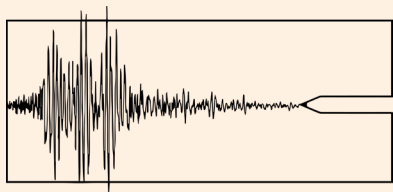


NORTHRIDGE

REVIEW

LITERARY MAGAZINE



FALL 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



The Northridge Review thanks the Associated Students of CSUN, the English Department and Creative Writing Program faculty and staff for all of their aid and support. We also thank each and every person who submitted to our magazine, whose voices give our magazine life. Thank you to Ellen Jarosz for organizing and facilitating our virtual visit to Special Collections, and providing us with the rich literary history that inspired our magazine. A special thank you to both Dr. Kameron Bashi and Paul Vangelisti for taking the time to visit us and share your insight and experience in the writing and editing fields, which encouraged and motivated us in the making of our magazine. Thank you to Emily Foyek for your lovely artwork that shaped the identity of the issue. Lastly, thank you to Sean Pessin for your guidance, providing us with the plethora of knowledge and creativity that make you the marvelous person and leader you are.

EDITORS' NOTE



Dear Reader,

It is often the most challenging times that deliver the best artistic works. Whether it was the earthquake in 1994 or the current events we are living through, *The Northridge Review* has persisted in our legacy of producing and publishing the works of our community. Our book showcases just some of CSUN students' amazing work that has come out of the difficulties of the year 2020. Our wonderful contributors and all of their creative feats make this issue of *The Northridge Review* an insightful book that embodies the times we are living in today. Our incredible team has worked arduously through these strange times to create our most interactive issue of *The Northridge Review* yet, producing an innovative way of experiencing our first ever book designed specifically to be online. In our 58 years of publishing this anthology, this is our first issue produced entirely in a global pandemic.

The amount of collaborative effort that has brought this book to life demonstrates the strength of our literary community, and the necessary place it occupies in each of our lives. I thank you as a reader of our book, and a supporter of our literary arts community. I hope our book finds you well, and provides you with inspiration and comfort in knowing that, even through the darkest of times, your creativity can flourish.

Nicolle Kaiser-Brower
Managing Editor

Emily Foytek
Assistant Managing Editor

AWARDS



The Northridge Review Fiction Award, given annually, recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*. This year's judge, Marina Mularz, won the 2016 New American Fiction Prize for her debut novel, *Welcome to Freedom Point*. She is a graduate of Northwestern's MFA program and CSUN's BA in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. The recipient of this year's award is Mimi Rizo for her short fiction, "Swan Pond."

The Rachel Sherwood Award, given annually in the memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes excellent poetry by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*. This year's judge, Paul Vangelisti, author of more than twenty books of poetry, including *Embarrassment of Survival* and *Days Shadows Pass*, and an acclaimed translator and small press publisher, recognizes "Why Buy the Cow?" by Emily Burton-Uduwana and "Editing is Never Done" by Chris Espinosa as two honorable mentions. The recipient of this year's award is Harrison Manzano for his poem, "Owl Pellet."

AWARDS



The George Dillon Memorial Award, presented by the Academy of American Poets, is given annually to a CSUN student in recognition of their excellent poetry. This year's judge, Adam Clay, is the author of *To Make Room for the Sea* (Milkweed Editions, 2020), *Stranger* (Milkweed Editions, 2016), *A Hotel Lobby at the Edge of the World* (Milkweed Editions, 2012), and *The Wash* (Parlor Press, 2006). His poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Tin House*, *Bennington Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Boston Review*, *jubilat*, *Iowa Review*, *The Pinch*, and elsewhere. He is editor-in-chief of *Mississippi Review*, a co-editor of *Typo Magazine*, and a Book Review Editor for *Kenyon Review*. He directs the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. Recognized as an honorable mention for the award is Elizabeth Lao for her poem "Calenture." The recipient of this year's award is Annabelle Bonebrake for her poem "The Ranch House."

STAFF



Production Team

Faculty Advisor: Sean Pessin

Managing Editor: Nicolle Kaiser-Brower

Assistant Managing Editor: Emily Foytek

Book Design

Editor: Joseph Jaffray

Assistant Editor: Tadeh Kennedy

Section Illustrations: Emily Foytek

Team: Jacob Brenner, Jonathan Flores, Austin Sawyer,
Steven Romo, Nicolle Kaiser-Brower

Public Relations

Editor: Katherine Nabulsi

Assistant Editor: Tristan Eisenberg

Team: Sindy Ixcatcoy, Astrid Roberson, Areli Alatorre,
Bryanna Benedetti-Coomber

Copyediting

Editor: Bryanna Benedetti-Coomber

Assistant Editor: Miguel Velasquez

Team: Taylor Ayers, Astrid Roberson, Emily Foytek

Editor at Large: Roza Gabrielyan

STAFF



Editorial Team

Managing Editor: Jen Eto

Assistant Managing Editor: Nicolle Kaiser-Brower

Fiction

Editor: Leonel Robles-Rodriguez

Assistant Editor: Kimberly Regina Mendoza

Team: Christian Barragan, Jen Eto

Poetry

Editor: Ismanuelle Dones

Assistant Editor: Joyce Montenegro

Team: Lorena Ramirez, Nicolle Kaiser-Brower

Drama

Editor: Omar Armenta

Assistant Editor: Elizabeth Lao

Team: Edwin Aguilar, Anthony Huben

Art

Editor: Adriana Garcia

Assistant Editor: Tori Bowler

Team: Carrie Chen, Jonathan Ornelas

CONTENTS



FICTION

Valley Dolls | Jake Tillis | 10

on reflection | sam goli | 25

Never Should Have Opened That Urn | Beau DeStefani | 41

Flowers From My Garden | Israel Hernandez | 54

Swan Pond | Mimi Rizo | 60

Yard Work | Kirby Ditto | 65

DRAMA

Flight 237 - Denver to Los Angeles | Natalie Van Gelder | 76

16 | Sarah Cesta | 93

POETRY

The Ranch House | Annabelle Bonebrake | 110

Calenture | Elizabeth Lao | 112

Human Error | Sophia Centurion | 113

The Making of a Self Portrait | Christina Alfaro | 115

Tell them and Sigh | Raven Freebird | 119

CONTENTS



- Record Keeping | Christina Alfaro | 120
- Elephant Keys | Emily Burton-Uduwana | 124
- Granite is the most common plutonic rock | Lisa Eve Cheby
- Owl Pellet | Harrison Manzano | 129
- Reading myself in the dark | Lisa Eve Cheby | 130
- The Doctor Attempts a Simile | Lisa Eve Cheby | 133
- You | Maya/M.E. Riles | 135
- The Year Without Meaning | Sheree La Puma | 136
- Sour | Aja Russell | 138
- Mothers | Emily Foytek | 140
- Why Buy the Cow? | Emily Burton-Uduwana | 142
- They Remind Me of Home | Raven Freebird | 144
- “참다” Korean Word for “Endure” | Han Sun Kwon | 147

CONTRIBUTORS

Click on any of our contributors names to be taken to their page of the contributors section of the book, where you can learn more about each contributor and their other works.



f I C T I O N



Valley Dolls

The Players

Sugarbaby was six weeks old the first time she saw a rubber duck—partially submerged in the tub, cushioned by her mother’s stomach and breasts, the plastic animal just out of reach on the other side of the bath. The water seeped into the drain, swam across 22 years of time, and trickled down the faucet of the new tub, into sugarbaby’s new life, now cushioned only by the marble base of the tub, now staring at a new duck, sugarbaby does not remember the first time. It’s not her fault—she was young, and it’s a somewhat non-consequential event in the grand scheme of things. Though, if she did remember, the weight of the past would push her down and she would drown. But it still feels like the first time. Water has seen everything; you can’t lie to water. I don’t remember the first time. Do you?

You can lie to a rubber duck, but it won’t get you anywhere fast. There’s something about a rubber duck where you can never quite remember where it came from—it’s just there, staring back at you, bobbing up and down with the current of the bathwater. And it should be said, everything in this world started with a rubber duck, and despite this, or perhaps because of it, the rubber duck was an intruder in her home. A welcomed intruder to her, but an intruder, nonetheless. An intruder coated with rubber and yellow, housing a cocktail of microbes and bacteria, and if it were a real duck, it would say something like, “Quack.”

And that’s all there is to be said about that.



Once upon a time, on the other side of the Valley... there were two acidheads. Well, that's a bit romantic for two junkies in Van Nuys. Or maybe it's time Van Nuys gets a romantic story.

Once Upon a Time... In Van Nuys... there were two acidheads. And as with any acidhead, their story begins with the lysergic acid diethylamide—the blotter, the loony toons, the LaLa, the mind detergent, the C₂₀H₂₅N₃O, the acid—this time taking the form of a page decorated with the graphic of a giant, trippy Kool-Aid Man, housing 900 tabs of synthetically processed hallucinogenic paper, which had traveled from a lab over the border and was sold to the acidheads after a series of bargains and negotiations via the dark web—a transcendent subculture of illegal affairs and unfortunate opinions, all of which the acidheads had become far too familiar with after the realization that they were able to get acid for significantly cheaper when it came from Mexico. Every tab not occupied by the Kool-Aid Man employed the iconic two-dimensional smile he wore, the color gradient of which transformed in a wave from top to bottom, while across the bottom of the page read, “Can You Pass the Electric Kool-Aid Test?”

A simple Google search on the part of the acidheads would have clarified that their acid was in direct reference to The Electric Kool-Aid Test—Tom Wolfe's as-if firsthand account of Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters' experiences as they drove around the country in a school bus bathed in rainbow colors, taking part in communal LSD trips in order to reach their destination, Further. The acidheads' rationale was significantly less admirable or impressive as Kesey and his gang of users—but they were still headed to the same place.



On Christmas night of the year 2000, a fire burned down the ConAgra meatpacking plant in Garden City, Kansas, putting 2,300 locals out of a job. Around 50 years prior, southwest Kansas had become the main source of hybrid corn, which in turn made it the heart of efficient cattle-feeding, causing it to have the largest concentration of beef packing plants in North America, resulting in the hiring of an unprecedented amount of immigrants, making whites the minority of the city to this day. Everybody thought the plant would reopen within a year, but it never did. It's, instead, the abandoned factory where the high school kids go to smoke pot after class. There's another huge meatpacking plant across town though, the Tyson plant, and it's this factory that makes the younger generation of Garden City residents believe that if they grow up to have done nothing at all, they'll always have the meatpacking plant. That's what the older generation had thought as well, until they smelled the burning meat.

Nineteen years later, a fire erupted in the Tyson plant, presumably caused by sparks from a welding torch, though it was minor enough to allow operation to continue a few days later. The father, who had worked at the ConAgra plant before it burned down, was working in the Tyson plant at the time of the fire, causing him to lose a hand while operating one of the grinders. Soon after, he converted to a vegetarian lifestyle, believing that meat was bad luck. He also, for whatever reason, decided that rather than using a prosthetic limb, he would from then on wield a hook for a hand—most likely a late-coming midlife crisis brought forth by a traumatic incident which was directly and anomalously related to a previous tragedy he had gone through—but it could have been anything, really. When asked about it, he simply said it made getting a Halloween costume that much easier.

And because there's the father, there has to be the son—the son of a man with a hook for a hand, and that is not an easy boy to be. And not much later, the boy's childhood sat compacted in the space of three suitcases stuffed into the trunk of a 2002 Ford Focus. The boy would disapprove of being called "the boy"—and in his defense, he was 18 years old, but really, logistics aside, he was just a boy, and if he writes a story about himself he can call himself the man, the gritty hero, or whatever the hell he wants. But for now, he's just the boy. As for the father's name, "the father"—well that's a pretty indisputable term of reference, and far more sensitive than calling him "the cripple."

There's the story of the divorce, but our story begins after that story, with the goodbye. Though, to be fair, if you started any story slightly earlier, you'd probably start with a goodbye. So they said goodbye. And now they're on the road to Los Angeles, where the father hopes to become a reality television personality and host—a dream he's had for some time, but it took two fires and losing a hand to figure that it was time to put the meatpacking industry behind him and pursue the fame he thought he deserved. It was a misguided goal, but after 20 years of packing meat, the trajectory upward isn't too steep. So, on the road they were, the boy driving due to the father's—well, hook. It should be said that this was actually yesterday, today being sugarbaby's bath and the acidheads' score. Or maybe today is you reading this, in which case the timing of it all is irrelevant, because none of this really happened anyway—except for the fires, weirdly enough.



Five years earlier, an attempted robbery at a pharmacy in Stockton, California had been stopped by a pedestrian, waiting in line to purchase his prescription of Adderall, who swung at one of the robbers in the neck with a switchblade hidden in his pocket, causing him to pass out from blood loss as the other robber fled at the sight of a knife. The attempted robbery lasted only 20 seconds. The detained robber spent the next five years in prison for what was considered a Class A felony, before getting off early on his good time.

Now a car sits outside a liquor store in Valley Village, occupied by the brother and the sister, who in that moment, were thinking the exact opposite things. The brother was thinking about what's next, while the sister thought about where they've been. In this respect, the sister was always behind the brother, and they sat in hope of a moment of courage or a swift rush of adrenaline, which at a certain point disappears after so many times.

For where they were going—Arizona, then Mexico. That was the plan, anyway.

As for where they've been—separate, but together. Tension slid through the sister's insides, clenching her from the pit of her deepest cavities in her cells and vitamins, contorting her anatomy, transporting her to the winter nights spent in the backyard of her stepfather's house up north, afraid to go inside, wondering how her brother's doing, wondering when he'd be home, wondering if he would rather be here than there, wondering if she'd rather be there than here, angry that her life seemed to always depend on other people, something that always felt worse with the cold weather. The brother, meanwhile, kept an eye on the comings and goings of the customers, informed by the scar on his neck.

There's also a cop but he doesn't come until the very end.



And then there's me, because, of course there is. I'm the guy writing the lives of the Valley Dolls. Or at least the filtered consciousness of that guy. And that guy probably has his own story outside of all this, probably a family and friends of some sort, some rituals, ups and downs and cycles, all in human nature. But it's all semantics really - me is I. And I'm sure there's a story bringing me here in this moment right now, but I'm not a therapist nor a psychic. I suppose all there is to say, really, is that I'm sheltered inside because of this fucking virus, so what else is there besides the stories. Enter Valley Dolls.



Everything Else

The bathwater flooded down the drain and into the sewer lateral, fell into the public municipal sewer system, where it waited to be dumped into the local sewage pipes, all as sugarbaby began to dry herself off, wondering who would be at the party tonight when sugardaddy knocked on the bathroom door, telling her that he had a surprise for her, holding in his hands a pink Miu Miu faille cady dress, flaunting a crystal embellishment on the shoulder strap and edges, accenting the seductive lines of the garment, the design truly characterized by a bare back with crisscross shoulder straps and a viscose lining—along with a pair of Louis Vuitton Bliss Multistrap Pumps in the color “blanc”—Louis Vuitton's reimagining of a classic Mary Jane, featuring two slender straps with gold-tone buckles, and featured the embellishment of the Louis Vuitton Circle Accessory, inspired by the clasp of the House's emblematic Dauphine handbag—these two pieces brought together by the true centerpiece of the outfit, a pair of Louis Vuitton Blossom Hoops, which put a precious but playful spin on the

Monogram Flower, crafted from 18-Karat white gold, hoops encrusted with diamond pavé and set with an iconic blossom motif—and inlaid with brilliant-cut stones, these signature jewels really were the modern way to wear diamonds day or night, working to mix and remix with other pieces in the collection, and at this point the bathwater had been granted access into the local sewage pipes and flushed into the regional sewage pipes, 15 miles away from sugarbaby's bathtub.



The acidheads were tripping balls.



The father and the son were somewhere between Albuquerque and Sante Fe, so they've been on the road for about six hours. An intrusive, sharp tapping sound had been overwhelming the boy's ears the whole way, caused by the rubber tip of a stylus made for touchscreen devices, which the father had ripped off and stuck to the end of his hook, jabbing into his phone. The boy, after swallowing anger the size of a description of a fancy dress, finally asked if he could stop stabbing his phone, to which the father reminded him that he had a hook for a hand, to which the boy reminded the father that literally nobody asked him to have that. The father continued tapping away, and told him he was looking up agents, so the boy threatened to crash the car, but the father told him there was no use because he was invincible besides his hands, which lightened the mood a bit.



The brother had found out at a young age that scoring at a liquor store at around 12:45 AM on a Monday was one of the lowest risk highest reward crimes there was. It was late, but far enough from last call to avoid the drunks rushing in to get a last buy, so they'd most likely only be faced with a slightly older-than-middle-aged man behind the counter, and maybe your average Valley local or two.

That's why they were in Valley Village tonight—the higher income communities have the tightest police responses, and the lower income neighborhoods expect it in their own homes, the constant reminder of which lives on the brother's neck. So Valley Village would serve as a happy medium, not too poor, but not affluent enough to where the police are expected to do their jobs to a certain degree of success.

And then it's Arizona, and then Mexico.



I'm a different narrator depending on what day you ask. In the mornings, I feel witty and the evenings sentimental. It's all human nature.

The acidheads fell deeper in the rabbit hole of The Kool-Aid Man's drug of choice, as the space they lived in revealed to them a funhouse of peaks and valleys and ups and downs, turning the boys inside out and looping over—there's never a good way to write an acid trip, so I'll leave it at this: The acidheads' heads dove into the acid.

Dear diary—don't worry, I'm kidding. I wouldn't do that to you, but I especially wouldn't do that to me. You're probably asking what the point of any of this is. Great fuckin' question. And then robots from the future broke into my apartment and asked what it means to be in human nature. I'm not committing to that. Truth is, I don't know. But admitting I don't know what I'm doing as a function for the story I'm writing is the authorly equivalent of beginning a speech with "Webster's Dictionary defines"—nobody asked what Webster's Dictionary defined, nobody cares what

Webster's Dictionary defines, and it's really just a lame cop out. So I guess this is me copping out. Or maybe I'm a genius, everything has meaning, and that robots bit came from a deeply repressed guilt I have inside me that my toaster can't feel love. Not likely, but maybe.

Anyway, maybe we'll come back to that playfully meta-mental breakdown later, but for now let me just say that sugarbaby's drug abuse had been casual until sugardaddy's entrance into her life. Though to be fair, it wasn't really sugardaddy, it was the money—any drug user's drug habits increase exponentially with the more money they have. And that leads us to the unopened mason jar of coke in sugarbaby's Gucci handbag, the size of which forced her to carry her phone in her hand rather than the bag.

Due to an oversight from sugardaddy's dealer, caused by a record level of cocaine imports from Colombia, now having more coke than he can keep track of, the mason jar in sugarbaby's purse contained a lethal amount of fentanyl—an opioid commonly laced with coke, usually in order to save costs, as fentanyl is far cheaper than cocaine. Not only were sugarbaby and sugardaddy to be the source of drugs at the party, though—they would supply the booze as well. So they'd drop by the liquor store in Valley Village before the party, both because it was on the way to Hidden Hills, and because sugardaddy owned it, so he could check on the kid he'd just hired due to a request from a family friend.

As with any good trip, the acidheads wanted to go outside. And because they were in a generous mood, and they didn't mind the walk, they thought they'd walk an hour to pick up a six pack of beer from the liquor store their buddy works at, and give him a tab for a ride home—an offer they knew he would be more than happy to oblige. So they set off down the Orange Line Busway Path, towards Valley Village.

And it's at this point in writing the story that Michael

called me and suggested we get a drink, though at this point that was months ago. Past me could really use a drink, and to be honest, now me wouldn't mind one either. So, I said sure, and suggested we check out the Fox Fire Room, a dive bar on Whitsett and Magnolia. I'd been meaning to check the place out for months—it's the closest bar to my apartment, less than a five minute walk—but perhaps more importantly, it's where they filmed the bar scenes in *Magnolia*, one of my all-time favorite movies. I remember seeing it for the first time and being blown away, all these storylines of nine main characters being interwoven and connected through the San Fernando Valley. (Did you think I was original?) And the Fox Fire Room holds one of my favorite shots of all time, a long take showing an aged "Quiz Kid" Donnie Smith walk into the bar to "Goodbye Stranger," revealing his infatuation to Brad the bartender and his stunning braces. (If you haven't seen *Magnolia*, watch *Magnolia*.)

So, having walked the short distance to the Fox Fire Room, I ordered a Blue Moon, to which the bartender asks if she's seen me before. I told her she probably hadn't. The place looked just like it did in the movie. It hadn't changed a bit. A few minutes later Michael walks in, and we take a seat at a table nearby, between a woman sitting alone at a large booth, crying and drinking a cocktail, and two men who we would become acquainted with in a matter of minutes. The bar was more crowded than I'd anticipated for a dive bar on a Sunday night. Everyone seemed to know each other, people walking around and talking as if everyone were part of one large group.

Michael and I went outside to smoke, placing napkins over our beers so they'd be there when we got back. Once finished, we came back in and removed the napkins from the top of our glasses. I accidentally dropped the napkin on the floor, next to the foot of the man sitting to the right of me. I grabbed it from the floor, and the man sitting across from him was already staring at me, and he

made some sort of joke about having to ask people to touch them, though I could hardly make out what he was saying due to the karaoke, which had started while Michael and I were outside. I stared at the man with a blank face, considering his resemblance to a lumberjack, beard and all, before the man next to me told me that he was just making a joke, and that he's an asshole. I laughed it off, but before I could do anything to prevent it, we were sucked into conversation with them. The lumberjack was talking to Michael, and the man to my right was talking to me.

It is truly unbelievable how, being 22, any man over the age of 40 at a bar will declare themselves your mentor for the night, despite the fact they're middle-aged or older and a nightly regular at a dive bar, drunk off their ass, and probably not in a position to be handing out life advice. But that's exactly what they did. It turns out Jeff was a writer, no one famous or anything, but he did write two episodes of *The X-Files*. The man next to me told me he was one of the owners of the bar, and texted the waitress to get us two more beers, as he explained how he had moved to America from the Philippines as a teenager, collecting recyclables for cash, as he made his way through university, and how he'd grown his success in owning multiple businesses—a car dealership, this bar, and another bar somewhere in Koreatown, and how anything was possible in America. I wonder how he's doing now.

Next thing I know we're a few beers in playing darts with Jeff, and he's talking about his favorite writer, I think it was Hemingway, and I thought it was an appropriate choice for a burly lumberjack-like man. He told us that we needed to keep a close group of creative friends around in our lives, and named a few of the most famous artists and thinkers of all time, that he claimed were friends, but I was fairly certain he was mistaken. These guys were the real fuckin' Valley Dolls. Then, after their actor friend explained how Tik Tok would be the next big thing (nailed that prediction,) we decided to head out, because at this

point it was past midnight, and this was a time in which we had obligations to the outside world which we needed to see about in the morning. Michael offered to drop me off at home, but I told him I'd walk, because I wanted to pick up a sixer before I went home.

And as I walked into the liquor store, I wondered where all this was going. Sugarbaby and sugardaddy were at the front counter, the cashier pulling out five very nice bottles of bourbon from the shelf behind him. The acidheads were near the back, chuckling at the word "Pabst," their beer of choice when they'd spent all their money on acid. The father and the boy were somewhere in Pasadena, And the brother and sister were putting on their masks, pulling out empty guns, finally about to get out of the damn car and rob the place. Some sort of convoluted climax? Probably. And as I grabbed a sixer of Modelo one of the acidheads swore he saw me in the reflection of the glass door, causing him to recede into what can only be called a "bad trip." The siblings slammed open the front door and began to hold everybody up, and the acidhead looked back at the glass and I was gone.

And then the convoluted climax happened—the brother held up the cash register while the sister demanded sugarbaby empty her purse, and when she pulled it out, the sister's head dove into the coke. The acidhead who saw me was freaking out as the bathwater was approaching The Hyperion Water Reclamation Plant. The boy was yelling at the father in the car for making him move across the country so he could pursue a pipe dream when the cop ran out of coffee. The spooked acid head jumped on the brother's back and took a huge bite out of his throat, causing his switchblade wound to reopen, taking away the sister's concentration from sugarbaby, who in turn threw the mason jar as hard as she could at the sister, shattering on impact, caving in her nose, to which the fentanyl entered her body directly, staining her insides, causing an immediate overdose, causing her to

collapse on the floor. The other acidhead started to run out the door but slipped on a combination of the sibling's ocean of blood and the faulty coke, and he fell on some glass. The brother fell to the floor, landing on the acidhead, with the other acidhead on top of him, in what can only be described as an acidhead sandwich. The sugardaddy began to grab the bottles of liquor when the cop walked in with an empty thermos in his hand. This all took place within 20 seconds.

The Original Ending

So, not following proper protocol in the slightest, the cop arrested everybody on the spot and shoved them all into the back of his car, and there was a mixture of crying, yelling, and bleeding, making it so you couldn't tell what you were hearing or looking at—they were piled on top of each other, an amalgamation of limbs and fluids. The father and the boy were driving down Burbank as the bathwater, which was traveling eight miles an hour down a pipe with a slope of 1/8th of an inch per foot, began to slow its velocity down until at a halt. The other wastewater rushed past it on all sides, as the bathwater began to move up the pipe in the opposite direction, gradually increasing in speed, eventually achieving a rate of 150 miles an hour, forcing itself against wastewater, debris, and an upward incline, navigating through a labyrinth of pipes in this underground concrete jungle, traveling from Marina Del Ray to Burbank in ten minutes. It seeped upward from the cement pipes onto the surface and crystallized into a sheet of ice in the middle of the road, right in front of the 2002 Ford Focus, and caused the boy to skid through a red light as the cop car sped through a green, sirens blaring, while the father's natural urge to put a hand out in front of the boy's body in order to dull the impact overtook him. So as the Ford t-boned the cop car, the father's hook slid into the boy's chest, between two ribs and into the pulmonary artery, like a hot knife on butter, killing him instantly.

Metal went through metal, twisting and turning into creases and sharp angles, while the windows burst open like little balloons, glass shards parading the pavement and the meshed entanglement of human appendages, cutting through skins while bones shattered miniature explosions, like grenades rupturing from within the collagen and out to the surface. The acidhead looked at me through the shattered window and asked if this is the part where he dies. And I told him that it was, and he nodded his head and died, along with half of the other ones, while the father forced his hook out of the boy's chest. And the Valley Dolls were finally together.

But let's say that all happened.

A New Ending

Then, after dying, the acidhead opened his eyes. And connected to the shattered window was a fleshy, pulsating tunnel. The other ones that died opened their eyes as well, and the bathwater unfroze, traveled to the car, up the tires, up through the undercarriage, seeped through the carpet, up the inside of the door, and started its journey into the tunnel. And as the acidhead watched the unimaginable, he forced his mangled limbs through the window, and into the corridor of flesh.

Then, one by one, the others collected their limbs and exited through the shattered window, crawling down the tunnel, their gushing blood carried away by the bathwater. The father saw a decomposed hand pass by him, carried by the flowing water, until hitting a wall at the end of the tunnel. At this point I notice water leaking from the living room floor, coming from the base of the wall. Then they broke through.

They surrounded me in my living room, demanding answers—to which I urged them, for their safety, to stand with some distance from me, and I handed them each a mask. Then I shrugged and pointed them toward the rubber duck in my bathtub. Though, if I'm being honest,

there is no rubber duck in my bathtub. I have no idea, I have no answers, and I don't know why. So we sat there in my living room, gallons of bathwater flooding into the apartment, waiting to see what happens next.



on reflection

Back then, I thought that if I tried hard enough—if I wore all the right clothes and curled my hair with that wand thing and painted my nails—I'd begin to see myself as a certain person and inevitably become her. But when I looked in the mirror, I saw someone I'd like to date, someone whose hand I'd like to hold and whose hair I'd want to brush my skin as she climbed on top of me, and now when I look back, I wonder whether I really thought I could hide, or if I had complete awareness that underneath it all, my six-year-old self stared back—hair wet from a warm shower and freshly cut short to match the red Power Ranger, beaming at my flat chest as I flexed my arms in different ways over and over. I wanted to look just like him—Jason, the red Power Ranger—with his black hair that never seemed to move when he beat up the Putties. I wanted to dress like him, move like him, protect people like him. At that time, I don't think it had even occurred to me that I *couldn't* be him—that would happen later. In those mirrors, though, I was him and every hero.

My preoccupation with fictional, dreamy and sometimes not-so-dreamy men who made it their life's mission to protect the people of a community, and often (most of the time) their capable but unwilling femme companions, began with Jason and extended well into adulthood. I might once have attributed this fascination to my natural inclination toward humanitarian pursuits or perhaps even a subconscious desire for recognition or praise, but now I know better.

What is it about age that situates us in a new vantage point? Sometimes I think it's as simple as the physical and physiological transformations of our brains that affects the capacity for self-awareness and reflexivity. Other times,

I think that as our own language grows, so too does our ability to investigate our own histories. But most times, I think that understanding depends so much on how we remember our own lives because *the way we think we are living our lives isn't the way we live them. The way we think we make decisions isn't how we make them*¹.

In those days, when my preoccupations began, my father still had his first shoe repair shop—the one he got right before he proposed to my mother—in Beverly Hills, which meant that on Saturdays we would visit him and I'd bring my Nikes there to clean after they got soiled all week from the playground at school. My father taught me how to do it once, and ever since, I'd kept every sneaker as close to pristine as I could. Sometimes it required only a wipe-down with a bit of soap and water. But other times I had to repaint them, which usually happened toward the end of my shoe's life when soap and water just wouldn't cut it anymore. Although I knew the end neared, I enjoyed very much the repainting process, especially after I finished one shoe and could compare it against the other to admire the restoration, the rescue.

My father also taught me to make leather wrist cuffs, which I loved to wear because they contributed to my boy-hero aesthetic. He came home wearing them one day and my eyes lit up; I had never seen leather like the one he used to make those cuffs—they looked as if forged from a sheet of metal. The following Saturday, after what seemed like forever in front of a cutting board and sewing machine, I walked out with my own pair. He had convinced me that if I wore them, I'd be able to grip everything with more strength. So the next Monday at school, I tested his assertion with a go at the monkey-bars, where I spent most of my time at recess and lunch, and found that I indeed could maintain my grasp of the bar for much longer than

¹Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh

I could without them, and, I was almost certain, I could do them faster, too.

That's how things were in those days. Osama would make up a fact, a harmless one, and I would believe it. Maybe I have him to thank for the conviction that I could be anything, anyone, that I wanted. Or maybe that's something to resent.

Maybe it's both.

How about this one?

My mother holds up another white puffy dress—the kind that looks like a miniature wedding gown—from a few feet inside of a cramped store, staggered and stacked ceiling to floor with children's formal wear, as I wait outside.

I give her the fuchi-face. She looks frustrated.

Because I don't want to seem at all interested in any of the clothing there, save for the suits, which I haven't yet realized could be worn by little girls, I refuse to go inside. Instead, I'd rather wait out front because next door is an equally colorful yet more appealing shop. In front of me, a mechanical frog swims in a plastic tub, which might actually be a cat litter box filled with water, and I watch as it bumps the other wind-up toys floating beside it over and over. I wonder when she'll stop asking.

Above the tub, knock-off Power Rangers toys hang on a metal grid-wall panel, and although they don't look as cool as the ones on TV, part of me wants to buy one anyway so that my collection covers all grounds. But, since my mom made it clear from the start that we'd come to the alley for my First Communion dress only, I don't bother to ask for one.

I've been going to catechism every Saturday morning for who knows how long now, but I already know all the stories and teachings because I go to a Lutheran school. I understand they're not the same, but they're the same enough that I often stop paying attention and let myself notice the carvings in the wood of the desks that I

sit in. Sometimes I get the one with the flower, sometimes the one that says J + S. It might look like it says Jesus, but I know it means something else.

Last week we got to practice how to receive the Eucharist, which meant I finally got to taste the host and to be honest, I wished I could take home a whole sleeve because they taste really good and I liked how they melted away on my tongue. My teacher said to make sure we didn't chew them though—that's not allowed because they've been consecrated. That bummed me out because I love to crunch. But imagine that! Crunching on the Body of Christ.

It's been about fifteen minutes now, according to my Red Ranger watch, and my mom still hasn't found a dress we both can agree on, which I already knew would happen. The lady patrolling the front of the store starts to sweep away a pile of fruit that someone just spilled, and my mouth automatically starts to water when I notice a huge piece of cucumber with chile on it on the pavement. Before I could wonder where they got the bag of fruit, I look across the street and see the rainbow umbrella with the cart half-hidden by a white pickup truck. Maybe when Mom's done, we can go get some.

Eventually she finds one and calls me into the store. I walk over, silent and disinterested, only to see, in her hand, a less puffy version of what looked to me like the same dress she showed me earlier.

Isn't this one so pretty? she asks through a huge smile. I shrug and tell her I don't want to wear a dress, and especially not that one. She explains, as we walk over to the full-size mirrors, that I have to wear one because I'll be in front of the whole mass and I have to look nice and do I want to be the only one who doesn't look nice. She does not look at all pleased when I tell her I don't want to do my First Communion if I have to wear that thing.

She holds the dress in front of my white knock-off Nike basketball jersey to get an impression of how it will

look and then asks me to take off my hat and let my hair down. From behind me, I hear her telling the shopkeeper in Spanish that she will need a size smaller and could she get it for her. By the time she brings it, my mother has already located and escorted me towards a fitting room, and has asked me to try on the dress in my size. I hesitate before I snatch the outfit from her and stomp into the room, which is just a curtain in the corner of the store.

Since I don't want to undress entirely, I keep my shorts on and take off the jersey. But in order to slip my arms into the sleeves, I have to take off my right wrist cuff because the velcro keeps snagging the fabric. As I rip it off, it makes a loud sound and I want to scream with it, but I don't.

When I step out, both my mother and the shopkeeper exclaim how beautiful I look and I'm not sure whether to say thank you or repeat my disdain for the dress. Instead, I say nothing and my mother walks me back to the full-size mirror. I keep my eyes down and when I'm face to face with the glass, I stare at my sneakers. She says I'll only have to wear it once, that it's just out of respect for the Church, that I'll never have to wear it again and will I just do this for her. Even though I didn't know it then, that I'd have to re-wear it for my first piano recital the next year despite a huge argument, I release a deep sigh and nod in agreement.

As she walks away, my eyes follow her and when I look back to the mirror, this time I find my own and I wonder if she sees what I see.

For the fourth day in a row, my mother kisses me on the cheek goodbye as she leaves for the office and reminds me: *You are my eyes*. As she walks out of my bedroom, I peek through groggy, half-closed eyelids in time to see her turn back once more, make the sign of the cross in the air, and kiss her thumb. The door clicks shut, which causes my sister to stir next to me in bed, and

as I look over to gauge whether or not she will wake up, I notice that her eyelashes have grown back a bit since two weeks ago when she found a pair of scissors and gave them a trim. Her bangs, which she also decided to snip, lie lopsided and disheveled on her forehead. How she didn't cut or poke her eye—or any part of her face for that matter—is a mystery to me, especially since she's four years old.

I want to laugh when I remember the photo of her that my father recently hung in the hallway. In it she stands on a chair and holds something she made out of construction paper at pre-school—her hair in pigtails, bangs in a jagged line. It's pasted on a large cut-out of a blue tie with a generic Father's Day wish written by her teacher, signed with my sister's handprint. She has on one of those shy smiles she does when she has to do something that makes her uncomfortable, like pose on picture day, or sing with her classmates. I'm not sure if she learned it from me or our brother, but it's a familiar one.

Even though I want to pull the covers over my head to shield the early morning sun and doze off again, the summer air is warmer than usual today and it's hard to fall back asleep. So instead, I peel myself out of bed and as I tiptoe out the door, I remember that I have yet to beat the next level on *Super Mario 64* and suddenly I'm not so bummed I didn't sleep more.

Before I can make it to the living room TV, I first have to go downstairs and pass through the kitchen, which means I have to say good morning to our new babysitter, Lucero. As I descend the staircase, I can smell chorizo con huevo and my stomach grumbles, but I know I won't have an appetite for at least two more hours, which works out fine because by then my brother and sister should be awake and we can all eat together.

Lucero doesn't know my stomach yet so as I walk through the kitchen and tell her *buenos días*, she asks *si quiero dos taquitos* and looks concerned when I decline. Even though I reassure her that I'll eat later, just like

yesterday, she seems dubious. But that's expected by now. My siblings and I are built pretty thin and everyone thinks we don't eat.

I'm about halfway through the second stage of the game, Whomp's Fortress, when I hear something fall and shatter in the kitchen sink. So I pause Mario, mid-jump, and scurry over to check on Lucero. We've had several live-in babysitter-housekeepers over the years who have tried to learn my mother's way of cooking and cleaning, so I feel nervous to find out what broke in case it means a strike against her.

A couple months ago, my parents let go of Angelita because, despite her best efforts, she would often break or damage things around the house. My mom would find marks on the white walls from her bumping into them with either the vacuum or the caddy full of cleaning supplies--and although I never really noticed those, I did notice when she broke the toaster-oven because that day I wanted to make a sandwich with the fresh bolillo bread that my mom had just bought from the panadería.

I had prepared all of the ingredients only to find the door wouldn't open, and then it had occurred to me that the night before, I kept getting distracted from my homework because I heard a bunch of noise coming from that general area. While I had thought she was cleaning the toaster, she was actually trying to fix it. So, when my mom came home that day, I had to relay the news that she had broken something else again. Out of all the mishaps, though, the last straw didn't come when she used my mom's white dish-drying towels to clean a spill on the floor during dinner, or when she burnt one of my school uniform shirts while ironing, but instead was when my mom came home to find my sister's make-over that happened on Angelita's watch.

As I walk into the kitchen, it turns out that a recycled glass cup had slipped out of Lucero's hands while she washed some dishes and I feel relieved to know she

neither cut herself nor broke anything of value. My mom likes to keep the containers that the pipián comes in so I'm glad it was that and not one of the crystal teacups that my grandmother gifted my parents for their wedding. Even though it has only been a few days since Lucero started this job, I get the impression that she cares in a way the rest of them didn't, -- and not only does it feel nice to be around someone like that, but I know my mom will be grateful.

Eventually my siblings wake up and come downstairs, and right away Lucero prepares the three of us each a plate. As we all eat together, I have a budding sense of responsibility that I haven't felt before. Sure, I've felt the impulse to protect them--that began the day I held each of them in the hospital. But responsibility? That's different.

Even after all these years that feeling hasn't left me and I wonder if that began with my mother's inaugural entrustment to me, or because of a sudden self-initiated awareness of common expectations of older siblings. *We seldom realize, for example, that our most private thoughts and emotions are not actually our own. For we think in terms of languages and images which we did not invent, but which were given to us by our society².*

Back then though, it didn't matter either way--all I knew was that I was my mother's eyes.

And, back then, that was enough.

It's easy to say that if it were up to me, this story would be linear because then cause and effect become relatively straightforward and it's easier to understand the relationship between and among events. But the reality is that it can't be told that way because stories are like webs--lives are like webs--and no matter what, as readers we are only getting a slice of it. Beside that, even if that wasn't true, I think in fragments, I understand in fragments, and

² Alan Watts

*following the “female aesthetic” will produce artworks that incorporate contradiction and non-linear movement into the heart of the text*³. Therefore, then, the assemblage of this story is inevitably messy and cyclical. But underneath all of it, beneath its fiction and its truths is a consciousness (Hello, it’s me, the narrator). And it’s a thinking one. Although it tries to sort through what’s real and what’s not, sometimes the lines blur because *when you’re living so intensely in your head there isn’t any difference between what you imagine and what actually takes place. Therefore, you’re both omnipotent and powerless*⁴.

Isn’t that the nature of a narrator anyway? We know things and yet we oftentimes have little control of what happens on the page. Like a subconscious thought made verbal, it just comes out.

I might have said at some point that I’ve never had a desire to tell stories. To be honest, I’m terrible at it; I mix up all the details and jump around and never quite get it right. But, I will admit I’m a great listener. In fact, I looked up my name when I was younger—it might have even been one of the first things I researched when my family got the internet in the nineties—and it turns out that’s what it means.

Maybe my name was some sort of prophecy and I was never even meant to tell stories anyway. Maybe what I’m doing is not even telling at all. Maybe, in the end, it really just is listening. Whichever it is, it doesn’t matter because right now I’m more concerned with the location of self in language. Or is it discovery?

Maybe it’s both.

The location of self in language implies that space for selfhood already exists in language while the discovery of self in language suggests that the self can only be understood *through* language. But what if the words don’t exist yet? Where does one find oneself then? Is it even

³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis

⁴ Chris Kraus

possible to create an identity without the words to create them with? Or is identity a narrative—stories and more stories? But even those have words. Maybe, then, identity is a feeling. But don't we understand emotions through language?

Do you understand what I'm saying now? About the circles?

All that I can be certain of is that *without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula*⁵, which means that I too am yet uncharted.

So let's continue.

You want to look nice, my mom tells me as I rifle through my younger sister's closet for something to wear to a day trip in Laguna Beach with my new boyfriend's family. As expected, she encourages that I wear a dress so that I make a good impression on his parents, even though I've already met them. Part of me wants to roll my eyes because I know what she really means and another part knows that I wouldn't be back at my parent's house looking for an outfit if I didn't, to some degree, think that she might be right.

Even though it's been a decade since junior high, when I would go shopping with my mom for the many school dances, I suddenly feel like I'm thirteen years old again looking for ways to grow into a proper adult. Since I've never been seriously interested in a man before, let alone had a boyfriend, my first instinct is to look toward my parents, and especially my mom, as an example. Sometimes I think it's because we look so much alike that I feel I have no choice in who I'll become. It will be three years from now that I'll shave my head of my waist-length hair in an effort to strip myself of that prognostication. Even then it will take two and a half more years after that to shave my head once more in an art film to make that

⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure

declaration public. That's the thing about queerness: it's a perpetual peeling away of expectations and guilt and shame and a life-long commitment toward affirmations and coming out and reinvention.

But for now, I'm in this closet sorting through outfits to hide all of that because I don't yet know my partner will love me anyway, almost a decade later, through my questions of what and who I am. I don't yet know that it's okay to be neither/nor *and* both/and. I don't have to choose and I can thank my father for telling me, from so very young, that I can be all of it. Because if I'm being honest with myself, *it's not that I thought I'd grow up to be a man / I just never thought I'd grow up to be a woman either*⁶, and even though maybe we both didn't realize the weight of his words back then, we understand it now.

Eventually I settle on a blue dress with stripes on the upper half. The next day he and his family tell me how beautiful I look, and because this time it was my choice, albeit out of insecurity, I say thank you and hide my disdain and embarrassment.

This will happen over and over for the next three years until at some point, I will begin to believe that I've finally done it: I'll have learned to curl my hair and paint my nails and wear tight dresses and heels and let myself be called by my birth name and as far as the world can see, I'll have become her.

But you can only bury yourself for so long before you start to suffocate.

Maybe it's the alcohol or maybe it was nostalgia, but like she used to do when I was three or four years old, my mother kisses me on the lips after I show her that I've found her wedding and engagement rings in the disarray of my parents' new apartment. It had been a long week—long few

⁶ Andrea Gibson

weeks actually—of moving everything that could fit from the two-story house they'd owned for thirty years into a two bedroom unit, and she had forgotten where she hid them during the move. This was no surprise on account of her lifelong suspicion of unfamiliar handy-people in her home and her equally long habit of hiding her valuables so well that she would lose track of them for a while.

On the other hand, with only a few clues, this was the first time I had found them myself, which may have contributed to her surprise. As a kid, though, usually I would ask her a handful of questions to jog her memory and eventually, like two detectives, we would find our way back to the hiding spot. Although I didn't like that it caused her stress to lose them in the first place, I felt proud that she could and would depend on me to help her—I felt important.

I knew you'd find them! You are my eyes!

As familiar as these words were, I'm not sure I am ready for them, not because I am tired of them or didn't want the responsibility anymore, but because I haven't heard them in thirteen years. Instead, *I don't know you anymore* took their place.

The first time she made that assertion, I was fourteen and had traded my teenage haute couture for baggy pants, sweatshirts, and Chuck Taylors. At the time, I had just begun attending an all-girls Catholic high school and I had recognized early on the opportunity to reinvent myself once more—this time to my own taste—especially because I knew no one there. The group of girls I befriended a couple weeks into my first year showed me acceptance in a way that only irreverent teenagers could. Like a mirror, they reflected my own values and desire for freedom, and the closer I got to myself—the person I wanted to be—the further my mother pushed me into being someone else. Eventually, I would meet my first girlfriend and by then, just like all the handy-people in her home, I became a stranger to my mother.

Now, while I stand in the kitchen with her and take in what she's said, I look toward my now-husband to see if he's noticed a shift in my demeanor as I don't want to bring attention to what this moment means to me yet. Like I'd hoped, he sits at the table smiling at the tender interaction between my mom and me, and I try to shake off the surprise of the sudden shift in our relationship.

Even though it's my mother's fifty-sixth birthday today, my father blasts disco, his music of choice for any occasion, through the tiny speakers of his phone, and when I ask him for the third time to let Mom select the music, he waves away my request and insists that I stop asking because she likes these songs, too. I look at my mom to check whether or not this is true, and she shrugs her shoulders and rolls her eyes in concession.

Although my siblings are also tired of listening to this music, no one budes to make a change, so when my father steps away from the kitchen counter to go dance, I grab his phone and look for a song my mother will enjoy. As Lauryn Hill sings the opening lines to "Killing Me Softly," my mother raises her glass of pomegranate juice and vodka and lets out a shriek that I know means she can't believe her ears.

Back when I was in eighth grade, my father had closed his shoe repair shop in Beverly Hills because the landlords doubled his rent, and instead of relocating, he decided to pursue financial services full-time, which he had until this point only been doing a few times a week. A few months later, once he started to make a significant income in his new career path, he wanted to retire my mother from her job at the law firm. I remember her reluctance and how she voiced her concern over leaving him with the full burden of earning enough for our family of five, and at the same time her delight at the prospect of staying home to raise her children. Not only would it bring her joy, but it would also mean no more strangers in our home.

After some time of my father's persistent encouragement she eventually agreed and they let Lucero go. But, of course, the house still required upkeep and that meant that now I could take on the responsibility of learning how to clean. Over time, we made a ritual of doing housework on Saturdays and to mark the start of each one, my mother would alternate between blasting The Fugees and the *Evita* soundtrack through the house on my father's stereo.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if my mother overrode his pressure to quit her job. Maybe we would still have our house. Maybe she would have been so preoccupied with work that she wouldn't have noticed the ways I changed. I could get lost in speculation. At the heart of it though, despite my resentment toward his stubbornness, I know he wanted to protect her. I don't blame him.

At the sound of the music change, my father throws up his hands in annoyance at having his dance session interrupted and reprimands me for having touched his phone. Although I've learned over the last couple years to ignore him when he gets angry, right now I am too overwhelmed to stay silent and I call him out on his highjacking of my mother's birthday gathering.

Like every time I stand up to him, I feel the familiar rush of blood to my face and sudden restlessness that accompanies my rising temper. And like every time this happens, I kick myself when I realize that despite my numerous attempts to emulate my mother, I am, whether innately or learned, just like my father.

As I stand opposite him, our mutual indignation face to face, I recognize all the freedom I've aspired to have and it hits me that even though he said I could be anything-- anyone-- I wanted, that does not mean I could ignore the implications of those choices. That does not mean I could disregard the responsibility of that freedom and of knowing who I may hurt in the process. But that's the nature

of disappointment—it implies there was an expectation. So why this desperation to break through from those boundaries? *A boundary is not that which something stops but, as Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing*⁷.

Even though in this moment I don't know it yet, one day the idea will strike me that maybe this whole time I haven't been trying to break through confines, but rather trying to recreate *the self-imposed equivalent of what social rites of passages traditionally have been for males: entrance ways into adulthood, into manhood in the sexual sense, into extra-familial love and work*⁸. Maybe I have been trying to mark *the need for individuation and autonomy in female terms: the need for definition achieved rather than accepted, chosen rather than enforced, made rather than born. Identity has become, for me and many women, the personal translation of emancipation: the political made personal, not suffered like a decree or a fate*⁹.

And even so, one day it will occur to me, despite all of this, maybe the circles I go in aren't even about locating an identity at all. Maybe, after all of this, I just wanted to protect the people I love.

Maybe it's both.

That's the thing about queerness: it's not only about the self—it's also about family, whether chosen or by blood.

But until then, I'll savor the now and shake off my anger. I will give my father a hug after our stare-down and we will laugh as we recognize simultaneously, for likely the hundredth time, our resemblance. In those moments, when we laugh together, I know he sees me and he knows I see him. In those moments, when we laugh together, I am grateful.

⁷ Martin Heidegger

⁸ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

⁹ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

As we both watch my mom sing along to her songs,
her cheeks flushed and pulled into a smile, I finally feel that
tonight, I am Cuqui's eyes again.
And tonight, that's enough.

Never Should Have Opened That Urn

Leningrad this, Stalingrad that, Himmler– Hitler, regardless, the words on the page started to blend together. A perpetual buzzing in her ear; *Great*, Bernice thought. Another migraine- as if someone was drilling their thumb into her forehead periodically. The pulsating feeling gave Bernice nausea, but she knew not to complain, anything could get worse nowadays, better not to jinx it. This feeling of sudden pain was a common occurrence, that she learned was associated with her companion. Her grandfather's absence never felt long enough, and the anxiety of that fact never gave her any semblance of reprieve.

Come on Bernice, you know this one. The voice whispered.

Something...something Italian, something about Hitler. This whole routine of playing games was becoming very tiresome to Bernice.

No games grandpa, just give me the answer. I don't remember this one. Bernice bit the tip of her eraser gently as she wiggled the pencil around.

No, no. I know you know this. Remember, we were there together!

We are ALWAYS together. I promise, I'll do the rest. Just remind me of this one.

Hmm, I'll give you a hint. Think back, it was last night. 7:04 P.M., your mom was watching Jeopardy! while cooking the spaghetti. I remember because you checked your phone to see if spaghetti was

vegan— again.

Bernice's teeth pushed further, slipping into the rubbery texture of the eraser.

I got no sleep last night because of you, the least you can do is give me the answer.

We were in the textbook, on the page about the causes of World War II. Think Bernice. It had a picture of the woman you thought was so pretty, you know... welcoming the troops home. You remember, she had a velvet Victorian hat that you wouldn't stop thinking about. You were on Pinterest for hours after, looking for ones just like it.

It- it's not coming back to me. How about a 50/50, I know it's either A or C. They both sound right... Vienna... Versailles... Vienna sounds right! She pushed her pencil down into the paper.

It was less than twenty-four hours ago, Bernice. How are you ever to learn if I give you all the answers. No 50/50, Bernice. We do not play lifelines here. Our family watches Jeopardy!—

She gripped and twisted the pencil further into the paper until she heard it snap.

—not Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.

She ground her teeth together while the pulsing continued. Two months of horror, sharing every feeling, and thought with her deceased grandfather. Two months of sleepless nights, consistent degradation, and above all, the ever-growing concern that she may be going insane.

She looked up from her test into the dim fluorescents above, letting out an audible sigh. Her teacher, Mr. Aker, peeked up from his book, lifting the glasses

clinging so dangerously to the breadth of his Polish nose that perhaps a whisp of wind would've knocked them off. Mr. Aker studied her look of utter detachment with his thick eyebrows and pointed back down to her desk. She returned a half-smile and lifted her broken pencil. His dimpled smirk instructed her the go- ahead.

Maybe she would remember all of this stuff about T-boats and war crimes if Mr. Aker hadn't been so damn handsome, she thought.

He is dashing, isn't he? I almost think you're one of his favorite students, Bernice, the way he calls on you with such confidence. I could not tell you why though. You're a flunky. A dunce, some might say. Maybe you two have that in common. If I could knock you on the head with my knuckles, I would.

And if I could've watched you breathe your last few breaths before you were turned into a pile of ash I would've. But we have to keep dreaming.

Bernice sharpened her pencil while looking back at her teacher reading from a hard-cover novel. The clunking and churning of woodchips meshed crudely with the sounds the lawnmower made outside the classroom.

Bernice! You do have teeth after all! And not of the gap variety from the photos I've seen on your living room wall. You know the ones next to Aunt Marriot. Yes, teeth whitened twice a year with your adequate insurance, and newly straightened from years of wearing braces, obviously to appropriate yourself into the culture of fitting in. Whatever happened to embracing your flaws?

Not all of us can be comfortable with chiclets for teeth. What do you have against Mr. Akers anyway?

I will admit, you have perfect canines for ripping and tearing

Bernice. You'll be hard-pressed to find me showing any appreciation towards a Stalin-fanatic. What was that video he had us watch last week? An absolutely reprehensible piece. Well, best of luck with the rest of your test Bernice. I'll be here sowing my regrets on siring a petulant granddaughter.

He was silent for a while after that, to Bernice's relief. She began circling letters randomly as she saw her classmates finishing one by one. She remembered hearing somewhere that C was the most common answer in multiple choice tests, so her paper was littered with C's. She read number 29, which had the answer for an earlier problem in the question. So, she went back and redid the answer she missed the first time around, feeling accomplished for noticing such a detail.

She heard grandpa exclaim a brief "hah" and then the sound of imaginary teeth gritting.

She was almost finished when she reached the short answer section. It was only one question. An essay question, Mr. Akers called it. "They will be the only questions you get when you continue to college," he had been saying all semester. It read "In your opinion, after all we have learned from this section, who do you believe is morally worse, Stalin or Hitler? Please provide examples."

Her headache worsened, but she put the graphite of her pencil onto the page when grandfather spoke up again.

Allow me, Bernice. Write exactly what I have to say.

Finally, she thought, some sort of reprieve.

What an insightful question, Mr. Akers. Loaded as it were with the implication that we can judge anyone's cruelties relative to well...

what? We can at least say that this is one that has been pondered by the penultimate of greatest thinkers for decades. Not quite top echelon thinkers, but those who had been getting so much done with their totalitarian government breathing down their necks. Where do I begin? Where can anyone truly begin with such a profound question that tells us so much about the human condition and morality itself. Only someone as creatively inclined as yourself, Mr. Akers, could've written such a question— Bernice, you've stopped writing.

She wanted to cry. *I can't do this anymore. You are actively sabotaging my life.*

WRITE IT. His tone shifted from its jarringly calm nature to authoritative, and somehow loud. She still had no idea how she could control his volume in her head.

She shuddered but held strong. *No grandfathe—*

—Write it and we will go back and redo all the questions you've missed. This is middle school-tier stuff, Bernice. If we must share this body, I will not have this brain go to waste. I've been given another lease on life. Which means you too have been given another chance at a life that can mean something. If you're worried about the grade let me say that you will get full credit for the test. Excluding maybe this farce of an essay question, in which case, we can later argue is in bounds of the language given at hand. It is an opinion after all, Bernice. This is what I mean when I say your teacher is a midwit at best. Now... write the rest.

So, she did. Lunchtime came soon after, meeting at her favorite table with her best friends, Marinka and Jess. She pulled out the contents of her lunch, a banana and a PB&J, while she began to ponder the last exchange with her grandfather. Something about letting him take control gave her a freeing feeling, knowing that he could provide her some security. There was a beauty in that,

although double-edged, as she never felt alone in these past months. Although persistently at odds, she felt a comfort that, in everything she dealt with, someone else went through it as well, someone who's had a full lifespan of experience. She had never given him that much control to determine how things may play out for her. It was like autopilot or the feeling of watching a movie. Sometimes she felt like she was driving a car, but from the backseat. Although he was not the ideal grandfather, and even held a downright sinister nature with his thoughts, she felt an awful sense of serenity, letting things play out. These thoughts were overshadowed by the knowledge that she knew, he could be listening to these thoughts as well. Better to not stroke the ego any further.

"Well, I just y'know really– really wanted to know if he loved me" Marinka said in a whisper, as her head wobbled to both sides.

"I've heard of girls giving shit-tests before, Marinka, but that takes the cake. So, what happened?" Jess guffawed, her mouth still filled with remnants of unchewed chips. Her necklace jingled faintly, the sounds surrounded by the clamor of students in the cafeteria.

Bernice heard the jingle in her ear but did not notice it fully, the hum like an old broken television set or a permanent tinge of tinnitus. Her eyes focused onwards and down, pupils dilated staring at the pink flesh before her, a boy's calf; fat conglomerating, then dispersing– tightening, and relaxing, twisting... and now flexing in place. She unknowingly began to salivate at the calf, a light pant leaving her lips.

Then came grandpa. Her fingers unconsciously gripped the metal rods holding up the cafeteria table below. Was it the chill touch of the metal or his voice

that sent for her goosebumps to return, rigid? The voice manifested itself in her head, a low, guttural thing, words being churned in such a way that it reminded her of a snake's hiss. The voice leaped around her jaunting, as if someone was whispering behind one ear and the other.

Awh yesssss, Bernice. You're finally seeing what I see. You see that rose-flush near the tibia? An unnatural occurrence born from a languorous attitude towards just about everything; assuredly not a pristine beast like you're soooooo painfully used to. He probably has never seen the digits on a treadmill go past 00:30 without feeling the tinge of futility. Why not just accept his fate?

We're not doing this. She thought, but her eyes did not wander from the calf, still morphing its contours every so often.

Please, Bernice, a moment of your time. Picture it, with me: Thursday, fifth period, the dreaded day of Mr. Dalynn's mandatory monthly mile. The students around are wearing grim faces, bloated from the cafeteria's incessant need to fill you up with cheap carb after cheap carb. But not our friend over there, can you see it? His face says it all, look closely: he twists his lips just for a moment, but it tells us all we have suspected; he has come prepared. While the rest of the students bake in the wake of Apollo, our mark marinates in the shade with a smug sense of satisfaction.

Mayhaps he got there with a doctor's note saying he has cramps—no, no... worse, vertigo! Dalynn is not surprised of course, all P.E. teachers have dealt with every possible excuse. How else could they be the plebeians of their profession without lying to themselves every day? They are the masters of excuses, but in this scenario, Dalynn is without the ability to reproach. The kids run on, punishing the pavement with each fleeting footfall and some may even show their revulsion to our boy, but he survives knowing he has avoided certain pain. It is that kind of laze I cannot help but

lament. But unlike that boy, when I regress or feel any form of a general malaise, I act. You- you see those freckles all over the back of his calf? He must be third-generation Irish; we haven't tasted that in quite a day. What I wouldn't give for a bite.

Bernice licked her lips unconsciously as she stared on, locked in. Her posture leaned and her neck craned as if her myopia was especially bad today. It had not always been like this. Some days she would hear the voice and instantly shut it down. But recently she felt tired, not willing to put up the fight. Sometimes she even felt as if she was being lulled by his voice, like losing her focus to her psychiatrist's Newton's Cradle as it goes side-to-side, tic... tic... tic...

"Like if I told him I had AIDS or some shit, I would've expected to be ghosted or dropped, but herpes? Who doesn't have herpes these days? Bernice... Bernice are you even listening to me?" Marinka exclaimed.

The sudden name-drop shook Bernice out of the trance. She was once again at her favorite lunch table of her high school's cafeteria, staring at her group of friends across from her. She had known this place for two years now but the jolt back to reality brought upon a sense of uncanniness; as if visiting an old hometown, years later. She looked around, blinking until her pupils eased back into their traditional diameter. These pupils rested onto Marinka and Jess. Marinka's eyes were puddled up, as if any comment would release the dam of liquid laid before her.

"Sorry," Bernice breathed out. She twisted her head, "Something about your boyfriend?"

"Augh" Marinka let out, and low sobs began.

"What a good friend you are," Jess added sarcastically as she wrapped her arms around her friend. Jess's demeanor had also changed, from jest to caring, knowing Marinka was in anguish. "Marinka was telling us that she told Jimmy that she had herpes, and if he truly loved her, he would stay."

"Oh my god, Marinka, I'm so sorry, when did- when did you find out you had herpes?" Bernice wore an inquisitive expression.

The wailing of Marinka got louder, as her head jostled dismissively. A cackle could be heard in the back of Bernice's head. The voice's laughter quieted when he heard Marinka about to speak up again.

"That's just it, Bernice, if you had been listening, you would know Marinka doesn't have herpes. It was all made up to test Jimmy's undying love for her," Jess said sharply.

"Oh," Bernice said and sat quietly for a moment. "Well! That's good news, you just need to tell Jimmy that you were joking! That it was just a test!"

Marinka's mascara had begun to smudge around her eyes as she sneered at Bernice. Marinka looked as though she could scream. Instead she ramped her voice up, increasing her octaves with emphasis.

"NO Bernice! You don't get IT. Now I look like a SLUT! He will never believe I would make up something like that! I already saw him talking to fucking Mindy Hannigan by Mrs. Bronson's class. Three months down the drain, just like that. Where the fuck am I gonna find anyone half as hot as Jimmy Nugent for Spring Formal?" Marinka said with almost a lyrical nature.

"Well...I mean... I thought you said Kevin from your geometry class sent you a Valentine's heart-o-gram. He's cute!

"Ugh! I can't even with you, Bernice!" Marinka's sobs had stopped in her momentary anger.

"GOD Bernice, sometimes I wonder if you are brain damaged. If you had been listening yesterday, you would know that Kevin Alabaster has been DMing Ally Lenowitz since December and was only trying to show Ally that he wasn't into her by giving Marinka that heart- o-gram. Jesus! Get with the program," Jess said.

Marinka's wails returned and Bernice had never felt so confused. Jess wrapped her arms tighter around Marinka and gave Bernice a toothy look that said, "fuck off." So, she did.

Bernice picked up the remainders of her sacked lunch and threw it into her backpack, not wanting to be wasteful before leaving the cafeteria. Ashamed and with a headache that made her want to swallow all the Advil in existence, she headed towards the women's restroom to rejuvenate. She felt a mix of things now, the world had all seemed so different now that her mind had a roommate. Not just any roommate, an overly-meticulous one with outdated ideas and rival political preferences; one who could judge someone for the flavor of gum they chewed; one who could turn your favorite film into nitpicks galore; a roommate that does not pay rent but wants to change the furnishings; the type of roommate who comes and goes whenever it is convenient for them. That is the one thing she felt thankful for; he was not always home, so to speak. He could've made that conversation worse; it can always get worse with him around.

At first, she thought it was her consciousness. She never knew where thoughts or ideas came from. But suddenly some entity was feeding her mind phenomena she did not understand. Manifestations of words that were unknown to her, little observations she had never noticed. Things she could not possibly think up by herself. They came to her as if they were her own ideas.

Then she started hearing him. A voice. A voice she had never heard before. It had a soft touch to it, a pleasant frequency. Though it came with a capricious nature; sometimes despondent, then erring on the side of threatening. Like an Oleander on the roadside, on first glance: a mesmerizing sight, until it murders you. The voice came softly to her in the beginning, a light hum when she was falling asleep. Fear did not strike her. She thought it was the most normal thing to imagine between the time of delirium and dream. But she was having dreams too now, dreams where she was not herself. Dreams where she was a man from a different time.

She proceeded into the restroom and gazed into the mirror. Her eyes were a bloodshot mess, melded in with the accrescent dark circles just above her cheeks. She could not remember the last night of good sleep she had gotten. *Look like shit, feel like shit*, she thought. She turned on the sink and the strikingly cold water ran down her palms.

Tsk tsk tsk. She heard him. Aren't you getting sick of the constant ennuï, Bernice? You really have chosen poorly for friends.

Please stop... please. I can't do this anymore. I can't live like this.

I sense it's from a mix of things. When we first met Marinka, my first inclination was to believe that she had a hard upbringing... well, relative to this time I mean. A mother who drinks and drags

her daughter into every department store, dressing her to fit in- in hopes Marinka could be the "cool" girl she never was. Maybe a father who sleeps around, who gets home and screams at his homemaker wife for spending so much on luxuries they can no longer afford since his failed contracting career.

She let him run on with it. Assumptions upon assumptions. Stereotypes and generalizations. What was even the point in fighting him? What did she do to earn such circumstance? This tedium had become eternal.

But the more Marinka speaks the more I realize I may have overestimated the problem. The new leading theory is she is a culmination of this society's desperate infatuation with hedonism. In my time- we of course were vain as well, but never have I seen the caliber of such in the youth. This vapidty stemming from your generations... dare I say, mania with instant gratification. The cyclical rhythm of man, Bernice, is a duality itself, fated to repeat time and time again. It is also why I suspect that Jess is such the sycophant. The most loyal lapdog is still a dog, and an ugly one at that. For all her attempts at coining a new sense of fashion and appearing "unique" all she has done is made herself appear offensively "basic" as you kids say. All this time's fads are so trite. Hmmm I assume combining the girls together would hardly be a decent meal. Less meat than a trout betwixt the two of them. Heh, I once believed that vegetarianism was a hackneyed trend, but never again, I underestimated people's lust for vanity. If they applied themselves to be decent human beings half as hard as they applied themselves at being skinny you might have competent friends. We won't bother garnishing them. Pfft, can you imagine the memorial service the school would provide? We would be witnessing their memorial for months to come, their faces plastered on every monitor, pictures on every wall up and down these halls. The school would probably have you speak of anecdotes of their graciousness, and their hopes and dreams. No- never...still, I'm sure we can find a use for the two of them. Everyone has a part to play, Bernice.

...What the fuck is wrong with you?

She slapped water onto her face from the sink below. She slapped her face several times until she couldn't feel her cheeks, just to make sure this was all real. She returned to the south-wing hallway to find Mr. Akers looking at her. His brow furrowed, fuming.

This oughta be good. Ooooh I feel as giddy as a schoolgirl, Bernice. Well technically, I am a scho-

FUCK OFF.

Mr. Akers bit down on the side of his mouth as he spoke. "Vice Principal O'Feely and I would like a chat Bernice, let's go."

"Maybe first we can look at where you went to university, and which hack peddled his communist manifesto down your throat... thrusting it down your throat over and over again," Mr. Akers said as he read the short answer from Bernice's history test verbatim. He looked towards Vice-Principal O'Feely while standing, one hand clutched the paper so hard it was creasing at the center. His other hand made distorted motions in his pants pocket.

"Should I go on?"

With some labored breaths, Mr. O'Feely spoke up. "That will be enough Mr. Akers, thanks for coming to me with that. I think we get the idea. I just don't get it, Bernice, what is going on with you? You used to be the ideal student. This is the third complaint I've gotten from faculty this week. Do we need to bring your parents in? Maybe we should have you speak to a counselor?"

*Bernice, if you would be so kind, would you please tilt your head 30 degrees to your left. I would very much like to see which *ahem* accredited university Mr. O'Feely went to.*

Flowers From My Garden

The first blessing bestowed by my stroke was that I got to see my three beautiful daughters. Had I known that was all it took to gather them for me once again, I would've lied long ago. I would've made my neighbor, Doña Meche, call Maggie and say she found me on my living room floor. She would tell them I hadn't shown up to our sunset seats by the fence, where we met daily and shared the latest chisme of our pueblo. I know now they would've believed it. They must have sensed my sprouting death, because they were home before I could water my garden the following morning.

I had longed to have my daughters together for years. I couldn't remember the last time my garden felt complete. Gratitude overwhelmed me as I appreciated the three beautiful flowers at the foot of my bed. Their sweet smells mixed in the stiff air of my small house of block. It must've been decades since we all shared the same scent. I longed for those days, when we lived together in our warm, yellow home. My house didn't feel as warm when it was left to myself. That morning when I woke to my daughters, I noticed the sun rays rest on my skin through the iron bars behind the window.

Margarita must've caught the surprise in my face before I did because she excused herself from the room to fix breakfast, as if to not overwhelm me.

"What do you want?"

"I..." I didn't know how hard it would be to spit my first words. I learned to speak again. "Anything's fine."

She smiled at me and I smiled back. I knew she would know just what to make. I couldn't remember if Maggie had asked that the weekend before, when she had visited last. I wondered if she knew that would be my last meal. I also wondered if that put pressure on her. Before

I could hope it didn't, she had already left my sunny pink room.

"Can I talk to her alone for a minute?" Hortensia asked her younger sister.

"Are you serious?"

"Just give us a minute. Go help Maggie with breakfast or something, 'bout time you make yourselves useful."

Dalia simply rolled her eyes and left. She never entertained the bickering of her sister. She had realized long ago there was no fight to win with a woman who always made sure the last sound in the air was her voice. Hortensia sat beside me and I wondered if she realized Dalia still hadn't had the chance to share a single word with me at all.

"How are you?"

"I'm... very happy to see you girls."

"I'm happy to see you too. It's strange though, none of us are little girls anymore."

"I know. You're all great and grown now. You've watered the dry seeds I've given you and out of flowers made grand trees full of life. I'm so proud of you."

"You have no idea how much everything you've done for us means to me," she stopped herself from sharing more and I wished she hadn't. I glanced at the gloss in her eyes and understood. I wished I didn't have to understand, and instead my daughter felt comfortable enough to cry in front of me.

"I know, mija." There was silence until I spoke again. "Did you fly in from el otro lado?"

"No, I actually didn't have to. I was in a city nearby promoting my new book."

"You weren't going to tell me?"

"It was for business. I didn't say anything in case I was too busy to come visit."

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Oh, about that..." she became nervous. "You've been getting the money I've been sending right?"

I couldn't tell if she was reminding me or asking me. So I simply sighed.

"Pinche Margarita, is she keeping it for herself?"

"I'm not the only one that needs help, you know?"

"She has been keeping it, hasn't she? I can't believe her. It's her fault she's—"

"No." I coughed.

"I'm sorry Ma," she said and stared. I could see her struggling to come up with anything to talk to me about.

"You know I've been thinking about moving back here."

"Really?" my eyes blossomed into bright sunflowers of excitement.

"Yeah. I was thinking of maybe spending a few months here, to write my next book. It could be like a work getaway. A visit home even. Of course I'd have to find a place to stay..."

The petals of my sunflower eyes dried up and the seeds in my pupils fell to the dirt as I realized what Hortensia was leading to.

"I could stay with you, right?" She said as if I would be alive by the time any plan of such would come to fruition. It must've been her way of asking me for the house, or the land, or whatever value it was Hortensia found in the place I called home. The same place she had worked so hard to get far away from. I stared out the window disappointed. Before I answered, her phone rang and she began to walk closer to the door.

"I've got to get this."

She picked up the call and left. Alone, I smiled out the window and admired my backyard. It was a work of art stretched through lifetimes. I had lived on the same plot of land my whole life. Over the years, I saw it become smaller and smaller as the soil was sold. My mother and I had lived where she and her mother had once lived. My mother spoke often of the times when the whole block belonged to our family, when the lands and the grass belonged to everybody. She dreamed of the riches nature had once afforded us. Of a time when the fields were more fertile, and the animals more lively. I never dreamt of these times. I recognized the beauty in the life that blessed my garden. I savored the juice from the fruits of my trees. From my window, I fantasized about walking barefoot on the wild grass again. I took a moment to appreciate two small cempasúchil flowers that had begun to blossom in the

back of my garden. I thought of the last Día de los Muertos, when I cut the flowers from the plant myself and took them to my mother's grave. I wondered if my daughters would cut those same flowers for me that November. I hoped they would.

Even though she never had a quinceñera, Dalia always walked around with her hair curled and propped up like she was ready to slip in her first heels and receive her last doll. When they were growing, we would often joke that Hortensia's hair had been done simpler at her quinceñera than Dalia's was done on a common day. When she walked back in the room her bark brown curls bounced like they did when she was fifteen. She still looked as beautiful and as young. It was I that had become wilted and frail.

"Are you sure you don't want to eat in the kitchen?" she asked as she balanced her way in with a fresh glass of tamarind water, a large plate of red chilaquiles, and a sliced orange.

"I'm sure," I said, with no energy left to get up.

She placed the food on a pillow on my lap. I hadn't eaten anything spicy for years. Maggie always yelled at me when she caught even a serrano in my fridge, but today she must've remembered how I loved spicy food in my teens and twenties before my health was a concern. I imagined she had gone to buy the ingredients, or possibly even sent Dalia to the store down the street. When they were younger, it had always been Maggie's duty as the youngest to go get the morning tortillas. I wondered if this time had been different. I reached for the pills on my bedside as routine, but I placed them back down without taking any. Of the breakfast, I had no more than a few bites and a couple sips, that I rejoiced in, as if that day were my last. I gave the plate back to my daughter who stared back at me speechless.

"Where's Maggie?"

"She's making more breakfast for her girls. She said she'll be here when she's done."

"Tell her I said thank you. It was delicious."

"I will," she grinned as I reached towards the plate and popped a last slice of orange in my mouth. The sweet

familiar juice and pulp burst on my tongue. "But the orange is from me. I remembered when my sisters and I would compete bringing you fruit from the backyard. We'd always try to guess what you were in the mood for."

"Somehow, you were always the one that knew exactly what I wanted," I reminisced.

"I just... know how to read you. I noticed your craving often aligned with how you were feeling on that day."

I didn't know if Dalia was right or whether she had been following a useless made-up strategy all those years. However, I didn't question her, for I knew of the child's observant nature.

"Thank you for the orange, mija."

"What did Hortensia want? Did she ask you to leave her the house?"

I answered only through expression. I knew Dalia wanted the house too. She had made sure to remind me enough times before, that she didn't think she needed to now. Her and my nuera had been struggling to find a stable safe place to live, and my house had become one more thing Dalia felt entitled to. Truth was, I didn't know who would keep my home when I passed and I didn't wish to decide. I didn't wish to compare and choose among my flowers.

"Doesn't she make enough money already? She barely ever sees us. Now she suddenly wants to be part of the family?"

"Dalia, please."

"Well, did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Leave her the house."

"I'm not dead yet. I'm still deciding what to put on the will."

"You don't have a will? What do you mean you don't have a will?"

"Diosito gave me another day for a reason. I'll fix one in the evening."

"It's okay, Ma," she hugged me with her empty hand and kissed my cheek. She started to walk towards the door, "Just worry about getting better for now."

"Dalia," I said and she stopped at the entrance.

"When do I eat oranges?"

"Mande?" she asked, confused.

"When I eat oranges, how do I feel?"

"You feel happy."

"And how do you know I'm happy now?"

"I don't," she answered and she gave one last smile before leaving.

"Dalia said you needed me, she didn't even let me finish breakfast."

"I wanted to see you."

"Is everything alright?"

"I don't want to die here," I begged Margarita.

"What? You're not going to die," she lied, holding back her tears.

"Can you take me outside?" If I was to have my last breath, it would be of fresh air. "Please."

Margarita gently grabbed me by the hand and walked me to the garden. I could hear her girls fighting inside the house, too young and clueless to understand loss. Maggie looked back, but instead tightened her grip on my hand. I nodded towards the house, making sure she knew I would be okay.

"I love you, Ma."

"Me too, mija."

"Call me when you want to go back inside."

She left me by the fence where Doña Meche smiled at me from her usual seat and enjoyed the last rays of sun.

"I was hoping you would come."

Instead of walking to the seat on my side of the fence, I walked into my garden and planted myself on the ground. I sunk into the soft soil. I laid relaxed, intoxicated with the scent of my favorite flowers. The bees flew from my flowers to my skin. They buried me in pollen and fed me the sunlight they carried with their thin wings. The smooth spring breeze kept me fresh. All I did was lay among my flowers, as I withered away back into the earth and embraced my second blessing.

Swan Pond

Mimi Rizo

I went on a camping trip with my family. This is something I need to get off of my chest. My family is usually drunk, usually laughing. My cousin used to, before she got drunk, tell me that she was a witch. After watching the Wizard of Oz, I wondered what kind of witch she was. I wondered what she might look like suspended in a bubble. She told me if I hung out with her long enough that I would also become a witch and she would be my witch mother. It took not long after the Santa Claus Hoax of 1999 to realize that she was not a witch, although my suspicion of witches in general lasted well into my teens.

My cousin uses Botox and has a big forehead.

The Botox has worn off now, but I know who she is and who she has been. The lines that creep around her eyes, brows, and mouth tell me as much. I never noticed when I was younger, back when her Botox was working. Her wrinkles form semi-circles around her eyes that are both exciting and concerning. She encourages me to use it as a preventative measure. She always has something to say.

She, my family, and I are sitting around the fire. I am down wind. It's late enough now that we ceremoniously roast marshmallows on metal sticks. My roasting pole gets caught between a crack in the wood, and I watch the metal turn bright red. I consider touching it, but upon remembering that I am too old to be curious about the feel of hot metal, I rest the stick on the rocks circling the fire. My cousin softly pulls a marshmallow from the bag and glides it onto the pole with which she twirls her dessert with care over the glowing pit. I stick my marshmallow straight into the flames of the pit and watch as the flames burn from purple to orange.

"You're charring your marshmallow."

She always has something to say. My goal was not to eat the marshmallow. I just wanted to watch it burn off the pole and into the fire where it would burn into the same texture of the wood, and I wouldn't be able to tell where the wood ended and the marshmallow began.

"I like my marshmallows burned, they fall off the stick easily this way." Earlier in the day I was offered to either cut a tomato, or wipe down the picnic table. I said I would do whatever was easier and got handed a rag.

"You always take the easy way out."

I don't take the easy way out. Why does she even care so much? Why are you so sad? You can't ask someone that. I mean, I wouldn't want someone to ask me. And so I don't ask her, but boy do I wonder. I'm sitting by the fire, down wind, and wiping my watering eyes.

"It's just a marshmallow." I wouldn't dare cry about marshmallows around my cousin.

"It's the smoke."

She buys it, and for that I am grateful. I like sitting by the smoke. The smell burrows into my skin. When I get home people will smell the smoke on me and they will know that I have been out camping with my family. My family is all drunk and laughing. I just sit there and observe the bruises on my knees and try not to make eye contact with my cousin.

"I'm going to sleep."

No, I am not. If I go to sleep, I will miss the fireside rituals that I usually hear from my tent, tucked away between two trees on an incline. For some reason I know that I am supposed to stay here downwind of this fire, sitting here indefinitely because no one told me how long they expect me to sit here. Family vacations are doing time for the crime of existence. Like original sin. Original sin is the being born part right? Meeting eyes with my brother on my left, I realize that I do not know how long I have been looking down. Nobody noticed anyway. They're not paying attention because they are all doing their best impression

of Batman. The neighbors who booked the campsites next to us are likely annoyed.

My older brother nudges me to let me know it's my turn to make an impression. I blabber something about being Batman and it gets a chuckle, but it's something I need to workshop. A familiar face, my father's, hands me a beer for participating. It's cold and blue. I get handed another one. You know this stuff really is not so bad. After about my third can, I am beginning to think about the absolute slander Bud Light receives. I disagree heavily and I don't think we should feel ashamed about it, I don't.

I feel lighter, better. A warm feeling floats me to my cousins' side. She is boasting about her trivia knowledge. This witch is oddly comforting, and I want to be near her. The fire is just embers now, and I am drunk. Before I know, it everyone is asleep and my cousin and I sit in the noise of the forest. The sky is so black I feel like I am trapped beneath a styrofoam cup. I can hear a frog in the distance.

"Why didn't you make your mother come?" Like I have the power to make anybody do anything.

"You know this isn't her thing. It was easier to just leave her alone."

Bowing my head, I am begging her to let me go to sleep. The worms on the floor are vibrating against each other, making waves that move east. I immediately regret squishing their pattern with my boot. Moving quickly, I remove my boot to find worm goo, but my boot is clean.

"That's not true, she just doesn't love her family."

I'm crying now, but it's not because of the fire because there are only embers. Through the legs of the trees I can see the rippling glimmer of moonlight on the black lake. I wander in the opposite direction. Beneath this styrofoam cup the only thing that is guiding me is the noise soft dirt and dehydrated leaves under my bare feet. The earth becomes marsh and I stop. The grime ebbs into my toes. I don't like it, but I allow it. There are definitely worms in this dirt. A frog with a familiar croak calls my name and I

am standing on the edge of a black lake. The black lake is small, depending on what you think small is. If a seven story building is small for you, then the lake might be very small. If you think swimming pools are large, then you might say that this lake is very large. To me, it is perfect.

Black glass shows me the upside down reflection of two stark white swans who casually float by. They are so casually in love. They are in love, but not because they think they are better than anyone. Although they are not better than anyone else, they are in love. As well as being in love, they know that they are just like everything else. Everything else, watching, knows that the two are not so much better than them, they are ordinary.

Although they are ordinary, they are different. Their difference is not in the way they float, because I can float too. Their difference is also not in the way they breathe, we all breathe. Well most of us breathe, some of us don't breathe. Some of us don't breathe anymore. Some people say they would rather not breathe than be ordinary. But that would mean that they would be dead. That would mean that they would rather be dead than be ordinary. But breathing and being ordinary are the same thing. The point is that the swans are in love.

We were not alone. Tadpoles are hugging my feet around the ankles, and although this would usually make me feel nervous I am incredibly at ease. Sleepy frog inhabited lily pads are a few shades lighter than the black surface of the water. Everyone is either asleep or precautious about my presence. I whisper my apologies to them and creep my toes further into the soft mud. Although it is late, and very dark, the water feels like a warm bath that has just been drawn. I think that somehow I am at the bottom of this body of water. Above me I can see my reflection, as though I am looking up at a mirror. It really is unusually warm. I kick my feet and push the soft water beneath me, moving toward the wavering image of myself. I look pale. My fingertips reach the air and I am so

relieved to not be trapped or drowning in this warm, black, lake. The contrasting cold midnight air pricks my ears in an uncomfortable way. Looking west, the direction from which I came, the faintest, tiniest light is visible and I see my cousin sitting alone near the embers. She is hardly a shape anymore. Just a thing that is blocking the light of the embers to spread. What a strange time I find myself in, in the time of swans, and in the time of geese, and in the time of frogs that have not been touched by me. Have not been touched by the current of time that seems to buzz at the very tops of these birch trees.

Yard Work

Kirby Ditto

Martin Morris and his daughter, Maggie, sat at the table in the middle of the dining room. Cracks of morning sunlight broke through the blinds that hung haphazardly over the old, drooping windows. He was midway through the sports section of the newspaper when she broke the silence and asked him if he was planning on attending the annual family vacation with her and the rest of the extended family.

"Hawaii? Why would you want to go to Hawaii?" asked Martin. "There's nothing to see in Hawaii that you can't see here, you know."

He shook his head and took a sip of his coffee, snickering at the mere suggestion of spending money on plane tickets and gaudy beach-themed hotels. Martin turned the page and glanced over the daily box scores, his eyes scanning the loosely assembled network of numbers and abbreviations common to the game of baseball.

"Sox lose again. Unbelievable," he lamented.

Martin slowly withdrew from his reading ritual and realized that his daughter was still sitting at the table silently with her hands folded politely out in front of her. He cleared his throat and looked up in an attempt to salvage the dead-end conversation, reluctantly noticing that she hadn't spoken in several minutes. Her sad, defeated gaze was locked on to some nondescript spot on the wooden surface of the old family dinner table where a happy family used to sit and eat. Maggie was young and beautiful, and as her father always told her, too smart for her own good. As they finally made eye contact, Martin felt the troubling sense that his daughter was going to scold him; or worse, employ a guilt-ridden tirade that he was no stranger to receiving. Quickly, as if he were trying to beat

her to the punch, Martin grabbed his coffee cup and held it up.

"How about I make you a cup? You look like you could use it," he said and motioned to the coffee maker.

"No, Dad, I'm OK. Thanks, though."

Although some caffeine would have been a welcome treat, Maggie had always hated the way her dad made coffee. It tasted like it was brewed with dirt and tap water and he never used any cream or sugar to mask the putrid flavor.

"Well, I don't know, Dad," said Martin's daughter, quickly re-routing his attempt to change the subject.

"There are great beaches. The culture is a little different. It's a great place to relax. I think you'd love it. Besides, when was the last time you got out of this house?"

They both gazed up at their surroundings. Martin's house was built in the 40's and looked like it hadn't changed a bit since then. The ceilings were covered in stucco, the walls paved in a faded beige paper that transformed the otherwise normal residence into a geriatric fun-house. It smelled like a bouquet of different fragrances from the homemade candles her father would patch together using the wax from the old, burnt out ones.

"Oh, you know me," he said. "I don't need to go anywhere. I'm perfectly happy here."

"Doing what?" Maggie laughed. "Yard work?"

The phrase had become an unspoken joke of the family for years, because it was the way that Martin released his obligations to anything or anyone but himself. "Yard work" had become synonymous with his absence, because even when he was working around the house, in the garden or on the lawn, he always had more yard work to do.

"Well, yes. You know, Maggie, the yard's not gonna take care of itself. Why do you think it looks so good all of the time?" said Martin, his pompous tone caused Maggie to wince as the words went in and out of her ears.

In truth, however, it did look good. The beautiful green lawn was perfectly edged and mowed every other day, and on the other days it was fertilized and watered by hand. The driveway and surrounding sidewalks were swept and sprayed. The flower beds were lively and colorful. Butterflies bobbed about and got swept aside by the warm, gentle breeze that passed through. The raised vegetable garden was beaming with pumpkins, cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, eggplant and okra. The yard and the garden were his only pastime, and unlike anything else in his life, they brought Martin an immeasurable sense of pride and joy.

It made Maggie sick.

She wished that her father, now approaching his late-middle age, was more outgoing, more daring, more available for adventure. Instead, he loafed around his house and spent his time in the yard, pulling weeds and meticulously spot-watering.

"Don't get upset, Dad. I was just thinking it would be nice to finally see you enjoy yourself on vacation," said Maggie. "You know, despite being a total homebody, you're still a part of the family. We'd love to have you there for once."

"Listen, Maggie, I'm not—"

"It would make everyone really happy if you could come," she interjected. "You know, you wouldn't even have to pay for your plane ticket."

At the mention of this her father slammed the paper down onto the table, his anger and frustration finally getting the best of him. He got up, spun around, and stormed over to the large bay window in the kitchen. He put his hands on the edge of the sink, drew his breath, and exuded a long-drawn-out sigh like a child who didn't want to eat his peas. Maggie could see that her father was staring longingly in the direction of the garden.

"I'm not going," he said. "I don't know why the hell I would fly all the way to Hawaii to relax when I can relax and

be happy here. I've got a ton of work to do and I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself knowing that the yard needs to be taken care of."

Realizing that there was no way that she could convince her father to change his mind, she finally relented. Out of respect for the man that raised her, she talked to him for a few minutes about things like sports and finances. He surprised her when he briefly asked how her mother was doing.

"She's fine," said Maggie, knowing that her father didn't actually care and had probably stopped listening. "She's happy."

After all avenues of possible conversation had been exhausted, she hugged him tenderly and she said goodbye, then hopped in her car and drove away. Maggie had this conversation with Martin every year. She would beg him to attend the family vacation and he would refuse, making up some excuse that usually had to do with him taking care of the house. He had become stubborn in his older age, nothing like the carefree and spontaneous man she had known as a child.

Martin waved goodbye and walked back in the house, relieved that his daughter had left. She had become so indignant and fussy since she had returned from college, a far cry from the quiet girl he raised. Sometimes he wondered if she hated him, but this thought was as fleeting as a rose in bloom. Without wasting any more time, he grabbed a Coke from the fridge and walked into the garage to grab his knee pads and gardening gloves. They were caked with dirt and grime, truly the unsung champions of the yard. Outside, the sun was warm on the back of his neck. The constant hum of leaf blowers and lawn mowers reminded Martin of all the money his neighbors were wasting only to have someone else enjoy the best part of homeownership. At this point in his life, Martin was sure that having a yard and garden to tend to was the great reward that all good men should strive to

achieve. There was no profession noble enough that could not afford a man some land of his own to mold.

Martin wandered down the small path that wound through the backyard. He stopped at the bougainvillea, captured by its intense and rugged beauty. He put his hands on his hips and stood there in pure admiration of the giant flora, inhaling and exhaling in a deeply satisfying and congratulatory way. Six months ago, the unruly plant had been wrapping itself around the west wall of his home, which was clearly the domain of the birds of paradise. He spent a few weeks manicuring the great bush until it crept back to the southern wall where it belonged. Martin loved the way the plants behaved, because unlike children, they do as they are told with proper care and attentiveness. Sometimes he wished his daughter would be more like the bougainvillea.

He continued down to the garden, past the hibiscus and the fig tree, down around the ferns and the lavender until he came upon the crown jewel: the vegetable garden. Martin's vegetables were absolutely exquisite in their quality and presentation. The peppers were spicy but equally sweet, the tomatoes were juicy and flavorful, and the pumpkins were massive and ready to be made into pie. The okra wanted to be washed and fried. The cucumbers begged to be pickled. He conversed with the plants as he fed them, laughing and giggling like a child playing with his toys. In his retirement, he had taken to spending hours working and talking to his plants like this every day. He seldom left the comfort of his own home, only making short trips to the bank and the supermarket and sometimes the home improvement store if he decided that he needed new gardening tools or yard decorations.

Martin worked the soil and pulled weeds, stopping every once in a while to drink from the garden hose. As the sun began to set, Martin gathered his things to take back up to the shed. Before leaving the garden for the day, and as casually as he did anything in his old age, he

put the tip of his finger in his mouth, sucked on it a bit, and then plunged it deep into the dirt. He pulled it up, inspected the soil covered digit for a second, and then put it back in his mouth. He swished the dirt and saliva around his tongue and then swallowed it. He sat there deep in thought, and then, seemingly satisfied with its taste, stood up and began to walk up the path towards his home. He could remember the first time Maggie saw him performing the “taste test”.

“Dad, tell me you didn’t just eat the dirt,” she had said.

“Honey, I’m not eating the dirt. I’m tasting it to see if it’s too acidic. You know, you can tell a lot about the health of your plants if you taste the dirt around them. It also shows them a level of trust that you have in them. They appreciate it,” said Martin.

The following morning Martin woke and went about his usual routine. He made himself a cup of coffee, retrieved the paper from the driveway, and then walked around the side of the house to spend some time in the yard. Outside, the morning air was unusually chilly and the sun was just peeking out from over the distant foothills. Dew speckled the plants and the grass and the multitudes of bugs were beginning to emerge to begin their various tasks. Martin continued down the path to the garden, smiling as he stopped periodically to inspect the foliage. His roses, which guarded the eastern border of the property, were about ready to explode. They had been pruned perfectly and the flowers would be in bloom any day now.

He arrived at the little clearing that housed the vegetables. The dirt was wet and the garden was glowing with excitement. He knelt down and began to plot the next round of crops that he would tend to.

“Peas there, butternut squash here. Oh, how nice it must be to be a vegetable!”, he thought to himself.

Just as Martin began to put on his gloves, the

telephone in the kitchen began to ring. He begrudgingly returned to the house but in no rush to actually answer the call. He would have to allow the yard to heat up a little bit before he would begin his work on it, anyways. Today was mowing, edging, and trimming the bushes in the front, and of course, working the garden a bit. As he walked to the kitchen to refill his mug he saw that the caller had left a message on his answering machine. He knew who it was from, as only one person still called him on the phone anymore. He approached it and pressed the glowing 'play' button.

"Hi Dad! Just wanted to let you know where we'll be staying and how you can contact me if you need to. You're probably out back and you don't need to call me back. We don't leave until tomorrow—so, if you changed your mind, we could see if there was a way to get you there? I know it's a long shot. Anyways, Dad, here's the address and the phone number..."

As Maggie read off the information like a droning hound, Martin pondered the idea of planting radishes. He dreamed of growing yellow onions and sweet corn. He thought about different methods of irrigation and perhaps transitioning to a 100% pure organic fertilizer (he loved the smell of fresh manure anyways). The machine suddenly stopped and emitted a loud beeping sound to signal the end of the message. Martin would write down the information later, though he really didn't know why he needed it. His daughter would be fine. She needed to stop worrying so much about him.

"Leave me alone and let me do my work!" he proclaimed to the empty house. As he returned to the garden, he felt a wave of jealousy for the vegetables that didn't have nagging daughters to deal with.

By noon Martin was completely drained of energy. He was dripping wet with perspiration and his clothes were covered in dirt and grass stains. His skin was slightly burnt and his stomach was yelling at him, letting him know that

he was hungry. Martin, in a fit of jealousy, dreamed of the wonders of photosynthesis.

But the yard looked good.

He went down to the garden to make a checklist for later. Weeds, tilling, spot watering, good conversation were all on the list of things to be done. As he finished writing he gazed down upon the pumpkins, glowing in the sun, the shiny orange rind sitting upon the finely-tuned earth. He suddenly thought about how he didn't want to deal with his daughter anymore, get asked about family vacations, or anything besides be in the garden. It was selfish for his daughter to continue to ask him for things he couldn't provide. As he stood admiring the pumpkins, Martin felt a strange sense of envy arise within himself. It was then that Martin decided that if he couldn't be a pumpkin, he could at least act like one. He figured it couldn't be too hard: just sit there and do nothing. To Martin, there was no better way to spend the afternoon.

After looking to make sure that his neighbors weren't peeking over the fence, Martin removed his clothing, gloves, shoes, and then sat in the garden, right in the middle of the pumpkins. He brought his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his shins to make a tight, compact ball of human flesh that hardly resembled a pumpkin. He sat there in the sun and soaked up its rays, trying to synthesize the light into energy. He pretended that his skin was a tough orange rind like a pumpkin, and that his guts were long stringy fibers that produced seeds.

"Maybe if I feel like a vegetable, I can be a vegetable!" he thought excitedly.

Every day for the next few weeks, Martin sat naked with the pumpkins. It had become a ritualistic endeavor. He stopped making his coffee, he stopped reading the paper or checking the box scores. He even stopped going to the market and the bank, which were his only few connections to the world that existed outside of the garden. He stopped checking the answering machine

and never bothered to call his daughter back, and in fact, forgot about everything else entirely. He would wake and go immediately to the garden where he would sit with the pumpkins. His skin began to turn dark orange in color, and the constant abuse of the sun was scarring his flesh, causing it to become tough and thick. He found that sleeping inside the house was becoming much too uncomfortable to get proper rest, so he tried putting some soil from the garden in between his sheets, but even that felt even more suffocating to him. Martin stopped sleeping in the house altogether, as he couldn't bear the thought of leaving his garden even for a second. Eventually, without his constant and delicate care, his other vegetables started to die and rot away. The bugs came and ate the decaying food, the flies laid their eggs in the flesh of the plants and maggots began to appear and crawl around the dying lot. But vegetables didn't care about anything, so neither did Martin. He sat there without moving until he forgot he was human.

A few weeks later, Maggie parked her car in her father's driveway. She felt refreshed and energized after returning home from the tropical vacation with the family. Her newly tanned complexion shined vibrantly through the light covering of her Hawaiian sarong. Although she hadn't spoken to her father since she left, it wasn't totally out of the ordinary for him. She knew he was stubborn and she tried to give him his space, even if it was just 'yard work'. As she walked up the path to the home she noticed that the grass on the lawn was overgrown and there were leaves strewn across the sidewalk. The flower beds were green with the new growth of weeds and it looked as if the mail had been piling up for weeks. The sight of the unkempt yard caused Maggie to become a bit frantic and, after knocking on the front door for a few minutes, convinced herself that her father must be in the backyard working. She walked around the side of the house and opened the gate, quickly making her way down the path through the

yard. She continued past the bougainvillea and the birds of paradise, and the roses and the ferns, and the flowers, and finally came upon the vegetable garden where she stopped, petrified in horror.

Amongst the insects and the piles of rotting organic matter sat a large and hideously deformed pumpkin. It was bulbous and grotesque yet magnificently ripe, and from the spot on the path where Maggie stood screaming, it almost resembled her father.



D R A M A



“FLIGHT 237 - DENVER TO LOS ANGELES”

A Play in One Act

Cast of Characters

Lincoln: Young man around age 25

Nancy: Older woman around age 65

Woman with Baby: Late 20s, early 30s
Baby is about two years old

Setting

A small passenger jet airplane.

Time

Early morning, around 8:30 am.

A young man, around age 25 (LINCOLN) is sitting in the window seat of the left side of the plane. Seated next to him is an older woman, around age 65 (NANCY). LINCOLN is dressed casually, in a crumpled shirt, baseball cap, and jeans. NANCY is smartly dressed, wearing a scarf that is trying to look expensive, statement “button” earrings, and neatly coiffed hair. NANCY wears reading glasses.

LINCOLN is leaning his head against the window, propped up on a travel pillow, eyes closed. NANCY is reading the in-flight magazine.

*An electronic bell sound *BING* followed by an intercom voice, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have reached cruising altitude. You may now feel free to use the lavatories, but while seated, please keep your seatbelts securely fastened." NANCY puts the magazine back in the seat-back pocket, reaches down and picks up her oversized purse from at her feet and puts it in her lap, fumbles through her purse, and pulls out her cell phone. This is all done very loudly. She adjusts her glasses as she fidgets with her phone, looking a bit confused or frustrated for a second, then leans over LINCOLN to take a picture of the scenery outside the window.*

LINCOLN opens one eye slightly, then shuts it quickly when she looks over at him.

NANCY leans over a second time, takes a second picture.

LINCOLN adjusts his pillow in an obvious manner.

NANCY leans over a third time, takes a third picture, then sits back in her seat and scrolls through the pictures on her phone. Makes a "tsk tsk" sound, sighs,

then starts to lean over a fourth time.

LINCOLN opens his eyes, sits up, puts his pillow away in the backpack at his feet, pulls out a big paperback book, and starts to read it. NANCY pulls back as he does this, looking slightly annoyed, but also apologetic or embarrassed. She straightens out and puts a smile on her face.

NANCY

Don't you just love mountains?

LINCOLN

Excuse me?

NANCY

The mountains.

Points out window

Aren't they just lovely?

LINCOLN

Um, yea, I guess.

NANCY

The pictures are for my son-in-law. He's a geologist. Works at the university. I think he said he teaches a class about mountains.

Pause

They really are lovely. We don't have them where I'm from.

LINCOLN

Does not look up from his book

Hmm.

NANCY

Florida. I live in Tampa.

Pause. LINCOLN does not acknowledge or look up from his book.

Well, actually, I'm from Nebraska, but at this point I've lived more of my life in Florida than Nebraska. But that's not counting the time I lived in Paris.

Dreamy look on her face

Either way, no mountains.

Another pause. LINCOLN still does not acknowledge or look up from his book.

NANCY

Do you live in California?

LINCOLN continues to look at his book.

LINCOLN

Yea. L.A. Well, Pico Rivera.

NANCY

So then you're used to the mountains.

Pause

Do you ski? Fish?

Lincoln closes his book, using his finger as a marker and looks at NANCY.

LINCOLN

I see them, but I don't visit them. They're just kind of... there. I've honestly never given much thought to the

mountains. I'm really enjoying this book though.

NANCY glances over at the book.

NANCY

That's a really big book. Usually on planes I bring light reading. I read that somewhere. Or heard it. Maybe on TV. That you should bring light reading on an airplane. Something not so bulky.

LINCOLN

I started it before my trip and I'm trying to finish it before we land.

NANCY

I see. Well, enjoy. Sure is a big book.

LINCOLN opens his book back up and continues reading. NANCY glances around her, searching. Her eyes meet those of the woman across the aisle. The woman has a small toddler on her lap. NANCY smiles, almost relieved.

NANCY

What a doll. She sure is well behaved.

WOMAN

Awe, thank you. She's having fun, I think.

NANCY

Is this her first trip?

LINCOLN looks up to see what is going on.

WOMAN

Oh no, she flies pretty often. Her grandparents live in

Florida.

NANCY

Oh? Which part?

LINCOLN rolls his eyes and goes back to reading.

WOMAN

Melbourne. It's near Orlando.

NANCY

Well isn't that funny, I live there, too! Well, Tampa actually. Just across the aisle, just like we are now. Isn't that funny. I have friends that live near Melbourne though. Their son is stationed there so they moved there to be closer to him and his family. Air Force, I think.

WOMAN

Oh, how nice.

NANCY

Should I thank you for your service?

WOMAN

Excuse me?

NANCY

Are you folks military?

WOMAN

Oh no, we're not. Just live there.

NANCY

I see.

Slight pause

Visit Disney World often?

WOMAN

Smiles and sighs a little

We haven't taken her yet. We figure she's still a little too young to really understand.

NANCY

Never too young to have fun. That's what I say. You should take her!

Woman smiles to appease NANCY.

NANCY's face winces and she grabs her neck.

WOMAN

Are you okay?

NANCY

Oh yes. Just a crick in my neck. Not as young as I used to be. You enjoy your flight. She really is precious. They grow up so fast...

Waves to the baby, then turns back around. As she turns, her smile fades.

NANCY turns back to LINCOLN

NANCY

So what's the big book about?

LINCOLN smiles and shakes his head a little in a "you've got to be kidding me" way. He reaches down to his backpack and pulls out a bookmark, puts it in the book, then closes the book

LINCOLN

Vampires, I think?

NANCY

You think? Looks like you're at least 400 pages in at this point. Seems like you'd have some idea what a book is about 400 pages in.

LINCOLN laughs

LINCOLN

A friend loaned it to me. She's picking me up from the airport. That's why I was trying to finish it. It's okay though, really. I still had 200 pages to go. I wasn't going to finish it.

NANCY

Well, like I said, it must not be that good if you can't even tell a person what it's about.

LINCOLN looks down at his book, a pensive look on his face, then looks back up at Nancy.

LINCOLN

It's alright, I guess. It's just a little weirder than stuff I usually read. I'm pretty sure there's a deeper, hidden meaning that I'm not seeing. Has to be. I mean, it does have vampires. Or what I think are vampires, but I think maybe they stand for something else? Like a metaphor maybe? Humanity's lost its...humanity?

NANCY

Sounds terrible.

LINCOLN

Laughs

Honestly, I really don't know. My friend Patty kept saying how much I'd love it, that everyone needs to read it. When she dropped me off at the airport, she handed it to me. I think she thought maybe it would help get my mind off of things. Give me something to do.

LINCOLN chuckles again, then stops and just stares at the book, lost in thought.

NANCY

My daughter bought me one of those electric book things. She put about a hundred books on it before she gave it to me. That way if I got bored with one, I could just pick another one.

NANCY pauses, looks up toward the corner of the ceiling as if contemplating.

I think she thinks I'm bored a lot. She asks me all the time, "Mom, do you have enough to keep you busy? Do you have enough hobbies? What about a knitting class?" Hah, like all old women need to knit. I lived in Paris for Christ's sake! People who lived in Paris don't knit. Well maybe they do, what the hell do I know?

LINCOLN furrows his brow, looking slightly confused, but interested.

LINCOLN

Well, is she right?

NANCY

About what?

LINCOLN

Does she have a reason to think you are bored?

NANCY

Maybe, I don't know. I think I get along just fine.

Shakes her head.

But that's not my point. The problem is that now I have too many options and I can never decide what to read! When I got it, I gave it a try. A good, heartfelt try. And when a book disappointed me, or I didn't get the point of it, I did what she suggested and just moved on to the next one. But then I just kept moving on, and on, and on. Never finished a damn book. So now it just sits on my nightstand, collecting dust.

LINCOLN raises his eyebrows and opens his eyes wider in dramatic boredom. NANCY does not notice.

I'd never tell her I hate it though. It'd just break her heart if she knew I didn't like it. So sometimes I tell her, "Jenny, I just love that book thing you got me. Use it all the time." Maybe you could just tell Patty you finished the book. Move on to something else.

LINCOLN

Thinks about it for a second

Yea, maybe.

Laughs

Your e-book problem kinda sounds like me and Netflix. Do you live by your daughter?

NANCY

Oh no. She hates Tampa. Says the humidity makes her hair frizzy. Makes a lot of jokes about alligators though.

LINCOLN

Huh.

Slight pause. LINCOLN looks away, thinking NANCY is finished talking.

NANCY

You know, I have yet to see a single alligator?

LINCOLN looks a bit startled and he quickly turns his head back to NANCY.

Been there going on 35 years and I hear about them all the time on the news, "Gator ate dog, gator attacks school children." Did you hear a gator killed a kid on vacation at Disney World? That poor kid. Happiest place on Earth my rear end. Well, not for him at least. But ain't that life. Full of promises and hope. Stability. And then...

NANCY looks lost in thought for a moment, then snaps back into rapid speech.

But I've never actually seen one. At the zoo maybe, and one time I made Frank drive me down to an alligator farm, just so I can say I saw one, but not in the wild. Not at my house. I guess they must not like me. Maybe they could bottle my pheromones and sprinkle them around DisneyWorld.

They both give an awkward chuckle.

So terrible. That poor kid. Oh well. What was I saying? Oh yea, she lives in Denver.

Makes a snarky face

Jenny and Dave. And they've got a little boy, my grandson

Braydon. Like that's a real name. But I don't say anything. Not my place, not my kid. Plus, it'd break her heart if she knew I didn't like my own grandson's name.

Looks down, slight pause

So, I keep my mouth shut. Give'm hugs when I see him. Call him on his birthday.

Slight pause, quickly picks her head back up

Anyway,

Smiles

I stopped there to visit for a few days on my way to L.A.

Pause

What's Netflix?

LINCOLN

Laughs

It's kinda like your electronic book thing, but with movies and shows. You watch them on a TV, or your phone or iPad.

NANCY

Huh. What'll they think of next...

LINCOLN

You know, I think I'm going to keep trying to figure it out. The book, I mean. Mind if I keep reading?

NANCY

Of course! Don't let me be the one to stand in your way of learning the deeper meaning behind vampires.

Winks

LINCOLN smiles at NANCY, looks to the window, relieved, then opens his book back up and continues to read.

NANCY picks up the in-flight magazine from the seat-back pocket again and starts flipping pages quickly, trying to find something she hasn't read yet. She sighs, then puts the magazine back into the pocket. She starts looking around again, searching.

NANCY turns to the woman across the aisle again and points out her window.

NANCY

Oh look, there's another airplane out there. It looks like we're racing! Maybe they're trying to beat us to L.A. I think maybe the little one would like to see. Can she see from that side?

WOMAN

Oh yea, look at that. Hey look Sydney, another airplane.

The baby does not look interested.

NANCY looks disappointed as she turns around to face forward. She sighs loudly. LINCOLN slowly closes his book again, sighs, purses his lips into a makeshift smile, then turns to NANCY.

LINCOLN

So, who are you visiting in LA then?

NANCY's face lights up.

NANCY

Some old friends of mine. We all live in different parts of the country, so we never see each other. Sheila's in Seattle, Gayle lives in Montana, and poor Susan never left Nebraska, bless her heart. Betty lives in Twelve Oaks, I think? I don't know. I wrote it down somewhere, but now I can't find it. I just know she's picking me up from the airport.

LINCOLN

Thousand Oaks?

NANCY

That's it!

Laughs and shakes her head

Twelve Oaks. I'm so silly. That's where Scarlett O' Hara went to the fancy party before the Yankees burned it down.

LINCOLN looks confused

Anyway, we're all boarding a cruise ship in LA and setting sail for Maui.

*Does a little dance in her seat,
LINCOLN smiles*

Fourteen days of fruity slushy drinks, dancing, and sun without all the stupid mosquitoes ruining the mood. After Denver this'll be such a relief.

LINCOLN

You don't like Denver?

NANCY

Who likes Denver? That's like someone saying they like Nebraska.

Laughs

LINCOLN

Well that sounds like a great time. I'm sure you deserve it. I've never been to Hawaii. I've never really been anywhere.

NANCY

Oh! You've gotta go! So many places. And they make it so easy! You just pick a hotel, pick an airplane, and you just go!

LINCOLN

My mom and I were planning a trip to Alaska, but we just never went.

NANCY

Well you should. I bet she'd like that. A trip with her son. What mom wouldn't like that?

LINCOLN

Looks down at his lap, furrows brow.

She died, actually.

NANCY

Covers her mouth with her hand

Oh honey, I'm so sorry. How long?

LINCOLN

Still looking down

Last week. Cancer. They said she was getting better, then she just...died.

Looks up at NANCY. Pained look on his face

How does that happen?

Pause. NANCY is quiet, but her face

shows concern and pity.

Her funeral was in Denver. There was a cancer center there, so she moved there a couple years ago with my stepdad. Fell in love with the place. I think she really liked the snow. She always talked about living somewhere with snow. Some doctor with some new treatment said things sounded hopeful. Anyway... it's like you said about the alligators.

NANCY

Alligators?

LINCOLN

Things are full of hope and promise. Stability. You're planning a trip to Alaska, visiting Disney World. And then... it's just gone. Everything's different. Why does that happen?

NANCY

I don't know. I really don't know.

LINCOLN

Who is Frank?

NANCY

What?

LINCOLN

You said Frank took you to see the gators.

NANCY

Oh right.

Slight pause

Frank was my husband.

LINCOLN

Was?

NANCY

A year ago. Heart attack. Didn't see it coming.

LINCOLN

I'm sorry, too.

*NANCY looks down. She takes LINCOLN's hand in both of hers and squeezes it. She looks up and her eyes are filled with tears. Her lip trembles. The plane jumps and they jump with it, startled. A loud, electronic bell sound *BING* followed by an intercom voice, "Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seatbelts as we are experiencing a bit of turbulence." NANCY lets go of LINCOLN'S hand, wipes away her tears, then reaches forward and straightens out the magazine in the seat-back pocket. She looks at LINCOLN and laughs. He laughs, too.*

END OF PLAY

16

Characters

Rose, 16
Evan, 17
Olive, 17
Mar, 14
Aleena, 15
Mrs. Wilbur, 38

The stage is split into three. Stage right is the community center, folding chairs are lined up in a circle. Center stage is the school classroom with a whiteboard and desks in rows. Stage left is the hospital room with a hospital bed and a heart rate monitor. Lights rise on all three rooms. Each actor stands shoulder-to-shoulder. After the first line is said, they each go to the appropriate room.

ALL

Sixteen Seconds.

ROSE walks to the hospital room and lays in the hospital bed silent. The heart rate monitor is beeping at a slow, yet constant rhythm for most of the play.

EVAN, OLIVE, MAR and ALEENA walk to the community center and sit in the

folding chairs. ALEENA is timid and keeps quiet. Evan has his arm around Olive, comforting her. MAR is shaking his leg.

MRS. WILBUR

That's all it takes.

MRS. WILBUR walks into the community center. Lights up on the community center.

MRS. WILBUR

Thank you for coming, it's nice to see you all here. You, you're all so brave for being willing to share your feelings and support your peers. Everything you're feeling is natural and nothing to be ashamed of. Grief is not a sign of weakness.

Pause

Trauma is, difficult. It's personal. But it also has this, this unifying function. It has a way of bringing those of us with similar experiences together to relate and console and grieve and recover.

Slight pause

Recovery takes time, of course. All things ease over time. And, while the grief may never end, it is not a place to stay. I am here to help in any way that I possibly can. If not to alleviate pain, then to be an outlet for you to express that pain. I want you all to know that in this room, you, your feelings, your words are all safe. You can, and I encourage you all to do so, share whatever is on your mind at any point during our meetings. I hear you and I am here for you. And, please, keep Rose in your thoughts.

Lights go out in the community center.

When the lights rise again, the same actors are there, but sitting in different seats.

EVAN

The worst part is that I don't even feel calm in my own house. Like, the other day, I was coming down the stairs into the kitchen. I didn't know it, but my brother was hiding behind the corner. When I walked in he yelled, "AHHH."

Some of the students slightly jump at this.

EVAN

And I screamed and I said: "Why would you do that to me? Why would you scare me in my own house," and he just, he didn't get it. I teared up and he didn't get it. He got mad.

MRS. WILBUR

Sometimes it's difficult to discuss our feelings with those closest to us.

EVAN

I can't talk about it with him at all.

MRS. WILBUR

Hmm.

Pause

Let's do an exercise. I'll pretend to be you. You pretend to be your brother. Say what you think he'd tell you.

Evan nods.

MRS. WILBUR

Hey...

Pause

What's his name?

EVAN

Noah.

MRS. WILBUR

Nodding

Hey, Noah. Can I talk to you about something?

EVAN

Sure.

MRS. WILBUR

It's really important to me that you listen and hear me.

EVAN

I'm listening.

MRS. WILBUR

I know we rough-house and joke around with each other a lot. But, what happened last Friday, it shocked me.

EVAN

Okay...

MRS. WILBUR

And I don't think I can play those same games anymore. Not right now at least. I need time to get over how... shocked I'm feeling.

EVAN

Do you think I'd hurt you like that?

MRS. WILBUR

What? No. Oh my God no. I just / think that

EVAN

You didn't even see what happened.

MRS. WILBUR

I didn't have to see it to be disturbed by it.

EVAN

You're being a pussy.

MRS. WILBUR

Woah...

EVAN

Why are you so upset?

MRS. WILBUR

I just experienced something traumatic.

EVAN

Traumatic?

By this point, Mrs. Wilbur is growing increasingly upset, forgetting that they are roleplaying.

MRS. WILBUR

Yes, traumatic. Do you know what it's like to / go through something

EVAN

You don't know what real trauma is.

MRS. WILBUR

You don't get to police my feelings, you fucking ass-

She stops herself. The kids are silent.

MRS. WILBUR

Clearing throat

I'm sorry. Um, that was good for you to get that out. Cleanse your system. We tend to fear that those we love won't understand us. We assume the worst.

Pause

I think that'll be all for this meeting. I'll see you all tomorrow. Have a safe and peaceful night, keep Rose in your thoughts. She'd be here if she could.

Lights go out in the community center. When the lights rise again, the same actors are there, but sitting in different seats.

ALEENA

Every time I close my eyes, I can hear it.

The students all nod.

ALEENA

My ears are still ringing. I hear the sound and I'm taken back for a second before I realize I'm just at home in bed.

Pause

The garage door opens, I hear it.

The car starts, I hear it.

The house is silent, I hear it.

I hear it in everything and in nothing at all.

Pause

MRS. WILBUR

Loud noises can trigger an extreme response. It's important to remember the grounding techniques. To connect with the here and now, do you remember any?

ALEENA

Play some music, take deep breaths, touch or smell or look at my surroundings.

MRS. WILBUR

That's good.

ALEENA

But it doesn't always help.

Silence

ALEENA

It should have been me.

Pause

Mrs. Wilbur walks over to Aleena and puts her hand on her shoulder.

MRS. WILBUR

Don't say that. You had no control over anything that happened.

ALEENA

I was standing right next to her, it could have been me.

Mrs. Wilbur stays silent and hugs Aleena.

ALEENA

It should have been me, it should have been me.

Lights go out in the community center. When the lights rise again, the same actors are there, but sitting in different seats.

MAR

When I think about it, I cry. So I've been trying not to. But, I don't think I can have all this inside me anymore.

Pause

We always have drills. We did what we were taught to.

OLIVE

We did everything we could.

MAR

It doesn't make it easier. It doesn't make it right.

OLIVE

No, it doesn't.

Mar gets up and walks into the class-room, he sits in one of the desks. Olive follows.

MAR

It's all so vivid in my head but it feels more like a dream, or a nightmare, than real life.

They both get up and begin stacking the desks like a barricade, almost robotically, as if it is a task they do daily. As they do this, the heart rate monitor in the hospital room begins to beep rapidly.

MAR

We locked the door.

OLIVE

We turned off the lights.

MAR

We silenced our phones, but some of us used them.

OLIVE

To send a warning.

MAR

To send an I love you.

OLIVE

To send our goodbyes.

Mrs. Wilbur slowly walks into the classroom. She watches them stacking the desks. She's scared.

MRS. WILBUR

I tried to remain calm. I told you to stay away from the windows.

MAR

We sat on the ground.

OLIVE

In the corner of the room.

MRS. WILBUR

I didn't know how to comfort you, but I had to.

OLIVE

We heard sirens in the distance.

MRS. WILBUR

This is real.

MAR

It was over quickly. But we kept still.

The heart rate monitor flatlines then goes silent. Perhaps there's red and blue lights flashing, like police car lights.

OLIVE

Not because we had to, but because moving was too hard.

MRS. WILBUR

I noticed Rose wasn't early to class that morning like usual.

MAR

We were escorted out of the room in a single-file line.

OLIVE

Leave your belongings.

MAR

Come out with your hands on your head.

MRS. WILBUR

This is real.

Aleena receives a text. She covers her mouth.

ALEENA

Quietly

No, no.

MRS. WILBUR

There was blood on the concrete.

OLIVE

I closed my eyes when we walked past.

MAR

I didn't want to believe it.

ALEENA

This can't be real.

They all freeze, broken out of the trance and look at her.

ALEENA

After a moment

She's gone, Rose is gone.

Silence

The lights go out on all three rooms. When they come back up, ALEENA, MAR, EVAN, OLIVE, MRS. WILBUR, and ROSE are standing shoulder to shoulder again.

ALL

Sixteen seconds.

ALEENA

I went to visit Rose every day in the hospital. The day I didn't, her body decided it needed to give up. She couldn't deal with the pain anymore and I don't think I blame her. I was there, that Friday. I was standing next to her. Five inches to the right and I would have been the one in the hospital bed instead of her. But, when the bullet hit her, she fell on top of me. She saved me. She didn't mean to and I didn't deserve it, but she saved me. How can I keep going when she no longer can?

ALL

Sixteen seconds.

EVAN

I wasn't there. I was in the parking lot. When I heard the first shot, I thought a generator blew. But after the second and the third and the fourth, I felt sick to my stomach. I got in my friend's car. I called my mom, "Mom there's shots, there's shots." She didn't believe me at first. "Are you sure?" I didn't see them. In honesty, I wasn't sure. I had never heard a gunshot before. But I wasn't going to stick around to find out. I wasn't going to stick around to be sure. We drove away. We drove to my house. How do I deal with the guilt of not being there?

ALL

Sixteen seconds.

OLIVE

School shootings are something you hear about happening in towns and states that are not your own. You get angry and sad and you hurt for those that lost their lives, but at the end of the day you can fall asleep at night knowing that for now, you're safe. It wasn't you. It wasn't your town. But this time it was. When it happens, it won't feel real. There is a cloud of disbelief and for a lot of the time, you have to remind yourself that yes, it happened, and yes it was real. And for a lot of the time, you won't know how to carry on. How do I go to school when my classmates no longer can?

ALL

Sixteen seconds.

MAR

Walking onto campus makes me uneasy. My knees shake and my thoughts race. A classroom is where you learn. It is

not supposed to be the place where you hide for your life. Desks are no longer desks, but objects you use to barricade the door. Metal water bottles and keys and fire extinguishers are no longer what they once were, but weapons you hold in case you have to fight. And you'll have to fight. Whether in person or with your fists or in your head or with your voice. There will always be a fight. How do I wake up days, weeks, months, years from now and pretend everything's alright?

ALL

Sixteen seconds.

MRS. WILBUR

I am always stuck in that place. In that room. I am calling out, I am trying, straining to tell everyone that it will be okay but I can't make a sound. I am a voiceless leader sworn to protect but unable to provide. I see the faces of my students all the time. In my dreams, they're scared and I am tethered to my desk, I can't help them. In the news, they're statistics shown on a graph. In the classroom, they're staring, waiting, praying it never happens again. How do I help them fight their fears when I can't even conquer my own?

ALL

Sixteen seconds.

ROSE

Two weeks before all this, my friends threw me a surprise birthday party. It was my sixteenth birthday party, and they got me this sweater I'd been wanting.

ALEENA

It was baby blue. Her favorite color.

ROSE

It was cloudy that morning. I decided to wear it and I felt

good. I felt confident. My friends were the greatest people I knew and for that, I'm so thankful.

She holds Aleena's hand.

ROSE

I was waiting outside with them that morning before class. I spent the last minutes of my life with them in the hospital. By the time we realized he had pulled a gun out of his bag, he had already shot me once in the shoulder. The next bullet hit me in the head.

MRS. WILBUR

No future.

ALEENA

No goodbye.

Rose lets go of Aleena's hand.

ROSE

He shot seven rounds in sixteen seconds. They hit me and four other students before he pointed it at himself. At least he knew what was going to happen. My life was taken from me without warning. My parents dropped me off at school that morning in my new sweater and I was sent back home in a body bag.

Rose walks to center stage.

ROSE

Today, you all live,

ALL

but there's no law to thank.

ROSE

If not me,

ALL

then somebody else.

ROSE

How many more children do we have to lose?

ALL

Sixteen Seconds.

ROSE

That's all it took.

Lights out.



POETRY



The Ranch House

Annabelle Bonebrake

When Natasha went blind, it took us years to notice;

she knew the corners
of the table like
protrusions
of elbows,

she knew turns
of the hallway like
the channels
of her femurs.

She watched us,
coming in with the groceries
and going out with trash.

She announced visitors
clicking like a skipping stone
down the hall.

She watched us
until her eyes became
nickel discs
polished to reflection

cataracts
pooling

on my arm flesh, where I've bumped
into corners

showing signs
of being neither here and there.

Now she is barking
at a back bell that no longer operates,
for the milkman,

who no longer comes.

Calenture

Lignin is sister to vanilla,
a chemical component of book-paper
that haunts the page
like perfume in an empty room.
Shouldn't memory be softer?
Shouldn't a ghost be less material?
How much time will it take?
Why is it like this -
the seeping amber linger, the peripheral static cling
that falters, tears, loops back,
sharp with artifact
bright and incomplete -
It feels like a bad habit,
the cups half-finished crowding out your desk
boxes you'll never put away
books full of dog-eared pages
with creases that won't lie flat anymore.

How can it be spring anywhere?

Thin light falls through the doorway, morning-blue
I look up every time.

Human Error

I exist in a world between one mistake and the next.
the moment before the knife slams down on your fingers.
between the bet and the broken dart on the wall.
tripping on the doorframe into the room where it happens.
I exist in the milliseconds between stuttered consonants
on the 1 we were supposed to carry.
a fork in the road.
the dirt over a landmine.
at the weak links of a promise.
in the seconds before the judge sentences cruel and unusual.
I exist between cruel and unusual, diagnosed *human*, and put
on a chopping block.

I exist after the match is resting but before his world gets hot.
during the blink before the spaceship takes off, before we can't see it anymore.
I exist to feel I'm not.
to wonder what existing means.
if I'm doing it right.
if humans can.

The Making of a Self Portrait

walk on that very thin white line sweetie

Pure white walkways

Stay off dangerous dirt roads

uncharted, missing labels

you'll lose your way if there're too many choices sweetie

razor party in the bathroom

the birth of a morning ritual

small smiles sprout to see

stainless

gleaming

skin

below jungles of foliage

only a raised eyebrow at the destruction of

protective layers

and later heavy grief

to watch all the pieces of me wash down a drain

ten years later

dye poured down a sink

excess pigment

that belongs on someone else's head

it lacks my essence

fails to capture my
Image

Idea

(who made this self portrait?)

blood flows down drains
heavy with my story
green and purple pulses full of fuel and fire
floating into a draining universe
a shrinking box that I don't fit in
warning as soon as it hits the surface –
rotating siren

no chance to begin an unnecessary race
no new labels in a world full of
phony ideas
stuck.

Just follow the white line sweetie

In a phone on a screen on a lifestyle page
emulate a woman I'll never know
configure
reconfigure
recalculate
act like I'm a damn machine
And not the woman I am

I was just skipping, which wasn't enough
Turned into a race

I just wanted pen and paper, which wasn't enough
aimed for the Olympic medals instead

what is a poet going to do?

what does a poet have to say?

sometimes all I can hear are his words on replay

I thought I could change the world too when I was your age

sometimes I don't know where my words begin

where do his end

unexpected la rains and long isolated walks

school strikes and kindergarten talks

College classes and yogic meditation

pandemic closures and home experimentation

I've arrived

a moment full of pitiful irony

the world has slowed

given us back Time

I contemplate my

Patience

Silence

Stripped wisdom

I forfeited when asked

gave up my only weapon

they know what I did not

our ability to break through lines

damage small boxes that never contained us

eternal dedication to stand as a monument against
their *Declaration of What a Woman Ought to Be*

I've become

homegrown

Took back what was stripped

away

Carried along by those who stepped off the white line first
who radiate their natural light

on our dreams

opened doors that had been locked and hidden

I say without

remorse

or nostalgia for things passed

they never knew

not a damn clue

what I'd become

Tell them and Sigh

Raven Freebird

Sometimes I tell them what they want to hear
I confirm the lie
Made by genocidal ties

forget to remind myself
About the ndn
That dont look like u
Or me
That ndn is more ndn than
U or me

But how can that be
generations have known where we need to be
colonization broke our stories
true ndns
are lost bc of american history

I know it
Absorbed by the mainstream
lost ndn
Where could u be
Ur right in front of me

I'm sorry for your loss
Come back home

Record Keeping

paper pinned down by a tack
hanging like my legs swinging off the edge
hidden walk to a bus stop-
silver tray

ceiling full of minuscule holes

blue dress

instruments to erase
the unmistakable

veiled stories

conspiracies burning

pulsing in each space

my limbs fall onto a burning field

skin blisters

layers of me melt away

still I continue this record

an apocalyptic vault became my home
hidden among seeds of every plant in the world,

instruments to create
the unmistakable

I watch a pink hydrangea
admire her willingness to alert the others
her soil is acidic
everyone knows

she has been poisoned

she shows it off so proud
she knows it's not her doing
she knows her soil worth

yet I am so afraid

spit out the truth
like sunflower seeds
spit it out

But my words move backwards
choke me on the way down
ring in my ear
swim circles inside my head like this is playtime
slowly they slip onto the paper

I'm forced to take on my secrets
elements of my existence.
proof of weathered la storms

I have no answers

no resolution.

my expression ends mid-walk

frozen

on a bus heading nowhere

Elephant Keys

My auntie left a grand piano.
Ivory-keyed, it claimed
our Midtown living room.

Never tuned,
with true elephant keys--
a sound like a trumpet:

My auntie's unplayable piano.
Mom kept it spotless,
dusted with care.

She stored books in its bench,
laid lace across its cover--
useless and loved.

I offered a polish,
an overdue tuning.
But Mom went white,

whiter than ivory.
Ivory, she said, is precious.
A tuner would steal the keys,

replace them with plastic.

Good, I said.

Why keep an elephant in a living room?

Granite is the most common plutonic rock

Pilgrim Monument, Provincetown, MA

I pay \$12 to climb the granite tower, erected
to commemorate white men's colonization of a peninsula:
252 feet and 7.5 inches. Below, I see the 1,200 granite blocks
that brag how men can restrict an ocean's ebb and flow with a dike,
which most call a breakwater so as not to conflate it with women
men cannot control. Why not build granite cauldrons
to commemorate the women's first washing
on the shores of this new land? I walked out
along this dike where granite glistens, like humanity

when caught in the right angle of light. I glimpse
this too in the tower, specks locked in its walls
where each town's colonization is marked
in a smoothed granite stone that makes me wonder:

How many kitchen counters in Los Angeles
could this tower renovate? Will they etch in them the names
of the tenants they evict? Each slab a memorial
to progress. From above, I can see I only made it out a hundred

feet when I early walked out on the dike, not even to the shipwrecked body
leaning against the haphazardly placed stones. Their sharp surfaces
and phantom shadows that warn of possible slippage belie the depth
of each step. My body that usually apologizes

for all the space it takes up, feels insignificant as a feather
when the breeze rises through the tower and up my dress --
I see my body disappearing off the tower

or between the fissures in the dike
like the inside of a cracked egg slides between
the edge of the rent-doubling granite and a handed-down pan.

Perched on the dike and, later, the tower, I want to crawl
across the granite and absorb its strength against the breaking
water and wind, confident in its own purpose
even where it does not belong.

Owl Pellet

Cut me open,
like a third-grade child
learning the intricacies
of the owl's digestive tract.

Find faded singsongs,
wishes to plunge ink into flesh.

Examine torn fabric,
sun-bleached
imagery, forgotten
idolatry.

Feast your eyes
on shattered
polycarbonate gluttony
that at one time held the depths of the ocean.

Within the folds of regurgitated
matter, the promise of an individual,

but all lies crumble beneath the eye of the scalpel;
like the nine-year-old biologist

you will find nothing but hair and bones.

Reading myself in the dark

Fingers circle around the aureole
and, as if I have not spent 47 years in this body,
I wonder if will I know it when I feel it?

Self-touching

required a purpose: to find ecstasy or the bud of death,
never simply to learn the intimate shape
of my windpipe, the undulations in the deepest pits
of my body. I asked doctors to explain
what I felt. They transliterated each bump,
rolled sensors over me, reported it's "mostly normal."

After a decade under my mother's tutelage
I knew exactly how the dough should feel:
cool and firm, no stickiness, easy to knead.

Yet no one ever taught me what mortality feels like
in my body. No one taught me to savor
the wondrous ordinariness of my being:

how the diaphragm contracts to welcome in
air, relaxes to let it go when all that is needed
is extracted; how it is brilliantly placed to massage
the thoracic duct, moving lymph, the purifier,
the bearer of light, through this body.

Maybe it is all that light that makes it painful

to look in the mirror. I want to memorize
each fold of belly that holds my ovaries and to love
my knees equally, imperfect match that they are.
I want the maps of varicose rivers to be my landmarks,
and, in the morning, I want my hand, fully awake,
to recognize I am me by the curve of my breast.

The Doctor Attempts a Simile

It's like scraping your fingers
down a piece of fabric, the doctor mimes
the motion, some threads are left behind

In this case, the fabric is my uterine wall
and the finger is an oversized Q-tip removing
the mucous membranes and my body's freedom to choose
when it will shed what it decides it no longer needs

To explain to the doctor the pain of this denial
of my super power to wound, to release, to prepare to grow
stronger, I attempt my own simile

It's like you need to urinate really bad, for a whole week

But I realize, as he nods in practiced sympathy,
there is always a tree, an alley, a place to find easing

For men

Matriarchy, if it survived,
would have given me a Goddess
Cup and fed me chocolate as I bled

I cannot tell if the clench in my belly
is infection or rage

or the chili I ate. Next time, I vow,
to deliver my moon blood in a chalice:

here is my endometrium, poured out for you
to test in remembrance of
the unquestioned wisdom of patriarchy
I refuse to drink.

You

You
My first.
My very first.
You atrophied me, and
I knew, easily.
You craved, I
surrendered.
Young, dumb,
They say, always.
Because it was me.
First, my fault.
Not yours.
Me.
You
My another.
Yet another.
You trophied me, and
I believed, knowingly.
You craved, I
numbed.
Old, dumber,
I'd say, turning.
I did it, too.
Was still me.
With you,
Motherfucker.

The Year Without Meaning

The hardest thing about losing

a year without sunrise. On the horizon,

blooms as heaven turns its back on barren

Among the moaning, trees, a realization that winter will not meet

Outside my window, a nexus of storms, north

in a cold valley, drying up bloodlines. How

my grief becomes, a museum of days/nights

like a secret eaching on repeat. The past

erasing present. What's your name?

Remember how you laughed

when I wrapped red scarves

'round soft curls & we raced

to Papa's house with the

top down. I kissed your

daughters,

absence

landscapes.

spring.

winds

crowded

layered

cheek. My heart wide
open/raw. Your love
deteriorating like
something
skinned.

Sour

Everyone has tasted something sour. Limes, vinegar, candy.
Most people enjoy it, to a degree.
It's a novelty. Some people can't stand it, even a little bit;
they want it as far away from them as
possible. Some people claim that they can never get
enough, that they wish everything they ate
was sour.

But that's not true. It can't be. Because acid is an irritant, no
matter what you do.
There *is* a limit.
Your mouth starts to feel raw.
Your stomach aches.
So you stop eating.

Some people are like that.
Sour.

You like them at first. They warn you that it won't last. That
your mouth will get sore, and your
stomach will start to hurt. That you'll leave.

And they're right.
Because they've seen it so many times before.

You'll try your best to stay, to push through, but they will slowly dissolve your strength. The things they say, the way they act, the things they do. Will slowly start to wear on you, like sandpaper in your mouth. And the more it wears, the worse it feels to have even a little bit. Until you can't tolerate it anymore.

"You're an acquired taste."

"You're fine in small doses."

"If you could just tone it down a little bit."

You don't have to sugar coat it.
They know.

They're annoying.
They're too much to handle.
They know.

They know because their mouths are blistered. Their stomachs always churn.
But they can't stop eating. They can't eat anything else.

"Why are you like that?"
Sour.

I don't know.

Mothers

I am who I am because of her.

Momma raised anxiousness and ambition.

I wrote truth that ruined what mom was trying to hide.

I had six people read it before sending it to her.

Addiction is a familial relation as close as cousin or aunt.

I knew addiction well and watched him wreck

Every person I loved. Six homes in five years was not a choice.

But the burden that was not mine haunted me from the spaces

I thought were most comfortable.

No use getting angry with the way she's wired.

She never wanted to be a mother and left her daughter

To clean up every mess she made. I felt bad for her until

I found the dirty pipes hidden in the walls, behind drawers,

In her purse.

Six homes in five years because I had people in my life

Who saw a promise and encouraged me more than

My mother's jealousy ever could.

They saw me as a vessel. I absorbed what they gave.

I needed to love myself as much as they loved me.

I am who I am because of the warm,

Fierce love of mothers who were not my own.

Nora, Jodi, Jess, Ms. Ana

All these mothers gave me the unconditional.

A village to produce achievement over anxiety.

I am these women who helped me in
More ways than I can count on my fingers.
I am more than any feeling of anger or depression could
proclaim
In the shadows of fear. I am a beauty
that took the minds of great women to mold.

Why Buy the Cow?

You repeated the old maxim
and you told me:

prudes live longer.
And you suggested

I curdle my milk
in the hot sun,

cover my spots
with massive sunglasses

and a sullen frown--
just to be safe.

And you said,
keep an eye out for magic beans:

if you get lucky,
you can trade them

for your own agency.
But don't get too lucky,

you said,
keep an eye out for the merchant:

if you give your milk for free,
one day he'll slaughter you.

But also, you said,
keep an eye out for the farmer:

if you price your milk too high,
one day he'll slaughter you.

Never close your eyes,
you said,

sometimes cows get stolen,
(like you got stolen)

even when they don't produce
any milk at all.

They Remind Me of Home

Raven Freebird

I bought these
long Dentalium earrings
back in October 2019
It is now April 2020
The cost?
80 bucks & a beaded heart
I still haven't gotten those earrings

The people I complain to, ask me
"Why don't you get your money back?"
"Why are you waiting so long?"

If they could picture a sliver
of my world
they would see
the earrings that remind me
of my mommy

a pair of
beautiful, one-of-a-kind,
long Dentalium earrings

I remember them on mom
before being ripped from her
She was breathtaking

These earrings remind me of mom
the one place I called home

Once at a powwow
fresh brown skin
& thirteen years young

I saw a pair of
long
Dentalium
earrings
They gave me a longing
of being

"How much?"
I even asked if she would give me an indian discount
like the way mom would have

"\$200"
& laughed at me
for asking about the indian discount
"It's 2013 girl"

ndns really know how to give bad news
maybe it's because
they are usually on the receiving end

I only had \$5
an urban Indian taken,
Taken
from my community
long before I could choose to run

I never did learn how to be kin with
Dentalium

Now I know
The system
captures broke kids
and shows them
the only way
to achieve their dreams
is thru material things

& so, I was taught
to Reach for the dream

a home projected to look
something like
a long
pair of
Dentalium earrings

So now that I can afford them, I don't want to let them go
\$90 and a trade

& when I get the
long Dentalium
earrings
I can say
"Mom, I'm finally home"

“참다”

Korean Word for “Endure”

Divorce,
they say is an act of heresy.
Accidental purple and green clouds
that never rains
emerges around her eyes.
Obedient shadows not allowed to speak
unless spoken to.
Home,
a nest of thorns.
Kitchen crowded with boxes of empty bottles
of disappointment
stacked upon the other.
Walls aren't walls,
for they whisper reality.
Baby sister cries.
Runaways can't survive outside.
The wardrobe inside their room.
beneath the extra blankets.
lies a small wooden box
without a lock.
My only escape
comforts me to sleep
every night.



CONTRIBUTORS



CHRISTINA ALFARO

Christina Alfaro is a storyteller by day and writer by night. She tells her stories on a yoga mat with body shapes and meditations, or in front of the elementary school children she works with everyday. Her favorite sounds are kids' laughter, ocean waves, and the silence during Savasana. She will earn a B.A. in Creative Writing this fall from CSUN.

Instagram: [@yogi.christina](https://www.instagram.com/yogi.christina)

Website: flowingstoriesyoga.com

EMILY BURTON-UDUWANA

Emily Burton-Uduwana (she/her) is a poet and graduate student based in Southern California. Her work has appeared in recent issues of *Stonecoast Review*, *Pensive*, and *Miracle Monocle*.

SOPHIA CENTURION

Sophia Centurion is a student writer based in LA and currently attending CSUN as a senior. She is majoring in Sociology with a Creative Writing minor. She started writing in 2018 at College of the Canyons where she was asked to read in the 2018 and 2019 Poets and Writers Events. Her first publication was in the 2019 issue of COC's Literary Magazine: *Cul-de-Sac*.

SARAH CESTA

Sarah Cesta is a senior at California State University, Northridge, studying English Creative Writing. Her short play, *16*, was inspired by the shooting that took place at her alma mater, Saugus High School, on November 14, 2019. She is currently working on her first full-length play. You can keep up with her on Instagram: [@ohsarahmichelle](https://www.instagram.com/ohsarahmichelle)

LISA EVE CHEBY

Lisa Eve Cheby, a librarian, poet, and daughter of immigrants, holds an MFA from Antioch and an MLIS from SJSU. Her poems and reviews have appeared in various journals and the anthologies including *Drawn to Marvel*, *Coiled Serpent*, and *Accolades*. She was a SAFTA Writer in Residence. Her chapbook, 'Love Lessons from Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Dancing Girl Press),' was featured in The Wardrobe's Best Dressed Series.

Website: <http://lisacheby.wordpress.com>

BEAU DESTEFANI

Beau DeStefani is a senior in his last semester at California State University, Northridge. He plans to finish his bachelor's degree in Marketing, and hopefully find a company to call home sometime next year. He writes fiction/creative nonfiction in his spare time for fun. He is in the midst of writing his first novel and first screenplay. He has no social media displaying his works, but if you wish to read any more of his stories you can email him at beaudestefani@gmail.com or message him on Instagram [@crowdebeff](https://www.instagram.com/crowdebeff)

EMILY FOYTEK

Emily Foytek is an English major here at CSUN. She is also the Assistant Managing Editor of *The Northridge Review*. Emily has written short stories and poems for nearly twenty years, and takes great pride in being a part of this magazine. If you wish to follow Emily's journey, you can follow her on Twitter [@em_foytek](https://twitter.com/em_foytek). Fun fact: Emily is an avid crocheter!

sam goli

sam goli is a writer and musician from Los Angeles, California whose work has been published by *Angel City Review* and *The Northridge Review*. Currently, they are writing their first book, *tiny portraits*, which focuses on various forms of identity, language, memory, and ancestral/familial trauma, and producing a collection of songs for an EP. Sometimes they perform around L.A. When they are not creating, they train for a 545-mile bicycle ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles, raising money to benefit the Los Angeles LGBT Center, which provides life-saving services for people living with HIV/AIDS. To date, they have raised over \$21,000. To find more of their work, visit their website at www.asleeplessmind.com or [@a_sleepless_mind](https://www.instagram.com/a_sleepless_mind) on Instagram.

ISRAEL HERNANDEZ

Israel Muratalla is a queer writer and aspiring teacher from Ensenada, Mexico, currently residing in the San Fernando Valley. He is an English student and writing tutor at CSUN. He was previously featured in *The Northridge Review* Spring 2020 edition with his short story "La Llorona". You can follow him on Twitter ([@israelmuratalla](https://twitter.com/israelmuratalla)) or Instagram ([@israel_muratalla](https://www.instagram.com/israel_muratalla)) for future updates.

SHEREE LA PUMA

Sheree La Puma is an American poet and memoirist whose work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Redivider*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *WSQ*, *Chiron Review*, *SRPR*, *The Rumpus*, *Plainsongs*, *Into The Void*, and *I-70 Review*, among others. Her poetry was recently nominated for Best of The Net and a Pushcart Prize, her micro-chapbook, 'The Politics of Love,' was published in August by *Ghost City Press*.

Sheree has a new chapbook, 'Broken: Do Not Use,' due out in 2021 with *Main Street Rag Publishing*. She received her M.F.A. in Writing from California Institute of the Arts and lives in Valencia, California with her partner.

Website: www.shereelapuma.com

Twitter: [@Shereewrites](https://twitter.com/Shereewrites)

Instagram: [@shereewrites](https://www.instagram.com/shereewrites)

Facebook: www.facebook.com/shereewritespoetry

ELIZABETH LAO

Elizabeth Lao is a recent CSUN graduate with a B.A. in English Literature. She loves Sappho, ghost stories, baking, and making digital art. You can find her languorously wandering through misty fields looking very haunted and/or tragic. It has been alleged that she, at certain times and in outrageous circumstances, writes.

HARRISON MANZANO

Harrison Manzano is a California native. He has been attending California State University, Northridge since 2017 as a Creative Writing major. His main interests are playing guitar and singing. Harrison's main outlet for creative writing is his songwriting for his band, *Rotten Apple Trees*. You can find Harrison and his band at [@rottenappletreesband](https://www.instagram.com/rottenappletreesband) and rottenappletrees.com.

MAYA/M.E. RILES

Maya Riles, or M.E. Riles, is a writer of 15 years and is a senior at CSUN majoring in English, Creative Writing. Her writing career started at the age of 7 when her family moved from Canoga Park to West Hills. Since early childhood, she was "different." She was born with a stutter that sometimes caused muteness. She was always the quiet bookworm who could not make friends. She was of mixed race. Born an American of black, Chinese, and Native heritage, she was too "white" for her classmates of black or African descent, "too dark" for her classmates of Asian descent, and too "exotic" or "confusing" for those of white or Latino descent. Writing was always a means for her to escape the mental and sometimes physical torment that she endured in silence for years. Since, she has confronted her past to embrace it as a source of strength.

She writes to provide catharsis, give hope, to make people laugh on the worst of days, and feel a heartbeat on the numbest of days. She writes to meet a thousand people, and tell them: "You're never alone."

Instagram: [@m.e.riles](https://www.instagram.com/m.e.riles)

To her fellow anime nerds: <https://www.fanfiction.net/u/6342049/>

AJA RUSSELL

Aja Russell is an undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing. She started school undecided, but quickly discovered that she possessed not only a desire to write, but a necessity to. She spends most of her time writing realistic fiction and creative nonfiction, with occasional dips into poetry, despite her aversion to the genre as a whole. She plans to begin graduate school in the fall, pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

HAN SUN KWON

Han Sun Kwon is a 2020 CSUN undergraduate for English/Creative Writing. He was born in Los Angeles and raised in Burbank, California. His parents were both from Seoul, South Korea. His hobbies include reading works by Cormac McCarthy, watching films, listening to early 2000's music, and driving. He hope to become an editor for MotorTrend

and attend grad school to teach community college. He plans to continue to write and become a known writer. He would like to thank Professor Angela Morales from GCC for guiding him, and CSUN faculty Professor Dorothy Barresi and Professor Martin Pousson for their support and incredible knowledge.

Follow his Instagram account [@bisonontheroad](#)

JAKE TILLIS

Jake Tillis was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley. He is in his last semester of undergrad at CSUN majoring in Creative Writing, and this is his second publication in *The Northridge Review* - the first being the Spring 2020 issue. His Instagram is [@jaketillis](#)

NATALIE VAN GELDER

Natalie Van Gelder is a graduate student in Creative Writing and a teaching associate at California State University, Northridge. Her research and writing interests center around speculative fiction and the medical humanities, especially the use of speculative fiction to foster empathy and understanding in the field of mental health. She is often inspired by her childhood and the landscapes of the Mojave Desert where she grew up.