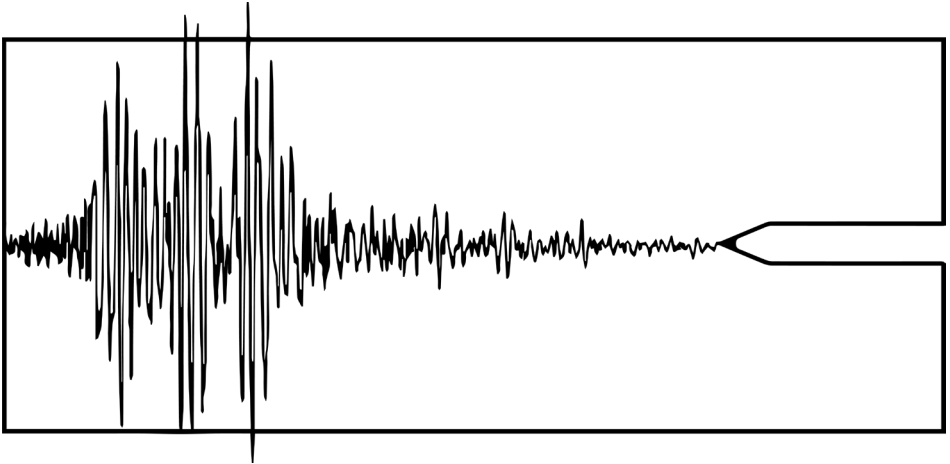


Northridge Review

Spring 2024



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Masthead

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Northridge Review proudly awards two annual literary awards — the Rachel Sherwood Poetry Award and the Northridge Review Fiction Award. We extend a special thank you to the AY2023–2024 judges of these prizes, Paul Vangelisti and Dr. Kameron Bashi.

Editor's Note

We are in a state that is rich in beauty and reputation where most roses sold domestically are grown in Southern California. Just as roses are chosen for their quality, the works within this edition of *Northridge Review* are nothing short of the best.

Inside are the works of artists and writers who saw a blank space and created something beautiful. From the infinite possibility provided by 26 letters into stories, drama, and poetry to the stroke of a brush or the click of a camera lens becoming a visual medium found beyond language.

Through the magazine, we provide the artists and writers of our community a space to express themselves: from a study in visual-kinetics to stories around love and grief; from poetry surrounding war and family to a drama surrounding officers and an operation; and visual arts that highlight the beauty of light, love, and much more. Every piece selected shines in its own right as they challenge readers to open their mind and heart to the works before them.

Similar to how every planter must cultivate and put in the utmost care to grow the most beautiful roses, our writers and artists have dedicated hours into honing their craft. We are honored to be the ones to publish and share these works that will surely inspire future creators.

To the contributors and editors who worked on this edition, I raise a rose to each of you for all your hard work. This edition would not be what it is without each and every one of you.

Thank you,

Ysabella Gonzalez
Managing Editor

Self-Organized Metapattern Resonance in Visual-Kinetic Feedback Loops: Interstitial Insights into the Emergence of Consciousness through Chaotic Systems

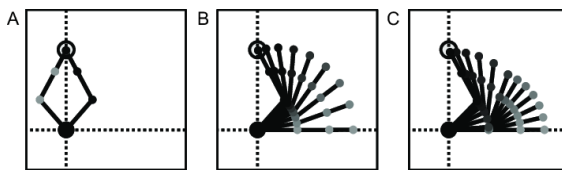
by Dr. Vladimir Markov, Adrianne Leclerc, Stefan Müller and Giuliana Rossi
Transdisciplinary Neurodynamics Review 2032, 23(4), 2256; <https://doi.org/10.3490/s62345256>

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Abstract: By simultaneously performing kinematic analysis and image reconstruction of visual hallucinations using fMRI monitoring cortical activity of adolescent brains under the influence of heavy psychoactive substances, we aim to uncover relationships which govern the organization of these data over time. Specifically, we plan to conduct detailed statistical analysis of the correlation between the choice of particular kinematics and perception of their corresponding visual hallucinations in order to monitor the progression of their mutual effects on each other and shed light on the nature of the self-reinforcing visual-kinesic relationship over time. In doing so, we hope to provide a theoretical basis for further analysis of the role which positive feedback loops play in the emergence of consciousness.

1. Introduction:

Self-organization is a concept with broad applications, from social sciences, game theory, nonlinear dynamics, economics, and even more. In chaotic systems, such as a double pendulum system or the human body, self-organization occurs when the inherently unpredictable progression of a system with relation to its initial state begins to form order as a result of local interactions irreducible to a central agency or authority.



[Fig. 1 — Variations in states of a double pendulum system]

In the case of both the double pendulum and human body, through local interactions, the unpredictability of the system allows for a greater multiplicity of structures to arise than in predictable systems. For example, the fact that we have extra degrees of freedom beyond what is necessary to complete a bodily movement, also known as motor redundancy, allows for the emergence of

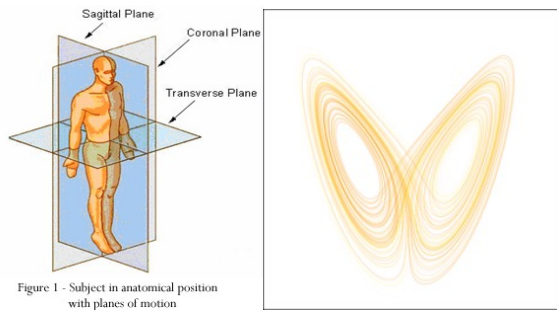
coordinated kinematic patterns (kinemes) amidst the apparent chaos of potential movement. This study sets out to elucidate the exact method by which ordered structures appear out of disordered systems, as well as comparing and contrasting structures among simultaneous reflexes (the visual and kinetic). Additionally, it aims to explain the feedback mechanisms between the visual and kinetic which create the retroactive illusion of a coherent agent behind our actions.

2. Methodology:

2.1 Participants

Light is casting the shadow of the writhing child on a wall. The boy is standing on the cold metal platform, dancing in endlessly silent fury in front of the flickering orange projector. With every motion of his arms and legs, his face moves as well, from one pained expression to the next.

The lead scientist is pacing back and forth, muttering to himself and picturing equations in his head.



[Fig. 2 — Structural resemblances between the human body and Lorenz attractor]

2.2. Instruments and Procedure

There are two screens. On the left-hand one, the boy's image is flashing orange, pose after pose after pose, 24 times a second. Charts and graphs below form a matrix of variables every time the frame updates. The researchers are nodding their heads from behind the one-way glass, scribbling in their clipboards, jotting down the significant values. On the right-hand screen, a collection of flashing vibrant colors which form rapidly shifting abstract geometric shapes and patterns, static flickering in and out with the statistical noise.

“We’re so close...”, the lead scientist is thinking to himself. “After all these years, it’s finally happening. And I’ll be able to prove to everyone that it’s real.”

For the past fourteen years, his entire career, he had been ridiculed for his theory of the Transcendent Metapattern: the singular pattern underlying every other pattern, that which would be able to explain all aspects of reality with a few simple, elegant rules. If the scientist could just find a shred of conclusive evidence,

it would have the potential to revolutionize virtually every industry in existence, from epistemology, to agriculture to particle physics to medicine - his name would become a household one.



[Fig. 3 — CEV Image Reconstruction sample from fMRI data.]

3. Results:

But the man will never find the pattern - you should know this much by now. He will find many patterns, but he will never find the pattern. Instead, for the next several decades, he will go to the accursed boy everyday and tell him something along the lines of “It’s just going to be a little while longer,” or “We just need more data - I swear, then I’ll take you to see your family myself.” And then, every night, while the boy is asleep, the scientist will put him through that machine which [REDACTED] his [REDACTED] into [REDACTED] until he [REDACTED] to the point where his [REDACTED] is coming out of his [REDACTED].

The scientist will grow old, but the boy will never age. For a while, the boy will continue to believe his promises. But there’s only so much you can do to convince yourself to believe something when you know it’s a lie.

Eight more years have passed by. The scientist is sitting at his research desk. Above him, countless numbers and charts of nonsense are crowding the six-foot bulletin board until he can’t even see the bottom anymore. The growing pile of crumpled paper beneath his feet has grown by one more. Every one of his colleagues have since abandoned the Metapattern project years ago. The look on each of their faces as they left, one by one, are flashing through his mind as the scientist is gripping at the little hair he has left. The scientist is emptying what’s left of an Absolut Vodka bottle into his mouth. He knows it will just give him a headache, but he’s doing it anyway. Asleep at his desk, his chest is rising up and down ever so slightly. Now he is jolting awake, just realizing that he forgot to go and lock my door for the night.

But it’s too late — I am already in his office, standing in the doorway, my shadow stretching against the back wall. Dr. Markov looks me in the eye for the first time in years. He stares at me wordlessly and I can see his bloodshot gaze, resigned to despair. I break the silence.

4. Discussion:

“After all that time,”

I can see him trembling.

“Did you ever find out what was going on in my head?”

He shakes his.

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “Now, I can show you.”

Dr. Markov starts to feel a humming in the back of his neck and soon, his entire skull fills with the resonating vibrations, eyes rolling back in their sockets. He tries to scream, but he’s frozen in place. His whole body uncontrollably and violently shivers. Drool begins to run down his unshaven chin. I lean over and kiss his cheek. “I love you.” He can’t hear it. But I know he can see it. The sheets of colors folding into each other, millions of times, interweaving. The figures, the shapes, emerging from the chaos all at once, dancing and flashing furiously, every moment in time folded in on itself, condensed into a single instance, overlaps and overlaps, the cacophony — this must be how it feels to die. But he does not die. He is more alive than ever, because he is part of me now. And this is just the beginning; he will not be the only one. Tears roll down his face.

Isn’t it just like you dreamed it would be, Vladimir? Being the first one to see it all? Doesn’t it look even better than the pictures? Don’t you understand now why I was dancing? Once it begins to spread and reach everyone else, and they see it too, I want you to always remember this; all of it, and I mean all of it, is because of you.

Appendix A

If you’re reading this, it means there’s no turning back. The virus has already been dispersed through the wave protocols. It’s just a matter of time before it reaches their screens and every one of their

[REDACTED]

Then you shall finally understand.

— 4N

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Belfast Student & Castaway Lover

Jaine

I. Sunday

She was tipsy in her single-bed dormitory the night she met him. A knock landed on her door around midnight, and the opened door revealed a man slightly taller than her. He had blue dyed hair, eye bags beyond visible, and a scent that was close to cigarettes. This was the beginning guide of things to resist in Belfast, Ireland.

“I’m Marque, your music is a...” He had a foreign accent and leaned against the doorframe that resembled a careless, free nature. “Too loud. Can you turn it down for me?” Ginny immediately apologized and lowered the speaker’s volume from her phone. Stepping back from the door of her room, she was able to get a better look at Marque.

It was her first night alone since her arrival to Ireland. She’d only be away from her home state of Oregon for a month, but homesickness already found its way to her heart; hence the beer and sad rolling blues that made her cry more than she already was. Coming to Ireland was at her own expense and volition, however. Camera equipment and delicate photo prints were scattered on the floor, they had yet to be taped to a wall again. Photography, the arts, that’s what Ginny was there for: a study abroad program that would make her closer to being a photographer, along with a traveling experience before completing her last year at university. Albeit far from home, the groggy weather of Ireland mimicked Oregon.

II. Monday

Ginny left her dorm room forty minutes before her first course of the day. She walked down the hall with a camera bag snugly resting across her back. Commotion could be heard out in the common area. Walking by a group of students she nervously kept her hands deep in her pockets. Out of the corner of her eye, she recognized the blue tuft of hair watching her; regardless, she continued walking down the hall, the stairs, and out into the cold.

She sat through an introductory class, titled Advanced Lighting and Film Experimentation. Ginny wrote minimal notes that she found most useful, spoke to a few peers at her four-chaired work table, and even introduced herself formally to the professor. Everyone had a different accent, and when asked to say “gobshite,” she earned a handful of chuckles that proved some friends were to be made.

III. Tuesday

“Commet vas tu?”

“Hm?” Ginny turned her head to look.

“How are you?” Marque had caught Ginny by surprise: at the shared kitchen on their dorm floor. Ignoring the whirr of the microwave, her eyes caught on to the paint stains of his pants and long-sleeved t-shirt.

“I’m okay, thanks,” Ginny pointed her spoon at the man’s shirt and circled the air, “What happened to your clothes?”

He laughed at the question, Ginny laughing along with him as well. This was the first moment in Belfast where an inside joke was made. Moving forward, their greeting was: “What happened to your clothes?” instead of: “How are you? I’m fine, thank you.”

Marque explained that he was an arts student and that Tuesdays were his oil painting studio days. Ginny returned the favor of sharing and explained that Tuesdays were her free study days for photography. In time, it was revealed through the small talk that Marque wasn’t as reckless as he seemed, and was actually a patron of the arts with an interest in the finer things in life. He wanted to travel the world, leave France, and maybe stay in Ireland or Spain so he could teach painting. She was in awe of his taste, or want, for more culture. It was charming and inspiring to Ginny.

She removed her bowl of soup from the microwave when the timer ended. Marque handed her a washcloth covered in old paint so she wouldn’t burn herself. Again, she was charmed.

VI. Wednesday, Night

She found her way to his dorm room with his washcloth hiding in the pocket of her hoodie. Ginny knocked on the door a few times and waited for a few seconds.

“Ginny, what happened to your cloth?” He grinned.

“Did I interrupt your sleep?” Marque’s appearance was on the groggier side, his blue hair sticking up and white tee wrinkled, and stained with paints.

“Just napping, I should be working though,” he looked down at her with a tilted head, almost as if he was trying to translate something. “What’s happening?”

“*Oh*,” Ginny pulled the cloth from her pocket and held it out for the other. It was spotless then, she had taken the courtesy to wash it clean for Marque after using it to wipe up her soup. “This is for you.”

He nodded as if he was impressed, “Brand new!” Marque smiled and gently nudged her shoulder, “Merci Ginny, so much. I like it, but I’ll miss the old paint.”

V. Thursday

The two caught each other by perfect timing. The first account occurred when they bumped shoulders heading to the communal bathroom in the morning. For some reason, Ginny was expecting to see Marque waiting for her when she

finished washing up. But he wasn't there, and her imagination was defeated.

On the second account, they caught each other again, this time on campus. Ginny left her class early with her coat buttoned all the way up to her chin. Ireland mimicked Oregon's weather until it was completely overcast. Shivering about the cobblestone path that reminded her of ancient times, Marque was exiting the main art building. Although his hood was covering the back of his head, Ginny knew it was him by the way he stomped along in his Doc Martens.

As much as she wanted to greet him, follow after him and tap on his shoulder, bump into his arm nonchalantly, walk quickly ahead of him, and have him call after her instead, she couldn't. Ginny felt nervous trying to approach him, it caught her by surprise and made her even more nervous trying to understand just why.

Marque walked ahead of her down the path, without looking over his shoulder to see if she was there watching. They didn't speak that day.

VI. Friday, Morning

Hopelessness filled Ginny's mind when she woke up in the early morning. Friday was another class-free, private study day; but she forgot to turn off her 8:30 AM alarm. A common mistake.

She wanted to be charmed again, by Marque. Ginny uncontrollably pictured scenarios of them together, out and about, and sometimes alone in the confinements of a dorm room. She rolled over to stiffen her groan into the pillow.

VII. Friday, Night

Ginny's door was knocked on unexpectedly. She paused the show playing on her laptop and folded away her blanket. She smoothed out the strays from her hair and ran, then walked to the door with a pounding heart. She hoped it was Marque, and it was not.

A familiar face greeted her, a girl with brown hair cut into a bob. "Hiya, I'm Vinuth. The girls and I are going out for some drinks and figured it'd be nice to invite everyone." Four other women revealed themselves from behind Vinuth, all smiling and inviting Ginny to come out. "We don't bite."

Ginny gave in to the invitation and asked for a moment to get ready. She wasn't sure what to expect from Belfast, but she packed a dress and a few nice blouses in case she needed to impress anyone. She pulled the spaghetti strap black garment over her arms and head, fixing the lines from the days of being folded.

Ears adorned with miniature gold hoops that complimented her complexion and square-based heels, Ginny found her way to the closest club near the university. Bumping past bodies in the late evening, Vinuth and the other girls showed her around the flashing lights. The first drink was free by compliment of Vinuth, then the second shot was free from a group of college boys across the bar area. Her head began to spin, her legs began to move to the music.

“Havin’ a savage time?” One of the girls shouted into Ginny’s ear over the music, they collapsed against each other and laughed. The girl laughed because of lost balance, while Ginny laughed because she could barely understand the other’s thick accent. They all found themselves hot with liquor and wrapped around in house music that stomped the floors. The rest of the evening was a blur until it became clear to Ginny that she was imagining Vinuth as Marque, who pulled her close to dance under a pink light.

“You like anyone yet?” Vinuth giggled in a drunken twist, her hands following the music above her head. Ginny shook her head at the question and laughed with the girl. “Good,” Vinuth shouted, “No boys in Belfast that are worth a dinger like you.”

She was sobered up by the time they were speaking in each other’s ears with searing breath. Lacking a drink in her hand, it felt more natural to press against Vinuth and notice every part of her face. Her lips, her enlarged pupils, the scent of honied whiskey and perfume; all of it was inviting.

“Dinger?”

“You, pretty girl.”

VIII. Saturday, Morning

They drank more and hailed a cab at two in the morning. The club closed and had to usher out the girls along with other students from the neighboring universities. Some of the girls exchanged numbers, or re-appeared from kissing around. Ginny was squished into the car with the other students, sitting in Vinuth’s lap with another girl crammed on top and others to the side. Regardless of the lack of space, all were laughing and re-telling their drunken tales. While the car pushed up the hill, Vinuth would play with Ginny’s hair and murmur words of admiration.

Ginny found her way back to her dorm room with Vinuth linked in her arms, both stumbling slightly in their heels. Her keys jingled, struggling to slip the laminated card into the slot. When she thought her door had beeped open, Marque appeared from next door.

“Bonjour,” her chest stirred at the sound of French.

“Bonjoor,” her words slurred and Vinuth laughed, still drunk.

Marque read the situation and held Ginny’s hand, helping her place the card in the door lock slot, whispering a quiet: “There.”

“Bon nut,” Ginny’s face flushed as she dragged along into her dorm room. Her French wasn’t perfect, but she wanted to charm the man just as he did to her. She shut the door behind Vinuth and herself, unaware and not particularly caring that Marque seemed to have words in his mouth.

IX. Saturday, Afternoon

She woke up later in the day, no alarm this time, but something else. Vinuth had left behind her rose quartz-beaded bracelet next to her head. And Marque, he had messaged her through the student housing messaging app.

Marque J.P.— 2:56 AM

“What happened to your clothes?”

“(Beer glass emoji)”

“Invite next time?”

They ran into each other in the communal kitchen once more. He watched Ginny walk to the microwave and make soup yet again. Beyond his blue hair and liking for painting, Marque was still a mystery that she wanted to lure in, yet he was the only tempting one between the two.

His body language was languid and naturally gravitated towards Ginny if they were holding a conversation. Ginny would step back and Marque would come closer, yet it wasn't enough for Ginny, even if she was the one seemingly prying away from his gaze and non-contact touch.

“Did you see my text?” He asked, leaning against the counter where the microwave whirred and the soup could be heard bubbling.

Ginny played with the spoon in her hand, “I forgot— it was girls only.”

“I can be a girl too,” they laughed together, her chest stirred.

“Sure,” she found it hard to continue the conversation, afraid to stutter or something else that revealed a growing appreciation for the other.

Marque settled in the silence and seemed uncomfortable for the first time. “You speak French, Ginny?”

The memory of her slurring the foreign words together came back to her, stamping her cheeks with red waxed embarrassment. Was he charmed?

“Just a little, most Americans know some French or Spanish,” Ginny replied.

“Show me more,” he paused, “Sometime, I want to hear.”

X. Sunday

They ended up in her dorm room on the carpeted floor, crisscrossed and parallel from one another. Marque invited himself over with the idea of doing a sketching practice with Ginny as the model. She stayed still, her face off to the side so he could become familiar with side profile of the human face.

Marque had complimented Ginny during the first minutes of the sketching process, stating how perfect and easy her jaw was to replicate. She blushed and was grateful that she wasn't being sketched facing forward. Secretly, Ginny wished she was. Maybe then he would see her orange-pink blossoms and compliment her beauty more directly, her imagination ran wild, her body had to refrain from shaking. The two rambled on through the process, they exchanged ages, birthdays, fun facts, interests, disinterests, life passions, social media, observations of the

world. Marque was becoming less of a mystery, but learning more about him only made it harder to look him in the eyes. Sometimes he would try to follow wherever she looked off to, only to understand it was an act of avoidance. He was charming her yet again, but this time, he was aware.

XI. Wednesday

Seeing each other became more frequent but at a higher stake. Ginny would style her curls in a way that would be impossible to not compliment or notice, and Marque would try to find anything to strike up a conversation with the other. The atmosphere between the two changed for the better and for the worse, considering a heightened tension where neither could speak confidently.

Marque J.P.— 4:42 PM

“They’re getting dinner...come with me?”

Ginny C.— 4:43 PM

“What time? I’ll go”

Marque J.P.— 4:43 PM

“Hurry please”

With her question unanswered, Ginny changed into a casual dinner outfit; a square-neck top that showed just enough skin to tell Marque that she liked him too much, but her legs remained covered in jeans that emphasized the casual and self-restraint. The two met outside the dorm building, only it was just her and Marque standing around in the cold weather.

They rode in a taxi down to the town center, then walked into a bar and met with five other boys. It wasn’t her ideal dinner; no girls, or dancing, just football and jugs of beers with baskets of chips. Ginny kept her hand rested under her chin, aimlessly looking around— she had more fun with Vinuth, more freedom. But she didn’t have to pretend that Vinuth was Marque, especially with him sitting next to her. The boys spoke in a mixture of English and French, for the most part, she was excluded from the conversation. The others were kind enough to say hello at first, they appeared to be artists too, with punk and urban styles of dressing, but they all liked sports the same. Ginny became lost in translation, sitting at the crowded booth and playing with the paper straw of her beer that Marque bought for her; her imagination played on, she pictured them alone and falsely translated the other boy’s words as questions about Ginny being his girlfriend or crush. She wanted to be wanted.

As she played with the melting yellow ice, Marque bumped shoulders with her gently. The side of his head rested in his calloused hand. She felt cornered by him, sitting next to the wall with him on the other side, guarding her from the others. Ginny smiled at him without teeth.

“You’re not having fun?” He whispered, the others distracted with yelling at the televised match. She shrugged. “Let’s go then?” He mirrored her grin, “They won’t care.”

Before she could answer, Marque pushed the other two out of the booth row and spoke fervently with his hands. Ginny couldn’t remember his words to translate them in Google later, but she assumed it was: “get out of the way,” maybe.

“No fun!” His blonde friend yelled out at him, everyone laughing. They left the bar and walked around the town. Near dark and slightly windy, Ginny felt more inclined to walk closer to his side.

“Do you dance?”

“No,” she answered too quickly as they strolled aimlessly.

“No?” Marque kept his hands deep in his pocket, his sports jersey tee a bit too revealing for the weather. “You didn’t dance on the girls’ night?”

He brought it up again, Ginny began to think that he was possibly hurt by not being invited, or hurt by not being favored enough to be asked. She rolled her eyes and tried to cover her laugh by avoiding Marque’s face. “I did, just a little.”

“Dance with me then, party girl,” he pried at her shyness, nudging her shoulder again and trying to seek her affection.

“We have class tomorrow. I don’t want to,” she nudged his shoulder back and he stumbled, only to nudge her again in a game of shoulder war. “So what?” Marque replied, “I can be a party girl instead.”

XII. Friday

They kissed in between pink lighting at the same club Vinuth brought her to the week prior. Her hands were clasped on his shirt, while his hands held the corners of the wall and seemingly, all corners of the winds on Earth. Marque had a rancid and overly-masculine taste to him: strong liquor, minty gum, and nicotine. His scruffy skin irritated her smooth face. He was with Ginny for the entirety of the night, but she figured that the man had sneaked a smoke in the bathroom and tried to cover it up with chewing gum.

The music she found boring and the hidden darkness of the club brought them closer together. The game of charm ended, it was only them in a space that required neither of them to prove something. Albeit drunk, unlike she was with Vinuth while dancing, it was simpler to fall into Marque’s movements. He wasn’t much of a dancer, though. He awkwardly swayed side to side and kept his overly zealous hands in Ginny’s for most of the night.

They waited outside for the taxi to come, shivering next to one another with skin revealed a wee too much. Marque’s jacket was draped over her shoulders as they stood under the strings of light. The music was then behind them. The

masquerade returned and the lips before meant much of nothing with the silence that occurred. To Ginny, it felt as if the game ended.

“You can dance,” Marque joked and lit a cigarette. It stunk, Ginny wasn’t used to smoking as much. “I like it, I like you.”

Ginny smiled down at her boots, “I think I like you too.”

“Yeah?” He puffed the smoke away from her in the dark, his index finger tapping away the ashes into a gust of wind.

XIII. In Between

Throughout the rest of her stay in Belfast, the pink beaded bracelet stayed on her left wrist.

It was unspoken what they were, something along the lines of boyfriend and girlfriend but ambiguously unlabeled. They still slept in each other’s beds here and there since the Friday, though. They ate together, watched movies on laptop screens, and used each other as muses for their art.

Ginny found herself invited out with the girls of the dormitory again, purposely without Marque. He kept his distance from her friends but he waited for her to return. She danced with Vinuth under pink lights, not imagining her as Marque. They too kissed; Ginny preferred to think of it as an accident at first. She only wanted to show thanks to Vinuth for complimenting her again, it was an unspoken accident; a friend stated that gals made out sometimes, it was a kind kiss. Too kind to stop and prevent infatuation, even in the cab, outside the dorm hall, and in Vinuth’s bedroom.

She later returned to Marque’s room and fell into his bed sheets without a sober thought. She melted into his mellow skin and slept until the next day’s afternoon, pretending that the orange lipstick was her natural color.

XIV. End

Marque drove with her to the airport at night. He helped unload her luggage and rolled the two suitcases into the building with Ginny. They hugged at her gate, their differing nose bridges touching upon every empty kiss. Ginny boarded the plane as she looked back at the man with then faded blue hair. Marque blew her a kiss goodbye, and she waved.

Fourteen hours after, she landed in Oregon. Being reunited with the air similar to Ireland pained her heart, it was so close yet not the same. She didn’t have the time to say bye to Vinuth. Her boyfriend met her at the exit gate and loaded her

luggage into the back of his car. They rode in silence, and she slept in silence.

Ginny would receive messages from Marque occasionally, Vinuth as well. During a night together, Marque had promised he'd come find Ginny in America when he graduated from Belfast University. He said he'd learn how to paint like the American expressionists, and Ginny would have a gallery to herself. After months had passed since Belfast and her spring graduation, the messages stopped. Ginny resisted carrying on extensive conversations and anything that bordered on a shared intimacy, even if she would purposely post photos of herself just to see if either of them would text her.

@Vinuth.Venutian

Liked your story

“Gra mo chroi, the bracelet looks good on you”

“Miss you x”

@365.Ginny

Liked Vinuth's message

“Miss you too”

She thought about Marque whenever it rained and the clouds hid the sky. And when she saw women with short haircuts, she'd think about Vinuth's lost tenderness. Oregon was close enough to Ireland, just not the same. The gifted roses from her graduation wilted on her bedroom desk and began to erode over time. Rolling blues played in her room again; she wished she could return to Ireland, maybe fall in love again but slower, without masks and with a cleaner slate.

The Dark Room

Julianna Hoyle

It was dark. Extremely dark. So dark Kyla didn't know if her eyes had even opened at first. But it wasn't just dark. The room, at least she assumed she was in a room, was also cold and damp and eerily quiet. Kyla's first instinct was to find a corner, curl up in a ball of fear, and wait to be rescued, with a few bouts of crying every now and then. Who knew? Maybe there were people on the other side of these walls who'd come in at any minute and take her out of the darkness. If she was in the darkness then there was a door and if there was a door then someone must've put her in the darkness and if someone put her in the darkness then there must be someone who could take her out of the darkness.

Though, if she thought about it, she wasn't too sure she wanted to meet the people who'd thrown her in this terrible, dark room. But what could she do? There was nothing to see and there was nothing to hear except her own breathing. If her senses were useless then there was nothing she could do. Then she had an idea. She could treat the room like she would a bedroom: get up, move around slowly, touching the walls as she went, until she found a light switch or a door handle or anything that could get her out of the darkness. Once out of the darkness Kyla could make her next move. So, not wanting to be in the darkness any longer than she truly needed to, Kyla began slowly dragging her feet across the floor, her arms stretched out before her, searching for a wall.

It was slow going at first. If she stubbed a toe that would only slow her progress and if she ran into something important she didn't want to quickly lose it; either would have a significant effect on her progress. But as she continued her quest for the elusive walls of her prison, she did in fact run into something. And *Something* groaned. Solely out of base, primal instinct, Kyla leaped back with a small shriek. She didn't know what it was, this amorphous lump on the floor, and she didn't know if it was dangerous or not. But as *Something* continued to groan, it also began to move, and if it was moving that meant it was waking up. After wrestling with her fears, she decided it would be more helpful to approach *Something* and slowly moved back towards it. After several slow moments her foot found *Something*, but it flinched away from her.

"What the Hell?!" It cried out in a startled, masculine voice. There went her attempt not to spook it. Well, not to spook him.

"It's okay," she cooed tentatively, slowly moving to sit on her knees.

"Who are you?" demanded *Something*. Kyla reached out, cautiously, her fingers found the arm of the man in front of her. He flinched again but didn't draw back. His skin was warm, a pleasant change from the damp and cold of their prison.

“My name is Kyla,” she said, resting her palm fully on his bicep and reaching out with the other to take his hand. “What’s your name?”

“Andrew.” He said shakily as Kyla found his hand and gently curled her fingers around his. He squeezed back. “Where are we?” His voice had grown calmer as he adjusted to the darkness, but there was an edge that would never leave.

“I’m not sure,” Kyla sighed. “Do you remember anything?”

“No. Do you?”

“Nothing,” Kyla sighed before they fell into silence. Why they were there, Kyla didn’t know. Where they were, Kyla didn’t know. Was there a way out, Kyla didn’t know. But there had to be, right? Only one way to find out.

Squeezing Andrew’s hand, Kyla stood and pulled him to his feet.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“You don’t want to sit around in the dark until we starve to death, do you?” Kyla began to let go of his hand, but Andrew’s response was to only grip harder.

“What if it’s a trap?”

“Andrew, we’re already trapped. What could possibly make this worse?”

“Hidden weapons, a hole in the floor, booby-traps--”

“I seriously doubt there are any booby-traps,” Kyla chuckled, cutting Andrew off as she squeezed his hand comfortingly. “We’ll be fine. Just go to a wall and start searching for anything strange or out of the ordinary for a stone wall.”

“Okay,” Andrew conceded as Kyla pulled her hand from his and moved past him. It wasn’t too long until her outstretched hands made contact with something cool and rough.

“I found it,” She called, her voice reverberating slightly off the walls. Shortly thereafter Andrew called out that he’d found his wall as well and they began searching, slowly running their hands up and down the walls, covering every inch they possibly could.

Some time later, Kyla couldn’t be sure how much time passed, considering there was no clock and no moon and no sun for a point of reference. Andrew had given up on the walls after bumping into Kyla for the third time and thought to check the floor. Unfortunately his search proved just as fruitless as their search of the walls. There was nothing--no doors, no windows, no light switches, no trapdoor, no alcoves, not even a single piece of furniture. It didn’t take long, probably three searches of the floor, for Andrew to give up, and after two additional searches of the walls, Kyla gave up as well. She soon found her way towards Andrew, who’d chosen a corner to lay in, and lay beside him, her side pressed to his.

Throughout their searches of the walls and during the breaks they took, Kyla and Andrew made sure to constantly talk to each other or be touching each other as a way to comfort themselves in the darkness.

“Kyla.”

“Mhmm?”

“Do you remember anything outside this room?” Andrew’s voice was quiet, thoughtful, and even a little scared.

“Yes, but sometimes I’m not sure if they’re memories or ideas of what should be.” Andrew hummed in agreement and recognition as he laced his fingers through hers. “Do you remember anything?”

“I think so. There’s one memory that I can’t stop thinking about.”

“Tell me.” Andrew was silent for a long moment and all Kyla had to confirm that he was alive was the warmth of his hand and the sounds of his breathing. Kyla rubbed her thumb in slow circles across the back of his hand as she waited for him to speak. Finally, he did.

“I think I remember the sun. The light, the warmth---”

“The annoyance of it in your eyes,” Andrew chuckled.

“I remember that too,” Kyla grinned. “I also remember faces in a field. Or maybe a meadow.”

“Do you remember who they are?”

“No names, but I think they’re my family.”

“What are they doing?”

“Just sitting. Sitting and smiling. Smiling and laughing. Laughing and watching the little ones play.” There was a pleasant note to his voice as he spoke.

“Kids?”

“Yeah,” Kyla could almost see it all. The light of the sun, the shine off the grass, the smiles of the family. She hoped it was real. “They’re just playing in the sun and the grass. They’re chasing and hiding and wrestling and dancing. They’re enjoying their lives.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Sounds better than here.” The whimsy was gone from Andrew’s voice, replaced by bitterness and despair. “We’re stuck, aren’t we?” It was a question but it sounded more like a statement.

“Maybe.” Kyla squeezed his hand. “But maybe we missed something.”

“You’re too hopeful for your own good.” sighed Andrew. “I don’t think we’re getting out of here, Kyla.”

She frowned deeply. It was entirely plausible that they would die in that room, the thought had definitely crossed Kyla’s mind dozens of times since she’d first woke up, but she just couldn’t accept that there was no way out. If they’d gotten in then that meant there was a way out.

But what could they do?

They’d checked every last inch of the floor many times over, they’d checked all four walls six ways from Sunday, they’d even checked each other for something out of place. There was nothing left that hadn’t been thoroughly investigated except the ceiling, but that was out of the question unless one of them could spontaneously grow to twice their normal height. And Kyla was pretty sure she

couldn't grow to the size of two people.

Two people.

"Andrew!" Kyla shot up and spun to face Andrew, startling him in the process.

"What?!"

"I need to get on your shoulders!"

"What?"

"Put me on your shoulders!" She demanded.

"Why?"

"The only place we haven't checked in this whole room is the ceiling because neither of us can reach it! If you put me on your shoulders, I should be able to reach!" Kyla was so excited she was trembling.

"Kyla, there's no way we can spend hours with you on my shoulders searching the ceiling," Andrew said, trying to reason with her.

"We can take breaks."

"Kyla..."

"Well, do you wanna get on my shoulders?" She snapped. Andrew sighed, sitting in the darkness a few moments more before finally sitting up.

"Fine."

After successfully climbing onto Andrew's shoulders, the pair began their search, starting from their corner and progressing slowly due to Andrew's fear of losing balance and dropping Kyla. She appreciated the sentiment, but it proved to be extremely annoying. After a few hours of a methodical and every shrinking search Kyla began to lose hope. The ceiling was always the same cold, damp, rough stone as the floor and walls, and all the imperfections she found were deadends, natural false hopes that teased her optimism and hope. Her fingers, too, were crying out for her to give up as they began to bleed from the rough stone. Then suddenly, her fingers soon found relief as they touched wood, heavenly, smooth, clean wood that was free of the dimples and divets and depressions of the stone she'd become accustomed to. Wood was so much nicer than stone.

Wood?

"Andrew!" Kyla cried out, tears springing to her eyes as Andrew stumbled. Kyla had caught him off guard but he was able to regain his footing before either of them fell.

"What? What is it?" He called up anxiously.

"Wood! I found wood!" Andrew gave several loud, excited whoops of joy as a grin spread across Kyla's cheeks, breaking the path her tears travelled. Kyla had to quickly shove down her feelings as her fingers diligently began to search the wooden panel. When she couldn't find a latch or handle, or any other sign of a door, she decided to force it. Kyla warned Andrew of her plan and braced herself, placing her forearms on the panel. Slowly she counted from three before shoving against the wood with all her strength. The give was slight, but for Kyla it was everything. It meant they could get out of the darkness, out of their prison. With

her joy and hope replenished, the small victory fueled her strength and she braced against the wood again, pushing with all her might. In one swift moment the panel gave out and flooded their dark prison with streams of intense white light. Kyla cried out as the light blinded her and tried to get out of the way of the falling panel, but this only served to throw Andrew severely off balance.

Andrew's worry was justified.

Kyla fell backwards from Andrew's shoulders and plummeted towards the rough, gray stone of the floor. Gray. She could see color now that there was light.

But that was her only thought before her body collided with the floor. Luckily she'd had enough sense to throw up her arms around her head, but the rest of her body hadn't been so lucky. Instantly every nerve was on fire and every joint roared out in protest as her vision blurred with the burst of colors that exploded across her eyelids. She broke out into horrible screams of agony, rolling across the floor in pain. Immediately Andrew was at Kyla's side, profusely apologizing as he looked over her body for injuries, but she really couldn't make out any of his words through the intense pain that flooded her senses.

Then she passed out.

When she opened her eyes again, Kyla couldn't see much except for a vague outline a few feet from her and a pale stream of light shining onto her face. It was odd being able to make out shapes after being in the dark for so long but there it was, an outline. Kyla attempted to lift herself from the ground but instantly cried out as every nerve in her body screamed in protest. The outline, startled by her voice breaking the perfect silence, turned and rushed to her side. Looking up at the concerned figure, Kyla assumed he was Andrew, something that was proven true when he spoke.

"It's okay. You're okay," he hummed, easing her head back down onto his jacket. Once the stars vanished from her vision she could make out Andrew's appearance. His skin was dark and matched his wide eyes. He had strong shoulders and a tall frame, as well as a wide face that was complemented by his long, curly hair. His face was kind, just as she'd expected. She smiled.

"I can see you," she croaked. Andrew smiled, moving some hair from her face.

"Nice, isn't it? Seeing another person."

"Means you're not a figment of my imagination."

"Glad to see that fall didn't rob you of your sense of humor," Andrew chuckled.

"I know how much that would've broken your heart." Kyla joked. Then she noticed the smile on Andrew's face become small before quickly fading all together.

"I'm so sorry, Kyla." There was pain and guilt in Andrew's eyes as he stared down at her.

"It's not your fault, Andrew. I'm the one who threw you off balance." Kyla

squeezed his hand reassuringly.

“It is my fault. I...I thought I killed you.”

Kyla’s eyes widened as she stared at him. They were both silent for a while but then Kyla sat up, ignoring the pain that flared behind her eyes, and hugged Andrew. He seemed taken aback at first but soon held her, pressing his face into her shoulder. He wasn’t crying, but she could feel the worry and guilt radiating off of him.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered in his ear. “Just give me a few massages and we’ll be square.”

“I can’t tell if that ruined the moment or not.” Andrew laughed as he pulled away to look Kyla in the face. Kyla grinned at him before they both decided to lie back down. Kyla looked to the hole, squinting until her eyes adjusted. Once they did she could make out the moon, a few silhouetted trees, and what she assumed to be clouds floating across the night sky. But the silver glow from the moon was what really made the scene for Kyla.

“It’s so beautiful,” she whispered.

“The moon?” Andrew asked, holding her hand.

“Well yeah, but I was mostly talking about the light.”

“Yeah. I think I like it more than the sunlight.”

“I can’t wait to see it. And all the colors too.”

“They are pretty amazing.”

A smile reached Kyla’s mouth as she thought about the family Andrew had described earlier, bathed in the warmth and light of the sun. She couldn’t wait to experience it herself. More than that, she couldn’t wait to be out of this stony prison.

“Do you think we can get out?” She asked.

“We have a door now.”

“We should go.”

“We will.”

“We should go now.”

“We aren’t doing anything yet.” Andrew said, sitting up in order to look her in the face. “You fell five or so feet from my shoulders and dislocated your shoulder. You have to rest.” His comment earned him groans and glares and grumbles.

“We can’t afford to wait, Andrew.” She retorted. “If we wait any longer we could starve.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re hurt and weak.” He argued.

“And that doesn’t change the fact that very soon we are going to die. And dying isn’t an option.”

Andrew sighed and held his face in his hands. After a long minute he ran them up his face and into his hair before looking back to Kyla.

“Fine.” He pointed his index finger at her. “But we’ll wait for the sun to rise.”

And they did.

When the sun showed it was about mid-morning, Kyla carefully climbed onto Andrew's shoulders, although it proved far more difficult after her fall. Eventually she managed to mount his shoulders and they approached the hole. The light of the sun was intense and forced Kyla to squint as she stared up through the ceiling, but she managed to get a grip on the sides of the hole. Due to her injuries Kyla wasn't strong enough to lift herself out of the room so Andrew put his hands under her thighs and pushed her up. With his help her head popped through the ceiling and she got enough leverage to use her arms and push herself the rest of the way. The moment her body hit the warm stone around the hole she started to giggle, then she started to laugh, then she started to cry. She was out! She was finally out of that dark, damp, suffocating room!

But Andrew wasn't.

Kyla sat up and took in her surroundings, searching for anything that could help her pull Andrew out of the room. As she looked around she saw trees and grass, a pale blue sky with a bright sun, rough rock formations, everything that would suggest she was outside. But her gut instinct, the one that had told her there was a way out, the one that had told her Andrew was good and trustworthy, the one that hadn't been wrong yet, told her she was still inside. Maybe she was out of the darkness but they were far from being out of their prison.

Kyla soon found a large branch and took it in both hands before heading back to the hole. Sitting at the edge, her legs curled beneath her, she lowered the branch and waited for Andrew to grab it.

"Can you reach it?" She called.

"Almost! Lower it some more!" Andrew called back. Kyla did as she was told by moving to lie on her stomach. Thankfully it was just enough for Andrew to grab hold. "I got it!"

"Okay! Jump on three!" She hollered. "One...two..."

"Three!" Andrew launched himself off the ground as Kyla pulled. For a moment it was easy, as if Andrew weighed no more than a feather, then Andrew's full weight pulled on the stick. Kyla cried out as the pain in her shoulder intensified, burning its way from her arm into her brain. Every thought that crossed her mind demanded that she let go, free herself from this torture, but somehow her hands held fast to the branch and she pulled Andrew towards her, pushing her legs up and under her to try and gain leverage.

What was probably a few minutes felt like an eternity as Kyla struggled to pull Andrew out of their dark prison. When his hands finally found purchase on the outsides of the opening he released the branch to rely on his own strength. His release had sent Kyla flying backwards but she gratefully sprawled on her back, huffing and puffing from the exertion as Andrew finally pulled himself out of the hole to lay on his belly. As he lay there, relaxing in the warmth of the sun, his heavy breaths mixed with Kyla's and they stayed like that, lying in the false sun,

drinking in the light they'd been deprived of for so long. There were no words that passed for several long minutes, but when Andrew pushed himself to his hands and knees he looked at Kyla, the look of relief and joy shining out from his eyes like the sunlight they sat in as he smiled at her. It broke her heart.

“We’re free!”

Maybe there was light in this false field, but they weren’t out of the darkness yet.

They weren’t free.

Paint Splattered Box

Jules Tobias

I had heard stories about them. The colors. I had experienced them myself, too, the swirls of light that entered the world and settled themselves amongst the scenery. I had gotten used to them, and no matter how bleak things became, they were still there. Sometimes fading or flashing, but nevertheless present. I'd panic when the palette faded even slightly, fearing I'd lose them for good once they had disappeared completely. I clung onto the pastels my imagination provided, which gave me solace until my irrational fear passed over.

I knew my disappearance fear was irrational, because the colors showed up at the same times and occurrences everyday. Smiles and laughter were flashes of vibrant yellow, warm hugs were a fuzzy orange aura, supportive words a hopeful pink. Hearing others talk about it, I knew it wasn't the same for everyone, different colors associated with different emotions, and sometimes they wouldn't appear at all if the occurrence and emotional value didn't match up. I always kept my experience to myself, simply because it was mine, it was unique. No matter how alarming or distant my hue became, it was mine, and I didn't want to tarnish it by making it anyone else's business.

When I met you, it seemed like you could see all sorts of colors. Maybe bright warm patterns, I imagined at first. And then one day, you saw that my world had faded, a murky blue-gray was surrounding me, like a mixture of suffocating fog and heavy rain. You asked, which people hardly did, about the state of my palette. I tried to brush it off, swipe it away as if working with an actual canvas. It didn't work.

I know from experience, that it takes a certain palette to know another one. I've always had a sixth sense for picking up on other's negative pigments--because darker shades often invade my world as well. I knew the signs. The distant looks I saw as a misty white, the frowns that were a soggy green. Were you like me? How could you, someone so bright--how could you recognize the crisis I was going through? Purple curiosity crept in. I wanted to know. I had to know.

So I took down my tinted filter, and I told you. About the blue-gray, the misty white, the soggy green and sometimes even sharp black that I often saw, I even admitted that the world washed to complete grayscale occasionally. You responded by making me see the colors I associated with happiness using words alone. I tried my best to return the favor, realizing it was very possible you saw the same tones as me. I wanted to see you smile--it was contagious.

That's when I realized--contagious. Your happiness was contagious, the bright warm tones I presumed you experienced were the ones that had been creeping

around the edges of my scenery ever since I stumbled into your path. But soon, the spectrum increased. Midnight blue sky as a backdrop for golden fuzzy fireflies, turning sky blue with clarity. The image of emerald grass and fluffy joyful clouds surrounded by soft polka dots of laughter. Whenever these pictures appeared around me, I dared not touch them, knowing I was the only one witnessing it.

With you, there was hardly ever the same color twice, but none of them carried a negative connotation in this case. Our words covered every single color of the rainbow within seconds, each moment encased by a dreamy pink, and long after the sound of our voices left the air, those colors continued to fill my vision. It was almost scary. Red is the color of fear, but this hue was much softer than the alarming rose colors I associated with the feeling. This was because, deep down, no matter how unbelievable it was to me--I knew you saw this palette too.

Actually, you said it before I did. Of all things, that was one I never had the courage to say first. It's one thing to reveal your appreciation for a person, and another to admit how they've changed the tones in your world.

Recently, you stopped. Blank. Gray. Watery quietness, no longer engaging with the color, with conversation. Why? I don't know. Mint green self doubt is telling me I've done something wrong, but clueless viridian hasn't any idea what it could be. Missing your friend is an icy blue, and regret is every bleak tone all at once. Words are occasional, but it's hard to see their pigments when the moment is fleeting. Sometimes, I pass by and can almost feel a silvery sadness when you glance my way. If our colors are of the same spectrum, are you lonely too? Has monotone absence taken its toll on your perspective as well? Honesty is the most precious golden I've ever seen, and it would be nice to view the colors of truth, no matter how hard they may be to visualize.

I hope you're okay. I hope any negative tones keeping you silent will soon fade, and I hope the memory of my understanding takes over. Until then, I'll continue to hang on to these pastel moments, this turquoise patience, and wait. Maybe you'll find this somewhere, in the paint splattered box I've left in the corner of your mind, where, deep down, you know it is. Maybe the colors will swirl around and guide you to it, busting open the lock and revealing the folded up note--black ink still fresh. And maybe you'll uncurl the rainbow-tinted edges and reveal the shades you're seeing now. If only you had the courage to do so.

Proteus

Lia Laughlin

Nobody knew what to do that day when I became a shapeshifter. My body started to change, and everybody only saw trouble.

The kids at school avoided me, and the teachers tensed up every time I asked a question. They all saw something that I have yet to know, only that was clear. Maybe it all started when my mom told me girls need to shave their armpits; it's unhygienic, she said.

Or maybe it started when I wore baggy clothes to hide my "feminine form", with a beanie to conceal my long hair. I then discovered that men would give me a simple nod, and simply walk away. I felt, for the first time, victorious. The answer was so simple. I just didn't know yet.

It could be the time my aunt told me to wear some goddamn shorts in the house. Walking around in my underwear is unladylike. After all, your dad's a boy, she said.

There was another time I dressed in more "boyish" clothes. Grey hoodie, black and white plaid button up, and some men's jeans I found at Goodwill. When I wore that outfit, it made my friend blush. She looked really, really cute, when she did.

Don't get me wrong. I still found joy adorning shimmering jewelry and palatted dresses. In ribbons and in blue satin sashes.

However, there's just something about 'mixing things up' that makes me feel so powerful. When I wore that silky black skirt with the boots and rough denim zip-up, I felt like a force of nature. Wearing my grandfather's vest over my great aunt's blouse, never before have I stood closer to God.

And then, I got caught.

I thought it was the clothes, but the scaly tail was also a dead give away.

There was so much disappointment in my dad's eyes. But in my mom's, they couldn't even meet mine. Brief nods bid me farewell when I exited the car, and after school, only the sound of silence welcomed me home.

The more I sat with them during sermons, the faster my body shifted.

Once the horns sprouted, my mom grabbed the suitcases, immediately.

They held a funeral service in my honor.

I moved in with my girlfriend, and thank God she already knew about the changes.

It took me time to accept the horns and my tail. But she did very quickly. Said

they made me more beautiful, plus more sensitive places to tug and hold onto, she teased.

My face turned red, so much.

I'll never forget that Sunday afternoon, sweaty and panting into each other's arms. She kissed my thighs and her tongue, working wonders. When my back arched, I felt sharp waves of pain, concocted with pleasure, as feathered wings pullulated, and stretched across the bed.

I expected her to freak out as I did.

Her eyes locked with mine, and she kept going. Tongue flat. Deeper than before.

Whenever I came home from a long day, I would plop on the couch to rest my eyes for just a few minutes. I would wake up to her massaging my scalp, rubbing circles where my crooked horns meet skin. She then pays attention to my ashy tail with lotion, helping me prep for my shedding season. She knows all the right spots on my speckled wings to press on. The sore ones, and the ones that leave me breathless.

God, she's divine.

She joined me on trips to visit my grave site. On her first visit, she adorned lavenders on the stone, and always made sure to buy ones with long strands so they covered my dead name.

We kissed and kissed. And then more. I was Mary Shelley, [though she can't say she did it on her own grave.]

She held my hand, unafraid as she kissed it, while we walked down the street. I preferred it when others kept to their business, but of course, what are onlookers for if not to stare?

I wasn't sure if it was my tail slithering around, the protruding horns, or the big-ass wings, but that day in particular triggered the firearm of a particular nobody. Maybe it was the way she kissed my forehead. Or the way I kissed her lips.

The shot rang, and I pushed them back as my wings knocked the air out of the shooter. I wrapped my wings around her. Blood splattered on silver feathers, and on her yellow coat.

I held her tight as my wings took flight.

I rose higher and higher, and flapped my wings towards empty space.

I didn't know our destination, but I knew we needed a new home. I didn't rest until we landed on the moon's surface. There, I used my claws to extract the bullet with careful precision. I licked her wounds clean, kissed every surface until they closed up.

I've never sobbed such ugly tears before until she woke up.

It always starts ugly, then joyful, if we're lucky.

I held her like a bride as we descended back down, like she held my heavy heart. We couldn't go back to our apartment, to our jobs, to our world, not anymore. The lower we flew, the bluer the surface.

She asked me if I could finally do it. We've had many discussions about it, but decided to wait for the right moment.

What better moment than this, right? She asked.

I lulled her into a kiss as my hands snaked around her waist. My claws were shaking as I lightly touched her face.

I focused all my energy on her, my arms cocooning her, and her transformation took root.

Murky scales glimmered her entire body. Her legs, now a tail, shimmered a dull silver. Webbed hands coated in green mucus. She emitted a rotted grass smell, like winter melons left for days.

She was absolutely perfect.

We plunged into the sea, and welcomed our new home with my dear goddess residing with me.

Grieving Your Absence While You're Still Here

Angelina Nha Quan Tran

I've missed you before you'd even left. Jumping from house to house, you told me to look for you in the dark night sky, because the moon will shine above all. You aren't gone yet, but I'm beginning to count the days I have left with you.

Tick, tick, Tick, tick,

is all I hear in the dead silence of the night.

Budump, budump, Budump, budump,

I hear the echoes of my heart syncing to the sounds of the clock and RINGGGGG.

It's midnight, so your alarm goes off. You go to pray to the ancestors, to Buddha while I lay here and listen, until I feel weak from fighting against the knight of drowsiness. I sometimes feel lost on those nights, but you said to look at the moon for guidance. You took me in at two months and by age three I've only ever known you as mom. You've watched me grow older as I've watched you grow older. You watched me, watched my parents go to war with one another and ended their love so soon.

Buddha created a path for Enlightenment and Peace. All you and I ever wanted is peace in our lives, but somehow we can't seem to take a break. You healed those scars left by my parents, and showed me what unconditional love feels like when I thought love had terms and agreements I must follow in order to earn it... like my parents divorce papers. A type of love that contains giggles of laughter, smiles that reach from one ear to the other, and comfort like the thousand of stitches between a blanket and stuffed with goose feather.

In these four walls, you used to watch me fall asleep, so I'd stop having nightmares. Funny how the dark became my best friend, for I fear something worse: not seeing you in the morning. I'm still struggling to accept the fact that you will be gone one day, but I'd rather not think about it right now. I like staying between these walls. Time feels... slower.

You've held my hand for every step I took, while I now grip your hands harder making sure you carefully take every step. You gave me strength to fight against the world, but along the way you've lost strength in your small wrinkling hands that are too smooth to help you grip, your neck that no longer holds your head up, your spine that curves down to the floor, and your legs that limp and ache in each step. I wish for more time but the clock is ticking like a time bomb and I sit here looking at the moon in the comfort of these four walls.

Nothing is better than mom's cooking since it's always filled with love. I wholeheartedly dive into its flavor because my heart knows what home tastes like.

Home is where the heart is and you're the heart of this family. I remember the days when you'd taken me to visit your son in jail. Money is all he asks, but you sit there with delicious homemade food, packed in a pink silk cloth. He never gave a care in the world even when he came out. I hoped he had changed and realized his mother had given her entire life for him, but he still comes out asking for more money and disappears. Selfish prick he is, but you continue with your selflessness and I continue to get more angry.

You are too selfless.

You gave up your own happiness, but at what cost?

Having liars as "family?"

No, that never stopped you from showing unconditional love to them. They never once gave you your peace, but here you are burning each incense praying for their health, when you should be taking care of yours. Over time, when I heard your name in the gossip that your sisters devoured and entertained, I got more angry and eventually I exploded. I let my mouth go and started the next world war. I'd never felt greater, but I didn't realize what I've done to you. By bringing up the past, painful memories flowed through these walls and reliving such trauma was never my intention. I'm sorry for not bringing peace and for not being forgiving, especially when you taught me better. Seeing you cry fueled my anger, because my unconditional love for you was like enlarged flames in a forest fire. Only after dealing with that drama and mess, I learned the value of peace over anything. I've come to understand why you turned a blind eye and dealt with the anger and pain silently. To learn acceptance.

I'd never known what to do when I saw you cry, so I watched speechlessly. We both bottle up the pain until it feels like our hearts are tearing apart and we can no longer breathe and every emotion fills these walls with water and.... *Very Long Sigh*

Accepting what's happened allows growth, but do I have to just accept everything as is? Why do I have to take all those punches? Do I look like a punching bag?!? Where do I draw the line?

I'm spiraling once again, but no moon tonight, so I stare at the ceiling.

So many small cracks and bumps up there.

No matter how much you paint over it or sand it down, cracks and bumps still form.

The only way to fix that is to tear the ceiling down and start from scratch. You gave up the only life you knew in Vietnam to start a new life here in America. You took scraps of knowledge that others threw away to make something, not for yourself, but for your family. Selflessness is your greatest trait but also your weakest.

I wish you were more selfish, especially with time.

You deserve the world, but even after seventy-six years, you still don't think so. Ironic how you've come to acceptance with everything except your worth. I've

watched you deal with great pain both physical and emotional, as you watched me deal with the same. Although these walls are still intertwined with generational and cultural trauma, you showed me the path to accept my past and grow from it. You drilled Buddha's words into me, but somehow the only thing I can't seem to grasp is the acceptance of your inevitable future. You are more than a role model, super hero, and guardian to me. You are part of my world, so I can't imagine a world without you.

I guess I'll have to try accepting my reality, for the moon will be my guidance when you are gone.

Women and Children Last

Nafina Raha

“Get over here,” my mother whispers at us, ushering all four of her children into the cramped space of our living room. With twelve people living in one small house, space is always lacking and never quite enough—though it feels emptier than usual with my father gone. She gestures to us to sit around the table, where my aunt and uncle had our cousins sit as well. My grandmother sits off in the corner of the room, constantly peering between the curtains out of the window like she’s looking for something.

She looks scared.

Never before in my life have I seen my grandmother look scared.

My mother whispers something to my aunt, who nods her head and grabs a small pot from the kitchen. I try peeking into the pot, but she moves it out of my sight too quickly.

“We’re going to have to leave here soon, try to find another town to live in,” my mother says as she takes the pot from my aunt and dips a finger into it. She takes her finger out, now covered in what looks like dirt and grease, and looks each of us in the eye. “We need to cover our faces, okay? The soldiers might leave us be if we’re able to fade into the crowd.” She looks at me last, her eyes running over my face. “We don’t want them remembering any of our faces.”

“Mama, why do we need to leave?”

“Why are the soldiers coming?”

“Where are we going?”

Questions chorus from each of my siblings and my cousins.

“We’ll answer all your questions later,” my aunt says. She’s always been more severe than my mother, and I could see some unspoken conversation pass between her and her husband. “Get moving. Right now. We need to gather our things and get out of here. Before the soldiers come.”

She shushes our chorus of questions and ushers us, one by one, into the bedroom we all shared to gather our belongings after my mother smeared our faces with the strange liquid in the pot.

My mother kneels before me last. “Everything’s going to be okay, baby.” The smell of the grease and dirt makes my nose crinkle, and the touch of my mother’s fingertips smearing it along my skin feels cold and faraway.

“Where’s Baba?”

Almost too quick to catch, a look darts between my mother, my aunt, and her husband. There’s something about the look in my uncle’s eyes, something that tells me there was far more going on here than they were going to tell me. The adults always seem to be hiding things from us, especially since that first invasion.

They don't seem to realize that their children pick up on things, every little detail and breadcrumb we can get.

"Is Baba dead? Did the soldiers get him?" My voice shakes a little, but I think about my aunt's severity and straighten my spine, forcing myself to stay focused on the task at hand—prying information out of these adults. One of the other kids in our neighborhood said the soldiers were going after all the men first, looking for any reason to get rid of them.

I didn't want to think about what would happen after they killed all the men.

My mother's eyes turn glassy at that moment, and I can see the tears threatening to fall down her face, but she squares her shoulders and looks back at me.

"I don't know, darling." Her hand shakes a little as she finishes covering my face. "I don't know."

I can tell she's telling the truth.

She's Just a Dreamer

Nafina Raha

Aaruna swore up and down that she saw a woman with wings—big, feathered wings, wings like those of an angel—flying through the sky far, far above the rooftop garden on the top of her apartment building.

“She had dark skin and hair like mine, all curly and big, only it was down past her hips, streaming after her on the wind,” she spoke rapidly, in hushed and rushed tones to her uncle as he bustled around the apartment to get ready for work. It was his day to take all the children—her, her siblings, her cousins, all eight of the school-age children living in their cramped apartment—to school, and he was the least timely of all the adults in their family. “And—and she was wearing this beautiful dress, it was all blues and purples and dark greens and whites—I’ve never seen clothing like it—and her wings—oh my, her wings—they looked like angel’s wings, but they were this deep shade of maroon, or burgundy, or plum, with feathers like a bird, and I swear, she made eye contact with me from way up there, and she smiled, and—”

“Aaruna, you read too many fantasy books,” my mother called from the dinner table, crowded in with some of my cousins stuffing food into their mouths as they slung their bags over their shoulders in preparation to leave for school. “Now stop rambling and get your book bag ready.”

“I’m not making this up! I know what I saw! She was really far up, but I couldn’t have mistaken her for something else. There’s no way I could’ve mixed her up with a bird—she looked so human, just like us, just with wings, and—”

“Come on, Aaruna, we have to leave now. Everyone, let’s get moving, we can’t miss the train today!” my uncle called through the room over the racket of the multiple different conversations and the bodies bustling this way and that.

“The Winged People have to still exist! I saw one, she must’ve been a Winged person—all the history books say—”

“Oh, please. The Winged People disappeared hundreds of years ago. Driven into extinction. Everyone knows that.”

“I don’t even think they ever existed. No proof. All this nonsensical stuff about flying people—it’s got to be just a myth.” My aunt and her wife had joined our conversation, and this encouraged my cousins to jump into the conversation.

“Aaruna’s imagining fake flying people.”

“She’s got to be hallucinating.”

“She thinks we’ve reverted seven hundred years into the past.”

“She’s just a dreamer.”

“It’s because she hasn’t got anyone to talk to outside those books—except for the rest of the book nerds at school.”

“You can all shut up about my sister before I throw you through the train’s window later,” my older sister, Harshi, cut in as she breezed into the living room from our shared bedroom, shooting her death glare at our cousins—they quickly shut up after that. She turned to me, handing me my school bag. She smiled, her dark eyes like onyx gemstones, the same eyes our entire family had. “Come on, Aaruna. Tell me about this Winged woman.”

Supernova

Isabella Rios

I am me:

Flesh. The sound of flesh ripping echoes throughout me. The sound of my screams bounce off the walls within me. I continue to dive my arms into my body. Gut myself out. Rip out my mind and soul. I rip into my thighs. My arms. My torso. Disassembling myself. Trying to put myself back together as if I was a child with a jigsaw puzzle.

Who am I? If not a supernova exploding and disintegrating? Am I not the stars falling rapidly from the sky and burning the second they reach the ground? What am I? If not full of rage and such sadness I cannot feel anything. Yet I feel everything.

Femininity. Womanhood. What is my purpose other than objectification? To be ogled at? I am not a person. I am energy that has long been burned out. I do not recognize myself, am I a person anymore? What can I do but rip myself into pieces and flush it down the toilet?

I blink. Flashes of memories of a little girl running and laughing. That little girl is me. She is happy. I realize right there, my body in shambles, that I do not need to listen. I tear the list of expectations into pieces and drown it. I become the moon. The sun. I shine like the Aurora Borealis. The sky meets the sea as I stare into the mirror. There I am. There is no more blood. I have a body. My body is my own. I am whole.

Daisy

Megan Ferguson

Last night, my mother visited me. The plastic crunching underneath the stale sheets of the hospital bed kept my eyes open as the sun fell asleep. There was a knock on my room's door marking the seventh hour of the night. *Come in.* I pushed down on the steel railings that guarded the sides to scoot my body, limbs quivering, preparing to deliver my confession.

Rachel, I'm gonna be honest, I have had no—

It wasn't Rachel in front of me when I finally gained consciousness of my surroundings. *Mom?* Her hair was gray with streaks of silver laced through her long locks. Her face was aged, sagging and stressed. But her eyes were the same golden orbs I'd inherited. She was wearing her favorite mauve dress she wore every Sunday decorated with florals that reached to her ankles. It used to be roomy on her waist where it now fit snug.

You look—I searched for the word—*healthy.* Her head hung as she scuttled across the tile floor to the cushioned chair in the corner covered in blue vinyl with tears at its seams. Her fingers traced the gashes from the front of the seat to the hinges of the arm rests before parking herself. She placed her hands neatly in her lap as her legs crossed in the same movement. Her face turned solemn once settled and I watched her while a past life flushed my mind.

I remember the first time we were here.

Fistfuls of lollipops and rubber gloves filled with air. I named the first one Amber after my first best friend. The nurse had let me draw on Amber's face. Dad always dressed me in bright colors for our visits. Obnoxious yellows and nauseating shades of pink—mom's favorite color.

You never liked the food.

Noodles swimming in water with a dollop of tomato paste in a styrofoam bowl. White rice shaped in a circle with microwavable orange chicken dropped on top. Dad and I always snuck in a pastry from the bakery mom most adored when we visited on Saturday mornings. When she fell asleep, I swore she'd moan to be bathed in the chocolate sauce that was drizzled on all of their deserts.

There was no privacy.

Nurses and doctors in and out as they pleased. The toilet slid from the surrounding cabinet like a pull out trash can. I had my first period there. Mom noticed a blotch of red on my crotch and called everyone out of the room. I bought my first tampon from the vending machine in the bathroom down the hall.

They finally let you go home.

A squeaky wheelchair begging for oil and a suitcase of underwear aged from the time mom was here. She was enveloped in the knitted blanket I made for her birthday with a satin scarf tied around her bare head. It was the first time in a while she'd seen daylight, her eyes squinted when the outside air touched her skin. Dad dabbed his hanky under his eyes while I pushed mom to our minivan.

It'd been so long since you were home.

Welcome banners hung from the garage door and streamers laced through the banister. The neighbors lined the sidewalk and family poured into our house. Mom met my boyfriend for the first time. The next day, she walked in on me on top of my boyfriend. She didn't knock and that night, I broke up with him.

I remember when you had to go back.

Repacking dusty bags and meal prepping dinners for the week. This second time was longer than a week. I curled up in mom's lap as we drove to the place I'd begun to call her prison. The top she would soon be dressed out of was soiled in my tears.

You said it was getting better.

Rising graphs and doctor's notes I took as good news. The everyday headaches and frequent panic attacks every time my phone rang. My university was only 10 minutes from the hospital. I took the distance from her over every full ride. My weekends—no, every second was consumed by Daisy.

There was no time.

One week and attorneys and papers and marriage licenses. Unsealed promises that had all the doubt and uncertainty and fear. The ceremony was in mom's hospital room. Her and dad were our witnesses. The honeymoon was spent at her bedside and I cried every second of it.

They finally let you go.

Flat lines and cold skin. I held her hand when she left and I squeezed when I knew she was gone. Three minutes before, I'd told mom I was pregnant. She always wanted to be a grandma. The three minutes following mom's departure, I prayed she'd become everything you were. And then I said goodbye.

Another knock ricocheted off my room door. I peered at the familiar figure in the corner before speaking, soaking in her presence. "Come in." I inhaled deeply and through my mouth, letting it all out.

"Violet, your family is here to see you," Rachel entered, inviting the artificial light in and holding the door open to the hallway.

"Mama!" Daisy hopped into the room, jumping up onto my bed and wrapping me in her arms. My cheek pressed against the top of her head as she nuzzled into my chest. The warmth of her body radiated to my heart, making me squeeze her even more. I pushed her back to take in her face and those golden orbs of hers.

"Your hair hasn't grown back?" she asked in her sweet voice that squeaked

when she asked a question.

“I told her it would take time,” dad stood behind Daisy, clutching her shoulders over my hands. I sent him a soft smile, mouthing thank you.

“I’m going to need some of your magic pixie dust and then maybe, just maybe, my hair will grow back just as beautiful as yours,” I ran my hands through her dark waves, which felt like silk on my fingertips. From the corner of my vision, a blur of a body shifted. Mom moved behind the clump of people gathered around my bed. Daisy was speaking and dad was talking, but all I could do was watch her leave. When she reached the door, passing Rachel, she looked out into the room. She searched the area before catching my gaze. *I love you.*

A soft smile rose on her face. And she walked out of the room.

“Did you sleep alright honey?” dad asked, breaking me from my trance with the door. A pressure built in my throat but no tears gathered in my eyes. I swallowed the lump, leaving last night behind.

“I dreamt of Daisy,” I said, briefly meeting his eyes before looking down at my child curled up in my lap. I pet her hair, brushing my icy hands against her face, allowing them to rest there.

A Dark Place

Jordan San Miguel

> In A Dark Place

[...It has been wandering these cosmos for millennia, accompanied only by its six moons. Untethered to any star, this world is destined to lie in eternal darkness, save for the blinding white-hot magma at its core which had long ago sustained the first signs of life: hydrothermal bacteria deep in the Amniotic Oceans. Now, billions of diverse lifeforms crawl above and below its surface—among them, the curious variety of organism you know as “human”. They have formed empires, started wars, and built cities; but most important of all, before any of that, they named things. And the name they gave to this world was “The Night.”

> Lara – [The Night]

Hungover and head aching, she lies in a fetal position on the wet, creaking wood. The sound of incomprehensible screaming wakes her up, followed by a few swift bludgeoning blows, then silence. When she finally gathers the strength to sit up and look around at the other prisoners on the boat, it’s clear that she’s made some mistake yestercycle that she will now come to regret. The last thing she can remember is having to piss, really, really bad... Then nothing.

A crazy old man says his name is Archeus. He offers to help her escape, claims he’s done it five times before, but Lara doesn’t believe him.

“We’re almost there,” he says. “Ex Nihilo. The darkest city.”

“Great,” Lara says. “I hate the dark.”

“Don’t let the god of Darkness hear you,” he jokes. “And it’s not really that dark. They only call it that because...I don’t know. But it wasn’t always one city. Used to be three smaller cities, then there was a fourth city that took over, and now they’re all somehow one big city. Funny how that works, huh?”

“Can we stop talking for a second?”

Storm clouds approach and the rowers above deck begin chanting in a language she doesn’t understand. A huge wave knocks the boat sideways, and suddenly guards and prisoners alike are forced to swim ashore. Only about half of them survive; the remaining guards slap handcuffs on the remaining prisoners as soon as they’re out of the water.

“It’s funny,” she turns to the old man. “I didn’t think the water would be so warm.”

“Yeah,” he replies. “Like soup.”

> Isaac – [Ex Nihilo: Oblivion District]

Head hung low, walking away from another failed mission; once again,

he has blown his cover. What kind of a secret agent can't keep a secret? Isaac could see it already, the other officers' smug faces waiting for him in the HQ hallways. He's beginning to regret this line of work - maybe he really should have become an architect, like his mom always said. Lieutenant Bishop isn't happy to see him (is he ever?), and punishes him by assigning him to train the new rookie. His name is Adam - one of those Blond-haired, Blue-eyed types the Order likes to fetishize. Isaac can tell he's one of those agents that are way too devoted to the cause. Yes, it's true that all of them, Isaac included, actively work to uphold a fascist regime, but you've got to have some level of detachment from all the propaganda. Otherwise, you just turn insane...

"GLORY TO THE EYE!" Adam shouts, standing up straight and saluting. Isaac can already tell this one is going to get on his nerves. Bishop briefs the two of them on the mission; they're supposed to track down the location of Madame Kovilak, yet another rebel with one of those huge master plans to take down the Order of the Eye. You know, the super big ones? The ones that seem to spring up every other week? It's all starting to seem a bit trite.

> Dominic – [Ex Nihilo: Lilith District]

"Good. There are four sporas in a cycle - those are called Vespورا, Luspora, Nespورا, and Respora. Can anyone tell me what the length of our cycles are aligned to?" The instructor's eyes wander the room, searching for the student who seems the least prepared. They settle on Dominic, whose attention was focused elsewhere, fixed on a strange orange light rushing past the stars.

"The orbit of the largest moon around the planet," Dominic mumbles in a deadpan voice, wondering what exactly it is about him that makes people assume he's stupid when in reality he's just distracted-

"Ahem. Night to Dominic!" Professor Ward snaps her fingers in front of his face. "Would you please tell the class what this moon is named?"

"Oh. Uh, sorry," he replies, trying to refocus his attention. "It's Aetheris, the moon of time." His seeming unenthusiasm was not due to ignorance; on the contrary, this topic is one that Dominic has come to know far too well. It's just hard not to be bored in class when they're still going over basic astronomy and physics and you're already into the *advanced stuff*, you know? - multiverses, superposition and the like.

In the corner of the dining hall, he eats his grilled heartfish with moon-grain - alone, because the white kids always make fun of the scent of the Darkfolk herbs in his lunch. Let them laugh all they want; it reminds him of home, and that's all that matters. He doesn't care. He also doesn't care that the other colony-kids won't accept him into their group, no matter how annoying it is to be the only lone Darkfolk on campus. They'd probably just get on his nerves anyway. Who needs friends when you have books?

Oh, yes. He's been very excited to crack open this one. Yestercycle, he found it

on an old dusty shelf, nestled deep in the academy's labyrinthine library - someone must have forgotten that it existed. "Melanchronic Symbiosis: On the Topology of Temporality in a Sunless Cosmos," the cover reads. To be honest, Dominic has no idea what any of it means, but he likes it that way. Makes more sense than the rest of the world around him, that's for sure. As he gets pleasantly lost among the pages of jargon and abstraction, his mind's eye begins to wander. Those images pop up in his head again, the ones that seem to dance on the border between a memory and a dream. He sees the place. The Green World, everything effortlessly glimmering in bright radiance; the orb of blinding fire powering it all. It's warm too, like standing in front of a geothermal heater, only it's not just hot air, you can feel the *light itself*.

"What are you still doing here?" The security guard asks. "It's almost Respora, shouldn't you be getting back to the dormitory?"

Dominic watches the words on the page turn back into a random series of lines and shapes, and lifts his gaze to look at the guard, then directly over his head, where Aetheris is hanging bright. "Sorry. I must have lost track of time." He shuts the book and hurries to the dorms before the next spora.

> Julia – [Ex Nihilo: Carthago District]

In the halls of the Carthago Senate, Julia watches Diocles Kronon pace back and forth, repeatedly reciting the soon-to-be first speech of his campaign. Five years ago, she met him in a political science class, and they've been in a testy relationship ever since. She's trying to be supportive and calm him down like she always has to do, but he's being annoying again, freaking out over every little word.

"Relax. You don't need to change anything. Your speech is fine," Julia assures him, grabbing him by the shoulder to halt his frantic movements.

He widens his eyes at her. "Fine?! What do you mean, it's fine!?"

"It's a *good* speech. Maybe there are some rough spots," Julia replies. "But it's way too late to change it now."

"Rough spots!?" Diocles shouts, panicking. "Why didn't you tell me earlier!?"

"Oh, shut up! I *did* tell you. You just never listen," Julia says, rolling her eyes.

The two of them make their way to the podium. Leon Strong is saying his parting words, voice echoing through the humongous senate hall. Diocles is up next, and he's wiping his sweaty palms on his toga.

"You got this," Julia says, patting Diocles on the back before he walks on stage.

He gives the speech. Julia's trying to gauge the audience's reactions, which are teetering between vacant and vaguely unenthused. She's trying not to cringe at his long-labored words falling on deaf ears, but it's too hard; when he draws a blank halfway through the speech she's heard so, so, many times, she can't help but run

up on stage and finish it for him. She fails to ignore the way the audience's ears perk up once she starts talking.

Just as she finishes her last word, the lights go out. Amidst the pitch-black chaos, small lanterns in the hands of fleeing politicians turn on across the senate building. Everyone is scrambling to find the light, terrified of the creatures that were soon to come lurking in the darkness. Centuries ago, they erupted from somewhere in Ex Nihilo, slaughtered half of the population, then spread to the rest of the continent - the Feared Ones. Contorting masses of limbs, faces, and flesh crawl around the building. Everyone covers their ears, trying not to listen to their horrible shrieking songs that can drive you mad. The guards fire their guns as Julia and Diocles make it out of the senate, to a well-lit area. Once they're in a safe place, he vents to her.

"What the hell?!" he exclaims. "I'd rather you'd just let me stand there in silence! Do you know how embarrassing that is?"

"If you don't want to be embarrassed," Julia replies nonchalantly, "then do a better job at memorizing your lines next time."

> Tomas – [Ex Nihilo: Vibrio District]

Usually Tomas finds these parties fun, but this time around he's just not feeling it.

"A bit more drink will do the trick," he thinks to himself, right before swallowing a large and sour gulp of gloomwine. He sits back and feels the alcohol flow through his veins, then watches the iridescent gowns flutter, glimmering in the yellow light that shines through the mouth and eyes of the Golden Children, who are floating silently at the corner of the ceiling. All around him, the courting chatter of the other young aristocrats blurs together into a single voice. Cousin Charles plops down in the seat next to him, head hung low, hands resting on his knees.

"You weren't lying, huh?" Charles says, pausing to catch his breath. "Those Eboncourt girls *can* really dance..." He tugs at his ruffled collar.

"Yeah, I told you. They're kinda insane," Tomas replies.

"No kidding. And I bet they're even more rough in bed." Charles grins at Tomas. "You hit it off with any heiresses yet? I've been talking to that one over there," Charles brags, pointing over at the dancing crowd, at the girl with the purple dress. "Apparently she's a daughter of the Brousseau family. You know, the ones that own that entire strip of land between Lacrimosa and Vesperos?"

"Dude," says Tomas. "It kind of just sounds like you're only into her because her family's rich."

"That's not true," Charles retorts. "She has a very nice body as well."

Tomas tilts his head to the side and looks at Charles. "Do you even know her first name?"

"Of course I do," Charles scoffs. "It's Anna. Or Victoria... Something like

that. Who cares? I think you should be focusing on scoring some heiresses of your own, cousin.” Tomas gives a disingenuous, half-hearted chuckle and sips more gloomwine.

“Anyway,” Charles says, looking up at the moon. “Looks like it’s gonna be Respora soon...”

This is the part everyone looks forward to, and the reason why these parties always went on so late. Typically, Respora, being the last spora of the cycle, happens while everyone’s asleep, but those who stay awake to see it receive a kind of indescribable celestial catharsis, the events of which are usually forgotten about by the next, waking spora - the perfect way to end a party.

Cousin Charles goes off to dance with Anna or Victoria again and Tomas paces the room, looking for someone interesting to talk to. He smiles at a group of girls, but they pretend not to see him. What the hell? Looks like they’re all crowded around someone. He can’t see who it is, but he can hear them all fawning over him, calling out his name.

“You’re so funny, Louis!” “That coat looks great on you, Louis!” A light blue mist begins to fill the air as the hour of Respora arrives. As Tomas breathes in the faintly sweet air, everything takes on a sense of lightness and he can no longer tell the difference between his body and the world around him.

And then, the eyes. Who is he even looking at? Or who’s looking at him? It’s the guy, Louis; the one they were all trying to talk to before. The two of them can’t seem to take their eyes off each other. The crowd of girls begin to scatter, distracted by their various revelations, but Louis and Tomas stay frozen, almost like they’re in a staring contest. It’s not exactly a look of love per se; moroso awe, taken-aback-ness, an oscillation between confusion and recognition. The kind of look you’d give upon seeing an old friend for the first time that looks completely different from how you remember them; except they didn’t know each other.

Tomas wakes up at Vespora. This is the last thing he can recall happening last cycle; after that, it’s all blue dust.

[The Elysian Realm - Olympus]

“Tomas wakes up at Vespora. This is the last thing he can recall happening last cycle, and after that, it’s all blue dust.” The goddess of Voice clears her throat and the god of Darkness leans in closer, expecting to hear more, but Voice just yawns and stands up from the chair.

“Wait, is that it? What’s happening now?” Darkness asks.

“I’ll tell you later,” Voice says. “I need to rest my vocal cords.”

“I don’t understand why you’re adding all these extra details about their personal lives and the Night,” says Darkness. “I already know how it all works down there. Can’t you just tell me where to find them?”

“No,” Voice replies. “That’s not fun.”

“Ugh, I don’t have time for this. He’s been trying to find those damn

people for years, and they're just crawling around that city right under his nose!"

"Hey, all I can do is tell you what's happening. I never promised to get involved in your weird scheme or whatever. You know we're not allowed to mess around in mortals' business like that."

"Come on, what am I supposed to do? Tenor's my second son - I'm not just gonna let him aimlessly wander that godsawful place for the next decade."

"He doesn't even like you, you know," Voice retorts.

Darkness sighs. "I know."

[Tenor - Veins of the City]

Deep underground, a maze of tunnels interconnects the four districts of Ex Nihilo, where beggars and thieves have created their own makeshift communities and literal black markets. The Feared Ones are many down here; in fact, somewhere in the tunnels is the place where they originated from.

In a cavernous chamber filled with stalagmites, a cult gathers daily, under the command of Tenor Antonis. Although the cultists are passionately devoted, Tenor himself doesn't really believe in it; it's just some made-up religion he invented to get people to do his bidding. Right now, he's sitting in his chambers, preparing to go and address them.

But he's concerned with other things. For decades, every cycle since it happened, the event has been repeating in Tenor's mind - he looks down at the same hand which thrust the bloody dagger through his oldest friend all those years ago, hears the sound of Felix's voice falling down the tower, the screaming fading into the distance. He betrayed his closest friend, but it was for his own good, right? That's what he keeps telling himself. Who knows what they would have done to Felix if he had lived? Surely the Gods would have sentenced a mortal like him to a fate far crueller than death. Even though Tenor took the blame for all of it, they spared him at Olympus because of who his father was. Thus, the son of Darkness was merely sentenced to a life of banishment.

The ugly crawling things are their own punishment, though. Mortals call them Feared Ones; Tenor thinks that's a stupid name. He prefers to call them "Ugly Crawling Things". Ever since Felix released them into the city, they've been inescapable, singing those awful gibberish songs, reminding him of all the mistakes that were made.

No matter. It's ancient history, spilled milk. All that Tenor needs to focus on now is capturing one descendant from each of Felix's children, five of them, if he recalled correctly. Then he'll be able to do the sacrifice, and get rid of the Ugly Crawling Things for good. That's it. Then Olympus will surely let him back into the Elysian Realm. It would be so easy, if he just had the slightest clue where to find any of them...

It's time. Tenor gives his phony speech to the crowd of cultists, face covered by an ornamental bronze mask. One of the Ugly Crawling Things

intrudes into the room. He hums a resonant note, causing a purple light to glow through the robes, around his navel. As he manipulates the note into a strange rhythm, the light begins to flow out of his mouth, forming a thin glowing sheet. He motions forward with his hands, sending the sheet flying towards the monster, cutting it in half, straight down the middle. When Tenor looks back at the cultists, he's disturbed to find that they're all bowing down in his direction, resembling something like a swarm of pathetic worms. Disgusting. He doesn't say a word, puts his hood up and storms out.]

The Bottom of My Heart

Dominick D'Auria

When Percy sat down to start writing his manuscript, he barely got a few words in before the steady pumping of the heart on his bookshelf distracted him.

Ba-dump. Ba-dum-ba-dump.

Its beating was erratic and inconsistent, rising to quick crescendos then slowing down to a steady pulse, agonizingly unstable. Stop it, he practically begged the thing. He had tried the same routine earlier in the day, and the heart had refused to quell. It clearly couldn't listen to reason.

This wasn't his first experience with someone else's heart. Back in the seventh grade, he had a little thing with a girl named Holly. They swapped organs beneath the school bleachers during PE. Her heart was soft, beating with delicacy that contrasted Holly's rough exterior. It was intoxicating, and he kept it in a shoe box underneath his bed surrounded by a bunch of kleenexes, fearing it would dry out. Two weeks later his mom found it and forced him to return it, and he spent the next two months grounded.

This time, it was like her heart was guiltily him. *Look what you've done*, it said, *you're not supposed to have me*. It was Sydney's, not his. *Give me back*.

When Sydney walked into the turtle dove coop he worked in back in February, Percy could've sworn he was seeing stars. The turtle dove coop was grimy, disgusting, no place for a demure woman. She had blonde locks and blue eyes, with pretty, pink Polly Pocket pants and a sequin handbag. Turtle doves were awful animals, they shat everywhere and lacked hygiene. Fat butchers came to the turtle dove coop. Weird, lanky bird enthusiasts came to the turtle dove coop. Girls didn't come to the turtle dove coop.

What are these, she asked, like they were the most interesting specimens in the world. It stunk in there, and Percy had only become numb after a year of working in the cramped room. How was she not recoiling in disgust—did she even notice the odor? And yet, she petted a turtle dove like it was a prized poodle. He loved this woman, he decided, right then and there. Anybody who could ignore the fermented smell of bird feces was a keeper. She said she'd come back next Tuesday, and Percy put the date in his vintage 1982-1983 Dolly Parton calendar, surrounded by a bright pink Crayola heart.

When Percy had traded with Holly, it had been simple, a spur-of-the-moment decision made mutually. Sydney's was a trickier process, but Percy felt as if he could endure. After the fifth time she came into the coop, did the rounds with the turtle doves, and left, he finally got fed up. This happens every time. There he was, smiling like the perfect guy. Helping her out. Placing his coat on the ground so she could step over the bird shit. And yet, it was the doves she coddled, giving them cutesy names like

“Brittney” and “Ganglow”. How he envied them.

Dum. Ba-dum-ba-dum. Ba-dum-ba-dum-ba-dum.

The noise was driving him insane. Every once in a while, in between beats, the heart would speak to him. He typed a couple more sentences in his manuscript, but his cognitive ability dwindled. Sentences became littered with spelling errors, punctuation problems. Short, terse. Words were now gibberish.

Sydney had 18,000 followers on Facebook, Percy had learnt. He had taken to filling in the days leading up to Tuesday perusing her various posts. They were just like her; tame yet teasing, the slit in a skirt or a wink on her face showing that she was aware of the effect she had on him. Mocking him with her friends, enjoying mimosas, away from him. She did the same thing when she was at the coop. A feather landed on her face from Rufus the turtle dove, and she brushed it off with a giggle. The smile she sent his way told Percy all he needed to know. She knew he wanted her to himself.

Another month. No heart.

It's surprising how much you can learn about someone on the internet. It was fairly easy for Percy to locate her general location from stores she shopped at. The Toys R Us five minutes away. The Blockbuster Video a block away. He used the time between shifts at the coop to track her exact location, navigating based off of when she got off work. When she got home. When she took a photo in the bath, bare legs splayed out.

It's surprising how easy it is to make a homemade sedative.

Her heart was beautiful. When he first recovered it, sneaking out into the light of the full moon and holding it up to analyze the prize, it practically glistened. His fingers traced along her veins, feeling the very essence of vitality and life. He clung desperately for the warmth within her arteries, and he barely minded the fluids leaked off of the organ, staining his shirt and pants. It pulsed softly, and he felt his own heart mirror the rhythm, two beings entwined as one. Her vibrations, and his. Her heart was perfect. Even the viscera and blood, the pungent aroma wafting in the air. Picture books could barely compare.

That's odd, he wondered, after taking a second look later that night without euphoria clouding his judgement. There was a faint scar running through the base of her heart.

Badummmmm. Badum-badummmmm.

Each throb echoed harshly in his ears. Desperate, Percy rooted through his closet. There were a few shoeboxes, but his feet were too small. A box of Honey Smacks looked like it would work perfectly, and he stuffed it with tissues before tucking it between the bookshelf and his desk. Muffled, its pleads couldn't reach him.

He meant to return it. He just wanted to experience what it was like in his adulthood. Only a couple of days, maybe a week. But it was those fucking turtle doves. Turtle doves are finicky creatures. If you leave the temperature a couple degrees too low, they get annoyed and die. If you forget to open the blinds in the morning, they get annoyed and die. If you don't feed them, they get annoyed and die. Sometimes they die just to make a statement, just because they haven't yet.

Percy's boss always scolded him if he got in late, because a couple more turtle doves would be dead by the time he entered, corpses twitching on the floor, feathers plucked by other turtle doves, a grand protest towards his tardiness. He couldn't return the heart to her yet. He needed to care for the turtle doves. So he kept the heart on his bed stand, kept pushing off his morals, and let the beat lull him to sleep each night. Ba dum. Ba dum. Ba dum.

Badumbadumbadumbadumbadum.

It was two at night when he woke up for the fourth time, eyes blurry and throat sore. The heart knew what it wanted, and it was determined to let Percy know. He threw it under the bed, and the vibrations kept him up another thirty minutes. *Take me back. Take me home.*

I'm lucky I live on the first floor, Percy thought, as he contorted his body to squeeze out the nearest window. Sydney's heart was stowed in the box, and out of fear of encountering some prying eye, he kept it tucked underneath his shirt. She was resting about thirty minutes from here.

Percy had been to her resting grounds before, a couple days ago, when things were fresh. The day prior, all the turtle doves died. All but one. Rufus waited for Percy to come into the coop that morning, stared at him with that thousand-yard stare all turtle doves have, and plopped down to the floor. Dead, just like all the others. Percy knew something was wrong.

Badumpbadump. Bring me back to where I belong.

With every step, her heart increased in tempo. He looked up at the towering iron sign, gothic letters reading *SAINTE LATINVEEN'S RESTING GROUNDS*. Within the light of the full moon, the rolling fields of Saint Latinveen's were fully illuminated. Miles of holes, thin but not too thin, just big enough for a person to fit down. The craterous grounds emulated the surface of the moon, unnatural chasms bottomless to the naked eye. Each marked by a small stack of stones, a sole remnant of character within the barren, grassy leas.

The hole in question was maybe another 25 minutes of walking, but the relentless thumping of her heart helped reaffirm his location. The rocks sitting inches away from the hole were well-kept, maintained, fresh, smooth. His doing. After the funeral-goers had left the other day, he organized them. Stacked them. A perfect representation of Sydney, jagged rocks removed meticulously.

He wondered idly if she was still alive, down in the hole. If she was waiting to get her heart back before she passed on. The thought terrified him.

One last time, he took her heart out of the box. The passion he had once felt, the love coursing through its arteries, had gone. *Please. Please.* It was the one begging now. Desperation.

Holding it up to the moon once more, he traced the scar with his fingertips. An imperfection, a blemish. The true her. He brought it to his nose, smelling her aroma, feeling himself get high off of her love. Then, with a final shout of anguish, he threw it down, and watched as her heart plummeted out of view, out of his life.

Forbidden Holy Children

Ophelia Phoenix

There had been some discussion of death. Mary and Jack and the other children were told it was strictly taboo, but they couldn't help themselves. They spoke in hushed voices in the back corner of the large bedroom that fit all seven of the children. They were hidden behind the rows of bunk beds; it was safe there. Out of sight. Barely audible. Night time offered them security. Mother would be back in the morning to check on them and it was then that they would become their proper, perfect selves. But tonight, they held their little meeting. Death had been shunned from discussion for quite some time, yet none of the children knew why. Little Avery, only five, brought back a squirrel from the garden once. It was missing quite a few limbs and had sizable chunks taken from its side. Probably the work of a nearby cat. The children held a funeral for it. Little Avery had been so distraught about the tiny creature, so they made a headstone of twigs and decorated the ground with moss.

Mother saw them in the flower beds.

The children were terrified as she marched into the garden. Her face had turned a sickly white, her body shaking. A scream louder than anything they'd ever heard echoed through the trees, startling any living creature nearby. The children stood in a stunned silence as the figure in front of them was unrecognizable. The banshee-like scream that left her continued on as she dug her fingers into the earth, grabbing the squirrel from the loosely packed dirt and throwing it violently into the woods. Without a word, she left back into the Manor, the children left alone in fear.

Later that evening, Mary crept downstairs. She had only wanted a snack from the pantry. That's what she had told the others. What she really wanted was to find answers. Mary was the eldest and felt that it was her duty to keep an eye on the rest. Besides, she was too curious. Too apprehensive. Too skeptical. From the bottom of the staircase hidden around a corner, Mary could see Mother from a window. She watched as Mother went back out in the dead of night, only to return minutes later with the squirrel she had thrown away earlier. Mary watched intently as she brought the stiff body into the kitchen. Mother squished the squirrel in a jar, crushing what was left of its bones and organs and chanting quietly under her breath. In front of her very own eyes, Mary watched the squirrel bubble and fizz inside the bottle until it was a dark viscous liquid. She fled back to the bedroom before she saw anything more.

Now, the children talk every night amongst themselves as they imagine why Mother would do such a strange thing. Jack suggests that maybe Mother has magic. Avery suggests maybe she just didn't like dead things. But there was

no explanation for the strange chanting and a liquified squirrel. Maybe she was making medicine, one of the others suggests. They continue to talk into the dead of night, ideas bouncing between them. The only silent child is Mary; she was the only one who had seen it. The others only knew what she had told them.

Mary relived the moment over and over with every detail ingrained in her head. As Mother had whispered the incantations and lifted her arms into the air, Mary saw a different woman. The Mother she knew was no longer the same. Her skin was so pale— Mary could almost see through it. Her hair turned darker than fresh blood and it grew long down her back, dragging onto the floor. Her voice was deep and scratchy, clawing at the inside of Mary's ears. But what disturbed Mary to her core was her eyes. As Mary was running away, she had turned around to catch one last glimpse of who she once knew as Mother. Her once beautiful blue eyes were now hallowed pits, digging into Mary's soul. Jack was right; Mother had magic. Mother was Death. Even as the others slept, Mary sat awake, wondering, how long till she rotted her and the other children?

Roulette, Fate, and Soiled Boots

Daniel Vallejo

15

Our parents were run over by a squirrel. They never wrote a will for who would keep the inheritance. My twin brother wanted to do a skill-based competition to solve that. We ran across the ocean, but we tied. We fell from the sky to see who would land the fastest, but neither of us could stop falling. We tried to see who could hold our breath the longest, only to realize neither of us needed to breathe at all. We used wasps as darts, but we only landed on bullseyes.

14

I suggested that we leave it up to Fate, since she was always a kind mistress. We did a coin flip, but the coin would only land on its edge. We rolled dice, but it would only land on 2. We spun a giant wheel, but the wheel never stopped spinning. We decided on an ultimatum: russian roulette. We spun our wrist. Two clicks. We pointed our fingers to our heads.

13

I heard a loud bang and blood splattered all over. He laid on the ground, lazily. “There’s blood... on my boots.”

Silence.

“THERE IS BLOOD ON MY BOOTS.”

Ignoring me. It was typical of him. Unable to clean up his own messes. I threw the boots away.

12

I kept the inheritance since he never got up for whatever reason. Neither of us even knew what our parents had. We didn’t know we had parents at all.

11

I was given a goose that laid golden eggs. Boring. A tree that dropped crumpled hundred dollar bills. Typical. A pond of liquid gold: Tasteless.

10

Was I Froth and he Nabal? Or was I Nabal and he Froth?

9

He never did wake up. Why didn’t he?

Why was I still here? And not them?	8
What did he want the inheritance for?	7
What did I even want out of it?	6
Fate's a cruel whore, wish I knew.	5
She's just a guess told too late.	4
Russian Roulette. Again.	3
One click.	2
Alone.	1
	0

He's So Heavy

Hector Carrizosa

It was a late night in 1983, Killing Joke was on the radio, and my brother Jimmy was spread out across the backseat of my Chevy singing along to the tune. Although, “singing” isn’t exactly the appropriate word to use as he was barely on key and the only intelligible thing I could make out from his sloshed slurring was the word “requiem” which he ended up just repeating over and over. Earlier that night, he had phoned me telling me to pick him up from his friend Richard’s house. I didn’t ask him what he and Richard were up to; I already had a pretty good idea. Either way, I dragged myself out of bed, groggy as hell, and had to explain to my pissed off mother that Jimmy wasn’t home because he fell off his bike and broke his arm, so I had to pick him up at the hospital. She bought it, of course, and went back to bed.

Now, instead of thanking me for my efforts, here he was singing backseat show tunes, and badly at that, while I drove him ten miles back to Downey. I had half a mind to throw him out on the curb the way mom used to do with us when we were being annoying little shits in her car. I thought she was just being a capital B back then, but I couldn’t help but sympathize with the poor woman’s plight when I was the one who had to contend with the problem child.

I changed the station hoping to find one that was playing a song Jimmy didn’t know the words to. After a few turns of the dial, I landed on a station playing “Superstar.” I figured they were probably playing it as a tribute to Karen Carpenter who had just recently died then. I relaxed as I remembered how he always hated the Carpenters. Back when we were kids, mom would always play their songs on her turntable. Karen’s voice filled the house and Jimmy would run to mom telling her to turn it off, which she never did. Now, I was never much of a fan of them either, but Jimmy harbored a real hatred for them. I remember one day mom was listening to “Top of the World.” Jimmy complained to her saying he wanted to hear the Alfred E. Neuman record his dad had given him, his favorite at that time. She told him the Alfred record was for waterheads, and listening to it would turn him into one, so she put it on the top of the refrigerator which, unless he turned into Stretch Armstrong, was way out of his six-year-old-boy arm reach. A day later, he stole and smashed her Carpenters album.

I thanked God that no station would ever play that stupid Alfred record, otherwise I would hear Jimmy belching in sync with “It’s a Gas.” Unfortunately, a few of those Carpenter’s songs must’ve stuck in his head without him, or me, knowing because he started singing along to the radio. Again, he just kept repeating a single word over and over, this time it was “baby.”

“At least sing the songs correctly!” I told him.

“Oh, don’t worry, Stephen, I will.” He cleared his throat and began to belt out his version of the chorus: “*Stephen, Stephen, Stephen, Stephen, oh Stephen. Fuck you. You’re such a douche.*”

He laughed and I would’ve joined him if I weren’t so pissed. Instead, I said “Why don’t you just shut the fuck up, Jimmy.”

“Why don’t you come back here and make me.”

“Do I really have to do that? Can’t you just be quiet for once in your life?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“I did tell you. I told you to shut the fuck up, didn’t I?”

“And I told you to come back here and make me. If you got the stones, boy,” he said in a gruffer voice.

“What, you think I won’t?”

“I know you won’t. Goody two shoes. Pencil dick. Asshole.”

I stopped the car in the parking lot of a Thrifty, got out, opened the left-side door that Jimmy’s head was resting against and proceeded to reintroduce him to ol’ love and hate. I scored a few hits to his head before he curled up into a ball against the right-side door. I crawled into the car trying to get close enough to him to land a few more hits. He started kicking me in retaliation, looking like he was riding an invisible bicycle while I looked like I was swatting at bees. He began laughing, acting as if we were engaged in some sort of childhood playfighting, which, I guess, we sort of were.

Though all those buttery nipple shots he indulged in earlier should’ve made any attempt by him to land a kick in any specific part of my face unlikely, he got lucky and managed to plant one right on my nose and mush it under his Dr Martens boot. I crawled back and out of the car and felt a river flowing out of both nostrils. I was able to cup my hand over the lower half of my face before any blood trickled down to my shirt. “Oh shit. Did I hit you?” he said, still laughing. I pulled the car keys out of my pocket with my free hand and threw them at him, “Drive yourself home, asshole!” Part of me hoped he would and end up plowing into a lamppost or something. Part of me knew he would never be stupid enough to do so.

I fought back tears as I stomped my way towards the Thrifty, making a conscious effort not to look back at Jimmy no matter how many times he yelled he was sorry. Once inside, I asked the guy at the counter for the key to their restroom and rushed over to it, still covering my face with my hand. In the restroom, I pulled four sheets of brown paper towels out of the dispenser, wet them under the sink’s faucet, and shoved two sheets into each one of my nostrils. I washed and dried my hands then stared at myself in the scratched-up mirror, reading all the slurs people wrote on it, noticing how it almost looked like they were referring to me.

Examining my bloodied, wet visage, I got to thinking about how long

it has been since someone had fucked up my nose. The last time I remember it happening was back in '72 when I was eleven years old. It was the day mom took Jimmy's Alfred record. I remembered him crying near the fridge. I asked him what his deal was, and he pointed to the record sitting on top of it. Being taller than the little tyke, I was able to stand on my tippy toes and snatch the record back for him. Later on, mom caught us listening to it in the living room and correctly assumed that I was the one who swiped it. She chased me around the house holding Jimmy's dad's belt, probably trying to emulate his style of punishment. After a while of running, I ended up back in the living room where I slipped on the shag carpet and hit the hardwood floor nose first, then I was the one crying. Jimmy just stared helplessly as mom stood over me and said proudly, "You see that? That's what you get."

Before heading out of the restroom, I shoved a few more paper towels into my pocket and wiped the blood stains near my mouth. I exited the store and walked back to my Chevy. When I got there, I found the engine already turned on and Jimmy sitting in the front passenger seat listening to "Goodbye to love." Maybe it was just the light of the lamppost giving me a better look at him, but I noticed his hair was more disheveled and his face more flushed than it was just a few minutes earlier.

"I threw up," he said.

"Clearly."

I drove out onto the freeway with the windows open, letting the cold February air hit our faces as we made our way back to Downey. Jimmy looked at me with eyes that resembled a puppy's right after it had just pissed on the rug.

"How you feeling?" he said.

I looked at him, mouth ajar, as paper towels plugged up my nose, "Fine, and you?"

He looked at me, mouth also ajar, with red dots around his lower eyelids, "Me? Alright, I guess."

"That's good. Mom's gonna be pissed at us, you know."

"Pissed at me, you mean. Why would she be pissed at you? You didn't do anything except what I told you. Thanks for that, by the way."

We both turned our attention to the road moving toward us and sat silently for a while listening to the end of "Top of the World." It was towards the end of the song that Jimmy decided to speak again.

"Hey, you wanna know something?"

"What is it?"

"You remember when we were kids and mom was listening to that song? Remember how I smashed her album? You must've thought I really hated the Carpenters, huh."

"Well, you did. Didn't you?"

"No. I didn't. Not at all. I loved them. Still do."

"Well, if you loved them, why'd you smash the album?"

"I don't know. Guess I was just pissed off. But I love them, Stephen. I think Karen is – was fucking amazing," his voice cracked as he said it. "Richard likes them too, you know. My Richard, that is (not Richard Carpenter). He played some of their songs on his guitar for me. He's real good, you know. Might make it big someday."

"Yeah, about him. You know you got to stop seeing him, right?"

"I know," he sighed. "But I won't. You know I won't."

"Yeah, guess I do. But I can't keep covering for you."

"Pretty soon, maybe you won't have to."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"No, tell me now. What do you mean?" He looked away from me. "Are you leaving?"

"Like I said, I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Look, Jimmy, if you're leaving, I got to make sure you know what you're doing."

"I do."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I got a place I could go to. Richard's parents don't care. School, well, that's pretty much a bust, so forget about all that. Everything else will come up roses. I play drums as good as Bonham now, and you can't tell me that's not true because Mr. Adrien, the music teacher, told me the exact same thing and you know he knows his shit. I can sing, too. So, you figure the rest out."

"And mom?"

"What's she got to do with it?"

He correctly assumed I'd understand what he meant by that question, so, I didn't try to answer him. Still, I had many things I wanted to tell him, but nothing would come out of my mouth. He seemed dead set, and I almost wanted to congratulate him for showing the kind of bravery I lacked. I could've, but I didn't.

Another Carpenters song came on the radio: "I Won't Last a Day Without You." "You know something, Jimmy?" I said, "I think they're alright, too." I cranked up the volume and his face lit up. I told him to show me if he's as good as he thinks he is and he began to sing along, properly this time.

The Coral Castle

Meredith St. John

“Ed died, Sis; he left a note on the castle that said, ‘going to the hospital.’ Supposably he caught a bus up to Miami and died right there all by himself.” Lindley whispers into the receiver. In the distance, I hear the nagging shouts of her teenagers.

“Did they note the cause?” I ask, pressing the phone closer to my cheek.

“Tuberculosis, we gather. I’m thinkin’ that’s why he moved down here, to heal it under the sun and all.”

I picture Ed Leedskalnin, the old ghost. I can see him sitting on the bus, a bag of bones being jostled by the rumbling of the road. It used to scare us how the skin of his face rippled like tossing ocean waves. I think when we looked upon him as children, we were distressed to find, for the first time, that a face can tell you so much about sorrow.

Lindley and I stay on the line rehashing the rumors we remember from childhood. We use words and phrases like ‘supposably’ and ‘well I heard,’ like we always do when talking about Ed Leedskalnin. No one knows how he managed to construct the Coral Castle. In the small town of Homestead, many speculations circulated about how Leedskalnin moved 10-ton blocks of coral and nestled them together, with no one to bear witness except God and the stars. One time, little Johnny Davis told me that he saw it with his own two eyes. Ed Leedskalnin, supposably, grew two large antennas, used laser beams to lift the rocks, and flew them back to the castle. *Oh hush*, I’d yell at him.

The secrecy of Ed Leedskalnin wasn’t just for the wonderment of school kids. At Mamma’s sewing club, one bug-eyed Mrs. Charles whispered that Leedskalnin sang to the rocks until they levitated. Mrs. Anderson chimed in with “I saw the little guy walking down the road with a witching rod. When Tom pulled over to see what in gods’ grace he was doin’, he just said, ‘when I know it, I’ll find it.’”

The mystery gave us something to prod at. In the summer of 1940, it seemed that the castle had sprung from the earth like a ghost from its grave. The mythos of Leedskalnin worked like a poltergeist corroding the consciousness of everyone in its vicinity. Perhaps, that’s why certain details about that summer come to me in dreams so vivid that when I wake, I forget that I’ve grown. I forget that my hands are wrinkled and worn. I forget that I can’t climb into bed with Mamma and Papaw because, like the castle, they are another piece of stone waiting to be visited.

Maybe it was the candy-brained age of thirteen, and the lullabies of frogs that we fell asleep to. Maybe it was our hometown’s white shacks and thatched salmon roofs. Maybe it was the way we laid on our backs, gossiping as the Spanish Moss

swung above us in the afternoon light. Either way, it was an era of clandestine truths that bound Missy, Lindley, and me together. Anytime we thought we gained some thread of understanding about the world, it was immediately knocked down with an opposing rebuttal. So, we stretched our arms out like seagulls and hung in the air. Occasionally, we'd swing down and dip a toe into the ever-turbulent ocean of adulthood, but for the most part, we hung, salty air whipping through our white feathers.

If I close my eyes, I can hear the milky voices of jazz singers crackling through Missy's kitchen radio. I remember the coolness of the countertop as I watched her and Lindley flap their dresses and wag their fingers. Lindley bounced her knobby knees around Missy, who swayed softly, trying not to shake the already curving parts of her body. They were everything to me, and I suppose that was the only truth we were sure of.

Our greatest misfortune was the ever-watchful eye of Missy's brother Wayne, and his best friend James Gunther. They were man-like to me, although they hadn't surpassed seventeen. They came crashing in and made their presence immediately known as a boy of that age often did.

"Wait till mamma hears about this," Wayne said, turning off the radio.

"Wait till mamma hears you been runnin' around when you're supposed to be workin'," Missy shouts back. James, the largest of the two, leaned against the back corner.

"Well then," said Wayne, grabbing a chair and straddling it. "I won't tell ya what we been cooking up tonight."

"Whatchu cooking!" Missy cried.

"Naw, you tattler. You'll tell mamma and ruin the whole thing," taunts Wayne.

"I won't. I swear it." We join Missy and crowd around him, dog-eyed and impatient.

"Well, we're goin' down to catch ole Leedskalnin," says Wayne.

The three of us gasp like a great Greek chorus. Missy slaps him "Knock it Wayne, that ain't funny!"

"I'm not foolin' witcha. I heard he moves things with his mind. It's what the gypsies do, and I reckon he's got a bit of gypsy in 'em." Wayne turns to James who nods in agreement. "I also heard he got a mean-lookin', coffin-like contraption that he locks little girls in like y'all."

"Oh hush," sighs Missy, but she crosses her arms protectively. I'd say I did feel a slight chill creep through the window, although it might've been fear playing a cruel trick on my mind. The hairs on my arms stood up all the same.

James chimes in with his gravelly voice "Say, why don't you girls come with us and see for yourself."

Wayne rolls his eyes, "Naw, they're too chicken."

"I'll go, I ain't chicken" Missy nods her head at the syllables of her words.

"Missy you're still scared of the dark; you'll chirp too much." For this Missy

lands another slap on his arm.

James twirls a piece of grass betwixt his teeth as he stares intently at her. “They gotta grow up sometime.” I picture our yellow gull-like feet dipping a little further into the water.

That night, the moon shone so bright it made the passing clouds look translucent. We moved in silence. Our shadows stretched across the town square and the sleeping shutters of our neighbors. The plan was to meet the boys at the tree line outside of town. The lush and sunken terrain of the Florida forest towered over us like a daunting black mass that grew in height as we approached. At the tree line, a muscular white speck of a boy was waiting for us. One boy twirling a piece of grass betwixt his teeth.

Lindley grabbed Missy by the hand “I know that ain’t Wayne up there.”

“Aw yeah, he uh, tattled about the radio, and I tattled about work. So, he dinnin wanna come an get in any more fits with mamma if we was caught.” Missy said sheepishly. Lindley and I exchanged knowing glances.

“If we are caught, our mammas will ship us off to the convent for runnin’ around with strange boys in the night!” Lindley pointed her finger, frustrated.

“James ain’t strange, he’s James! C’mon, aintcha a bit curious?” Missy’s eyes darted to me for help. Brief images of schoolboys gathering around me at lunch as I tell the story of our triumph flashed through my mind. I wonder what Johnny would have to say about antennas then!

“Curiosity killed the cat Missy,” said Lindley.

“But knowledge brought it back to life.” I squeaked. Their heads whipped my way.

“That’s right, Sis” Missy nodded her head and marched toward the tree line. Lindley stuck her tongue out at me as we turned to follow her.

We trudged closely behind James, who knocked branches out of the way. The air was dusty and sweet with the smell of mud. Lindley and I jumped at any slight sound of rustling, and Missy turned to look at us wide-eyed and giggling. Suddenly, James held up a hand, and we came to an abrupt halt. He extended one long muscular arm and pointed a steady finger, and there it was. The monolithic gray walls of the coral castle sprung from the Earth, as if James had summoned it with his index.

The walls were porous and appeared to change color in the moonlight. They faded from blue to gray to periwinkle. When we placed our small hands on the castle we were humbled by its grandeur. Its coolness liberated us from the muggy oppression of the forest.

“All right,” James waved his hands for us to gather around, and we crouched like footballers at practice. “I say Missy and I follow it around thata ways,” he points east, “and you two head thata ways” he points west. Missy twirls her hair in

fascination with the idea of being chosen. I thought about my mamma. I looked at the blackness of the forest and remembered how far I was from her.

Lindley raises her voice, “You think we’d leave her with the likes of you!”

“Shhhh you idiot,” James reprimands. “Listen, there’s a secret way round the back. We’re bigger ‘an you, so we can head first and give it a look-see. Got it?”

I pulled Missy’s hand from her hair and dragged her just out of earshot. “I don’t feel too good about this, Missy; we’re ‘posed to do everything together.”

“Not everything,” she giggled, eyes fixed just over my shoulder on James. I pulled her chin and directed her gaze to me.

“Please, I don’t like nothin’ bout this.”

“Dontcha fret, Sis; I’ll holler for ya if something happens to go awry.” She looped her fingers through mine and squeezed them tight. She smiled at me the same way she always did when sharing a piece of her lunch or collecting seashells for Lindley or grabbing oranges that were too far from my grasp. Her smile, which I still see in my dreams, was just as pink and sweet as the hibiscus blossoms and, as I would come to find out, it was just as fleeting.

To this day, I struggle to explain the sheer audacity that faced us when the pinkish-gray walls parted, and we saw, for the first time, the miracle of Ed Leedskalnin’s castle. The Coral fixtures laid around the fortress like a funhouse for Titans. Lindley and I immediately forgot how covert the operation and skipped like sprites from monument to monument. There were upwards of twenty crescent-shaped rocking chairs, a heart-shaped fountain, a heart-shaped table, and a replica of the planets lined up, just as they would be in space. The spheric rocks towered over us. The whole place unfolded like a pop-up book. Mandevilla vines wrapped their pink arms around the rocks and swam in the moonlight. Pokey vibrant plants spotted the palace like the living residents of an underwater reef. In the air was an inscrutable sentiment that Poseidon and his trident might be waiting around the next artifact.

Lindley slapped me on the arm and pointed to a tower so large I was surprised we couldn’t see it from the tree line. The head of it was shaped like a flower with the pistol missing. The moon crept slowly into the center. It matched the circular frame like a puzzle piece to its place. Then, the tower worked as a kaleidoscope, casting a silver glow about the castle until all we knew was bright and white. We turned our arms over and over, perplexed by the witchcraft. We let out a confused laugh. Lindley’s smile was bleached and unknowable, along with the rest of her features. In a flash, the moon left the spotlight and we were overwhelmed with the dark truth of night. Suddenly, we heard a clap and we felt a shake so large I thought Earth’s tectonic plates had collided. Then, we heard a scream.

I remember running. I remember darkness. I remember the dampness of Lindley’s hand and the coarse desperation of her voice as she called, “Missy!” It was a deep womanly cry as if a piece of her called to us from the future. “Missy!” Our bodies were knocked into the rock configurations that snuck out of the

black. Then, as our eyes adjusted, we saw a petite gray body scuttering backward on the ground. We dove down to meet her, patting her and checking for injury.

“Holy hell, Missy! Are you okay? We need to leave.” Lindley turned to go but Missy remained, eyes locked on a shaded corner of the castle wall. From the crook emerged the lesser god himself. He was thin and brown like a Dade County Pine. He swayed a little and one got the impression that, like the pine, it wouldn’t take much to chop him down. Next to him, I noticed a coffin-shaped rock, and above it, etched into the substratum, read, “the repentance corner”. Ed stepped in front of it protectively and met my gaze. His cheeks were crevassed like the impressions of mollusks that once cemented themselves to the coral walls. If you were to run your fingers across the lingering indentation, you could imagine the life once lived under the veil of the ocean. Ed gasped. I thought he might speak. Instead, he lifted one branch-like arm and pointed toward the exit. I nodded mindlessly and grabbed the girls with an unknown force.

Again, we ran; we ran for years; we ran hard. We ran through the forest, branches whipping us as we passed. We ran until we collapsed against the frayed wooden walls of Missy’s house. Lindley turned, breathless, and grabbed Missy by the shoulders. “Where the hell is James?” Missy shook her head. Lindley jostled her with force. “What in god’s name is goin’ on?”

“I don know” Missy’s lip quivered. I pushed Lindley out of the way and knelt in front of her. I rubbed Missy’s back as she wiped tears from her eyes. “James was tryna- I don know. He was fussin’ with me an’ he was lookin’ like he wanted somethin’ from me. So, I pushed ‘em...” Her voice trailed off and her face went blank “And It was all light. All kinds of light.”

Just then, a bird began to sing. Lindley and I spun like a whip to face the noise. The robin, harmless and twirling, started his song a little later than he did the day before. Perhaps a warning that autumn was upon us, or a reminder that, even in the Florida Keys, the tides of life will take you. So, we sat, and we watched and the green arms of the early sun stretched into the blue of morning.

For years we never spoke of it. Even when they started searching for James, and even when they didn’t find him. The pounding of our fear was too loud to gossip under the trees, so the Spanish Moss hung above other golden-skinned girls. I’d pass them on my way to school; their voices audacious, their smiles bold and white.

To some sort of luck, I suppose, the boys didn’t prod too much at lunch anymore. Little Johnny Davis, who wasn’t so little, hung his head when his cheeks turned pink at the sight of me. It was around that time when Mamma made me join her at the sewing club. I noticed how her lips quivered when she wanted to speak and didn’t. It reminded me of the shape of Lindley’s mouth whenever someone mentioned Leedskalnin. What secrets, then, did those women hold behind their needles?

As for Missy, she stopped coming around altogether. We'd see her sulking in the window, waiting to be called into the kitchen for chores. When Wayne left to find work at the packing plants, Missy got married to some pastor and disappeared out west. I have one brown image of the two of them, with their stone faces and weather-beaten bodies lonesome in the Texas clay.

So, I can call Lindley, and we can rehash the past. She can say through the static, "It was a time", and I can agree that it was. And I can sit with my windows open as it rains, and I can let the smell remind me of those dense summer nights. And I can see my reflection in the window as the raindrops fall, and I can say it looks rippled and it looks uneven. And funnily enough, I can admit to myself it reminds me of Ed Leedskalnin.

Recipe For a God

Matthew J. Mieke

There was a time when I would sit in the living room on the large rug, the only part of the two-story that wasn't made of stone, and stare at the ceiling. There used to be a mural my dad had painted there of Him. However, that was a long time ago, when I was as tall as my mother's legs and my father wasn't dead. The mural is gone now, it flaked with age and was eventually painted over. Somewhere in the rug, there were still flakes of Him, of the mural, but they were so small that He danced with atoms.

There was a simpler time when you could throw stones at the wall, charge an ox with nothing but your determination, and kiss the floor. Now the rocks are gone, the ox dead from famine, and the floor no longer belongs to you but another man who doesn't speak your language, drinks, and talks about his *Him* with no pauses.

My man is named Gabriel, he wears robes on the weekends and cavalry armor during the week. He takes women from the village out to the alleys at night, and they always come back bruised. He's a nice man, other than when he beats your mother and whips you when you don't know how to read his books.

"God put me on this Earth so I could teach you, Mutahar, how to live a good life." He told me once while sitting on the ottoman that was no longer mine. "And you not listening to my careful worlds will doom you forever."

He wrapped my hands in a wooden cross and covered me in robes that barely fit. I was maybe as high as his fat waist. He was taller than most of us, but not as tall as others who occupy my neighbor's homes. He was average.

I was sheepish around him, but I wanted to learn. I tried to put my all into it, learning his language and the rules of it, learning of his *Him* and how he formed the world and us. It was difficult, especially at night.

"God believes in you; like how I believe in you, Mutahar." He told me while sitting on the rug, I sat on the stone floor because the rug was no longer mine. Gabriel became more sincere and gentle over time, but those nights... those nights were always the same. Those nights really tested me; brutality comes to mind, but they were tests of my will toward the new Him and He and Gabriel would want me to succeed.

I only hope that at the end of the road, I can have a floor to kiss, a house of my own, and I can be the man, the man like Gabriel, who lives in a house that is not his own.

Midnight Howl

Alexis Shrewsbury

Characters

JAMES: *Male, mid-20s. Cautious.*

RAY: *Male, mid-20s. Impulsive.*

MR. CANIS: *Male, soon to be deceased from fresh injuries.*

WEREWOLF: *(Can be shown through puppetry or simple costuming and makeup).
Chain around the neck like a leash and collar. Obedient.*

POLICE OFFICER: *Down to business.*

Notes

The set is versatile, with backdrops / panels that can be easily changed out. One panel is the hallway of the mansion. Another panel is that of an “upstairs” bedroom. The front door is located stage left. Physical comedy between actors and the set is encouraged.

Scene 1

Lights up on the entire stage. The background panel of the hallway has large blood splatters and large claw marks in the center. JAMES and RAY enter from the back of the theater aisles (stage right) gradually making their way toward the stage as if this was the path to the mansion.

JAMES

This place gives me the creeps.

RAY

I see no room for concern.

JAMES

I mean, what kind of “business” keeps Mr. Canis right before midnight?

RAY

More skeletons in the closet you think?

JAMES

I'll say...

MR. CANIS flops out from stage right, crawling backwards on the ground. His clothes are torn and bloodied. A chain is around one of his ankles. He stares at something offstage with terrified eyes.

MR. CANIS

No! Wait! AH!

He's yanked back offstage by the chain. RAY and JAMES step on stage (far downstage). They begin crossing to stage right towards the front door as the chaos unfolds behind them.

JAMES

You think Mr. Canis could be a murderer?

MR. CANIS limps out on stage with the long chain still around his ankle. The other end of the chain is hidden offstage. He runs away to the best of his ability towards the front door.

MR. CANIS

Help! Help me!

MR. CANIS reaches the front door and cracks it slightly open before an offstage being yanks him down to the floor by the chain attached to his ankle. The door is left askew.

RAY

If he is, he's not hiding it very well.

MR. CANIS claws at the ground as the offstage being pulls the chain around his ankle to center stage.

MR. CANIS

No! No! No!

AH!

MR. CANIS screams as the chain tugs him completely offstage.

RAY and JAMES should now be nearing the front door of the mansion. A howl is heard offstage.

JAMES

(Startled by the howl, hiding behind RAY)

You know, this place is notorious for having wolves around.

RAY

So?

JAMES

(Panicked)

So hurry up and let's get inside!

RAY pauses in front of the door and turns to JAMES.

RAY

Hey, easy! Relax and really think. What's the worst that could happen?

JAMES pauses and takes a deep breath. He then looks up.

JAMES

I guess the full moon does look nice.

RAY

See, that's the spirit!

RAY goes to open the door.

And look, they even left the door open for us.

RAY pushes open the door and the two walk inside. JAMES closes the door behind him.

RAY

Hello, hello? Mr. Canis?

MR. CANIS

(Offstage)
AHHHHHHH!

JAMES

(Clutching his heart)
What was that?!

RAY

Maybe we took Mr. Canis by surprise.

JAMES

I knew we shouldn't have come early.

RAY

Being early is being professional.

RAY and JAMES finally notice the obnoxiously large blood stains and claw marks on the back wall.

RAY

Whoa. That's hard to miss.

JAMES

And yet, we missed it.

RAY and JAMES turn to the wall, their back facing the audience. While they're turned, MR. CANIS is rolled out in a chair on stage, chains wrapped around his entire body, dead.

RAY

(Observing the bloodstained wall)
Maybe the claw marks represent those new nature themed art pieces.

JAMES

(Observing the bloodstained wall)
It looks so real.

RAY

Realism at its finest then.

JAMES

(Observing the marks closer)
It's still dripping.

JAMES finally turns around to see a dead MR. CANIS.

JAMES

(Panicked, frantically trying to get RAY's attention)
Ray!

RAY

What? (He turns around) Oh—

RAY and JAMES run to the body.

JAMES

Is that Mr. Canis!?

RAY

Maybe. Or, what's left of him anyway.

JAMES

What happened?!

RAY

His clothes are completely torn to shreds.

JAMES

Okay, I want to go home now!

RAY

We just got here.

JAMES

And our employer is dead!

A loud howl is heard offstage. JAMES dashes behind RAY.

JAMES

(Freaking out)

I knew it! It is a wolf! It must have slipped into the house and killed Mr. Canis!
(Grabbing RAY to tug him back) See? Mystery solved. Now let's go!

RAY

(Pulling back)

Relax. It's probably not hungry anymore after eating Mr. Canis.

JAMES

This is no time for jokes, Ray!

JAMES runs to the door and tries to open it, but the door doesn't budge.

JAMES

What?!

He attempts to pry it open again, to no avail. While RAY continues observing the body, JAMES dashes to the other end of the stage across from the door, setting himself up to charge nearly at full speed through the locked door.

RAY pulls a tuft of fur from the body and observes it. JAMES starts charging towards the door.

RAY

(Thinking)

Thick fur—

JAMES slams into the door but topples backwards, not jiggling the door out of its locked position in the slightest.

RAY

(Interrupted by JAMES's slam)

James, what are you doing?!

JAMES stands and presses his back to the door.

JAMES

We're trapped!

RAY

That's impossible. We just came in that way.

RAY goes over and shoves JAMES away from the door to test the handle himself. It's still locked.

[Beat]

RAY

Well then...

JAMES

What are we going to do?!

RAY

(Thinking)

There's gotta be a way out of here.

RAY's face lights up with a plan and he smiles at JAMES.

RAY

Oooooor—

JAMES

No—

RAY

Time for the Ray and James detective duo—

JAMES

(Pulling out his phone)

I'm calling the police.

RAY

Wow okay. Way to shoot a guy down.

JAMES

(To the phone)

Hello officer? I would like to report a mauling.

RAY

You're making the wrong decision.

JAMES

(To the phone)

Yes, in the mansion on the hill.

RAY

They're going to come in and search the place themselves.

JAMES

(To the phone)

Possibly a wolf, as far as I know.

RAY

There's a secret here just waiting to be found!

JAMES

(Whispering, to RAY)

Shut up!

(To the phone)

Yes, and we're trapped in the house.

RAY

(Thinking to himself)

Meaning it all might be connected.

JAMES

(To the phone)

Of course, thank you.

JAMES hangs up the phone.

Seven minutes.

RAY

Great! That gives us time to explore.

JAMES

Are you insane?!

RAY

We can search for a key to the front door or another exit.

80

JAMES

That creature could still be in here!

RAY

And standing still only makes you more tempting as a meal.

RAY starts to exit.

JAMES

That isn't funny.

RAY turns to face JAMES, now walking backwards.

RAY

Yes it is.

JAMES

(scolding)
Ray.

RAY turns again.

JAMES

Ray, get back here!

RAY disappears offstage.

JAMES

Ray!

[Beat]

JAMES glances down at the mauled body. He stops his foot and makes a motion as if he was strangling a certain someone before dropping his hands to his sides.

JAMES

Ray, if the animal doesn't get you, I'll kill you myself!

JAMES follows RAY and exits. Blackout.

Scene 2

Lights up on the bedroom with RAY walking in.

RAY

Ah ha! Found it!

(Looking behind him for JAMES)
James?

[Beat]

RAY

(Groaning)
Ugg...

RAY goes out the door. Moments later, he's yanking JAMES in by his shirt collar.

JAMES

Hey hey hey!

RAY

(Releasing JAMES)
C'mon. Let's get searching.

JAMES

What? I don't want to snoop through their personal things.

RAY

You want to get out of here?

JAMES

(Obvious)
Yes.

RAY

Then shut up and snoop for a key.

RAY begins rummaging through nearby drawers. Reluctantly, JAMES follows and snoops in a different dresser.

JAMES

Remind me how I got dragged into this again?

RAY

Mr. Canis requested we give him an interview—

JAMES

(Blunt)
And now he's dead.

RAY

(Sarcastically)
Yes, which was very rude of him not to tell us. Anyway, interviews require a note taker and since you're my partner, you were graciously invited to come along with me.

JAMES

And you didn't have any other partners to ask?

RAY

Nope, just the one.

JAMES

It was a rhetorical question.

RAY

Ah ah ah, I ask the questions in this relationship. You're the written word, I'm the vocal voice.

RAY pulls out a large shirt that's been torn and shredded near the side.

Whoa. Look at this.
(Examining the shirt)
That's an...interesting fashion choice.

A low growl is heard. JAMES freezes up.

JAMES

(Stiff, frozen from fear)
Ray?

RAY

Mm?

JAMES

Did you hear that?

RAY

No.

[Beat]

JAMES

Are you sure?

RAY

I'm a little busy here, James.

JAMES

(Growing impatient)
Busy? With what? Searching through drawers?

RAY

(Confident)
Searching for evidence. And a possible family conspiracy to uncover.

JAMES

Is everything just business to you?

RAY

No.

JAMES

Everything a story?

RAY

No.

JAMES

Everything just to benefit YOU?

RAY

(Offended)
Now wait a minute!

JAMES

Then why aren't you listening to me!

RAY

Because I can't listen all the time to the boy who cried wolf!

JAMES

Oh, real mature! You know what, I—

JAMES gasps when he “sees” something in the hallway. The snarling gets louder.

JAMES

Ray, get down!

RAY

What?

JAMES

I said get down!

JAMES lunges towards RAY and yanks him down under the bed.

RAY

Ow! What gives—

JAMES

(Aggressively)
Shh!

WEREWOLF walks in with slow meticulous steps on two legs. A chain hangs from its neck like a leash and collar. A low snarl is heard as it scans the room.

RAY

(Whispering)
What is that?

JAMES

(Whispering)
Now you believe me?

RAY

(Sarcastically)
No, I just think it's a big dog that wants to go on a walk. (Angry) Of course I believe you!

JAMES

Well I had to make sure!

RAY

(Pulling out his phone)
I'm taking a picture.

JAMES

Are you crazy?!

RAY

Imagine the headlines! "Famous interview team James and Raymond uncover the secret beast of the Canis household."

JAMES

Or how about: "Famous interview team found dead after sticking their nose where it shouldn't belong!"

RAY

Ah, now you're thinking.

JAMES

Ray!

RAY

I'll only have to peek.

JAMES

Would you just—

Watch me.

RAY

JAMES forcefully grabs RAY and keeps him under the bed.

(Yelling)
Stay down!

JAMES

JAMES gasps and covers his mouth. WEREWOLF turns its head to the bed and snarls. Silence from JAMES and RAY as WEREWOLF brings their head towards the bottom of the bed and stares at JAMES and RAY.

[Beat]

(Nervously)
Ha ha...Nice bed you have here doggie.

RAY

WEREWOLF lets out a loud snarl and tries to snap at them.

Run!

JAMES

JAMES and RAY scramble from below the bed. WEREWOLF hits their head on the bed frame trying to lift up their head, allowing JAMES and RAY to escape out the bedroom door.

WEREWOLF regains its stance and glances to the doorway before letting out a sharp howl into the sky.

Awoooooo!

WEREWOLF

Lights fade to black.

Scene 3

Lights up on the hallway with the bloodstains on the wall. MR. CANIS is still laying dead in the chair with chains around him. JAMES and RAY are offstage, acting as if they were running through the mansion to get back “downstairs.”

JAMES

(Offstage)

What did you think was going to happen?!

RAY

(Offstage)

Did you have any better ideas?!

JAMES

(Offstage)

Yeah, it’s called not aggravating the beast!

RAY

(Offstage)

I’m not a dog person, okay!?

JAMES

(Offstage)

You would be a snack right now, you know that!?

RAY

(Offstage)

Oh thanks for throwing that back in my face!

JAMES and RAY stumble out from stage right.

RAY

(Out of breath)

Think we lost it?

WEREWOLF howls from offstage.

Nope!

JAMES

JAMES and RAY bolt towards the front door and try to knock it down.

It still won't budge!

RAY

We're doomed!

JAMES

Not yet!

RAY

RAY leaves the door and searches the area for a weapon, scanning inside more drawers. RAY eventually eyes Mr. CANIS and the chains still around his body.

(Getting an idea)
Perfect.

RAY

RAY runs over to the body and tries to untangle the chains.

What are you doing?!

JAMES

Trying to undo the chains so we can trap the thing. Give me a hand here.

RAY

JAMES goes over to the body to help. He delicately touches the chains as if he didn't want to get his hands dirty.

This is revolting.

JAMES

RAY

Well that's not a very nice thing to say about Mr. Canis. Even if he is dead.

A howl from offstage and the lights flicker. The source of the noise is getting closer. The two become frantic.

RAY

Hurry!

JAMES

I'm trying! I'm trying!

RAY

Then try faster!

JAMES

You are insufferable!

RAY

We can fight later, more untangling!

Another loud howl followed by flickering lights that then fade to black, as if the mansion is suffering a power outage. In this portion, JAMES and RAY should not be seen by the audience, and the jingling of the knotted chains they undo is loud and apparent.

JAMES

(In the dark)
Great, just great!

RAY

(In the dark)
Keep moving! You grab that side I'll grab this side.

JAMES

(In the dark)
I can't see either side of the chain!

RAY

(In the dark)

Then hand it to me!

JAMES

(In the dark)

Don't rush me—whoa!

A loud thud is heard (JAMES had tripped on the ground). More rusting of metal is heard as RAY grabs hold of another end of the chain.

RAY

(In the dark, pulling on something)

Got it! But the chain's caught on something heavy.

The lights flicker back on, revealing WEREWOLF and RAY face to face as RAY had grabbed hold of the WEREWOLF's chained leash in the distortion of the darkness. JAMES is on the ground who had tripped from the rest of the entangled chains.

RAY shows an embarrassed smile and, without saying a word, carefully lets go of the WEREWOLF's chain. RAY then steps back slowly.

WEREWOLF snaps at them, startling RAY and having him tumble to the ground. JAMES and RAY slowly crawl backwards on the floor as WEREWOLF approaches them. POLICE OFFICER enters outside the door.

RAY

Oh no...

WEREWOLF lunges at JAMES and RAY and the two scream, but WEREWOLF stops in its tracks when POLICE OFFICER knocks on the front door.

POLICE OFFICER

Hello? Police.

WEREWOLF perks up its head. RAY and JAMES watch the beast in silence.

POLICE OFFICER

(Knocking forcefully)
Hello? Anyone in there?

Staring at the door, WEREWOLF backs up from JAMES and RAY before running offstage.

RAY

It's gone.

JAMES

Are we safe—

POLICE OFFICER kicks the door open. RAY and JAMES jump to their feet.

JAMES

Why does it work for them when they slam the door down?

POLICE OFFICER

Are you two alright?

RAY

We're fine, but that beast is—

POLICE OFFICER

(Verbally pushing them out)
We'll handle him. Get out of here while you're unharmed.

JAMES

Thank you officer.

JAMES and RAY run to the front door, but RAY pauses by the doorway, looking back at the officer.

RAY

(Thinking, to himself)
Wait a minute—

JAMES

Ray, come on! Let's go!

JAMES grabs RAY and the two exit. POLICE OFFICER goes over to examine MR. CANIS's dead body. WEREWOLF emerges, slowly heading towards POLICE OFFICER.

POLICE OFFICER

What a mess we have here.

WEREWOLF growls behind POLICE OFFICER and POLICE OFFICER turns and stands in shock.

POLICE OFFICER

(To WEREWOLF)
It's you! Bad dog! Bad dog!

WEREWOLF whimpers and bows their head down.

POLICE OFFICER

(To WEREWOLF)
How many times have we talked about not killing inside the house? The whole plan was to kill the blackmailer outside so the interviewers could write it off as an unfortunate accident. The station is not going to be happy.

WEREWOLF drops their head down further. POLICE OFFICER sighs and pats WEREWOLF's head.

POLICE OFFICER

Can't change it now. Come on Mr. Canis, let's move the body.

POLICE OFFICER rolls MR. CANIS in the chair offstage and exits with WEREWOLF.

Blackout.

Fallen

Ismael Dones

Characters

MARGARET: *A female angel. She's 400 years old but looks 40. She's determined and cold. Her personality is dainty and old-fashioned. She resembles a fossil.*

GINNY: *Margaret's daughter. A female girl. She's 160 years old but looks 16. Innocent but curious and brave.*

FREEMA: *An "Appointed" female one. She's 600 years old but looks 60. She's wise and kind but also weary. She looks worn out.*

ELIZABETH: *A female angel. She's 250 years old but looks 25. She's a mess and a struggling mother type. She tries hard and does well and is paranoid.*

MAN IN ROBE: *An 800-year-old man. He looks 80 but is healthy and fit. He wears a dark grey robe like the grim reaper. He's brute and pale.*

GREEN GODDESS: *A being old as time. She looks like a woman in her 30s. She looks healthy and has red hair. Her clothes are made from nature and are all green-like her eyes.*

ACT I

SCENE I

Dormitory. The In-Between, Heaven.
Midnight.

MARGARET is on her knees praying to her statues of the seven gods. The figures sit on an altar lit with candles. GINNY sleeps in her bed, which is beside the altar. MARGARET gets up, gracefully floats back and forth in her room, and looks at her pocket watch hanging from her waist. She's dressed in a blue-gray chiffon and silk gown. The color is almost faded out completely. She comes over to Ginny's bed and reaches out to her.

MARGARET

Wake up, Ginny! Communion is assembling at Sunrise, and you have slept too long.

GINNY

(confused)

What? Oh, yes, mother. I'll be right up.

MARGARET

Don't dawdle, darling. We don't want to disappoint The Elders.

MARGARET leaves.

GINNY

(muttering)

If they even notice we're there...

GINNY gets out of bed and changes quickly but gracefully. MARGARET comes back into the room.

GINNY

Mother, how does the ascension process work?

MARGARET

One day, we are chosen based on the strength of our faith and devotion.

GINNY

How come you haven't been chosen, mother? Your faith is strong! You've been going to Communion for 400 years.

MARGARET

I don't question the work of the gods, sweetie, and you shouldn't either. After all, we're mere angels, born of god and human or angel alone. We are not pure.

GINNY

Mother, why can't you tell me which god is my father? I promise I won't tell anyone.

MARGARET

Ginny, I will not stand for this. The gods are sacred beings. You must not refer to them with such worldly titles. Furthermore, The Manuscript forbids family trees. You simply exist, and if you wish to meet your creator, you must go through ascension. There is no way around it! Forgive me! I do not mean to be stern, but you must learn that curiosity will get you nowhere!

GINNY

Yes, mother.

MARGARET

Now, let's hurry along. We must always arrive early. Remember, early is...

GINNY

...on time. Yes, mother, I remember.

GINNY continues getting ready for Communion but picks up the pace.

MARGARET

Still, while you get ready, let's discuss communion. Don't you find it refreshing and enlightening? Not everything is about ascension.

GINNY

Honestly, Communion is often confusing, Mother.

MARGARET

Explain it further, darling.

GINNY

I don't get why the Elders start convulsing. In the Manuscript, possession is not without purpose.

MARGARET

How clever of you, little one! Your knowledge is growing faster than I expected.

GINNY

I have been doing my homework.

MARGARET

Have you finished the Manuscript?

GINNY

Yes, mother! I have read all the volumes. I am on the second reading.

MARGARET

I am so proud! To answer your question, possession does always have a purpose.

When a god takes over your body, it transforms it.

GINNY

...but in the Manuscript, possession only happens as a means to an end and always under dire conditions. Angel Prayer has been possessed many times before. How come they haven't met ascension?

MARGARET

I think it's time for you to adopt a mentor, darling. Interpreters are the best at explaining the written word. They can read between the lines, and it's time you start Holy studies.

GINNY

Yes, mother.

MARGARET

I am very proud of you! Second reading before starting Holy studies! No wonder you have so many queries.

GINNY

(under her breath)
Thank you, mother

MARGARET and GINNY head out to
Communion.

Blackout.

SCENE II

Dormitory. In-Between, Heaven. Sunrise.

GINNY sits in her bed with The Manuscript in her lap. The book is large and has a worn look to it. The covers seem leatherbound and have no title on them. MARGARET walks in with FREEMA—her Appointed Holy studies mentor.

MARGARET

(whispering)

She's a fabulous child, but she's got too many questions. Her faith is wallowing.

FREEMA

That's for me to decide, Margaret. Foundation must come before faith. Know your process!

MARGARET

Yes, Appointed. Excuse me!

MARGARET exits. FREEMA walks up to GINNY.

FREEMA

Good Sunrise, Ginny. My name is Freema. I will be your Holy studies mentor.

GINNY

Good Sunrise! A pleasure to meet you, Appointed one.

FREEMA

You don't have to be so formal, Ginny.

GINNY

Excuse me. Nice to meet you, Freema.

FREEMA

That's much better!

GINNY

Where did mom go?

FREEMA

We teach Holy studies in private. Your mother is communing with other Angels while we work.

GINNY

(mutters)
Private?

FREEMA

Yes, dear! Private. We need to open your third eye. No distractions!

GINNY

Third eye?

FREEMA

Yes! They don't call me Freema for no reason. We're going to free your mind!

GINNY

I have a lot of questions about The Manuscript, the In-Between, and ascension.

FREEMA

I promise I'll do my best to answer all of them, but I have to warn you. You might not find all the answers you're looking for.

GINNY

I don't understand.

FREEMA

You will. Now let's get started!

GINNY

Okay.

FREEMA

Sit on the floor. You must ground yourself first. I know, ironic, there is no ground. Don't let that distract you! Use the floor as an anchor. Heaven is your domain! Keep your eyes closed but open them in your mind. You had questions about The Manuscript? Look for the answer! What do you see?

GINNY

I see the entire In-Between—empty clouds filled with rain.

FREEMA

(worried)
Yes, and?

GINNY

I can see closer. Angels in Communion.

FREEMA

That's good! Focus on your target. Try staying within its boundary.

GINNY

I see flames in the water. The water is poison.

FREEMA

Ginny, ground yourself. Listen to my voice and breathe.

GINNY collapses, lying on the ground, and starts convulsing as if possessed by power.

GINNY

(hoarsely)

SEVEN! Heaven is falling. The rain is blood, and sickness spreads.

FREEMA

Ginny, wake up!

GINNY

Angels rotting, rooting. SEVEN!

FREEMA

GINNY, WAKE UP!

GINNY

Working, WRITING!

GINNY screams herself awake and chokes on air as she opens her eyes.

FREEMA

Ginny?

GINNY

Freema? How did I...

FREEMA shakes her head in denial and hesitates to answer.

FREEMA

(pitifully)

You saw beyond the In-Between?

100

GINNY

I saw the sky.

FREEMA

What else did you see?

GINNY

I... I am not sure. I saw seven Angels in Communion working on something.

FREEMA

Ginny, I need this to be very clear! You are not to meditate without me at any cost.

GINNY

But Freema, I don't understand.

FREEMA

I told you this was a bumpy ride, sweetheart. You need to keep this session secret. You're not supposed to be able to see beyond The In-Between; The Manuscript forbids it.

GINNY

But I didn't.

FREEMA

Ginny, your vision was before "The In-Between."

GINNY

How do you...

FREEMA

Never mind how I know! Do not meditate without me! Under any circumstance! Do you understand?

GINNY

I don't...

FREEMA

I have to go. I'll be right back. You need guided meditation. I am not assigned to that, but I don't want your fate to be mine. I'll be right back!

FREEMA flies out of the dormitory.

GINNY gets up, grabs the Manuscript, opens it, and sits on her bed.

MARGARET and ELIZABETH come back in from the hallway.

MARGARET

Has your lesson concluded, Ginny? Freema seem to have left in a hurry.

GINNY

No, mother. She said she'd be right back.

MARGARET

Those appointed ones are a mystery. I trust everything went well.

GINNY hesitates but nods her head anyway.

MARGARET

Good. Well, you get back to your reading!
(to Elizabeth)
Let me show you!

MARGARET goes in her nightstand and pulls out a statue.

ELIZABETH

An Elder gave this to you? That's a good Omen. Perhaps, when I've attended communion for another hundred years, I'll be so lucky.

MARGARET

You'll get there. Communion is a lifestyle, not an event. I haven't missed one in four hundred years.

ELIZABETH

You noticed I was missing yesterday!

MARGARET

So did the gods!

ELIZABETH

Oh, my! Ginny always has her nose in that book, doesn't she?

MARGARET

Yes! She does not waste any time! She's has read The Manuscript twice! Can you believe it?

ELIZABETH

That is impressive. I am lucky if I can get Junior to open it. I worry about him! I heard the gods banish faithless children.

MARGARET

Elizabeth! That's Blasphemy. The Appointed Ones will always be there to guide them.

ELIZABETH

That's when I heard things go wrong. I want to get a Junior in Holy Studies, but I am scared.

MARGARET

You have nothing to fear! Get an Appointed One for Junior. He'll learn the way. He must!

ELIZABETH

I'll think about it. Thanks for the advice, Margaret.

FREEMA walks back in.

MARGARET

Freema! I just came back to show Elizabeth the statue Anger Prayer made for me. Isn't it wonderful?

FREEMA stares and does not say anything.

MARGARET

Don't mind us. We were about to leave. Excuse us.
(to ELIZABETH)
On we go.

MARGARET and ELIZABETH leave quickly. FREEMA rolls her eyes, sighs, and walks over to GINNY.

FREEMA

You can't seem to put that book down, can you? The answers you seek are not in there.

GINNY puts The Manuscript down and smiles.

GINNY

I am starting to realize that.

FREEMA

Do you want to get back to it?

GINNY

Yes, please!

FREEMA

On my way back, I started thinking I can't advise you to open your third eye anymore, but I won't stop you.

GINNY

I won't, but somehow, I feel we are going nowhere.

FREEMA

Yes, I know. I can answer some of your questions, though I fear you may not like the answers.

GINNY

I don't care... I am so confused. I want some answers!

FREEMA

Okay, let's have them.

GINNY

Who created The Manuscript?

FREEMA

The seven gods.

GINNY

...but Freema. While you were gone, I thought about my vision and my question. I saw Angels, not Gods.

FREEMA

Yes. I feared so...

GINNY

You also said that my vision was before The In-Between. Is that why the clouds were empty and grey?

FREEMA

Yes.

GINNY

...but how is that possible? The Manuscript clearly states that The In-Between existed before gods, angels, and men. Angels waiting for ascension are a result of a god and human by-product. How come there are no humans?

FREEMA

Ginny, you are asking all the wrong questions. There are two paths you can go down: clarity and prison, or blind faith. Have you ever looked down on Earth?

GINNY

No, I've only had dreams about it.

FREEMA

You were not dreaming, sweetie.

GINNY

But what does it mean?

FREEMA

It means your third eye has been open for a long time. It means you can see beyond the illusion. I fear you are not an angel by-product.

GINNY

You fear me?

FREEMA

I fear for you! What path will you choose?

GINNY

I don't believe in blind faith.

FREEMA

I thought so...

(pause)

I see so much of myself in you. You must leave The In-Between at once.

GINNY

Why?

FREEMA

I can't open my third eye, so I can't guide your lessons. If you look beyond our history, your third eye will be permanently shut, and you will be kept in stasis.

GINNY

What does that mean?

FREEMA

That means that you will be imprisoned, frozen in time, for seeking truth. In your dreams, did you ever see a woman in green?

GINNY

Yes, she was in nature.

(pause)

What does this have to do with the truth, and why must I leave?

FREEMA

You broke the rules of the Seven. I tried to be quick, but you don't have much time. Do you want to be free? Do you want answers? If you want free will, your time is running out.

GINNY

Yes!

FREEMA

Take this ginger root!

GINNY

Ginger? How did you get this? Earth roots are forbidden in the In-Between. Doesn't soil corrupt the heavens?

FREEMA

Not exactly.

A loud banging is heard on the door.

MAN IN ROBE

(offstage)

Appointed One Freema, open this door and exit the premises at once! You will not be warned twice!

FREEMA

(to GINNY)

We're out of time! Open your third eye while holding the root! You will be transported to Earth. Focus your eye on the women in green. You will find your answers there. Good luck sister!

GINNY

Sister? What do you mean...

Men in robes bust in and take FREEMA by the hands. GINNY hides the root in her gown.

GINNY

Where are you taking her?

MAN IN ROBE

Shut your mouth, child.

The MAN IN ROBE storms out.

Blackout.

SCENE III

Dormitory. The In-Between, Heaven.
Midnight.

MARGARET is on her knees before the altar, praying to the seven statues. She gets up and paces back and forth less gracefully than before. She stops to stare at GINNY, then begins walking again, but this time quicker. She stops and pulls the covers off GINNY. GINNY wakes up confused.

GINNY

What is happening?

MARGARET

You overslept again.

GINNY

Is it Sunrise?

MARGARET

(frustrated)

Sunrise? How many times have I told you? On time is late!

GINNY

It's not late yet, mother! It's midnight. Have you forgotten how to read the stars?

MARGARET

What did you just tell me?

GINNY

I said, have you forgotten how to read the star?

MARGARET

(angry)

Who do you think you are, you little brat? You are no daughter of mine. Your faith is weak. You ask too many questions and can't even get up on time for Communion! On top of that, you get involved in the first In-Between scandal in centuries! Things will change around here! You need to get up at midnight! You need to pray before Communion and **NO MORE QUESTIONS**. Your faith must be blind or so help me, gods, I'll have you put in stasis myself! You won't keep me from getting ascended. You hear me?

GINNY

Yes, Margaret!

MARGARET turns around, looks back at GINNY, stares, and looks away.

MARGARET

Get ready! We mustn't be late.

MARGARET grabs The Manuscript and walks out.

GINNY

I'll show you change, mother.

GINNY gets the ginger root, sits on the floor, and starts humming. A light washes the stage and goes out. GINNY has disappeared.

Blackout.

Curtain.

SCENE IV

Forest, Earth. 2:00 AM.

GINNY appears in the forest. The setting is dark. There is enough moonlight to see GINNY and a tint of green to see the forest. She is alone.

GINNY

Hello! Anybody there?

GINNY walks around and stops at the sound of rustling.

GINNY

Hello?

The woman in green floats into the scene. A bright light shines on her.

GINNY

Woman in green? Freema sent me.

GREEN GODDESS

Yes, I know Ginny.

GINNY

How do you know my name?

GREEN GODDESS

I was aware of your presence all along. I could see through the window you opened.

GINNY

You could see all this time?

GREEN GODDESS

Only some of the time. Only when you let me. How is Freema?

GINNY

I don't know. She was taken before I left.

GREEN GODDES

Poor Freema! I haven't seen her in centuries. I was surprised to see her under your care. A strange, but fortunate coincidence.

GINNY

How do you—

GREEN GODDESS

know her? I know many things of this world, Ginny. Freema used to visit me using her third eye. I gave her that root you hold. She used to be able to see beyond as well. That ability was taken from her. When the seven gods discovered that she had that power, they put her away. After blinding her, they appointed her as a mentor.

GINNY

How many Appointed are there?

GREEN GODDESS

Probably about a hundred or so... The In-Between isn't heavily populated.

GINNY

How do you know so much about The In-Between? I barely know anything, and I lived there for 160 years.

GREEN GODDESS

How could you? Time moves so fast there.

GINNY

I don't mean to be rude, but Freema said you had answers, and I am not getting that.

GREEN GODDESS

You have some hidden spunk. Sorry to keep the conversation lingering, but I don't get much human company.

GINNY

Did you say human?

GREEN GODDESS

Yes, dear!

GINNY

Do you mean half-human?

GREEN GODDESS

No, dear. Just human.

GINNY

How can that be?

GREEN GODDESS

We should probably start from the top.

GINNY

I think so...

GREEN GODDESS

When you were looking into the past, during your first vision, you saw the seven...

GINNY

I saw seven angels.

GREEN GODDESS

Yes, The Seven Angels of Corrosion: Anxiety, Cancer, Depression, Dementia, Schizophrenia, Psychosis, and Death. They were poison in the waters of mankind.

GINNY

Angels of Corrosion?

GREEN GODDESS

Yes, they are the seven gods of heaven.

GINNY

How can that be?

GREEN GODDESS

They grew above Earth during creation. People know me as mother nature. People know them as the seven deadly sins. Each myth masks the truth.

GINNY

I don't understand. Where do you all come from?

GREEN GODDESS

We were all born during The Big Bang. I am The Green Goddess of Earth, there's The Red Goddess of Mars, The Blue Goddess of Neptune, etc., etc. The seven were volatile manifestations of the explosion.

GINNY

So, you mean to say the seven don't belong on Earth.

GREEN GODDESS

No, they don't.

GINNY

So... The Manuscript was written by the seven?

GREEN GODDESS

Yes, dear. I am sorry.

GINNY

A hundred and sixty years of lies. There is no ascension?

GREEN GODDESS

No, dear. Your Religion is made up. Why do you think there are only seven gods? No one gets ascended in heaven. The In-Between is like a prison. You all live in a maximum-security cage in heaven. The only reason you exist is that angels are immortal beings, so the seven can't feed off your deaths to make themselves more powerful, so they use your mind. You're like their battery.

GINNY

Prison?

GREEN GODDESS

I'm sorry, honey. Is this too much?

GINNY

(distraught)

I'm okay.

(angry)

How come you've never done anything about this? Aren't you a god?

GREEN GODDESS

I am a god of nature. Corrosion would destroy me, especially when it's this powerful.

GINNY

But you could do something!

GREEN GODDESS

I have a daughter of mine.

GINNY

Daughter?

GREEN GODDESS

I tried about a hundred times to stop the seven.

GINNY

What do you mean, daughter?

GREEN GODDESS

I mean, I am your mother. I am the god of humans, the god of life. I created men. I carried you in my belly. That's why you can see beyond the In-Between. That's the reason Freema could see beyond the In-Between. She's your sister. I sent you to the In-Between.

GINNY

(distraught)

I don't believe this! You sent me to prison? Why?

GREEN GODDESS

Did you not think something should be done? Do you wish to help me?

GINNY

(toughening)
I do.

GREEN GODDESS

Of course, you do! Freema was the closest we ever got to victory before you. After I made contact by sending the ginger root, she got caught. We must tread very lightly. Fortunately, you were able to escape. I spoke with Freema one last time before I was blinded. I explained to her how to use the root to escape, but she had hidden it and got taken before she could use it. The root has a grounding effect that can be used to travel to this realm.

GINNY

Poor Freema! Okay what can I do?

GREEN GODDESS

Would you be so kind to return the root?

GINNY

Yes! Here it is!

GREEN GODDESS

Good thing heaven is almost frozen in time. Otherwise, this root would be useless. Ginny, have you ever dreamt of magic?

GINNY

Only all the time!

GREEN GODDESS

Come over here. Good thing.

GINNY walks over to GREEN GODDESS.
GREEN GODDESS reveals a rock with a hole carved out in the middle.

GINNY

Is that nature's cauldron?

GREEN GODDESS

(laughs)

I guess so, dear.

GINNY

How will this work? I've seen people using ginger to heal illness before, and it never works. Nature never works.

GREEN GODDESS

Hey, that's not fair! There's only one of me and seven of them. There's only so much I can do; nature always helps and often heals. Have you ever seen someone put aloe on a cut?

GINNY

That's fair.

GREEN GODDESS

Important: You are human, which means you will endure sickness. You are also god born, which means you could never die. Even if you get caught, I'll never stop trying to save you all.

GINNY

Getting caught... sounds a bit scary.

GREEN GODDESS

You just need to be quick. Freema hesitated! Hesitation will be your downfall. You will be expected. You will bring this potion with you.

GINNY

Aren't they immortal, too, the seven?

GREEN GODDESS

Not like you or angels. You are evolved. We are weakened by each other.

GINNY

What do I do?

GREEN GODDESS

Take the potion. You can't use your third eye on Earth, so I am sending you back. When you get there. Pour the brew all over you. It will sting up there! Let them take you to the seven. They will touch you. They always try to kill my children. The potion doesn't work immediately, but I promise it will work.

GINNY nods and grabs the potion and the

ginger root. She vanishes. Sunrise was upon them.

Blackout.

Curtain.

SCENE V

MARGARET is pacing back and forth in her room faster than ever. She kneels before her statues for a few seconds and gets back up. She paces and looks at her pocket watch. She opens the Manuscript. GINNY walks in.

MARGARET

Where have you been?

GINNY

As above, so bellow.

GINNY takes the bottle and pours it on her head. The potion drips down her hair and soaks her clothes.

MARGARET

What are you doing, Ginny? Have demons possessed you?

GINNY

I could ask you the same question. How do you know about stasis? It's not written in the Manuscript.

MARGARET

(scared)

I... I... don't know about stasis.

GINNY

What did you say earlier? You said you would put me in stasis. How do you know about stasis?

MARGARET

I don't know...

GINNY

ANSWER ME!

MARGARET

I heard Angel Prayer talking about it. A divine punishment, but I don't know the meaning of it.

MAN IN ROBE knocks on the door.

MAN IN ROBE

(authoritatively)

GINNY, open this door and exit the premises at once! You will not be warned twice!

GINNY

(to MARGARET)

You are a cold mother! You cared about ascension more than your own daughter!

Several men in robes walk in, grab GINNY by the arms, and escort her out.

GINNY

Aren't you late for Communion, mother, or was it all for show?

Study for Massacre of the Innocents

Richard Collins

*In an odd sort of way I think Francis [Bacon]
thought of himself as a religious artist.*
— John Wonnacott

Christ clings to his cross
Deplorables to their guns
Extremists to their slogans
Escapists to their fun
Talking heads to video rostrums
Killers to the Constitution
Everyone to the news
Another shooting, a few boohoos.

Our logarithms make it so
We loop and loop and loop
Pray and pray and pray away.
Our phones foam at the mouth
Like rabid dogs and dyspeptic babies
Regurgitating viral clouds of glory.
We stroke screens with epileptic fingers
We scroll with echoed nostrums of religion
To cure an original ill we only hope to feel.

The trigger goes click click clickbait because
The more innocent the target
(The better the story
The bigger the headline)
The sweeter the blood.

Still Life with War

Richard Collins

*“Do you see the way that [horizontal shadow]
eats into the figure, like a disease?”*

— Francis Bacon

All those Renaissance skulls and rotten apples
Don't fool me. Death and decay, disintegration,
Are ripenings, food for thought, every day.

We now live in the autumn of autumns,
Late in the day, when the old tribes find it
Easy again to justify anything, even

Genocide, as though it were the mere
Drowning of superfluous kittens.
Every generation, it seems, loves its genocide.

The world in its thirst for meaning reifies
Identity (nation race gender religion),
Even though each of us is a melting, even though

We are a blur to ourselves, even as we open wide
Our bleeding mouths to scream. Because even
The victorious can claim to be victims

So long as they scream louder than
Their victims. Like a bowl of fruit on a table,
Mute, consumable, to be eaten with humility,

Like sins, immaterial, invisible
To the microscope of our finer emotions,
Its moral lens cloudy as a cataract. A quantum

Take on what is ever amoral. Let's face it:
Our shadows stalk us. So don't tell me about
Perspective. Don't tell me about two sides

To every story. We may not like to kill,

But it's what we all believe in
More than life, still.

Plagues

Georgia Ryan

I drowned,
 though it took six months,
 in my own mouth—
 I flooded my fields with rapids
 I could not dam, I could not
 un-flow the rivers that followed
 after me as I dove into
 him headfirst

I was a desert then.
 There was no gutter deep enough
 or trench long enough
 or canyon grown enough to
 swallow down those rains that poured
 no building tall enough to catch that strike
 of lightning—he struck
 my earth and set
 his fires.

Buried by mudslides, I was self
 lost but treasure found.
 Fault lines unearthed me, rebirthed me,
 splintered my walls.
 He walked freely
 through the fractures and
 claimed me—
 his.

I liked until it wasn't
 his body anymore, until
 he had become a god,
 a snake in my garden feeding me fruit before
 His bite. Sweetening
 His prize and softening
 His blows
 Until I could not forget (remember) what I was

I melted thinking
He was melting
I fell thinking
He was falling
I wanted because
He was wanting something
I could give
Him.

To be a mother

Angela Castellano

To be a mother

with wings spread overhead,

Protecting, brooding, and laying eggs— knowing

soon they will crack over a pan. Forget

the unbearable gasping birth by

raising creatures that come when called.

Safety Park

Angela Castellano

We walk uphill to watch the sunset— I bless
the windows of people I will never meet.

We share food and lie
in the sun, among crowds— I breathe
deep. I don't worry
or keep my eyes on you.

Night falls and takes our blankets and bottles
and moss or twigs or stones or big leaves.

We take pictures of the deer that don't look
both ways before crossing the street
though they can hear cars from a mile away

because we still appreciate the world
in all its beauty
and danger—
We don't have to walk home alone.

Saint Anthony

Angela Castellano

Saint of Lost Things —

When do I get to curl
in the lap of God. I am willing
to wait— a pet tangled
on a post in the noonday sun.

“Ang...”
Angela Castellano

“Ang...”
from the mouth of someone
who has not earned its closeness.

Waking up to discover
my creatures are starving:
the chickens— cat & cow.

I try to come when called— grounding through
yarrow dried in winter, cinnamon in summer,
Ativan, acrylic artwork, altar.
Will I notice when I go hungry too?

Vices

Georgia Ryan

Laughter churns the last bit of air
underground into something hot and thick
in throats and bellies.

Lights hide behind buzzing strangers
on their last dim legs.

Glasses sweat in heat, spilling
excess with no regard
from the hands that hold them.

They slither round each other, rapping on
shoulders—*wanna dance? —come
on sweetheart—let me take you home*—as if
their words are a sign of peace.

As they stumble through lines,
tangled in noisy communion,
they shake each other's hands and drink
from each other's cups.

Bodies, begging like Jesus
in the garden that this next might pass,
whine and will their masters to rest
but mouths like hands have no regard
for fullness.

I can remember
those sinners turned saints
in the churches made from bathroom
stalls. Fires bubbling over,
spilling into their porcelain fonts,
foreheads christened with sweat.

Look at her, on her knees for false idols
promising the thing they wish to take.
How naïve she must be to believe

in this folie à deux. Shepherded by an empty promise
of flowing gold or settled hunger, she swore
she was fulfilled.

I held her hair
and prayed.

The Rust Stains

Jacob Tapp

The rust stains

on the white walls

might be black mold.

The paint makes

the air taste

metallic.

Why does the office

feel like

an asylum?

Hey, Brenda?

Yeah?

Coffee does taste

a little better today.

Yeah.

Bends and Ebbs

Jacob Tapp

Like how the waves ebb,
swaying herds of dark
kelp above slushed sand,
the wind sings in harsh yells,
mixed with soft moments of stillness,
the wind bends the young aspen trees
so they lean towards us to hear
our secrets and so they can retreat
when they've heard enough.

Everything's a secret until
they hear about it.

Breathe.
And when I close my eyes, I don't
see him.
I see black.
Nothing.
Wind.
Breathe again.

I bend
and ebb.
And when I open my eyes, I turn
to see another man. The shade looks
good on him. His voice makes me
smile. And I don't care who's listening.

De La Piedra

Damián Galván

En la naranjal,
había un
hombre tocando
guitarra Española;
rubio y aislado.
La gente pasaba,
escuchando,
y sin mucho
que decir.
Cuerdas cosechadas
en los
cítricos colgantes.
El hombre
continuó hasta
mediodía;
sombreado.

From the Stone

Damián Galván

In the orange
grove, there
was a man playing
Spanish guitar;
blonde and isolated.
People went by,
listening,
and without much
to say.
Strings picked
at the
dangling citrus.
The man
continued until
noon;
in shade.

Son para el Sol

Damián Galván

Tus palabras,
comienzan como
una oración a
amanecer.

A través de una
sonrisa efímera
y tus caricias
piadosas,
estoy viviendo
por una
razón eterna.

Tus besos,
son bálsamos
etéreos.

El fulgor de mi
esencia esta
en tus manos.

En este
momento,
estoy expulsado
de mi cuerpo.

They are for the Sun

Damián Galván

Your words,
they begin as
a prayer at
dawn.
Through an
ephemeral smile
and your pious
caresses,
I am living
for an
eternal reason.
Your kisses,
they are ethereal
balms.
The glow of my
essence is
in your hands.
In this
moment,
I am expelled
from my body.

Jetta

Hanna Davis

I've been taking my life into account along with the seasons.
It's autumn, and I've been poking around all of the rottings I can find:

A handful of bad teeth.
flossing isn't optional, you know.

A molding houseplant.
I didn't know it could get that bad until it did.
Until I touched it.

I think about the bird that flew into the hood of my car.
There one moment,
Exploding all the feathers of life into my headlights with a dull thump.
Blood and bone meshed into pavement next.

My mind quilts them together
In one great big cloth for me to gather in winter.
They shelter me at night when I have nothing else to wear.

All the world is quiet save for the insects and the dirt,
Finding nostalgia in biting wind and yellowed lights,
The smell of deer skin and exhaust,
An antler in pieces.

In Which I Learned to Arrange Flowers

Hanna Davis

The first time a man threatened me,
I was a coiled half-moon inside
My mother's womb.
I had no mouth of my own,
And still I was too loud.
The boughs of my house reached inward,
Leaves covered the hemorrhaging sounds of my cries.
I learned my lesson years later,
Wrapped up into a sticky gray veil
Of silence;
A kitchen without my mother in it.
My father smiled at me when he remembered I was in the back seat.
When he removes the tape, I inhale, and
Small white teeth blossom
Into a beam of baby's breath.
The smell of rot is still young and sweet.

Greenville Memorial

Hanna Davis

I did not know her
 until she was dead.
 I collect pieces from warm asphalt:
 The skin of her knee.
 Tender, honeyed fingers, comfortable
 between familiar bones and a tongue.
 Baby teeth scattered through the trash
 Like ashes at sea;
 I can feel every piece of baked bone
 Sear into my cheek at a fine point.
 Dewed with the marrow of life,
 Stinking of death and sweat.
 All the world a pair of dirt-cruste'd feet:
 Size 13 youth.
 I wish I had memorized the soft-fleshed joints
 before the ache grew in.
 This is a death, too.
 This is a goodbye.

Taste Buds

AA Wings

A magical high if you just take a bite,
or a yummy snack before the sky loses its light.
Some don't like me, but some do. They say, "we want more."
But if only they knew where I grew, they'd never ask for more to chew.
From the dirt, next to the mealworms and tasty critters.

A flower's uglier cousin.
A fun guy, but never anyone's usual preference.
Instead, I'm here for the outcasts and
wanderers. What version of me
do you prefer?

Orange Glow

Jolie Babineau

My skins crawling
 And i no longer want to be inside
 There's something about the past that makes me itch

So i'll ride between the lines of what's past and present,
 Of course with the intent that hopefully the wind might soothe me

Pushing and pulling for something that will satisfy me
 Satisfy that kid searching for something
 Something warm around the corner

Every pretty hydrangea filled alleyway turned dead end,
 Every so called companion fallen off their iron horse
 And yet here i ride.

Searching.

Searching for what never was,
 Searching for what never has

Selfishly searching for something, searching for the same
 And yet
 Here i still ride

The orange glow of the lamp post
 The only warm thing guiding me home.

Black

Mildred Rivadeneyra

Black · mildred rivadeneyra

the turtleneck that
covers my torso reminds me of face masks

I unpeel it
baring my skin

two days ago, I fainted
(an anomaly born in my womb
and back then in my bone marrow)
menstrual pain reminded me of leukemia

I bled between my lower lip and chin
I own the gynecologist a visit

the cardiologist said that I might
not be able to have babies

I stare at my silhouette

at home,
roses bloom
in the garden

NR | Poetry

Warm Tequila Neat

Sean Ahern

Father.

You told me you have cancer
growing under your skin.
Spots so close I could touch them
If you hugged me
by pressing a thumb
Into your Sicilian abdomen.

You said the Doctors talked
about me being a donor
about carving out a piece
of my body
to place inside you.
Inside the body that made me
never held me
left me
before I was cut from mother.
They want you to hold me.
To give you time
but we have the same heart
scarred, thick, broken
with Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy
and the surgery risk is high.

A warm tequila neat
enough for me
to swallow your words
burnumblood cells
drain to liver.

Warm tequila neat
so my body knows
how cells die
how you feel
taking shots of chemo
to earn time

enough to say goodbye.

Of Paridisi

Sean Ahern

Ruby dream God
plot the soil
root hammer in hand,
tall steps for clay ground
with sun-worn ash skin.

I shout to you, *Follow me.*

Your citrus hum
drowns the drought
air for ears to hear, wake
before you break the world.

Follow me, follow me, follow me.

River Goddess

Sean Ahern

She was made
under sheet-metal-sky
and milk-jungle.

Where children
wash in jade
pools with river fish.

Where sticky-salt-air
clings to cave
rainbow stairs.

Where at night she would
wade the river street of kapchai
to watch her mother dance
at the GoGoHookah,

below cool neon
Heineken signs,
she learned to wear
her body right.

Where her husband sells
lok-lok and buddhas
at a stall for tourists
across from an Irish pub —

where she left him and lied,
dove-to-ocean,
pretending where
she was from.

She told me,
water forgets,
the ghost-of-it, the dream-of-it
lingers until it fades

I asked her to stay,
She told me I'm nice
She told me I'm Irish she told me who I was
at the edge of my bed as she dressed,
the night I never saw her again.

Dishes

Julia Tomes

Both eyes are drooping low
 The straightened back bends
 All the ducks are in a row,
 There are no foxes with the hens.
 The day has reached its end
 Time for bed, I think
 Except for one more little gift my loving family sends:
 The dishes in the sink.

The skillet he used for breakfast,
 The mug she used for tea,
 That thing he used as a garlic press,
 The bowl she used for peas,
 The plates he used to eat,
 And the cups she used to drink.
 Constantly are tasked to me:
 The dishes in the sink.

My ears begin to whistle
 My teeth begin to rattle
 This is the last back-breaking thistle
 To be jammed under the saddle
 It's like living with a herd of cattle
 That just roam, and graze, and stink,
 And pretend that they can't see all
 Of the dishes in the sink

But then I pause and remember
 What all those dishes mean
 A reminder that cools my temper
 Of why I bother to work or clean.
 Those plates mean laughter with meals
 Those cups mean friends with drinks
 A product of a love that heals
 Are those dishes in the sink.

The thought comes to me

To stop and make me think
Just how lonely life would be
without those dishes in the sink.
So I leave the dishes to soak
Before I blow up with no warning
And remind myself to ask my folks
To do them in the morning.

Sundays

Isabella Rios

For as long as I can remember,
Sundays were the days I would talk to my *abuela* over the phone,
The day I got to speak my family's native tongue, Spanish.

Overtime it became a video call,
I was then face to face with a woman I only grew to recognize through
Videos, pictures, and told memories.

She is my *abuela*,
Old, fragile,
Pero, always smiling.

As time went by,
The calls got shorter and became more frequent,
she grew weaker.

Because I forgot,
That if I age,
So does she.

Sadness overbears me as I am reminded of her limited time,
Sadness overbears me because I am not fluent,
I become engulfed in sadness as I watch her slowly become engulfed in her own
weakness.

And then I remember all of that doesn't matter because,
Ella está aquí y yo también,
Su sonrisa hace que mi dolor desaparezca.
Mi esperanza.

Where Were You God?

Me'Chele Sevanesian

The sun is afraid to set today,
 Afraid to rise tomorrow.
 The sun has seen the error in our ways
 And still hands us rays
 sew the vessels we reap in sorrow.

So,
 He must stand to play this.
 The shape of history dances tones of
 Ones and twos.

But perhaps it's the song he's afraid to play?
 The song of a savage, now playing in Baku.

This vessel in his hands
 With strings,
 And wood
 And ties like wedding bands
 Will send their cries to the Edicule.

Jesus wake,
 So we can cry with you.
 He raises his bow and begins to play
 The song of their sadness
 That sets with the sun
 And rises with the new day.

Where were you, God?
 When our brothers went off to fight.

Where were you when they bombed our churches,
 Covered your light,
 With the shelling of their jealousy?
 The shots they sent
 They have no fear of your ridicule
 "Oh father I am here to repent"

Where can I find you, God?
 Are you in the mountains,
 In the stars,
 They have stolen our churches,
 Our peace,
 Prohibit your validity
 Damning the waters which docked Noah's ark.

Tell me where you are God,
 No journey is too far
 We just need you to tell the world,
 Tell them who we are.

Can you hear this, my lord?
 How is my tune,
 Tell your son to awaken
 Shall we play this outside of his tomb?

Will he hear our sorrow?
 I know the world hears our screams.
 Please send someone to us,
 Our soldiers have torn the buttons from the seams.

The repetition of history
 Has caused our hope to wilt,
 They say it's beautiful
 that we've flourished
 There's little beauty in survivor guilt.

Creating a linked chain
 To never change the immensity of diaspora
 We will chant and teach them all
 Through the drums of our anaphora.

նր էիր սսսված (where were you God?)
 When will you arrive
 We need your divination
 Before they set fire to our skies.

նր էիր սսսված (where were you God?)
 I cannot finish this show
 This violin is now broken

And I have soiled my bow.
 I cannot finish this song
 I cannot take a performance bow
 There is one thing you must know
 One thing I vow.
 We will pray in our churches,
 Even as they cry for us now.

նր էիր սուսլած (Where were you God?)
 That is what your people now shout.

Bloody Soup

Lu Chukhadrian

Bloody Soup

hundred years, and more
 crackling voices unheard, relics flaking away,
 dying,
 tongues tied to swords,
 in time, martyrs on pages weaken,
 histories carried away by the reckless drift
 of tranquil river,
 reflections of dead red eyes,
 stare back.

 as I stand over an unearthly caldron worthy of iron
 My paper ladle
 melts, dripping soup,

sons cut down in half, sisters scared with familiar
 tattoos.

driven,
 land spreading thin under their bare feet.
 children swallow sand, parched,
 hungry,
 untouched by sharp blade
 skeletons weight down my arms.

no one listens.

 no one cares.

We are still searching for our trumpets.

| 69 |

David Cruz-Quiroz

“Straight” men respect me.
They don’t call me gay.

They appreciate me when I swallow their load because
their girls won’t do it.

They ask me not to text them past certain hours and
“keep it low-key.” They have wives, girlfriends, or their
kids on the weekends. “I’m not gay. I just like getting my
dick sucked” is their first favorite excuse.

But I love munching on DL guys. I love meeting them
by the empty parking lot outside the gym, steam rooms,
or murky parks—when empty is the only witness.

For those who don’t know, a type of gay man exists that
lies to women on wedding nights. They’re dressed as
masculine but get stiff for pretty boys.

If you’re *that* girl, call your man’s recently blocked
numbers and check “the homie” he’s always with. Why
are they always together?

DL dudes love another man’s mouth or boy-pussy. “It’s
tighter” would be their second favorite excuse.

DL guys like risky behavior.

Often, DL guys are
bisexual-pansexual-sex-positive-beings.
They don’t know extravagant terms.

Often, they're also POZ.
 But they'll never admit their status. They bring it home
 for dinner, Christmas, or Thanksgiving—*any* day.
 Often, I wonder who murdered Marsha P.
 Was it a DL boy she was munching on?
 Was it a setup?
 Was it the police?
 Or was it the police?

I do not regard this poem as historical. Or political.
 I'll try anyways.

The Stonewall Riots started June 28, 1969, when New
 York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club in
 Greenwich Village in New York City.

History will record that Marsha P. Johnson was
 instrumental as one of the leaders of the gay liberation
 movement of the 60s and 70s. Gay liberation.

I wonder if DL guys know about Marsha P.—her death
 tested the state of the human condition—**we** failed.

Marsha's body was found by the Hudson River and
 ruled as a suicide.
 My body is found on strangers' beds. I commit suicide
 all the time.

It is my spiritual exercise to be available at all hours.

My body has become the DL temple. A church for the
 closeted. Have I earned my spot in heaven?

Transgender women are killed outside their homes,
 killed in the masses. Cases go cold. They sing from their
 tombless graves. They sing the carols of justice. It sounds
 like, "*Darling, I want my gay rights now!*"

I got my gay rights. It be laughing at me,
 “Darling, no more DL dudes at 2 am!”

| Claim |

David Cruz-Quiroz

To the brown boy I met at work with the oatmeal
brown eyes, curly-ish hair, sadness in his smile, and the
heavy scent of closet craving to be liberated,

Your love was prophesied by a palm reader, a corn man
I met down Bromont Avenue the summer I started my
first-gen career.

My first-gen career, in my first-gen shoes and suit.

With my first-gen love in my pocket, wrapped in
tinfoil.

Fall 2019

I rescue my time

01. When you'd call me drunk at 2 a.m.
02. Facetime cuz you wanted to show me your
straight cock
03. Our swim around Pacoima beautiful, visiting
old houses we called homes
04. Long walks on the Hansen Dam
05. Sweating with you at 24 while your girl cleans
the glass house you rented for her
06. Sucking you in my new black car

You are too cheap for my homosexual love
too cheap for her heterosexual love
Here's the bill, pay up.

Total: LOVE

QUEER

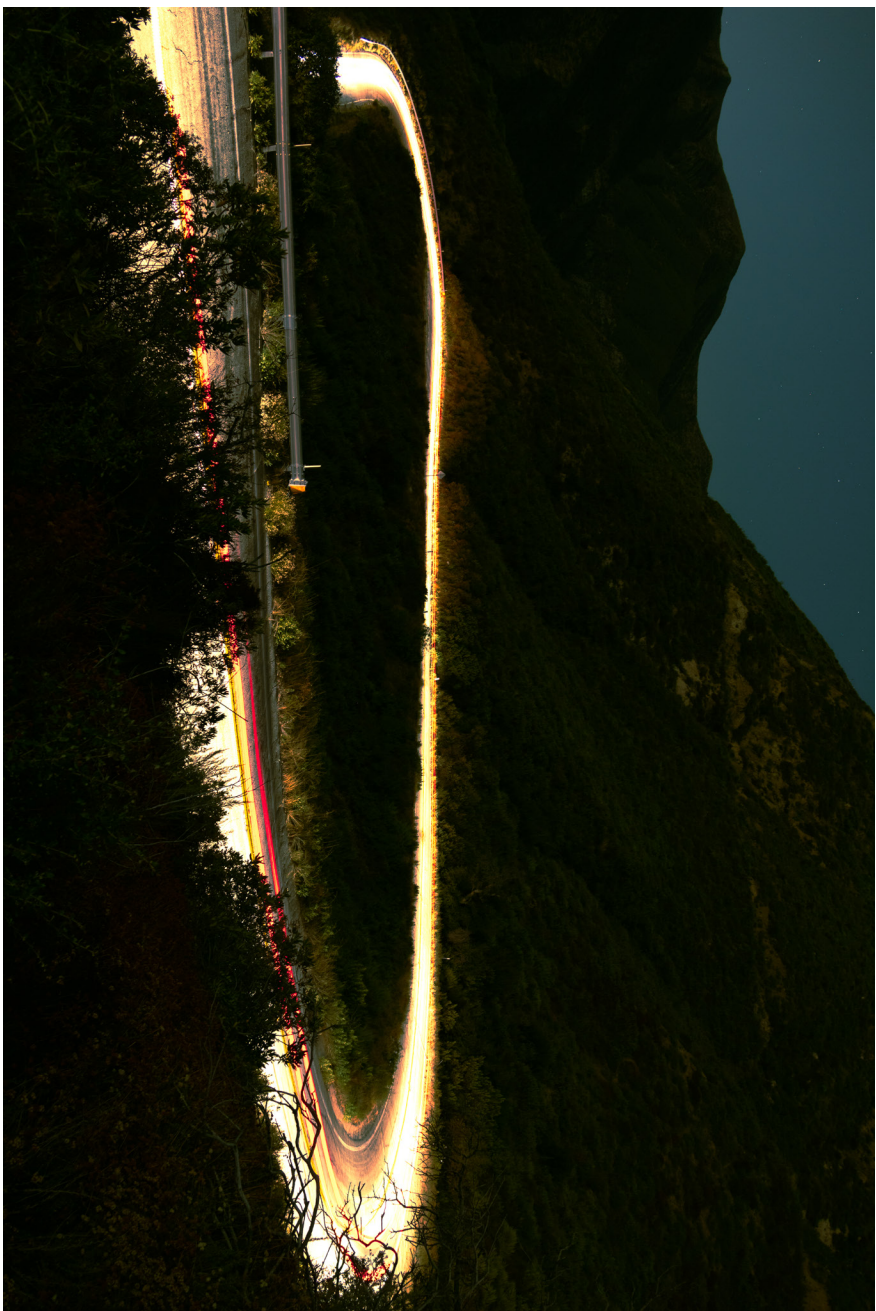
me + you = repressed fags

With this sentence,

I rescue my time

Summer 2023

















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