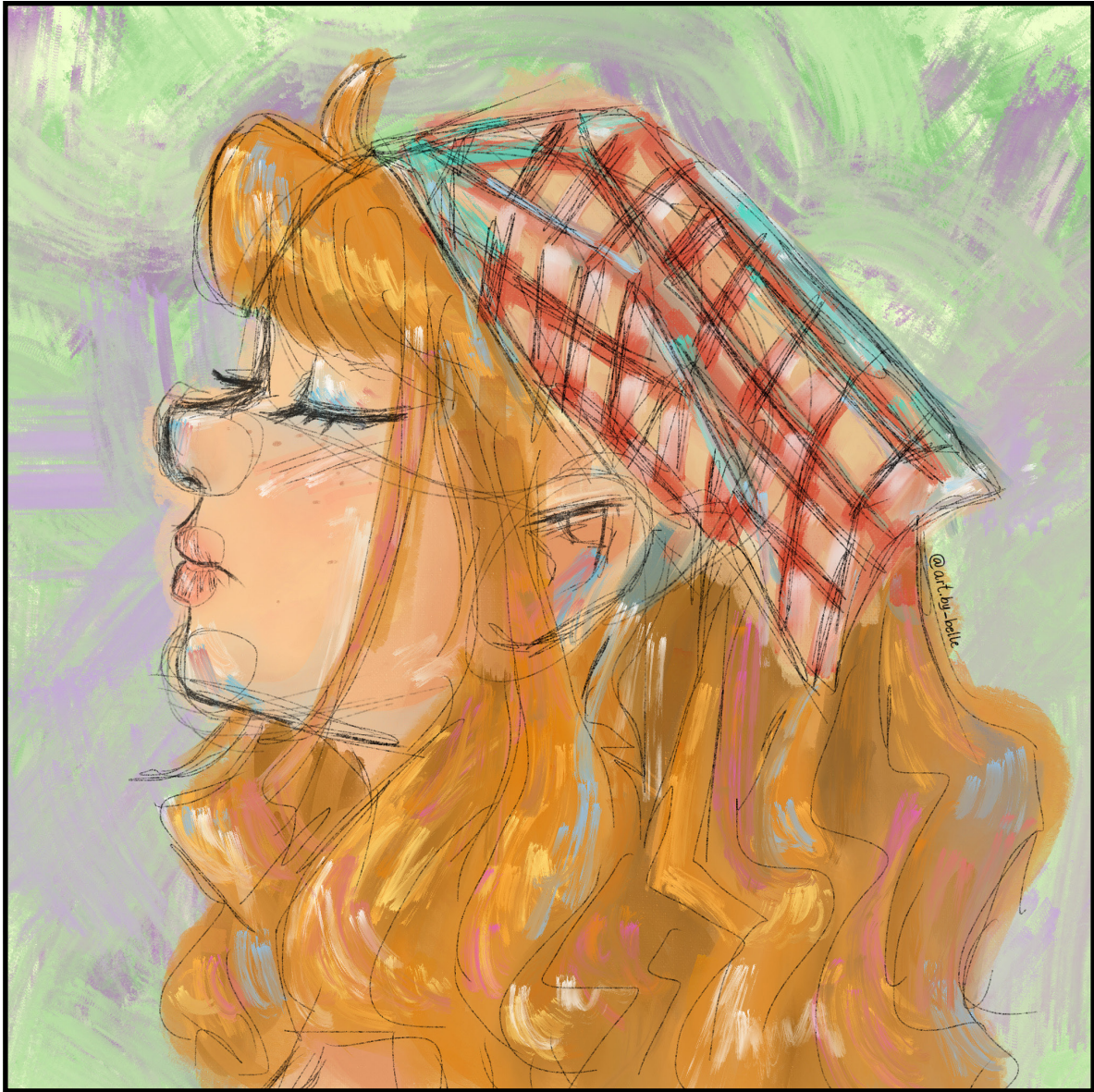


THE VAGABOND

Spring 2026



The Vagabond



Spring 2026

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From Left to Right: Gunnar Rash, Devanne Candare, Jose Zuniga, Alexis Ramos, Jesus Martinez Castaneda, Lily Reese, and Mariana Vizcarra Moya (not pictured: Denise Rodewald)

This semester's Vagabond was fully funded by the Southwestern College Foundation.

Editor's Note

Spring has come and gone and that means we have a new edition of the Vagabond! This semester was full of many challenges and setbacks that were out of our control. Nonetheless, we pulled through another semester and are proud of our accomplishments and publication of writings and art from across Southwestern College students and the Southwestern Donovan students. This semester I took a back seat as I became more involved at the Writing Center, our Head Editor Gunnar Rash greatly stepped up to piece together this edition with the help of a hard working editing and review team.

This semester our club tried some new things like our newsletter to help promote Vagabond writers and club members. As we continue The Vagabond into Fall 2026 before the start of a new magazine class with equal potential to the Vagabond, we hope to further refine and organize our outreach and collaboration across the Southwestern College campus and communities.

This semester we are publishing submissions from Southwestern College students, and Southwestern Donovan students. These submissions include poems, prose pieces, flash fiction, plays and scripts, and unique to every Spring edition we are also publishing artworks. We were so glad to see an increase in student submissions this semester, totaling about 35 unique student submissions.

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

**THE
VAGABOND
SPRING 2026**

The Vagabond editorial staff would like to thank the following people and organizations for their support of the publication of our club's 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 five 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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Sin Tí

Imelda Leyva

Sin tí no
no hay textura
que es una cremasura

Al amanecer me despierto
al saber k te voy y te encontré
con todo tus amigos esperando
arriba colocando y aveces abajo

-Agua pasa por mi casa 'cate de mi corazón-

eres tu la gracia con
donde la música

ese tambor de vida
vibra de hermosura

Así me gustas
Con ese color
estás perfecto
para la salsa

gordo y panzón!
tan verde maduro
para esta noche
y el sazónete.

Invitare a todos
Yo les doy el

tomate, cebollita,
cilantro y al terminar la sal y mucho limón.

tus compañeros!
toque de sabor,

chili serrano, ajo,

Serán el gran splendor de
la noche de amor.

The Fall of Icarus

Isabella Valdivia

Some see the story of Icarus as a tragedy;
 A man scorned for his foolishness
 in loving the unobtainable.
A fabled death warning of greedy ambition.

A son who'd disobeyed his father's orders.

 A
 Son
Who'd
Fallen

Then, a new perspective emerged, insisting Icarus laughed as he fell;
'for he knew that to fall means to have once soared,'

Unafraid to fall — having rather fly than live a life of mediocrity.
Instead of asking if he'd fall, he asked, *'What if you fly?'*

He didn't regret his choice, even as his wax wings melted and a hurricane of feathers enveloped him. The stories say that for a fleeting moment, he grazed the sun.

Consider the story of Icarus one overcome by the threat of failure —
 But outweighed by the conviction of one's passion.
 Urging you to soar; and if you're to fall, laugh into the wind.
Reaching for the sky as the ocean envelopes you.

 Knowing
 You'd
 Soared

Refuse to live life avoiding the fall.

Weightless along the shore — standing still.

Refuse to live in the in-between.

Some see the story of Icarus as a tragedy;

Others see the story of Icarus as a fortune through tenacity;

A man adored for his courage

A fabled life of dream chasing and fulfillment.

Lonely Sovereign

Jocelyn Martinez Villa

My heart is gold and my hands are cold. - Halsey

From the bottom of my heart, I know I'm a lover girl.
From the bottom of my heart, I also know I'm an autonomous subject in a lonely castle.

My castle has brick walls, reinforced with the strongest materials from earth. I'm a sovereign ruler that keeps a tight regime within my heart. Cold blood, and no feelings. That's what I tell the lover girl hiding inside the castle's dungeon, who's dreaming of the outside world, dreaming of a sky that can embrace her with the gentleness of home. I tell her, her home is the dungeon where it is safe.

§

It was the young lover girl's mother who helped her build the foundation of her castle. The first brick was given to her when she was five years old, and her father passed away, and her mother said *I love you* for the very last time.

The young lover girl wasn't sure if she needed to place another brick when her mother's sister opened her doors to a small family of three. One mother, one little boy, and one little girl. She didn't think she needed a brick. The young lover girl's small family of three became a family of seven.

Unfortunately, she eventually laid down a brick. Sweat and tears helped stack them, as she learned to grow up — faster than any kid should. As an older sister, it is important to make sure everyone is taken care of. The next few bricks were placed by a girl who felt like an outsider, because her house didn't feel like her home, and she wasn't allowed to be a child. She needed to be a grown up. What kind of kid is a grown up at 14?

It was here that she realized she was damned. This 14 year old would become an unruly sovereign, protecting the soft lover girl, hidden deep within the castle's dungeon.

At 14, she learned that she needed to take a job, and help her mother. At 14, she learned that although she was only a kid, she had to be mature enough to take care of all her cousins below her— she needed to be responsible like a mother. At 14, she learned that she did not have the same freedom as every other kid she went to school with. At 14, she had to learn to be silent and blend in. At 14, she learned that she was alone.

The next few bricks were angrily placed down. The silent ruler created walls so high, people couldn't peek inside. A monarch that breathed fire at 17.

At 17, she already knew what it was like to be alone. She also learned that her castle was not strong enough to

protect the lover girl hidden within. She learned what it was to be called narcissistic for wanting to explore. She learned what it was to feel small and be called a burden by someone who had opened their arms to her when she was only 5. She learned what it was to be called selfish, for wanting to leave her mother and her brother behind while she tried to pursue an education. She learned what it was to want to be free, only to be yanked back by a cold chain, while her mother watched with sorrow that someone was clipping her daughter's wings. She learned what it was to destroy her relationship with her brother, the only person she loved the most. She learned what it was to have anger burning in her veins she self destructed. She learned what true rage and fury was. She learned what ire was.

At 17, she reconstructed her castle, making sure the lover girl stayed silent and compliant. Inside the castle she would be safe. Inside the castle she couldn't see what a disaster the ruler was — destroying her future like an unwinding piece of thread, begging to fall apart.

At 17, the lover girl became a dreamer. She dreamed of freedom while the ruler destroyed their sanity and future. The lover girl dreamed in colors. She dreamed of art. She dreamed of escape. She dreamed of being saved.

At 17, the lover girl found her savior in a woman who dyed her hair the color of blue bubble gum. A savior, who sang of an intense rage, similar to the longing the sovereign had deep within her thick skin. The lover girl found her escape in the *Badlands*.

For once, the unruly sovereign, let the lover girl dream.

She listened to music, a realm of magical landscapes and sonnets. Every song she listened to felt like letting her body soar through a vast sea of clouds, a frenzy of euphoria fluttering across her skin with every beat. A high of pure ecstasy. It was a feeling like getting lost, but also being found at the same time. The harmonies of every song was

like stepping foot and escaping into a different dimension where anything was possible, and pretending nothing existed but her.

Music brought freedom, in ways a 17 year old could barely manage to grasp, as she listened to the same album on repeat. It encapsulated emotions she couldn't voice out, but somehow felt down to her core. The sound of soft beats and sweet words hugged the girl, as she laid in her bed, wondering if other people were feeling the same rage. Or wondering if others had their own dreams they longed for.

It wasn't until she was 27, that she truly stepped foot into the *Badlands*. It was here where she realized that even while her castle was built high with walls cold to the touch, there were people who managed to find some of the cracks she kept hidden. Fairies, coming to set the lover girl free. The rageful queen was finally letting the lover girl see the light of day. They had both found a place called home, amongst outsiders and friends. Amongst, a sea of sweaty bodies and dancing figures. She had finally found the feeling of belonging, standing next to her best friend, who chipped away at her walls, as they both walked together into the *Badlands*.

§

Pebbles crushed under my feet, as I quickly ran with a half empty pizza box, searching for the nearest trash can. My body buzzed with a high I had only experienced once when I impulsively went skydiving. I knew what was coming, but it felt like a dream.

The pizza was long forgotten by the time I found a trash bin. My next mission was to find my friend in a sea of people buzzing with the same high I was buzzing with. My feet carried me into the soft grass. A little to the left, and right across the stage, that's where my friend was. She

had encouraged me to move up closer, but I couldn't. I was frozen in my spot, knowing it felt too dreamlike to be real. To be standing so close to someone I had looked up to for many years. 10 to be exact.

Pink and blue lights flashed. It was like a wave of nostalgia hitting me, as the colors swirled in my vision, transporting me back to 17, when I dreamed of being a different person while I listened to the same songs on repeat. I was 17 again, dreaming of the lives each song held, dreaming of cities that could hold me in their arms like a familiar friend. I was 17 again, being transported to a far away land, where I could be anyone but me.

The pink lights burst into flames, and suddenly I was face to face with the very first vinyl I bought before I even owned a turntable. A pink record. A blue desert on the cover.

Bubblegum pink, and soda pop blue.

My friend held my hand, jumping up and down, making me smile. Or maybe *I* held *her* hand, and I made her smile, because I didn't like to be touched, and I hated affection. Love made my skin crawl. But in that moment, I was in love.

I was in love with the colors dancing in front of me, like will-o-the-wisps leading me down a secret path. I was in love with the bodies that kept moving forward, bringing me closer and closer to a bunch of lost strangers I didn't know, but felt connected to. I was in love with the chaos around me.

The screen kept changing from pink to blue, and blue to pink. I looked over at my friend, and felt admiration. Grateful I met someone who was willing to pound at the cement walls I built. I was grateful I found a soul sister who understood me in ways others didn't, because while she chipped at the cracks and broke down my walls, I was do-

ing the same. Like two stars burning bright together, similar to one another.

She was sunlight. Glimmering like a ray of gold and warmth. I was moonlight. Radiating a soft light across a dark blanket of darkness.

We both let our lungs burn with smoke that caused our limbs to loosen, and our worries to leave.

I anxiously waited, my eyes wide and expectant. I couldn't stop thinking of the girl who was 17.

Finally, it was as if everyone held their breath at the same time, the screen in front of me glitching pink and blue. The first chords of the first song slowly blaring from the speakers. My body was consumed with awe, my palms sweating, and my heart racing.

My lungs searched for air. In front of me, was the woman I saw as a savior, in a short blue-green wig.

It wasn't until the second song, that her voice strayed away from the original, and she hit a note that opened the gateways of dopamine. That single note shattered the dreamlike feel, and plunged me into reality. This was my reality. It wasn't a dream, it was real.

My favorite singer was 20 feet away from me, singing an album I listened to on repeat at 17, because I was angry at the world — angry I wasn't free.

Her voice was like honey down my ears as she walked across the stage like it was her home. She was so close, I could feel her fiery warmth. My heart was beating wildly, my arms tingling with a strange sensation, and my feet soaring.

The pink and blue backdrop burned into my retinas as every memory and feeling I had at 17, came barreling down on me like a crushing and liberating weight. It was

like I was both 17 and 27. I was both the lover girl and the lonely ruler.

I felt my soul yearn as I sang the words — *California never felt like home to me.*

I felt my heart ache as I sang — *from a tender age I was born with rage.*

I felt my anger cry as I sang — *I keep a record of the wreckage in my life.*

I felt my high skyrocket as I sang — *but we don't feel like outsiders at all.*

I could feel that 17 year old lover girl reach out to that hopeless 14 year old who once built a prison posing as a castle, and held her hand tight, squeezing with every fiber of her being. That 17 year old masquerading as a mean and hard sovereign sobbed as she sang — *Your little brother never tells you, but he loves you so, you said your mother only smiled on her TV show, you're only happy when your sorry head is filled with dope, I'll hope you make it to the day you're 28 years old...*

All those feelings I felt at 17, came tumbling out, crumbling those walls and covering them in gold. Like a volcano that was long overdue.

Memories of the close relationship I had with my little brother, now severed by family trauma and us growing up as adults. The fact I remember the last time my mother said *I love you* was when my dad passed away. The truth that I searched for that child-like happiness hidden within me through alcohol and weed, spending days blacked out drunk and in so much debt because I thought home was inside bars and in clubs. The terror I felt, knowing I feared turning 27 for all my life, because it was at 27, that my dad passed away, I didn't think I'd ever make it to 28, let alone deserved to.

In this moment of pure ecstasy and freedom, I final-

ly let out every emotion I had pushed down, ignored and buried, in order to protect myself. I admitted to myself that being made to feel small was not the way to grow up. I admitted to myself that being forced to become an adult too fast for the sake of others wasn't fair. I admitted to myself that it was not selfish to want to dream, even if those dreams didn't involve other people. I was not selfish for wanting to live. I admitted to myself that I sacrificed a lot for my family, and I found my solace in music, and in a singer who held her own demons.

It was in the middle of a graveyard, listening to my favorite siren sing, and dancing next to my best friend, that I realized that the high I was feeling was the high of being free. In the middle of that graveyard, died the angry and lonely ruler, clutching her crown with a smile on her face, as a will-o-the-wisp danced over her. Her castle tumbling down once and for all.

The South Sac Iraq War: Making My Own Rules and Growing from Them

Orlindo “Neeno” Myles

Who would have thought that a trip to the local food market would be the beginning of a nightmare? It all started at a well-known grocery store called Pack-N-Save. In 2001, I was just a kid that had the whole world figured out. Yet, I didn’t understand systems, poverty, or how certain environments shape the decisions people make. All I knew was that sometimes we didn’t have enough, and when you grow up like that, your thinking starts to adapt to survival-of-the-fittest instincts instead of lofty rule-abiding ideals.

“HAHAHA!” I burst at my recollection of the event. Theresa, my older sister, was with me that day. “TI,” as I call her, was 12 and I was 10, so growing up we were always close in age and close in experience. We saw a lot, and we went through a lot of things together. One example is the time I took a shit in the Dollar Tree parking lot, and Theresa was my “lookout,” so nobody saw me dropping potatoes. Besides pooping out Dollar Tree property, she also had my back elsewhere—whether it was school, “Da hood life,” or family struggles, we were side by side trying to understand what was happening around us.

Eventually, it was Food-Stamps Time, which meant a big shopping trip. It was one of those once-a-month shopping sprees, courtesy of Uncle Sam, where you go inside “Pack-N-Save” to grab everything and stretch someone else’s money. “MOMMY”, I shouted from excitement, at

the shiny, sparkly, and overstuffed shelves, in all the long aisles (and yes, I call my mother, “MOMMY”, even in adulthood). Even now, I remember Food-Stamps Time as if I were there again; it is as if I am walking again through those same aisles, gazing upon everything on those beautiful snack-abundant shelves, bloating with the tastiest sweets my tongue couldn’t wait to touch. Being a kid and all, grocery stores always felt like a dragon’s lair full of delicious plunder I wanted but couldn’t always have.

It was that day; I noticed the snack aisle. Those beautiful milky white packages of string cheese and fine paper bags of Goldfish crackers. Now, to most adults those might seem like tiny things, inconsequential commercial afterthoughts, but to a kid they looked absolutely stunning. Like it was yesterday, staring at them and thinking about how good they probably tasted. At ten, I was not thinking about rules or consequences the way adults do. My one-track mind was simply focused on the fact that I wanted them.

At the sight of the Pack-N-Save booty, sometimes I laughed, “Hahaha”, from utter joviality. The memory is that emotionally raw, that I still laugh upon seeing it in my mind’s eye. I can even remember looking at Theresa, and then looking back at the infinitely many snacks calling my lips, and taunting my fingertips, with thoughts like “You know you want me. Come taste me.” The snacks,

like Christmas presents, came wrapped in a rainbow of colors, from blood-red Cheese-Its, to summer-grass-green Fruit Rollups, and, of course, let's not forget the dark-African-warrior chocolate bars. It was then that the thought crossed my mind, that it would be easy to grab them without payment, and let's be honest, no one would probably notice. In that instance, I was not thinking about stealing in the way society defines it. I was only thinking about how to get something I wanted when I knew we did not have the money to buy it.

Reflecting back now, that moment represents something deeper than a kid wanting snacks. Symbolizing exactly how children begin learning from the conditions around them. Reality sets in and certain struggles become normal, you start absorbing lessons without anyone explaining them. You then begin to read the environment around you and understand how things work even when nobody teaches you directly.

What's in a name? Well, my city where this Pack-N-Save was located says it all. The Iraq War conjured images of bloodshed, cutthroat tribal feuds, and mindless violence in the streets. That's why people in the hood called my area of Sacramento: South Sac Iraq. In other words, I grew up someplace where survival was something people talked about all the time. Grown-ups worried about bills, food, and making it through the week, while kids saw those struggles even when they were not explained out loud. But as time goes by, you start to believe that you have to figure things out for yourself. And a lot of times that means making choices without fully understanding the bloody consequences.

Theresa and I were just kids trying to navigate the chaotic world we were born into. We did not create the conditions around us. Just two chameleons adapting to the environment in order to not go extinct. Looking back on that moment in the grocery store, I see how it was one of the

early times I realized that life was not equal for everyone. Other kids could grab whatever they wanted because their families had the money, while us other kids had to learn how to deal with not having enough.

It wasn't long after those childhood years, my life took a major turn. At fourteen, I found out that I was not the son of the last name that I bare, then at the age of fifteen, I was incarcerated. It was this moment that changed everything. Getting locked up that young meant my teenage years and much of my adulthood would be spent inside institutions after institutions that operate under strict rules, constant supervision, often inhuman conditions and, let's be honest, cruel and draconian expectations.

Imagine the mental state when you are placed in an environment like that at a young age, it forces you to grow up quickly and, in some sense, harshly. You're forced to learn lessons about discipline, authority, and consequences in ways that most teenagers never have to experience. The world within the world inside those walls teaches you how power works, how respect is earned, and how every action can carry serious consequences, some fatal. But it also teaches you something else. It teaches you how to reflect.

Spending years with limited freedom, you have time to think about your past, your choices, and the path that brought you there. In the beginning, those thoughts can be painful. Then you start replaying moments from your life and asking yourself how things could have been different. As time passed, however, reflection can turn into growth.

Today, when I look back at the kid standing in the snack aisle at Pack-N-Save, I see someone who was still learning how this FUCKED-UP world worked. I also see someone who was navigating circumstances he did not fully understand yet. I could also see someone who had the potential to grow beyond those early moments. Sometimes, when I see what the mirror shows me, I am reminded of

these lines: “IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE THE CHANGES THAT I MADE IN MY LIFE, ALL THEY SEE IS JUST THE BOY THEY LEFT BEHIND.” Those are Jah Cure’s lyrics, but they are the living truths that flow in my veins like a second type of blood. Why? Because the most important lesson I have learned is that our past does not have to determine our future. Put differently, the promise of my future does not have to be an image from my South Sac Iraq past. HUMANS CAN CHANGE. HUMANS DO AND CAN GROW. Humans can also use their voices to create meaning from even the most seemingly purposeless experiences. So despite what the prison guards tell me, I can change. I have changed. And my voice is the ultimate weapon against anyone who argues otherwise. This is the story I continue to tell today.

Sincerely,

Orlindo “Neeno” Myles

Time Passed By

WNDR

We made a promise once,
“Meet me when the flowers bloom.”

We were 15 then,
Kids with dreams that reached the stars,
Imagination the size of skyscrapers,

Nothing stayed the same.

8 years flew by,
Those dreams have long been forgotten
Imagination no longer a valid form of thinking

Yet, I hoped you'd never change.
I kept that promise
Every year, fresh flowers

You would've loved to see them
Had you not left so soon.

Poppies
Belle Nelson
Digital Art



The North Star

Teddy Baek

Most of our memory is lost in time; we pass through moments in our lives, then we fade, faintly and numbly. But some memories do not fade with time, they stick with us and never fade.

On a winter day, my mother took me on a train. It was cold, and I could see the snow outside of the train's window. When we arrived at the train station, so much snow was falling down, we couldn't even see! We went to my grandparent's village. My mother walked me to the house and told me stay there. I was five years old. Before she left, she held up ten fingers in front of my face. She did not explain. She said that she would come back in ten "finger" days. That night snow kept falling. The next morning, I woke up and my mother was already gone.

I planned to stop her before she left. When I woke up in the morning, I ran outside looking for her. I didn't see her footprints in snow. So much snow had already covered them and the world around me. She was gone. I stood and cried, calling for my mommy. My grandpa found me and embraced me, struggling to hold me still as I begged him to bring my mommy back. As I struggled, my grandpa told me, "A boy is not to cry." But I could not stop crying, because I already missed my mom's warm touch and scent. This was the first time I felt that something had broken and my whole world fell down inside of my heart.

In the village, kids did not speak like me. Everyone in the village had accents. My accent was a city accent. I was different. The kids constantly teased me, reminding me that my mom abandoned me. No one would play with me. I was free to chase the butterflies, and I made a frog my friend.

When I went to the village store, I heard some women whisper that my mother had left me. When I heard that, I ran to my bed and covered myself with my blanket and cried for a long time. I missed mommy so much. I started thinking, maybe I'm not worth staying for. I wanted to scream, "Mommy, I will eat all my food, I will be a good boy. Please come back."

My grandparents tried to care for me the best that they could. They made me feel like everyone else, and they took me wherever I wanted to go. They loved me so much. In the summer, the house would get very hot. My grandfather sometimes took me outside to sleep in courtyard where the air was cooler. We would lie on the mat and look at the night sky.

One night, he pointed to a bright star and he told me, "When you get lost, look at the sky, stars will show you the way home." At that time, I did not really understand what he meant. Only years later would I understand what he was teaching me.

Several days later, my father came for me. My mommy was supposed to come for me, so I was not expecting to see him.

The very first thing I asked him was, “Where is mom?”

He said, “Mom is waiting for you at home.”

Home felt strange. There was no place for me there. But this is where I was born. Why did I feel like an adopted child? Why didn't I belong here? Even the kids in the neighborhood made me feel like a stranger. They told me that I was gone so long that I had started to speak like the village kids, with a country accent. I couldn't believe it. I left and came back a stranger. I didn't even speak the same way.

Days went by, then my mother gave me most of my older brother's things: old clothes, shoes, toys, and a three-wheel bicycle. She gave me his things because he didn't need them anymore. But when he saw me wearing his clothes and playing with his toys, he thought I had stolen them from him. He got very angry! He was so angry, that he hit me over and over again. I tried to explain to him that mom put the clothes on me, but he did not care. He hit me every single day, and the pain only got worse. Sometimes my mother would just stand there and watch when he would beat me. One time she even cheered him on while he hit me. As a little boy, this was very confusing. My mom was supposed to protect me, but she was helping the person who was hurting me. I felt so alone. She had thrown me away, again.

On the first day of school my mother made me walk by myself. She asked me if I knew how to get to the school. I said, “yes,” so she gave me a note to take with me. When I got to school, I noticed something different. All of the other kids came with their parents, but I was the only kid that was alone. I didn't know where to go. I curled up in a corner and started to cry. I didn't know what else to do. Thankfully, a lady approached me and asked me what was

going on. I gave her the note, and after reading it she told me to come to her class.

As a child, I remember I was always getting sick. I wanted to be sick every single day. When I was sick, my mom would take care of me. I loved her scent and care, and this was the only way I would get it. When I got older, I stopped asking for her. I didn't need her anymore, because she couldn't make the pain go away. Not anymore. I begin hurting myself instead. I started collecting pills to swallow them, and I would drink the chemicals under the sink. I would slam my head against the wall and the floor. I had to go the hospital countless times. I didn't really understand death, I only felt like I had to stop all of the pain. I jumped from a three-story building, and broke both of my legs. I healed physically, but I could never fix the broken parts inside of me. I learned how to swallow my emotions, sorrow, despair, and endless pain.

I met a girl who was my first love. She reminded me of my mom's warm touch and scent. Initially I didn't realize what attracted me to her. She did not pay attention to me; she was just like my mom. This reminded me of home. I felt alone when I was with her. I tried to make things work, but I didn't know how make real emotional connections with all of the anger and abandonment I carried inside of me.

When I became a father, I learned how to love someone else. One day, my daughter, when she was about six months old, started scratching and hitting her own face. When I saw that, I ran to pick her up to hold her. I told her, “No. no. no. Why? I love you, don't hurt yourself.” In that moment, I saw myself as a little boy crying in the snow. Later, my son also started hurting himself, slamming his head on the wooden floor. I ran to pick him up and hug him, and I told him, “You don't have to do it. I care about you. I love you, I'm here.” These moments made me feel like the same lonely little boy waiting and wanting to be loved. Looking

back now, I realize how badly I needed someone to say these same words to me.

I was angry all of the time and I didn't want to go back home. Instead of healing, I chased money, success, and control. Those things made me feel strong, not weak. But inside I was still that hurt little boy crying, asking, "Where's Mommy? Mommy, do you know I already know to count to ten?" When she told me ten finger days, she did not think I could count. Instead of talking about my pain, I closed my heart. My thinking became selfish and wrong. I used power and success to fill the empty place inside me.

Up until I was imprisoned, I had no contact to my mother and father. But right after I came to prison, I received a letter from them. They wrote me letters every week. My mother told me that she was sorry for what happened during my childhood. She told me she was battling depression for a long time, and that was why she had sent me away to live with my grandparents. She apologized for neglecting me and leaving me to fend for myself.

I received the first letter at night, and I immediately wanted to look toward where my parents lived in the country side. But when I tried to look out of the little narrow prison cell window, all I could see was my reflection and my tears as they poured down my face. I could only see the scared five-year-old boy in my reflection. I turned off the light, and I kneeled down, and surrendered to my emotions and feelings. Then, without meaning to, I began to sing, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound... I WAS BLIND, BUT NOW I SEE." I began to pray. All of my childhood memories were passing through me. It was time to forgive. It was time to say goodbye to that little boy.

I think about my grandfather frequently, and the night sky in his courtyard. I remember the star he showed me, the one that helps people find their way home. Later I learned that it was called the North Star. The North Star stays in the

same place in the sky, helping travelers find their way in the dark. This star has become a symbol in my life.

My grandfather's lesson and my faith have come together. When I feel lost, I think about that star. It reminds me that even if a person makes several wrong turns in their lives, it is still possible to change their direction to find their way home. Now, I want to help others who have lost their way, I want to take off their weary shoes, wash their feet. If they cry, I will cry with them and show them their very own North Star.

Miguel Owens

ADHD

Miguel Owens

I forgot what I was going to write about.

A Scene with a Director's Cut

Alexis Ramos

You said “I’m not in the wrong, I’m ready when you’re ready to give me an apology.”

During one of our last arguments, I recorded it for my safety. Here’s some of how that went.

“You never asked how I was doing. You never asked me like, you never, you never, you never—”

“Beacu—” I said before she started to proceed with exactly what I did wrong. Except, she couldn’t even figure it out either at the moment. . . I can’t remember the last time I finished a thought with her. Somehow I was still a prime-interrupter.

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t—What do you mean? I don’t—If you don’t understand then I feel like I can’t continue to have this conversation right now”

Pause. Okay.

My fine reader, if you were to have an anxiety-attack you

were very transparent about why and what it’s about and what could be helped — avoided — , should *you* feel obligated to ask the person hosting you, in their home, if *they’re* okay. To the person I considered my ‘better half’ at some point, *I* asserted:

“I wasn’t obligated to, I wasn’t obligated to. I understand how you felt, but—”

Uhm. Is it normal to never, and I mean never get to the periods at the end of your sentences with someone when you’re in the middle of argu—then you forget what you talk about.

“I-I-I-I” She stumbles on her explanation like a dice shaving itself into a sphere trying to find a point to land on.

“I can’t have this conversation *anymore*,” She gnarled back.

I’ve learned to become a mediator from progressive erosion of insult to injury. Insults and injury were experienced over the course of years. I was trying to alleviate blame off of my back and pour it between us, separate from us, aside from us. How can lovers truly be in harmony if foul play

exists among them?

When she uttered “*anymore*,” I stood as a fool on Everest without a parachute or oxygen tank staring into the mountainous beast I’ve climbed onto. How will I leave this box, El Cajon? How did I end up here? Why am I back here again?

§

“I can’t have this conversation anymore,” She repeated and snapped me back into myself.

It’s time.

§

I can hear a distant “Cut!” in the background like George Cukor.

§

“I can’t have this conversation anymore,” she continues, “*I need to stop*.”

“Ok,” five-seconds later,

“Do you want me to leave?”

Silence.

“Ok. I’ll leave.”

§

The clapperboard sounds off in the distance.

§

She goes, “You don’t understand?” I had torn apart my insides to keep her warm.

She delicately said this like a lost child, afraid. Her voice emulated the way she wanted to make me seem to make *her* seem: small. It was similar to that of a preschooler told to go to time-out, framed by another kid’s destruction.

I don’t understand? How did I interpret this situation incorrectly? I don’t always remember things. I’m fucked up in the head. I heard her. I thought I—No, you did. *You do*.

“We’re not going to have this conversation right now.”

“No no no please.”

Fuck, my lungs are working too hard.

“No, I will not sit dow—” I say with the chatter of her words vibrating in my bones, and I physically ache.

“Please. Please. Yeah, go ahead and sit down.”

“No, I don’t feel you—”

“Oh, I,” she giggles, “I’m okay.”

She tells me like a mother telling her child she’s dying to control her kid to sit down, to eat soap. Eat soap to wash out what she said, what you said, and whatever she selects from her chosen narrative depicting reality. After, you’ll be just fine, just a clean slate. Her story will live on as your rosetta stone.

“No.” I told her stern as a grey -rock, as I’d find from re-

peated toxic engagements with a lover who ringed a pretty last name as mine.

“Please. Stay!”

Her words plowed my chest, while her finger was directly pointing at the chair’s heat. This woman is a director if I’ve ever seen one. Shocker to say. Not many of those today. She wants me to recite *her* script, sanctioned and in solitude, sitting-down to endure the abuse. Otherwise I’m not the ‘good’ girl I was when she met me. She didn’t know me then, but I wanted her to.

“Isabella, Isabella, I do not feel like you’re okay—”

“Lower your voice.”

“Ok.”

Reveal at Director’s Cut:

I took a couple moments to realize how de-composed I was. It’s already the next scene.



If someone asked, “What did you learn from shooting with that director?” And no, not Kubrick, not Tarantino, but *you*. Well, I’d say I learned to not assume the worst in people, while letting the actions and words of people shape the worst of themselves, which you need to act accordingly as if you’ll die otherwise. In a sense, you will. You’ll die, and if you get lucky enough to leave, you’ll have to recitate dead matter anyway. Words make stories, words make love, and words make war; and, directors are story-builders,

world-crafters in real-time. They shape what they perceive is art and beauty. And sometimes she tells you that you look like a Disney Princess because of your small, button-nose that she deeply envied. And sometimes she tells you that you look the prettiest after you’ve cried.

Operation Jungle Jewel

Arturo Arzaga

It happened in the year 1991. I was lost in the jungles of Panama for two days on Operation Jungle Jewel. The jungles of Panama are one of the most unforgiving environments, with humidity that feels like you're in a sauna. The tangled web of thorns and vines drain you physically and emotionally just trying to hump (walk) 50 meters. I was eighteen years old and had been in country for only a few months when my squad was given the orders to help in the recovery of an American aircraft from the WWII era that had crashed many years ago. This task force was made up of a platoon of Infantry and a squad of Combat Engineers (infantry with explosives as a specialty). As the Engineers, our specific task was to build an LZ (landing zone) in the middle of the jungle, so that the Blackhawk helicopters and other smaller helicopters could land and help with the recovery of this downed aircraft.

It all started when we were called on early in the morning, without any warning or prior knowledge that we would be going on this mission. Our orders were to get our gear ready and to pack a duffle bag with extra boots and battle dress uniforms before we could go. Once we were ready, we took a short helicopter flight from Fort Clayton, on the Pacific side of the canal, to Fort Sherman, located on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal, to join the Platoon of Infantry that we supported as the Engineer squad. Once all was in order, we all got into a Chinook Helicopter for the

3-hour flight to the jungle where this aircraft was last seen. As I entered the rear door of the Chinooks, screaming engines and twin chopper blades seemed to thump me in the chest. This felt like a really important mission. I remember hearing the crew chiefs saying that the weather was not good, and we might have to cancel the mission. Eventually the pilots got us through the heavy cloud cover and fog to the area of the jungle closest to the crash site. The Chinook struggled to land because the terrain was wet and slippery and the chopper was too heavy, so we had to jump out of the rear door as it hovered a few feet above the ground, and we struggled to get out of the way because of all the mud. That was intense, but we all made it safe. Now the real fun was about to begin.

Once we were boots on the ground, we all got our ruck sacks and our weapons and began the rigorous 5-day hump to look for this downed aircraft. We had some help from locals who had an idea where the plane was, and so we took their lead. Five days of hiking in the wet and humid jungle with 75 lbs. of equipment, food, and water. It was grueling. When we finally found the airplane sticking out of the ground on the side of a hill, all of us were exhausted from humping for what seemed like an eternity. Soaking wet, tired, hungry, and covered in mud; the real work to create the LZ began.

We quickly established base camp and began the two-day job of clearing a landing zone in the middle of triple canopy jungle. Some of the trees that we cut with chainsaws were so tangled that when we cut the tree, they would just hang, and we had to use machetes to cut the vines and tangled mess just to get the tree down, so that we could cut it into smaller pieces. After two days of intense work of clearing tangled trees and brush, the LZ was finished and so we all celebrated with high fives, most of us half naked to cool off. A Blackhawk landed and brought us warm food and the duffle bags that we had packed previously. So, I remember digging into my duffle bag and quickly undressing out in the middle of the jungle so that I could change into dry uniforms. We were all still very dirty guys on this mission. Sargent Kriser was my squad leader and he asked, "Does anyone want to go down to the creek to wash up?"

Me and Private Robertson replied, "I'll go with you!"

"Okay, then grab your soap and a towel and leave your weapon with your battle buddy and let's go!"

The triple canopy Jungles of Panama are so unforgiving and hard to navigate. Just walking fifty meters can be a challenge with all sorts of bugs, snakes, and what we call fifty caliber ants that can give you a nasty bite. As we set out for this creek, we soon found ourselves all wet, sweaty, dirty again and lost. I remember asking Sargent Kriser, "Do you even know where we are?"

"We're in fucken' Panama!"

In the process of trying to find our way back to base camp is when I broke my right ankle sliding down a rock to cross over a creek. My right foot got wedged between two rocks, and the weight of my body cracked my ankle. The pain pulsated, and I struggled to pull my foot out of the rocks. When this happened, Private Robertson asked, "Sargent, should I walk up the creek to see if I could find the base camp?"

"Okay, go ahead, but only walk up a few meters, and if you don't see anyone, come back."

He set off, but we never saw him again. Me and Sargent tried to start a fire which went bad because of the lighter. It was so hot it blew up in Sargent Kriser's face. Soon it got dark, very dark, so dark that I could not see my hand in front of my face. The triple canopy jungle gets so dark because no light penetrates through the thick canopy. To make matters worse, it started raining, hard! It felt like I was sitting beneath a waterfall. So, Sargent and I had no choice but to settle down and just sit on the ground next to each other. Our bodies got cold from the rain and I was in tremendous pain from my broken ankle. It was the worst night of my life, because it did not stop raining. Soon my body began to shiver uncontrollably. I thought I was going to die and never see my family again.

The next day the rain stopped, and Sargent and I were on the move. I had to crawl because of my broken ankle. Sargent was walking ahead of me, and all of a sudden, as the canopy opened up, I saw a person about 300 meters away. Sargent did not notice the person, so I yelled out, "Hey Sargent, look!" He looked ahead and finally saw a woman getting water from a creek. We continued walking towards her. She looked about 13-15 years old, and she was part of a small family that lived out in the jungle with her father and her son and a few kids in a small hut that they had made off the side of a fallen tree. It was like a picture out of National Geographics with half-naked barefoot indigenous people. At first, they looked afraid of us, but once I started talking to them in Spanish and let them know we were lost, their fear changed to help and support. The father offered to relieve the pain in my ankle with some home remedy, a red liquid with flowers in a clear jar. I took off my boot, and as soon as I did, I could see the damage, a deformed ankle that only got worse after taking off the boot and it made me sick to my stomach. My ankle had swelled up to the size of a softball and turned blue and

purple. Their remedy felt like a blessing so carefully rub the unknown liquid on my ankle.

Soon the night was upon us once again, and I found comfort in staying with them, under their little hut with a fire. They offered to feed us rice and rabbit meat. Sometime in the middle of the night, I awoke to the sweet sound of a helicopter that located us with the use of NVG's (night vision goggles), but was unable to land because of the unstable terrain. I can remember getting up as best I could and I waved my arms up and down, yelling for help in a desperate attempt to be rescued. My efforts seemed to go unseen, because after about ten minutes the chopper just left. The next morning, about twenty soldiers walked up to our location and began to give me first aid for my broken ankle. The search party was thankful for allowing us to stay with the family and they started giving them flashlights, MRE's (meals ready to eat), and batteries as a way to show their gratitude. Soon after, a small helicopter lowered itself down close enough to get me, and as it took flight and flew over the trees in the distance, I could see lots of other helicopters in the area. It turned out to be a full-scale alert, just to find us and bring us back.

Once I got back to Fort Clayton, I was greeted by our Company Commander and our First Lieutenant so I could give them my version of what happened. Then I was taken by Humvee to Gorgas Hospital, where they put two screws in my ankle which are still in my body to this day. While all of this was taking place, my mother had a sense that something was wrong, and she was ready to go to Panama to find me. I never told her what happened until later, but she somehow knew. Mothers' instincts. My poor mom, the things I put her through.

As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a soldier in the U.S. Army, not fully understanding what could happen and the affects it could have on my life. When I told my parents that I enlisted, my mother was sad and my fa-

ther was mad, so they were in no position to offer advice. When I enlisted at seventeen, I did not really realize what was to come. Operation Jungle Jewel was a traumatic experience that I never got counseling for, and this would affect me for the rest of my life. Most people think traumatic events involve heavy combat situations and fire fights, but that is not always the case. PTSD can happen to anyone, causing lots of underlying problems that – if not treated – can make a person deal with it in unhealthy ways. Alcohol abuse, drug use, and unhealthy coping mechanisms in an effort to forget what caused trauma. The military does not tend to help those who have been in these types of traumatic events, because of the stigma associated with mental health. I hope my story could help anyone reading this who has had a similar event happen in their lives to seek professional help, whether you served in the military or not.

Apá

Richie Rubio

My dad taught me how to shave when I turned nineteen. It was probably later than most young boys learn, but it didn't really matter as I stood there with the electric razor to my skin, dad to my right dragging an invisible one over his own face, miming the movements. It felt like a christening, this grand event I'd always seen on TV with emotional music and close up shots became just me and my dad sharing our small bathroom, smelling of aftershave.

My dad taught me how to drive. We would sit in an abandoned parking lot two times a week where I crashed and ran into invisible cars, practicing turns, rearview mirror and shaking off the fear of running people over by accident. I used to panic when a single soul appeared even remotely close to the entrance, convinced I would kill them if they so much as took a step forward. Dad would laugh, knowing full well I would not, no matter how clumsy. When I failed my first driver's test, he bought me churros and took me to the movie theatre.

My dad introduced me to music. I imagine I had not a few hours of life and he was already shuffling his ipod around, blasting Billy Joel or REO Speedwagon so his baby would know what real music was since the beginning. As I grew, I didn't waiver, introducing him to songs from his time he didn't really know and every time I was elated. Most of my best memories with dad are in the car, singing along

to 80s music on the way to wherever. It could be a 5-minute ride home, but we'd still sit in the garage to finish a particularly good song. The older I got the more we'd fight for the aux, a pointless activity since our playlists are almost identical copies, but it was still fun to win.

My dad introduced me to movies, too. All the way from crying when Han Solo was frozen in carbonite, to laughing at Mrs. Doubtfire's antics; loving Spock no matter who played him; staring in awe at Sarah Connor; cheering for Spider-Man; cursing out Annie Wilkes; rooting for Katniss; cowering every time he played the Pirates of The Caribbean theme song. Both sat on the couch watching until it got very dark. Mom would sometimes walk by, a big smile on her face and ask "What are you watching today?" and we'd just look at each other and laugh, inviting her to sit between us and fall asleep during *Venom* or *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

My dad taught me how to fix stuff. I'd leave my figures or dolls with a severed head on his desk, a very macabre thing to stumble upon, I'm sure. The next day they would appear in the middle of my purple rug as if nothing had happened. He'd fix my jewelry, my broken trophies, curtains, put up my posters, shelves and lamps, but he would always insist I watch him do it. I'd be eager, most of the time to help and now my friends come to me if they need simple but complicated fixes. I feel important—useful. I get

a glimpse of how important my dad must have felt, or feels, when mom leaves her broken sunglasses or I left the amputated leg of one of my favorite characters on his work desk.

My dad taught me how to be a man. I guess that means different things to different people but to me, it means never giving up, being respectful and polite, occasionally cursing like a sailor, but always sticking to my morals. Gut feelings make a person. He taught me what it is to be appreciated and cherished, and along with mom what true love looks like when it stands the test of time. My dad is better than any superhero I've ever read about, watched, or met.

My dad taught me how to live.

And I won't ever forget.

Learning, One Call After Another

Sam Cabrera

Fifteen.

Cleaning out the basement is risky business; you never know what will turn up. Sometimes you find something you weren't expecting to. I remember my task that afternoon was just that: cleaning. I should have been doing my algebra homework, but I decided to take one for the team. Being the only man in the house, I was taught at an early age that it was my duty to confront all of life's dangers for the women of the house, even if those dangers were spiders and the occasional "spooky" spider web. Hero. I know, the title comes with the job. While traversing the world's deadliest landscape, dodging my old Batman themed toys, Legos, and my sisters' old Barbies. My foot kicks and launches a hard plastic case on the ground sending it skidding across the concrete.

Great. What did I break now?

It skids to a halt in a dark corner, but I can see it staring back at me. His eyes and eerie smile find me; his complexion is cracked and weathered. He has seen better days. *Mr. Telephone, my old Fisher-Price Chatter Phone* I inherited after my sisters outgrew his novelty and his lessons. He taught me some of my very first lessons in life, one phone call at a time. As I walk toward him, memories and visions come one after another: my past, present, and future converge.

When I finally reach him, I hesitantly pick up the handset thinking... *Will anyone answer?...*

§

Twenty-one

CLACK, CLACK, CLACK! The sound of a heavy aluminum Maglite banging on the metal door of my cell shakes me out of a troubled sleep.

The deputy sheriff looks through the small window embedded in the door and yells, "You have a visit, get ready!"

What? Who came to see me, is it my attorney? My anxiety builds and makes it hard to stand, but I dress quickly and exit my cell. The officer motions for me to follow him.

When I approach the sheriff, he says, "Yeah, some old guy has been pestering the front desk for a few days now. I don't know who it is, but he really wants to see you. Put your hands inside of your waistband, and follow the yellow line." He motions for his partners to open the front gate and then shouts, "Walking!"

§

...Silence. Obviously no one answers my call on the old and tattered toy, but it reminds me of the blissful parts of my childhood before it turned sour. Growing up I learned the harsh realities of life and the importance of fulfilling the expectations of others. My mother told me that I was a quiet kid that hated to be held by anyone other than my father. I was selective, stubborn, and mischievous, so it's no surprise that I had my fair share of scraped knees, bruises, and cuts; trophies of my childhood adventures. I was just like my father, so naturally I went to him with all of my problems. Whether I needed help with math or a Band-Aid, he always fixed what was broken. I cherished our bond while it lasted, and blamed myself when it ended. At some point in our relationship, I seemed to do everything wrong, so he stopped fixing my problems. I only have a few pictures of us together, one of which was taken with my friend, *Mr. Telephone*. In the picture, I am three years old and I am holding the handset with what must be the most awkward hand placement possible, and my father, a few inches from me, completes the illusion. He holds up his mimed hand-phone while looking down on me with loving eyes. In the picture, his mouth is open and I can imagine what he says...

§

Ten.

“Why didn't your mother pick you up?”

I hesitate, and carefully tell him, “I'm not sure dad, but could you please come get me? I don't want to walk home again.” I can feel his frustration, a wordless warning.

He is probably wondering who gave me his new number; one more secret he couldn't keep.

He finally responds, “Where is your school again, is it the one off of Sycamore?” He forgot that I graduated last

year so I remind him, “That was my elementary school, I'm in middle school now. It's on San Marcos Boulevard.” He seems even angrier now. *It's my fault, I should have just walked home.*

He quickly blurts out before abruptly hanging up, “Ahí te miro.” He's mad. I already know what he is going to say.

§

...He probably speaks the childish gibberish that always made me smile, a language only he and I understood. What ever happened to those days? Being his only son, we used to do everything fathers and sons were expected to do together; now I am lucky to see his taillights when he drives away after picking up his mail. I learned that it's just the way it is when parents separate. All their commitments get washed away and they ignore the stains that are left behind. Speaking of washing, Mr. Telephone needs some love and affection, he has seen some trauma. The cloth cord is tangled and frayed; *I knew I couldn't make a phone call to save my life.*

§

Thirteen.

“What's your dad's phone number?”

I don't know it. I haven't known it since my father left, so I lie to the officer, “I forgot it, I'll just give you my mom's number.” He looks at me and reads every lie in my childhood book of secrets. *Maybe he knows that my dad left me a year ago.*

The officer looks at me with disapproving eyes and says, “Whatever kid, but someone has to come get you before school lets out.”

I don't reply, I just stare blankly back at him. I can tell

that the officer is disappointed, but I have a feeling that it's not with me or the fight I was just in. I'm dreading what comes next.

§

I give up after a few hours and decide that I've had enough of the perils of the basement for one day, so I collect my spoils and head for my room. I've had my own room for about three years now, ever since one of my sisters flew the coup to live with her husband. I guess she still believed in marriage even after our father decided to call it quits on all of us. She had a different relationship with him. She was daddy's little girl. She got all of his love and attention, and I got whatever was left over. I had to share a room with my parents for most of my childhood, so having my own room was liberating. It made me feel like the master of my own universe. I could have never imagined that in six years' time I would be in jail facing the end of what I knew to be my life.

§

Twenty-one.

When I enter the visiting room for the first time, fear consumes me. Who is this guy and why does he want to see me? I find him at the final window, the glass is scratched beyond recognition, but I can see him. Old and battered, a reflection of my inner self. He looks at me with eyes that are red and tired of giving up more than they ever have before. I never thought I would see my father again, much less here in jail. He left me to fend for myself, and yet here he is as if he still has a stake in my life.

What was I supposed to do? Walk away?

I am not him.

He picks up the phone on the other side of the divide waiting for me to do the same. I give in to his pain, and my own. I pick up the phone, "Hi...dad, what are you doing here?"

He can't speak, his tears choke off any sound he tries to make, but he finally whispers, "I came as soon as I heard, they wouldn't let me see you until now...I'm here."

I cry in front of my father for the first time since the day he left my life eight years ago. I hold on tightly to the phone, so I won't lose myself to the sadness. My knuckles turn white with loss and regret. For the first time in a long time, I allow myself to cry and my dad is there to tend to my wounds.

Speaking softly, my dad says, "I'm sorry Mijo, I'm so sorry...for everything, but I'm here now, and I will not let you go through this alone."

§

Thirty-three – Present Day

True to his word, he did not let me go through it alone, standing faithfully beside me ever since that day. I was sentenced to Life without the possibility of parole when I was twenty-one. It was one of the hardest moments of my life. Even so, years later and to my surprise, I have never been happier and more optimistic of my future. My journey has been difficult and full of bad decisions that I would give anything to undo, but the changes I have made as a result have been invaluable. Today, I am surrounded by opportunity and good friends, the best of which is my dad. I call him every week and we talk about everything, the good and the ugly, and mom is always close by. In an odd twist of fate, my parents found each other again. I guess coming to see their son every weekend, year after year, reminded them of what they once had. They found themselves, but most

importantly, we found each other.

§

“Hola Mijo, cómo va el colegio y tu trabajo, ¿tienes estudiantes nuevos?”

I refuse to respond in Spanish, so I answer in the most formal academic English correctional education can buy, “College is going fantastically, and I have a surplus of students right now, everyone is eager to get their GED.”

I can feel his pride when he replies, “I’m proud of you Mijo, you’re doing so good over there, I am so proud of you.”

§

Now, every time my dad tells me that he is proud of me, it never fails to bring a childish smile to my face. I picture myself all those years ago...awkwardly holding a handset that is connected to its receiver by nothing more than a cloth string and imagination, looking to my dad... I say, “Thank you dad, for everything..I love you.” As he looks to me, holding his mirrored hand-phone, completing the reality, he replies, “I love you too Mijo, and never forget, everything is beautiful.” This is his new mantra that he makes it a point to frequently repeat, to remind me that no matter how bleak the road ahead looks, it is all a matter of perspective.

Giants and Spirits

Angel I. Ramirez

A long time ago at the preschool I once attended, a smaller and more innocent reflection of myself stood behind a small market stand. The stand itself was sunbleached heavily from exposure to the sun and was completely made of plastic. It had small cabinets which housed baskets full of plastic goods, and an empty sign stood above it as rows of other market stands lined up side by side like a great wall beside the blacktop's furthest edge. Numerous children were running around making good use of their imaginary dollars and businesses, but I stood behind my fruit and fish market as if I was a real merchant with no business. As the other children played and used their own imaginations to fit whatever world they saw themselves in, I gazed down at the plastic fish and fruits on my stand and, in my youthful perspective of the world, I wondered how lonely we all must be. The sad pale fruits, which were so far from the rich natural lands and forests which they derived from. The dead-eyed fish staring up at the blue sky above us, a reminder of the endless oceans they had been pulled from. And then there was me, a small child looking around wondering what I could do to make a single customer, or in another case, a friend. While I did want to go out and express myself to the world of tag chasers and hide and seekers, the smaller me felt nothing but intimidation as he looked in the faces of a multitude of happy, unaware children. My fears for such a small age seemed to have forced me to stay behind this

plastic sunbleached stand, as an invisible chain tied around my ankles and bound me to it. While my body was indeed free to go do anything I wanted, my mind was in a prison of my own creation.

Yet as I looked down pondering the scary world around me, along came a girl whose face I have long forgotten to time since then. With hair as black as night, a complexion like milk and coffee swirled together, and a smile as bright as a sunrise, this girl approached me from beyond the foggy borders of the playground, and set her ship to my lonely port. She offered her own imaginary dollars to me to purchase my fish and my fruits, yet fear whispered in my ear like an ill-minded friend as she made her offer. Confused, she gave me a look of what I remember to be one of uncertainty before she changed her approach. She spoke of how boring these sorta things were and to my surprise, she invited me to play with her by the big tree near the blacktop.

Being lonely, I was hesitant at first, yet ecstatic in the next moment. I was fearful yes, but I was also a child who was happy to jump at a chance to play. As I chased her across the playground, I wondered how the fish and fruits would be settled as other children took over the stand, what new sights and friends might they see or meet? I will never

know. Our journey across the blacktop sea took us to a land with a single giant tree which stood high above us all. To my youthful imagination, the thing towering above us was almost like a giant's foot was buried beneath the ground with its leg stretched up to heaven. I would stare up the massive tree for what felt like an eternity before I turned back towards the girl.

She poked her head from behind the tree as she dared me to chase her around the giant's foot. While the image of her face is lost to me, the memory of it taunting me with a sticking out tongue would be engraved in my memory as I began the chase. At that very moment, I could feel the rush of wind blowing through my face as the pounding of my small heart sent blood and energy across my body like a great river. The panting of my breath would be met with the cracking of a smile. And as I chased her around that tree, it made me feel free from the weight that fear was having on my soul. In an instant, I was transformed from that lone merchant in the hustle and bustle of the blacktop sea, to the free and merry wanderer amongst the birds that sing, the giant who sleeps, and my first ever real life friend.

She and I became inseparable after that day. Everytime the blacktop and playground was open to us, we played all sorts of games around the giant's heel and went on all sorts of imaginary adventures. From us chasing each other as zombies in games of tag, to digging for lost treasure under the ground where the giant's foot rested, we spent many days being a part of each other's small worlds. Like the sun and moon, we became two sides circling a single living thing. As I grew closer with her in those early days, my appreciation for her became something I only heard concepts of from my family. A feeling so complex yet so positive that I was so sure it had to be it - love. I began to show my first acts of chivalry to her like a knight to a princess, from letting her enter the class before me, offering extra gold fish from my own snack bag, to even one day, trying to give her the chance to hang out with me beyond the borders of the

school grounds.

I remembered my excitement when she said yes. It was much like things I would find ecstatic in my life today like winning the lottery or finding my lost earbud. Yet as the day came, I offered to my grandmother and other family members to have her stay the night. The looks they gave me were confusing as I looked at her with an equally confused face looking back up. With looks of concern on their faces, they told me she couldn't stay and that she had to go back home. I tried asking why, but my family gave no reason. With tears welling up from my eyes like waterfalls, I turned to the girl as I told her she couldn't stay. Of which, she would nod her head, and leave my house.

After that day, I lost contact with the girl who saved me from my sad life in the sea of the blacktop. With age, my assumption came to be that we drifted apart after the ordeal with my family, or maybe she was so heartbroken, she and her family must've left. I figured it was another one of those things of people growing apart and never seeing each other again. Just a regular old scenario.

However, as time trudged along and as my memories of the girl remained strong, yet grew more hazy and clouded with the time I spent after, I found myself one day at the age of sixteen reminding my mother of the girl who I was friends with long ago. I told her about how I wondered how she was doing and thought maybe someday I would meet her again. After all, the world is so wide is it not?

That's when my mother gave me a look of hesitancy as she realized that for my whole life...I didn't know. It was after this, my mother asked me a question. A question which shattered my perspective for the rest of my life there after.

"You know that she wasn't real right?"

...I couldn't begin to process it. It was impossible, she was right there with me the whole time. When I gave her my gold fish in piles, I wasn't just leaving them next to me in class. The days I held the door open for her to go through, I wasn't letting empty space enter the class before the other kids. When I chased her around the giant's heel, I wasn't chasing nothing. She was always there... wasn't she?

Many weeks after the realization set onto me, the fog that clouded my lifelong perspective began to clear piece by piece. The days where she was bringing me to a world away from that of the horrid blacktop, it was just me. All those adventures, the games, the little moments I had around her...she wasn't really there. As I continued to reflect on her, many questions came to light. What if she was a ghost trying to curse me into an early grave? What if she was my imagination seeking companionship in a figurative being? Or what if it was some strange blend of the two? I'll never truly know the fullest answer, and neither could anyone else as the time which she had in my life has long since followed the style of some birds, flown away and never to be seen again.

Yet what I have learned from her will always be real to me. While it is true that the gold fish I shared was left beside me, the games I played were all done by myself, the love I had was not clear to me at the time, the impact she had on me stood the test of time. I mirrored what I learned from those few days of childhood into the rest of my life, from her giving me my ability to be more open to new people and friends, to helping me find my voice when I most desperately needed to speak it, to even giving me the capacity of love and affection I hold for all my friends and family. All of these things still give me the very wind I need for my sails, and allow me to set across the many vast oceans

across the world to find who I truly am. Yet to this day, I still dream of figures without faces, and it often makes me wonder. Will there ever be a day where in the deep recesses of my mind, I will be able to meet the same person who saved me from myself, in that dreaded blacktop sea? Maybe, there's no harm in hoping after all. But until the day comes where I will meet that girl again in this life, or the next, I will continue to set sail, for a tomorrow with more sleeping giants and more friendly spirits.

Sunflower Bees
Belle Nelson
Photograph



Distance/of a/Dare Victoria Mendez

A dalliance draped in misty air
Caution carries to foretell
Fickle despair drying the days
 damp
Diluted to distinction
witness a solution
Counteract confusion
 a quick tin of
bale leaves return to a city
 affairs
Stole some sense from a stone
 Fated to forbode
& clothe
forbidden woes washing
 Wanes of weakness
Personal pieces
 Decorated deep ends To find a
sleeping stare one can harbor to
share the saline was safe to meet,
composition to concede a neatly need I have
yet to receive.

Contrary Virtues

Tiffany Barton

Waiting by the ocean, for an ebb so strong it pulls me in,
'Patience is a virtue', yet I crave that gentle caress of the sea upon my skin.

I watch the waves as they come in and gently recede,
Never too far away, yet never too close to me.

We made a pact, you see, the sea and I,
I'd abstain from entering deep, and I'd wait for the sign.

I draw pictures in the sand with my fingers, as I watch the waves crest on the sea,
My eyes, an inability to wander, and my body is planted firmly, though it would never ask that of me.

My temperance it waivers, as the scent of salt on the air fills my senses, dripping with its lust,
Does it want me to enter, but fears someone's touch?

I'm waiting, and I'm waiting, I don't mind, as I will do what I must.
There's no road map, or textbook to build something with the ocean, such as this kind of trust.

I release from my pride, my self doubt, and my concern,
But when I think of the ocean, I can't help but yearn.

To be enveloped in comfort, so gentle so kind,
Yet the further you enter, it's roughness, it unwinds.

Does it fear that I judge it, if I knew its true depth?
My heart bears a kindness, I fear the ocean forgets.

Does it think on its pollutions, and items littered within,
That its rot is so deep, that it can't accept more than friends?

How I'd help rid of the sickness, so those things do not fester,
It'd be no charity or pity, only a kind gesture.

My mind it wonders on the possibilities, and memories I cherish the most,
I know I can't swim well, but I don't blame the ocean for the fear I feel when I get too close.

My body it moves, to dip my toes in the water,
My diligence not to step too far in, for fear that trust might falter.

It might be years before I feel ready to feel that caress of the sea,
But, I hope in all hopes, that when I am, it'll one day also be ready for me.

Inck-a-bög

Imelda Leyva

What's that sound ?

'Inck'

I say out loud, *'Inck?'*

'-ab'...

(5) *'-bög'*, I brush it aside.

'Grumplererrr' - ugh, thats my stomach

I missed lunch & dinner.

I'm famished & parched.

I should go to the market

(10) buy all the stuff.

Huh, nothing was all in my mind.

'Inck, inck, iiiiiiiinck'

I jumped out of my sofa bed

looking a bit scared,

(15) it's only 8 o'clock.

Is it my book shelves?

On my toy clock,

along the magical rocks,

& all my knickity-knacks

(20) I see these 3 blue googly eyes.

'Inck, inck, inck, -a, -bög'

Is it mocking me?

*'Listen, you 3 bitty lil' eyes,' I began to say.
'You're in my favorite spot
(25) get-out, Out, OUT...
don't want you near my knickity-knacks.'*

My stomach growls out loud
'Grumplerrerr,' I sigh.
I need an orange-julius
(30) & some golden Lord rings

'Inck-a-bög'
'Ab-si.. coming after you Inckabög,' I reply.

I see a small long needle beak,
maroon fluffy fur
(35) with sparkling gold highlights,
at only 3 inches tall.

Wonder if it's hungry?
For a hotdog wrapped in bacon,
with avocado, ketchup, mustard, onions & relish.
(40) It's my special a-la-almost everything.

'Tiiinckabög'

It leaps onto my lap.

Too hungry to scream; instead, I say,
*'you want to go get some food,
(45) play some video games,
& read my few fashion zines with me?'*

'Inckabög', 'Inckabög', 'Inckabög'

I'll take that as a sippis, a oui & a yes.

(50) Past 3am,
it beat me at 3-video games.
Made a small bed
but it fell asleep on my neck.

I whispered unto the air,
Inckabög,
(55) *just don't pee on me, please.*
You're now my best friend.'

A blessing of 3 googly lavender eyes.

"inck"

Fish Bone

Jesus Martinez

“A feeling of having something poking at the back of your throat”

I have known you for a while.
When I see you, I can't hide my smile.
I won't lie, it's been a trial.
Until now, I've been in denial.
So what else is there for me to do
But come out and say,
You're a good friend.

We were eating at the mall.
Running haphazardly down the halls.
We played some games at the arcade.
And all of my troubles seem to fade.
I see your eyes, a shimmering blue.
And all I can say,
Is I think you're great.

Your laugh so sweet, it's like a song.
Too bad I can't listen for long.
You're moving soon, and you'll be gone.
At least we talked until the dawn.
I have no choice, I must say what's true
I have to admit,
That I love you.

“to protect and to serve”

Henry Solís Vega

My first memories of life were created in a home, known as “Casa de Vi”. Vi is pronounced Vee, and it’s short for Beatrice, the owner of the home. My address was 1623 Pleasant Avenue, Los Angeles CA, 90033. It’s in East Los Angeles, specifically Boyle Heights, a few steps from Mariachi Plaza. For a young American kid, it was a magical place. Casa de Vi is a Victorian cottage; a weathered detached house that looms high above street level. The steep, gabled roof, plus the ornamental wood detailing and decorative trim throughout, I think, caused it to resemble a miniature dollhouse.

For this particular story, my siblings and I were in the care of my grandmother María de Jesús De la Torre Solís, because both my parents were away at work. The entire neighborhood referred to her as “Doña María” and by the honorific title “Lady Mary.”

My father and uncles only addressed her as “Jefa” or “Jefita” (boss, boss lady). For me and my siblings, she was “mi Abuelita” (grandmother). Her embrace, her voice, her touch, was love incarnated. It was healing and protection. Mi Abuelita was a tall woman, standing five feet nine inches, with freckled fair skin that tanned a semi-golden hue. She wore a Spanish shawl that draped over her head and shoulders, which veiled her long, beautifully braided grey hair. Abuelita was a tough, strong, and respected woman.

It was just my Abuelita, both my brothers, and me, plus our three dogs outside in the backyard. It was a hot day in Southern California, so Abuelita had opened a few of the thin but tall windows of the house to circulate some air and cool us down a bit. The sounds of the outside city easily entered our ears. Suddenly, we heard the rattling of our front yard chain-link fence, then a second rattling from the fence separating the front yard from the backyard, followed by the sound of our dogs barking.

Abuelita looked out and down through the open window and saw a shaved-headed terrorist—a cholo, the “bad guy”—running along the side of our house. She screamed at the intruder, “¡Salte de mi casa, maleante, le hablaré a la policía!” (Get out of my house evildoer, I’m calling the police!). He did the opposite; he found the side door leading into our home’s ground floor, and entered our home. He was now underneath our floor boards, literally right under our feet. He had trespassed into our ground floor, our laundry room and storage room. It was a huge stand-up area with rows of wooden pillars. We heard him moving under us, moving things. We felt and heard when he bumped the wooden pillars.

Soon after, we heard the sirens of LAPD patrol cars. My Abuelita blurted out, “He robbed the liquor store.” She ran over to the front door and turned the locks on all the

three bolts; she hurried to the rear door and did the same. My siblings and I were at her heels. I felt safe close to my strong, big, and loud Abuelita. My Abuelita ran back to the front of the house and opened a front bay window. She stuck her upper body out and proceeded to wave her arms and yell for the police. LAPD officers were maybe two hundred feet away, converging at the corner liquor store. She screamed in Castilian, “Help us, he’s in our house. The thief is in our house!” LAPD officers approached our house, guns drawn. LAPD officers didn’t speak Castilian. Abuelita looked at my brother and me and told us, “Tell them he’s in our house, down stairs.”

I leaned over the windowsill and looked down at the police officers, who were looking up at us. I said, “The robber is in our house, on the floor below us”. We were all pointing at the side door below us that led to the ground floor. We told them, “He’s in there—the side door”.

The officers asked us, “Did you see him enter your house?”

We responded, “YES! We did. He’s a cholo.”

The officers were debating whether to enter the dimly lit ground level of our house. They flashed their lights inside the dark ground floor. “We don’t see anything. He’s not in there.” And turned to leave.

My Abuelita screamed at them, “¡No, no, no se irán sin llevarse al ladrón! No sean cobardes, entren y sáquenlo.” (No, no, you’re not leaving without taking the thief! Don’t be cowards, enter and retrieve him.)

My brother and I translated, “He’s in our house. Don’t leave us.” We saw the two LAPD officers stand in front of the door to our ground floor. They raised their arms forward; one hand held a gun, the other a flashlight. They both entered the ground floor, and moments later, we saw them both step back out, without the intruder.

My Abuelita screamed at them, “You cowards, how can you leave that robber in here with us? I have children with me!” The officers turned their backs on us and left our front yard; My grandmother was screaming, “Insolent cowards, how dare you!”

When the police officers were out of sight, my Abuelita turned to look at us, “Mis hijos” (My children). I only sensed fear in my grandmother’s aura once in my life. This was that moment. Her facial expression was worry, and she reached into her mandil’s (pinafore) front pocket and pulled out her rosary. She held her rosary in her hand, her thumb massaging the beads. She gave me a phone number to call. I needed to dial the phone because her eyes were bad with small letters and numbers. I dialed the numbers on the rotary phone. “My son, a liquor store robber is hiding under our house...the police were here. They left us alone with him here. We can hear him under us... your father is on his way.” My Abuelita hung up the phone and grabbed her mini Dodger baseball bat, the one she used to break a man’s arm in the past.

I saw her pace the floor silently, stealthily, her index finger held up to her pursed lips, which made the sound, “Shhh”. We had to obey; for her safety and ours. We could hear the thief moving things around underneath us. Abuelita was honing in on his location. She pointed down and mouthed, “He’s right here.” She pointed to a spot under our hallway, then our kitchen, then our bedroom.

I remember hugging my grandmother’s thighs and looking up at her worried demeanor. She told us reassuring words of bashing the intruder’s head if he tried to enter our upstairs room. She told us we were safe, and that she would beat that evil criminal. I asked her, “How, grandma?” And she would act out her swinging motions with much vigor. Her stern, concentrated facial expression while demonstrating her vicious back-and-forth swings reassured me. She would surely hurt this intruder.

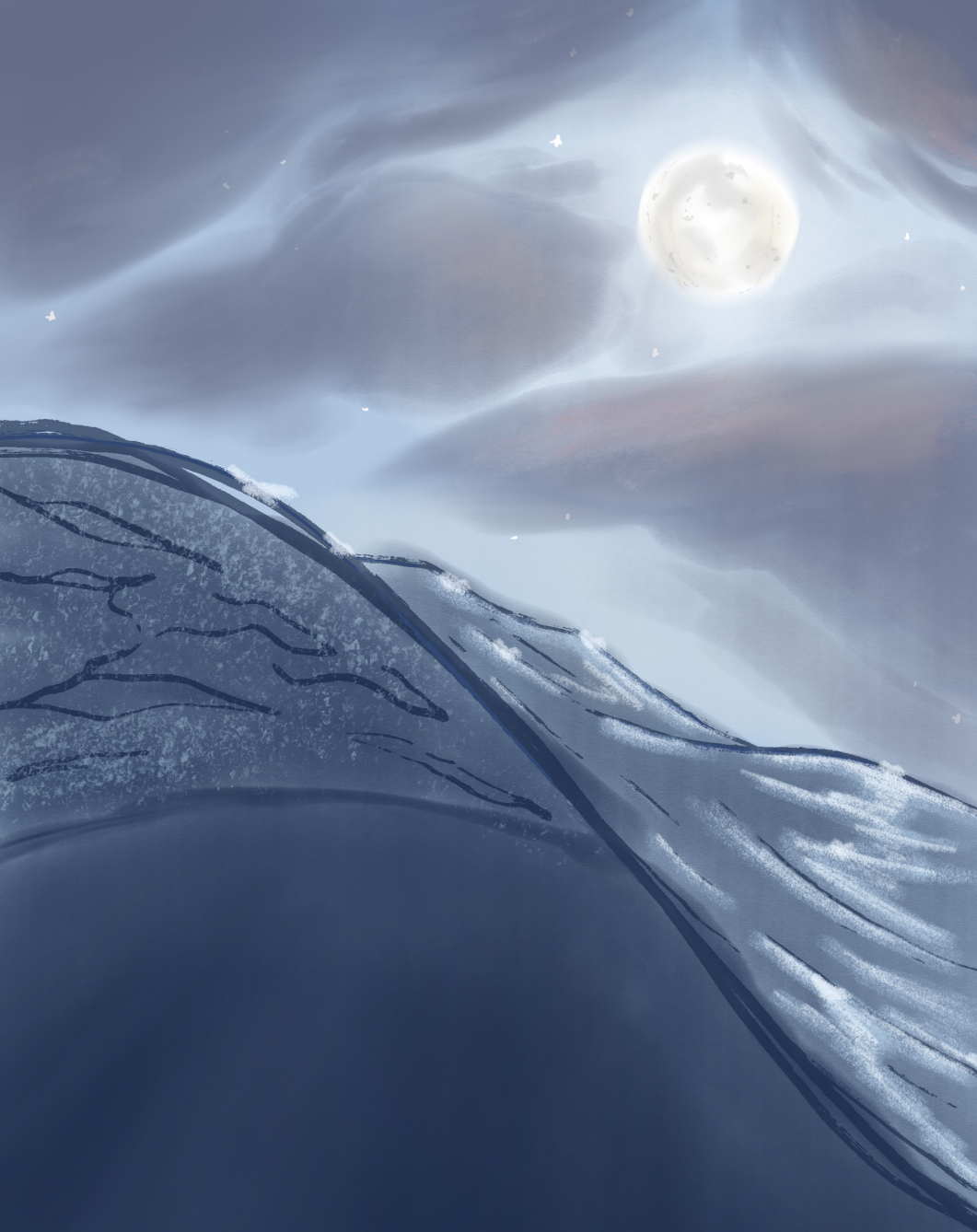
I remember the sun was going down, it was casting a red light on our home. I was hoping my dad would arrive and handle the intruder. I remember hearing loud noises and grandma getting up and rushing to the window. The thief was on the move. Our three dogs stood sentry in front of the door to the ground floor, their barking getting louder and more intense. The intruder opened the door, but his attempt to leave the house was halted by our three dogs. I saw Blondé, our white German Shepard/Chow mix go in for a bite. I saw Bluffy, our big German Shepherd, take his turn. Our most aggressive dog is La Chata, she was a Chowchow. She was vicious and relentless in her attacks. The dogs briefly disappeared from our view as they pounced on the intruder who fell and retreated into the house. I was excitedly cheering on our heroes; Blondé, Bluffy and La Chata. I didn't sense fear in my grandmother any longer. She had a smile on her face, her grip on the mini Dodger bat not as intense. All three of us were peering out of the windowsill at a very unsafe angle, looking down. We didn't want to miss the show.

We heard the intruder's scream. My brother and I turned to look at each other in astonishment. This was real life; our dogs were attacking, even biting the intruder. We saw the intruder attempt a second escape. He was trying to kick and jump past three snarling, attacking dogs. But he failed to escape, he was overwhelmed. The sound he emitted was a soul-chattering cry of desperation. He sounded like a hurt child, wailing and begging for mercy. For a brief moment, his screams scared me. He was covered in tattoos. He had a bald head. He was evil. Why were his screams hurting me? The sound of his desperate cries did not match the bad guy I was looking at.

On his third attempt, the intruder used our mop stick to fend off the dogs, just long enough for him to sprint for the backyard fence. He jumped over our backyard fence and escaped into the alley. The smile and cheers of my relieved and proud grandmother were contagious; we cheered with

her. I soaked up her aura of happiness, of safety... it was over! Our ordeal was over. Our fear, our abandonment was over, or so I thought. Our beloved dogs were our heroes that day. They had protected and served us well. That intruder and those incompetent LAPD officers left my home that day with my family's sense of security. They planted a seed of fear and distrust in my soul, and that seed sprouted into a huge ugly tree.

When my parents arrived, they greeted us with strong, long hugs and kisses. Their worried eyes looked deep into our souls. We excitedly, and without pause, recounted what we had experienced. After this ordeal, I saw my father cleaning guns inside the house for the first time. I heard my LAPD detective uncle (CRASH Unit) tell my father, "Shoot any motherfucker who enters this house. Make sure he's inside the threshold. Drag his body inside if you have to." This story was retold many times in the coming days to the many people who visited our "Casa de Vi."



Moonsea
Alexander Fernandez
Digital Art

Daughter, Unclaimed

Isabela Escobedo

I don't know how long it was since I last showed my arms to the moon,
since I felt her benevolent wind fall onto my skin,
making me too, one with her beauty.

As a child I believed her glow could undo every ache,
every whisper of sun, every thought in my head.
I believed so many things.
None of them true.

I wonder if, after countless nights,
she ever mistook me for one of her own.
Perhaps when I was young,
and the sun had not yet,
burned its flames into my skin.
Forever erasing every trace of moonlight.

And I wonder if she still sees me now,
and waits for a second.

Before calling my name.

Does she still recognize
the soul she should have claimed?
The soul she could not free?

And what does she think now of the way that I look,
of just how unforgiving the sun can be with its prey.
When she sees me alone, what does she see?
My body, now tarnished,

or the moonlight in me?

And surely she must know how I cannot be undone,
how I'm forever gone,
how the light which I wished for did not come in time.

Oh moon,
I could never be you.
Not now,
not today,
perhaps not ever.

Oh moon,
why did you abandon me when I needed you most?

Today my body shows no sign of you,
and moon,
if you saw through my flesh and into my soul,
would you see the sea which reflects only you?
If only the sun could have known my soul too,
if only he had left me, and let me be you.

And tonight, and each morning
I swallow a pill
that is made from your glow.
How I wish people knew
that the souls of your daughters
look just like my own.
That I carry you, moonlight,
would you please let it show?

Birdman

Evelyn Mejia

I coughed up blood.

Droplets of red splattered across the sleeve of my blouse. I shoved the pile of woven blankets aside as a violent fit of coughing surged in me. I tried to call for Rio, but my voice was nothing more than a broken whisper. The muffled arguing in the other room drowned out my pathetic cries anyway.

“ . . . wasting time if we keep fighting,” she said to Father. “Listen to her! She needs treatment. She *needs* a physicker—”

“Absolutely not,” Father interjected. “I will not allow your sister to be treated by a damn Etharian. I forbid it.” His heavy footsteps paced around the kitchen. “The herbalist in Vientos. . . what was her name? The one that aided your mother?”

“Vientos?” Rio huffed. “That’s a day’s trek from here. She won’t make it that far in her state!”

Father muttered something too quiet for me to hear. A rebuke to Rio’s words I assumed. My body was burning up, beads of sweat dampening my forehead. I had no more strength to keep listening.

I heard my father shuffling about the room before the

front door of our adobe home creaked open.

“You’re not seriously going all the way there. It’s much too—”

“*Enough!*”

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

“Rio, please,” he said, “just. . . stay put. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

Before Rio could protest, the door shut and all was quiet again save for the chirping of faraway birds. She came into the room a while later and gently scooped me into her arms, whispering soft reassurances at my stirring. She wrapped the thick blankets around my body as a makeshift rebozo and secured me to the back of her embroidered shawl. Without another word, we ventured outside, the heat of the sun greeting my cheeks viciously. A promising day it was. Perfect for playing in the stream. I felt another cough coming and thought of the times I was free from the wick- edness in my throat.

“Where. . . are we going,” I managed to say.

“Hush now, *pequeña*,” Rio whispered. “Rest your head.”

Bounded tightly to her back, Rio treaded us cautiously

to the stables in the heart of the pueblo, glancing around in case Father was still nearby. She picked out the first horse she saw and mounted a bit awkwardly, nearly losing her footing as the horse sidestepped. After she secured us in the saddle, we rode away to the east. To a path unknown to me.

We arrived at a chapel just as the sun was beginning to retire. It stood out in the overgrown thicket. Desolate and dark. A worn structure that looked to be as old as the trees around it. Rio dismounted with haste and approached the arched doors. The symbol of the Great Eye was engraved on the top frame, watching us with careful intensity as Rio knocked.

Someone, out of my view, opened the door.

“Please,” Rio spoke frantically. “My sister — she... she is very ill. We need your help.”

The other person said nothing. They welcomed her in after a short inspection and led her into a dimly lit hall. The inside was chilly and the faint smell of frankincense lingered nearby. I tried not to cough but the rattling in my chest was too great; my choking echoed through the empty pews.

“In here,” said the person. Though the voice was quiet, I could tell it was a man who was leading us in by the sound of it.

Rio walked into a small room, keeping me close as if a beast was about to leap out and grab me. The man directed her to set me on the table in the middle. As I laid on the wooden surface, the man hovered over me, and only then was I finally able to see him better.

He was so pale. Almost sickly. His stringy hair was the same white hue as his skin and flowed just above his bony shoulders. What caught my eye were the pair of small wings

behind his neck, the feathers splayed out like heaven’s arms. The larger wings on his back were tucked neatly in contrast.

Birdman, I thought. It was my first time seeing one of them. The angels that descended from the Eye above. *Etharians*, they were called. The clothes he bore were that of any Lacrymist physicker. Long garments of white robes under a black coat fastened with a cincture.

The Etharian propped my head on a pillow he had materialized and began to examine my neck with his long, spindly fingers. Up close, his face unnerved me. An odd beauty lost within the stark features of his gaunt countenance. Faint brows. White lashes. His eyes, though, were of the most translucent blue.

A lifeless blue.

I looked away in fear, searching for Rio who was standing on the opposite side with worry. She noticed my panic and caressed my head.

“It’s all right, *pequeña*,” she said, softly. “I’m here.”

Saying nothing, the physicker turned to the counter against the wall and began to work over a mortar. He crushed dried leaves with a pestle, poured a steaming liquid over it, strained the remainder into various small glasses and did some other handling I couldn’t see well. He worked with such incredible precision that I hadn’t noticed the passing of time until he returned with a shell.

Whilst holding my head up, he brought the shell to my mouth and tilted. “Drink slowly,” he muttered.

The liquid concoction was acid on my tongue. Both sour and bitter somehow. It was a labor for me to swallow all of it but alas I did with great struggle.

I snapped my head away as another coughing fit seized me by the chest. My throat stung as I gasped at the air,

failing to get a proper breath in. Rio quickly positioned my head back on the pillow and brushed the damp hair out of my eyes. She then threw her shawl over my trembling body.

“She will need,” the physicker said, “two vials of this a day. Dawn and dusk.” His voice was so hoarse and quiet, it sounded as if he hadn’t used it in a long time. “You will need three days’ worth. Each vial is five chips.”

Rio reached into the satchel at her waist and ruffled inside before her face drained of color.

“I . . . I don’t have that much.”

The physicker frowned. “Oh. That’s a shame. Quite a shame indeed.”

“I can work for it,” she added quickly. “I can help around the chapel. Cleaning, gardening—whatever you may need.”

The physicker somberly shook his head. “Hm. No. . . no, I’m afraid that simply will not do. Obsidian is required for my provisions.”

Rio chewed her bottom lip then opened her mouth to say something but thought better of it. The physicker raised his chin after a moment.

“I do, however,” he said softly, “accept *other* forms of payment.”

Rio took a step back.

Something in that room changed. A slight shift in darkness. At the mere age of five, I couldn’t understand why Rio’s breathing wavered. What kind of chores would make her clutch her blouse so tight?

The elixir began to settle into my body, making me grow weary by the minute. Rio glanced at me then back to the birdman who carefully studied her with those red-

rimed eyes. My sister looked smaller all of a sudden. A mouse and an owl. Even when she stood a little straighter, the physicker’s stature quelled any confidence Rio was trying to establish. He sauntered by the table with a graceful gait.

“I’d advise not to try any foolishness. I have saved her life. I can take it with just as much ease. Including your own.”

Rio swallowed. My eyes fluttered under a growing weight. She slowly crouched to meet my ebbing gaze and reassured me in that soft way she always did. When she got to her feet again, Rio held her chin high at the birdman.

“I’ll do what I must,” she whispered. “I only ask that you spare her any harm. Please.”

The physicker inclined his head. He then led Rio into an adjacent room I hadn’t noticed before. His hand hovered over the small of her back, ushering her towards the solid oak door. My sister gave me one last look before disappearing into the darkness with him.

I fell into a deep slumber not long after.

When I awoke, I was strapped to Rio’s back again. She was frantically mounting the horse we had arrived in, almost in a hurry. I was pleased to find my fever gone. There were still aches in my body and my throat prickled but compared to the day before, I felt more alive than ever.

I peeked over Rio’s dark curls as the horse’s trot turned into a canter. I called her name, my voice still raspy.

Rio sighed with relief. “Oh, thank the Blessed Eye. You’re awake. How are you feeling?”

“Hmm. Hungry.”

She chuckled. “Your appetite is back. That’s good. You

mustn't strain yourself too much now. You're still quite—”

“Where is the birdman?”

She stayed quiet before answering. The thud of the horse's hooves filled the silence through the grassy path. Birdsong in the trees.

“Your convalescence is all that matters now, *pequeña*,” she said, finally. After a moment she added, “How about we break fast on sweet flatbread? What do you say?”

I nodded into her hair before peering behind us with wonder. How young I was. Guarded by the haven of naivety. A haven that would erode as I grew older and began to understand why we never saw that physicker again. Though the memory of him was etched in my mind, we never truly spoke of what happened that day.

Nor did we ever speak of the blood that stained the edges of her sleeves.

Eros-Arrows

Imelda Leyva

White airy marshmallow
you sit & wait
the blues breeze sparkles,
the green fields awake.

(5)

*“Aah the air,
the ocean.
nature,
it’s so grand”*

Golden telescope
plumage so fair
with bow & arrow
love is no despair

(10)

*“To be me
or just love me,
can’t blame anyone,
for their jealousy.”*

(15)

Romanticize, flourish,
champagne, peonies,
strawberries, baby breaths,
& fire flies the perfume of the night.

(20)

*“I see a victim,
a needed soul.
Here I come to save the day.
Dionysus wished he could be me.”*

(25)

Who the hell are you?
Is that... a diaper on

you?

Oh no, I know you.
Go away, I am good.

(30) *"I'm confused?
You look lost.
Just a pierce
through your heart."*

I lost my keys,
not my mind.
Just go away
you Pampers

(35) butterfly.

(40) *"I will make things right.
Always the hero at night.
L-O-V-E is what you need,
doing this for centuries."*

Hers's a 4-letter

word back to you

R-A-I-D will aim it at

you.

No, diaper boy, no.
I reject heart break

again.

(45) *"Hershey kisses,
walks under the big cheese,
Goo-goo-oogley eyes,
& sweet things."*

Your sonnet #9

million

(50) is beginning to suck,
You lost that touch.
Take your

marshmallow to a coffee shop.

Imelda Leyva

*“Adieu, Madam
I am the best you know,
I do not fail you.
...Are you sure?”*

(55)

please.

but me.

me,

(60)

I am free to do as I

Answer to no one

I am happy, trust

...Oh yay! I found my keys.

Ghosts in My Room

Jesus Martinez Castaneda

The room I call my bedroom is not my own. Ghosts linger in every nook and cranny always present for my eyes to meet. The only items I can call my own are my bedsheets and blackout curtains to keep out the demon from hell that is the sun. Everything else belonged to those before me. That top shelf of my bookshelf is lined with books of evil, of history from the Nazis and WWII Germany. My Grandfather's ghost an enigma to me, a stranger who haunts the top shelf beside my closet. When I get ready in the morning the mirrored closet door opens, one side belonging to me, the living, and the other the ghost of my grandmother. Her dresses, coats, and shawls break out from the corner of the closet reaching towards me in bed while I sleep. These ghosts persist despite my best attempts to hand them off to third party ghost hunters. I hope one day we may find peace in this home and these specters find new homes to haunt for I am in need of more closet and shelf space.

They! Want! You!

Richie Rubio

Shed your skin for camouflage, approach children from afar
Watch your perfect curls float down to your feet, lost
Snipped within an inch of their life, then shave the rest off
Do it, *do it*, do it
Scowl at uniqueness, draw your blade; point it at a woman, build the cage
Rid the world of hospitals and propagate your oil spills
Straddle the hostages, no means of escape
Deport your barber, your dentist, your mate
Hide your skeletons under the same bed you've secretly shared with another man
Drop-kick your wedding ring, have a cig, have a laugh
Do it, *do it*, do it
Burn the ballot boxes, go to space, use a slur, shave your face
Go to sleep, dream with sheep and not the men you put to sleep
Make a life, take a life all in the same day
Fight for greed, not for honor, like the others used to say
Hit your wife, watch true crime, *does it resonate?*
Load your guns, ski masks on, storm an enemy base
And when it turns out to be a school, target black and brown not beige
They! Want! You!
Step right up and join the circus, don't look down that's where they're worthless
You know you want the uniform!
Go bomb the world, there's always more
Revolution means no war means no business means no money
Don't think peace can buy you a Ferrari
Uncle Sam wants *you!* And *you!* And *you!*
Don't you want to save the country?
Someone else can do your dirty laundry
Be a man, don't ask why, be Lex Luthor not that other guy...
Bring the pain, watch the game, cheer the cheer but scream "They're fake!"

Wash the blood off the scythe, use it as a cooking knife
Screw the earth, ask away
“What can I help you with today?”
Take and take and take and take
And don’t blink twice or your head is on a plate
Pull the funding, start a fight, open brothels, dim the lights
Never wonder if you’re right, just *do* and *take* and *kill* and *smite*
They! Want! You!
So pucker up and say goodnight

The Day I Became Rich

Adam Ochoa

As a child, I kept a close eye to the ground when I walked, searching for misplaced pennies, hoping that I might get lucky and find a quarter. This was my first source of income and it was tedious work. I saved every cent I would find in my Batman lunchbox, clasp it shut and burying it under my bed while making sure that no one saw where I hid my treasure. I knew that if I was diligent enough in my search, one day I would be able to save up for some new shoes that actually fit. My grandparents were unaware that I had once again outgrown my shoes, and I didn't have the heart to tell them. Even though I was young, I knew better than to ask my grandparents for money we simply didn't have. The whispers at night made me aware of our situation and how difficult it was to raise an unplanned child. We were struggling, and I was partly to blame. So, I never asked my family for things. I went out and earned them myself. I guess my quest for riches started when I stopped going to school.

I started by sweeping the floors and picking up trash at construction sites while my grandfather and uncles did the specialized labor. I enjoyed my job; it definitely beat going to school, where the teacher would make me do math problems I couldn't solve. I even got paid for my work: \$20 a day, which was big money for me. I was learning the value of hard work and stuffing my lunchbox in the process. It was all going well for a while and I was happy. I told myself

I could do this for the rest of my life. Yup, everything was swell, until the dreadful day I was discovered.

I hardly noticed him when he snuck up on me. I swear he was sneakier than a fox, this one. On his routine inspections, the construction site supervisor noticed a very scrawny little boy, covered in dirt, eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on the deck. I had been staring at the man-made lake near the home we were working on, mesmerized by its beauty. The houses we worked on were more beautiful than anything I had ever seen before. Palaces built for kings. I would daydream about one day living in a home this extravagant. By this time, the coins in my lunchbox gave it a nice weight and reassured me that anything was possible. Even for me, yes me, to one day live in a palace like those. Every time I stuffed my lunchbox, I knew that I was making progress. Soon, I would need a bigger box. But, halfway through my sandwich and daydreaming, the supervisor pulled me out of this fairytale and into reality.

“What are you doing here?”

“I work here,” I replied as I lifted a broom.

“Like hell you do kid. How old are you?”

I raised up eight fingers to show my age.

“Jesus Christ. You should be in school, son. I can’t have you working here!”

And just like that, no more job, no more new shoes, no more palace. My efforts to work my way out of poverty were put to a halt. My brief employment as a construction worker had concluded and I was placed back in school. Worst of all, I now had a social worker who would monitor my attendance. I was very upset about the whole ordeal. I spent most of my class time daydreaming about ways to make money. My options were limited. However, on my way home one day, I found what I was looking for. A new stream of income where you didn’t have to worry about supervisors disrupting your work flow. Self-employment. Entrepreneurship. Collecting cans.

It was easy. Everyone in my neighborhood had parties and drank on the weekends. So, I was in a target-rich environment. Check. And I had my weekends free to myself after I finished my homework. Another check. And best of all, no supervisors to tell me I couldn’t make my money. Check, check, and check.

Henceforth, my weekends were spent collecting cans at parks, and the big blue bins at my neighbors’ houses while they were away, and, best of all, the riverbed on the edge of the city where all the homeless people congregated. The riverbed was my special place. I enjoyed talking to the locals there; they would tell me stories and give me their empty beer cans. I knew they were also in the recycling business so it meant a lot to me that they would donate some of their profits to my cause. They knew I was saving up for new shoes and would reassure me that I would meet my goal. I’ll never forget them or their kindness. I can still see their faces when I reminisce: their red and sad eyes, their skin worn and beaten by the sun, their posture slumped, looking utterly defeated if it weren’t for one thing: their big smiles. Old Man Joe’s smile in particular was especially memorable because he had no teeth. Yet, in all their modesty and lack

of material things, they always had a smile, and I always got the sense that they were happy. I would see them and see genuine joy, kindness, and compassion as they shared each other’s company. These were the better memories of my recycling days. Besides the long hours and messy work, everything was going well with my new job. That is until the other little kids, the ones who had shoes that fit their feet, started noticing me.

They would point and laugh, but I would continue digging, doing my job, and pretending not to hear them. But I was dying inside. They followed me, and it seemed as if the lids of the trash cans became heavier as they taunted me. Their laughs cut me deeper than any discarded piece of sharp scrap metal or broken bottle. I just wanted them to leave me alone and let me be. *Didn’t they know I was just working to fulfill my dream of becoming rich? Why was the road to riches paved with so many obstacles?*

Eventually, I spent less time digging and searching for cans. Being ridiculed made it hard to focus on my work. After a while, the pestering was too much for me to bear, so I left the park, with my bag half full of cans and my spirit torn. They had won. I accepted that I would never be rich.

I arrived home feeling defeated. The tears in my eyes made my grandparents stop what they were doing to see if I was okay. I told them I didn’t want to be rich anymore, and that the recycling business was not going as I planned. I’ll never forget what they told me that day. My grandparents explained to me that we were already so fortunate and, in fact, “rich.” I looked down at my worn shoes and our half-furnished apartment, puzzled, but I continued to listen. My grandparents explained that we were rich in other areas such as health, spirit, and most importantly, family. I hugged my grandparents tight and told them how much they meant to me, smiling and crying tears of joy. And just like that it all made sense. I knew that money would never satisfy my every need because some things you simply can-

not buy with money. That's when I knew the secret behind Old Man Joe's smile. It was gratitude, friendship, and love. To this day, my family will always be the most valuable part of my life. In fact, no matter how much I stuff my Batman lunchbox, it could never equate to their value. That was the day I discovered I was already rich.

Seasons of Love

D. R. B.

It was the middle of Autumn — the leaves around us had turned crisp, crunching under my boots with every step I took, the once lush and saturated green trees had now turned into bright hues of orange, yellow, red, and brown. I was five years old when Sarah, my oldest sister by three years, got bit by a mouse who was hiding in the foliage that my mom had raked into a fresh pile. A cold breeze, announcing winter's impending arrival, wrapped around me, as I ran toward my sisters and my parents in the backyard of our house, tending to Sarah's hand.

"It was a shrew. It must've found the leaves to be a comfortable tent." My mom said, curiously inspecting the pile of leaves, the rake laying deserted in the grass next to it.

My twin sister Natalie and I kneeled down to the pile of foliage, trying to find the small animal that had every-one stop in their tracks and drop what they were doing. I couldn't find her, so I turned to Sarah, who to my surprise, wasn't even crying. I noticed the blood on her finger, but she didn't even seem fazed by it.

"The mouse was probably just scared," she said calmly when I asked her about it later.

I still remember thinking how cool she was, so tough for not crying even after getting bitten, and still finding compassion and understanding for that small animal that

had hurt her.

It was Spring, the afternoon sun neared its zenith and graced the small and stuffy classroom with its warming, and yet annoyingly blinding, rays. The lively conversations between my classmates filled the tiny space, making me think that the end of the school day couldn't arrive a minute too early. Natalie sat beside me as our art teacher instructed us to pick inspiration for our next painting project out of old magazines she handed to us. Art was one of my favorite subjects in High School, but that particular teacher and I didn't see eye to eye, so I found that my enthusiasm for this class was limited. As I leafed through the magazine, my attention landed on a beautiful acrylic painting that depicted a group of flying Hummingbirds feeding on a vine of blooming flowers. The blue and green hues of the iridescent hummingbirds' feathers, and the vibrant pink and creamy tones of the flowers, created a beautiful harmony of colors that immediately spoke to me. Unsurprisingly for my sister and me, she felt the same way and picked it to be our art project.

"Hummingbirds symbolize good luck", she told me, a happy glimmer in her eyes. I looked down at my canvas and dipped my paint brush into the acrylic paint, feeling her

contagious joy wash over me.

Many years later, my mom found our paintings between forgotten boxes full of old school assignments and projects. She hung it up in the hallway between our family pictures, and now, every time I see them when I return to visit, I think about the small moment of happiness Natalie gave me in a time when it was scarce. And I do wholeheartedly believe that hummingbirds bring good luck.

It was early January, and Winter was in full effect — the park laid under a thick blanket of snow, transforming the bare trees and vegetation into a winter wonderland. My boyfriend Victor and I made our rounds, stopping at the small stream that led through the area and pooled by a tiny pond that was a very popular spot for the ducks who called it their home during the Summer. The soft crunch of the snow beneath our boots was the only sound within the old stone walls of the park that still inhabited an old monastery building from the 12th century. Our walk through the history-rich grounds was interrupted when we approached a large meadow that usually sprouted an abundance of wildflowers during warmer months but now offered the perfect opportunity to make use of winter's gift.

“Come on, let's build a snowman together!” I said and pulled him onto the meadow, giggling when my gloved hands raked through the loose yet dense snow — perfect for forming snow balls. A couple of feet away from us, someone else had had the same idea and built a snowman with outstretched arms.

“Let's build an even bigger one!”, I said and we instantly got to work.

This was Victor's first time actually *living* in an area where it snowed. His experience with having to shovel snow in the early morning, scrape the ice and frost off the

car windshield, or having to change from summer to winter tires, had been kept to a minimum for my boyfriend from Southern California. It made me happy watching him experience things I had considered a normal and mundane part of my life.

“Hey, can I show you something?” I asked him, as I watched him begin to stack handfuls of snow onto each other, into what was to become the base of the snowman. He nodded so I grabbed a handful of snow, forming it into a firm ball. Then, dropping it back into the loose snow, I quickly rolled the ball through the untouched area until it reached a size that stopped at the height of my knees.

“I could've been doing it this way all this time?” Victor's incredulous look on his face made me burst out laughing.

We found loose branches and stones laying around the area, using a pointy stone in place of a carrot for its nose, and I sacrificed my scarf to wrap it around its neck. While we finished building the snowman in record time, I found myself giggling and laughing through its entirety, completely forgetting about the cold wind biting at my cheeks and not caring about my fingers getting numb from the melting snow in my hands.

“I think we beat the others,” Victor said, nodding to the other snowman that now appeared tiny in comparison to ours. He was right, our snowman was even taller than I was!

Pleased with our result and the cold eventually starting to creep into our bones with the passing hours, we made our way home but not without looking back one more time to see our snowman triumphantly standing in the middle of the snow-covered meadow, smiling at us.

It was Summer, and the sun had just given us a breath-

taking goodbye, dressing the sky in cotton candy clouds and laying its golden veil over the shores. I remember that we had arrived almost too late for the sunset at Coronado Beach, but we had traveled too long of a way for us to turn back. Carrying our blankets, chairs, and Chipotle order, Victor and I made our way onto the unusually empty beach. The gentle sound of the waves and the distant cawing of the seagulls above us instantly relaxed me. Digging my toes into the warm sand and smelling the salty ocean breeze, made me soak in and cherish this moment full of gratitude.

My eyes caught on a shell sticking out of the sand next to me. I picked it up, admiring the fine lines on its white surface, flecked with dark red spots. My thumb glided over the smooth inner side, and I marveled at the beautiful remnants of a home that had once belonged to a marine animal, far away in the ocean.

I couldn't help but feel a wave of sadness wash over me at the thought of my family back home, at the life I had left behind. The goodbye had been swift but tearful — I'd felt a mixture of excitement for the new adventure and a parting pain that would still remain years later, brimming through me right in front of the security line at the airport leading Victor and I toward our gate. Toward our new life.

Back then, I hadn't fully realized it yet, but I was entering a new world without Natalie by my side every day. I had to learn how to love from afar, the pain of missing my sisters and family a constant reminder of what I had left behind. Natalie's occasional visits now became a welcoming band-aid to that wound in my heart.

Soon enough the night sky donned its impressive dress of twinkling stars. Around us, campfires were lit and the wind carried snippets of conversation and laughter our way. For the hundredth time that day, my gaze fell onto the ring on my finger — a sight I still couldn't get enough of. The wedding had been exciting and life-changing at the

same time. I was starting a life with my best friend in a place that came close to paradise, yet was oceans apart from the life I had grown up with and known for the last twenty-three years.

"Thank you for taking me here," I said to my husband, feeling the giddiness and elation every time I used that word.

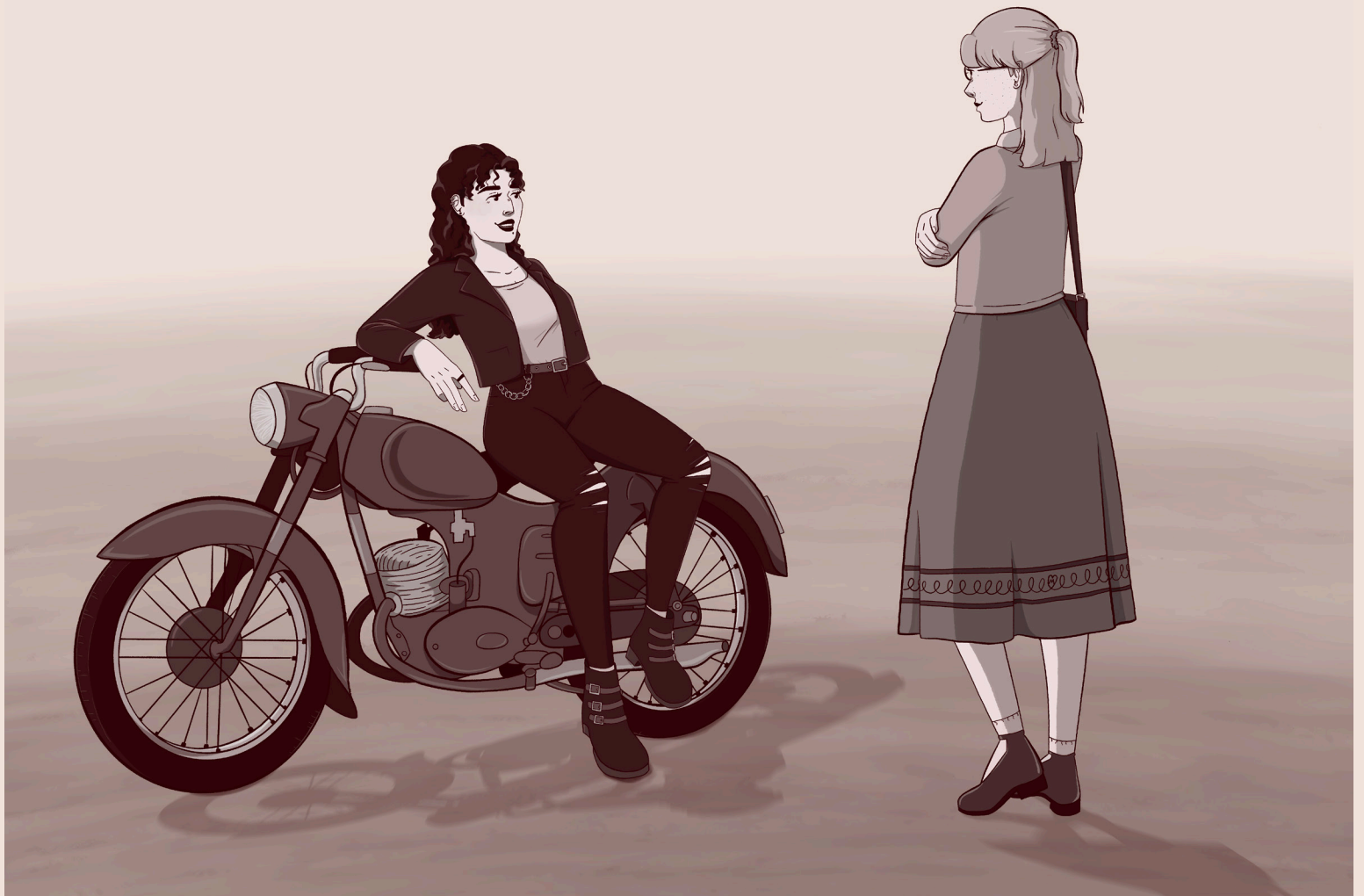
Victor looked up from his half-eaten bowl and smiled.

"I knew you would like it here," he said.

I looked up at the sky full of stars, listened to the sound of crashing waves and watched as the moon illuminated the water's shimmering surface.

"I do", I said, and I knew that there was a lifetime of happiness awaiting us.

The Summer of '56
Marianna Vizcarra Moya
Digital Art



Paradise Valley Hospital

Lily Reese

The world can be separated between a living organism and non-living. The earth's core does not have a beating heart. It cannot reproduce. It cannot breathe. That must dictate that the world must not be alive.

The four walls are yellow as described by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It's the color of the mentally ill who can't be left alone in good faith. It streaks the walls for miles, with long winding hallways to assure no one can find their way out. There's seven exit signs placed in every individual hallway, with no regard if it's an actual exit or not because the employees know where to go and the patients *don't*. It's designed that way.

Every room is as big as a closet. Enough space for a bed and a nightstand for food. Cubbies, essentially. A place to drop off things you might need later or to be forgotten. There's always someone posted at the door, eyes glued to their computers. You can't have your door closed. If you try to use the bathroom, they'll knock every minute to assure you haven't dunked your head into the toilet bowl and drowned. They think of you as a dumb pet.

"Everything okay in there?" They ask, but what they really mean is "Hurry up already. Another moment and I'll come in there myself." All dialogue is a means of control. "Eat because we legally need you to. Answer my questions

because we need to see if you're not fucking brain dead.", "Sit up because we need to check your blood and if you have enough meds to not attack us. You're better when you're pacified. We don't have to worry about you."

The only exception is when someone else is in the room. So I stand there, in the dim light. The heart monitor beeps every second. It's a metronome that makes one mad. I used to hate when I'd sleep with her because I could hear her breathing and the fact our breathing was in sync meant we were similar. I'd pace it, trying to tell myself to work in opposite tandem. I never slept comfortably.

I didn't want you to see me like this / You've been missing for two days, what exactly did you think was going to happen?

She's half asleep. I think it's meds. They tell me she's just exhausted. They sedated her *only* the first day because she was violent. She wanted to die. She wanted all the painkillers in her system to finally do it. They probably did too. After all, they gave her more painkillers with little to no worry.

What happened? / I don't want to talk about it.

So there's nothing to do but sit there on my phone. I sit there for hours. The thing about mental hospitals is they're

a step above a grave. It's all people with no loved ones or relations who were abandoned. There's a lady with dementia in the next room, begging for her children. She screams for the police. She thinks she was kidnapped. The nurses echo her, beckoning them mockingly.

"Sorry, there's no police here." No one is coming to save you, they mean.

Each room has a speaker too for the nurses to hear what's going on. Occasionally, they'll turn it on and call out "codes" like "Code Sepsis" or "Code Stroke" which at the time, I found very redundant considering it's not code at all. It's probably to make the patients uneasy.

There's been a guy who's been screaming all day on the floor above too / That sounds annoying.

And later on, I could hear him myself. Writhing against the bed and telling them to stop touching him and how badly he wants to kill them.

They're going to move me down a level. They thought I wasn't sane enough to be up here / Oh, really?

The nurses later said she admitted she still wanted to kill herself. The number one rule is to never tell anyone you want to die. But I think she wanted to be cared for. She wanted to be loved. And that solace was found in someone who wanted to give you lidocaine patches and is paid to say your name.

The silence is almost defeating however outside of the white noise. There's no TV remote. She's sitting in her own blood. She refuses to eat. There's no showers. All she does is sit there, vacantly. Between sleep and her own misery.

So I tell them to get a TV remote, to get new sheets, I get her food that isn't hospital food, new clothing. I can't sit in a rot that isn't my own. There's stars outside the door with happy faces drawn on. There's septic in the air.

"I should've died," She starts, finding her own feelings. Her resolve. "I should've died because you would've gotten money and you would've been happy."

And it's such a comical statement, because it means I've been nothing but greedy and all those praises and times she's told me she is filled with love have never been true. I laugh.

"The money from your death wouldn't have even covered the funeral."

And she laughs too, probably because she has to. I can't find it within myself to be like every successful child and hold her hand and tell her how loved she is and how much I value her and want her and to see her breath and laugh and run and

So she goes on about how unloved she is, a failure, undervalued, and how she wants to be ten feet underground, memorialized, to be free just like her brother who killed herself all these years ago. It's her turn now. And all I can do is listen because I'm focusing on the heart monitor and making sure it doesn't match my own. It doesn't work though.

She looks at me. With a look to tell me I've betrayed my entire purpose. I was supposed to save her. I was supposed to love her. I was supposed to be a pretty person with pretty thoughts and pretty wishes, but I'm not. I write stories about bad people doing bad things because that's what I am and one day, I'll cry from the very same hospital bed that the world didn't cherish me.

"I'm alive!" She starts to cry in horror, with all the weight of all the non living things. Something she should've been. "I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive!" She grips her hair and shakes her head. Her eyes snap open. She grabs my arm. We are no different from the nurses. And what she really means is

"And so are you!"

Opposites Attract
Noah de Jesus
Digital Art



A Certain Type **Miguel Owens**

Always on my mind despite my young age,
A desire I was forced to keep locked in a cage,
Damn the law and never mind the shame,
Cougar hunting is my favorite game.

Some guys prefer them young and bold,
Other guys chase a heart grown cold,
Whatever path you may endure,
I always liked mine more mature.

Flirtatious glance, a smile that stays,
This is definitely not a passing phase,
Often teased for these types of mine,
Nothing wrong with preferring fine wine.

I love their calm, their effortless poise,
The way they laugh, such an infectious noise,
The way their gaze can just pull me in,
I prefer to have a Mrs. Robinson.

Only in a Still Life

Alicia Nieves

A spectral glow resides within the memories of my childhood
Observant of the signs and loose pockets of reality in a world once reigned by God

I remember my aunt's house
how vast it seemed
The ceiling so high
I believed it was a church

I thought if I could figure out how
to skate my hand along that beige drywall arcade
I could slip into Heaven
and sprout feathered wings of my own

I am no longer a worshipper
But that belief still knells within me

§

My grandmother once lived in a small house
we only visited twice

Thick wisps of nicotine stained the space itself with that inextinguishable scent
Sunglow basked from shaded lamps rather than open windows
Insistent clicking echoes from the stove
replicating life
with a flawed understanding

Nothing else exists outside this house
It floats alone in an all-consuming darkness
Craving company

§

Houses only reside in dreams
Unknowable, non-organic structures sheathed in drywall and insulation
Electrical wire veins and copper water-pipe organs
Out of focus with reality
Mistaken for a still life
Trapped in the blurry horizon
Untouched forever

§

My existence conjoins trailers
They cannot live or breath or nurture warmth
Only exhale
And sink

When I touch the low ceiling of my trailer
I feel the cold drywall push down against me
Trying to swallow

Beverly Hills 90210

Problems I Have with the Machines We Make

Holly Jones

I am sure that when I was little, the happiness I felt was in part because I wasn't controlled by the machines people make. I lived my life free from that encumbrance. Then I grew out of this and became front and center to the control of the machines. My cub scout's leader taught me a valuable lesson. Always do your best. That is what he demonstrated with his behavior. To me, this was a chicken with a question mark?

Just like a dumb chicken pecking the ground will stop and look up at you then go right back to pecking. WHY? Was Mr. Winters the den master actually just another machine or system in disguise? I always want to do me. And that is usually the best thing. If I want to watch Inspector Gadget all day, why would anyone care? Then all of a sudden, I am older, in jr. high. And loving it. The Girls, the bullies. The Algebra. The Music, and the PE.

Why?

Out of the frying pan and into the fire; I left one machine for another, and, as luck would have it, a very, very sinister machine. As for the girls, I was never the right guy for any of them. As for the algebra, I thought I would never learn it; now it's my favorite thing. Music took me out of my problems, but has since grown effete and obsolete. PE is still important, but the one big thing that was important

for the machine was affluent "Beverly Hills 90210". Who could not care about Dillan and the other protagonist in the drama? The locker room was humming with 7th grade boys with a vociferous recount of the previous night's episode. But!!! What is this? I was ignored when I put in my thoughts!!! Why? What happened? How could this be? A machine was made by the other boys; it allowed only the best boys to talk. Creating a position of authority for them. Then all of a sudden; "I am older and in high school."

Things were great! If there was one thing the jr. high machine had shown me was the machines we make are real; "be self-reliant." I entered the 9th grade with no fear. Not only in my mind but on my shirt as well. It was the popular thing to wear a "No Fear™" brand shirt or shorts or pants. I liked the solid black "No Fear™" t-shirt and felt empowered when I entered auto shop class wearing my solid black "No Fear™" shirt. Soon I was praised by the teacher and the students alike as the most knowledgeable student in the class. Fun fact: I built my first engine with my dad when I was 13 and in the 7th grade. I built my second engine with my dad when I was 14, and in the 8th grade. By the time I was 16 in the 10th grade I had built 20 different engines.

I loved fishing in the Tijuana sloughs in my free time. It was only a 5-minute walk through the sand dunes from my

front door to The Tijuana River; back then it was nothing but a trickle that sometimes made it all the way to the ocean, but only if it rained really hard. The present-day situation with the Tijuana River started in the flooding of 1994. Tijuana is a Kumeyaay Indian word that means “beautiful sea shore.” But the tidal estuary part of the sloughs, they were not made by the Tijuana River; every day the tide comes in and goes back out. Tidal limits are clearly seen by the reeds and rushes that grow in the mud flats created by its ebb and flow. Like eternity. It was ancient. It felt like it had been there a million years. Every day the tide coming in, then going back out. The sun rising, then the sun setting. Angel sharks breed in this estuary. One of only a few places in the whole world where this happens. Millions of years this was like this. It was a 5-minute walk from my house.

I had started smoking when I was 14, and everyone complained. I couldn’t understand it. Why? I loved smoking cigarettes. Why couldn’t they just leave me alone? I loved fishing at the sloughs and smoking cigarettes. I had an unlimited supply of ghost shrimp taken from the alluvial mud. THE BEST BAIT EVER!!! I loved listening to Led Zeppelin and AC/DC. And the all-nighter beer binges that were impressive for a 16-year-old. I got a job at a car repair shop. At first, it was just changing tires and oil. Summer job. But the cars coming in; I always knew instantly what was the matter with them, and why they weren’t running correctly. I was quickly promoted by the owner of the business, an Italian man with arms that were covered by so much hair they looked like animal fur, and given endless praise at my miraculous ability to diagnose engine maladies. My own car bay with hydraulic car lift, \$5,000 Snap-On™ tool set, big, 6-foot-tall, multi-storied, candy apple red, Snap-On™ tool box. A work bench with big table vise, Snap-On™ wall calendar, a pneumatic hose and all the pneumatic tools to connect to it, loyalty not only from all the happy customers but my boss and co-workers. I was given all this after 6 months of changing oil and tires. This is the machine that

I had to live my life. I can’t say made, because this machine “Just was.” I didn’t make it.

Every day, I loved my mom and dad. Every day, I loved my dogs and my brother and friends. Every day, I hated school and all the unnecessary classes. When am I ever going to use any of that stuff? It became a situation where the only class I attended all semester without fail was auto shop class. All the other classes in high school were conflicting with the Tijuana sloughs and lunch and beer and cigarettes and work at the auto shop. At the real auto shop, that is. Not the school auto shop. Although I represented my school at Cuyamaca college for auto shop. I did a lot of work for my high school auto shop class. Cuyamaca is another Kumeyaay word. At the real shop, I wore a blue and white pen striped work shirt with my name embroidered in red cursive writing in a patch on the right breast. A silver tire pressure gauge in my front shirt pocket was mando. Flat top haircut. I was just like my dad. The smell of gasoline, diesel fuel, axle grease and Berryman’s B-12 carburetor cleaner and a Led Zeppelin song, permeated my every thought. These were indeed the happiest times of my life. In the spring time the flowers blossomed and the smell of the pollen mixed with the gasoline really made me feel supernatural. Like a newborn baby killdeer. Bambi. In a meadow of sand dune grass and flowers. Fascinated by seagulls. Nothing but icy cold Bluegreen Ocean water and clear sky. Other worldly; ethereal. Until...

I got called into the principal’s office for a counselor interview. The counselor informed me that I was being permanently expelled from school. Why? What happened? My heart sank like orange sunshine that went below the ocean’s distant horizon in a flash of iridescent green at the Tijuana sloughs. A tornado ripped through my heart. Like a garbage bag caught in razor wire being mercilessly blown by hard wind. The counselor, she said I had missed too many classes and that I could not make up for it. But what about graduation? How could this be? I was a good kid. I

always did what I was told, and never complained. What did I do to deserve this? My mother was going to be ashamed of me. Then like a Hail Mary, she throws me a life line. Softly, she says, "They have a program for students just like you. That you can enroll in it and work at your own pace. Would you be interested?" Yes! I jumped out of my seat. Yes! Absolutely please enroll me. And that was that. Everything was even better than I thought it would be once I started this program. Better than I had thought, that is? All of a sudden, I could go back to my life and not worry about high school ever again.

In the first three months, I did an entire school year of credits toward graduation. It was so easy... I attended class two or three times a week for three or four hours each time, and I was also able to stay in high school shop class. I was given the books and all the homework and all the tests and I could do as much as I wanted. Attending class a couple times a week, the teacher tutored me for any questions I had. I did every question in every chapter, i.e. the chapters usually had three pages of questions at its end. I had to answer every question on all three pages. I didn't mind. To graduate I was guaranteed. I could hardly wait. My Uncle was a badass helicopter pilot in Vietnam; he had a phoenix with lightning bolts painted on the nose of his Huey, Bell 1. So, I was going to enter the marines and fly helicopters. Then I met Robert. It was a cold, dark, drizzly, and sanguine rainy day. My girlfriend suggested I meet him because he likes to party. He was 27 and had his apartment and didn't care if we smoked weed. But quickly, it became obvious we didn't have much in common. After a couple weeks of meeting him, I swore to never see him again. We just did not like each other. He was toxic. He made death threats. Talked shit about me to everyone I knew, and basically made me the butt of all jokes. Why? What had I done to deserve this? Nothing he said was true. He didn't even know me. Time passed... It reminded me of the locker room and the hum about the affluent "Beverly Hills

90210." Once again, I was a nobody.

A year and a half later and I was almost ready to graduate high school, when I got a call from a man saying he was from the marine recruitment office. He said he got my info from the social security administration and asked if I would like to join the marines? "WOW!! YEAH!!! WOW!" The Marines... I was Gob smacked. He came in a baby pink ford torus with government license plates and picked me up and took me to the Chula Vista marine recruitment office to enlist. I took the ASVAB, did the physical, and planned on finishing the last couple of classes I had left, and then I would be going to camp Pendleton. That is the deus ex machina, made! Done! Sayonara!!! Chinese girl..., that's all she wrote. It all happened all so naturally.

Nothing really wrong with it, but that it really did happen this way. The main problem I have with this machinery is that I've been in prison since I was 18. Less than a week. Exactly four days. After enlisting in the marines, I got into an unforeseeable fight with Robert, killing him. I have been in prison ever since. 33 years now. I am sorry, and I never meant for this to happen this way. But they will never let me go.

DNR

WNDR

It was always supposed to be us in the end. Two dumb kids fated to grow old together in this lifetime together. It was written as a love story.

So why did life make it a tragedy?

One carefree night. We were at the club celebrating a friend's 25th birthday. We had been responsible. I drove that night. Never really cared for alcohol, so I became the designated driver by default. We were supposed to be okay.

One second you were cracking a joke about how I refused drinks but would never say no to free pizza no matter how bad it was. The next I woke up in the ICU, alone. A reckless driver was going 90mph on the wrong side of the road. I'd later learn you were gone, only after trying to rip the IVs out of my arm to try and find you myself. By then it had been two weeks, and I wanted everything to be a cruel joke or a dream.

For the three months I stayed in the hospital, only a few of our friends showed up. They needed someone to blame for this accident, and it felt easier to make me the scapegoat instead of turning their hate to the person who walked away with bumps and bruises after claiming a life. I'd be wheelchair bound for the rest of my life. Chronic pain in most other parts of my body. I lost so much, but nothing hurt like needing to plead with your family to let

me attend your funeral. My efforts went unnoticed. Your mother wanted me dead instead of you. Your father never had much to say, but his bloodshot eyes told me enough to know I wasn't welcome. Your brothers never came, but I saw on social media the smear campaign they were running against me. Their grief was palpable, and I knew they just wanted you back as much as I did.

The night before you were set to be buried, I needed to have another surgery done. I didn't care to pay much attention other than my odds weren't the best. I was advised against getting a DNR in place should things go south by the few people who still cared to want me in their life, but my mind was set. I hoped I'd die on that table, meeting with you in the afterlife to spend the rest of our promised years together. I wanted nothing more than to be with you.

Time of death 18:37

Plumis

Victoria Mendez

 Fallen right
 through the thorax.
 Teeming to touch,
 past the colors.
 Cellulae
 Quod
 Vapor!
 What for?
 Could the conscious see,
 a swelling dream?
 Fleeting to be found
 Audi Levitationem.
 Resonance,
 Reductive,
 Reach.
 Ubi est ars?
 Link it to the stars,
 Blink but don't get too far.
 Nullum pondus est,
 to the trial of fate.

The Exercise

Jesus Martinez Castaneda

Record your face during a session.
Analyze your expressions.
Break yourself down into angles and pauses,
catalog every flicker like evidence.

All eyes on you—
even when there aren't any.

Anxieties surface anew,
not from the student,
not from the lesson,
but from the small glowing square
watching me watch myself.

Upon completion of the recording
I feel myself contorting—
not physically, not yet,
but somewhere behind the eyes
where self-awareness turns feral.

Insecurities captured for the cloud,
archived, replayable, undeniable.
Proof that I exist the way I fear I do.

I hate hearing my voice aloud—
how it stumbles,
how it lingers too long on certain words,
how it tries to sound certain
and fails in the attempt.

My focus drifts to the screen.
Not the student's confusion,
not the sentence we're untangling,
but my own face,
lagging half a second behind me
like it's judging.

The phone drops mid-speech.
A small, stupid accident—
but now it's part of the footage,
another moment to rewind,
another reason to cringe.

My ADHD feeds on this propped-up device,
gnawing at every reflection,
every notification,
every version of me I can't ignore.

I struggle to give good advice
while dissecting myself in real time—
teacher and subject,
speaker and interruption.

I take no photos or recordings.
I've spent years avoiding mirrors
that talk back.

This exercise is demoralizing—
not because it shows me something new,
but because it won't let me forget
what I was almost able to ignore.

Now every session feels recorded,
even when it isn't.

A phantom lens hovers in the air,
waiting for me to slip.

I want no more sessions
like this—
where I am split in two,
teaching from one side
and watching from the other.

I hate my expressions—
how they betray hesitation,
how they search for approval
no one is offering.

And now I know:
it isn't the recording that's the problem.

It's that I can't stop
replaying it.

A Day in the Pool

Juan Zaragoza

My earliest memories of my childhood go back to 1993 in Palmdale, California, when I was five years old. My older brother Luis, who was thirteen years old at the time, had a video camera and was filming everyone in the neighborhood fighting each other in our backyard. Our backyard was huge, with a big garden of many different plants, flowers, and trees. My parents are Mexican and put a lot of work into fixing up our backyard with freshly cut grass and plants that grew fruit like strawberries, a peach tree, a cactus, and a big apricot tree that used to hover over the pool and provided some shade. There was a wooden patio area with a cement platform floor, with tables, chairs, and an Olympic weightlifting set on it, and a punching bag hanging from the wooden patio. Our above-ground pool was getting reconstructed so the water was taken out and all the plastic film covering was ripped off, so the floor was covered in sand.

It was a bright sunny day in the middle of summer, with the sun beaming down. There were a total of eight of us: My older brother Luis, “White Boy” Jerry, Brian, Kevin, Demarcus, Tyrone, Danny, Fabian, William, and me. Besides William and me, the age range of my brother and the other kids was from twelve to fourteen years old.

The order of fights began with my older brother Luis fighting his friend “White Boy” Jerry, followed by Brian and Fabian, Kevin and Danny, and then Demarcus and Ty-

rone. They all fought three rounds but were wearing boxing gloves and were mostly going for body shots. My brother eventually got the idea to have me fight my best friend, William. He was seven years old and had been taking karate for a while now. Even though I was five years old, I was a little bigger than him.

William would stay with his grandfather Don Henry, who was a Cubano and lived across the street from my parents’ house. He and I were boys and hung out together almost every day. We both loved watching ninja movies, Power Rangers, and practicing fighting each other with plastic swords, guns, and sometimes with our fists. He was always seen around the neighborhood practicing his karate kicks, yelling “Aya, aya!”, usually in the front yard of his grandfather’s home.

The shape of the pool was round, and its size was about twenty feet in diameter, with a brown five-foot-high surrounding wall. In order to get into the pool, you had to climb in through a stepladder, which William and I both did, and my brother got in to film and play the part of referee. Once the fighting would begin, the stepladder was taken out so it would not get in the way. To my younger self at the time, it appeared like a real Roman Colosseum fighting arena, but instead of lions or gladiators, it was my friend William.

We stood barefoot facing each other on opposite sides, I had black shorts with a red shirt, William had some brown shorts with a white T-shirt. The first round began with William and I beginning to fight with each other slowly. William was trying to throw those high kicks he would always practice, and I would try to swing like a boxer, throwing left and right punches. He had this look of concentration and focus while throwing his kicks and straight punches with form and technique. It looked like he was trying to practice what he had learned in his karate class. He would open up his legs wide before throwing a kick. I was just a brawler swinging left and right punches. I used to practice boxing with my brother, while we would also work out lifting weights.

I was constantly laughing and smiling and I thought this was fun at first. We also went three rounds, and after each round, my brother would go to both of our corners with the video camera. He went to William's corner first, saying things like, "William, how are you feeling, what do you have to say to the camera?" William had this serious look on his face with his eyebrows mean-mugging the camera, and making sniffing noises while he was breathing hard, almost as if he were crying.

Afterwards, my brother would go to my corner and say to me, "Juan, how are you feeling? What do you have to say to the world watching this fight?"

I was just smiling with my hands touching the back of my head and my elbows covering my face. I remember a big laugh coming from my brother, and he said, "He likes it!"

Everyone who fought before us used boxing gloves, but since William and I were so small, the gloves were off. We eventually started connecting our punches and kicks, and loud smack noises were heard when one of us got a hard hit on the face. We both started fighting seriously, and our hits were landing, making us both angry. William then

landed this perfect hard right kick to the left side of my face. I still remember how hard it felt to this day.

My vision went dark, and that old saying of "getting your bell rung," is how I can best describe it. A snap moment in time, where things slow down until time stops completely, and I heard nothing but silence. A loud smack noise was heard from the left side of my face and then a sudden rush of adrenaline sank in, and I felt this overwhelming sense of emotion and power that changed everything from fun and games to anger, hate, and revenge. Consumed by this complete rage, I was so angry and upset that I began to cry angrily and rush toward William. It was almost like I turned into another person, or Mike Tyson, because I had this focus and strength.

I started connecting hard right and left punches to William's face. Blood began to come out of William's lips and nose and then he hit the floor. He was lying face down on the sand when I jumped on top of him, grabbed him by his hair and bashed his face into the floor. His face was completely covered in sand, and he was crying, until my brother pulled me off of him. I then heard everyone hooting and hollering, "Fuck yeah! Juan, you fucked him up."

Everyone was patting me on the back and looked at me with this look of amazement and praise. William was crying that he could not see because the sand was in his eyes. He was then taken to a water hose to flush out the sand from his eyes, crying loudly before he was sent home. I remember how good it felt to receive that praise, which made me feel accepted, validated, and proud.

That day, I learned that when I got angry, I had a superpower inside of me. The belief of using violence to gain acceptance was born. The motivation to seek that praise soon became an addiction that had severe negative consequences on my life. My parents would later see the video, and instead of telling my brother, "What is wrong with

you? How could you possibly make your 5-year-old brother fight his best friend on a videotape?” –No, that didn’t happen. What happened was I got even more praise from all my family members, especially my father, mother, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Throughout the years, they would constantly applaud me for that day in the pool, which made me feel powerful. Violence was instilled in me at a young age, and it only got worse.

I saw this video years later and said to myself, “Wow, I was really fucken young...” A thought that runs through my head as I sit in my prison cell with a life sentence, waiting for my board date.

Memoirs of the In-between

Andrea Moreno

Two sides facing each other,
Projecting through thought,
Symbols and sayings.

The land of the free,
For who should that be?
A dream, a promise awaits for those who seek.
A wall that runs to the edge of the ocean
painted with sayings.

To walk among the line
That separates and unites
Two sides
facing each other
Two lives
coexisting with one another
A memoir
of the in-between.

I exist coming and going
A liminal state in its own language.
To look over the wall,
And peak into the other side.
Two crashing waves becoming one
And a saying that goes, “con cuidado mijita”

Pop Magazine Self Portrait

Halo Hernandez

Digital Art



My Parents' Son

Jose Ybarra

This story is very personal in the sense that I never imagined how much my parents' instructions would continue to be a major part of my life. Yet, I will do my best to relate this through my prison journey of the past forty-seven years. Perhaps I should start by letting you know I never saw prison in my future at the young age of eighteen. Nevertheless, this is what transpired after killing two people like I did. I can remember waking up in the hospital after being shot by the police. The pain of the gunshot wounds meant nothing compared to the pain I felt in my soul of ruining my life.

Now, understanding the reality of being sentenced to LWOP (Life Without Parole), there were a lot of unknowns for me (for I had never even gotten a parking ticket). Then, the concept of dying in prison was not something I could wrap my mind around, but if I cared to survive, I needed to deal with it someday. However, I must mention that I didn't have a choice in who my parents would be, what race I would be, whether I would be male or female, or the country I would be born in. Yet today, I believe that the family I entered into was especially made for this man. The proof is in the lasting experiences that life tends to prepare us for in so many ways. For example, in those dark days prison tends to present, keeping those everlasting family memories close, not only helped me survive but allowed me the blessed opportunity to repair and strengthen most of those

damaged relationships.

Clearly, there have been a lot of changes in the prison system over the past forty-seven years. For when I first arrived there were only four prisons and one that received new prisoners (today, there are still at least thirty-four, down from thirty-seven). Yet, I think the most disturbing thing of all has to be the false pretense of hope. It has been used to control and manipulate most prisoners, sad to say. Surely, everyone has their own personal opinion concerning this subject, and that is fine; I'm only relating mine. But the reality of me ever being released is more connected to a miracle. Nevertheless, I should say that doesn't mean I have given up on hope. This again is due to my parents who taught me to never give up. Plus, having my first daughter at the age of fifteen, and the other two before I turned nineteen, didn't allow me the privilege of giving up either. Some people might question having children at such a young age, but being Southern-raised and Catholic (didn't believe in birth control), the only thing I thought about was how blessed I was in God giving me my children.

As a matter of fact, I would like to share one of the most precious moments in my life, which was the birth of my little girl. I can still remember the overwhelming joy I felt being told I was going to be a father. My soon-to-be wife looked at me with the same excitement. At this mo-

ment, we both realized our dream was coming to fruition. I did not care whether it would be a boy or girl, all I wanted was a healthy baby. Surprisingly, while we (my parents and my wife's parents and I) were all waiting for her to arrive, my mother approached me with concern, wondering why I was so nervous.

My only response was this is my first born, in which she laughed and drew the attention of all the people in the waiting room. Then she told me, in the most comforting way, "You have always been a father." (Because I had been helping to raise my seven siblings, who were all my junior). The truth of the matter is, at this particular moment in time, I was thinking and recognized the great sacrifice it would take to raise this child. These were my parents who had instilled in me hope, strength, and courage to move forward in all that I do—no matter the (my) situation.

Therefore, when people ask me who I am, my reply is simple: my parents' son, my grand-parents' grandson, which my own family understands—wife, three daughters and four grandsons, along with six siblings (all girls) and extended family. There is a deep-seated pride in being able to say these words, for I truly believe I bring honor to them all. Especially, since they invested so much of themselves in my upbringing. Sadly, they are no longer with us in the flesh—but their spirit is as strong as ever. Today, through that guidance, I do everything in my power to be the man they all expected me to be.

Obviously, I lost myself—or better yet, forgot who I was—for quite a few years at the beginning of my prison sentence. However, by God's grace, I found myself and have been on this journey we call life for the past thirty years.

Consequently, prison has affected my loved ones in many ways, not all of it was negative, some has been positively productive. For instance, all my daughters are married

mothers and successful women. My two oldest grandsons (25 and 23) are graduates of the Marine Corps, while the two younger ones (11 and 14) dream of becoming state troopers (police officers). The influence of the family's dedication to service (my father was an Army engineer) has stood the test of time. Therefore, due to my parents' instruction as a child, I have been helped to be the man I was always intended to be, even though I'm in prison.

Thank you for letting me share.

Sincerely, Jose Ramon Soto Ybarra

In the Night

Miguel Owens

Winter air turns to heat,
People fleeing down the street,
Sounds of thunder cause a fright,
A lot going on in the night.

Cut mid-sentence during speech,
Hear the sound of tires screech,
Flash of lightning; a blinding sight,
A lot just happened in the night.

Screams of terror start to fade,
Stains of crimson; a darker shade,
Over yonder; beaming lights,
A lot going on in the night.

The Rum of Reason

Victoria Mendez

Rivets the nights that I
clandestinely cry crimson.
There was a drift in the season.
Would you be able to keep it?
He is the explanation
for the indelible cause
of every scar, that trickles down to stars.
If you look too long,
you would see galaxies
emerging
just from his alabaster eyes.
A sinking sight of lullabies.
Logos lingering by ethos,
Catching a glimpse of
what you need to know.
Stand by to repeat
The way his smile broke down reality,
I forgot that I existed.
But he made it so easy to live.
The casual cruelty that I exude,
He turns it into divine darts of duty
to consume.
Become the space in every ellipse he creates.
Transcending the gravitas,
in the gates that we lock.
My colloquial cause for all the things above.
I speak unto thee,
to give me jovial justice,
sweet Aloysius of ardor.

Victoria Mendez

Waiting to be ignited
by the thorns of time.
To be classified, not redacted
by a streak of a line.
To be guided, guarded, and wanted.
To be chosen for the eclipse of all things effervescent.
You are what ruminates in my blood
Pass it on,
My ethereal swan



Aztec Dream

Louie Jordan

Acrylic on Wood

A Journey Through Time

Zechariah-Levi: Fleishman

I lie on the bed listening to the seconds tick away on my watch. *Tick, tick, tick*, and my mind wonders how I got here. What led me to this system? How did I end up spending thirty-one years of my life in prison? *Tick*, and the minute hand moves. I ponder how dismayed my life was. I must have been five years old when my parents split. All I knew was that my mother got my two brothers, three sisters, and me, and we ran from our condominium to her best friend's waiting van to help whisk us away. My father was abusive to all of us. I found out years later that Child Protective Services had given my mother one hour to leave the condo, or we would all be taken from her. This was my first run-in with the system. My mother got custody of five out of the six of us. My older brother wanted to live with my dad, but by the time I was six years old, I was living with my Padrino (godfather) in South Central Los Angeles.

A few months later, my Padrino moved me to Brooklyn, New York. I was the only child in the house. I didn't have to share a room with anyone – *this was awesome!* I learned my Padrino's religious practices, Santería, a belief from West Africa. My father is a Puerto Rican Catholic, and my mother a non-practicing Israeli Jewish migrant. Thus, for me to come to learn Santería was like a game. Santería was different from anything I had known. We had the chickens, goats, rabbits, and various other animals needed to fulfill the mandates of Santería. I learned about the

dos and don'ts, the reasoning for sacrifices, dress attires for every occasion, and language – well, Yoruba (Lucumí), the official language of Santería, was my first language, so no problem. Spanish was my second language as I was proud to represent my Puerto Rican heritage. My Padrino is a Babalaô (“father of the secrets,” or, more simply, “high priest”). I did everything Santería demanded of its practitioners. I was a godson that my Padrino was proud of. When you saw me, you were seeing him.

I had to enroll in school, where I learned English, and this is when I learned that I had privileges that many others didn't have. My Padrino, being a Babalaô, was important to the community, and because of his standing, I had privileges. I became arrogant. I didn't think much of anyone else. Everyone has heard the term “chip on the shoulder.” Well, I had the whole Papa Pringles on mine. Arrogance took me from being that pride and joy to, by the time I was twelve, having to be moved across the country back to California, a state I was born in but was very much a foreigner to. The way people spoke sounded weird. I felt like I was trying to understand *Chewbacca* from *Star Wars*, and their mannerisms seemed backwards to me. So, I learned to adapt to this strange state. Feeling like an outsider, I did what I did best—sell drugs, womanize, and do what I wanted.

In California I met the girl I would give my heart to.

There was nothing I wouldn't do for her. What happened to me? Arrogance and pride – I had that. Attitude—very much had that. Being part of the fellas – that's what was missing. What happened to the fellas?

I did all I could to have her love me; I even lost my friends. But what I felt, she didn't. She got pregnant, and I knew she wasn't happy about it. I knew I had to respect any decision she would make, but I was scared and didn't show it. I was there to support what she wanted, but deep down inside, I begged and pleaded with the Santos I once worshiped that she would choose to keep this child. Later, our daughter was born, and I had my Princess. *But what am I supposed to do? What is a dad?* I was lost – I wasn't taught any of this. I was taught to be a Santero, not a dad, boyfriend, or mate. I fell back to doing what I did best – sell drugs, womanize, and do what I wanted.

Doing what I wanted – huh! What is it that I wanted? I know – the world! Well, what a fool. I already had the world, so what is it that I really wanted? I never got to know because ten months later, at age nineteen, I was in prison with a life term. Damn! How did this happen to me? Yet, here I am. You think I'm doing what I want, when I want – *NOPE!* I'm in a system that dictates when I wake up, when and where I work, what time I eat and what food I eat, what time I shower, what clothes I wear and how I am supposed to maintain them, and even when I can use the phone and for how long. This system was not designed to sustain my past, but it has odd rules that must be followed or the consequences are dire. It's not here to make you a better person, it's here to break you. I had to survive, and for the last thirty-one years I've learned the ins and outs to keep me safe and breathing another day. *Tick, tick, tick*, and the years have passed.

I think of how many times I did what I wanted, but now – what is it that I want? Freedom? Family? Love? I know, to be a husband and father – something I never got

a chance to be. So here I lie, listening to my watch, *tick, tick, tick*. I reminisce about old days while living in a system that dictates my everyday. Will I get to know something different in my fifties and sixties? Maybe I'll find out in my seventies, but who knows because no one can tell me.

The Shape Maker

Niko Paulino

Since he was young, Sal always loved making shapes. He loved taking a small piece of himself and making something entirely new out of it. As he grew older, Sal not only embraced shape making, but became even better at it. The shapes he made were polished, they were whole, and people even paid him to make them personalized shapes. He made friends with other shape makers. They all traded ideas and tips with each other all while encouraging each other to keep making shapes which resulted in Sal learning how to make even more shapes such as rectangles and octagons. Every other month all of the shape makers get together and display their shapes inside of a hall. Sal's shapes were especially praised for being so unique.

However, Sal more recently has noticed that some shapes looked... different yet familiar. They looked good, too good. When he picked them up, they felt more hollow compared to the shapes made by him and his friends. He searched for the creator of these shapes, finding the table that was over three times as large as most others' tables and covered in these odd shapes. That's when he found out the creator of these pieces was Al. Growing up, Al constantly bullied Sal over his love for shape making. Sal usually brushed him off no matter what he said to him, especially when the support he received from everyone else basically cancelled out whatever he said. Seeing him at the hall was very much a surprise.

The fact that Al was there somehow wasn't the biggest surprise. Sal held an impromptu interview with Al, trying to figure out how he had gotten into shape making at all. He was expecting to hear that he realized how beautiful and fun shape making really was, something that showed his growth as a person. The actual answer given was the opposite of what he wanted to hear. Al had bought out a factory that allowed him to make shapes in bulk, making molds out of the shapes from Sal and his friends. He then sold every shape at rates that are just as much, if not more expensive than the shapes from actual shape makers.

Sal's excitement quickly turned to disgust. After the hall, the shape makers held a meeting. Immediately, they agreed to ban Al from every upcoming event. After that declaration, they had to brainstorm ideas on how to make sure the factory made shapes. As days passed, they put all of their ideas into action. They tried to make their own shapes en masse, but quickly realized that they couldn't match the sheer output of the factory, and even when they came somewhat close they ended up making shapes that they weren't proud of. They tried to protest the factory by simply not buying its shapes and though they did manage to change most peoples' minds, there were still too many people that still bought them. They even tried to directly confront Al by telling, possibly begging him to stop by trying to convince him how much fun shape making would be

if he were to actually give it a try himself. As the conversations dragged on, it became clear that Al did not care about shape making.

The shape makers gave up on Al, it was clear they couldn't change his mind. When they gathered back together, they decided to just keep on making shapes on their own. This was when they realized that there were people that didn't care about Al's shapes, if anything they resented them just as much as the shape makers. Those who stuck with them had kept their loyalty firm, and the community quickly grew with people that either became shape makers themselves or simply just observing and buying the shapes they made. While others may believe that Al's method was better, nothing could beat the shapes made by those who really were trying. Besides, it's becoming a lot easier to distinguish Al's shapes from actual shapes.

Changing Lenses

Samuel Tellez

When I open my eyes, there are a few seconds of blurred vision before my eyes start to focus. I raise my head to see myself hugging the steering wheel. I look up through the windshield and I can see a desert for what seems to go on for miles in every direction. I wait for a tumbleweed to roll by just like in an old Western movie. My head feels like concrete under a jackhammer, and the cottonmouth and liquor are still heavy on my breath. *Where am I? How did I get here?*

I turn around and see my brother knocked out in the back seat, and I'm trying to understand my current circumstance. I must've been asleep in this awkward position for quite a while because my legs are still numb and asleep. Time to shake this off and get up and see where the hell I'm at.

I open the door and swing my body to get out of the car, and that's when I fall over sideways from the seat. "What the fuck?" *Am I still drunk? Or high?* Panic starts to set in because I still can't feel my legs and half of my body is hanging out of the car on the ground.

"Art! Wake up!" I yell as I pound on the side of the car. He stumbles out of his sleep, and the look on his face tells me about the night we must've had.

"Why are you lying on the ground? Did you fall asleep

out there?" my brother says as he exits the backseat.

"Something's fucking wrong! I can't feel my legs and I can't get back up. Help me up." That's when he picks me up and helps me back into the front seat. "Call 911. I'm tripping out right now...Did we crash or something?"

"Nah, hold up, let me call. Damn, my phone is dead. Sam, try yours."

"Shit! Mine is dead too. Take me to the hospital."

Six months later, I'm still trying to remember the process Nurse Kelly taught me during my hospital stay on how to properly transfer from my wheelchair onto my bed without falling. I can't tell you the number of times I've fallen already. My balance is wobbly like a ten-month-old baby learning how to take his first steps. Okay, time to get dressed.

Nurse Kelly's voice echoes in my head, "I'm going to teach you everything I can from putting on your socks and getting dressed, to getting back into your wheelchair if you fall down."

"I know how to put on socks and get dressed," I say, not realizing that she was preparing me for my future self-sufficiency. Every day she takes me outside, away from

the beeping monitors, and pushes me down the block to the coffee shop to get hot cocoa. But today is different.

“Alright, Sam, I want you to push yourself to the crosswalk, but don’t worry, I’ll be right by your side. And then, once we’re there, I want you to roll down the sidewalk, and we’ll cross the street together.”

Pshh! No sweat. I got this. Halfway down the block my arms are tired and I can feel a sweat start to build up. *Am I going to make it to the light? Or even across the street?* This becomes our new routine every day until I am comfortably able to push myself all the way to the coffee shop and back all on my own.

As Nurse Kelly’s voice fades, I snap back to reality. In my apartment, I sit on my bed and bend one leg towards my body and put on my left sock. Then I repeat the process with the other leg. The total time it takes me to get dressed is about thirty minutes, which is fifteen minutes longer than my past routine. But tonight is the night. I’m finally getting out and going to the club. My friend Phillip picks me up and the car is packed with some of our friends. Another ten minutes just to get into the car and get my wheelchair folded up into the trunk. We get to the club and can see the line to get in is ridiculously long. An hour goes by, and we’re finally at the front of the line.

The bouncer looks down at me and says, “We’re at capacity. I can’t let you in.”

“Alright, I’ll just wait until some people leave, and then there should be room.” Not even two minutes after I say this, two fine-ass females walk up and the bouncer lets them inside. “Hey what the fuck, man! You just said you were at capacity.”

He doesn’t even look at me as he replies, “They were already here. Look man, it’s gonna be a long night. You might not wanna wait around.”

That’s when it hit me. I’m not getting in. This is a new, yet familiar feeling. His reasons for denying me access aren’t because of my skin color, the way I am dressed, or that I am a male. My wheelchair is the reason I can’t get in, or I should say, the reason I can’t get in is because I am in a wheelchair. I explode, “Hey asshole! I know the owner and this will be your last night on the job, motherfucker.” He doesn’t even look at me. He pretends I don’t exist. The next day, I get his ass fired.

That night was the first of many new experiences to come my way. Everywhere I went, I felt like everyone stared at me or looked down upon me. But what hurt the most was when people pretended like I didn’t exist. It didn’t matter where I was. It could’ve been the DMV, the grocery store, the mall, or just going to a restaurant. The feeling was always the same. I was now an outcast at the bottom of society’s totem pole.

I felt like I was in a pit of quicksand, suffocating, with no way out. But I *had* to get out. I needed a change because the self-loathing and depression bound my heart with the strength of a Boa Constrictor. These feelings crippled me with anxiety. But those same feelings also became my motivation to make a positive change. I was determined. So I tried looking at things from a new perspective. Because, quite honestly, I was tired of looking at the glass half empty.

I now had a placard that said I had reserved parking everywhere I went. At amusement parks, I didn’t have to wait in line for hours — I was now fast-tracked to the front. Train rides were free. Bus rides were free. *I was now free to take the world up on its opportunities.*

It’s been sixteen years since I woke up with the steering wheel in my face and my whole world was turned upside down. The lens through which I view the world became unclear, like foggy eyeglasses. Over time though, I’ve ac-

quired different techniques on how to clean that lens up a little bit. No more are the days where I sit and mope with a dark cloud over my head. I have adjusted and accepted my disability. I have *embraced* it. Today, I now hear the voice of Nurse Kelly saying, “Damn Sam! Look at you now. You’ve gone beyond going down the block and crossing the street to the coffee shop; you can put on your socks and get dressed in less than ten minutes; and you haven’t fallen out of your chair in *years*.”

I simply reply, “Yeah. That’s just how I roll.”

Kisses from Iceland

Richie Rubio

It's cold here. Colder than you'd appreciate. I packed your green parka, the one with the holes in the sleeves. I'd be extra chilly otherwise. I've thought about sewing them shut but it would feel like a small death. To fix what you broke, a quiet betrayal. You won the rips fair and square. Last time I saw you, you asked about the birds. I have to admit I haven't seen many around my place, but just this morning I woke up with the sun and a flock of them put on a show for me. They flew upwards and did a loop-de-loop before heading west, back to you, I hope.

There's a fountain in the middle of the square where I go to get my groceries, it's carved to look like a small child in climbing gear spouting water from his walking stick. This is where I sit and write postcards to mom. Kids hang out here too, running around the clearing and drawing mountains on the gravel with chalk. Their hopscotch design gets more complicated with each passing week but I find it's a nice challenge. Mika, the one with the braids, narrates my process from start to finish, like a very enthusiastic sportscaster.

The lighthouse is quiet most of the time, and I've figured out the beacon so Astvin doesn't have to help me much. The old man's an enigma really, mostly keeps to himself but I come home often to find extra tools on my doorstep or a fresh Skúffukaka on rainy days. I can nev-

er bring myself to say thank you, but I get the feeling he doesn't need me to.

When the air starts smelling like buying a one-way ticket home, I cook. Was never much of a host back then but I've gotten a feel for it now. I've become friends with the couple next door, the cyclist that walks their dog near the stables, the local florist and the renowned Astvin, who now collectively sit at my living room table at least twice a month. Those days are my happiest.

Two small gnomes stare at me while I write this, lodged in the lighthouse's back garden as I lean over the counter behind the beacon. They're looking up. Have they always? I spend a lot of time up here. My room might be on the floor below but I find myself coming up most nights, watch the piercing white path shoot out into the ocean like a sign from the angels. The beacon guides boats to safety, right? Maybe that's why I ended up here. It lit the path home.

Hiking keeps me grounded, in a way. Aurora Borealis hangs over my head like a question but I don't ask it. Backpack strapped, feet tired, knees buckling. Ice melting into my ankles while the sun fights hard to warm up my face and I'm alone, but not lonely. There's no music, just me. And my breath is not there but neither are you and that's okay. Waterfalls made of icicles stand frozen in time before

my eyes and it takes everything in me not to take a picture. I silently promise I'll remember. Whatever that looks like in the future.

I wish there was more to say. More to recount, more to be specific about. But I also don't. Not really. While it would make a better letter it would not make a better life.

I promised to write, though it has taken some time to form the words. My hope is this correspondence takes you by surprise. A happy one. Enough to break through whatever else there is beneath the surface. Two things can be true at the same time. Or at least, that's what I believe. I wish you the same happiness I have found in the most unexpected of places in every aspect of the life ahead of you.

I'll be happy to hear from you if that's what you decide.

Regardless, if you're ever lost at sea, my light is always on.

Kisses from Iceland,

Me.

Education, Race, and My Journey

Mark Cole

FOREWORD

PRESENT DAY: → The overhead lights seem blinding, and so bright, as they reflect down from the white ceiling, as if I was standing center stage with a spotlight focused directly on me.

Thump-Thump, Thump-Thump, my heart raced;

I can feel my heartbeat pounding faster and faster as the presenter continues to read our names aloud. Her announcements seem like they are getting louder and louder as she calls out every name.

Thump-Thump, Thump-Thump; my heart still raced;

MISTER SAMUEL TELLEZ, **come on up,**

“CONGRATULATIONS!!!”

I can also envision myself sitting there squirming around in my chair, wearing my black cap and gown, as a drop of perspiration runs down the left side of my forehead. I glance up and down the aisles of chairs filled with my fellow graduating class, and wonder, “are they feeling all these rushing emotions that I feel?” One of my classmates on my left side nudges me with his elbow, with a bewildered

look on his face, “*Brother, WE,*” as he motions towards everyone around us, “*did it!*” We all sit there apprehensively with excitement as we wait for our names to be called.

Thump-Thump, Thump-Thump; my heart continued to race;

MISTER RODERICK FONSECA, **come on up,**

“CONGRATULATIONS!!!”

I ruminate back on the beginning of this journey that I never thought would ever happen, and how proud my MOM would have been if she was still alive today.

Thump-Thump, Thump-Thump; my heart raced on;

MISTER SAMUEL CABERA, **come on up,**

“CONGRATULATIONS!!!”

The year was 1971, and as a young student at the early age of 6-7 years old, my beloved Mother had started me off on my long educational journey as a HeadStart Preschooler Scholar. My Mother who I called Momma back then, had sacrificed a lot personally as she raised me and my 12 other siblings on her own.

As an essential worker, she was a (RN) Registered

Nurse, who worked in the medical field at the USC Medical Center, known as the GENERAL HOSPITAL, which is located in the (Civic Center of the Greater Los Angeles area). She had enrolled me and my sister who was 11 months younger than me, into a school that was still in the process of being built, directly across the street from my house. This future school which was going to be named “Robert F. Kennedy Elementary School,” is located in a small community in the hills of East Los Angeles California, called City Terrace, also known as the Beverly Hills of East LA...

When the school was finally completed in 1972, one of Senator Kennedy’s Sons, Joseph P. Kennedy II, was flown in in a helicopter that landed right on the new school’s playground. He had come to dedicate the school in honor of his father’s legacy. “Boy, that was an awesome sight to see, that huge helicopter flying over our heads as it approached, with its loud and resonating engines along with its rotating propellers hovering, and then landing.”

This community is a customary Mexican town where, if you find yourself walking down the street to the closest neighborhood liquor store, or by the park playgrounds, you’ll hear the happy sounds of the neighborhood kids playing, with the voice of the paleta man ringing his bell shouting, “paletas, paletas,” (the paleta man, is the community’s version of a Mexican ice-cream/snow cone man, pushing an ice cart around the neighborhood, loaded with the perfect frozen treats). You could also find yourself driving to the nearest hand carwash, and you will hear the rhythmic tunes of the guitar, accordion, and trombone, harmonizing playing Mexican music Rancheras or Corridos, either by a passerby car or truck, or coming from one of the close-by residents. Neighborhood dogs could be heard barking, along with the sounds of “GALLOS,” roosters, with their harmonic singing in the background. In a close distance, you could hear the recognizable sounds of the police or paramedic sirens blaring, or just blocks away.

You will also hear the loud roaring jet engines from above, of an occasional passenger airliner flying overhead so low, you can see the close details underneath the plane’s hull and wheel wells, as it circles very low back to the airport. Overhead is the airliner’s U-turn landing route to the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX).

This is a visionary example of the community that I was raised in, which was like a little Tijuana. Back in those days, just a few blocks down the street from my house, right next to a liquor-store, in their parking-lot to be exact, was a mobile-home trailer that was being temporarily used as the HeadStart classroom that we attended. Every morning, my Momma would walk us down to the trailer for school, me and my sister were terrified being left behind alone with strangers. She would have to sneak away every time in order for us to stay.

Eventually my sister and I got moved to our new and completed classrooms, and during this transition, was when I started experiencing my first interactions with other cultures and races, as some of my classmates and teachers were of different ethnicities and cultures. I had a close friend of mine who was Asian, his name was Roger, and he wore huge coke bottle glasses. He was from South Korea, and was basically going through the same experience as myself, trying to adjust to a new school. Most of the student body there were predominantly Mexican descent, but most of our teachers and faculty at the school were White, except for our school’s dependable janitor, Mr. Bernardo, who was Mexican, and loved listening to baseball games on his little pocket transistor radio. When he came walking down the hallways or across the school’s playground, we knew it was him, because he always carried what seemed like a thousand keys jiggling.

As the grand opening of the school developed, the faculty and staff started to resemble the student-body and the surrounding community. My sister and I were the first

preschoolers that helped establish the schools' HeadStart class. We were of mixed races as my father, who we really never knew, was an African American, and our beloved Mother who raised us, was of Mexican descent. There was a total of five of us siblings that got enrolled, and during this process, the school Administrators had thought that my sister and I were adopted by my mother, due to being molato (of mixed race). My other three siblings were Mexican and had Spanish names such as Correa, as they had a different Father.

One of my fondest and earliest memories in respects to other ethnicities, was with my first-grade teacher Ms. Beck, who later changed her name through marriage, to Mrs. Brown. She was white, and lived up in an affluent Mountain-Foot-Hills community that was around 45 minutes to an hour away from the school; this neighborhood was predominantly Caucasian White. Mrs. Brown also had a son that was around my age, his name was Kevin Brown. One day she had gotten permission from my mother and invited me over to her house for the weekend to spend time with her and her family. It was an experience I will always value and never forget.

One thing that had me confused at my young age back then and asking questions was, "why wouldn't my teacher allow her son to go to the same Brand-New School that she had worked at and that I had attended?" (That was puzzling to my young mind at the time!) Through that experience, it was then that I started asking questions and realized that there were major gaps between different societies, the well off, and the less fortunate. As a child, I was oblivious to this structural racism that I was a part of. I was now starting to understand and recognize how the living conditions in a low-income community differs by far, from well-off districts. The abundance of having all the necessities and livelihoods, compared to the struggle to obtain the necessities just to stay afloat (this was as clear as night and day, two different lifestyles and societies!), "SHIT," Ray

Charles could have seen the difference himself.

One thing that I could say going through this experience, is that I was taught about other

cultural differences such as customs, foods, and family traditions, as I became familiar with some of my classmates, and their families. One person that I will always hold close to heart, was one of my 3rd grade classmates named Cathy Arellano, although she was Mexican, her skin complexion was real huerita. Cathy had passed away due to a tumorous brain cancer. She would come to class with her head bald, due to her chemotherapy treatment. Every day when she came in, our teacher and classmates would all celebrate her bravery, and her courage, as she *fought* for her life, but continued coming to school.

That one tragic and dreadful day finally arrived, and we never saw her again. It was a very sad day for the whole school. The impact of losing a classmate to a sickness as deadly as cancer, affected the whole student-body of our school as well as the faculty and staff. Till this day, I can still see her big bright hazel eyes that sometimes seemed to change colors depending on the clothing colors she would wear, and her big smile that was so full of life with her rosy pink freckled cheeks. Cathy also wore prescription glasses that would highlight the color of her eyes. She would come to class almost on every occasion with her bald head wrapped up in a pink or sometimes white scarf.

As I elevated from grade school on up to intermediate Junior High School, the majority of my fellow classmates were either using drugs, selling drugs, or were gang-members that derived from low-income families and urban communities that were living in poverty, or from broken homes. Most of our role models were gang and drug dealers that were stuck in that revolving door to prison or replacement homes. These challenges were very detrimental in my motivation to learn academically which changed my willing-

ness and aspirations to continue with my education. I was eventually placed into a continuation schooling system with other neglected and delinquent students that were bused in from around and throughout the local school district. These other students had also suffered from having fixed mindsets in believing that change was not achievable.

I eventually dropped out of school, and with a poor mindset believing that I could not perform on a specific level that was expected of me, this created a destructive domino effect of setbacks and failures in my life that continued on for over 3 decades. This spiraling effect ultimately led me down that pipeline to juvenile detention centers, and eventually to prison. While in prison, one day my daughter who was 9 years old at the time asked, "Dad, what are you doing in there so you can come home sooner?" Those sweet innocent words felt like 1000 daggers tearing through my heart and pride. Through several major setbacks that involved the passing of my mother, and my brother, as well, as my failures as a responsible father, brother, and uncle, I finally decided after all these years of failures, to confront these challenges and letdowns head-on, and started on my amends for a positive change and growth within myself, and in life.

MISTER ADAM OCHOA, **come on up,**

"CONGRATULATIONS!!!"

Thump-Thump, Thump-Thump: my heart raced:

Although I still struggle, this new motivation has reignited the fuse in me to reach-out and take hold of my pathway to my academic goals in achieving a higher education. I am now at the threshold of completing one of my educational goals and should be, if God willing, be graduating, and receiving my associates degree within the next cycle of completions. The harder I work on a better ME, the more my ability will grow, and a positive mindset will continue to develop. *"Everyone can improve their abilities through*

hard work." As I move forward on this academic adventure, I can now envision and see what the possibilities are as I have witnessed these ceremonies of inspiration time and time again...

MISTER MARK COLE, **come on up,**

"CONGRATULATIONS!!!"

EPILOGUE

With my heart racing, I envision myself rising up from my seat with excitement after hearing my name called. I hear everything, as our families, friends, college coordinators, and teachers continue to applaud and cheer, as we walk what will feel like the longest walk we will ever take; (which will only be 10 steps or so from our seats, very long steps though) to receive our Honors and Associates Degrees from SouthWestern College. Never in my wildest dreams, would I ever have thought that I would be graduating from college inside of a prison's visiting room. As I approach the stage, I will glance over my right shoulder to see the tears of joy and pride gleaming off the faces of my daughter, and sisters, as they wave their arms in the air enthusiastically clapping and cheering, and shouting my name in delight. As I glance to my left, I will see the prison administrators lined-up shaking our hands congratulating us as we walk past them;

Thump-Thump, Thump-Thump; my heart skips a beat, but continues to race:

"DAD-DAD, over here, CONGRATULATIONS,

WE LOVE YOU, you did it!!!"



My Crazy Life

Louie Jordan

Acrylic on Canvas

Recluse

Alicia Nieves

You who are a being for which adoration
is seldom inspired, yet
you've evolved to prosper in its absence
An existence I aspired to embody
in my own lonely years

For the centipede is a being who knows only to love
herself

Long and sultry, her body is garmented
in black onyx chitin, sleek and impervious
With a long train of amber legs
to distinguish her

She struts elegantly
fluid and unhurried
Though she is blind
she explores the world
headfirst

A halo of
molten jaws
treated with venom
Her grin

is permanent
She dabbs black lipstick on
to her sharpest points

Sublime as she is
she takes no interest love
Romance is no burden

For her a joyous life
is one spent alone
unworshipped

>~~~~~{

There are centipedes that catch bats mid-flight

They'll crawl to the ceiling of a cave
And hang themselves
From their ultimate legs
(those final elongated appendages)
And simply takes hold
Of anyone who flies too close

Isn't that crazy?

Yoink!

To think

Icarus could've been devoured by something
that wasn't the ocean's embrace

>~~~~~{

Giant centipedes will eat
Anything
Including:

Other centipedes

Frogs

Tarantulas

Scorpions

Birds

Mice

And small lizards

They will occasionally sip the juice from fruit as well

Though they cannot subsist upon it

How ambitious!

Utterly dauntless!

They seize every opportunity

To thrive

To feast

To live past fear

And embody it

Evolution's exoskeletal devil

To gaze upon a centipede

Is to know terror

And be faced with a hunger

so immense

it will consume

Everything

>~~~~~{

Such times in my life are over now

Or so I believe them to be
Why then do I find myself
writing on this subject again?

Well
I'm not sure what else to write about...

I've spent so much time in this
Frigid isolation

That finding myself a new identity
is difficult
Suddenly finding a group of people who understand me
Suddenly having someone to love
Suddenly knowing what I want to do in my life

Reality as a human is

suddenly appealing now

Perhaps one day I will leave all this behind me
For real for real
And my poem could be about a Siphonophore
And it won't have a single line about
loneliness or horror

I could be free
of fear
and hunger

I could be
free

Road to Oddilia: Mazelike Beginnings

The Ocean's Scribe

Legends and whispers tell of a country unlike any other, a land where reality is unbelievable, and supernaturals run free. This place is called-

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Tommy says, interrupting his own research, "a place where Fiction is reality, where nothing is impossible, Oddilia. I know this already! How is someone supposed to research this place if nobody knows anything that 100 other sources don't already know?!"

Tommy yells to himself in the middle of the night. He is an avid follower of the supernatural, but heard a whisper of this place, Oddilia. All he knows is that this place is fantastical, and fantastically hard to find. But it's way too late,

"4 am, Jesus," he says, finally looking at his laptop's clock. He was supposed to be in bed around 11 or 12.

So reluctantly, he gets ready for bed and flops onto his bed, but as he sleeps, a light slips into his room, the light seeming annoyed but doing something on his computer before leaving as abruptly as it entered.

This man before you is 21, once a renowned journalist with the nickname the prophet, for his somehow innate sense to read social cues and find truth in small stories. But one day he disappeared from the papers, why? Because of this story, where his usual stories take a few weeks, he has

been working on the story of oddilia since he was 20. He was fired for not moving on to the next story and people forgot about him, but he still wanted to find out.

Tommy wakes up the next day, but when he opens his computer, a card on his keyboard, golden in all but material, with brown words.

You want to learn? Put me in front of your camera, find the other 12 cards, and find your way here normy. Prove you're more than that.

"No way, is this real?" Tommy says, surprised as he inspects the card. He looks on the back and with a pink pen it says, **"Thanks a lot, you giant, I had to wait for hours to slip this in ya room when you finally sleepin' ya normy!"**

This would catch him off guard and make him feel a bit bad for staying up so long, but He would then log into his computer and raise the card to its camera, hoping something bad doesn't happen. But soon, he sees something appear on his screen, slowly growing bigger until

POP!

Says a pink and purple dragon girl, literally just appearing on his screen the second the card is shown, shrinking from half the size of his screen to about a quarter of that.

“Hello, human, I’m GIGI! I’m here helping you find Oddilia! I hope we can be great friends! Sorry I’m so excited to talk to another normy again, IF YOU CAN’T TELL!” she says so fast he can barely keep up, the last bit sounding like she is barely containing her said excitement. Tommy blinks a bit, processing this dragon girl’s whole vibe. She has white horns, the tips colored pink like they were dipped in paint, wearing black armor obviously meant more for show than practicality with pink lining, and a notable thing, she is glitching around, literally.

“Wait, are you a glitch?!” he says, snapping her back to the moment. **“AH, well uh, technically yeah. Wait, but wait. I’m a good glitch. Think of me like, oddilias Google, a little living program meant to help you find us,”** she says in a calming tone.

“Hold on, find it?” he says with retention. “I remembered that supernatural beings can contact us, normal humans, via these golden cards, but I have a chance to find it?!” **“Ahh, smart~ I’m sure you’ll make it far in the normy competition,”** she says, teasingly making Tommy pause.

“What’s the normy competition?” he says, wanting to learn more.

“Questions, questions, questions! You humans are so curious! But a good question, you see the normy competition is something we hold every 3 months, we find the nomys, peo-

ple like you who aren’t used to our chaos and put ya thru it, and if you beat all 12 competitions you get to come to Oddilia.” Gigi says, tip-tapping at the bottom of his screen.

Tommy is stunned for a second. Everything he has been looking for is now offered to him on a silver platter, and he just has to win this competition to do it. “I’m in,” Tommy says with a bit of excitement and smiles with something else he doesn’t understand in himself yet.

“Oh, perfect! Ok, ok, here, give me the card.” She says, reaching a claw to him from the screen.

“What?” Tommy says, dumfounded for the 4th time today.

“Give me the card. Put the card in front of the screen,” she says with a beckoning claw

“Uh, ok.” As Tommy does so, Gigi reaches for the screen, and a clawed hand comes out of the screen, takes the card, then goes back in, with Tommy flabbergasted and Gigi holding the card.

“Shit, ok,” Tommy says, surprised but definitely interested.

“OK. You’re going to need to go here.” Gigi says inspecting the card before glitching open a website that looks like Google but is called “The dragon’s info Hord” to open up a map of the area, and pings a spot in the park. **“You’re going to need to go here and bring this golden card.”**

“What car-” Tommy says before getting cut off by his printer wirling to life and prints a new gold card. “... You can control my print-”

“Yes, I can control your printer :)” she says with a playful smile, tail swishing “Hmm. I have questions, but I will save them for later,” he says as he picks up the golden card and reads it.

The golden thread will lead to the forges melting exit. *“ok this is definitely a hint to something, but what, bmm, just going to have to find out when I get there. Wait, but that’s in the park, there isn’t a forge there. Magic stuff is definitely going to happen.”* Tommy Thought

“Am I allowed to bring anything else?” he asks Gigi.

“oh” she says, surprised, **“bring the card and whatever you can carry on your body, no bags. Oh, and FYI, you’re not the only human that will be there; a few other normies are looking to join us oddilians.”** After some hesitation, Tommy gets up, gets dressed, before packing them into his car and drives off to the park. He soon arrives there, he is wearing a red leather jacket, buttons slightly open to show the yellow undershirt, red sweat pants, and running shoes, holding a beaten metal bat he hasn’t used in a while in one hand, a flashlight in another, and his phone and the card in his right jacket pocket. He soon finds the spot and sees other people around there with stuff the normal person wouldn’t bring, 13 in total, but they’re not going to the exact location.

“They’re waiting... they must know something’s up with that spot and are waiting for someone to go in first to see if it’s real. Should I wait? Hmm... no. If this is a composition, and if only one of us gets to go to Oddilia...” Tommy thinks for a second, but not too long. **“It’ll be me.”** Tommy proclaimed to himself.

Soon, he walks to the spot, and every abnormal person looks up at his action, waiting for something to happen. He makes it to the hill and sees someone there, they look human but seem different, breathing with a huff of their

nose, each breath with a gold nose ring.

“Card.” the huffing man says with a gruff voice. Tommy hands the huffing man his gold card, and the man grins. **“Crazy arent ya, first come first served right? Well lets hope ya like it, enjoy the maze.”**

Suddenly, the man stomps, and the floor opens up under Tommy, dropping him to what looks like a cavern lit by torch. Tommy lands roughly with everything still on him. He turns on his flashlight and sees a sign: **the Minotaur’s forging-maze.** “Huh, ok. A maze. I can do a maze.” Tommy says to himself before hearing stomping from above, “guess they’re not waiting anymore, let’s move.”

He runs through the twisting halls, soon hearing others running too, even seeing glimpses of a man with a purple movable suit with a purple messenger’s hat and a green feather in it leaving a path of the things falling from his pocket. Tommy would look at them, **sensing something**, before jumping over them and continuing. Looking back he would see another guy a stronger man who seemed to skip leg day with a blue jumpsuit with torn sleeves, his foot would touch the fetters and-

BOOM

In an explosion of green and purple confetti and ash, but the strong man in blue would seem unbothered, **unscratched**, glaring at Tommy, before he leaves, thankfully not being chased. But still shaken he would turn a corner and bump into someone, a woman in a movable orange slip dress with matching lipstick, she would be annoyed slightly but seeing as he is new to the competition.

“So you’re the newest competitor, red bat boy? It was brave to show us how to start this part of the competition. **Maybe I can, thank you~**” she says, putting a finger

over her lip, softly kissing her finger.

“Look lady, I don’t want any trouble, just let me thro-” Tommy tries to get out before the woman shushes him with the kissed finger, indirectly kissing him.

“Sh sh sh, quiet toy~ you bumped into me and almost muddied my dress. **KNEEL~**” she says, her lips softly glowing orange and the mark on his lips glowing the same orange. Suddenly, Tommy falls to his knees, and she steps on his head, making him look down with a sharp heel, not too high so he can run still.

“The fu- why is it hard to move? What did you do to me?!” Tommy says through gritted teeth, looking up at the lady as he shoves her heel off his head, but she recovers, sauntering back with a sensual spin.

“Oh, I just adore newbies like you, you make excellent and interesting toys, especially with how resistant you seem to be. You may call me **Hina, the sunset seductress**, and I know in this dim maze you can not see it well, but my beauty is irresistible. And what did I do to you?” she says as she forces Tommy’s head to bow by just pointing down like a dog. “Its an ability I got from my last go around at this, **Sunset’s Kiss** is what I call it, allows me to control anyone these lips mark.”

“Powers? We get powers from this!” he says, trying but failing to get up but his body is betraying him just ‘cause of some mark. “Yes, but you won’t make it that far; only a set limit of people can move on to the next challenge, and beginners have no luck, especially reckless ones like you.”

Tommy tries to struggle, but it’s no use; this lady is forcing him down with this power, but while looking down, he sees something, a golden piece of yarn that weaves through the maze. Then he remembers the card:

The golden thread will lead to the forges

melting exit. “I may be reckless,” Tommy says, looking up at her, “but that doesn’t mean I’m not **smart**” he says as he bites his lip, wiping the kiss mark off with his teeth. He soon hits the back of her knee to knock with the blade of one arm and with the other hitting chin with the bat knocking her to the floor as he scrambles up and, with the flashlight still in hand, following the golden tread. But it soon leads to a huge forge room, where everything seems to be melting dangerously hot, but he sees the light at the end of the room, the exit.

“What the, no way they expect me to run across this, I could di-”

But Tommy’s thoughts are interrupted as he hears the sounds of running from behind him. He looks back with his flashlight and sees it’s Hina, making a sprint for him. “... **Screw it.**” he says to himself as he makes a break for it. The ground is like quicksand, so he can’t stop moving, or it will consume him, but the flames feel controlled somehow. Less like all-consuming flames but molding fires, shaping him somehow, his build growing in the flames. He is being forged and growing stronger. But soon he gets out and is... back at the hill again?! He seems to have walked out of the tree the snorting guy was leaning on. Then suddenly.

“BA-ha-ha-ha, you really are crazy!” the man’s voice says, but as Tommy looks back to see the man instead in the shadows of the tree, he would see a hairy chest where the height of his head was before, looking up Tommy would see a hulking bull of a man, a minotaur. **“Running through the reforging flames like that is a daring move for a normy beginner. You’ve got potential,”** He says as he hands Tommy a new golden card. **“One down, eleven more to give,”** the minotaur says more to himself.

“Guess that lady wasn’t lying about only some people

making it past each challenge” he would to himself as Tommy walks back to his car, card in hand, when his phone buzzes. “Hello?”

“Hey Normy~” Gigi says teasingly

“wha- Gigi?! How are you on my phone?” Tommy says surprised.

“Oh, your phone was charging on your computer when I popped up, I connected instantly.” she said bluntly

“... dame. Ok then.” Tommy says slowly accepting it

“So how did it go? Did you manage to get your next card? QoQ” She says, including the emoticon.

“.. ok that was an emoticon and I did actually. First to get it, plus encountered some orange chick that went by hina.” he says adapting accordingly

“The Sunset seductress?! Oh yeah, she was closest to getting here last year.” she said with some surprise.

“Really?” he says picking up on the surprise

“Yep, but was just overtaken by another chick who called herself the sea witch. Wait, you just beat the Minotaur’s forging-maze, right? You’re buff now?” she says with intrigue

”Yeah, I didn’t expect that. Why do I need this, other than fighting off the other contestants?” he asks.

“Oh, in oddilia the normal people evolved to be that strong, you could probably lift a car

:D” she says excited.

“Really?! That’s crazy.” he says, flexing his muscles a bit.

“Oh yeah, ready to go on the next one?” she says teasingly. **“... Definitely.”** Tommy says with that smile.

To be continued



Elder
Louie Jordan
Acrylic on Wood

Positive Indifference

Lily Reese

I used to drink a lot of energy at the tail end of last year.
Because there's no better feeling than being in love and awake.
That slurry in my veins, that shaking of my body.
He used to have terrible memory. We talked about oranges a lot. I like them, he would say, like it was brand new.
So we'd talk about citrus on the tongue. The artificial. Sticky saliva.
I don't like them all that much. I was a bad person at love. I probably should've lied.
He'd ask me about the flavours I did like. I love trying new things. Tell me what you think.
Ritualistic morning photos of cans which would send our hearts into palpitations by noon. (I swoon.)
I got presentations. I got papers. I got tests. I have love on the mind.

I'd read your heart on a page, (a symptom? No wait! or was it a-) symbiosis of vulnerability.
He used to praise my writing. He used to show his friends. He'd call me talented.
And for an artist, there is no better confession of love. And for a human, there is no better purpose than to be loved.
You've thought about it too. That headache. That dehydration.
It's December 30th. Yeah, I've thought about it, he says. That energy, that 200mg of caffeine.
I want it. I want to feel alive.

December 31st, I'm calling again.

Standing outside.

It's cold.

It's lonely.

Let's talk about it. Let's talk about fatigue and thin skin on oranges to be ripped open.

I have passion and you and love and there's fireworks (or is it gunshots?) caroming around my head. Let's do it. Let's have our existence blend into the world of nothing yet everything to those with love in their eyes and have our words reach other without that ritual substance abuse of saccharine spit-

["I'm positively indifferent about you. But I'm indifferent about everything. I know it sucks, but it's the best I got. I'm not capable of anything more than that."]

Thunderhead Pastoral

Alexander Fernandez

“Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth.’ I realized that too long after I got here,” said the hooded man. He spoke clearly, yet his voice was hushed with dryness. It was as if a boy had been someplace too long. His tattered robes were no help in determining his age, either.

“What a strange character you are, sir. I reckon *they* didn’t choose to call you the fletcher.”

“Smart boy.”

“It’s too boring, isn’t it?”

“Don’t repeat your meaning when someone recognizes your thinking. Makes you seem nosy, if not dull.”

The boy just gave a nod.

“Well, did you want something or not? I can fashion you splades, blunt points, f—”

“Do you have any stories?”

The man was silent for a moment. His hunch really makes him look elderly, now.

“I can tell you a story, yes.”

“It was summertime in the river country — back in seventy-nine, or thereabouts. Eighteen, mind you. The last couple of rains were hitting a small pasture town by the edge of the great prairie...”

§

Folk were going on about this towering, white plume on the horizon. By the middle of the week, every cloud had streaked across the pale blue sky to point at it. It was there for days, as if the town was on trial by some higher power.

One young man, adept with a bow, set out into the open fields in search of something exciting during this moment of limbo. He rode his horse long that day, trying to well out his own high spirits. The sun was high, too, so the man settled for some sport. He weighed his options within the former bison-plains, now deposed by gunmen and their cattle. A rabbit? He thought. Some waterfowl? But those were easy game for children, dogs, or for old men to take some petty pride in. He wanted something that showed skill, like six crows out of the grass, though he did not own a pistol. A buck won’t be seen in these meadows until after the big rains. The man gave a daring look to the flat-topped plume.

Happening upon a marshy pond, the young hunter es-

pied a magnificent heron wading among the reeds. It stood as still as an old pine — a perfect specimen against the straw and dry greens of the bank. The hunter slid off his saddle and crept through the grasses towards the unsuspecting bird. His mind was the air. His body, more reeds. He was the marsh itself, and the heron was his.

Drawing his bowstring, the man held for a second to savor the moment before triumph. *Such a slender neck to uphold my deftness.* One strong shot easily toppled the glorious animal to its side, and the bowman scurried around the pond to collect his quarry.

The sounds of the marsh were still, and the heron lay dead in the mud — a perfect prize for a countryman's proud son. A tangled neck and loose jaws lapped up seeping pondwater as blood soiled its steely plumage. But as the hunter went to pull his arrow, the heron parted its beak.

“Of all the Man’s-beasts in these fields, I hope you get something out of killing me.”

The bird’s deathly rasps so perplexed the young hunter that he could only squat and study the bewildering animal. It lifted its head up out of the silted water and met the man’s face with a nectar eye, to which he could only clack his throat to the beginning of lost words. His heart then felt a pull from behind, and he became aware of his own breath. The man’s mouth opened at this moment, but he said nothing. He just looked to the ground in doubt, observing once more the arrow wedged through the heron’s neck.

The hunter collected himself, plucking a single feather from a folded wing, before withdrawing from the pond-bank.

“Wait,” croaked the heron. “You are forgetting the most important thing.”

“Which is...?” The hunter teased, feeling his nerves again.

“You forgot to thank an old bird for a gift.”

The man huffed. “You’ll be thanking *me*... for making some use of your feathers.”

But he only kept the one.

The man retracted into the grasses and led his horse up a nearby hill, wanting for a rest beneath a lone tree. Ridiculous fisherbird. Regardless, his head spun from the uncanny scene. The man let a crow fly out from a high branch as he settled on his back and closed his eyes with a sigh.

§

Clouds rolled and eyes darkened in the sky as evening beset the land.

The man awoke to rustling leaves and billows of warm air on his skin. The sky had become a light gray, and the prairie was now silver and dull with shade. *What hour is it?* He sat up and peered for his horse in the shifting sea of grass. *Dumb animal... still getting spooked by a windstorm.* Preparing for an overnight rain, the man started back home. He knew his horse still had the wits to return in the direction of town. In the process of standing up, however, he witnessed the grass before him parting.

There again was the heron. It stood with heaviness and grace and an arrow still in its neck.

The man fell back against the tree’s roots with a breath. “Not tired of living?”

“That is not important.”

“Then what *is*? I have no business with the guardian spirit of a pond,” the man asserted.

The heron tilted its head.

“Shoo. Off with you now.” The man flapped a hand at the bird and stood up.

Its gaze followed him as he left the base of the tree.

“If you wanted a feather, you needed only ask.”

The man pulled the feather from his pocket and held it briefly. “Why have you come all this way?”

The bird ignored him. “Killing me was not a necessary means.”

“I never wanted your feather. Here, take it back.” He outstretched his arm to the heron.

“It is not yours to give.”

“Then what do you want, you silly creature? I shot you to train my eyes. The least you could have done was stay dead and let me take your carcass properly.”

“It was not fair.”

“Life seldom is,” the man shot back within a second.

“I mean it was not an honorable exchange,” the heron clarified indignantly.

“That is still life.” *What am I saying? I sound like a bitter old man.* “Go away. I have had quite enough of you.” The man shook a finger at the heron and gave it one last glance. Nothing. He continued on down the hill. “Go back to your pond, heron, and forget about me!”

§

The winds chilled, and the sky grew a sooty blue, but the young Bowman marched on. The storm tailed quickly, and he was soon buffeted by the dark air of a thunderhead’s grip. Silent cursing occupied the man’s mind as he still had a distance to go.

He had a strange feeling of dread. Why did the storm have to blow in today? The man could not shake the thoughts falling upon him from the gales. The rattling of field grass seemed to whip at his soul, testing his resolve. The world around him was too gray to perceive anything beyond the hill he was climbing and a trail of parted foliage behind a heron walking his way.

The man turned in surprise and kept climbing, trying to keep his distance. I should have looked back earlier, he scolded himself, but he tried to elude these thoughts. Cresting a higher hill, he checked the heron again in a moment of pause. It stayed on its course. He shivered and pushed to the hill’s peak. Thunder sent distant clouds tumbling into each other. The man was trapped between two seas of sky and stems. *Oh, enough of water.* After this there would only be more ponds, more marshes, and more herons. Why am I still giving that bird more thought? I don’t owe you anything! He faced the storm above him and demanded for it to stop.

All the man heard in return was a buzzing squawk. He quickly looked down in front of him, spotting the alive-again heron a fourth time. It was much closer now. He considered running, though he could not judge his distance from town. The sky was too shrouded around the hill they stood atop.

“Back with more dogma? What do you want now?”

“What I *want* no longer matters,” replied the gray bird. “There is a payment owed.”

“Clear off!”

The heron shook itself in the wind.

“I want no part in strange dealings of the spirit,” the man started again.

“Yet you have partaken, nonetheless.”

“I don’t give a damn about a dead bird!”

“You clearly do,” it rasped.

“Then, here, I’ll pay,” the man said, holding out the wing feather once more. Its shiny barbs had frayed somewhat from being carried. “You want this back, don’t you?”

“It is not your token to give,” the heron repeated. “It must be your own to bargain.”

Oh, begone, already. The man tossed the feather to the wind. “I’ll show you a bargain!” He yelled to the heron, fishing the first of seven remaining arrows from his quiver.

Bow in hand, the young man let loose a mighty shot into the heron’s breast. Downy feathers gushed out of the creature as his arrow tore through it. Wisps of blown plumes scattered around the bird like dust. The winds grew rough in this moment, sending the man’s shot whistling back around. In utter shock, he contorted wildly to evade his own puncture. The arrow hit the ground behind him as the sky bellowed in distaste. The heron remained standing.

He shot another arrow, again to the sound of thunder, but it disappeared into the dark. Fear took the young hunter’s mind as he nocked and shot more and more arrows, each clacking against the bow in quivering hands—refusing to wound the bird once loosed. After narrowly missing his own self for a final time, the man stood still, trembling in defeat. *I am without hope. This is not limbo. This is a hell.*

“Whatever trick this is, demon,” the man cried, “I’ll overcome it! I’ll beat you! You will never see the end of

me!”

The winds then flew into a stream so swift it ran like soft water around him, he who had crossed his arms before his scrunched-up face. The heron took several steps towards the young man, where it croaked in a graven tone:

“You offer me feathers back in the form of arrows. You state that life is unfair to all. You will never perish so long as I bear witness to you. These are your terms.”

The man began a final sputter of disbelief. *The gall of this thing to weave my words back at me.* Thunder brewed somewhere far off. He stood, seething, thinking only of his stray arrows stuck somewhere in the dirt.

The heron continued, standing with crooked feathers and gaps in its flesh. “You gave me no respect, and by these terms, is how you choose to live. I shall give you none in return. The least you can do is comply with it.”

The tall bird gangled towards the man, bringing back the rougher winds of the storm like a thousand angry wingbeats. But the dark whirl of veiled force ushered him to attention. He could no longer see beyond his arm’s reach, nor could he see the heron. He saw not what became of his bones—how his flesh peeled away in the spinning night. As thought left his being, he only envisioned his place in what he had just been told. *An eternity under the heron’s patient eye?* The gored hunter’s agony lost itself to the coils of the wind.

§

“So *that’s* Thunder Hill, then?” The boy asked, pointing.

The fletcher nodded.

“In that case, I think I *will* have some arrows. Any kind.

I'll take just eight.”

The fletcher stepped wide through the ankle-deep water and pulled an arrow each from eight separate bushes of reeds. Reeds in this place all had wooden stalks with fuzzy, patterned ends and sharp, metal roots. They clacked and they rattled, when touched.

The boy received his bundle from a crumpled pair of hands. “The fields over there are similar, too.”

“They are,” answered the fletcher, softly.

The boy set foot on his ferry barge, again, with a quiet ripple.

“How much longer do you think you’ll have to work?”

The old, hooded fletcher looked out over the marsh-speckled grassland and scratched his scarred cheek. “I’m not quite done.”

Silence is my First Language

Barrett Davenport

Every morning begins the same way, in silence. The sun slips through the narrow gap in my curtains. It doesn't knock or make a sound. It just glows soft rays of sunshine across my bed like it's trying to wake me up gently. Everything is quiet. No buzzing alarm clock. No birds singing. No loud sounds. No surprise noises. Not empty but just still, soft, quiet air.

My kind of quiet. My quiet.

This is how my mornings always begin. Sometimes when I open my eyes I wonder if I'm still dreaming. Then Daddy comes in. He bursts into the room, arms waving, face glowing, and his lips saying the words *good morning, baby doll*. He greets me the same way every morning. I can't hear him, but I understand him. I already know how it sounds anyways.

I grin.

I am an expert at reading lips for only being seven. Daddy knows this, and yet he still talks to me as if I can hear every word. In his own way, he believes I can. Either way, Daddy always talks to me, even before I put on my "super ears" – cochlear implants.

I squish my face deep into my pillow, trying to hide. Maybe the morning will forget about me, but it doesn't.

The light from my Moana nightlight isn't glowing anymore; it's been swallowed by the morning. Heihei no longer dances across my ceiling like he does in the night, helping me find my way tiptoeing through the toy minefield as a stumble to the bathroom.

But it's okay, because the quiet is still here. It didn't leave; it never does. But I'm not scared of the dark or the quiet. I like it.

"Socks first, Daddy," I demand without making a sound. I poke one foot out of the covers. Daddy laughs. I can't hear it, but I can see it in his eyes. The routine is the same, left foot then right foot, always left foot first. Daddy gets it right every time.

My outfit for the day that has been picked out the night before, hangs from the mirror. As Daddy grabs the shirt, I know it's time. I roll out of bed and slide the shirt on from over top of my head. Today is my new *Huntrix* shirt.

I strike a pose, a pose only a princess could do.

Daddy watches me, smiling quietly and clapping without a sound, but his face shines like fireworks. I take a bow and get a silent applause.

Then suddenly – CRASH. Chaos enters.

Brutus.

He zooms into my room like a furry tornado. His paws thump against the floor. His tail swings everywhere, knocking over my toys. Daddy says that he is a bull in a china shop, but I think he is more like a wrecking ball.

Brutus's tail knocks everything to the floor. Horses, Barbies, books, and LEGO sets all find their new spot according to Brutus. On the floor and broken. Daddy looks at the mess and starts to pick up the pieces. I shrug. It's fine. I don't worry because the LEGO fairy will fix it by tomorrow morning. She always does.

Daddy holds out my "super ears", but I shake my head and zip past him. I race down the stairs and dive onto the couch. The TV is already on and Carl, my older brother, is here too. The TV screen shows pictures moving but no voices and no sound, at least I don't hear anything.

I like it like that. It's the best part.

Daddy once told me that the first movies ever made had no sound, and that I get to live in the "good old days." I get to decide what everyone is saying. It becomes mine. Maybe they are arguing about jellybeans or planning a birthday party for a dinosaur. These "good old days" movies are the best.

Daddy comes downstairs, stopping every two steps to rub Brutus's belly before he allows a path through. Daddy places my "super ears" next to me on the top of the couch cushion and mouths, *whenever you are ready*.

I look at them, then away, then back again. I don't reach for them, instead I watch.

Everything feels calm. I take everything in: the way Carl's eyes follow the TV, the way Daddy stretches his arms after getting smothered by Brutus, the way Brutus's chest moves up and down as he breathes. The scent of the morn-

ing smells like toast and bacon. Yum! Morning feels like home.

Daddy says that most communication is not spoken or heard, but comes from body language, posture, hand gestures, and facial expressions. I believe him because I understand everything. I don't need sound to know what is going on. I have a superpower, a secret weapon.

But still, I wonder what will today sound like? Will it be silly? Will it be soft? Or will it be too loud and crash into me all at once? That happens sometimes.

But I'm not scared because I get to choose. I can turn the sound on, or I can stay right here. In my quiet world. I look at my "super ears". A tiny orange light blinks at me. Waiting. As if it's asking me a question, "Well, are you ready?"

I hesitate.

If I put them on, the world will change. The quiet will disappear. Sounds will rush in; voices, footsteps, and birds filling every empty space. Sometimes it's exciting and sometimes it's a lot. What will I hear today?

I smile and nod a little because I know something special.

Even when I turn the sound on, the silence never really leaves me. My quiet doesn't go away. It hides within me. It's always there waiting. And if it's too much, I know that I can come back to the quiet place, back to myself.

Silence is my first language.

Silence is my normal.

Silence is my safe place.

Silence is my home.

Silence is my happiness.

Escape, Identity, and Duty

Michael Scott Godfrey II

Ever since I was a child, I have wanted to travel the world and experience new things. By the time I was eleven, I figured the Navy would be the easiest way to travel for free while satisfying my sense of duty. Historically, my family has deep roots in the military. My father was in the Navy from 1988-1992, my aunt in the Air Force for twenty-four years, and my great-grandfather was in the Army during WWII. Joining the military was a way to join my family, join their struggles, and be a small part of their accomplishments.

Growing up, I spent most of my time with my grandmother. Her house was my safe space, a small three-bedroom paradise surrounded by trees. My grandmother lived alone with no one else to help her, so she relied on me for a lot of things. On the weekends, when she didn't work, we would go to the Flea Market, work on projects around the house, take care of the dogs, and organize her hoarding collection. I hated working on these things. They were boring and I contested her whenever she asked. But even though I hated these chores, I loved spending time with my grandmother. She understood me, loved me, and most importantly accepted me for who I was. She taught me that people who "loved" me did not have to hurt me. Up until confiding in my grandmother, I had learned to give up and give in to the pain, because flinching and pulling away only made it worse. She supported me, and going to her always

made the abuse and the problems disappear.

When I turned seventeen, I thought my time to enlist had arrived. It turned out that being under-age, in this case under nineteen in Alabama, required my grandmother's consent to enlist. Whenever I brought it up in conversation, she would flat out refuse to sign the waiver. She had other plans for me, anything else that would keep me close to her and safe from harm. I didn't want to disappoint her, so I waited, but I knew that I was destined to serve.

Six years later, and without saying a word to her, I enlisted in the military. Ten weeks later in August of 2013, at the age of twenty-three, I was headed off to bootcamp. But before that happened, I had to break the news to the only person that ever truly cared for my wellbeing. Later that night, I couldn't hide my betrayal any longer. We just sat down to dinner and I broke the news to her as she was watching her favorite television show.

"Grandma, please stop crying. I'm going to be okay."

Through tears and hysterical whining, she screamed back at me, "Why can't you just let me cry? You're leaving me!"

I was leaving her, but I was also running from my past.

Most people believe that the training starts in boot-camp. For me, that was not the case. No, in fact, it began the moment I stepped foot into the O'Hara airport in Ohio. Looking around, I spotted the other potential recruits and decided to join their circle. As we waited, we learned more about each other. One recruit was a man from Kenya hoping to gain US Citizenship for himself and for his family. Another recruit was from New York; she was simply looking to get away from her home and her family.

Our first Recruitment Division Officer (RDO) was nothing to sneeze at. At 6'3", he was pushing close to 230 pounds of pure muscle that could only have been achieved by spending countless hours at the gym. He was a Senior Chief (E-8) with twenty-two years of Naval service under his belt and on his way to retirement. Seeing him standing there, showed me what the future could hold for me, I wanted it all for myself. My daydream was cut short by his demand.

"Take off your sweater, recruit!"

I was at a loss for words, but as the instructions sank in, I simply looked at him and said, "This is a long sleeve shirt, not a sweater."

I was rewarded with a look that could only be identified as pure and utter astonishment. But he instantly replied, "Did I stutter?! Take off the damn sweater!"

Wow. I thought, if you want it that badly, then fucking take it! I complied, removing the long sleeve shirt. This was when I learned my first lesson: *shut up and follow orders*, no matter how senseless they may seem. Six hours and a bus ride later, I stepped foot onto the Great Lakes Training Command grounds.

After climbing off the bus, we were ordered to line ourselves against the walls, facing each other. One by one, they walked us through a door for urinalysis before having

us return to the wall. We had no way of telling what time it was, and I had no idea how long we had been there waiting for the last person to finish. After what seemed like hours, the last person finally finished. One thing was certain; I was learning my second lesson: *leave no "man" behind.*

Exhausted, we all made our way to our compartment – temporary compartment mind you, as we had yet to be assigned to our divisions. We walked in. What was once a rowdy bunch had become a lethargic unit of exhausted individuals. You could see the novelty on everyone's faces slowly fading. We were all ready for bed. I fell asleep immediately wondering if I had made the right call.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Dear GOD! What the hell is with the racket! I literally just fell asleep!

I looked around, and noticed the dark sky looming beyond the windows. As I turned toward the noise, I saw the RDO banging a metallic lid with a piece of wood, screaming for us to get to the line at the edge of our racks. We would come to know this area as the "toe line." Bleary-eyed, and still exhausted from the events of the day before, we watched each other sway back and forth, slowly heeding the call.

"That was fucking pathetic! Ten minutes to get from your rack to your toe line? You would all be fucking dead if this was a real emergency! Now follow me."

Ugh! We're tired! Can't you see we're practically dead on our feet?! We just got here, give us some time to adjust! Words, I knew if spoken aloud, would turn this manageable situation into a true nightmare, and thus these words remained unspoken.

Along the way, on shaky legs, I glimpse a clock almost completely hidden from view. Two thirty-eight in the morning. A few hours of sleep...not bad, I thought to my-

self. When we finally reached our destination, our fatigue began to drain away. We had gone to the main issue, this was where we got our gear – all of it: shirts, pants, shoes, covers (hats), sewing repair kit, undergarments, to name a few things, and a duffel bag to shove all of it into. The pack must have weighed nearly eighty pounds which was about forty pounds less than my own 120-pound frame.

Our RDO had the look of disappointment after looking at his wrist watch. After referring to his internal to-do list, he screamed out, “Gather your packs! I’m taking you to the Division you will be part of for the rest of bootcamp; if you make it that long!”

With heavy packs on our backs, and an hour of marching later, I learned my third lesson: *Be prepared for anything.*

We arrived at our new compartment and for the first time, we had some semblance of choice. We had the option to choose which of the three-tier racks would be ours for the remainder of bootcamp. I chose a top rack because most of the others were avoiding them. The less competition the better. I settled in, waiting for the return of our RDO.

To our surprise, in walks, not the Senior Chief RDO that had gotten us here, but another RDO. She introduced herself as a first-generation military member in her family with eight years of service as a Master-At-Arms. She was hoping to become a Petty Officer First Class (E-6) by the end of her Recruitment Training Duty billet. She informed us that she would be our primary RDO. She would be the one that would transform us from civilians to service members of the United States Navy.

The next seven weeks involved the laborious tasks of training under her tutelage. We learned formation and marching, training with weapons, and we studied and tested on the history of the Navy. We also learned the numerous designations within the ranks of the Navy, teaching us who

we could speak to and how to speak to them. We immersed ourselves in physical training, it became part of our schedules and was also a form of punishment. Either way, it was torture.

The weeks passed and my only contact with the outside world were letters from home and the occasional phone call when we earned them.

Ring. Ring. It’s been two weeks since I spoke with my grandmother. *Ring. Ring. What if she doesn’t pick up?*

“Hey, grandma.” I feel the pain in my stomach when I hear her crying on the other side of the line. “I’m sorry for not calling you sooner...”

She cuts me off, “I am happy to hear from you. I have been so worried. How are you doing in Bootcamp? Did you get my letter yet?”

I was yet to get any mail, so up until this moment I was unsure if she would speak to me again after I made the decision to join the Navy. I began to breathe easier knowing that I had her support, and with that, I could make it through anything else they threw at me. The reminders of home and knowing what I had left behind, provided me comfort. I knew that what I was doing was bigger than myself, and that I made the right choice.

Nine weeks of bootcamp later, it was time for all of us to become official service members. The graduation hall erupted as families and loved ones broke into a cacophony of applause, whoops, and hollers as my division, Division 403, marched in. We marched in with our heads held high, proud to be the Navy’s latest addition and eager to share who we had become. As the excitement quiets, the silence is broken by the captain giving the same speech he had given us hundreds of times. But on this day, we hung on to his every word, and the oath we swore became heavier in our hearts and minds. A weight we would bear together so

others would not.

As he spoke, I couldn't help but scan the crowd. *Do not break formation!* The order was engraved in my soul, but the desire to see familiar faces was just too great. *There! I see my grandmother and my aunt!* Their look of pride was empowering, only they knew who I was, and they were there to witness who I had become. Seeing them made me stand that much taller, and made my chest stuck out just a bit more. I was proud of what I had become. Growing up, I could not defend myself, but today I knew I would defend my country. Today, I was joining my family's legacy. I had a duty to not only my country, but to my friends and most importantly to my family.

When the captain finally finished his speech, our RDO began calling each of us. As she named my brothers and sisters, all I could think about was our final lesson of boot-camp: *You sacrifice more than yourself for your country.* Finally, she calls my name, and for the first time with my family beside me, I hear:

“Seaman Godfrey!”

Triste Bella

Stephanie Eguiza

Quítate mi corazón
De mi alma
Cuidárte lo
Llévelo a la playa
Para que pueda sentir el sol, el aire, y el agua
Pobrecita triste bella

A dentro del mar
La sal se mete
En las grietas
Y purifica lo que te ha atormentado
Ya no llores triste bella

Levántate y toma
Tu primera respiración de la vida

Untitled

Devanne Candare

And if I had ever a mistake,

(and I have, many), it was proof of my living.

And if I had ever regret,

(and I have, countless), it was proof of my mistakes.

And if I had ever changed,

(and I have, lots), it was proof of my regret.

So I'll make mistakes,

Because I'm still living.

I'll regret,

Because I'll make mistakes.

I'll change.

I've already regret.

The Magic Piece

Alexis Ramos

Black Phoebes guide noise as sanctuary,
Heavy footsteps ride a mind of their own,
My mind wandered humanity's queries
They manifest in time, of which true, is unknown.

§

Some believe that stonehenge was born from a curse.
Worse, some think they're crafted by Aliens,
Insecurity in intellect,
What do we really know?
Confounded by ignorance,
We ain't brainless.

§

Some believe greenthumbs are merely a myth.
Some think they're individually lost causes,
worthless without a pit.
We're not who we are,
We forgot the gardens we planted,
almost like Babylon didn't exist.
Money, money, money!
humanity's man-made tint.

§

Do hummingbirds judge our jingles—
Hums of madness—Or
Do they ravish
in botanical gardens?
Along the humans, sunflowers
in silk-skin they reach.
Call upon us!
—your friends,

To Wonder Why We Wander

Angel I. Ramirez

In the quiet and quaint shadows of the forest grounds, an invisible force raced through the trees with blinding speed. As it rushed through the woods faster than the birds and the flies, many leaves were dragged and ripped clean from their trees by the entity while a great many endured its assault. With it racing through the trees its body began to take shape as a layer of natural debris was dragged from the forest floor into the air. It dragged these layers of plants as if it was its prey, before twisting and turning towards a unique sight. As it dragged its trail of deceased leaves and torn twigs, the force began to approach a single, lonely tree. One that, unlike the others in this vast forest, had roots which were stretched far across the opening it stood in, yet it stood furthest from any other tree in the forest. With its bodies of lifeless debris dancing and weaving up the lonely tree, many leaves and twigs tore from the hulk of this lonely giant as the force climbed higher and higher. However, as it rose towards the very top of the tree, a strange speck of green caught its attention.

There, just a few branches from the top of this lonely tree, a caterpillar was inching its way across the length of a weakly thin twig, far above where any other caterpillar dared to venture. The force drew itself closer towards the small insect almost curiously, this little one was far from where any other caterpillar usually would be. Yet as the wind blew more violently from the force's presence, the very

edge of the twig it stood on suddenly snapped as the poor caterpillar clung on the edge of the torn twig for dear life. The leaves and twigs the entity carried around juttied back in surprise as the life of this unique little creature was now in danger. For a moment, it watched as the small insect struggled to hold itself onto the small twig as it began to tear more and more from the hull of the tree from the caterpillar's own weight. Suddenly from the caterpillar's own breath, it made a small, helpless plea.

"P-Please!! If it's really you, don't make today my last!"

As he shouted this sudden and unexpected command, the flurry of dead leaves and twigs stopped their spinning dance around the caterpillar as they began to hover in place. The invisible force was surprised, it had assumed that all life had not known it was there at all, and it never anticipated a creature of this world to try to actually-speak to it. Yet before the small insect could even process what was going on around him... *SNAP*.

With the caterpillar now hurdling down towards the ground on the edge of this small twig, the entity wasted no time. Using its power of manipulating the winds, a blanket of leaves rushed to the aid of the small caterpillar before carrying him and the twig he remained attached to towards the safety of a sturdier twig. As the caterpillar raised his

small green head to look around himself, the leaves would urge the small insect to crawl towards the sturdier twig before dissipating the moment he was secured onto it. Confused and a bit scared, the caterpillar watched as the leaves and twigs danced in an unnatural spinning motion in the middle of the air before a voice spoke out to him in a soft, echoed tone.

“How did you know I was here?”

The caterpillar looked around confused. “um...I didn’t.” He said with an awkward expression on his small insect face. The bundle of leaves spinning in the air all faced towards the caterpillar as the little one looked around nervously. “M-My brothers and sisters and I all know of you. You’re well... we refer to you as Zephyr. Y-you clear away the weak and deceased off the land to make room for the strong. A-and You make sure the strong get the air that they need to breathe and you have seen everything we haven’t.”

“Zephyr is what you refer to me?”

“Y-yes.”

“How pleasant! In the years I have roamed and traveled, such a name to me has not all been made present.”

The edge of the branch in which the small insect stood began to descend at its point as this entity, with its coat of dead leaves and twigs, looked curiously at the little caterpillar and seemed to somewhat sit alongside him.

“What you say is true, I see the stars differently than you can, and I have seen lands which you will never see. I’ve seen lakes of salt spanning miles, and seen all that there can be.” said the one called Zephyr in its soft spoken tone as a cluster of floating leaves inched closer to the caterpillar. “What I haven’t seen, however, is a creature of your size partaking in this endeavor. So tell me, if you wish, why are you so different from your family? And why would you par-

take in, what you creatures call, this ‘death wish?’”

The caterpillar looked down in shame as Zephyr spoke to him in its estranged rhythmic tones and a voice that blew on his face softly. “I-I, well, I guess I’m just...not ready to, be like them I guess.”

The entity twisted itself curiously over the twig as it quietly danced around the small insect. “Not ready? But why not? Your kind turn to such beautiful little things, even when the world around you is in health or in rot.”

The small caterpillar shrugged as he began to crawl up the length of the tree. “I-dont know. But...none of my brothers or sisters wondered why they even wanted to ‘Change’ the way we do. They just went for it and I guess I was the only one who really wanted to know why before I decided to change, you know?” He said with a hint of frustration in his small puny voice before turning towards the sky, in hopes he was speaking to Zephyr at its face.

“Change sometimes doesn’t need a reason. It’s just the way things are sometimes, for the planet, its life, and even its seasons. I can understand why you have your doubts, but why don’t you venture down below and see what this change is really all about?”

“Because I just don’t understand, why do I have to change into something else to be considered beautiful or amazing? Aren’t I already enough for this world? And if not then, why do I even start out like this?...It just feels strange to me.”

For a moment, the wind above the tree line went silent as Zephyr looked down with surprise. For such a small thing, he had really big feelings. “Your mind seems louder than one would expect. Is it possible to guess that fear is the reason you have chosen to reject?”

“...maybe. I’ve already seen all of my brothers and sis-

ters change into what they are now, and they're all so beautiful and talented. They already know how to do tricks, they talk about how great the taste of pollen is, they can fly, and they all are able to be together. But...I think I am scared. And I'm still here, and I just don't see how I can shake myself out of it." With his tiny head dropping down, and a sad look in his small face, the caterpillar once again glanced at the floating leaves before readjusting himself as if he didn't say what he just said. "B-but it's fine! Really! Besides, pollen can't be THAT much better than leaves right? Leaves are the best thing I have ever eaten!"

The entity's voice would give a slight chuckle, "You may have a solid reason, but that's *all* you have eaten."

"I—well, that's true. But they can't be, can they?"

With the caterpillar giving a look of concern, his face turned towards the horizon as he and Zephyr took a moment of silence to just be where they were. The treeline of the forest could be seen for miles around them as waves of green flowed beyond the insects own sight. However down below them, shimmers of bright orange specks could be seen dancing between the trees. While he couldn't exactly see what it was, the caterpillar had what it was, his family. A solemn look of loneliness befell on the caterpillar's face as now more than ever, did he feel so far away from everyone and everything he knew.

As the leaves and twigs continued their silent spins across the air, the entity shifted its movement ever so slightly as one of the many dead leaves rested upon the caterpillar's back. Like a stranger's giant hand against his backside, Zephyr rested this leaf against the caterpillar.

"It is within your species to feel fear, it is how you all have made it here. For years and years, your fear has granted you safety from that which brings you harm. But in these and many other circumstances, it seems fear brings you to a constant state of needless alarm. Your words seem to stem

from a pain I do not know. You claim to seek no change, but I assume your heart wishes to grow?"

The caterpillar sat there in silence as a small sigh escaped the insect's mouth. "It does...but what if I mess everything up? What if I hate the pollen, what if I tear my wings, or what if I die while I'm still in my chrysalis?"

As the small caterpillar's head continued to droop down even lower, he expected to be belittled for how strange he was feeling. It made sense knowing he was speaking with such a powerful being. Yet as the caterpillar looked beside himself, he watched as the leaves and twigs began to spin around the caterpillar into a tunnel of light. From the caterpillar's perspective, he watched as hundreds of dead leaves and twigs formed a spiralling tunnel towards the sun. As he felt the cool wind, mixed with the warmth of the sun, the caterpillar could feel a chill run from his head to his tail. He never knew such a beauty made with the leaves could even exist in such a way. And as the warmth and coolness of the sun and wind were felt everywhere and all at once, Zephyr spoke once more in its ethereal tone.

"Whether you make it in life or not, I sadly cannot say. For the lives I have seen in many have all ended in many ways. But what I can tell you is this, that while stillness can be your trusted friend. It will not save you from your nightmare, nor will it bring you to your happy end. So hunt for your opportunities, take your leap of faith. That every day you choose to soar, or roam, I will be there for every chase."

As his face gazed into the beautiful spiral of greens, browns, and oranges, a single leaf suddenly swept the small caterpillar from his feet as in an instant, the little one began to hang on for dear life while he began to plummet from the top of the tree. The rush was so sudden that the small caterpillar feared what was happening. Was this a trap? Did he fall for it? Will his last moment be that of a fool? These ideas and many others flew all around the caterpillar's mind.

Yet as he opened his eyes, he looked around the world with awe. Sitting upon the leaf that had swooped him up, the caterpillar watched as the ground grew closer and closer as a flock of leaves followed his every movement. It was an enchanting thing, to know the feeling of flight long before he ever spread his wings.

“For every tumble and for every bit of nectar, I will be sure to see you are safe. Because you truly mean so much to me, as a being with no face. I cannot feel as you do, I cannot taste, I cannot smell, but I can see. You are loved and appreciated, no matter who you choose to be.”

With its words beginning to grow more echoed and distorted, the invisible force surrounding the caterpillar on his leaf dissipated with a great gust of wind which sent all the leaves around the insect flying. On his tiny little leaf, the caterpillar held on tightly through the air as he made his descent towards the forest floor. Caution was riddled in his eyes and relief was at best shaky within his breath as the caterpillar looked around. With a smile across his face, the caterpillar eased up as he looked high above at the tree he had just come down from and witnessed as the trail of leaves moved on beyond his sight.

Trudging along the forest ground, the caterpillar wandered the forest floor with Zephyr’s voice in his mind. As time passed, his own fear riddled thoughts began to be swapped for the words of the entity who spoke to him, befriended him, and ultimately, saved him.

Eventually as the days passed, the caterpillar would make his decision. And as the fall and the winter season came to pass, a legion of butterflies would flood the forest come spring. Walls of orange fluttering wings riddled the forest as this great colony sought to join with one another in their species’ yearly migration.

Yet in the hull of one of the many nearby trees, a decaying, dried out chrysalis could be seen resting within its

floor. The place in which it sat was slightly warm as bits and pieces of the material laid silently in the heart of this giant.

However, as a sudden gust of wind began to pass through, the remains of this chrysalis flew high amongst the leaves and twigs as it was brought to a place all too familiar. A lonely tree. Only this time it was far from alone. Large swarms of butterflies in the thousands flew and rested all over the hull of this great giant as it was the place in which all butterflies made their stop to reunite and reconnect. To share stories of their unique lives and to remember the ones who were lost. The wind blew around and through the waves of fragile beauty surrounding the tree, and as the small gust of wind carried the leaves, twigs and chrysalis remains from the edges of the tree, they would scatter as they flew up towards the very top. And at this highest point, far from all the others, a lone butterfly with the brightest wings of them all rested at its highest point. And as the sun set beyond the horizon, a wave of orange flowed throughout the woods, in an embrace to last eternally.

Lessons of My Life

Dwayne West

Picture yourself lying on the ground, unaware of what just happened. You gather yourself up and notice your blood-stained shirt and the boots of police officers near you. Later, you are thrown in the back of an ambulance and hauled off to an unforeseen future.

My story didn't start off this way, and I never thought that it would take that turn. My story isn't filled with action scenes, kill counts, and gun fire. Nope, just me and my struggle to fit in. I never thought that I would be shot multiple times, taken to the brink of death, and then thrown in prison. I always wondered what others meant when they said things like, "You'll learn one day, and life has a funny way of teaching you." I hate to say it, but man...they were right. I'm writing my story in a prison cell, revisiting the events that led up to my incarceration.

I am not a U.S. born citizen. I was born in Belize where I was raised by my parents and family members. Thinking back to when I was just a young kid in Belize, I have always done things on my own. Not having a brother or sister made me naturally independent. I enjoyed playing marbles alone, perfectly content without an opponent. Back then, life was pretty simple, and all of the hard decisions were made by my mom and dad. Later in life, one of the toughest decisions I would have to make would be to just be myself.

I never considered myself to be a bad person, or that the things I did were "bad things." I thought myself to be just like you. I did normal things like: listen to rap music, play video games, hang out with the homies, smoke weed, and carry a loaded gun. I was just like everyone else, just a normal teenager. I had friends, actual friends, you know, the ones from school who weren't up to no good. Friends who you could invite to your home, friends your parents knew about. Friends you played ball with, friends who actually cared about you.

For a long time, I got away with having actual friends while reaping the benefits of hanging with the homies. The benefit I speak of was the elusive membership in a gang that I thought I wanted to be a part of.

The title *gang member*, in my opinion, is complex because there is more to understand than just the title. In the United States, districts are divided into sections, separating races into classes: lower, upper, and middle, creating economic and social segregation. Laws work against the color of your skin. The land of opportunity, if you missed the fine print, it reads: if you are the right color. We create systems that encourage individuals to self-enforce racist narratives. I am not justifying senseless murders or criminal activity. I am simply saying that we are what you made us to be.

I was never initiated into a gang, but I can remember being almost recruited by someone when I was about thirteen years old. I was offered the line and asked if I wanted to represent a clique associated with the gang. I was offered a *signing bonus*, a gun and a wad of money—it was tempting. Little did I know that I only wanted this other life, free of the oppression, that I had been chasing for the better part of my childhood. I was always different, powerless, and ostracized in high school. I struggled to find myself. This was my chance to be part of a family where power and acceptance were the signing bonus.

I kept this offer to myself.

Not even my mother knew that I was growing further and further away from her and myself. My intentions weren't aimed at hurting her or my family members. I just wanted to fit in, to be a part of something, even if I was not considered an official gang member. Eventually, I turned down the offer, but I continued to associate with other gang members.

When my family decided they wanted to move to the U.S., the land of opportunity, they came with hopes of a better life than they found in Belize. I squandered that opportunity, as I am currently serving a 25-year sentence for assault on a peace officer, and for the possession of a semi-automatic weapon. The truth is, most of the charges I'm in prison for are fictitious. I mentioned I carried a gun before, but what I didn't mention is that, after a long day at work, my mom found that gun in my room. Luckily, I got caught by my mom and not by the cops. She threw out my gun that day, down in a storm drain somewhere. My behaviors and actions were starting to become a problem, a problem I was too ignorant to acknowledge. I thought everything was cool, but my mom knew something was not right. I think back now and wonder if only I had confided in her and told her what was happening, I would be a different man and wouldn't be writing my story from a prison

cell. I fell victim to the system; chasing acceptance and validation came at a cost.

It was October 15, 2009. I had just turned twenty-seven a few days ago. It was a sunny day in Los Angeles California, and I woke up and got dressed for what I thought was going to be a normal day for me. I spent most of my day outside chilling, smoking weed, and drinking Old English with some of my friends. Later that night I passed out in my rocking chair in my room. My mom woke me up and said there was someone there to see me, and to my surprise, it was a cop. The police report falsely claimed that a doctor had approached me earlier that day, and was confronted in a way that made him concerned. He then called the police who arrived later that night. Confused, I stepped out into the hallway and saw the cop standing there with a blank stare. I panicked and said, "Oh...can I take a piss first?"

The officer didn't respond. I then questioned the officer, "Wait...what are you doing here?" He didn't respond. The officer remained silent and rigid.

It happened fast, all I remember was my back hitting the hallway door. One second later, without a notice, the LAPD officer had pulled his taser and shot me with it. The feeling of being tasered is like being hit with a paralyzing blow over and over again. I somehow pulled the taser prongs from my chest, my instinctive reaction was to get away, and I ran back into my room, but the officer followed closely behind me. He then pulled his collapsible baton out from his side and swung at me. I reacted by dodging the strike and then delivering a blow of my own to the officer's head with my fist. I grabbed him by the collar and began to land punch after punch. We began fighting in my room, eventually knocking my television off my drawer. At one point, he placed me in a chokehold, but I was able to break free.

I remember a moment when I was standing near the

door to my room, then just falling to the floor. I was on my back, confused as to what had just happened. According to the police report, the officer had shot me four times, but my body told a different story. After falling to the floor in the hallway of my apartment, I tried to figure out why I couldn't get back up. I realized that something was wrong, and when I looked at my chest, I noticed my shirt was soaked with blood and full of bullet holes. I don't remember seeing the cop reach for his gun, nor do I remember hearing his gun go off, but in the span of a few seconds I had been shot nine times.

By the time I realized I had been shot, I remember seeing the boots of the other cops piling into the hallway. I was handcuffed and placed into an ambulance that was waiting out front. According to my mother, the story of the shooting involving an officer made it onto the local news, and my mother and neighbors were questioned by reporters. The police chief addressed the public by stating that I was "gang related." He painted the picture of an individual who was ruthless, impulsive, and violent—the same image that I thought I wanted to be. That was almost seventeen years ago, and I have learned a lot since then. This experience taught me one of the hardest lessons of my life: that it is perfectly okay to be myself.

Life Through Reflected Light

Donna Lopez-Landers

Traditional Illustration



Plus One

Halo Hernandez

The rain pit-pattered outside, flicking against the glass and melding with the various noises of the sleepless city of Chicago. Its artificial lights reflecting off of the droplets and turning them various hues of yellows, reds, and whites.

The halls that led up to her office were covered in a dark red ornate wallpaper. The only sign of its detail was the light that illuminated through the cracks of her closed office door. The only light around as Donné approached it. It was always dark around her. She liked the dark. She once told him that was when she did her best work.

He reached for the brass doorknob and twisted it open, the creaking noise being introduced into a room with a faint radio humming a used tune and the rain's incessant tapping.

"...You called for me, *Patronne*?" he asked in a low accented voice.

She sat on the edge of her desk, one leg over the other while a cigarette hung between her long fingernails. She wore a pinstriped suit as dark as this very night, extending from the tips of a brimmed hat all the way down to the point of her high heels. The stripes were as thin as thread to be sewed together. She wore it with a myriad of golden jewelry all over her and her suit, almost as bright in color as her silky white hair.

A signature look of Arlene Griffiths. Or of *The Lassie*. *Bloody Mary*. *Lady Luck*. *The Merry Murderess*. She's been known by many names, but to Donné, she was *Patronne*.

She turned around and flexed her wide lip-sticked grin across her pale face, standing up gesturing the smoky cigarette in her hand,

"Don—!! Oh, do please come in! Come in! And shut the door on your way in, please!" she chirped in that elevated voice.

Donné stepped inside and did exactly as he was told, slowly drifting his hand off the knob of the door and taking slow steps across the carpet.

"What do you request of me, *Patronne*?" he asked again as rigid as his posture, standing like a board of wood was stuck in his suit.

Arlene tilted his head and cigarette in tandem, pursing her expression into a playful smirk,

"Oh darling... you stand there like a little soldier ready to head off to war—! You look so silly like that—! You know—I once knew a man who wouldn't *shut up* about serving and honoring his country in The Great War and all of that mumbo jumbo. He'd blabber on about how he was *this* rank

under *this* sergeant... he was awfully *boring*, always wanting to flaunt his badges... excuses excuses to make him seem like the manliness man at the table...

“Oh, but honey, there’s no need to stand in such a *boring* way! No, you’re *hardly* a boring man! In fact what I would like to inform you about is *exciting*! Do loosen up!”

Donné tried to relax his shoulders, and allow his muscles to slouch; easier in thought than in execution. Arlene smiled, taking a few steps closer to him,

“Perfect, perfect, yes... ” she murmured, then clapped her hands,

“Now– Tonight is very special, I hope you know... and I do believe that you’ll love it as much as I do, Donné; we are going to a dinner party!”

Donné perked up at this, lifting a brow,

“A dinner party?”

“Yes, a dinner party! Oh, don’t give me that look, it’ll be fun! Come on now! Everyone all dressed to the nines, shining in the bedazzling light that’s like a private beacon in the night. The laughter and the jokes being tossed here and there, floors for dancing, tables for eating, tall seats for rich cats to wave their champagne glasses... yes I *did* say champagne...! Champagne... and wine, bourbon, whiskey... *Manhattans*... a perfect little nook for giggle water to be exchanged...

“What’s not to love about it! You know how much I *love* parties don’t you, darling? Especially what it can do for business... and speaking of business...”

“...What might be your plans for the business, *Madame*?”

“Oh a lady never tells–! And it’s not for me, silly!”

Arlene leaned in close to his face with a sly smile,

“...It’s for you, sweetheart...!”

Donné blinked and refocussed his look onto her lidded eyes,

“For me? What do you mean?”

“Must I explain everything? How humorous you are, Don– you, my dear, are going to be performing tonight... swooning tonight’s audience with that guitar of yours, playing hymns the likes of which have never heard. You’re going to captivate everyone with those striking dance moves that you can hit, and you’ll enamor them with your soulful lyrics as you sing the best you’ve ever sung into that microphone. Who knew that your raspy and husky voice such as yours can sound so amazing in those little French songs of yours? It’s something honestly so breathtaking, wouldn’t you think, Don? Now imagine the crowd wooing and crying out your name, applauding and cheering because you have won all of their hearts with your talents... yes, you!”

“...Me... I see, yes *Madame*, I will perform my best.”

“Yes. You will. Because I can make something happen you know... tonight, certain somebodies will be there. Certain... *managers, venue owners, record labels*... and I will be there to... *get into a talk or two*...”

“Really–? *Patronne*– you really don’t have to–”

“*Hush*. I want to! It’s all of your wildest dreams coming true, is it not? I have the power to make that happen, so I shall. You do your thing onstage, while I pull a few strings backstage, hm? We’re a team, aren’t we?”

“Uh... yes, we are... *I- I don’t know what to say, Madame*–!”

“How about, ‘I’m ready to go *mon cher*’? We best be off

now— here!”

Arlene marched away from him and off to a nearby chair, where a finely pressed suit lounged in waiting for her to pick it up and hold it up to the musician,

“Put this on! I had it especially tailored for *you*, dear.”

Donné followed the suit, his gaze fixated on the shiny fabric and smooth features. We wished to hold it like it was an ancient artifact of purity.

“That... for me? I’ve hardly worn anything as expensive as this—!”

“Well one day you’ll be worth a million, so you better start dressing like it!” she laughed.

His attention was locked onto the suit until the smoke from the cigarette in her hand swirled across his vision, dancing before his eyes and twisting in a seductive tango. He stared at it for longer than he thought.

She pulled it away,

“*Oh down boy*... there will be plenty to smoke at the party! Besides, you’d be bursting into a coughing fit on stage and harming your precious little voice, hm? We don’t want that now do we?”

“...Okay. Yes-”

“Yes. Now enough chit-chat and go put it on! We leave in a half-hour.”

“Of course— thank you so much for this, *Patronne! I!*” he faltered in his speech while the suit was handed to him, feeling a weight on the lapel of the suit and seeing it shine in the light. A golden emblem. “*AG*” it read.

“...What is-?”

“Oh that? Well, you are my plus one are you not? I wouldn’t want you wandering about to be confused as anyone else’s, right?”

She leaned forward and spread her smile, her reddened eyes locked on his,

“You’re with me. Remember?”

“...Yes. Right. I’m with you.”

“Perfect.”

Donné nodded, taking gradual steps out of the office and huddling the suit close to him. He cleared his throat,

“Thank you again for everything, *Madame Griffiths!*”

“Oh please, do call me... *Madame Arlene.*”

“...*M-Madame Arlene-* right. Thank you!”

He left the office, shutting the door behind him, the faint ambiance refilling the room.

Arlene shoved her cigarette into an ash tray while she eyed the door. She snickered.

“*Cute.*”

Bound **Imelda Leyva**

I did not know I would be here.
I was not aware that delight
was bound in paper,
near Funko-Pops, plushies, blind-boxes,
& so many tchotchkes.
Give me, give me, give me more.

Eeeeeeeeeek! (My neurons cheered with glee.)

This is just one
One of...
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.
Wait, 7 ate 9.
No, really it was H₂O damaged
& my books had drowned.

Whyyyyyyyyyy! (My heart ached & cried.)

I began to fill it years before
my daughter was born.
Comics are my laughter, fashion strut along,
illustration is my passion,

children literature really?
I got no kids; I will take 20.

In looooooooooove. (My soul now glows.)

Y.A. Fiction well this is anew.
It began with some comic ideas,
my daughter slept by my side.
“What’s this?”, a book had begun.
As a child I have been told,
I should never draw, sew, sing, & so forth.

“You are NOT good...” (Evil aunt’s words haunted me.)

‘Valentine & Rion’ comic had evolved
a story, a series, was that all inside me?
Like purple dead-netters & creepy buttercups,
amazed I was like my child, McQueen my lil’ one.
“I believe in you. It’s time I believe in myself too.”
I needed another notebook & more pens!

Scribble, Scribble, Cross-Out, Scribble, Scribble...

One bound with 4 peculiar stories
next to the python & go.

I would have never known.
“You are NO good”, I know & will still be told.
Just now I am stronger than before,
& who knows maybe theirs a film ahead.

Need #9, 10, 11... so many books on the floor. (Who would of known.)

(Emotional) Motion Sickness

Alexa Cuadra

“What happens when people open their hearts?”...

“They get better.”

– Haruki Murakami

§

There was a soft, warm light that only dimly opened up the road ahead; the fog thickly covered anything past what was directly in front of us. The small rocks on the pavement below us crunched as we zoomed past. There was no signal, and we could only really hear a faint static on the radio. I look beside myself to see her, her eyes fixed on the road. Her eyebrows were deeply furrowed in concentration; you could see the street lights come and go in the reflection of her thick, black, square glasses. She held a strong grip on the wheel.

I stared at her intently. Her hair was a dark brown -- almost black -- coiled and thick. Her pink, plump lips shone against the reflection of the dim lights outside. The bridge of her nose was only slightly hooked and her eyes were of a round almond shape, adorned with short wispy lashes.

“I can’t see a single thing,” she whispered under her breath.

You could tell in her tone of voice that she was getting frustrated. I sat there, almost dumbfounded, trying to find the right words to comfort her. I reached over to her, placing my warm hand on her thigh, and caressed her. She didn’t turn to acknowledge me. Her eyes remained fixed on the road. Those eyebrows remained just as deeply furrowed. I removed my hand in defeat.

Sensing my shift, she turned over to me. “I’m sorry,” she sighed out, “I’m just stressed.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

A silence fell upon us once more.

I looked over at the window to my right to see the layers of mist fly past us as she drove. There was a layer of dew on the hood that slowly streaked up the windshield, forming a shape of its own against the wind. It was late into the night at this point and the fog outside was getting denser by the second. It felt as though the world itself was closing in on us.

I interrupted the silence.

“I know there must be a lot going on in your mind. You’ve gone through so much these past couple of months -- nothing a person should ever have to go through at our

age,” I started, “but you can’t just leave me in the dust. I never know what’s going on in your mind anymore. I feel like I’m always just guessing.”

Her eyes remained on the road ahead. She bit the inside of her right cheek as her eyes darted around, trying to think of something to say. A small frown formed on her lips that twitched into and out of place as she fought the expression. Slowly, her eyes welled up and shone against the light. A single tear rolled down her face.

I reached over to her and brushed it off with my thumb.

“I’m sorry...” she finally let out.

She quickly swiped the falling tears and took a deep breath. She turned over to me gently and gave me a sad smile, still fighting the deep-set frown embedded within her face.

“... it’s just hard.”

“I know it is,” I replied, “but I don’t know what to do anymore. I don’t know how to help you. Can you please just tell me what it is? Was it something I said?”

“No. No, not at all,” she hastily replied.

“Then what is it?”

Her eyes started welling up with tears quicker than before, ricocheting from her cheek to her cloth shirt. Her short lashes quickly webbed with the moisture, her eyes and face slowly flushing.

“I don’t know...”

“Come on—”

I was interrupted by the static of the radio, growing louder and louder until it was completely gone, replacing itself with the mumbles of an old song.

If you miss the train I’m on

You will know that I am gone

You can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles

We both turned to look at each other in silence, her tears gone. She turned back to face the misty road as my eyes lingered, fixed on her.

Lord, I’m one, Lord, I’m two

Lord, I’m three, Lord, I’m four

Lord, I’m 500 miles from my home

Her tears returned gently.

“I just miss everything,” she finally let out, “Months have passed but I can’t stop thinking about it. I miss my home, my room. I miss the comfort of just being there. It wouldn’t matter if I’d get home after the most stressful day of my life, I could just sit between those four walls that were *completely* and *wholly* mine and truly relax.”

I stared at her intently, in awe of the words that were finally pouring out of her mouth.

500 miles, 500 miles

500 miles, 500 miles

Lord I’m 500 miles from my home

“And god, I miss my family. I miss going home and being greeted by my aunt on the couch. I miss going upstairs and bothering my mom and my sister in their rooms. I miss it all. It just hurts. My chest aches just thinking about it.”

She sounded exasperated as she spoke, her shoulders and face animated every word she let out. Her tears flowed consistently. I couldn’t do anything except watch her, give her my full attention. I could feel her analyze my face as she’d go back and forth between watching the cold, misty road and looking over at my softened expression.

Not a shirt on my back, not a penny to my name

Lord, I can’t go a-home this a-way

“I’m just so angry. He took everything away from me — everything that I had laid out for myself, everything that he promised me. It’s crazy how quickly things can change — how quickly he changed. I just can’t help but wonder what he thinks now; does he regret it? Does he even miss us? God, I’d give anything to know what’s happening in his head.”

I slowly nodded in response.

This a-way, this a-way, this a-way, this a-way

Lord, I can’t go a-home this a-way

She sniffled as she took a beat. Her eyebrows were knitted and her frown was still twitching on her lips. Her

hands remained steady on the wheel despite her shakiness in breath.

“But even despite everything — everything he’s done to me, to my family, I still can’t help but miss him. I mean, he’s still my *dad*, you know? I miss who he used to be. I miss who I thought he was. He’ll always linger in my mind.”

If you miss the train I’m on

You will know that I am gone

You can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles

The last lyrics echoed in the car and the radio went back to faint static. A silence consumed us as she finally took a deep breath. I hadn’t looked away from her for a second. When I finally did, I began to see the road slowly opening up in front of us.

She looked over at me and let out a small chuckle.

“I’m sorry, that must’ve been a lot to take in,” she let out playfully, her face puffy and pink. The outline of her lips were swollen and you could see the pressure tighten as she curved them to speak.

“No, my love, not at all,” I finally replied, staring at her with care. I shifted in my seat.

“You know, this is what I’m here for,” I started, “I’m sitting next to you for a reason, right? There’s two seats in the front of a car, I’m here to be your copilot. You don’t have to clench so hard on that wheel anymore, I’m here to take over whenever you need me to.”

I did the motion of swerving the wheel and she giggled. That’s all I wanted — to hear that beautiful laughter.

“Thank you,” she sighed out. Her expression finally softened and her grip on the wheel was no longer as tight as it was before. She yawned and stretched a bit in place.

I chuckled as I saw her tired face.

“Here, pull over, let me drive.”

The Vicar

Jesus Martinez Castaneda

It's been months since his passing and he's finally getting a mass.

Oscar was the cooler cousin, the kind that made adulthood seem attainable when I was younger. His style, his confidence, the ease with which he occupied the world. All of it fascinated me. He had access to futures I could only imagine as a child trailing behind him at family parties. Now what remains of him sits inside a small wooden box at the front of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

Outside, a light rain taps endlessly against stained glass and sun-faded clay walls. The sky hangs low and gray above National City, and relatives flood through the church doors carrying damp jackets and old grief. I see faces I haven't seen in nearly a decade. Cousins enlarged by age. Uncles softened by time. Children who were once infants now tall enough to bow their heads during prayer. Many are strangers to me now.

An old iron portrait stand holds up Oscar's image beside the altar. In the photograph he is smiling with effortless cool, frozen in a confidence death could not flatten. The stand creaks slightly whenever someone brushes past it, as if even metal struggles to support memory.

Our Lady of Guadalupe surrounds us in gold trim, candle smoke, and dark wooden saints. Mexican iconogra-

phy blooms across every surface — roses, sacred hearts, the Virgin suspended in eternal radiance above the pews. Though I am an atheist, I feel strangely comfortable here. Not faithful, but held. The church feels less like proof of God and more like proof that grief has architecture.

My father sits behind me beside my brothers, quieter than I have ever known him. I keep thinking about my uncle. How do you comfort a grown man who has lost his child? What words survive a thing like that? My father lost a nephew only a few years older than his own eldest son — me. The math of it unsettles him. I can see it in the way he stares at the floor, jaw locked tight as though afraid something enormous might escape him.

Then the Vicar arrives.

He is tall, pale, draped in white cloth that hangs from his body like theater curtains. Gray threads through his hair. Immediately I cannot stop staring because the man looks exactly like my English professor. Not similar — exact. The resemblance bends something in my brain. My mind refuses the distinction. For the remainder of the service the Vicar becomes my professor wearing holiness as a costume.

I imagine introducing him to my family.

This is my professor. He teaches fiction literature and

occasionally speaks about death as if he has academic tenure over it.

The Vicar takes my aunt's trembling hand and whispers something gentle to her, though from where I sit I cannot hear the words. A blessing, probably. Yet in my mind my professor is making a film reference none of us understand. Maybe Hitchcock. Maybe Kubrick. Something black-and-white and devastating.

Rainwater drips from coats onto the tile floor.

The lecture begins.

My professor reads scripture with the cadence of assigned reading. He moves through passages the same way he discusses novels in class, pausing with solemn importance between lines as if waiting for participation. I almost expect him to ask the church a question nobody answers correctly.

Then he places his hand atop Oscar's ashes.

A small squeeze bottle appears from his sleeve. Hand sanitizer spills across the wooden box with a wet clicking sound. He rubs it carefully into the surface.

Clean now.

Sterilized.

Academically acceptable.

Prepared for higher education.

Nobody else reacts. The congregation continues praying while I stare at the box shining faintly beneath church lights, my cousin reduced to sanitized remains and discussion material. I want to raise my hand. I want to ask what happens to a person after they become an object. Whether memory counts as resurrection. Whether grief is simply love with nowhere left to go.

But class ends before I can speak.

New Orleans

Miguel Owens

Deep down in Louisiana, there's a city,
Blanketed under a thick layer of humidity,
A place of voodoo, seafood, and sinking plains,
Cursed by Mother Nature with hurricanes.

Like a diamond in the rough, her beauty shines on,
I hear her call to me after being gone for so long,
Locals love to dress her up in all gold and black,
A sight so breathtaking-I can't wait to go back.

A new city, now familiar, like a second home,
Mardi Gras, steamboats, jazz, and the Superdome,
From Louis Armstrong to Lil Wayne and beyond,
The jazzy beats in the streets keep me going on.

“Big Easy” is just one of her many names,
Quiet rivers, endless parties, and football games,
Opposing fans walk into our trap, all hoping for a win,
Everyone stops and cheers when the Saints go marching in.

The gloomy night sky gently weeping overhead,
Street lamps bleed through the mist, a soft orange-red,
A bittersweet goodbye, but our bond will never sever,
I love you, New Orleans, now and forever.

Saol Aisling

Mariana Vizcarra Moya

The sounds of movement in the kitchen got louder as she became more and more awake. Still groggy from the heavy sleep she makes her way to the kitchen. The noise was of her girlfriend going through the cabinets.

“I hope you weren’t trying to surprise me with breakfast in bed,” she called out.

“Vera!” Her girlfriend turns around startled. “I know that cooking is your domain darling, I was just looking to see what was low to add to the grocery list.”

Her girlfriend moves to a seat on the bar and Vera takes her place in the kitchen.

“So what do we feel for breakfast?” Vera said with a smile.

They had been living together for five months now and it still felt like a dream. Pictures of the both of them were scattered all over their apartment. They had gone all out and bought everything in sets with their signature colors. Their home felt so uniquely warm and vibrant that Vera hated every second that she was away for school. Everything felt perfect inside of their little apartment.

After breakfast they finalized their grocery list and Vera watches as her girlfriend packs the last of her things into

her dufflebag. Standing at the front door they gave each other one last hug.

“I’m sorry that I can’t stay to meet your parents, my love, but you know how my mom gets about delays,” she said, while stroking Vera’s hair softly. They separated enough to be able to look at each other. The red curls that have always enchanted her framing her girlfriend’s face.

“It’s ok, these were last minute plans, I get it. You can meet them next time. Are you sure I can’t walk you to the station?”

“I’ll be fine. Text me whenever you feel like talking ok?” She gives Vera a small kiss, and with one last beautiful smile that always makes her blush, walks out the door. Her parents were set to arrive in the evening and she had to make sure everything was just right. She got to work on tidying the apartment and headed to the store once her home became spotless.

People-watching became a lot more fun when she moved to the city almost two years ago, there were plenty more people to observe and sometimes make stories about. The bus was her favorite place to do so. In front of her was a group of women she saw there often. They were all having lively conversations, one had the same mole by her mouth as her girlfriend, another had her laugh. Vera nev-

er had a good group of friends before but her girlfriend makes her feel so loved she hasn't worried about stuff like that in months. Same store everytime with the same set of cashiers. One with the same red hair as her girlfriend, one that looked like a shorter version of her dad, and one that always gave her a large smile, it used to make her blush but not since meeting her girlfriend.

On her way home she felt a migraine starting to form, they have been happening for weeks now. After getting home she found that her Aspirin box was empty. The knocks on her door make the light pounding in her head worsen. At the other side of the door were her parents, several hours early.

"Surprise! We left early so we could spend more time with you," her mom said, giving her a tight hug.

"Hope this didn't mess up your routine too much, we just haven't seen you in so long." Her dad said while ruffling her hair and giving her another tight hug.

"It's all good, I just need to put the food away," Vera replied. With her parents settled in her living room she put everything away, the migraine slowly getting worse. Vera knew herself enough that she could go through lunch before needing to go to the pharmacy. Plenty of time to catch up and leave after the appropriate amount of time. Her parents were looking over all the pictures and trinkets that were on display.

"These are such nice pictures. When did you take this one?" Her mom asked, pointing to a small frame on the wall.

"Oh, that one was like two months ago when my girlfriend and I went to the beach. These are all pictures of us," Vera replied.

"Both of you recently?" Her mom turns to look back

at the picture.

"Yeah, we like taking them of places we visit."

Her mom looks at the pictures on the wall a little longer, her dad standing up to look at them more closely.

"You look very happy in these pictures, and she's just as pretty as you've said," her dad said, facing her with a small smile. "And where is she?"

"She's visiting her parents, she'll be back in a few days."

The conversation fizzled out a little and she started on getting lunch ready. Her parents continued asking her about school, if she made any friends with any classmates. The answer still being no, the handful of times she tries they are short with her. Being friendly with her neighbors was also the same, she would wave and they didn't so much as look back at her most times. They kept asking questions after they ate and her migraine continued to get worse.

"Are you guys gonna be ok if I leave for a bit, I need to get some medicine for my headache." Vera said.

"You should've said something sooner. How long have you had them?" her dad asked.

"On and off for a few months, I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I actually have something that is just for that," her mom quickly grabs her bag and hands her a small pill from a white bottle. "These are daily and it will get rid of your chronic headaches. How about you go to sleep, don't worry about us."

She left them in the living room as she slept in her room, muffled conversations seeping through the door.

The next handful of days were slightly strange. Vera's parents followed her around for every errand, despite be-

ing told she can handle going to the store by herself. They spent a lot of time trying to convince her to talk to more people. Her parents have talked to her neighbors more in these few days than she did in two years. Even though class wasn't her most favorite place to be, it was the only place where her parents didn't follow her. They hadn't been this overbearing in a long time.

Her headaches had managed to slowly get better, lots of water and the pills her mom offered her. Her mind had felt fuzzy for months and it was starting to clear up.

The four day stay turned into a week and Vera didn't know the proper way to ask them when they planned on leaving. She didn't have to stay wondering for too long because one night after dinner while they were relaxing on the couch her parents suddenly turned serious. Her father was the one to speak first.

"Vera, we want to explain why we made such rushed plans to see you."

"We hadn't seen you in so long and you always said you were fine when we asked but," her mother's voice wavered a bit and she started fidgeting with her hands. "We got a call and they said you haven't refilled your prescription in months."

"We just wanted to make sure everything is ok, that nothing bad happened and talk to you," her father's voice struggling not to sound worried. "When we saw your pictures we had to take a different approach."

Vera had a hard time understanding what they were trying to say. She couldn't figure out why they were so upset, she felt great. Everything in her life was finally fine. Why was this such a big deal to them?

"What are you talking about?" she asked apprehensively.

"The pills weren't for headaches, they were your medication," her mom looked ashamed while saying it.

"You've been drugging me! How could you do that!"

"We had to do something to break the delusion before we talked about it. I know it was wrong but it's not as if this was our plan all along," her father still trying to keep the situation calm.

"So because I'm happy for once in my life I'm being delusional? Can't you trust me with my own life and my own decisions?"

She sat staring at them. Their faces filled with worry and sadness she had seen many times before in her life. In childhood when she would come home feeling sad and hollow, as a teen when the fog in her mind wouldn't go away. The last time she saw it was when she moved for college, reminding her of the schedules she needs to keep and the numbers she could call if anything happened.

"Darling, could you grab the picture you have with your girlfriend from the wall?" Her mom asked.

"Why?"

"Just- please can you?"

She stood up and went to grab one of the picture frames from the shelf. All the frames from the wall and the shelves being such a regular thing to see she didn't pay attention to the actual image in them anymore. As she picked it up she noticed that where her girlfriend was supposed to be it had become just a landscape image. Vera quickly grabbed the one next to it and saw that it was only her in the park. Confusion and panic started making her chest feel heavy. Every single picture frame was devoid of her girlfriend. Her girlfriend's face was still so vivid in her mind, all their memories together. But she was gone.

'No no no no no no no no no no this can't be happening'

She was hyperventilating and her fingers started feeling like wood. Everything was fine, she was happy, it all made sense. And now it vanished. She couldn't hear anything her parents were saying as she ran into her room. Pulling out her phone she checked the photos there. Nothing. The chat logs she thought they had were all one sided conversations with her own account.

The tears that fell from her face weren't felt, legs no longer being able to hold her. Nothing could be felt as her entire reality shattered around her. Only when her breathing evened out did she notice her parents around her. Her father stroking her hair softly and her mother telling her reassurances.

"I want to go back," Vera said in such a quiet voice they almost didn't hear her.

"We're going to contact your school and tell them you need time. We're taking you home, okay?" Her father said.

"I want to go back."

Vera wanted her life back. She wanted her girlfriend next to her. Wanted to live in that fantasy again. The apartment that once was bright and full of love is now forever haunted by someone that was never real.

We Are Not

Liz Gonzales

i. I had two parents, one I lost and another has lost me. The years fade away. The hurt still lingers. My two protectors never together, only colliding. There was always a blurred line between love and hate. A line so blurred, at times, I never knew what side I was on. The foundations of my family, ruined by the lies.

He was the first to leave.

In the cover of the night, through the haze of his mind or his wandering eyes he left us. Chasing heights we could never touch. Drowning in endless daydreams of false euphoria. Returning as if nothing had happened. They were both good at that — pretending. Pretending that the false life we were living was anything but a facade as fragile as shattering glass.

She was the second to leave.

Another gone in the cover of night — as if the night hadn't taken enough. Gone in a worse way than he. Cigarette smoke clung to her, the scent lingering for years — maybe only in my mind. The smoke covered the scent of death. Selfishly she tore herself away from us, hoping he would come back to her. To escape the loneliness she built for herself. There was nothing left to come back to, in his eyes at least.

Just three empty husks and a house.

ii. There is a place I call home that I will never see again. So many memories make up a house, a home. Each creak and shutter memorized like an extension of my body. Hiding in the cupboards and under the stairs. Running around the house with my sister. Climbing on the furniture. Chasing each other around the sun woven onto the living room rug. A home filled with laughter and family. I thought I saw my home for what it was, but as the years passed my eyes opened and I saw the filth.

Empty, dirty, lonely, not a home, but a house.

Long gone is the safety I had once felt, if that was even safety to begin with, ignorant bliss maybe. Ignorant to the suffocating feeling of the house. The fear of the creak on the ceiling — she's awake. Walking on glass eggshells, ignoring our bleeding feet to avoid the ire, the punishment, the degradation.

The house remembers what we try to forget.

Every fist smashed through drywall. Every broken mirror. Every door kicked. Every scream. Every tear. Every drop of blood stains the carpet. This house was torn away

from us. Stolen by a protector, leaving us nowhere.

With nothing.

Good riddance, please let me back in.

The sun was pulled away and thrown into the garage.

Flooded.

Rotted.

Hauled to the curb like everything else. My whole life was thrown out onto the street. Like it was nothing.

Like we were nothing.

iii. I kept my sisters.

When everything else was torn from its foundation, we stayed.

Not cleanly, not unscathed — but together.

Our protectors are gone.

Our house is gone.

We are not.

Contributors

ARTURO ARZAGA is an incarcerated U.S. Army Veteran and a Medal of Valor recipient for the state of California currently working on an AA degree in Arts and Humanities and training service dogs for Guide Dogs of America / Tender Loving Canine out of R.J.D. Correctional Facility. His goal is to eventually attend the University of Irvine Bachelors program at R.J.D. campus. He loves nature walks and fishing and just taking in all the different seasons of the year. At R.J.D. he's known as "The Bridge Builder", and he wants to continue the work of bringing communities together.

TEDDY BAEK is an immigrant from Korea and he is currently serving a life changing sentence in state prison. Today, Teddy lives a life of optimism and reflection, leaving behind the negative thoughts of his past. He hopes to serve his community in the future, leaving a positive impact on whoever he encounters along his journey.

TIFFANY BARTON is an aspiring author from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. After entering into the military service back in 2015, she was lucky enough to be stationed in San Diego, California, and has since made this city her home. Now a Navy Veteran, and a mother of one sweet little boy, Tiffany hopes to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing. She enjoys writing fiction, specifically in the high fantasy genre, and writing poetry as a means of emotional release.

D. R. B. is a writer and English major at Southwestern College San Diego, California. Born and raised in Germany, her writing is often reflective and experimental, exploring various genres. She currently serves as an editor and hopes to transition into a full-time career in the publishing industry after graduation.

SAM CABRERA has been fortunate enough to find purpose in his life after struggling for the initial years of his incarceration. Today, he spends his time educating himself and his peers, because growth is only possible through understanding. He is looking forward to what lies ahead in his journey, always remembering that *everything is beautiful*.

DEVANNE CANDARE is a student of Everything.

MARK COLE is a dedicated student and a proud Father, Brother, and Uncle. He loves reading and writing, something he never found interest in, before dedicating his life to change. Mark enjoys helping others, listening to music, and connecting

with his loved ones. This is his story of transformation, growth, and revitalization through experience, and education.

ALEXA CUADRA is a writer born and raised in San Ysidro California. She is an English major at Southwestern College and is graduating with her Associates in Arts for Transfer this spring. She is committed to Portland State University and is planning on teaching Literature at the high school and college level. She is only really beginning with her journey in creative writing and is hoping to grow and learn in order to get published sometime in the future.

BARRETT DAVENPORT is a non-writer based in San Diego, California, whose work is shaped by a diverse and service-driven background. He graduated from Lake Superior State University with a bachelor's degree in Fire Science and Building Codes and is currently pursuing pre-med studies with a focus on anesthesia. A retired Captain firefighter/paramedic, he brings real-world experience and discipline into his writing. Outside of his professional and academic pursuits, he is a devoted husband and father of two, who enjoys coaching baseball and spending time outdoors.

ISABELA ESCOBEDO is a Mexican author/poet. Wishes the world would become more kind.

ALEXANDER FERNANDEZ is a writer from San Diego, California and is attending SWC as a Film major, though the direct path to his dreams are not set in stone. A deep love for Fantasy drives him towards atmospheric and imaginative works. He writes to revive the little kid who never stopped playing pretend.

RODERICK-OLAF FONDECA (ZECHARIAH-LEVI: FLEISHMAN) is a Puerto Rican/Israeli Southwestern College Student, scheduled to graduate June of 2026, with AA Degrees in Sociology and Liberal Arts: Social Behavior. He will attend UCI in 2027 with the goal of achieving a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology. He is the father to Ashlie and Nathan, and grandfather to Mary and Jacob. His hobbies include music of all genres and giving lectures in Judaic Studies.

MICHAEL SCOTT GODFREY II is from Alabama and is currently pursuing his Bachelor's Degree in Sociology. This is his story of transformation from a civilian to a service member.

LIZ GONZALES is a writer from San Diego, California. They attend Southwestern college as an English Literature major. They're planning on getting a Masters in Library Sciences and working at elementary school libraries. They are new to writ-

ing, but since starting this semester, they really enjoy it and plan on continuing.

HALO HERNANDEZ is a digital and traditional artist with a more cartoony style and with art pieces that tell a story.

NOAH DE JESUS is a writer that often likes to explore deep themes in the stories they write. They're very passion about what they do, and they are more than willing to share their interests, passions, and ideas with other folks. They tend to go on a long tangent about their characters as well.

HOLLY JONES is a student/writer in Southwestern College's Restorative Justice Program.

LOUIE JORDAN has been incarcerated for over 34 years, since the age of 19. He never took any art classes, other than art appreciation with Southwestern (currently enrolled). Painting for him is a way to escape everyday prison life, and also a way to bring his desires or dreams to life.

IMELDA LEYVA, a writer from Chula Vista, California, currently an English and Computer Science major at Southwestern College. Her aspirations include obtaining an MFA and eventually teaching at the college level. Imelda finds immense joy in writing children's literature, young adult fiction, comics, and poetry.

DONNA LOPEZ-LANDERS is a multimedia artist whose work explores emotion, identity, and personal experience. Her art often reflects a balance between introspection and expression, drawing inspiration from everyday life, relationships, and inner thoughts. She enjoys experimenting with different styles and mediums, allowing her creativity to evolve naturally over time. Through her work, Donna aims to connect with others on a deeper level and evoke genuine feeling.

JESUS MARTINEZ is a writer from San Diego. He has always loved writing stories and making characters. Jesus has been writing for as long as he can remember, even reading out his short stories to his third-grade class and sharing little comics with his friends at lunch.

JESUS MARTINEZ CASTANEDA is a student writer from Tijuana, Baja California. He goes to Southwestern Community College as an FTMA and English Major and works as an English tutor at the Writing Center. 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.

JOCELYN MARTINEZ VILLA is a creative writer and artist who loves storytelling. She is a student at Southwestern College, studying to get her Bachelor's in Art, and hopefully attend CSU Long Beach in the fall of 2027. Jocelyn loves creating immersive worlds through writing and art, and hopes to work in the Illustration industry one day and also work as a freelance artist. Jocelyn enjoys writing in her free time — taking little adventures with one creative idea at a time.

EVELYN MEIJA is a Salvadoran-American student at Southwestern. Although she is majoring in Dental Hygiene, storytelling has always played a big role in her life. Apart from writing, she is a digital illustrator and a huge fantasy geek.

VICTORIA MENDEZ is a poet and dancer from San Diego, California. She is an alumna of Southwestern College and SDSU. She loves to experiment with writing by combining different languages, such as Spanish, English, German, Latin, and Binary Code, into her poems.

ANDREA MORENO is an emerging Chicana fronteriza writer, artist and educator based in the Tijuana San Diego borderlands.

ORLINDO “NEENO” MYLES is an author, entrepreneur, and visionary storyteller focused on transforming struggle into purpose. Born and raised in South Sacramento, who has been incarcerated since the age of 15, he embraces his lived experiences into powerful writing, including his book *75 Things Not to Do in Prison* and upcoming poetry collection *A Ghetto Black Shakespeare, poems from a caged phoenix risen from the ashes*. Through his creative voice, business ideas, and relentless determination, Myles aims to inspire others to rise like a phoenix from the ashes and redefine their future.

TIARA YSABELLE (BELLE) G. NELSON is a self-taught artist and is attending Southwestern College, majoring in Studio Arts. She loves to draw and has illustrated for two children's books and a novel. She is married to a writer and spends her free time drawing, playing video games, and hanging out with her husband. You can email her at bellescornerbusiness@gmail.com and you can visit her art Instagram account [@art.by_belle](https://www.instagram.com/art.by_belle).

Hailing from the sunny beach-side lands of San Diego California, ALICIA NIEVES; more commonly known as Ali, has at last gathered her strength to publicly publish some written works of hers. While currently working to complete her Associate's in English, she hopes to one day earn her Master's in Information and Library Science to become a librarian. Her passions include horror, bugs, medieval fiction, and the eventual demise of corrupt systems of power in whatever form they present themselves.

NIKO PAULINO loves to write characters and worlds to build around said characters.

THE OCEAN'S SCRIBE is an up-and-coming writer that hopes to keep their identity anonymous. They are a fiction writer, specifically Modern fantasy. Their end goal is to leave a mark on the world and a positive one too, because with all that is happening in the world, a good escape to a place like no other for a little while, can help.

ADAM OCHOA is an undergraduate at UC Irvine, studying both Sociology and English. During his free time, he enjoys writing poetry and short stories, in addition to painting portraits and landscapes of places he wishes to travel to. His passion lies in learning new ways to creatively express himself, his experiences, and his hopes for the future. He lives in sunny San Diego, where he is enjoying the weather.

MIGUEL OWENS is an up-and-coming writer, screenwriter, and director born and raised in San Diego. He is currently enrolled at Southwestern College planning to transfer to SDSU as an English major. He aspires to become an Oscar-nominated and award-winning filmmaker. He enjoys brainstorming new ideas and creating original screenplays. In addition, he also writes short stories and poetry. His main inspirations come from films, personal experiences, and, most importantly, his friends and family.

ANGEL I. RAMIREZ is a resident writer and artist of San Diego who specializes in fantasy and adventure stories. He has attended Southwestern College in order to expand his creative abilities and has big dreams to make films and series tackling topics and issues that will appeal to the hearts of many. His ultimate goal, is to pay creativity forward to the minds of future creatives like him.

ALEXIS RAMOS is an English student at Southwestern College. She is an Editor of *The Vagabond* and has been published in the SDPA and in various editions of *The Vagabond*. She is transferring to the University of California, Berkeley in the Fall

2026 to pursue her writing.

LILY REESE is from San Diego, California, and an English Major at Southwestern College. He is one of the editors of the Vagabond. He aims to keep writing about the grotesque and abstract, edit on a professional level, and continue his academic career to read everything the world has to offer.

RICHIE RUBIO is a Mexican writer from Tijuana/San Diego. 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.

SAMUEL TELLEZ is a student from Palmdale, CA. He goes to Southwestern Community College as a Sociology Major. He is planning to get his BA in Sociology through UC Irvine. He is an avid Magic: The Gathering player and enjoys the social aspect of the game.

ISABELLA VALDIVIA is a twenty-year-old writer born and raised in San Diego, California. Currently pursuing a double major in English and Communications at Southwestern College with a deep-seated passion for storytelling, and plans to become a creative writing professor. Along with this goal, Isabella plans to continue nurturing her other artistic outlets, such as music, dance, and choreography. Looking ahead, she plans to publish a fantasy series, a long-standing project she's been developing since high school.

HENRY SOLÍS VEGA is an American with roots in California, history in Texas, and memories scattered across the world. He had a bohemian upbringing and continues to be a vagabond today. This is his first attempt at showing his audience the story, as opposed to telling it.

MARIANA VIZCARRA MOYA is a student in Southwestern that is studying architecture. They have a passion for literature and film. She hopes to one day make a graphic novel.

DWAYNE WEST is currently a student enrolled in Southwestern College on echo yard at Richard J. Donovan correctional facility. He enjoys a friendly game of pickleball, and he placed 4th in the very first pickleball tournament on echo yard. He

is eagerly awaiting his release and return to his community.

WNDR is currently a student at Southwestern College who wants to grow their writing portfolio. Born and raised in San Diego county, they find comfort in writing, crafting art, and going to vendor markets to come up with ideas.

JOSE YBARRA is a student/writer in Southwestern College's Restorative Justice Program.

JUAN ZARAGOZA is a writer from Palmdale, California. He has an Associate's Degree in Communication studies and Liberal Arts from Bakersfield College and is a Sociology Major from Southwestern College. He is planning to attain a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology with a Minor in English from the University of Irvine. He is passionate about welding and hopes to own his own business one day. He is also a certified Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist and is passionate about helping at-risk troubled youth.

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:

swccreativewriting@gmail.com

visit us on our official blog

www.theotherwritersguild.blogspot.com

or visit our linktree

linktr.ee/theotherwritersguild

Once again thank you for your continued support.

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