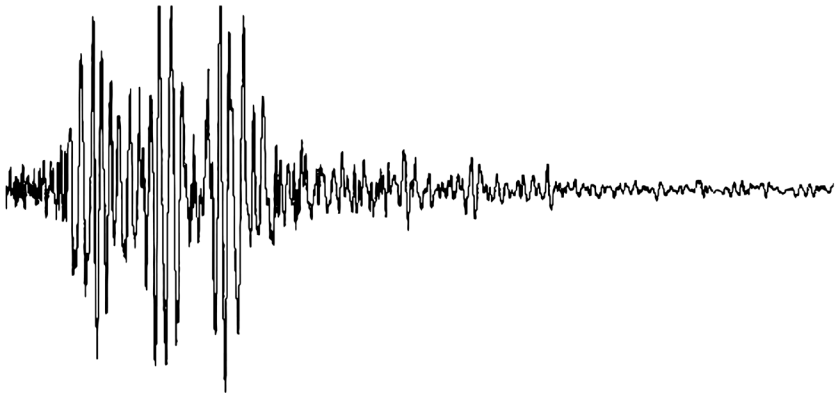


# The Northridge Review



Spring 2020 Digital Edition

# A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

The Northridge Review thanks the Associated Students of CSUN, the English Department and Creative Writing Program faculty and staff—especially Dr. Kent Baxter, Dr. Jackie Stallcup, Dr. Beth Wightman, and Suren Seropian—for the aid and support that keeps this literary project alive and flourishing. We also thank Dr. Katharine Haake and Frank De La Santo for your continued support, generosity, and wisdom. And thank you Wendy Ventura, Marlene Cooksey, and Wendy Say for helping us in Frank’s place during his paternity leave. Thank you Ellen Jarosz for facilitating our visit to Special Collections & Archives. Special thanks to Don Share for sharing your insight in literary publishing with our team, and to Hannah Kucharzak for guaranteeing access to *Poetry*. Thank you Elizabeth Lao for illustrating our lovely faces for this issue. Thank you Jen Eto for the headshots on the website masthead. Lastly, thank you Sean Pessin for your brilliant guidance and dedication to literary art and education, and for being the fabulous rock star that you are.

# E d i t o r ' s   N o t e

Dear Reader,

This book represents a long tradition of student-run literary publishing that continues to evolve with the ever-changing and diversifying CSUN community. Founded in 1962, *The Northridge Review* has survived because of our ability to adapt and weather the unexpected and extraordinary circumstances that life presents to us. That said, it should come as no surprise to you to hear that our team has devoted countless hours of their time, working remotely from their shelters-in-place, in order to bring this issue into existence. We are proud to present *The Northridge Review* in our most unique form to date, one that is hopefully accessible to a wider scope of readers than we have previously been able to reach.

Thank you for picking up and reading this book. I know that you will enjoy your time with the works of our lovely contributors. I hope that you continue to support our publication and the future of literary arts and publishing.

Onward,

Jen Eto

Managing Editor



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**Art**

*Ching-Chien Yeh*









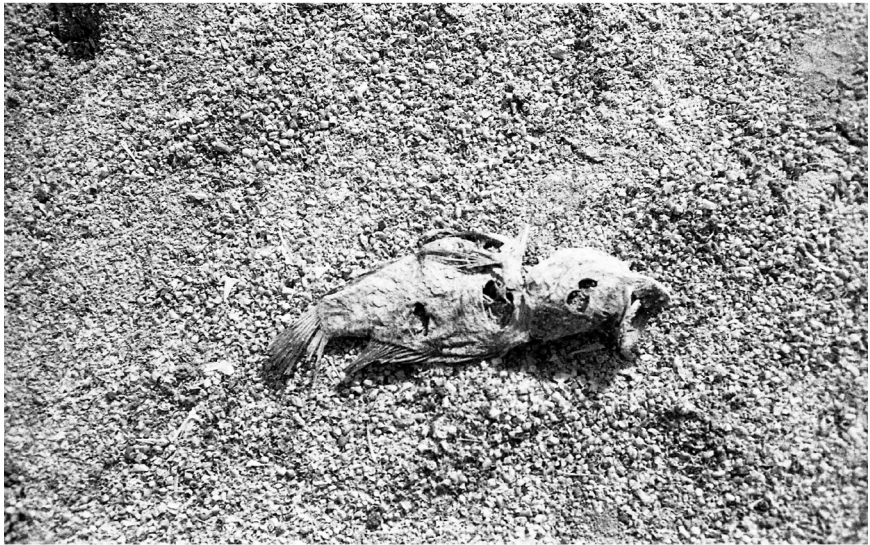


















Serrata con Venezia

*Natalie Jean Porras*





Human

*Benjamin Orozco*













break

*sam goli*



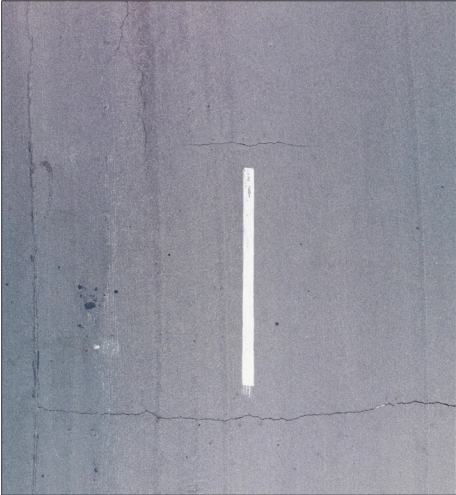
mother

*sam goli*



Face Your Fears

*Khanfucious*





# Poetry

# ovejita

B i a n k a B e r m u d e z

. I  
When you were little  
you never wanted to hang out with  
boys,  
but neither did I,  
those totems made of mud,  
cracking to dust  
beneath my gaze.

It didn't mean anything then.  
It didn't have to.

Fourteen years old,  
five years and six hours away from me,  
I was playing dress-up online  
and you were playing dress-up  
for your parents.

You would have rather been playing  
with the girl who smiled at you,  
twirled her hair,  
and your stomach, in  
bathroom stall confessionals. But.

We were taught to love a God  
mighty, and big, and bold.



Unlike yours,  
mine loved me back.

Here is the apology  
he'll never give you:

You didn't come out,  
you were hunted.  
(I'm sorry.)  
Hands all around you  
(I'm sorry.)  
locked in a room  
(I'm sorry.)  
for hours  
and hours  
(I'm sorry.)  
with only shadows of your  
*mami and papi*  
(I'm sorry.)  
trying to pray  
their daughter  
into their *hija*.  
(I'm sorry.)

Yes, we were taught to hate  
but it was far too late,  
far too late,  
the words that went unspoken,  
festering,  
cavities in our teeth,  
leaving us  
aching.

They'd say  
*resa por tu prima*  
she's a little bit lost.  
But what is there to pray for  
when there's nothing  
wrong?

And would you pray for me?  
Would you pray for me, too?

*Ovejita,*  
They think you're a bible verse,  
about going astray,  
painted themselves as shepherds,  
but they're the crooks.

So, I remember  
how *mami* always says  
*no sabes buscar,*  
feel the words tumble  
out my mouth like yarn  
from wool,  
because if they'd been looking  
just a little harder  
they would've found

you had never  
gone away.

. II

*Ovejita,*

you are not unforgivable;  
there is nothing to forgive.

But,

I'd still wash your feet,  
I'd still bless you,  
even though it doesn't mean  
much to you anymore,  
I'd still look at the first person  
with poison on their tongue,  
and let he who is without sin  
cast the first stone.

Know this. Know this. Know this. And:

I hope you never regret a single thing,  
I hope you hold your wife's hand every day,  
I hope the weight is comfortable against  
your own,  
the easiest thing in the whole world,  
worn with time.  
with affection.  
lines tracing from one palm  
to the other,  
without seams.

I hope you know

I love you.

# I . C . E

B i a n k a B e r m u d e z

*a Black Out Poem Set to the Hip Hop Classic: "Ice, Ice, Baby" by  
Vanilla Ice*

Ice Baby

stop listen

Ice

grabs a hold of me tightly

like a harpoon

Will it ever stop? I don't know

Turn

To the extreme a vandal

the speaker

killing,

Deadly

a felony

leave

the kid

a problem

revolves it

Ice Baby

Ice Baby

kicked

to the point, to the point  
of Burning  
they go crazy  
solo  
just  
stop  
Kept on pursuing the  
busted and  
dead  
less  
lovers  
Ready for the  
Gunshots like a bell  
shells  
Fall on the concrete  
on  
the avenue  
get away before the  
Police on the scene, know what I mean  
The fiends

a problem I  
revolve

Ice Baby  
Ice  
Take heed  
Miami's on the scene you didn't know

My town created  
holes in the ground  
a chemical spill  
that you can feel  
this is hell  
We want to

fade  
Cut like a razor blade  
Keep my composure  
it's time to  
kick

the problem solve it

Ice Baby  
Ice

get out  
Ice Too cold, Ice Baby Too cold  
Too cold, Too cold Too cold, Too cold.

# The Crossroads

A u n d r e a R o m b e r g

Meet me at the crossroads,  
where all manner of people come through.

My companion who sits with me each night is a vampire,  
who points out Greg the werewolf and tells me about their bad  
blood.

I met Shelley, accidentally and awkwardly, as one night I had been  
sitting where she had been  
clawing out from her grave.

There's a ghoul whose name I can't catch,  
muttering about how hard it is to get flesh.

It took me a while to realize I was dead,  
my companion telling me that not many ghosts linger like I do.

Each night, there's someone new to meet that's passing through,  
each night, I stay there, still undecided on which direction to take.

Meet me at the crossroads,  
where it can get pretty lively.

# Editing is Never Done

Chris Espinosa

I *finally* get it  
as the fish tank light flutters and  
sparkles over the shipwreck,  
while the Youtube rain soundtrack makes  
it feel like the room is dripping.  
The three little ones dive and dodge  
the bubbles, pecking at them, convinced  
they are food.

I finally get *it*  
searching through the mass of digital  
folders, all scattered and down deep  
in a hard drive.  
I finally get it when I reread old works after  
promising some girl I would send her  
a few words, just a taste, something to whet  
the appetite and maybe she'll think  
I am *good*.

I get it, *finally*,  
that editing is never done, and it's late and work  
wants me in early and there isn't enough water  
in the apartment to wring in sobriety so it's all  
suffering and cotton mouth. It should have been a quick send,  
copy, ctrl-V, but my finger slipped an hour ago  
and I'm trying to decide if "circumnavigate" is the right word  
choice in line four, stanza nine, and it was two  
hours ago when  
I wanted a cigarette and for  
some reason, or the shift in cold weather,



“circumnavigate” just bothered me.

So ten minutes ago I decided to rewrite the whole poem from scratch, and it was shorter, *compress*, Hall always said, *Chris, please, for the love of god, compress*. And now, two pages is four stanzas and it’s marvelous and I am a little less than drunk, but it doesn’t matter.

The poem is gorgeous and the confidence is back and I feed the fish and *finally* stand for a congratulatory smoke, knocking the water over, slamming the top of the lap to rescue the hard drive from the wave and as everything crashes and swells I realize, I never pressed save. And it *doesn’t* matter.

I finally *get* it; the poem exists for as long as you see it. Poems are “Super Position,” an electron in two places, simultaneously.

A stanza existing and unwriting itself all in the same moment.

In my head I type an apologetic ballad to the girl and crawl into the cold covers of bed, all the while still wondering why circumnavigating just didn’t seem like the right place to end.

# Thawing

Mackenzie Moore

My friend told me  
LA would thaw me  
This is good  
she said  
tucking my scarf tighter  
the brittleness of Chelsea  
cutting through both our coats

*Mhmm*

I nodded  
Suspicious.  
But I wasn't one to talk  
a glistening block of ice  
sliding along  
unable to be stopped  
unable to sit still  
unable to be touched

She wasn't wrong  
I dripped for a solid year  
after moving  
Leaving trails behind me  
as I tried to acclimate  
to the blinding light

This thawing though:  
all the water has to go somewhere  
That without the municipal pipes  
dumping into the East River  
you need to find  
new storm drains

People in LA cry in their cars  
There is no solidarity  
like crying on the train  
where someone will  
shoot you *the glance*  
that infinitesimal nod  
We've been there,  
you'll be okay

You cry in the sunshine  
and it feels like a joke  
Like the equipment van  
parked on your street  
will call wrap  
so you can go back to  
whatever it is you do

Your wish is granted  
and so you stop thawing  
before you even realize  
You go out one morning  
ready to wipe up  
after your soggy footprints  
but they're gone

*Huh.* Just like that  
You nod,  
Suspicious.  
But you're preoccupied  
because your skin is bone dry  
Parched. Papery

*Could use some cold weather*  
you lament  
But you can't go back to freezing—  
Surely it would cause cracks.

# Brimstone

---

Me'Chelle Sevanesian

We counted vertebrae  
My back was thin enough  
You named the black holes after my absence  
They pointed at us and said  
It was a shame a girl like me could love a man like you  
But I know that the evil that lives in my jaw gnaws  
So while yes,  
You are evil  
I am insidious.  
When we found the home made of Brimstone  
We knew it was made for us.  
Spider webs freshly made and damp  
The wood was inhabited by termites  
The mightiest of parasites

The day was dark and mildew driven  
The best type of days  
When you made a proclamation  
That a house can be dark  
But a home must have light.  
You said it was my job to keep the lantern burning  
So I promised  
I would never let it dim  
It was my job to keep our light  
So just like that I swore  
I was more than a tunnel vision checkpoint.

Dead roses replaced with vibrant yellow daisies  
New wood paneling  
No spider webs on my window sills



You were trying to change me,  
Screaming

“Stop changing, leave it be let it decay find the beauty in death in dark,  
What if we run out of light,”

“You are beauty in darkness,  
The bearer of brightness,  
Of beauty,  
I do not need decay  
To close my eyes  
I am not changing you,  
I am showing you.”

I had fallen asleep on the only broken thing left,  
A tattered couch with one leg still intact  
It smelled like years of laughter and looked as if it had been  
Through the ringer,  
It was the last thing that reminded me of myself

He took that from me too,  
He didn't want to add memories to the ones already there.  
He said this would create our own

“Keep the fire going,  
It is getting dim,  
I want more light”  
But I am a woman of tunnel vision antics with no light at the end of  
It.  
No need for warmth,  
I can find the light and warmth in my self,  
But I did not shine bright enough for him,  
So I set the house on fire  
Ripped the pages out of the books  
Out of my journals

Brimstone | Sevanesian

I set you a flame in the house we built from brimstone  
And every day I sweep away the ashes  
And I am glad I found the warmth from the lantern  
That you gave me power over.

# Construction

Donel Arrington

It starts with the pledge of allegiance  
in kindergarten, when you're five or six

the fourth of July, Sparklers, Captain America  
hot dogs, red white and blue cake.

Will Smith blowing up aliens and that  
white CIA guy in *Black Panther*.

Then Columbus, the founding fathers.  
The idea that George Washington,

and Thomas Jefferson were great men.  
That they believed in freedom and justice

for all. It grows and it morphs until you're  
reading in your history book that the U.S.

invaded Iraq to liberate the Iraqi people from  
Saddam Hussein, Afghanistan from the Taliban—

This is the foundation of the American Myth  
this is the construction of the American Lie,

Never are you taught that you are on stolen land.  
Of the conquest and torture, the rape and bloodshed.

That Washington and Jefferson didn't care about  
the freedom of their slaves, of the natives whose

genocide created the 13 colonies and beyond,  
of the women who weren't allowed to vote

Not that! Never are you taught about the land we  
stole. About California, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado,

Texas, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, The Dakotas, The Indian Wars,  
Sharp Knife Andrew Jackson and his scalping techniques—

Never are you taught about the CIA toppling democratically  
elected governments in Panama, Syria, Iran, Guatemala, the

Congo, Brazil, Chile, Not that! Not taught about installing  
dictators and death traps, no never. Never are you taught

the fact that the FBI murdered Fred Hampton while he slept  
in bed next to his pregnant girlfriend. That the CIA brought crack

to the streets of Compton, that the War on Drugs is code for war  
on Black People and the Anti-War movement—

Never have they taught you that, because if they did  
that would be the destruction of the myth,

the destruction of the America that they've constructed  
in your mind since you were a kid watching the Superbowl,

listening to the national anthem as the jets fly overhead.  
Never would they have taught you that— because if they did,

you might just see America for exactly what it is.

# A Recipe For Family Dysfunction

Steph Lopez

Prep time: 2 minutes to whatever time he tells everyone he lasts.

Cook time: 9 months

Total time: A lifetime

Serves 5.

## Ingredients:

3 eggs

3 teaspoons semen

2 undocumented adults

2 diagnoses of anxiety and depression

1 promised American dream

1 diagnosis of cancer (*a premalignant tumor may be used as a substitute*)

2 college tuitions

5 mouths to feed

4 underpaid workers

1 tablespoon of salt

1 ½ cup of tears, separate ½ a cup

30,000 dollars

A pinch of misunderstanding

*for added flavor:* A dash of selfish desire

## Instructions:

1. Add the 2 undocumented adults to a mixing bowl and mix in 1 promised American dream

and put to the side.

2. In another bowl, whisk together the 30,000 dollars, ½ cup of tears, and 1 tablespoon of

salt. Combine ingredients with that of first bowl.

3. Simmer on medium low for a few years, gradually mixing in the

eggs and semen, and the remaining cup of tears.

**Note: 3 children should be produced. If it begins to thin too much a dash of nagging grandma may help.**

4. Slowly begin to fold in all remaining ingredients.

**Caution: Mixing in both diagnoses of depression and anxiety may cause adverse reactions and a sour taste.**

5. Take off heat and cover.

6. Fight over portion sizes, and serve cold.



# Skirt Chaser

Y e s e n i a L u n a

You find your next victim to prey on,  
and place false hope into their hearts.  
Proud of the damage caused,  
you stroll on to the next.  
Love is a foreign language to you,  
yet you manipulate its mechanisms like a pro.  
Those three words recited over and over  
I - Love - you.  
With a fake smile,  
you armor your selfish, arrogant heart.  
The way your fingers glide,  
leave your prey weak and submissive.  
Your gentle tongue knowing exactly what to do.  
The devil is a trickster,  
even he would fall for you.

# The Universe Poem

Tim Needham

The universe, I have learned,  
is dangling on a string,  
hanging from a lid,  
inside a trash can,

filled, of course, with fireflies.

Well ... that explains everything,  
doesn't it?

(but only for a moment)

Until I begin to wonder:  
What is outside the trashcan?  
and  
How did it get there?  
and  
What day is trash day?

# Metonymy

---

Angel Baker

Do you want to be a *mother*? I don't quite know what to say but I say, *Woman is not metonym for mother.*  
You see something disappear in a man's face when you pierce this veil. *But you should have that joy, so when your body fails you, you remember the sloppy cheek kisses and swing sets.*  
I say, *Your life sounds lovely.*  
I remember once, too, thinking that the past was solvable like a green-shrubbed labyrinth, wires that need untangling, a fifth dimension dream that needs decoding. His face says, *I know better than you.* I smile to say, *You silly pretty thing.*

# thirteen

---

s a m g o l i

i walk

desolate streets beside my family, three-thousand  
miles away from the rubble of two  
smoking stacks of three-thousand  
lives, too many tons of debris.

we enter

a diner. a grey silence saunters  
over then sits  
among us—an unfamiliar visitor.  
on the t.v. behind the counter, images  
of bruised  
men with turbans, their wives  
weep, plead for Allah's mercy.

*Osama, Osama:* we hear my father's  
chewed name, ground between tooth  
and tongue, spit out like the shells  
of sunflower seeds we usually share on sunny  
days like these—pockets full of laughter,  
drinking black & mint tea. today,

we share

a grand slam breakfast, beneath  
a freshly printed banner declaring *united*  
*we stand*. but from my own circle, at this table,  
i notice people peer in, strangers  
squinting to investigate our Arabic  
coffee-colored eyes, turned downward  
beneath thick dark brows. my siblings,

too young to notice. my parents  
pay with the credit card stamped  
with my mother's Mexican name instead.

we leave,  
bellies full, spirits betrayed,  
in my dad's ford s.u.v. driving  
away, i look for the shadow of  
one of the two American flags  
we have clipped to our back  
side windows. at high noon, all i see  
is pavement.

# a philosopher said taste depends on class

---

s a m g o l i

miles away, distressed acidwashed  
skinny jeans lie  
folded on a table—rag  
and bone,

two hundred  
and fifty plus  
tax

here, could pay her month's rent, could  
buy her time to relax. instead  
she washes and folds until her bones  
show, cleans floors on her knees, ignoring  
her grumble below—acid  
rising. at home with her children, wiping  
bread crumbs from their faces with a rag,  
damp from distress and

a bit of milk.

before bed, hands folded, head  
bowed, sews up holes in torn  
little pants.



# Roses Wilt in May

---

Ellen Mejia

Dead siblings are roses wilting in May.  
Green thumbs reach  
for stems and snip air, bacteria  
and abnormal cells secreting through  
thorns that cut palms  
with each damaged malignancy.  
Pesticide, Azacitidine, Decitabine injected into  
marrows of shriveling bones to  
mend the terminal grief of roots clinging  
to lost blooms. They continue to wilt, the poison-cure  
prolonging consuming white sheets,  
glass vases displaying faded petals  
until they die in July.

# When Brown Met Gold

---

Ellen Mejia

my parents  
crossed borders  
to eat fruit & opportunity  
instead of  
dirt & poverty  
they swam across  
clotted rivers  
& red seas  
to see fireworks & city lights  
instead of  
missiles & dynamite  
they came as  
teenagers with  
degrees in labor  
instead of  
honors on papers  
they came to cities of  
emerald palms &  
golden dawns  
with 7 dollars &  
priceless hope  
they were met with  
slurred greetings &  
hostile waves  
a welcome when  
brown meets gold

# Hands, an Apache Prayer

---

Corie Alvarado

Only a few hours old, you held  
my hand for the first time. Tiny fingers cocooned  
in yours—tan, covered in age spots, with small  
birthmarks that I grew to count.  
Fourteen.

Twenty-six years later, you held my  
hand a final time. A breathing tube filled  
your throat while you traced impatient  
circles along embroidered yellow flowers.

Your hands remained weeks after, guiding me as I  
picked shards of glass from the floor of dreams; white  
cactus flowers among ears of blue and white corn.  
Yours steadied mine, soaked in tears that  
tasted like Sunday Morning Mass.

We deserved more time in corn fields sprouting  
from rust colored dirt. More time swimming up red-rocked  
streams, its waters rushing loudly down mountain sides. I  
needed more time under hot Arizona suns, brighter  
than the false fluorescence of that hospital room.

Your last six days still lay scribbled in your cursive: the  
last prayer, a hand, that I still cling to.

*You are never parted from the beating of my heart.*

# Twenty-Five Mediocre Birthday Wishes

C o r i e   A l v a r a d o

From five thousand seven hundred  
and seventy-seven miles away,  
*happy birthday.*

I wish you a lifetime of lukewarm coffee  
and unflavored oatmeal, served by a wife  
wearing a striped flannel onesie—who  
loves asking questions during a  
movie you're both seeing for the first time.

Long buffer times when streaming on Netflix. Videos  
with incorrectly synced audio. A  
dinner table with uneven legs. The sensation  
of 100 lost sneezes—in a row.

The world's smallest water heater.  
Group conversations that change exactly  
when you've thought of a clever comment.

Lots of pre-planned sex, only at night with the  
lights turned off—socks on.  
Half-mast erections on slightly  
overcast mornings. A month full  
of overcast mornings.

Flimsy toilet paper in cramped bathroom  
stalls. The middle seat on a fourteen-hour flight.

I wish you beautiful children that  
chew with their mouth open—who  
leave Lego booby-traps on the kitchen floor.

Non-fat milk  
in your Raisin Bran cereal—stale  
from a clumsily closed box.

But

I will never wish you a woman who listens  
to your insecurities on a Tuesday at 2:15 in the  
morning, caressing your hands—parked  
across the street from your mother's old  
house. Not a woman who spends the  
first twenty-two minutes of her day  
staring at your face while you  
sleep, memorizing every shadow and freckle.

I will never wish you that  
because I am already gone.



# Drama



# Call Me When You Get This

---

Brandon Sanchez

Setting:

Two characters, DAVE and MICHELLE, are leaving each other a VOICEMAIL. Dave is at his house, while Michelle is sitting in a café.

## **MICHELLE (through VOICEMAIL)**

Hey, it's Michelle! Sorry I couldn't get to the phone but leave a message and I'll get right back to you.

*A beep is heard offstage.*

## **DAVE**

Hey, it's me.

*Lights on DAVE's side of the stage. He is pacing around his living room.*

I just wanted to talk to you about, I don't know, everything I guess?

*Lights on DAVE go out.*

## **DAVE (through VOICEMAIL)**

What's up, it's Dave. Leave a message and I'll get back to you.

*A beep is heard offstage. Lights on MICHELLE's side of the stage. She is sitting alone at a table in a coffee shop.*

## **MICHELLE**

Hey, it's me. We should talk.

*Lights on DAVE's side of the stage.*

**DAVE and MICHELLE**

Honestly, we should have had this talk a long time ago.

**DAVE**

It just was never the right time, you know? It seemed like every time I was ready to do this, something else was more important.

**MICHELLE**

We've been together for almost two years now, and they've been some of the best of my life.

**DAVE and MICHELLE**

Do you still remember our first date?

*DAVE and MICHELLE both leave their sides of the stage and meet in the middle, a table in a restaurant. They interact with one another but continue speaking as if they are on the phone.*

**DAVE**

Honestly, I wanted to do this right then and there, but, you would have thought I was crazy. You just looked so beautiful.

**MICHELLE**

From the very first time we went out, you were the man of my dreams. I pictured myself getting old with you, having a family with you... I knew you were the one.

**DAVE**

You laughed at all my jokes, and I laughed when you had trouble pronouncing escargot. It was simple, but, it was special.

**MICHELLE**

It was the best first date I had ever been on, even if the escargot tasted like slimy dirt.

*Extended silence. Both characters stand up and look at one another.*

**DAVE and MICHELLE**

Do you remember our anniversary?

**MICHELLE**

You knew I never got to go to my high school prom, so you took me out to that fancy jazz club. We got all dressed up and spent the night dancing...

*DAVE and MICHELLE both walk to the front center of the stage and continue their calls while dancing with each other.*

**DAVE**

It had been a full year since our first date, so I knew that was the night. I wanted to give you the prom night you never got to have. It was everything I had wanted it to be, until...

**DAVE and MICHELLE**

Your/my Mom died.

*They stop dancing and break apart.*

**MICHELLE**

I got the call while we were still at the club. I knew she wasn't doing well but, I thought I still had time.

**DAVE**

We went back to your place and you spent the rest of the night

crying in my arms. I had wanted to do this back then but, it wasn't the right time anymore. I needed to be there for you.

**MICHELLE**

I guess I just needed you there with me, to get through that. But, we were never the same.

**DAVE**

You got distant. Which is fine, I gave you all the space you needed.

**MICHELLE**

I just needed some time to figure everything out.

**DAVE**

We still saw each other, but it was rare. I knew it was just a rough patch, though. We'd come out on the other side stronger.

**MICHELLE**

I took a lot of time to think. About my mom, about you, about me... about everything. Thanks for being patient with me. For as long as you could.

*Extended silence. Both characters return to their original settings.*

**DAVE and MICHELLE**

Then that date happened.

*DAVE and MICHELLE return to the restaurant setting.*

**MICHELLE**

You wanted me to feel better, so you took me back to where we had our first date.

**DAVE**

I figured going back to where it all started might bring back that spark.

**MICHELLE**

You wanted to talk, to go back to the way things were. But I wasn't ready.

**DAVE**

You couldn't look me in the eye for most of the meal.

**MICHELLE**

I knew you wanted this to be special, but I just couldn't do it.

*MICHELLE hurriedly walks out of the restaurant setting.*

**DAVE**

You asked for a separate check and left before dessert. I didn't say anything at the time, but that hurt.

*DAVE leaves the restaurant setting, the lights go down on that part of the stage. DAVE and MICHELLE return to their original settings.*

**MICHELLE**

I shouldn't have walked out on you. I just wasn't ready for all of that.

**DAVE**

I just wanted things to go back to normal, but I know that's dumb.

*Silence.*

**DAVE and MICHELLE**

I'm so sorry about last week.

*Lights on center stage. Where the restaurant scene originally was, there is now a thin wall. Two silhouettes appear on the wall. They are arguing without words.*

**DAVE**

I guess I just, got tired of waiting? And that wasn't fair to you, and I'm sorry.

**MICHELLE**

I was shutting you out and you got tired of it. You were right. I wasn't taking us seriously.

**DAVE**

I just love you so much. It's been months since your Mom passed, and I couldn't stand seeing you fight that fight alone anymore. I just wanted you to know that I'm here.

**MICHELLE**

You kept trying to make me feel better and I kept treating you like dirt. I don't blame you for blowing up, I would have too.

**DAVE**

I shouldn't have raised my voice. That wasn't fair to you.

**MICHELLE**

But that was the last thing I needed.

**DAVE**

I haven't seen you in weeks. I don't blame you for not speaking to me. I wouldn't speak to me either.



**MICHELLE and DAVE**

So, that's why I'm calling you.

**DAVE**

We haven't spoken since last week, and I've been trying to think of a way to make it up to you.

**MICHELLE**

I've thought a lot about what you said last week.

**DAVE**

I knew I wanted to do something big.

**MICHELLE**

I needed to figure out what I wanted from you; from us.

**DAVE**

But, I know you, and I knew you wouldn't even speak to me until I made this right. I had wanted to take you out somewhere, but, this will have to do. I can't wait anymore.

**MICHELLE**

I can't hold my feelings in anymore. I need to let it out.

**DAVE**

It was never the right time, but now it is.

**DAVE and MICHELLE**

I have loved you since the first time we met.

**MICHELLE**

You have been the man of my dreams for almost two years, and I have loved every second I've been with you.

**DAVE**

You're the most important person in my life, and I want you to know that.

**DAVE and MICHELLE**

And that's why I need to tell you...

*Both characters breathe, readying themselves for what they're about to say.*

**DAVE**

I want to marry you.

**MICHELLE**

I don't love you anymore.

**DAVE**

I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to have kids and raise them with you.

**MICHELLE**

I'm sorry, I've been so unfair to you. You didn't deserve any of this.

**DAVE**

I can't wait to see you. Things are going to be better than ever, I promise.

**DAVE and MICHELLE**

We need to talk in person. Call me when you get this.

**DAVE**

I love you.

*Lights out on DAVE.*

**MICHELLE**

I'm so sorry, Dave.

*Lights out on MICHELLE. Extended silence.*

**VOICEMAIL**

You have one new voicemail. To listen, press one.

# Because It's Sunny in LA (Especially on Skidrow)

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Thaddeus Nagey

ACT II, Scene II

A street lined with tents. Could be underneath an overpass, near a bus stop, park bench, or on a sidewalk. Multiple cinder blocks on stage. Rows of tents, misc. belongings, sleeping bags, a dilapidated couch, and lots of junk.

Dave, Jackie, and James are the ones left on stage. James unzips his tent looks around, steps outside and sits on a cinder block. He starts to read. Dave sprays graffiti art on a large piece of cardboard.

Below poem is re-written in pentameter. Stage is well lit. Must read poem at a slower pace with rhythmic body movement. Can dance or perform with bodily object work or interpretations.

## **JAMES**

*To audience and paces up and down the stage, acting the poem out in an artistic way through movement and object work. Instrumental, "America the Beautiful" is playing on the speakers.*

Like clockwork, planes landing every half hour.  
Hailed from the tower. Two bright lights trailing.  
Arms motioning, flailing. The end opens.  
An unloader trailing. Thirty of 'em.

## **DAVE**

*Looks up from his art, calls out to James*  
Thirty of them? Thirty of them.  
An unloader trailing. Thirty of 'em.

## JACKIE

*Jackie lays on a cot and gets up.*

Dead bodies. Remains. It's a poem. Let me see that!

*Grabs piece of paper from James and recites. Meanwhile, James grabs a folded flag from his tent and pushes it on Dave. As she recites, James and Dave unfold the flag similar to a military funeral ceremony. Actors must study how to unfold flag and perform ceremony.*

Everyday. The devils deliver them.  
A fog of grey. Far and wide, camouflage.  
Unloading our sins and entourage.  
We'd carefully drape, sins of war and rape.  
To cover our mistakes, always too late.  
We gently unfold our patriot flag.  
For our people from Bagram and Baghdad.

*Jackie lays back on cot while James and Dave drape the flag over the body. Dave grabs the poem and recites.*

We beg for solace, we are somber and sad.  
Carefully placed, our gloved hands on the rails.  
Walk them with severance, knocked over by gales.

*James stands at attention and salutes.*

We salute with reverence, hail to veterans.

*They both grab the cot with Jackie on it, drape the flag over her and slowly move her, one step at a time, off stage and through the audience aisle. Meanwhile, James finishes poem and speaks toward audience.*

Deliverance from pure benevolence.  
Unwrap stars and stripes. Honor archetypes.  
Check that the black straps are sturdy.

Account for remains along this journey.  
Thoughts and prayers are rarely the right answer  
When war spreads like a terminal cancer.  
Remains are transferred, one part at a time.  
Carefully logged, tedious paradigm.

*At the end of the aisle, just before they reach the door,  
James and Dave put down Jackie and Dave and Jackie exit  
through the rear of the audience. James yells out, shaken,  
nearly crying and walks briskly back toward the stage.*

Their mothers receive them—is there no crime?  
Long for peace again. Peace again this time.

*Back on stage, sits down on a cinder block.*

**JAMES**  
(To audience)

There's not much left when you are stuck in the cracks. I found myself weeping in-between the flights. I would crawl into the closet-where no one could find me. And I would just sit there and weep.

Most were people I didn't know. Air Force, Marines, Army, Navy... sometimes Iraqis, sometimes even Taliban. Sometimes people I knew. All came back in pieces of some sort. We would sort them, bag them, ice them, put them in caskets. Military ceremony, loading them onto the plane. Tradition. Standing at attention. Parade rest. Quiet. Pure quiet. Unload. Ceremony. Tradition. When I came home... (*pause*)... there was no welcoming party. The dead always had a welcoming party. All of them. Not me.

Most of my family didn't want to know me anymore. Were they ashamed? Death infiltrated my spirit. I was saturated.

A dark cloud. Death. But I was still alive. Did I deserve to be alive? DO I deserve to be alive. (*Yells*) Well, do I? I'm not lazy.

I came back to work. To eat. To live. I was rejected. Cast aside. You know what they told me? I was overqualified. I guess I was too skilled. “Thank you for your service,” they’d say. Pretty Stressed, Tense, (and) Depressed. PTSD. They told me I was a disorder. As if the stress and trauma wasn’t a natural thing. DISORDER. PTSD. Pretty Tired of Stress Dumps? Oh, Oh! How about this? Post things sucked, dude.

Then they would send me on my merry way. *(Pause)*...I tried to get help...*(Pause)*.

*Stands up.*

You know, I once survived off of an apple, an orange, and two slices of bread for TWO WEEKS. I looked up at God...is *(looks up)* there a God? PTSD. Prepare... To... See... Dangers. Am I going to die? *(Looks at audience)* HOMELESSSSSSSSNESSSS. Loneliness. Here I am... *(pause)* ...with no welcoming party. Jobless, hungry, homeless. *(Sarcastic and whiny)* “Thank you for your service.” The good news? They say the only thing certain is death and taxes. Well, since I got no job, I got no taxes. HA!

LIGHTS OUT.

END SCENE





# Fiction

# Balloon Time

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J a k e T i l l i s

## Birth of the Balloon

There were only two things for certain.

1. Charlie died and turned into a balloon.

2. He and Frankie were supposed to watch the film *Mississippi Ninja: The Sculptor's Revenge*—later that evening.

But before we get into it, let's just address the balloon thing. Yes, he really died and turned into a balloon. No, it's not a metaphor—if by the end of it all you're thinking the balloon was a symbol for childlike innocence or something, you probably believe in love at first sight, and that your dog really was sent off to a farm. I don't know if everybody dies and turns into a balloon, or a microwave, or a rusty spoon—probably not. His name was Charlie, he died, he turned into a balloon. (Refer to number one of the list of certainties.)

The balloon was with the body, in the bedroom, caught between the window and the half opened blinds. It was an unremarkable balloon, in the sense that for a balloon that had just been a person, it looked a bit plain. As a “regular balloon” goes (a balloon which has never been a person)—no complaints. It was a yellow balloon with a white string—not much more you could ask for.

Naturally, or not, the balloon had a few questions racing through it—‘Why am I a balloon?’ ‘How did I die?’ ‘Why am I a yellow balloon?’ ‘What about Frankie and Darla?’ ‘Does everybody die and turn into a balloon?’ ‘Am I thinking these things or speaking them?’

“Am I a fucking balloon?” The balloon asked this one out loud, although without a mouth, it was more of a feeling that made this the case rather than any tangible change. It's a weird feeling, to speak to yourself, making promises without a mouth, but you agree there's a distinction between thought and voice without sound. Not that this really makes sense, but then again, a balloon said it.

Interestingly, Charlie had died in the middle of the room, three feet away from the window—the same place the balloon was born. Had a Lasko oscillating tower fan not been blowing air through that

side of the room, the balloon would have floated straight up, and into the razor sharp blades of the ceiling fan above. Had this been the case, we would have referred to this incident as **Birth and Death of the Balloon**—but due to the downward airflow from the ceiling fan combined with the sideways momentum gained from the Lasko tower, the balloon floated up toward the wall, safely burrowing itself between the window and the blinds.

Normally, that Lasko fan is stored in the hallway closet at this time in November—but due to one of those inexplicable heat waves the San Fernando Valley seems to get every once in a while, the fan was taken out of storage and placed into the bedroom, earlier that morning. Call it fate, call it karma, call it global warming, but that, to me, is far stranger than Charlie dying and turning into a balloon.

In that same moment, 31 years earlier, Hobbes Dolly signs the last document in his contract for his first leading role in a Hollywood movie... Actually, we'll hold off on that for a bit.

And hopefully, it'll all make sense in the end.

## Cows and Chicken

“Forty cows, twenty-eight chicken, how many didn’t?”

“That’s an improper question.”

“No it’s not—it’s a riddle,” Frankie explained. She continued, “Forty cows, twenty-eight chicken, how many didn’t?”

Charlie took another sip of his coffee, he was holding the mug in one hand and driving with the other. Frankie didn’t like it when he did this because she thought it was distracted driving—but at 6:30 AM on a Saturday, there is only distracted driving.

“Well, I don’t know. I can’t think of anything,” Charlie replied after a few moments of loose thought. He was a little pissed to be outwitted by an eight-year-old, but that sort of jealousy was so suppressed in him that he thought he was just hungry.

“Well think better!” Frankie insisted.

“You mean think harder?” Charlie challenged, chuckling at the simplicity of such an unbearably tall order. But for a quick moment,

Charlie thought about what life for him would look like if he were able to think better. Nothing specific came to mind, but ideas like “abundance” and “mountainous” were in the running.

“No, thinking harder won’t do anything, you have to think better.” Frankie explained.

The genius of it.

## **We Don’t Do That Around Here**

“Ok Sculptor, your time freezing people is over. I’m gonna chop you up into little pieces, and feed them to my dog Justice. Cuz this is America, buddy... And... God damn it what’s the line?”

“And we don’t do that around here.”

Hobbes thought that over for a second. “And we don’t do that around here? Are you fuckin kidding me—that’s the best you could do? And we don’t *do* that around here?”

“Alright let’s take five, camera back to one,” Bud blew into the megaphone. The various crewmembers scurried around resetting the stage, and Hobbes took out a cigarette and lit it, just as Avi rushed over to calm him down.

“Hobbes, Hobbes, look I know you may not agr—”

“I went to film school Dave, I’m a classically trained fuckin actor, and you have me saying shit like ‘And that’s not what we do around here’—fuckin bullshit man,” Hobbes interrupted.

“We all went to film school, Hobbes.”

“Bull-fuckin-shit we all went to film school.”

Hobbes is a little stressed out—he’s got a lot riding on this film. It’s the spiritual sister film to both *American Ninja* (1985), and *American Ninja II: The Confrontation* (1987), each directed by Sam Firstenberg—as well as his feature debut as a leading man. And it’s 1988 now, CDs are just starting to outsell vinyls, John F. Kennedy Jr. is People’s Magazine’s “Sexiest Man Alive,” and *American Ninja III: Blood Hunt* is in post-production—helmed by a new director and leading man, due to creative differences between Firstenberg and the studio. Firestenberg, now working on his current project

*Riverbend*, recruits Avi to produce *Mississippi Ninja*, with a new director, and a new leading man the world has never seen before—Hobbes Dolly. So Hobbes has a lot at stake here. His own career, and the legacy of Firstenberg’s *American Ninja* franchise.

## Darla’s Memories

Frankie put her Minions backpack in the empty cubby, gripping the string of the balloon in her right hand. The bag had a yellow one-eyed monster holding a banana to its ear. Underneath it, in big yellow letters, spelled “BELLOW?” When Darla first bought her the backpack, Frankie showed it to Charlie—who saw it, then immediately tied a rope to the fan in the kitchen, and hung himself. (But really, he said, “Cool backpack!”)

Darla was near the front door, talking to Frankie’s third grade teacher Carlos, who had generously offered to come in to school an hour early, to accommodate Darla’s new job. Since Charlie’s death three weeks earlier, she’d been forced to take a job as a receptionist at the warehouse of the water delivery service Aquaquench—an unfulfilling nightmare of a job, but she did get a lot of free water out of it. Prior to Charlie’s passing, she worked as a freelance real estate photographer, though as the cameras in cell phones had become higher quality, she found herself getting less and less work over the past couple years. That job hadn’t made her heart swell like a fiddle either, but it beat working for a company whose slogan is “When did water get so easy?”

“You know, you’ve got a really special girl here—Frankie’s always surprising me with the things she comes up with in class!” Carlos said, not really knowing what to say in these sorts of situations.

This simultaneously threw three separate memories into Darla’s head.

1. The time Darla and Frankie were sitting at the kitchen table. Darla was doing the New York Times daily crossword on her phone, while Frankie worked on her multiplication tables. Then Frankie asked her, “I think it’s important that I know more about the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. Could you give me some context?"

2. The time Darla asked the waitress for a Diet Coke, and Frankie asked her, "Are you trying to fool us, or yourself?"

3. The time Darla let Frankie use her laptop to watch a show on Netflix. Frankie came back a few minutes later with a picture of a painting pulled up on it. Frankie asked Darla if she liked the painting, to which Darla told her that she did, and that she loved the colors. Frankie exclaimed, "Hitler drew it!" (Later that evening, Darla asked Frankie to show Charlie what she had shown her. Once Frankie had told him that Hitler drew it, Charlie joked that the painting had been Hitler's second greatest accomplishment. Darla had a talk with him later that night about what not to say in front of eight-year-olds.)

"Yes, very special girl this one."

## The Flux-Capacitor

It wasn't the fact the pipe was completely disconnected from the drain that caused Charlie's mind to spiral—it was the toenail sitting underneath it which did that. And let me be clear, this wasn't the tip of the toenail you get when you cut your nails—this was a complete, unaltered, museum quality toenail, lying on the floor of the kitchen sink. Charlie had just fixed the same sink three days earlier, but now he's faced with a disconnected pipe, and a toenail painted midnight blue. Frankie sat on a chair he'd pulled up for her, while the homeowner, Sophia, sat on her bed in the bedroom across the hall, and brushed her hair—thinking about how it was a great decision dying it a "chestnut brown" after all, and fucking the plumber.

"Are we watching a movie tonight?" Frankie asked, although she knew very well that they would be. She had grown fond of watching movies with Charlie, most of which were probably too violent for Frankie to be exposed to at such a young age. Luckily for her, Charlie loved action movies, and watching action movies with Frankie was Charlie's favorite thing in the world. They called them "Peanuts and Pop Night," where Charlie would go to the liquor store, grab two one-liter bottles of soda, a big bag of peanuts, and go home and put on



an action movie. They had special mugs for the soda, and a special bowl for the peanuts, all of which were western themed—though they never watched westerns.

The question snapped Charlie out of his spiraling mind, and he assured that they would in fact be watching a movie later that night—*Mississippi Ninja: The Sculptor's Revenge*. This would not be Charlie's first viewing of the film—in fact, he had watched it a week earlier, while Frankie was at school, then immediately rewatched it with commentary provided by the director, John 'Bud' Cardos, producer, Avi Lerner, and star, Hobbes Dolly. He did this from time to time, in order to throw some interesting facts at Frankie while they watched a film.

"What's that about?"

"Well, it's about this guy in Mississippi—he's a ninja—he needs to find and put an end to The Sculptor's terror—a failed artist who turns mad and starts freezing people into works of art," Charlie explained.

"Ooh, clashing ideologies, my favorite," Frankie replied, almost devilishly. "How does he unfreeze them?"

And to that, Charlie insisted that she'd just have to wait and see, but asked if she wanted to see something gross, and pulled out the bloody toenail, just as Sophia made her way over to check on the two of them. Frankie let out a scream, Charlie chuckled, and Sophia said, "Oh my god!" Charlie looked over at Sophia's foot, and in her high heels he saw five toes—four of them painted midnight blue, and one of them wrapped in white bandage, stained a bit red from seeping blood.

Charlie offered Sophia the toenail and asked, "This yours?"

Sophia claimed she had no idea how that would have gotten there, and insisted she must have, for some reason, discarded the toenail in the kitchen sink instead of the trashcan, after she had lost the nail when accidentally clipping a piece of furniture.

"That doesn't make any sense," Frankie objected.

"Sure it does Frank... So Sophia, in terms of the sink, what it looks like is that your capacitor went bad for the flux-gauge, but luckily I

had a spare on me. They're about ten bucks, if you could reimburse that on top of my services that'd be great, but if you don't got it on you, then don't worry about it."

"Her what went bad for the what? You two aren't making any sense," Frankie objected again, having gone on too many jobs with Charlie to let something like that slide.

Still, Sophia gave him the ten bucks, and embarrassed, apologized for the inconvenience. So Charlie finished sealing up the pipe, they all shook hands, and besides the toenail, it was all business as usual.

"Why'd that lady give you ten dollars?" Frankie finally asked, as they drove away.

Charlie chuckled, "Cuz I told her that her flux-capacitor went bad."

Frankie gave him a blank look.

"You know sometimes I forget how young you are—it's from the movie *Back to the Future*."

"What's that about?"

"Well, it's about a guy, who goes to the past, and now he needs to get back to the future."

"How'd he get to the past?"

"The flux-capacitor!"

Frankie let it all sink in.

"And you just gave it away?!"

Charlie erupted into laughter, and explained that the flux-capacitor is not a real thing, although it would be awesome.

"But why'd you tell her that?" Frankie asked, still trying to wrap her eight-year-old head around the toenail, the flux-capacitor, and now the ten dollars—the whole situation still beyond her already outsized world of knowledge.

"You just gotta be patient and find out," Charlie persisted.

"I don't wanna be patient."

"No one wants to be patient sweetheart—but sometimes, you gotta be it."



## Hair and Makeup

Hobbes Dolly sat in his trailer and stared at himself in the mirror, as Julie, the makeup artist, applied his makeup. On set, 50 feet away, they were shooting his final confrontation with *The Sculptor*—but with so many stunts and flips he couldn't do himself, he was barely in the thing at all. He pulled out another cigarette and went over the last line in the film, with as much conviction as he could gather.

"I guess you forgot the one rule of art, Sculptor... Don't —Jesus Christ this is stupid. That's stupid right?"

"Hey I'm just the makeup artist, I'm just here to make sure you look good saying it."

"Yeah, you always do Julie," Hobbes agreed. He spotted a ring on her finger through the mirror.

"You're married?"

"Engaged. Never noticed the ring?"

"All the pretty ones are... Suppose this film's a hit though, and I'm a big star—"

"Then I'll see you in the movies, Hobbes," Julie replied, shutting down that impossible reality as quickly and efficiently as possible, as she finished his makeup. "All done."

Hobbes stood up and took a last drag of his cigarette. It was impossible for him to know that *Mississippi Ninja: The Sculptor's Revenge* would not be a hit, nor would he become a big star. He couldn't know that the film would be pulled from theaters, but gain status as a cult classic for the cheesy premise, writing, acting, and poor direction. Because as much as he knew the script was shit and the costumes were cheesy—there was still a chance.

"I guess you forgot the one rule of art, Sculptor... Don't fuck with a ninja."

## The Incident of the Three Black Shoes

Darla had just dropped Frankie off when she received a call from her boss, Toby from Aquaquench.

“The whole place is flooded, it’s gonna take at least a few days to get the place up and running again,” Toby explained.

“Did a truck leak?” Darla asked.

“No Darla, it started raining inside,” Toby replied sarcastically, to which Darla flipped off her phone and mouthed, “Fuck you.”

“Well,” Darla said, “At least the floor will be clean at the end of it all.”

“I’m not really sure why you would say that. Anyway, take the few days off and I’ll let you know when I have more information. I’ll be in contact.”

Now Darla had the rest of the day to do—well, absolutely nothing. She did need gas though, so she stopped by the 76 near the apartment, to fill up her tank.

“Can I put twenty in number three?” Darla asked the 76 cashier. He took her money and began to ring her up, as Darla looked around at all the snacks and drinks sitting on the shelves, before a scratcher lottery ticket with rows of four-leaf clovers, and a leprechaun hugging a pot of gold on it, caught her eye. In her head, she said, “Fuck it.”

“Yeah and I’ll take this scratcher too, the one with the leprechaun on it.”

“One buck.”

Darla took out a buck and handed it to the cashier, then pulled a penny out from her pocket and started scratching. She needed three rainbows, but only got two, and the rest gold bars. No dice.

“I’ll get another one.”

“One buck.”

Darla took out another dollar and handed it over to the cashier, “I’m pretty sure you can’t lose at these things twice in a row, right?”

The cashier smiled at her and handed her another leprechaun scratcher, and she scratched away. This time she needed three green hats, but she got two green hats, a rainbow, and the rest gold bars. No dice.

“One more,” Darla told him, taking out another dollar.

The cashier chuckled, “I don’t wanna take all your money lady, but I will.” He handed her another leprechaun scratcher, and she had at it. Now this time, she needed three black shoes—and she got the three black shoes, along with two hats, and the rest gold bars.

“Oh shoot, I won 20 bucks!” Darla said, forgetting you could actually win these things. She handed the scratcher over to the cashier, who looked it over, had her sign something, and handed her a twenty.

“Luck of the Irish, what are you gonna do with it?” the cashier asked. Darla wasn’t sure, but she began to peruse the gas station, looking for something to buy with her newfound riches.

Two minutes later, she returned with a big bag of peanuts, two one-liter bottles of pop, and a cake that read, “Happy birthday Jordan!” from the frozen section.

The cashier began to ring her up, “Is it Jordan’s birthday today?”

“I don’t know a Jordan,” Darla explained. “I just like lemon cake.”

## **Frankie Gets an Ice Cream**

When there’s 18 flavors of ice cream to choose from—and you’re an eight-year-old girl—the world really is full of magic. Charlie had already picked out his flavor, chocolate-malted-crunch—the only flavor he ever got. Frankie on the other hand, was looking at all the flavors like she’d never heard of ice cream before.

“You gotta pick something Frank, you’ve been looking at the ice cream for five minutes. It’s not gonna change.”

“I’ll take one scoop of bubblegum, and one scoop of birthday cake,” Franky finally decided.

“In a cup or cone?” the man behind the counter asked.

“In a cone,” Frankie replied.

“No actually we’ll take it in a cup,” Charlie interrupted. “You always make a huge mess with a cone.”

The ice cream man suggested, “Well I could put it in a cup and put a cone on top, no extra charge.”

“You my friend, are an American hero,” Charlie told him. “And a

scoop of chocolate-malted-crunch in a cup, for me.”

The ice cream man scooped up one scoop of bubblegum and one scoop of birthday cake, in a cup, then put a cone on top, scooped up one scoop of chocolate-malted-crunch, in a cup, then began to ring them up.

“Alright that’ll be \$7.16,” the ice cream man told Charlie. Charlie took out the crisp ten from his wallet, and gave it to the man, got his change, and gave the man a one-dollar tip, before he and Frankie sat at a table, and began to eat their ice cream.

“What’d you get? Bubblegum and birthday cake?” Charlie asked.

“Yep!” Frankie replied, taking a big bite out of her empty cone.

“You know, sometimes you act like an eight-year-old girl.”

“I am an eight-year-old girl,” Frankie informed him.

“Yeah well... sometimes you act like one.”

They continued to eat their ice cream.

“The answer was twenty, by the way,” Frankie told him.

“Excuse me?”

“The answer to the riddle! Forty cows, twenty ate chicken, so that means twenty didn’t.”

Charlie took it all in for a moment.

“Do cows eat chickens?” Charlie asked, although he was pretty sure they didn’t.

“I don’t know Charles, maybe they do, maybe they don’t. But that’s not really the point. Can’t you suspend your disbelief for the sake of a riddle?” Frankie challenged.

Charlie gave out a laugh, “Yeah, I suppose I can. That’s a pretty good one.”

## **An Unlikely Coincidence and an Even More Unbelievable Hero**

Jordan’s birthday cake sat on Frankie’s lap, as her and Darla drove down Coldwater after a day of lotteries and memories. Frankie grasped the string of the balloon in her right hand, as it swayed in the wind outside the window. She should not be blamed for letting

go as a 2006 Toyota Camry made a sharp left onto Coldwater, cutting Darla off and causing her to slam the brakes, in turn making Frankie act upon her instincts to grab the cake to ensure it didn't fall, leading to the balloon's free ascent into the air. And even with all that, Darla bumped into the Toyota. Frankie, of course, was freaking out, crying as the balloon floated away from the car. Darla tried to calm her down while pulling over behind the Toyota and searching for her insurance information in the glovebox—but truth be told, she was just as upset about it as Frankie.

A man in his 60's exited the car, wearing an angry face which, to be fair, he'd been wearing long before the car accident. He had a grimy look to him—his hair wasn't greasy or anything, and his fingernails were clean, but you could tell the man had some grime in his soul. He approached Darla's car ready to kill, but his internal rampage was cut short in seeing a little girl crying with such an intense sadness. So all he could ask Darla was if the girl was okay, to which she said she was fine, but that the accident had caused her to let go of her balloon. The man told her that, as a little boy, he had a stuffed lion, and to this day he's still a little upset about losing it. And as he told his story, he saw, in the distance, a yellow balloon caught in a tree.

So he climbed the tree. And he untangled the string, making sure to be careful the branches didn't puncture the balloon, and he approached the crying Frankie, and offered it to her. She took it by the string, and looked at the strange man who had just saved the day, and she grabbed his hand, and thanked him.

There was no real damage done to either car, and just as quickly as the woman and the little girl had come into the man's life, they drove off. Frankie opened the window, stuck her head out, and smiling, waved at the man goodbye. And for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime, Hobbes smiled back.

### **How It All Ends (In Retrospect)**

A few hours later, the soda was poured into the western-themed

mugs, the peanuts placed in the western-themed bowl, and the DVD inserted into the player. They were all on the couch, watching *Mississippi Ninja: The Sculptor's Revenge*, eating some peanuts, drinking some pop, and eating Jordan's birthday cake—Frankie, Darla, and the balloon.

And hopefully, it really did all make sense in the end.

# o n m e m o r y

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s a m g o l i

## Placement

Four feet to my left and six feet below the grass lies a cement box containing the pastel pink casket in which my grandmother's body rests—a color and style she selected and paid for years prior, which, upon reflection, I realize matched the sweatshirt and pant combination she often wore—and tucked into her right hand, a note I wrote by candle-light, face flushed both by the glow of the flame and an inner swell, the morning of her wake almost one year ago.

And from this plot, another may or may not arise.

Two feet in front of me, sitting on low beach chairs on the steep hill of the cemetery, my mother and her older brother converse en español about the sandwich shop down the street where he would like to take us for lunch. As they chatter on about the variety of carne they offer, my sister and I exchange glances in recognition that we will have to pick up food elsewhere since they don't have meatless options. As I return my gaze toward my mother, I notice she has in her hands an emerald quartz heart, half-wrapped in an off-white cotton handkerchief, that I identify as having belonged to her mother.

Regardless of whether or not I have seen these artifacts before, I release a deep sigh as I watch her fold and unfold the cloth, clench and release the stone, thinking about how those two objects, observed together, evoke the spirit of my grandmother and I feel a sense of her presence through these representations.

How long can one possibly live? They say one may live as long as the last person who remembers them.

I begin to wonder where she purchased the two, whether *en México* or somewhere in her adopted *Los Ángeles*. Did she pray over the heart like she did the two inch gold medallion with *El Señor Jesuchristo* on the front and *Nuestra Señora de San Juan de Los Lagos* on the back that she wore around her neck since as long as I can remember, which I now clutch and run my thumb over in my right pant pocket? I don't display this relic to anyone except, on occasion, my mother because of the commotion it causes amongst certain

relatives. Minerva Villarreal gave it to me herself at a time when she acknowledged the fragility of her age and wanted to gift her short list of possessions to her kin, at a time when she still contained the memories of her life, when she could remember whether she ate that day or not, when she still knew where she was, when she still knew my name.

In those years, when she remembered, the housing market in California had not yet crashed and my siblings and I all still lived at my parents' house on the westside. We would still go to mass every Saturday evening and go for dinner afterward as family, because even though we knew Sunday belonged to the Lord, not a single one of us—save for my mother and hers— would dare wake up before ten in the morning. But we did things that way, our way. These days the only place half of us find God is on the money we earn to pay the rent.

I often wonder how we made it this far—my family creating life in America. I don't mean that I doubted them or am surprised. I just can never ask my grandmothers about their stories again. I could hear it from their children, sure, but those firsthand accounts have come and gone, and here I am now putting together the pieces.

To know what they felt when they arrived, Minerva from *Monterrey* and Karimeh from *Bethlehem*, and not just that they arrived, would enrich the narrative I have of their migration, of their realities. I would have an account of their stories, and not a version twice-removed from their own truths—the re-telling as described by their children. Now we have too many gaps to fill. So to whom do these stories even belong, and who wrote them?

They also say that representations of the self, photos and possessions, will outlive us. I think about this as I continue watching my mother with the emerald quartz heart. After a moment, she folds it back up and returns it to her brother.

*How can I let her go?* I hear him ask but not really asking at all, more like insisting in its absurdity. He recounts to us the times his friends point out to him how often he comes to visit his mother's grave, as if once a week were too much for a grieving man who



happens to live only five minutes from the cemetery.

Three feet behind them, I observe my father pacing, not really listening to any of the conversation happening around him, and looking in all directions for the source of the smoke that has been wafting our way since we arrived thirty minutes ago. It smells of barbecue and I anticipate that within the next five minutes he will suggest that we leave and head to lunch.

Almost on cue, he finds a moment of silence and cuts through it like a knife asking if we would like to leave now. Despite predicting the arrival of that question, I can barely contain myself and shoot him an unapologetic glare, reprimanding him for only concerning himself with his stomach and can't he see we all came to spend time together to remember grandma.

Immediately after, I notice him bow his head either in discomfort or acquiescence and as I let my frustration dissipate, it occurs to me that I can't remember the last time any of us went to visit either of his parents' graves.

I look toward my brother and sister for solace, who have both made themselves comfortable on the *sarape* we laid on the grass, feeling somewhat guilty for having reacted with such agitation. They stare back in silence, thanking me with their eyes, and I kneel down with them, suddenly aware of this familiar scene. Out of the corner of my eye I try to assess my mother's spirit, and even though she says nothing, I can feel her relief.

After a heavy pause, my uncle returns to a discussion we had earlier, as if nothing had happened, about replacing the coolant fluid in my car, giving me clear instructions on how to do it myself. As he gets into the technicalities, I notice three coyotes appear over his shoulder in the distance. I pay them little attention, reasoning that they likely inhabit this land and therefore yield no danger, but I underestimate our dog's senses, and within moments he begins growling from under the embrace of my sister's arm where he has been nestled quietly throughout our visit.

My entire family turns in the direction in which our dog now snarls, suddenly more alert than they've been all morning, and while

the coyotes remain far off, they can't help but to grow more alarmed, particularly my brother who begins packing up our belongings at once. I suggest that the pack doesn't seem too interested in us, pointing out that they probably often encounter humans, and eventually we are able to subdue our Jack Russell, which grants us a bit more time to devote to our little patch of familial unity on the hill.

Although my mother's sisters and their families couldn't join us on the first anniversary of my *abuelita's* passing, I feel our cohesiveness more than I have in years. This isn't the first loss we've experienced, my immediate family and I, but something about watching and loving a person throughout their life cycle—through life, through aging, through palpable decline—seems to have made us all aware of our own mortality—the certainty of losing each other, one by one. And when I think back to when I was small and I would sneak into the back room of Grandma Karimeh's house with my cousin to find her box of cigarettes so that we could break them, and in our minds thus prevent her from smoking, all of our efforts seem so futile and I wish in that moment to pause time.

As we make our way down the hill toward our cars, finally heeding our grumbling stomachs, one of the coyotes wanders in my direction and we make eye contact. We stand there, about fifty feet between us, examining each other. After a moment I move closer, ignoring the warnings from my family, feeling a budding gratitude for this encounter. With eyes locked I crouch down, desperate to preserve this moment, and pull out my camera. As I wind the film, choose the aperture, and set the shutter speed, the coyote waits, never looking away. In a second, I snap the photograph and our moment ends, passing so quickly yet feeling more infinite than ever, and I file this memory alongside another: a portrait of my *abuelita* erupting in laughter watching *Sabado Gigante* on the rocking chair in the living room of my parents' house, as she did every Saturday.

Some memories fade over time, losing strength because of their triviality, or get replaced by others the longer we move through life. Others shuffle around like pebbles in a stream, present but take time

to uncover. And yet others still embed themselves like the roots of a tree, taking hold so deep that they become you.

As I turn back to return to my family, I notice that yards away at the top of the hill, in the shade of a tree, the other two coyotes lounge with their eyes squinted and panting in the heat, lending to the impression of a serene smile.

## **Displacement**

I question why I'm sharing this vignette. Most days, and especially during significant moments, I feel the elusiveness of the minutes that I live, and then lose instantly over and over. Maybe I want to remember everything, feeling ever nostalgic for the now. I can say, at least, that's why I take photographs.

Or maybe, it's coping.

I try hard to preserve—to remember, to document, to hold space for—the stories of my family and my ancestors and my life, but at some point I lose certainty about whether I, in actuality, write non-fiction or fiction. Everything I narrated in the preceding section happened. But could I really assert that any of it is the truth?

The other day I found journals I kept as I entered early adulthood and as I read the pages, I noticed how differently I remember and understand the stories of my own life now versus then. Different details stand out, different events have shifted in their significance. But aren't these *my stories*? Shouldn't I be certain of my own narrative? I've been building my identity on them my whole life but suddenly I'm not sure if it's dependent on my ever-changing *memory* of them or of the events themselves.

If any of the stories turn out not to be true, does it even matter? At some point they were real enough to make me who I am. Is that enough?

What happens to identity once we've forgotten? I contemplate this often, especially when I think of my grandmother and how she understood herself and her life, or didn't, as her memory faded. Maybe she didn't pay it any attention. But with it went part of our history.

By writing down these events, these narratives, these vignettes, I've transformed them, reframed them, produced a copy of the truth. They've been composed from memory and filtered through a—my—consciousness, which are both fallible. So, does the truth only exist in the Now? And if so, why bother with any of it? What am I doing?

I don't know.

Either way, whether it matters or it doesn't, here I am anyway. Writing. Exploring.

Maybe I'll arrive at some conclusion by the end. Maybe I won't and I'll keep writing and re-writing the same stories, compounding them with future experiences, in future contexts.

It all starts to feel a bit narcissistic at some point. I look to Socrates for consolation in moments like this, when I feel self-conscious: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

I shrug, not knowing if that changes anything.

## **Replacement**

I didn't mean to write this story, or any other subsequent one for that matter. I encountered it when I flipped through notebooks I'd kept with quotes that I'd scrawled down from books I'd read, when I reread journals I'd kept and notes I'd jotted to myself about observations and feelings I had, when I reflected on other stories I'd written and what compelled me to do so in the first place. I put this all together, essentially compiling my thoughts, noticing patterns, over the last two decades. Now I am left with a puzzle.

As I look forward, whatever I write, photograph, film, compose—from now until an arbitrary end—attempt to put it together, to reassemble, to see the whole picture. In other words: to reclaim our history, to reframe experience and trauma, and to let go.

# Blue

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A m a n d a M e i d a a

*Today, you will be sad.*

I shudder at the thought and a wave of emptiness sweeps through my stomach. I lay in bed, stare at the ceiling, and fixate on the corner that's cracking, getting bigger by the day. I notice it on the other days, too.

*Not today. Please, not today.*

I wait for the speaker to say this was a mistake. It's never happened before. It's never made a mistake, but I can't help myself. I need today to be happy.

I'm tempted to smash the speaker into the wall. It can't dictate anything if it's a smashed pile of plastic. The last time I tried, I woke up the next morning to a brand new speaker, shining and taunting me.

A small oval-shaped speaker that only spoke five words a day. Capable of paralyzing me.

It takes me an hour to get out of bed and I go through the motions of getting ready slowly. My mind whirls with different excuses I can tell Mr. Greenburg. *I'm throwing up. I'm sorry. My ankle's sprained. It hurts too bad. The world has swallowed me whole. I can't get out.*

I'm still thinking of excuses as I walk down the sidewalk to the bookstore. I have earphones shoved in my ears, but the end isn't connected to anything, the excess chord crammed into my pocket. It's my best tactic, no one talks to you when you have earphones in. I stare at the ground mostly, stepping over the cracks and weeds that grow through the concrete.

Sometimes, I wonder how they got there, life bursting through the hard earth. Sometimes, I wonder how I got here.

I hear someone say something that sounds like my name, but I don't shift my head up to look. *Maybe, they'll think you can't hear them.*

When I finally arrive at the bookstore, I glance at the large clock on the wall and it says I'm fifteen minutes late. Mr. Greenburg looks up from behind the counter and frowns for a moment.

“What will today be, Blue?” He knows but he still asks. Some days, I don’t answer him.

I take a deep breath, swallowing the lump forming in my throat. I shake my head slowly and he nods in acknowledgement.

I go through the motions slowly. It’s hard to be motivated, to do things that usually make me happy. I stack books on the shelves, finding no interest to delve into any. Nothing triggers a flicker of excitement. I don’t eat a scone today, it won’t taste the same. Not because the recipe has changed, but because I have. Mr. Greenburg’s cat Whiskers floats around me all day. I don’t give him any attention, but I can see his movements from the corner of my eye. I don’t know what he thinks he’s protecting me from. He can’t help me. I make myself a cup of tea during lunch. I take it, set it on the coffee table, and sink into the couch. I slouch and stare at the cup, watching the steam rise.

I almost consider skipping my break altogether when Theodore walks into the store, making the bell above the door jingle. He saved Whiskers when he got stuck in the fire escape last year. I apologized profusely and he said his job wasn’t only about putting out fires.

I wish I could sink further into the couch. I don’t want him to see me, but it doesn’t take long for him to spot me.

He looks away from me for a moment and says something to Mr. Greenburg. They both look at me briefly then continue on. I stare between the two of them, wondering how they’re both impeccably put together while I fall apart. *What am I doing wrong?*

“Blue,” Theodore says. He’s standing in front of me now. He cautiously looks at the seat next to me and slowly sits beside me.

“Hi,” I mutter. I almost don’t say anything at all. He’s here, but my heart doesn’t flutter the same way it does on the happy days. I want to crawl into my skin, far away from him.

“You want to share a scone,” he says.

*Yes, just not today. I shake my head.* “No.”

He’s here, but I still feel alone.

“Okay,” he says. “Maybe tomorrow.” I shrug. *Maybe.*

This has happened before. I don’t know why he comes back.

I swallow hard, hoping I'm not trapped in a sad day the next time he's here.

When he's gone, I'm alone with my thoughts again. I take a deep breath, slowly and gasping all at once.

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Night time is the hardest. My thoughts feel magnified, banging against my skull.

When it's time for bed, I dread the darkness. But I dread the sun rising even more. I shiver in my warm bed, wondering what the five words will be in the morning. I try to conjure a speck of happiness but nothing comes. Not when I know sadness will come again.

I lay down, staring at the black air above me, and remember my first day with the speaker. The majority of my first year with the speaker was happy. I was young and my mind still had a quiver of control.

The speaker sat on my nightstand and gave me instructions. That was the only time it ever said anything else. *Never reveal your speaker's identity to anyone around you.*

My mom couldn't see it. Neither could Dad.

It only burdened me.

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*Today, you will be happy.*

I breathe in, a sigh of relief escaping me, and continue staring at the ceiling, still and wide eyed. It's been a week since the last time.

I turn over to my right and feel the bed springs squeak beneath me. I smile to myself, knowing today will be better.

I get out of bed and go through the motions of getting ready. I do everything quickly, brushing my teeth and my hair and then getting dressed.

When I finally get outside, I trip over my toes, eager to get to the bookstore. Happy means I'll be on time today.

I decide to take the long way. I follow the dirt path beside the field of trees instead of the sidewalk, embracing the trees and the

colors, red, orange, brown, and yellow. I watch the others on the path, walking their dogs or jogging. The cool fall breeze sweeps past the back of my neck and the warm sun creeps against my cheeks.

“Morning, Blue.” I turn towards the voice and see Theodore.

“Morning,” I say, waving.

“You look happy this morning,” he says.

I wonder what I must have looked like the other day.

“We got a shipment of new books. I’m excited to... dig in.”

“Anything I’ll like?”

“You’ll have to come and see for yourself,” I say. He waves me off after promising to be by later.

When I get to the store, Mr. Greenburg is behind the counter looking at something I can’t quite see. He has a steaming cup of coffee in front of him, and the smell of coffee mingles with the smell of books.

“Morning,” I say. He startles and looks up, his eyes softening as soon as he sees me. He squints at me for a moment, the wrinkles by his eyes becoming more prominent.

“What will today be, Blue?” He stares at me, hopeful.

“Good,” I say, digging my hands into my jacket’s pockets. “Today will be good.”

His shoulders slouch in relief.

*Me too, Mr. Greenburg. Me too.*

I spend the day going through the boxes of new books that need to be put away. I’ve always enjoyed putting things away, and Mr. Greenburg revels in the fact that he doesn’t have to now.

I get lost in a book here and there, making a connection with the pages beneath my fingertips. Every time Whiskers brushes up against my leg, I move on to the next book. I scratch behind his ear and he meows in pleasure.

I always keep a piece of paper in my pocket. I pull it out, write the title of the book that I know I need to come back to, and then shove the paper back into my pocket. I help a few people find the books they’re looking for.

I nibble on a scone that Mr. Greenburg has waiting for me on the



counter. My favorite is blueberry. I drink a cup of tea and sit on the lush green couch in the corner on my lunch break.

Shortly after I sit down, Theodore comes in and we talk about our favorite books. He drinks his coffee and laughs when I tell him I read romance novels. He eats the pieces of my scone that I've left behind, the pieces without any blueberries.

Happy days always go quickly.

"It's almost time to close," I hear Mr. Greenburg say hours later. "Would you just close the back door for me?"

"Sure thing," I say.

After I do as he says, I take the two books that I set aside earlier, and leave for the day.

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*Today, you will be sad.*

The crack in the ceiling has spread past the middle of the room. I stare at it until it goes blurry.

I sit up in bed, take the speaker, and throw it against the wall in front of me, using all the strength my tired bones can muster.

But the sadness still festers.

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"Does your speaker always tell you to be happy, Mr. Greenburg?"  
He looks up at me, puzzled. "Speaker?"

# H o s a n n a

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C h r i s   E s p i n o s a

In my dreams the Brooklyn Bridge is always burning. A hellfire of steel and limestone ruminating in the midnight waters below, the air reeking of oak barrels. The Roebling lighthouse sears, but does not make a sound. In different dreams the Brooklyn Bridge topples and tumbles like a Dandelion in a summer's breath. The cables ripple and nip, letting out echoing 'twangs' and D-tuned octaves that agitate the skyscraper skyline. Mortars and planks of old swollen wood swan dive to the dark drink below. And even in other dreams the bridge snaps like a piano string. All of Manhattan moans like a dropped cello. In the dreams after the bridge finally all falls in, hissing cinder and trusses and burning brick, I always see her standing on the other strand. Her hands always tucked tightly into her black pea-coat pockets, collar up, eyes swollen with sadness for the whiskey waters engulfing the sinking iron and towers. In every dream I am always on my knees settling into the sands of the opposite bank. Sometimes I warm my hands on the fire, or hum along to the wailing caissons, or dip my toes into the wet rum-colored mud. Every time I settle into the swell she takes a disappointed step backwards in retreat.

That is how I imagine it most mornings but vodka tends to distort the truth, I have heard, bourbon, by chance, can steal memories. One thing that is absolutely certain: one night New York City took her.

It wasn't by the darkness of midnight. It wasn't in the faint pink and tender orange of twilight. It was after work on a Thursday. I wasn't home with her when the city snuck in (at least that's how I always pictured it, a six foot tall, broad-shouldered, dripping New York tenderly turning the front door knob and tip-toeing into the living room, feet like icicles and head like an engine block, slowly creeping towards her like a ballet dancer in *Black Swan* until it's right behind her as she washed dishes) and stole her. That city with its iconic bridges and subways, taxis and terrorism and tourists, stoops and window-sill-yellers and leaners, on-lookers judging

and reprimanding, light posts and alleyways forever known as the 'devil's doorstep.' That city filled with poverty and poetry and unimaginable wealth and grids and blocks-of-forever separating everyone from a movements distance to the most incredible pain or happiness, whichever they would come to know right then.

In the days following the pillage, I found love letters she and the city traded for months while I was asleep or away or passed out. The months after New York stole her I found transcriptions and texts, sonnets and nudes from her to it, it to her, everything was nothing but love and affection, solemn dreams and promises.

If I could now talk to the city, if I could plead or beg for it to return her; I would. I would trade New York the world for her. Gold or silver, ten thousand souls or all the angels in the Kingdom, just to have my shaky hands back in hers. If the city bartered or gambled, I would double down or haggle. If it slept, I would creep in at dawn and steal her back as she showered. I would run with her under my arm across the country, naked and confused, madly in love and not leaving a fingerprint of regret. I would sell all my stock, I would trade any penthouse, and if she asked me to give up that thing she said I loved more than her, I would weigh my heart and my love in a bronze casted scale. Every time I sleep I am piling tequila and gin bottles as a kindled alter to the city to deliver her. Almost every time I drift off I am building a funeral pyre to her on the other side of the smudged river to burn a tower of calcium and granite for her safe return.

Some nights though, I close my eyes and she forgives me. Some nights I dream that she takes my stubbled cheeks in her hands and butterfly kisses my forehead and my world is enveloped in a heavenly peace. Other nights I stay up and constantly pour one for her and sip from that poison cup as if it were an Irish funeral. I leave it on the countertop to flicker and flutter like a Blessed Virgin Mary candle and remind me. Some mornings I wake and scream 'enough is enough' into the empty living room. I run out of money and I beg my father, some days. Others, it's my brother. If you ever hold me down and place a rag over my mouth and pour liters of water into my gasping choking breaths, I would drown. If you caught me off

guard and begged for me to stop, educated me on how I am just killing myself and my eyes are encircled in black rings like an old tree and my posture has collapsed and that you haven't seen me for days and the days in which you do see me in the parks or passed out on the balconies, you would tell me how it tears at your heart like a rat against the concrete wall as it drowns in the sewer from a heavy rain. You could say my bones are dying, note that my insides are dying, snicker whispers about how I am dying and I would stand perfectly still, too enabled or unable to take any next step.

If I close my eyes I do not wade into the rushing sluice, but float above it. In that obfuscated umbra, when I look down, usually when I am half or one thousand staggering steps away from her, I cower with uncertainty about which shore I love more, and if I should just let the city have her, and me my fountain.

# La Llorona

Israel Hernandez

Where is she? I can't remember where I placed her. I thought I left her next to my bag of meth, but she's not there. I run to my small room and check the busted wooden crib next to my mattress. It's empty.

"Rosa? Rosita? Where the fuck is my baby?" I cry in desperation, hoping she'll respond. But she won't. She's only a month old, or has it been two already? "Cry! Laugh! Do something you stupid child!"

And then I hear it, coming from outside. A soft echo of a cry slithers in through the window. That's not Rosa. It's a grown woman. I step outside and realize the woman is sobbing loudly. I wonder if any of the neighbors will come out, but the dark houses look sound asleep. My bare feet pick up the cold dirt and carry it with me as I follow the cry. I see her at the end of the street, sitting on the edge of the river. Her boney bare feet are clean, as they're brushed by the stream.

"Rosa?" I yell, even though I know the woman isn't her, but I'm scared. I clumsily dance my bruised brown legs over to her as if they're broken. I know she's close enough to hear me. I yell louder than her cry. "Rosa!"

The woman stops. I feel my heartbeat do the same. My hands shake as I get closer and her image clears up. She wears a white lace veil over her head of long black hair with a matching white gown. I only see her from behind, but I see she is cradling something in her arms.

"Are you looking for something?" she asks me without turning around.

"Yes, I..." I hesitate. I feel stupid saying it out loud. "I've lost my child."

I stop a few feet behind her. Too scared to get any closer. She stays silent, all I hear is the gentle stream of water splash against the rocks. Spla, splash.

"Have you seen her?" I ask.

Spla, splash.

I try to peek at what she holds in her arms, but she keeps moving them. She looks back suddenly and I jump back in fear. Her skin is so tight on her face she looks made of bone. Her eyes are the darkest black I've ever seen. Still, she looks me up and down. I see her judge me. I see her wonder why I'm barefoot, why my legs are bruised, why I lost my child. I see her wonder if I love my child. But I know I love Rosita. That's why I'm looking for her.

When I look behind the woman's frightening face I see the blanket-wrapped baby in her arms. I see Rosa. The woman must know because she gets up immediately, clutching my baby while she turns to face me.

"You're not a mother," she says. And I see the truth in the darkness of her eyes.

"Give me my child," I cry, falling knees first on the dirt.

"Rosita is my child," she says.

I see her take my child and throw her in the river. I jump in desperately waving my arms but all I find is the blanket Rosa was wrapped in. She's lost my child again and now she's gone. I cry in the river as I dive down in search of Rosa. Underwater, I remember my beautiful baby. I remember the warm water washing her soft skin. I get out of the water and run back home. The pebbles and ants pinch the dirty soles of my feet. I run to the tub and pull her out. The water still feels warm, but her body doesn't.

"Rosa!" I cry. I shake her small body, but she stays still.

She took her.

# Do You See Anything?

Blair Siegel

## **Dawn.**

The shiny new Tesla hums at the red light. Its fancy start-stop technology makes it hard to differentiate when the damn thing's ever on to begin with.

The driver, probably a 30-something-year-old CEO, is glued to his phone.

His eyes perk up, *light's still red.*

Brows frowning, he's unhappy with his wife, his startup, or both.

To his left the grass begins to shift, awaken, as the motionless figure stays planted.

Instinctively, he feels the light turn green. Off he goes.

Do you see anything?

## **Late Morning.**

An older woman turns the corner. With her are two small dogs; they look more high maintenance than I'll ever be.

She's in a tennis outfit, though how often she plays is debatable. Her platinum blonde hair and fake chest is an eyesore. She boisterously yells into her headphones, a foreign language I can't interpret.

Her black sunglasses remain stuck to her eyes.

She faces the busy street, receiving the occasional whistle and catcall as the cars pass.

It makes her yell louder; the veins in her neck start to rise.

She enjoys it.

Her dog leashes are fully extended; off they go for a sniff. One's even brazen enough for a pee. He leaves a puddle next to the now darkened blanket.

They trot back to their master.

Off she walks, obnoxiously shaking her behind, hoping the boulevard enjoys its last glimpse of Beverly Hill's finest retired. She walks by, doesn't notice the figure, the dismantled home, the stain her scraggly mutt left.

Do you see anything?

### **Lunch.**

A group of construction workers parade by.

Fast they all walk, starving from the busy work morning.

Engulfed in their conversations, they eagerly walk up the stairs leading to the supermarket.

A shopping cart filled with miscellaneous items block the August sun from his emaciated body.

A few more construction workers pass, one notices the cart in the corner of his peripherals, looks quickly, sees the rest of the ugliness, soon looks away.

He frowns.

Some notice the smell. Though not understanding *where* exactly it's coming from.

Up the stairs they go.

Some businessmen in suits walk down. All on their phones. They don't look twice.

Do you see anything?

### **Rush Hour.**

The main street is flooded with cars.

The light is green but the lanes stay stagnant.

It's 5:30 pm and the sun is at its strongest.

The breeze makes the 95-degree day a smidge more tolerable, but in turn it causes a few of his belongings to scatter around the patch of grass.

The side street is congested with dozens of cars. They're not going anywhere anytime soon. The traffic today is particularly bad. Most



people look at their phones, some stare out their windows, mostly checking to see if traffic's moved from the last time they checked twenty seconds ago.

They're focused on wanting to get home. Wanting to work out. Wanting to try that new restaurant. Wanting to open a beer. They don't give enough fucks to *really* look out the window.

His mousy brown hair sways in the breeze.

His skin is bright red from being in the hot sun all day. Some scabs begin blistering.

Do you see anything?

### **Late Night.**

Almost 3 A.M. A couple drunk guys trickle from the bar down the street. They stumble down the sidewalk, hungry.

Giddy, they're wasted.

Suddenly walking up the flight of stairs to the supermarket entrance seems like the biggest task of the night. Instead, they opt for the more expensive one across the road.

*Oh shit* one blurts, accidentally bumping into his cart filled with his miscellaneous, but valuable things.

Off they stumble.

Do you see anything?

### **The Next Day.**

Police cars, caution tape, a couple of coroner cars barricade the sidewalk.

His cart with miscellaneous, but valuable things, are gone.

His sunburned stature, mousy brown hair, are gone.

The side street is closed off.

The main street is backed up with traffic.

Everyone in their car makes sure to look once, twice, four times.

A couple of onlookers across the street try to figure out what happened.

Did you see anything?



wind was stronger is here, pushing the leaves into a dance I had never seen. I loved it. My hair was in a ponytail but I was positive that if it wasn't I would've looked like Pocahontas in that moment. I closed my eyes and breathed in the air, pretending that I would never have to leave.

*“¿Qué haces? ¡Bajate de allí niña!”*

I opened my eyes to see the bane of my 6-year-old existence, the temperamental teacher who even my mother hated. She looked furious, even from up here, I could see the small vein popping from her forehead. She made her way closer and closer to the tree. I scurried, trying to make it down before she could catch me. But climbing was easy, getting down was not. I moved carefully, stepping around each jagged branch. I could still hear her yelling. I stepped on the next branch, it was a little one but it seemed sturdy. My foot went on it, bending it slightly, and SNAP.

For a second, I saw everything. I felt everything. I felt my head being tugged upwards by something near my jaw. I saw the teacher rush to my side, pushing me up and sliding me into her arms. I saw red, dripping from my cheeks and onto my shirt. I saw the kids rushing towards me. But that second passed, and then I saw nothing.

I woke hours later, from what I was told. But I don't remember much. All I remember is being flooded with brown. I opened my eyes and saw nothing but the brown I love, one that matched the leaves in the trees. The one in my mom's eyes. She pulled me close and told me never again.

I looked up at her as she said it, the tears streaming down her face. I hid in her chest. It wasn't until a week later when she was changing the bandages that I told her about the moon, about the wind in my hair. She just smiled and said,

*“La luna está más cerca que nunca.”*

# How Those We Once Loved Become Strangers Again

---

Natalie Van Gelder

Sagittarius is located in the southern hemisphere of the sky between the constellations of Scorpio and Capricorn. It is the only constellation that I can recognize, and it is because a boy pointed it out to me in a clear, dark sky when I was 15. He told me the archer's bow and arrow are aimed at the scorpion's heart to keep him from wandering. I thought this was both fascinating and cruel and wondered how tired the archer must be, constantly forcing someone to stay when they want to go. But what if the Greeks had it wrong? Perhaps the archer had other reasons for acting with such threatening force.

---

"He's not very nice to you," Amy said, sipping her latte. Capricorn is an earth sign and when paired with a fire sign they tend to provide balance and grounding. Amy had provided me with such a service since we first met in the fifth grade. At twenty-two, our schedules made it difficult to connect as often, but we made it a point to meet once a month for a "real, grown-up breakfast."

"He's not mean," I said.

"I didn't say he was mean. It's just that, no matter how much we try to deny it, we are each the center of our own universe." At this, I rolled my eyes, but Amy pressed on with her theory, "I'm not saying we are all selfish, terrible people; I just mean that we're only able to really understand ideas that we can relate to."

"So, we are different. Why should that be a problem?" I asked, "I mean nobody is the same. And, in all honesty, why would I want to date someone exactly like me? How boring would that be?"

"I'm just saying there has to be a middle ground. There is healthy different and unhealthy different. When you are with someone, your

two worlds unavoidably overlap,” Amy put one hand over her other halfway, “Like those color charts we learned about art class. And that’s okay! That’s normal. You are red, he’s yellow, and that tiny part of you both that overlaps is orange. That part is compromise. That’s your relationship.” She looked up with her eyes to make sure I was following. I stared back, confused, but with intention. At this point, she turned each hand palm side up one at a time, “But you will always still be red, and he will always be yellow.” She weighed each hand with a bounce, “Compromise is good, but if you force him to be a little too much like you or you try to be a little too much like you, that’s where the breakdown starts. If you both become orange, I mean, well then neither one of you can be happy.”

I stared at her for a moment while a lone cricket chirped in the oleanders next to us, “Amy, you are always so eloquent and yet I have no idea what you are actually trying to tell me,” I teased. “Are you saying I’m not happy?”

I could see Amy choosing her next words carefully, “I’m saying that when you are with him, you are not you. And I can see that being a problem.” I wanted to tell her she had it wrong, but I couldn’t. So, I took a long sip of my coffee. “You know he’s a Scorpio, right?”

“Huh,” she answered, “Yea, that makes sense.” She laughed, made pincher claws with her fingers, and attacked my hand as I reached for the last piece of a cinnamon roll.

---

Josh and I met on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2000 when The Cure played a concert at The Greek. Amy and I sat near the top of the amphitheater, she at my right, and three rows back to my left sat a young man in ripped jeans and worn boots. As the band played “A Letter to Elise,” I focused in on Robert Smith’s bloated, sweaty face. His heavy eyes melted like black crayons down pasty cheeks and I thought of my own eyes three days ago when I realized Bryan De Franco would never call me back. I needed a cigarette. I excused myself from Amy and proceeded down the thousand vertigo-inducing stone steps, breathing in mixed fumes of spilled beer, garlic fries, and clove

cigarettes. I went on a walk to be alone, not to make a new friend. But as I descended the last flight of stairs, my foot slipped off the concrete edge, sending my hands skyward to grasp the aluminum handrail. My soft pack of Marlboro Lights went skidding across the ground, landing at the feet of a young man in ripped jeans, worn boots, and a black t-shirt.

He asked me if I was okay and helped me to my feet. I brushed off my pants and assembled my pride as he handed me my cigarettes and made a snide comment about lung cancer. I thanked him, turned to leave, and he asked me to hold on. “What do you make of this concert so far?” he asked.

I looked him up and down and smiled, answering him with another question: “Did you know that eleven years ago The Cure was the most famous band in the world?” Josh smiled and when he did, his gray-green eyes smiled, too.

---

After getting a tour of Lindsay and Kevin’s new two-bedroom condo, Josh and I settled down on a porch swing, each with a Corona sans lime.

“Their house is so nice,” I commented, “They seem so happy. I’m really happy for them.”

“Yea, dual incomes are great,” Josh replied.

“We have dual incomes and it doesn’t seem to help us,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“You have a roommate, I have a roommate,” I counted on my fingers, then held them up, “two each – dual incomes.”

“Okay then,” said Josh, “but when was the last Jessica paid you her half of the utilities?”

“Touché,” I replied. We sipped our beer and swung our legs. Every few swings, my right foot would accidentally hit his left.

“Have you ever thought about it though,” Josh asked. “Thought about what?”

“About us,” he specified, “moving in together.”

I took another sip. In all honesty, I hadn’t, and the thought of it now made me feel trapped. Still, I knew I had to give him some answer, “It’s something to consider,” I said.

“You don’t sound very excited.” He paused, “I mean, I just asked us to move in together. Isn’t that like every girl’s dream? A guy who can commit?”

“There’s just a lot to consider,” I repeated. Just then Amy came around the corner.

“There you are,” she said loudly, “I couldn’t find you anywhere. Lindsay found that record she got at Amoeba.”

“The Sex Pistols one,” I asked with big eyes.

“Yea,” Amy answered, “She wants to show you. Can I borrow her Josh?”

“Yea, fine, whatever,” he answered.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Josh. As I jumped off the swing, I shot Amy a glance that said, “thank you for saving me.”

Once inside the house, the questions started. “What was going on out there,” she asked.

“He asked me to move in with him,” I said.

Amy’s eyes grew with surprise and then concern, “What did you tell him?”

“Nothing, really. You showed up right before I had to.”

She shifted her question, “What are you going to tell him,”

“I haven’t decided,” I thought for a minute then said, “I guess I’ll say yes.”

“You guess?”

“I mean, he’s right isn’t he,” I pondered, “Isn’t this what every girl wants? A guy that will commit and move forward and all that?”

“But do you want to move forward with this with this particular guy,” she asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Not wanting to sound defensive, I backtracked, “I mean, yes. I do want to move forward with this particular guy.” I paused then said, “I love him.” Amy pursed her lips to hold back judgment, but I was sure I saw pity in her eyes.



By the time I got back outside to tell Josh the news, he was drunk and teasing our friend Matt, who does not like to be reminded he is 5'3" tall. "You aren't even a half pint, Matt, you're a shot glass!" An eerie silence fell over the rest of the group nearby as Josh laughed.

On candy stripe legs the Spiderman comes, softly through the shadow of the evening sun<sup>1</sup>. I looked up in the sky to find Sagittarius, but he was hiding behind the clouds.

---

On our first date, Venice Beach had never seemed cleaner. The breeze off the ocean licked our faces and blew acrid vapors from the sidewalk behind us so all we could smell was kelp and sea salt. After starting the morning in Santa Monica, Josh and I had settled down into the flat expanse of hot Venice sand that lays between kitschy shops, marijuana dispensaries, and the rising tide. We were serenaded by a Rastafarian man with bongos, whose loose interpretation of the Bob Marley catalog made us feel far, far away. Occasionally, one of us would ask the other a question about where they worked, what their family was like, where they went to high school. Josh mentioned he was a Scorpio, although he didn't really know what that meant. I laughed and replied that I'm a Sagittarius and I thought that meant that we are not supposed to be friends. I asked Josh about his dreams and he said he'd like to climb El Capitan in Yosemite, then settle down and have kids. I told him I want to see the world because life is one big adventure. We discovered we knew four of the same people through a friend of a friend of a friend. A fact that at the start of a romantic friendship always feels serendipitous, no matter how coincidental.

After hours of talking, we sat in silence for a while and it was not awkward. Sometimes, when I'm happy, I will start singing without realizing I'm doing so. "Show me show me show me how you do that trick<sup>2</sup>," I mumbled.

Josh turned toward me, and I felt flushed. Instead of teasing,

<sup>1</sup>Lyrics from "Lullaby" by the Cure, 1989.

<sup>2</sup>Lyrics from "Just Like Heaven" by the Cure, 1987.

however, Josh smiled and continued the song, “the one that makes me scream she said. The one that makes me laugh she said. Throw my arms around your neck.”

I smiled back and we carried on together, “show me how you do it, and I promise you, I promise that I’ll run away with you. I’ll run away with you.” We both laughed and Josh said, “It really was a good concert.”

“It really wasn’t,” I countered, “a last-ditch effort to hold onto something great as it slips between their fingers.” I picked up a handful of sand and let it fall between my own fingers.

“It was still a good concert,” Josh insisted.

After a moment, I replied, shielding my eyes from the glare of the sun on the ocean “Yea. It was. It was a really good concert.”

---

Josh and I got back to our apartment after spending the afternoon at IKEA, wandering clearly- marked aisles lined with meticulous dioramas of bargain-priced elegance, “*Follow these arrows to find domestic happiness,*” they instructed, “*only \$19.99! (some assembly required)*” At one point I dragged Josh over to a bookshelf that stood out to me. I told him how perfect it would fit along the wall between the couch and the tv stand. “I could put my records on it. I’m running out of room for them in the closet.”

“Did you ever wonder if maybe you have too many records?” Josh commented.

“No. I don’t ever wonder that,” I answered, “I think we should get it. It could be my Christmas present,” I turned my head and winked. He rolled his eyes and sighed.

He said I could get it if I loaded it into the car by myself. I told him fine, but he had to help me assemble it when we got home. He said fine.

“You have to read the instructions,” I said to Josh as we sat on the living room floor of our apartment, “you’re holding the wrong part.” He wouldn’t listen. I screwed in a metal dowel with the provided Allen wrench and changed the subject. “Did you hear that Jeremy is

moving to Japan?”

“I did not hear that. When did you talk to Jeremy,” asked Josh.

“This morning when you were in the shower. He got a job teaching English at a high school in Okinawa.”

“Can you hand me that,” Josh asked, pointing to a long strip of metal.

“That’s Part A, you need Part C,” I said, handing him the correct part. I continued my story, “The company he will work for pays all living expenses. Room and board, food, and he gets a stipend.” Josh did not reply. His face was skewed as he tried to fit together two pieces of pressboard that would not marry.

“Anyway,” I carried on, “they’re looking for more applicants. He gave me the information before we got off the phone.”

At this Josh stopped what he was doing, the two parts loose in his hands. He laughed, shook his head, and said, “We are not moving to Japan.”

“Why not,” I asked, “wouldn’t it be nice to try something new? Move on to a new adventure? Think of all we could see and experience. You always say how much you hate your job.” I knew if I stopped talking it would be over, so my story quickened pace, “We could save that extra money and maybe get a house when we get back. We could get out of this crappy apartment. We could be a family.”

As I rattled on Josh grew impatient. He waited for me to finish, readying his sharp scorpion tail and when I stopped talking, I was struck right in the shoulder blade by his stinger. “I have a family and they live here, not in Japan.” He said the next words with conviction that told me the conversation was over, “I am not moving to Japan.”

The poison set in and I felt the blood drain from my face. I was wounded, but I did not cry. I went back to the task at hand as *Disintegration* played on the hi-fi. The pops and clicks of needle on vinyl usually felt like a warm hug, but at that moment they stabbed at my patience, taunting me. I felt nauseous like I had spun around too many times myself.

“You are never going to get those two parts together,” I said as

Josh continued to struggle.

“I know what I’m doing,” he said.

“They aren’t the right parts. Part C connects to Part H with those short screws over there.” I pointed to a spot about a foot away on the carpet. “The ones in that little baggy marked with a ‘3’”

Through gritted teeth, Josh repeated, “I said I know what I’m doing.”

I laughed, “I don’t think you do, actually.”

Josh’s face hardened into a shiny crust of armor. With a giant serrated claw, he pinched the plastic bag and flung it across the room, missing my face by inches. Without any hesitation he turned his head back to me and said, “You know you aren’t really as smart as you pretend to be, right?”

“Excuse me,” I asked.

He stood up and I followed suit. “All those facts you throw at people to sound smart. We are building a case for records you barely ever play just so when people come over, they can see how “smart” and “interesting” you are,” he pinched his fingers into air quotes and shrugged ugly when he said these words. “People you don’t even care about. People you don’t even like.” Josh reached for the top record on a pile near the couch, grabbed it, and before I could stop him, he threw it at the wall in the direction of the baggy marked ‘3’. I ducked and covered my head, then I heard it crash and shatter. Jagged shards of black vinyl flew from the record jacket, landing in a pile of melancholy. My arms suddenly ached and my heart raced; I clenched my fingers into fists—short, thin nails digging into my palms. I let the pain fuel my hate.

“You don’t even know me,” I whispered, still staring at the record. I turned and looked him in the eye. “You don’t even know me! But I know you. You’re just a selfish, ignorant bully.” I contorted into a form no longer recognizable as I became the centaur, the hunter, the archer. I pushed him with my front hooves, steadying myself on strong, rear legs. “You try to be funny, so people find you interesting but really, you just insult people. You make them feel terrible about themselves, then you laugh at them and try to get others to join in.”

“Don’t you dare push me again,” he said.

For once I felt solid and powerful, “But you know what’s really funny? People laugh when you leave. They laugh behind your back at your pathetic attempts to be funny. To be liked.”

“Shut up,” Josh warned.

I steadied on three legs and kicked Josh with my fourth, my hoof catching him in his scrawny front leg. “You don’t even realize it, do you? You try to make people feel weak so you can feel strong. And then when you leave, they laugh at you. THAT is sad. And you know what else?” Josh swung around to grab my arm with his chela fingers, but I swerved, and he missed.

I remembered the quiver at my back and reached in to pull out my largest arrow. I set it into my bow, pulled back, and fired, “One day you are going to look around and you will be alone. Because instead of making people laugh like you wanted to, all you did was make everyone around you feel like shit.”

I stood for a second and watched Josh stand there, his shiny black armor cracked, his insides vulnerable and spilling from his abdomen. I aimed my last arrow straight at his heart, as I was always destined to do. A kill shot to end the conversation for good. “You are a sad, weak, uninteresting person. And everyone sees it but you.”

On the stereo, Robert Smith crooned, “...and you finally found all your courage to let it all go.”

“Don’t worry about the damn bookshelf. I’ll build it myself.” I picked up a few shards of broken vinyl and tossed them at his feet. “I can’t believe you broke my dad’s record.” I sulked down the hallway and winced when I heard Josh kick the pressboard shelving, bringing an end to a piece of furniture that never had the chance to live.



In August of 2000, Josh took me hiking for the first time. I never realized such colors and smells existed so close to the hot concrete and asphalt of the city.

“It’s so beautiful here,” I said, “how do you know about this place?”

"I know about a lot of places," he replied, "spending time in nature was a big part of my parents' lives so I guess they wanted to make sure their kids experienced it, too."

"I feel like I've missed out on so much."

"It is easy to forget it's here, but you have to make time for it. This is what it's all about - all that's around us right now. You lose touch with what's important when you don't interact with it. It makes you better, somehow."

"I can see that." I looked at him with admiration and curiosity. "That's kind of how I feel about books and music,"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, just the fact that another person created it. They put themselves into something to share with others. You feel that connection to another place, another world. You imagine being there and it takes you out of where you are right then. It makes you see the world as a place bigger than yourself. It helps me understand things better. I feel that way right now, being out here with you. I remember how small I am."

We found two flat rocks at a point that overlooked a vast valley of pine trees and sat down. "And that's a good thing," he asked.

"I think so," I picked up a rock and threw it as far as I could. "It's nice that your family is so close. I wish I had that."

"It is nice. I know I'm lucky." He picked up a rock and turned it over and over again. "How old were you when your dad died," he asked.

"Fourteen," I replied, "I'd just started high school."

"You guys were close?"

"As close as you can get. I never really connected with my mom. She's hard to connect with; typical Virgo. She likes to be left alone, so that's what I've always done. I think my dad felt bad, so he made up for it in a lot of ways."

"How so?"

"He was the one who talked to me about school, friends, boys, all that." I took a moment to examine the ants crawling at my feet. As they marched on one-by-one, I passively wondered how

some creatures can interact so effectively without any intentional communication while the rest of us struggle for just the right words. “I think he was lonely, too. He’d make me read books by authors he thought were important and we’d talk about them. He bought me my first records—Miles Davis and Led Zeppelin. We’d listen to them over and over again. At first, I tried to make sense of the sounds, but after a while, it all just made me a little numb; but not in a bad way.” I realized I was rambling and looked up at Josh to see if he was still listening. He was. “We made these crazy detailed plans to visit Egypt and Venice. He’d pick up books from the AAA office and we’d mark them all up, circling all the things we’d want to see when we got there. He’s the reason I’m so easy to talk to at dinner parties,” at this I laughed and threw another rock.

“I love that you know so much about different things,” he said, “You make me want to learn more. Grow. Be better.”

“I love that you love that about me,” I said. A discouraged look swept his face and I smiled, adding, “and I love you, Josh.”

He sighed in relief. “I love you, too Lucy.” Josh pulled me to my feet, locked my fingers in his, and we walked some more beneath the trees as they filtered the city’s excess carbon.

---

On a sunny Friday in the spring of 2001, Amy and I met at Tower Records on Sunset. The many televisions that hung from the ceiling were turned to the same channel where they all played The Cure’s video of “Killing an Arab.” Amy returned from the new cd section and elbowed me in the arm. “Hey,” she said and tossed her head toward the section she just passed. Josh was standing two rows away, body facing us with his focus downward as he flipped through CDs.

My attention turned to the background music:

*I can turn and walk away, or I can fire the gun, Staring at the sky, Staring at the sun, Whichever I choose it amounts to the same, Absolutely nothin’.. I’m alive, I’m dead, I’m the stranger...*

“Let’s just go,” I told Amy. We put down our CDs without paying, turned around, and walked to the exit. Before we reached the door,

I turned around once more to see Josh. His head was raised, and his eyes met mine, then he looked down and proceeded to shuffle his fingers through the plastic cases. Before I turned back around, I caught glimpse of a bit of stinger on the end of a shiny black tail as it flicked between his worn black boots.



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