

N O R T H
R I D G E
W
2021

R
E
V
I
E
W



FALL ISSUE

Acknowledgements

The Northridge Review thanks the Associated Students of CSUN, the English Department, and the faculty and staff of the Creative Writing Program for all of their aid and support. Special thanks to Frank De La Santo for all the behind the scenes work that makes this magazine possible. Thank you to Ellen E. Jarosz for organizing and facilitating our virtual visit to Special Collections, and providing us with the rich literary history that influenced and inspired this issue. Thank you to Elizabeth Rodriguez for your lovely artwork that shaped the identity of the issue. Thank you to Sean Pessin for your guidance for we could not have achieved this feat without your continued support. And finally, we want to thank all of the wonderfully creative writers and artists who submitted to our magazine whose talented voices give our magazine life.

The Northridge Review Awards

This year's judge of the Northridge Review Fiction Award, Dr. Robert D. Montoya, is an Assistant Professor in the UCLA Department of Information Studies and Director of California Rare Book School. They also direct the Library, Ethics, and Justice Lab at UCLA. Recognized as an honorable mention for the award is Sandra Leyva for her pieces *King Arthur Eats His Squire's Food*, *A Lake Writes a Letter to a River*, and *Laurel Goes for a Walk with The Crocodile*. The recipient of this year's award is Ashley Tuang for her piece *Tala*.

This year's judge of the Rachel Sherwood Poetry Prize, Moncho Alvarado, is a sister in residence in air, a Cihuayollotl trans woman Xicanx poet, translator, visual artist, and educator. She has been published in *Meridian*, *Foglifter*, *Lunch Ticket*, *2018 Emerge Lambda Fellows Anthology*, *Poets.org*, and other publications. Recognized as an honorable mention for the award are Cyrus Shafii for their piece "Planes," and D. J. Lupercio for their piece "Puzzle[R]." The recipient of this year's award is Douglas Lee for their piece "I Wonder...."

Editors' Note

Dear Reader,

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone in so many ways. People, workplaces, and schools have had to adapt to the ever changing state of our nation. Our small literary magazine was no different. Due to this tumultuous time, our staff could never meet in person, could never assemble a physical book, and only knew each other through icons on a screen. And yet, they carried on and worked together to assemble the beautiful issue you see before you. Through collaborative effort, *The Northridge Review's* legacy persists!

We are in awe of all the wonderful writing we had the pleasure to read this semester. The CSUN student body is immensely talented and we have thankfully captured and memorialized a piece of their genius in this magazine. Creativity will flourish against all odds and the contributors here are a testament to that.

Whether you are a writer, artist, or a supporter of the arts, we thank you, dear reader, and we hope these works inspire you as they have inspired and touched us.

Onward,

Diana J. Lupercio & Sandra Leyva

Production Team

Sean Pessin

Faculty Advisor

Diana J. Lupercio

Managing Editor

Layout and Design

Copyeditor Staff

Sandra Leyva

Assistant Managing Editor

Copyeditor Staff

Events

Israel Muratalla

Lead Book Design Editor

Layout and Design

Copyeditor Staff

Cynthia Hernandez

Layout and Design

Copyeditor Staff

Kaila Rivas

Assistant Book Design Editor

Copyeditor Staff

Layout and Design

Cassandra Garcia

Lead Copyeditor

Layout and Design

Events

Yesenia Luna

Assistant Copyeditor

Layout and Design

Marketing

Nicole Derderian

Business Manager

Marketing and Circulation

Events

Frank Simonian

Assistant Business Manager

Marketing and Circulation

Events

Gabby Woodings

Marketing and Circulation

Events

Michelle Ansari

Marketing and Circulation

Events

Editorial Team

Faculty Advisor

Sean Pessin

Editors at Large

Emily Gurrola

Alejandro Zizumbo

Prose Editors

Tadeh Kennedy

Ricardo Acevedo

Assistant Prose Editor

Sam Bowers

Prose Staff

Alejandro Zizumbo

Israel Muratalla

Katherine Rodriguez

Poetry Editor

Valerie Quiroga

Assistant Poetry Editor

Asusena Lopez

Poetry Staff

Emely Foytek

Katherine Nabulsi

Tristan Eisenberg

Drama Editor

Bryant Martinez

Assistant Drama Editor

Joseph Nixon

Drama Staff

Miguel Velasquez

Art Editor

Alberto Delgado

Assistant Art Editor

Andre Alviso

Art Staff

Raquel Dubin

CONTENTS

King Arthur Eats His Squire's Food

Sandra Leyva

15

A Lake Writes a Letter to a River

Sandra Leyva

17

When You See a Sleeping Fairy

Edwin Aguilar

19

Insanity

Edwin Aguilar

20

The Middle

Stephanie Mendez

21

Puzzle[R]

D. J. Lupercio

35

Abuelita

Sofia Solares

36

jan. 01, 2010

Sofia Solares

38

CONTENTS

Burn
Sofia Solares
41

Ringlets
Sofia Solares
42

Tala
Ashley Tuang
43

Origins
Helena Mahdessian
51

Torn
Carrie Newell
54

Planes
Cyrus Shafii
59

Sunlight
Sam Rousso
62

A Golden Hour
Timothy Batchelder
65

CONTENTS

The Story of Daydreamers
Ameera Karraa
66

reincarnation
Ameera Karraa
67

Sacrificial Fly Rule
Cyrus Shafii
69

A Mother's Kitchen
Amelia Rhett
75

Mango Tree
Amelia Rhett
76

Dinner and a Movie
Carrie Newell
78

Standard Ice Cream
Sam Rousso
85

Ralph Closes at 1 AM
Sophia Centurion
86

CONTENTS

Another Drunk <i>Sophia Centurion</i> 87	How to Tell Your Friend She's Being Cheated On <i>Sophia Hejran</i> 95
The Powerful Part About the Brain <i>Sophia Centurion</i> 88	Open and Closed Doors <i>Janet Meza</i> 97
Solitude <i>Andrew La</i> 90	Solutions for Natalie's Problem <i>Aislinn DeButch</i> 118
Boys in My Hood <i>Andrew Flores</i> 91	Ya No Llores <i>Amber Castellanos</i> 120

CONTENTS

Below the Stars <i>Amber Castellanos</i> 129	A Respite Walk Around The Quarantine Neighborhood <i>Gevork Sherbetchyan</i> 146
Under the Umbrella Bungalow <i>Amber Castellanos</i> 138	Compound Interest <i>Billy Allen</i> 147
Postcard to April <i>Stephanie Reinheimer</i> 142	Pictures of the Woman I Love <i>Carson Lane Campman</i> 156
Laurel Goes for a Walk with The Crocodile <i>Sandra Leyva</i> 144	Blissful Ignorance <i>Andrew La</i> 165

CONTENTS

**The Circumstances in Which Poor Communication
Ruined Your Family Dinner**
Christopher Bangasser
166

Birthday at Akbar
Carrie Chen
171

Insectoid
Erik Huerta
172

Today I Could Only Find a Small Lizard
Carrie Newell
174

Jurassic Park
Francis Santos
177

Gucci and Dirt
Carrie Newell
178

Gevorg's Day Off
Nairi Simonyan
183

Bananas
Joshua Windolph
190

CONTENTS

Duck Dynasty <i>Sierra Marshall</i> 193	Gloved <i>Joseph Silva</i> 205
Of Eternal Night and Spider Wings <i>Natalie Van Gelder</i> 194	Take Out the Trash <i>Gillian Moran-Perez</i> 206
Downtown Metro Slap <i>Victor Perez</i> 198	Centurion <i>Justin Weekley</i> 254
Swimming <i>Katie Papa</i> 200	Practice <i>Gevork Sherbetchyan</i> 256

CONTENTS

Echoes

K. M. Tisdale

257

Empty

Elizabeth Rodriguez

260

Group of Misfits

Elizabeth Rodriguez

261

King Arthur Eats His Squire's Food

Sandra Leyva

"Oh, Laurel," says King Arthur exasperatedly, "Must you play with your food?"

Laurel does not look up from the floor where she sits squatted over her dinner plate. Her mashed potatoes are completely mixed up with the green peas and laid into a mound as if it were a tiny mountain on a plate. Her chicken is split and sticking up from several places out of the potatoes.

She grabs her glass of water and pours it carefully on the food. Water spills out and slowly covers the rest of the plate, becoming a grey and brown lake surrounding the mashed potato mountain. It shimmers in various colors due to the grease from the chicken.

The plate looks awful. She sighs and drops her table knife.

"I'm bored!" she announces.

"That is no excuse for playing with your food," counters King Arthur, "A lady must be poised and elegant at all times. And not sit like a buffoon on the ground!"

Laurel rolls her eyes, "Fine" she stands up quickly, making a green pea fall to her dress, "where should I sit then your highness?" she feigns a curtsy.

King Arthur gestures to the wooden chair next to him at the small round table. Laurel takes it.

"You know," she begins as she sits down, "I know my little project isn't the greatest, funnest thing to do today, but what else can I do? Dr. Bores took away my hair dolls."

"And your hair," King Arthur adds knowingly looking at the strangely parted bowl cut on Laurel's head.

"Exactly!" she self-consciously runs her hands through her hair, "So, any great ideas? What else can I do?"

King Arthur ponders the question for a minute. "Well, we can always write. We can always read. Dr. Bores left some books around here, or some pens and notebooks at least, did he not?" There is a sound of his own growling

stomach, "We can always eat. Tell me, my dear, are you going to finish that?" he points to the plate on the floor.

Laurel shakes her head.

King Arthur proceeds to drop on all fours as he saunters over to the plate. He lowers his mouth and begins to eat Laurel's leftovers. Laurel stares at him with a tilted head.

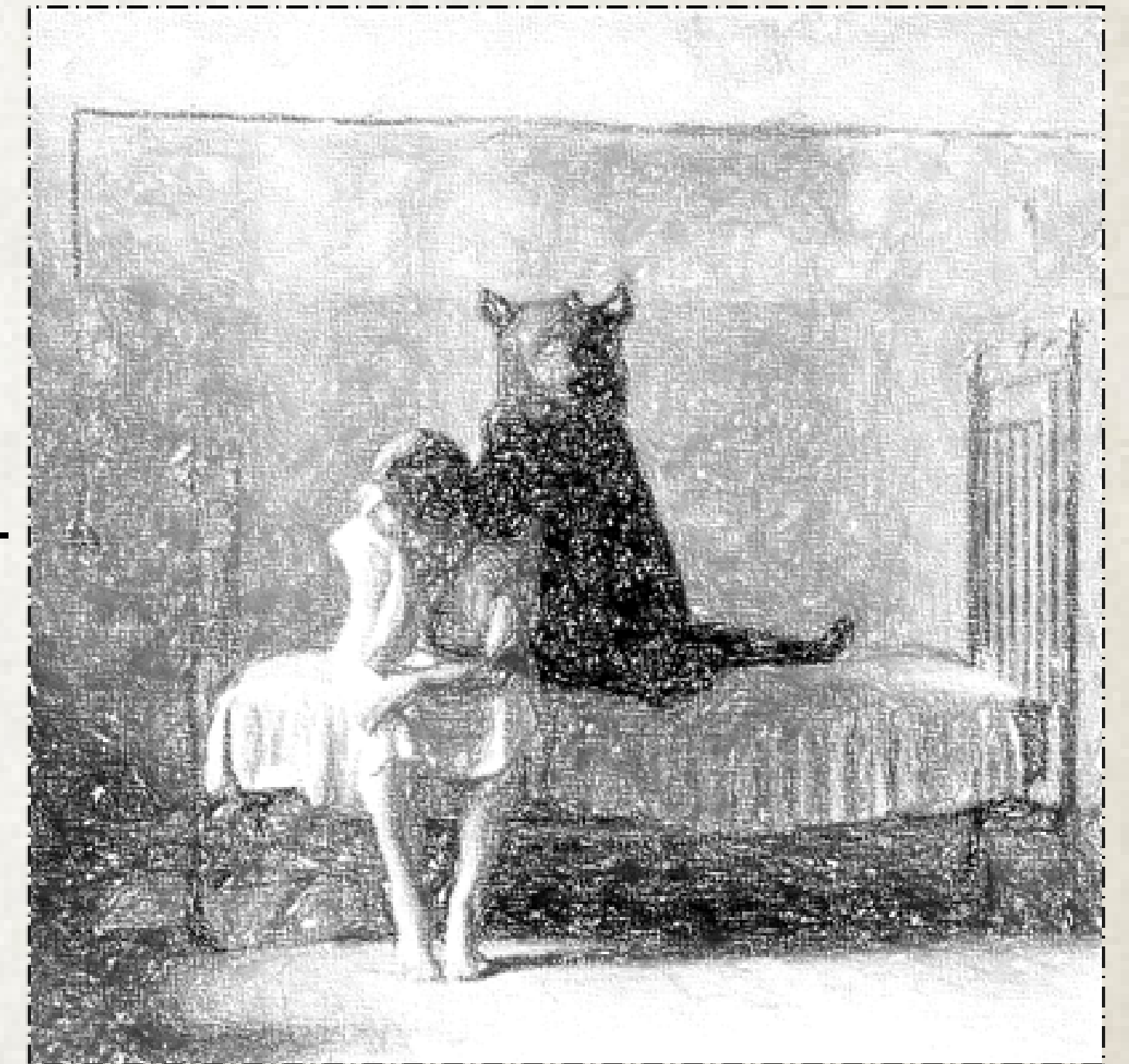
"Try not to make a mess, King Arthur, Dr. Bores always blames me for it."

King Arthur looks up, swallows the food in his mouth, and says politely, "Don't be ridiculous. I never make a mess," he continues to devour the food on the plate, then looks up again, "a lady must not spread lies either, you know" he says with his mouth full.

Laurel nods slowly and turns away as King Arthur continues to eat. She slowly gets up from the round table and sits on her decrepit bed. She tries her best to ignore the sad walls surrounding her as she looks out the window wistfully. It is spring outside, with vivid green life covering the grand landscape.

King Arthur notices her silence and gets up, joining her on the bed. He carefully picks the pea from her dress, eats it, then rests a hand on her shoulder.

"It will turn out fine, young squire," they say at the same time. They sigh in unison and sit in silence, each staring in a different direction.



A Lake Writes a Letter to a River

Sandra Leyva

Dear Cousin River,

I miss everyone, River.

I am very alone and still; many of my animals have left me without giving me a weeks' notice, even without telling me why. It's been too calm, River, too calm here.

I miss brother Lake, who used to be me, but then separated when it didn't rain last year. They were so still. Stiller than me. I wonder how they are doing, River, I wonder every day.

I miss Waterfall. Oh, Waterfall was merciless. Waterfall fell with force, crashed onto anything below, uncaring. Their cold passion always impressed everyone. I used to be Waterfall for a little while, but then I rained and fell here, River. I wonder how Waterfall is doing.

I miss Fog. Fog used to come here, River, oh, they came here very often. But then it got very hot and it didn't rain last year. I haven't seen Fog since. They were so slow, River, and so grey. And silent. Sometimes it merely fell, dowsing its surroundings with itself, covering the setting in its entirety. It was so hard having a conversation with them, River, I talked all the time, and Fog never answered. But I still miss them, River, I really do.

I miss little Puddle. Puddle is always fun! The human children love them so much, River. Always still, sometimes with mud, sometimes with leaves, until someone comes and disrupts its quiet surface. Once, when I was Puddle, a little girl splashed by with her crocodile and they both roared with laughter! I miss little Puddle.

I miss Rain. I miss being Rain, I miss Rain visiting. It's always a fun time catching up with Rain and Everyone in Rain. They are so loud, River, so incredibly loud, but I would welcome their loudness now.

And above all, I miss you River. River: always moving, always flowing, never stopping. Oh, how I looked up to you River! Always wanted to join you again after those fun times we had in the mountains! But then we joined

Ocean and it rained and I became Lake and you stayed River. Because River always stays River.

I miss you.

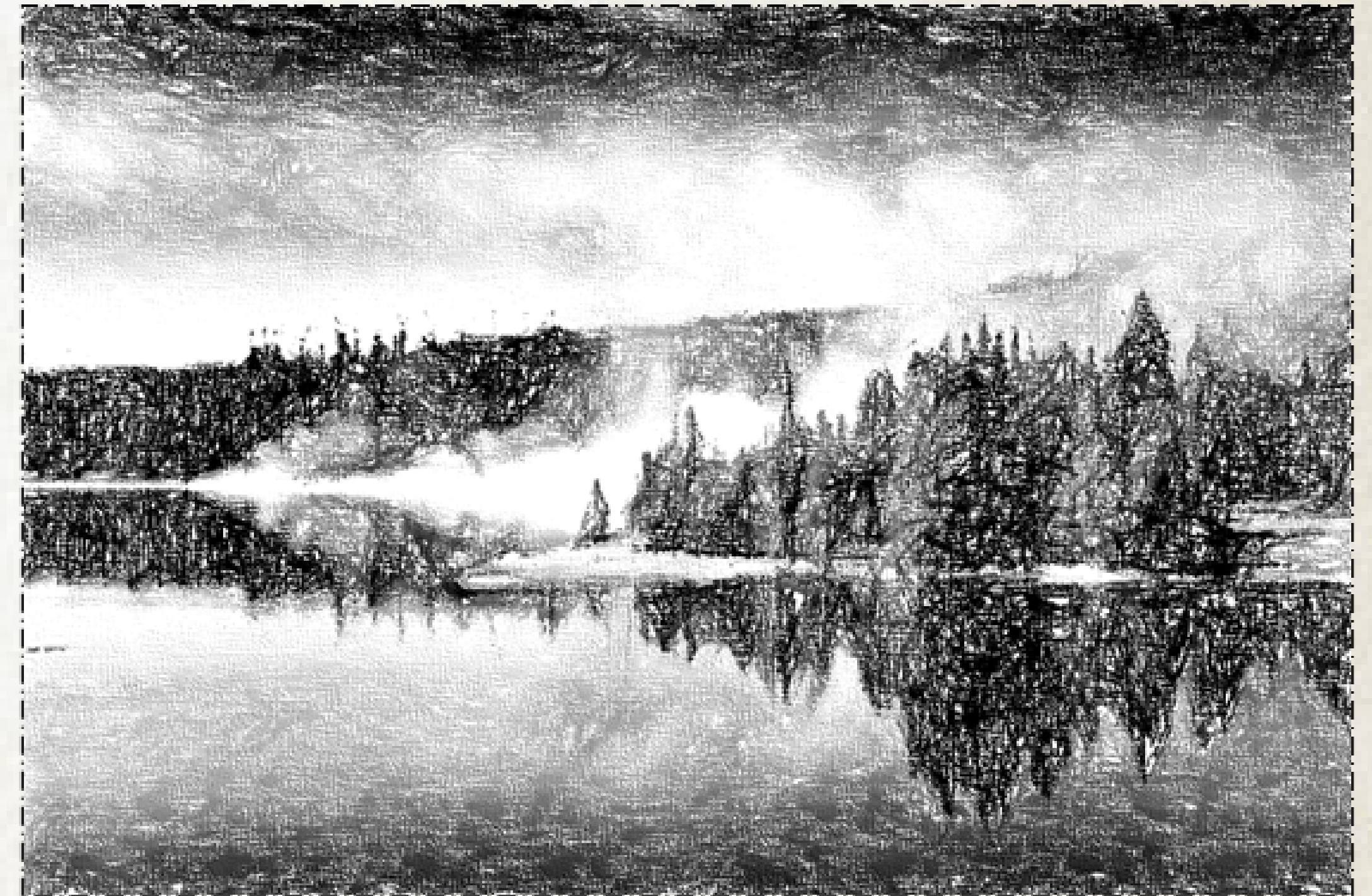
Nothing much is happening here. Except for the loud machinery going on in the distance. I hoped the people would come over and swim and laugh and float but they have not done so. Instead, they send me strange gifts. Barrels. Lots of barrels all filled with grease. Grease? I think it is Grease. It makes my waters shimmer beautifully in various colors, River, but my fish and ducks hate it immensely.

I am not sure whether to like these gifts.

With so much time on my hands, I have recently gotten into writing, River. It is an exciting new hobby, but I did not know what to write about. So, I decided to write a letter to you. I hope that was okay.

Sincerely,

Lake



When You See a Sleeping Fairy

Edwin Aguilar

When you see a sleeping fairy, cradle it with both branches. Let the fairy breathe in the smokey wood from your palm and the dry grass from your wrist. When you see a sleeping fairy, don't startle it or it will fly away never to be seen again. When you see a sleeping fairy, sing songs about the moon falling in love with the sun and night chasing the day, for it craves light in its dark world. When you see a sleeping fairy, let the nightlife orbit around you, an array of endless fireflies and fluorescent mushrooms and glowing trees and blooming bioluminescent dandelions that stretch from your crackling roots and branches, because that's the fairy welcoming you in its dreams. If the fairy begins to cry, show it the fireflies or the glowing roses that bloom once every ten years, because even its tears burn your wooden eyes. When you see a sleeping fairy, it knows that you really are alive, and it wants a home in you. You call on the squirrels to dig into your center and lay a kaleidoscope of flowers for the fairy to slumber upon. When you see a sleeping fairy, it's because you'll never see it awaken. And when you see a sleeping fairy, it's time for you to fall into a euphoric, endless sleep, while the fairy dances and flies and springs in the mysticality around your slumbering shell.

Insanity

Edwin Aguilar

The walls began to speak one day
and the wooden floors slithered in unison
 The curtains laughed in the rolling wind
 and the windows stared judgmentally from inside
The gate's mouth remained shut in silence
while the grass taunted in the tainted air
 The dog began to speak in the ancient tongue of Aristotelianism
 while the cat began to bark and peel its skin against the sanded cabinets
The walls crawled in closer day by day
and the pillows began their smothering at night
 The whispers grew louder and deadly in their minds
 and the real world became a mirage of kaleidoscopes
The water drugged itself
and the food grew poisonous
 The knives became glasses
 and the medicine transformed into candy
On the last day the walls spoke
the bodies had rotted into the wood
 When the dusty doors began to open
 one remained bolted to the healing world

The Middle

Stephanie Mendez

SCENE

JIM is sitting on a couch reading the newspaper.
KRISTIN barges in wearing a beekeeper suit while holding a watering can.

JIM

How is it outside?

KRISTIN

They didn't let me get to my flowers.

JIM

I told you that it wasn't a good idea to go out today.

KRISTIN

Well, they need to figure out when this issue will be solved. I cannot continue to live like this!

JIM

Well, they can't do anything about it right now.

KRISTIN

I blame the government.

JIM

Government? What government?

KRISTIN

I'm just saying that for paradise, it's just not so great.

JIM

This isn't paradise.

KRISTIN

Then, what is it?

JIM

I don't know. Brad just said that it isn't the after—

KRISTIN

Fuck Brad.

JIM

It isn't his fault.

KRISTIN

Then it's your fault.

JIM

How is it—

KRISTIN

If you had been paying attention then—

JIM

Are you trying to tell me that I should have hit the deer?

KRISTIN

It wasn't even real!

JIM

How was I supposed to know that!?

KRISTIN

You know, I always knew that you were a shitty driver.

JIM

Just because I refused to hit a deer?!

KRISTIN

You had time to stop the car!

JIM

I told you I couldn't.

KRISTIN

Yeah, that's because you suck at driving.

A loud beep is heard, and a voice begins to speak overhead. JIM and KRISTIN are frozen.

JANET

Hello! Hi, uh... yeah... I just wanted to let you know that we can...we can hear you.

JIM

Sorry! We didn't mean to be so loud!

JANET

Yeah, I don't think you turned off your speaker.

KRISTIN

Sorry, Janet! We'll take care of it right now!

JIM fumbles with a wall speaker. He presses a button.

JIM

There we go. *(Pauses)* Well, that was embarrassing.

KRISTIN

Oh, it's just Janet. You know she's really nosy.

JANET

I can still hear you.

KRISTIN

(Nervously laughing) I—I... How's Carl?

JANET

It's the red button, if you're wondering which one turns it off.

KRISTIN

(To Jim) Go! Turn it off!

JIM runs back and pushes the button. There is another loud beep.

JIM

Hello. Janet are you still there. *(Silence)* Okay. That was interesting.

KRISTIN

I wonder how Carl puts up with her. I feel bad for him, like he had to deal with her then and now. He should have divorced her before he died.

JIM

Yeah, he told me how he had planned on doing that but then he had that heart attack.

KRISTIN

Poor Carl. I wonder if he was sad when she appeared.

JIM

You would think this place would announce something like that.

KRISTIN

I heard from Tessa that Janet had remarried.

JIM

No.

KRISTIN

Yes. I wonder how that will work out.

JIM

Maybe Carl will just dump her onto her other husband.

KRISTIN

I just know that I want to see that play out. That will teach her!

JIM

Maybe we'll hear it. Now, how did this thing turn on?

KRISTIN

I don't know. Oh! You know what it must have been the door.

JIM

You have to be more careful.

KRISTIN

We should probably talk to Brad about moving it.

JIM

We should call him.

JIM walks over to a rotary phone. He picks up the receiver.

Do you know what his phone number is?

KRISTIN

It's probably in the handbook.

JIM

Okay. Where did you put it?

KRISTIN

It's right there.

KRISTIN points to a thick book on a coffee table. JIM walks over in disbelief.

JIM

Please tell me that there's a directory on here.

KRISTIN

I don't know. I only read the first page. It was too hard to hold it.

JIM

Who has time to read this?

KRISTIN

We do. I mean we are dead.

JIM

This is going to take years.

KRISTIN

Don't you like to read?

JIM

I like to read the newspaper.

KRISTIN

We're dead. What else do you think is going to happen?

JIM

We still have family and friends there.

KRISTIN

And?

There's a knock on the door. Jim opens the door. JACK and CHRISTINA walk in.

CHRISTINA

(Snotty accent) Hello! We heard we had new neighbors!

JIM and KRISTIN stand there in silence.

Not like we had any... on this side at least. Oh! Before I forget.

CHRISTINA hands KRISTIN a cake.

(Hesitantly) Well, what a lovely place you have here. Jack and I have a much bigger place, but then again we were... fortunate. Who knew that that would travel here! *(Laughs)* So, what happened to the two of you?

JACK

Oh. Don't mind her. She simply needs new friends.

Don't push it.

The last person we met was Janet.

That nosy bitch.

(Off stage) I can hear you!

Oh, hello Janet! How's Carl?

I told you she's always snooping around.

I see that you haven't had it fixed yet.

Wait, you're telling—

CHRISTINA

JACK

CHRISTINA

JANET

JIM rushes to turn off the speaker again.

JACK

There's a loud beep again.

CHRISTINA

JACK

KRISTIN

JACK

You have to speak to Brad about it. For some reason the wiring here is awful.

CHRISTINA

It took me a week to figure out how to turn on the TV.

JIM

Ours works fine.

CHRISTINA

Do you have to use the robot?

JIM

Robot?

CHRISTINA

Yes, the small rectangular robot. I wish it spoke.

KRISTIN

Do you mean the remote?

CHRISTINA

The what?

KRISTIN

The remote. You know the remote control. They come with all of them.

CHRISTINA

Are you mocking me?

JACK

Now, I don't think they meant any harm. She's just a little dramatic. She used to be an actress on Broadway.

JIM

Really? What shows were you in?

CHRISTINA

I was the lead in Irene. Those soldiers loved to watch me.

JIM

Don't think I've ever heard of it before.

JACK

It's from the early 1900s. She doesn't understand the passage of time.

CHRISTINA

I don't appreciate you speaking of me. I can clearly hear you.

KRISTIN

So, when did you die?

JIM

I don't think she meant...

KRISTIN

We died in a car accident. He didn't know how to swerve so we landed in a river.

CHRISTINA

I died in a fire.

KRISTIN

The two of you?

JACK

No. I had an aneurysm.

KRISTIN

That's scary.

JACK

You know I didn't really feel it.

KRISTIN

How far apart did you two die?

JACK

Ten years.

KRISTIN

Wow. How did the fire happen?

JIM

It all sounds awful. So, how may we help you?

KRISTIN

Don't be boring.

JIM

Excuse me.

KRISTIN

So, the fire.

CHRISTINA

I don't remember it except that it was hot. I still believe that I was murdered.

KRISTIN

Really? Any ideas on who did it?

JACK

It wasn't murder.

CHRISTINA

You never believe me.

JACK

You tend to embellish things.

CHRISTINA

Well, I do love theatrics. After all I was an actress for 40 years.

They stand in silence and then turn to look at each other for a moment.

KRISTIN

You know this cake is getting heavy. I'm going to set it down.

CHRISTINA

Yes! I hope you love it my baker Tom makes the best cakes in town.

KRISTIN exits.

JIM

How did you get a baker?

CHRISTINA

Brad introduced us.

JIM

Brad. By the way, how do you contact him?

END

Puzzle[R]

D. J. Lupercio

L O O K F O R T H E S I G N S
T H E O N E S T H A T H I D E
O U T I N P L A I N S I G H T
T H E F L A G S I N R E D N O
I N G R E E N D I S G U I S E
L O O K B U T D O N O T S E E
P I E C E T O G E T H E R S O
A L L M A Y W I T N E S S T O
O U R C R I E S O F N E E D S

Abuelita

Sofia Solares

It was my abuelita's favorite season—Spring. It was around the time when the flowers would blossom in unison, creating a beautiful pathway of colors leading to our front door. Every afternoon when I would come back from school, I would be greeted by my abuelita, who would be sitting outside on a plastic lawn chair sewing different floral designs onto the fabric attached to her embroidery hoop, or *costuras*, as we'd call it in Spanish.

Seeing that I had gotten home safely, she would get up and open the door for me. As I folded the plastic chair and carried it back inside the house, my nostrils would be filled with the smell of whatever food she decided to make for the day, usually black beans, fried sweet plantains coated in sugar, and homemade flour tortillas.

This was an everyday routine throughout my adolescence. Even on the days where she wasn't feeling her best, she never failed to make our house feel like a home.

On rainy days, she would poke her head outside the door during every commercial break of her favorite series, *La Rosa de Guadalupe*. From a distance, I could see her small silhouette against the glass window frame of the door, usually wrapped in her red and gold tiger cobija. On days it rained, she would have hot chocolate ready on the stove for me. The cold weather was no barrier when it came to my abuela.

It wasn't until I left for college did that routine break. Winter had come. The flowers were gone. The plastic chair was gone. The *costuras* were gone. When I'd come back from class, my nostrils were no longer greeted by the smell of homemade foods, but instead were replaced with the smell of wooden furniture and the musty air from the lack of ventilation. It wasn't home. It was a dorm.

Eventually, weeks turned into months, and slowly, I became accustomed to this lifestyle. Thoughts of my abuelita's *costuras* soon were pushed aside and I no longer craved black beans, nor the sweet taste of the plantains. I grew to love the dining hall pepperoni pizza and the savory breakfast bagel that they sold in the campus cafe. I grew to love my bed on the top bunk, despite hitting my head several times on the ceiling. I grew to love the navy blue patterned

carpet that spread across my dorm room.

Soon, it was finally time to go back home. My first home.

After driving down the California coast for six hours, I finally had arrived. And there she was. My abuelita. Waiting for me on the plastic foldable lawn chair with her costura in hand, as she always had done as if nothing had changed. With the miles that had separated us for so long minimizing itself to only a mere few feet, our eyes met for the first time in months and I looked at her. I really looked at her. I had never realized how the corners of her eyes had begun to wrinkle without the need for her to smile. I noticed how the loose skin underneath her arms would wiggle with even the slightest motion. I didn't know we shared that same birthmark on the right side of our nose. What I remember being only a couple of age spots on her cheeks were now constellations across her face.

She propped herself up from the chair, her underarm skin swinging from side to side, and embraced me. With my arms around her frail body, I inhaled the top of her now predominantly white head.

"Te extrañé, mija," she said at a barely audible volume.

"Yo tambien, abuelita," I responded, hugging her back even tighter.

That was almost five years ago. A lot has changed since then, the plastic lawn chair now remains empty, but the flowers continue to blossom.

jan. 01, 2010

Sofia Solares

I've gone to more funerals in my life than I have been to weddings. The first funeral I went to was my grandfather's—diabetes.

I was never really close to my grandfather on my mother's side for a variety of reasons. I was in the United States, he was in Guatemala, plane tickets are expensive, he hates traveling—the timings just never really seemed to align. I remember one winter vacation, my mother asked me if I wanted to go to Guatemala for the holidays. I immediately said yes. I've always wondered why my mother suddenly decided that specific winter to go. But now that I look back on it, she probably knew his time was near.

My grandfather had been diagnosed with diabetes for over twenty years at that point. It was something I kind of just assumed wasn't that bad since he was still alive after all that time. Since we were always so far from each other, I never really saw the effects that his illness had on him. That winter was the only time I saw the toll it had on his mental health.

I remember walking into my mother's childhood home—the home my grandfather had built during his younger days. Then I saw him. The man that built the roof over his head with his own two hands, laying in bed in adult diapers.

"¿Quién es ella?" he asked my mother, shakily pointing to me with his bony finger. He didn't know me. He didn't remember me. He didn't remember the granddaughter that he held on the day she was born. While I was looking at the man that always wore brown plaid shirts and matching suspenders, he was looking at a complete stranger. The man that I was excited to see after so long apart had no recollection of me whatsoever.

I can still remember the only time he had come to the U.S. We had gone to the park that was near my house and we fed the ducks bread as we walked along the lake. I was terrified of ducks, but I remember wanting to impress him so I could seem like a big kid. There's a box of photographs in the garage from that day. It's been ten years and

I can't seem to look at them without crying. I wish I had known that that was the last time I was going to see my grandfather in good health.

I don't really remember what happened after that. My mother and I didn't end up staying at that house that week since there wasn't really space for visitors in the small house. Or maybe because she wanted to protect me from further heartache. I'm not really sure anymore.

The trip continued and my mother would visit her father every other day, while I stayed at my father's side of the family's house. I liked it there. I had cousins to play with, my grandmother would always cook my favorite meals, but most of all, I didn't have to witness my immobile grandfather. I didn't want the image of when he was healthy to be replaced with images of him struggling to go to the bathroom or having to be mouth fed by my aunts.

Soon January 1st, 2010 came. I was burning fireworks with my cousins at midnight to celebrate the New Year. I had never done that before since it's strictly forbidden in most parts of the U.S. I specifically remember the overpowering smell of the burning wicks and the burning sensation in my eyes from the excessive smoke, but I didn't care. I was having fun. I was spending time with my cousins who I only had the chance of seeing once or twice a year. I can vividly remember burning a bumblebee firework, one that would fly and spin in the air once ignited, before my aunt called me inside. I assumed it was to tell me to get ready for bed or to ask if I was hungry. But instead, she told me to go upstairs, that my mother was asking for me. I remember being slightly annoyed that my firework time was being interrupted.

"Se murió tu abuelito Rupe," my mother told me.

I bawled my eyes out. Of course, I had cried before. I cried when I broke my elbow. I cried during arguments with my siblings. I cried when I didn't want to go to school. But nothing could compare to the way I cried that night. I uncontrollably sobbed in my mother's arms until I was hyperventilating. While I was a mess, my mother didn't shed a single tear. Or at least not in front of me.

I knew my mother loved her father. She would send him as much money as she could while she was in the U.S for his medication and would talk with my aunts every week to see how he was doing. She always told me stories of when she was younger and how she always felt like she was her father's favorite out of her six other siblings—something that she would rub in their faces. She told me how during nursing school, her father was her biggest sup-

porter. How he would always encourage her to get good grades and work overtime to help pay for the tuition.

That's how I choose to remember my grandfather. Not as someone who would scream incoherently when he was denied his sugary snacks or whose memory was becoming nonexistent, but as the man whose golden tooth would shine when he cackled with laughter or the man who was strong enough to carry me over his shoulders. That was *my abuelito Rupe*.

Burn

Sofia Solares

The sizzling metal clamps burn a piece of me. And I enjoy it. I don't mind that a part of me is being erased. It's only temporary. Although I wish it were forever.

I can hear my hair cry as the straightener forces the curls away. Each strand weeps as the stylist repeats the same movement over and over. I sit in the same position for hours, not caring that I'm uncomfortable and that my legs are cramping. Beauty is pain and pain is beauty, right?

The rancid smell of my dying hair fills the room. It kind of makes me feel bad for it. Almost as if I'm forcing it to decompose. I flinch when the tips of my fingers touch the burning comal when I flip tortillas. My poor hair. Smoke emerging from the metal. Forced to touch the comal. Over and over.

I wonder what my abuelita would say. Would she be mad that I'm rejecting the hair that she gave me? Or would she understand my pain? Would she have straightened her hair if given the chance? Perdóname, abuelita.

Ringlets

Sofia Solares

It's been years since I last straightened my hair.
I no longer crave the need for assimilation,
nor have the desire for the approval of people who reject my curls.

The curls that my abuelita Lina passed down to me and my ancestors before her.
The curls that bounce with each step I take.
The curls that earned me the name, *colochita*.

I don't feel the need to apologize for having 'untamable' and 'unmanageable' hair.
It's a part of me. It *is* me.
My curls aren't going anywhere, and neither am I.

Soy una colochita y me gusta.

Tala

Ashley Tuang

On the final day of my *Nanay's* life, she told me a story. As I sat on a sunken brown couch, I watched my pale-faced grandmother breathe slowly with the support of a tube that ran from her nose and draped along the bed that held her slim frame. Her hand, embedded with wrinkled lines, felt as thin as the sheet she laid upon and rough as the worn-out texture of the couch. The four bare walls around me felt dull. The greying color seemed to close me in the small room with the bright, pristine lights of the hallways as my only exit.

"*Clara, anak!*" *My child.* She said to me, her Filipino accent still thick despite the years of living in America heavy on her tongue. She turned to me with her greying, curly hair that draped around her shoulders. A shadow of a smile appeared upon her lips and her eyes wrinkled slightly with happiness. "I knew a girl like you before. Strong. Smart. Full of ambition."

Her voice sounded hoarse, yet strong and firm as if she wouldn't allow her sickness to silence her. For a moment, my grandmother didn't look sick as she reminisced her memories. For a second, I could forget about the constant beeping that monitored her heartbeat, all the wires that hung off her body, and the sterile air filled with alcohol. My grandmother always told me stories of her life in the Philippines and her childhood, so I could hold on to the part of my life I left behind when I was only a few years old. Although my grandfather would force her to suppress them as if telling me stories would pull me away from a good future in America. Yet, she still told them before we slept in our shared bed between the congested walls of our house, as my grandpa's snores filled the room from his place upon the floor.

Nanay continued, "There's a Tagalog myth about the goddess of the morning and evening star, Tala. In the past, people believed she created light for men to follow at night for safety. This changed when Spain stole the land of our ancestors. The Spaniards forced people to believe that her light was only an evil spirit trying to kill men and make humans lose their way. But—I knew a girl named after Tala, her skin was naturally touched by the sun and she was

born in the *probinsya*, where the stars were not dulled by the city lights. The life in the *probinsya* is a simple one, Clara, where one *piso* is worth nothing more than happiness. It is the struggle that makes you show how much you love your family and this girl, Tala, grew up tending the farm in her backyard to show her family how much she loved them. Every day, she woke up to the sound of a rooster as her alarm clock and worked under the hot sun in her rice field with only her thin cloth wrapped around her face to shield her skin. But the life she wanted was not in the *probinsya*, she was one of many who wanted to escape the farm life and have more opportunities. She worked as hard as she studied in school, always holding a book and spending hours on her studies. For Tala, her dreams were so much more. As much as she worked hard for her family, she wanted more than a life of gathering rice patties for them. Her dream was to go to college and her family encouraged it, but for a woman, dreams feel like the sun's hot glow on your skin that lingers—night or day. Even when a *piso* was not worth more than happiness, Clara, a *piso* will never satisfy your dreams."

As she spoke, I could imagine the province that my grandmother grew up in and the place I was born, it emerged from the memories of my only visit back when I was thirteen. The small, worn-down buildings with concrete walls, to prevent the damage from rain and typhoons, lined up along a small, crowded, uneven street that was mostly dirt. Paths of dirt intertwined between the houses and streets, creating clouds of dust as children ran through them with their *tsinelas*, slippers. Despite the condition, the muted tones of the province were still almost as lively as the attitudes of its inhabitants. It was brightened by the windblown palm trees and endless fields of rice cradled by the small line of houses separating little neighborhoods. I remember I used to run with the other kids, as we tried to catch dragonflies through the long fields of grass prickling our legs.

My grandmother's words also shadowed who I believed myself to be, as she said: a girl who works hard to show how much she loves her family by studying hard and attending a good college. She was right because life in the province was simple, but the struggle in America is heavy. I see it in my mom's tired eyes after coming home from working two jobs, as she had to pick up for the father I did not have. It is evident in my grandfather's weakened bones from the long hours he used to work from mopping dust-filled floors stomped on from the heavy traffic of a hospital. While my mother was worn down, trying to be a mother and father, my grandma did everything my mother could not. Nanay promised me she would always take care of me through the hot meals ready on the table when I came home from school, clean clothes folded nicely in the drawers, and her warm embrace every time I went to

sleep. I, like Tala, want more for my family and dream of finishing college to fulfill their dreams.

"Tala was *matapang at matalinaw*, so eventually she was able to get into a college in Manila and leave the *probin-sya*. She felt so proud of herself for doing what people told her was impossible, but it was only the start of her struggles. The *probinsya* life was too quiet and slow for her, but she wasn't prepared for the city. Manila was fast, quick, and the stars were dimmed by tall buildings and the long traffic of cars. The moment she got there; she already missed the stars." Nanay looked at me with her soft, brown eyes that always reflected her love for me.

"Is that how you felt when you came to America, Nanay?" I ask her, drawing her hand into mine and letting my head rest against the side of her bed. If I closed my eyes, it was almost as if we were laying in our room at night, as she told me stories to put me to sleep.

"Of course, every day I miss the stars and the feeling of being in the Philippines. It will always be home to me, but I left knowing America was where you needed to be." She spoke with her strong voice. I reminisce about my earliest memory, where I looked out of the plane window as it drew me toward the shining city lights of Los Angeles and away from the Philippines. From above, the city looked like a cluster of stars and it held the dreams that my family wanted for me.

"The city life tires you, Clara, because it's busy and never stops—even in Manila. Especially for a young girl like Tala, only nineteen years old like you are now. When your life changes fast, even your dreams become heavy and that's part of the struggle. For Tala, she was lucky because she had family in the city to also help her and her mom who followed her, so she would not be alone. In the city, it's easy to get lost and Tala got lost because she worked herself too much. The work of her classes and the cost of her tuition were enough to burden her fast, but when a girl is as strong as her, she will never stop. She started to forget herself in the big place that she was in because she became part of the traffic in the morning and went to sleep to live the same day tomorrow. It was always wake up early in the morning to help her *Tita* bundle vegetables to sell at the *palengke*, go to school and attend her classes, come back and work with her *Tito* and *Tita*, then stay up late to study for her courses. *Parang ikaw, Clara.*" *Just like you, Clara.* "Always working and studying—nonstop. Tala would never learn to take a break because she was afraid to stop."

"One evening, she was working at her place in the *palengke*, selling her vegetables. The rush of customers com-

ing and leaving always made her feel overwhelmed because it's always busy and crowded. Everyone is talking all at once and it's hard to focus with the heat." I remember the time my Nanay took me through a *palengke*, I felt so small compared to the rows and rows of stalls with an abundance of fish, vegetables, produce, and even the roasted pigs that would hang off a string. The heat of the Filipino sun made sweat drip down my back and the humidity combined with the overflowing crowd was enough to make me feel almost claustrophobic. To imagine myself working there, under the hot sun, was difficult. "Even though many people came and left, she remembered this one young man who came by at the end of the day every evening, to buy the last of her vegetables. He was quiet, but her *Tita* told her, '*Yung lalake na yun, parate ka tinitignan!*' That boy is always looking at you.

"Everyone in the *barangay* teased her about it, saying that he was looking to court her and that he was captured by her beauty. Tala didn't believe them; she wasn't interested in being courted or distracted from her studies. Yet every day, this handsome young man would come to buy vegetables from the tired-looking girl out of sympathy. Eventually, he finally found the courage to ask her for her name, ask why she was always wearing a school uniform, and where she went to university. The way he tried to flirt and make *ligaw* caused everyone in the *barangay* to tease her even more, but Tala was stubborn and dismissed him. Still, every day as Tala looked tired as she cleaned up, he would offer to walk her home. She always said no, she could walk herself home and didn't need a man to walk her home. In the Philippines, the way men snuck into a woman's heart is through food, so after many tries, he snuck up on her by bringing her *merienda* every day after work. Of course, Tala who barely had time to sit and take of herself easily took his offerings to fill her empty stomach."

"That was the start of them and their story together, he would bring her *merienda* and he would walk her home, as they talked about their dreams. Their dreams are what brought them together, it made Tala feel less burdened by them and he felt amazed by how hardworking she was. He was the oldest son, living in Manila, hoping to find a better job to provide money for his large family. He had hoped that the city would open opportunities to go abroad and make a better living. Tala liked his ambition, it made it easy to feel like she wasn't alone and that she didn't have to carry her dreams by herself. Soon, Tala would fall in love with this young man and find herself within him. But, to find yourself and fall in love with someone can be so fulfilling and dangerous at the same time."

"Both of them worked tirelessly, Tala with her school and the *palengke* and him with his construction job. Tala still fell for him deeply, thinking maybe they could escape the life of poverty together and it filled her with hope. She

was so young, of course, her head would not only be filled with dreams, but with fantasies. He entertained her fantasies, letting her believe that they had a strong future together and getting close to her. Everyone could see how in love she was with him; it was unquestionable when they spent every moment together. With him, Tala felt as if they shared the sun's intense light together. He motivated her and took care of her when she did not have the time to do it herself. Every night, he helped her with her studies and made sure that she did not go to bed with an empty stomach. He even gifted her with presents like school supplies and wrote her letters. She even held on to a photo of them, where on the back he wrote a note, calling her his dearest Tala and telling her how beautiful she was. At first, everyone could see how much he cared for her too."

"Although, the more that they spent time together and got to know each other, she realized how much she did not know about him. It was only a few months before things started changing quickly. What she didn't realize is that he didn't want her to know everything about him. He asked her to always be by his side, to help him achieve his dreams, and to be his to fill her with hope and promise. Yet, she didn't know anything about his family and what *probinsya* he was from. She only knew that he has moved from place to place, but where his family lives *hindi siya alam!*" *She didn't know.* "Even when he made promises to always be with her. He became distracted and never stayed still, always saying he's going to visit family in the *probinsya* and do work in another city. He started going away for long periods of time, saying he was busy and couldn't keep up with everything. He would come back with apologies and empty promises of making it up to her. He was working hard for a better future, he would tell her. Tala still had hope, because she saw his guilt and burden, he carried so much for a young man. Slowly the person that she met, the person she was happy with and found herself in, became a dangerous warning. The more time he spent away from her, the more confused she felt, and he gave her no explanation. His promises faded away and Tala went back to only focusing on her studies, to distract her from his absence and to put out her anger for him. Eventually, Tala did not know who he was at all, it was as if he disappeared from her life. She realized that he had fooled her, and her heart felt empty. After he had not shown up for a while, Tala finally went to the house he had lived in, his friend was there, and he was gone. She asked what happened to him and his friend hesitantly said, '*Sorry Tala, uma-wi na siya...kasi...yung asawa at bata niya kailangan na siya.*' *He went home because his wife and child needed him.*

"Tala was destroyed, she felt so betrayed and angry, thinking she was stupid for believing him in the first place. The empty promises hurt her and crushed her, but they did not crush her strength. The love that she felt for him be-

came painful instead, but she knew he was worth nothing to her anymore, not even her time to mourn his promises. She took her pain and used it to focus on her future, so she could leave the city, move abroad to be better, and be far away from him and never think about him again. But it was also already too late, he had tainted her. In his absence, a child already grew in her belly and Tala saw her future change as the bump became bigger. She already knew she was carrying a child for a while, her body told her quickly and she hoped her body was wrong. But it wasn't, and the city's eyes became unkind toward her, as they looked at her belly. Having a young face with a child in your stomach was a sin to them, especially when they knew that there was no man by her side. So, she had to leave school and move back home with her family, because college and the city had no opportunity for sin. Her family was disappointed that they lost their only way out of the rice fields, but she was more disappointed in herself for being fooled by that young man. Yet, she was still *matapang*, because she had already failed herself and did not want to fail the child inside her. She felt like a disgrace to her family and herself, but her dream of moving abroad to the U.S. never disappeared, and knew that nothing else would stop her from achieving that. She would only trust the promises to herself and only rely on family to help her get there one day, she promised herself to never let a man get in her way again. She knew that the U.S. was where her child needed to be for a better future and the moment that her daughter was born, she promised to do everything for her to have a better life."

There was a long pause in the room before finally, Nanay said, "And that child is you, Clara."

Her words hit me with a force; they were her breath of relief as if she had been holding them in for so long. I imagine she's been holding it in since the moment I first asked about who my father was. I could feel my gut twist from her words, and for a moment, my heart tightened with unease as I processed every single word she had told me about this girl, Tala. My mother. Every word paralleled me, my mother, and my grandmother—it resonated within me for a reason. My Nanay's voice changed from her storytelling voice to something softer. "Do you remember your mom's full name?"

"Lilia Banaag." I answered her, still in shock.

"No, *anak*. Her full name is Lilia *Tala* Banaag."

"This story is about my mom and father..." The words fell out of my mouth slowly, reluctant to slip out. I lifted my head from the bed and my Nanay was staring at me, her eyes were never hardened, and she nodded slowly.

At that moment, I did not process it fully, the words just ran through my head over and over—from beginning to end. She had just opened a door to a part of my life that was never allowed open. The only thing I ever had of my father was my reflection in the mirror, where I picked out the features that must belong to him. As a young girl, I had grieved for a feeling I never had: the love of my father. Except throughout my life, the love of my Nanay and family dulled the aching curiosity to know who my father was. Now more than ever, that burning curiosity to know my father and his family dulls in comparison to the love from my small family that raised me between small, congested walls. As much as my father was a mystery, so was my mom, who concealed the parts of her life that she didn't want me to know. All I ever knew was that my mom had me young and my father left me before I was born. Yet, I knew she loved me in a way that wasn't as apparent as my Nanay, she showed me through her long hours of working that slowly hardened her. My relationship with her was different because in Nanay's eyes I saw unconditional love and in hers, I saw her determination to shape me to be better than her. While my Nanay taught me love, my mom taught me strength.

"You're old enough to know now and I know your mother still hurts from the wound he left her. She hurts from her dream being changed and looks at you to fulfill the dream she could not. I don't want you to think that she doesn't love you or never wanted you, Clara. You are her dream. You are our dreams and more." Her words were still strong, and it gave me hope that her body was strong enough to keep pushing too. I felt grateful that she finally told me the truth after wondering my whole life because I always felt as if I reflected as my mother's mistake. *"Mahal na mahal kita, Clara." I love you very much.*

"Mahal na mahal din kita, Nanay." For a moment my eyes well up with tears, as I wrap my arms around her and let myself hold her. I wanted to stay in that moment forever because I still knew time with her was slipping away and the tube that clung to her nose would only help her breathe for so much longer. When I closed my eyes, every part of me ached for it to feel as if we were in our bedroom, falling asleep together, just as we did every night till I left for college. Alas, our moment ended when a nurse knocked on the door, telling me that visiting hours are over. Walking out the door and saying goodbye would forever be ingrained into my memories. They were my last moments with my Nanay.

The next morning, my mom told me that Nanay had left us. Parts of her lingered between the walls of our home, where the indent of her body should be in her spot on our bed, the smell of her perfume on her clothes, and the

plants growing from her garden in the back. Every part of her that was still alive reminded me of her, and she didn't feel gone yet and it made it hurt even more. Laying alone in bed, all I wanted to do was go back in time and relive all the moments I had with her to cherish them once more over again. Then, I just felt lucky to have had someone who loved me so much that she sacrificed everything to give me more. Not only that, to have had two strong women who gave me everything I have. I know my Nanay lives through my mom and me, but a part of me excruciatingly aches for her to come back. The smell of alcohol still reminds me of that room, as the wires hanging from her seemed to drain the life out of her. At night, I constantly replay her last words to me about the story of my mother. I have never really known my mother the way I know my Nanay, but now I understand her and now I understand myself more. Even after I learned the truth about who my father is, I have never felt more distant from him and it seemed like he should be a part of my life that is untouched—at least for now. Only because I felt even more lost without my Nanay than I ever did without a father.

When my mom and I eventually go home to the Philippines to spread her ashes, she is everywhere there, and I know it's where she belongs. Bringing her back feels like a band-aid to her loss, as it solaces me knowing that she is finally back home after leaving to give me a better life. Our family is there by our side, all my cousins, her children, her nieces and nephews, her remaining siblings—all of us, extensions of her like the leaves upon a tree. I had forgotten how green the Philippines is, especially back in her home province. The abundance of green trees is reminiscent of her garden in the back of our home, more than just the plants and vegetables in the corner of the yard, instead, it is everywhere and sprouts from the ground in every corner. The Philippines is her garden overgrown. Even after some time has passed, there are still parts of her that are alive. I see her as the sun sets upon the ocean's crest, a wave of light casting an orange glow. She had always told me that the sun's light was most beautiful as it sets. She's still there when I look into the stars at night, which are still bright despite the city lights clouding them and they remind me of her dreams for me. She's there when the smell of coffee and food fills the room in the mornings, reminding me of the moments I came home from school to the smell of her food. I feel her most at night, where she never lets me feel alone, an empty place where she should be. These parts of her in the world will never go away and I never forget her love for me or her stories. Ahead, I still see the better life that my Nanay and family sacrificed for me.

Origins

Helena Mahdessian

I was born on the Mediterranean coast
to parents that spoke Languages.

Using their Languages, they de-
cided to clothe me with a name

that Babushka already wore
humbly and with a smile,

but Nadyezhda turned into Fa-
dyezhdada on the birth certificate so

Dad decided on second-best,
with even a letter change from Y-

elena to H-elena (only a matter of
personal taste and not culture ad-

aptation). Even so, the Rus-
sian to Greek opened up

comments and origin stories made
by everyone else and not me.

Me, I was on the receiving end
with a slightly defensive he-

art that still soaked up their well-
intentioned Helen-of-Troy's and Helena, Montana's.

They didn't know that Y-
elena was a great-grandmother of mine

from the Ukraine whose story
I remember with sympathy

Or that I step in and out
of the bright, shining light

That claims to be the meaning
of my name and every variant it inspired.

Finally, twenty years later, I gave
a St. Helena Island, exile of Napoleon

answer to a neighbor's "Do you know
what famous figure in history

you're named after?" and he was silent
while I continued to sweep the sidewalk.

Torn

Carrie Newell

INT. BASEMENT APARTMENT—GERMANY, 1937—NIGHT

A barren one room basement apartment. A cathedral wood tube radio sits on the kitchen counter. A wooden truck is discarded on the floor. A child's coat hangs over a hook.

Wartime stole all other signs of a home.

ALICE, 13, pale and underfed, stuffs clothes into a tattered suitcase on a fold out bed. Her practiced movements make no sound. Half empty, she shuts it. Out of time.

Her words quiet, earnest.

ALICE

Now.

DAVE, 8 scrawny and nearly see-through from lack of sun, huddles nearby.

They speak only in whispers.

DAVE

It's our home.

ALICE

Put on your coat.

He WRINGS the corner of his shirt.

DAVE

They're coming back.

She grabs the case, sees him frozen and yanks his coat off a hook.

ALICE

Come on.

She reaches for his hand, but he steps back.

DAVE

Don't go.

ALICE

Here.

She holds his coat out for him. He slips his hands into his pockets.

ALICE (CONT'D)

Dave.

Her eyes dart to the clock. 6:45.

ALICE (CONT'D)

(Pleading) Davey...

He stares at his feet, swallows hard.

DAVE

No.

She sets down the suitcase and kneels before him.

ALICE

Do you remember what they said?

He won't look at her.

ALICE (CONT'D)

"If we aren't back by Wednesday , you leave." Right?

He can't look at her.

ALICE (CONT'D)

Davey, it's Thursday.

She takes his hand in hers and lifts his chin.

ALICE (CONT'D)

We have to.

He stares at her, betrayed.

DAVE

Stay.

ALICE

Come with me. Please.

He pulls his hand back. Her eyes start to swim, then harden. She snatches him up, and, for a blessed moment, he's too stunned to protest.

ALICE (CONT'D)

(A firm whisper)

We have to go.

He comes to, kicking and hitting her, oddly silent. He struggles to break free.

She lugs him toward the door, fumbling with the suitcase. Her fingers wrap around the doorknob and

He SHRIEKS

Piercing their bubble.

She drops him. Clasps her hand over his mouth. His hands shoot to his mouth too. Terrified, they huddle on the floor.

They listen.

Nothing.

He opens his mouth, but she shakes her head, "No!"

Gravel CRUNCHES outside.

They tense, holding their breath. Alice looks at the window. It's empty.

She frantically glances around the room for something, anything. Bed, table, closet, sink—

Her eyes jump back to the closet door across the room.

She slips off her shoes. Dave follows suit.

Another CRUNCH outside.

She lifts Dave. Her socked feet sneak across the deadly terrain. She opens the closet door and deposits him inside. Shoes in his hands.

Her eyes search the room. She grabs up his coat and the WOODEN TOY TRUCK. She pushes them into his arms.

Heavy boots SHIFT on the gravel outside.

She reaches around Dave, behind the few hanging items, an old dress, a jacket, and pushes on the wall.

CLICK, the wall opens—

She turns, eyes boring a hole into the front door, did they hear?

She looks back, revealing a crawl space big enough for *ONE*.

A shadow falls on them. She turns, a figure passes the small window. Terror in uniform.

ALICE (CONT'D)

(all but mouthing)

When we're gone, you leave.

His head frantically swings back and forth, the motion screams no.

She shoves him into the hidey-hole, firm but gentle.

ALICE (CONT'D)

When we're gone, you leave.

His fingers grip the toy truck.

Her pale hand pushes against the faux wall closing him inside. She mouths "I love you."

POUNDING at the front door.

Davey's wide eyes disappear into the dark as the secret door CLICKS SHUT.

Planes

Cyrus Shafii

When I was younger,
I would watch the sky
for hours
for my father.
He would leave in the morning,
All day,
as planes flew overhead
I knew
He was their master.
I wondered if he could see me
and waved just in case

Back in Tehran,
when he was younger,
my father would watch the sky for hours.
Climbing plumb trees,
standing on rooftops,
pausing in soccer fields
and classrooms
whenever he finished his tests early,
he watched his own planes

and knew as well.

When he was the age I am now,
his mother met him in a military hallway.
Holding crisp papers in proud hands,

he let
her tell
him no.

Don't fly for this war.
Don't fly after.
You might fall.

Don't make your mother
watch you fall from the sky
when you hang the stars for her.

So he didn't.

Years later,
as he drove people to airports,
he named my brother for the birds.
He and my mother
took blue and white sponges

to the wall
to make clouds for us.
He made us stop
to watch the moon
in the blue day sky.

As midnight passes
I lay awake in bed,
I forget
the planes flying overhead
are planes
and not missiles,
someone in a suit forgetting us.
The suited figure expects praise
from us as my father tells me about
his family
who hung the sky for him
Back home.

My mother died a year after his.
He says
they can see us on the ground.
I look down
because if I never check,
I'll never have to know if it's true or not.

Sunlight

Sam Rousso







A Golden Hour

Timothy Batchelder

Is evanescent like happiness
poured in a glass.

The sun, a muddled orange
drenched in bourbon,
dashed with shades
of bitter red,
half-sunk
beyond the gold
rimmed horizon.

It stokes a familiar glow,
that gentle fire within,
and a tipsy grin.

Maybe, maybe
it's enough.

The Story of Daydreamers

Ameera Karraa

I spent years traveling through
time, dislodging myself from the idea of

permanence.

Pressed into the corners of someone else's mind,
I make a living out of borrowing second hand

realities.

Used, dirtied, neglected
like the pair of jeans you thought looked nice
Until it no longer did. Back in the closet

it goes.

I scramble up walls I created. Call it
mental exercise. I call it

protection.

slip tumble tumble
because even I am too tired, too

afraid

to face the light that won't always greet me.

reincarnation

Ameera Karraa

my mind has been poisoned by
the words others pressed into my wrist.

my veins are on fire, my throat clogged
by wispy ash-gray smoke. an alarm

clock is ringing in the distance. a siren
joins with its sorrowful wail. i do not

know where this is coming from. i do not
know how to stop it. i can only

curl into myself, diminishing my space,
my gaze, my breath. is this all

that is left of me?

* * *

i awaken one morning in a bed

carved out of Mother's stomach.

the fire is gone, the ink of someone
else's hatred recedes from my skin.

my ears have stopped ringing, now tilting
in the direction of the sun. this quilt of

grass that embraces me was gifted to me by
my friends. i hear their singing, clear as day.

on legs lighter than air, wearing infectious
smiles only, they dance, a celebration

of my awakening. as they put me on their
shoulders, we become as tall as trees.

my cheeks tint rose red. i'll find my
home by remembering their smiles.

Sacrificial Fly Rule

Cyrus Shafii

Elisie jumped, and while in the air she pinched her big toe on her right foot, and she hung herself in the air until she heard Angel Lee laugh, a big, kiddish laugh that made the birds watching them from the yard fence scatter. Then she let her toe go and let herself to the ground.

Angel Lee Sabre was the newest member of their foster home. She was six, half of Elisie's age, and absolutely refused to smile for anyone other than Elisie. In turn, Elisie would share her natural talent for floating with her—she couldn't fly. She was human, after all, and humans don't have wings, but she could float.

She kept it to herself, mostly, but for the younger, sourfaced kids in Richard Mittie's Foster Care Home, she would float.

Mr. Mittie loved taking the children to baseball games. He would buy them uniforms, and people with cameras would take pictures of the children standing in front of the players and of the players signing little baseball bats for the children. The halls of Richard Mittie's Foster Care Home were lined with these pictures.

These pictures, in some cases—such as Elisie's—could be used to measure the growth of the children, depending on how long they had been there. These pictures also served as a source of income for the home—people saw the adorable children and would be inspired to fund the baseball teams. The teams, in turn, would pay Mr. Mittie to let them take more pictures with the children. Mr. Mittie would then take the money, and he would buy more uniforms and tickets to take the children to more games.

"I hate baseball," Angel Lee said the afternoon before her third game. Softer, she added, "I miss my old homes." She had been through two other group homes, and had nearly been adopted at one point, Elisie knew, but that had fallen through when her almost-Forever Family got one too many speeding tickets.

Elisie must have accidentally shown some sympathy on her face, because Angel Lee said defensively, "My old homes never made us wear these stupid pants."

Elisie had already pulled her uniform on. "'Least it's not the jerseys soccer players have to wear, kid," she said, schooling her face into a pleasantly neutral smile. "Those look cold." Not that she knew. She had grown up in Richard Mittie's, thus, baseball was the only sport she was truly familiar with.

Angel Lee sat in the dirt of their backyard, which served as a makeshift baseball diamond when the sun didn't bake the grass to the point it would prick through their pants and socks and sting them, or when it wasn't turned to mud by the rain. Elisie preferred keeping her feet bare, so she rarely played in the yard. Instead, she sat on the porch and watched Angel Lee pile dirt onto her new uniform, shake it off, then pile it on again. Elisie could tell that by the time they left and she had to put it on, it would be completely brown.

Elisie frowned, watching her. Some dirt was cute, especially on someone Angel Lee's age, but too much dirt and no one would want to adopt Angel Lee. Granted, children didn't typically get adopted out of Richard Mittie's, anyway—people liked to imagine they were close and that separating their "team" was cruel—but they did sometimes get rotated out to other homes or some baseball fan would see their faces in the paper and fall in love with one of them. So Elisie jumped, pinched her toe, and floated until Angel Lee laughed and felt agreeable enough to put her uniform on.

-

Mr. Mittie didn't actually spend a lot of time in Richard Mittie's Foster Care Home. A man perpetually in his sixties, he constantly wore a baseball hat with a weird bird logo on it that Elisie assumed was for some old, long-forgotten team from his childhood. He had spent over half his life providing temporary-to-semi-permanent homes for children and ran four separate homes, each one holding about nine children at a time. Baseball was the only time all the children really interacted, whether watching it or playing it unless they happened to go to the same school.

They poured out of their city-donated vans and nodded at each other as they grouped together in the parking lot. Elisie waved at Ruthie and Caleb, the volunteer drivers. Caleb, a redhead with a face more beard and freckles than not, had actually aged out of one of the other Richard Mittie's Foster Care Homes and seemed to share Mr. Mittie's enthusiasm for the game, going to college on a sports scholarship.

Caleb looked sad for a moment when he recognized her, then walked over and good-naturedly pulled the bills of Elisie and Angel Lee's hats over their heads. Angel Lee glared at the ground.

Pointing over his shoulder, he said, "Ruthie here thinks she saw seven cardinals on the way up. Think it'll be good luck, though heaven knows which team for."

Caleb always asks someone about whether they've seen any birds before games. *Tradition*, Mr. Mittie once called it, or *Ritual*. At Richard Mittie's, traditions and rituals were honored among the kids and volunteers—it wouldn't be baseball without them. Elisie toed an X into the ground before stomping on it with her heel, hard. She had made that her pre-game ritual years ago.

"So, y'all excited for the game?" Caleb asked, laughing. He always asked her that before games—another tradition.

Elisie returned his laugh automatically. "Kid, you have no idea." She took Angel Lee's hand and squeezed it. She thought she felt Angel Lee squeeze back before the kid tore her hand back.

-

Years ago, when Caleb was sixteen, he had seen Elisie float. Elisie had only been in the home a year then, and couldn't stay in the air long. Still, Elisie had hoped to make friends with the other Richard Mittie kids.

Caleb had screamed and ran to Mr. Mittie, who had been chatting in the shade with an assistant-volunteer coach—another former Richard Mittie kid.

"You okay, kid?" Mr. Mittie asked.

Caleb pointed over his shoulder at Elisie. "That—that girl was *flyin'*!"

Elisie hunched her shoulders. She hadn't been trying to do anything wrong. She just wanted to be liked in her new home. Would Mr. Mittie abandon her like her old family?

Instead, Mr. Mittie laughed. "Who's flying? Elisa MacFly? Caleb Runner, kid, birds fly, bugs fly, balls fly, but *humans*?" He shook his head in amusement. "Mr. Runner, kid, humans don't have wings."

At the time, Elisie had been surprised that Mr. Mittie had known her name.

-

Elisie and some of the other older children would do their homework during the game. They had to hide their papers and books behind their bags and look like they were having fun, in case the camera turned to them, so they often sat in the second row, letting the younger children sit in the front.

This time, Angel Lee said she wanted to lay down and rest, so Elisie sat in front and let her take the back. Truthfully, Elisie thought Angel Lee just wanted to avoid the cameras—apparently, her old homes never had cameras turned towards the kids, so she found media attention of any kind weird.

Elisie had no choice but to pay attention to the game for once. It was actually pretty fun, even if the teams playing weren't that good—one team kept flinching from the ball when in the outfield and the other seemed primarily made up of nearsighted people that all collectively forgot their glasses and contacts at home.

One of the batters, possibly intending to hit a sacrifice bunt, hit the ball poorly, sending it flying up and behind him. Right towards them.

Right towards the second row of them, judging from the angle.

She looked behind her. No one else was paying much attention. The ball would likely hit someone in the face.

Possibly Angel Lee.

She kicked off her right shoe and jumped, pinching her toe through the sock. She caught the ball in the newly signed glove she had been given. She hung herself in the air a moment, then dropped herself back into her seat.

-

All those years ago, Caleb had pulled her aside after the friendly game between the homes.

"You flew," he said.

"I float," she corrected.

"You *freaked me the hell out*, excuse the language. You ain't very good at baseball, ya know."

She nodded, not entirely following his train of thought.

"Do ya want to spend your life at Richard Mittie's? 'Cause it ain't gonna be much fun if you don't like baseball."

"I do like it," she said.

Caleb shook his head and pressed his palm into his eye. "I don't like baseball, myself," he said. "I love it, and at this point, there ain't nobody clamorin' to take me home with them, so I might as well go on lovin' it. Tell me honestly, do you love it?"

Hesitantly, she shook her head apologetically.

"Then don't go around doing—*that!* Because if you scare off any potential fosters, ain't nobody's gonna want to take you home, either!"

-

The newspaper, printed the day after the game, was titled, "HOMETOWN HERO CATCHES BALL." It showed a picture of Elisie holding up the baseball she had caught, Mr. Mittie's proud hand on her shoulder, Angel Lee perched on his shoulders and looking off to the side so you couldn't quite make out her disgruntled look. The article misidentified them as "Lisa SacFly" and "Angela Saber" in the photo caption, joked that Elisie should try out for *basketball* with that jump, and promised that, if nothing else, local baseball fans would flock to donate money to Richard Mittie's Foster Care Homes.

Elisie really hoped someone reading it would take interest in Angel Lee. At six, she was already on the verge of being too old to adopt for most people, and she didn't seem like she would come to love baseball anytime soon.

Elisie and Angel Lee sat on the porch together, still wearing their dirt-covered uniforms—Angel Lee had torn her real clothes while dirtying it, so Elisie had agreed to wear hers out of solidarity—looking over the article. They heard the back door open and Mr. Mittie walked up to them, baseball in hand.

"Kids," he grinned. Then, to Elisie, "You flew earlier?"

She shook her head automatically. "Humans can't fly."

He adjusted the brim of his hat, scratched the back of his head, pulled a large, white feather out from his collar, and looked at it with disinterest before pocketing it. "That's right, Miss. MacFly." He laughed and held out the baseball, "Here," he dropped it into her hand, "got this signed for you, kid. You should have seen that catch on the big screen—looked like they played it in slow motion for everybody!"

She nodded.

Mr. Mittie turned to leave, then said, "You're a smart kid, aren't you, Miss. SacFly?" He didn't wait for her answer. "You've got talent, kid, real talent—especially with the younger kids. But remember there's a *time* and a *place* for talent from now on."

She nodded.

Mr. Mittie smiled one last time, said, "I see myself in you, kid," and walked away. For a moment—just a moment—Elisie gripped the baseball tightly and imagined chucking it at the back of Mr. Mittie's head, to try and knock his stupid cap off his head. Just to see what he had to say about her pitch.

But that wouldn't be setting a very good example for Angel Lee, would it?

When he re-entered the house, Elisie turned away.

After a moment, Angel Lee asked, "Why are you still *here*, Elisie?"

Elisie rolled the ball around in her hands before placing it by her feet. She thought about what Caleb had said to her all those years ago. "Tell me, kid, do you like baseba—"

"No. Duh."

"Well," Elisie thought of all the other sourfaced kids she had shared her talent with before they had been moved, rotated out, or in some cases, taken to real forever homes, "you gotta like something if you're gonna be here."

A Mother's Kitchen

Amelia Rhett

She is now
 tethered by kitchen twine
 to the pot roast in Pyrex
that brews in the oven.

A trail of purple
 imprints peek out
 beneath her velvet sleeve.

She spins along
 the yellow walls
 clutching a gin martini

in a fixed frenzy,
 careful to never
 set the knife
too far out of reach.

Mango Tree

Amelia Rhett

Her Mother's mango tree was sacred,
reminding this Mother of her

childhood in Havana.
She laughed for the mango tree

panicked in the California wind
and snapped in the November storm.

The marigold-stained mangoes
struck the emerald blades,

unwillingly rolling themselves
down the Topanga driveway.

She laughed for she knew
her Mother would weep,

seeing what was once adored
is now destroyed.

She laughed for she wished
her Mother would have wept

when watching her roll
down the driveway,

into the margins of life,
while her Mother watched her rot.

Dinner and a Movie

Carrie Newell

CHARACTERS:

GREG: Early to mid 30's. In rumpled street clothes, everything is falling apart around him.

ALEX: Early to mid 30's. Casually dressed, though her clothes are wrinkled, everything is falling apart around her.

SETTING: A living room, late afternoon. Upstage there is an armchair, center there is a couch and a coffee table. The apartment is a collection of a combined life and used to be well kept.

At rise: There is a man, Greg, sitting in the armchair holding a gun in his mouth. He stays like that for a long time, and then moves the gun from his mouth to his temple. He's on the brink. Hesits for a long time, then takes the gun and exits up stage.

A moment later, the front door opens and a woman walks in. She is carrying a bag completely full of mangos. She walks in and sets the bag on the floor near the coffee table. Takes off her jacket and shoes, then goes into the kitchen and grabs a knife and a cutting board. She comes back and sits on the couch, pulls out a mango, and starts peeling. She then begins toying with the knife. She is running it up and down her arm over a bandage that runs from her wrist up her forearm.

Off-stage, Greg is heard approaching, roused she begins peeling again. He walks back into the room from behind her. He is still holding the gun. She does not look back at him. He stares at her for a long moment, tucks the gun into the back of his pants, and begins.

GREG: Hi.

ALEX: Hi.

GREG: I thought you were at work.

ALEX: I was. I left early.

(He comes downstage and sits on the opposite end of the couch from her. She cuts a mango. When she finishes cutting it she takes a piece and eats it, not offering him any. He watches her.)

ALEX: Do you want some?

GREG: No. *(Pause)* Yeah. Thanks.

(She hands him a piece of mango, and he notices her wrist is bandaged.)

GREG: How'd you do that?

ALEX: Mangos.

GREG: Mango.

ALEX: Sure.

(They eat for a moment.)

ALEX: How have you been?

GREG: How's work?

ALEX: I told Mark to fuck off. I'm not going back.

GREG: What happened?

ALEX: He said something smart.

GREG: You should've left a long time ago.

ALEX: I don't think he took it seriously. He just stared for a minute then said, "see you tomorrow." He thinks I'll get over it.

GREG: Prick.

ALEX: Ass.

GREG: Dick.

ALEX: Fucker. You?

GREG: It's work. I go, I go through some paperwork, I come home.

ALEX: You haven't been coming home.

GREG: No. I was out.

ALEX: I gathered.

GREG: What are you gonna do about a job?

ALEX: What'd you come by for?

GREG: I come by every day.

ALEX: While I'm at work?

GREG: Yeah.

ALEX: Why?

GREG: To think. You know, it's easier to think here.

ALEX: Where've you been staying?

GREG: With Mike.

ALEX: Yeah, he doesn't think much.

GREG: Never has.

ALEX: Awesome at beer pong though.

GREG: True. You two tore it up last Halloween. I had the toughest chick in the place.

ALEX: Sorry I'm home. Probably makes it harder to think.

GREG: No. I'm used to you.

ALEX: Took a few years.

GREG: Finally got the hang of it.

ALEX: Long nights with Lunchables.

GREG: Chick flicks and stale popcorn.

ALEX: Cult classics I never wanted to see.

GREG: Madonna tickets I never wanted.

GREG: Staying up late when I wanted to sleep.

ALEX: Waking up early when I wanted to sleep.

GREG: Scraping burnt waffles off the iron.

ALEX: Taco stands.

GREG: Swap Meets.

ALEX: Ice cream at 3 am.

GREG: 2 betas and a cat later.

ALEX: And now you're gonna leave?

GREG: We should have got a dog.

ALEX: A big one, a dog that barks all the time. Now that'd fuck with your thinking.

GREG: I'm not leaving.

ALEX: Just not coming home?

GREG: I come home every day.

ALEX: While I'm gone.

GREG: Ok, not coming home while you're here then.

ALEX: Let's be specific?

GREG: Yes, let's. Alex, I just can't—

ALEX: No, let's avoid it. Mango?

GREG: Thanks.

(They eat in silence for a minute.)

GREG: How'd you cut yourself?

ALEX: I told you.

GREG: You lied.

ALEX: Where'd you get the gun?

GREG: I—, *(he pulls the gun out and sets it on the coffee table)* It's Mike's.

ALEX: So.

GREG: So. *(Pause)* It's supposed to get easier.

ALEX: That's what they say.

GREG: The Dr.—

ALEX: She's a shrink not a Dr.

GREG: Has a PHD.

ALEX: I could have her PHD. I'm not comforted.

GREG: Maybe it won't get easier.

ALEX: No, it won't.

GREG: I can't do this, Alex.

ALEX: That's my line.

GREG: You always get it. It's mine this time.

ALEX: Fine.

GREG: If we're gonna do this you have to say something.

ALEX: We're talking.

GREG: Fuck Alex, come on.

ALEX: Do you really think there's something to be said?

GREG: We can't just sit here pretending like it never happened.

ALEX: But it didn't.

GREG: It did.

ALEX: It didn't.

GREG: It did.

ALEX: I fucking hate her.

GREG: What?

ALEX: I fucking hate her. *(This sits between them, taking up all the air)* Stay tonight. I wouldn't have done it.

GREG: I would have.

ALEX: If I hadn't been here?

GREG: Yes.

ALEX: But not tonight.

GREG: No, not tonight.

ALEX: And tomorrow?

GREG: I don't know. You?

ALEX: I don't know. Is this even possible?

GREG: I don't know. Mango?

ALEX: Yes, please.

GREG: You know I don't even like mangos.

ALEX: You don't?

GREG: Never have.

ALEX: But you always eat them.

GREG: You always give them to me and I like you.

ALEX: Do you want a peach?

GREG: Nah, too sweet, I want the mango. I'm used to them.

(They both stare into space, closer, but still alone.)

Standard Ice Cream

Sam Rousso



Ralphs Closes at 1 AM

Sophia Centurion

The freedom of solidarity infers that company will come with shackles. Someone needs to pay the price of perceiving, the threat of eyes always. They watch to avoid becoming Predator or Prey, as if one could be something else. Even starving owls will eat their youngest, so what is sacred? The people with power are the ones whose no must be obeyed. It is a power that cannot exist without others; charity is the same way. Who will stop me if I go madwoman screaming down my street, destroying everything? Only a fool would try to stop a blizzard. We are hired employees handing out samples of our magnitude like pieces of apples in jello. Why must I take deep breaths, content myself with heroic silence as I churn away? At the risk of sounding insane, I confess I have felt myself fall into pain at the world's inconvenience. Why shouldn't I cry among the cereal boxes? Is it to save me from people knowing I am broken, I need help, I cannot do this on my own, or others from recognizing themselves. This is the first need infants learn to communicate; it's the reason tears are external. Sometimes even laughter, if half a second too long, can be considered excessive.

Is human just a cough we hold? Or a curse that makes us lock ourselves in at night so we all can be monsters
before the sun rises again.

Another Drink

Sophia Centurion

I need another drink. Please stay with me, at least until I pass out in a pile of my own remorse. I do not get to choose who I hurt and who makes everything make sense. All my wishes are beyond the genie's ability. Who's dead anyway? Everyone I need is here taking her 4th or 5th shot. Please no pictures of whatever it is I miss. Do you remember last December, or was that not even you? Who do I address for the hate, I left it around here somewhere. God has held the sun in place but has never turned back time, I don't think time even exists. I think it has been at least a couple dozen millennia since pieces of me were blown up and scattered across this valley. Please trust me, the year is crawling together, they are trying to become whole again.

The Powerful Part About the Brain

Sophia Centurion

it will protect you:
when feeling becomes pain, it stops.
It becomes the acid
poured into itself and doesn't
discriminate what it destroys.

I didn't mind the self destruction.
A bomb's only purpose is ripping open its own shell
to spit shrapnel over the human life
it claims to protect.

The powerful part about the brain,
it can fool itself over and over again
survive off imaginary frosting,
become so desperate
that it leaves itself swaddled and abandoned
in the middle of the city at the mercy
of all my mother's prayers.
We are the mouse and the hand crushing it,
we are just as blind and stupid as Icarus
and as useless as his father.

The powerful part about the brain
it will hide me
from its biggest threat,
until I promise to take care of her.

Solitude

Andrew La



Boys in My Hood

Andrew Flores

THUMP-THUMP.

THUMP-THUMP.

THUMP-THUMP.

He wonders if the lump in his throat was his heart trying to escape his body or his tongue retreating back into his esophagus looking for where his voice went. Lactic acid building up burned his legs and he kept pushing to get away from those COCK-COCK sounds. Fireworks have a more booming sound, and produce a fair amount of light, these were more piercing and abrupt. He hears the screeching sounds of tires scraping asphalt and knew that they were coming for him next. He said a quick prayer to God, who usually ignored him, and hoped his friend was not at the receiving end of those hollow tips. He ducked behind a burgundy Ford mom-mobile and peekedw his head out only to catch the eyes of the menacing black Honda. He was less afraid of the car and more afraid of who was in the driver's seat. However, the Honda's eyes were menacing and sent shivers down his spine. It was almost snarling at him. As the car drew closer, he headed to the back passenger side, to avoid eye contact with the mean Honda. It stopped abruptly, as it parked parallel to the burgundy mom whip.

"We can fucking see you, you fat fuck."

The words hit his ears like dry ice and burned as he turned his head towards the nearest house and ran as if he were an escaped convict running from the police. He went over a fence and under a tree, over a baby tricycle, and under a porch light, over a shrub, until he emerged on the opposite side of whatever side street he was on. His head was on a swivel and, after checking the dark surroundings and finding himself to be the lone creature crawling around the dark street, he slid under a white Toyota and hid. The car that was playing a loud song by 50 Cent crept by as the shiny gold rims winked at him against the shine of the scattered streetlights. As it rolled by and out

of sight, he quietly slipped out from under his newfound home and disappeared in the opposite direction, fast as he could go. His titties flapped and flopped and made a small clapping noise as he ran along like a madman. Sweat started to sting his eyes and his glasses started to slip off his round, brown face as he was gasping for a breath that was never to be found. His worn-out chucks clomped along as his pace started to slow from a full-on sprint to a moderate jog. His eyes glowed yellow in the dark alley as he scanned around to see if there was any sign of life stirring about. He cut left and then cut right, then made another right at the dim dead lonely street light. The glowing light revealed a street sign that read "MILWAUKEE STREET." He hurried to the other side of the street and ducked behind a once electric blue trash can that was now riddled with cracks and mysterious stains from years of use. It reeked of used diapers and bad decisions, so he held his nose shut as he tried to slow his breath to a crawl. He sat there and looked at his blue-tinted G-Shock watch and pressed the little button on the side which caused the tiny screen to flash "3:36 AM". It was so quiet that the small beeping noise that came from the button could have been heard three blocks down. He pulled out his matte black phone and the brightness blinded him for a second. He paused for a moment that felt like a year and disabled the sound. He texted Jon and waited for the grey bubble with the ellipses to appear, but after sitting for an eternity, it did not. He looked for the burnt-out black Honda with the mean white lights and gold rims but still had not seen it since he got away. He stayed behind those trash cans until the birds lullabied him to sleep.

He woke up to a wrinkly old abuelita holding a broom. "Niño! ¿Qué está haciendo? Vete de aquí!" She shooed him away with the broom like he was another stray alley cat. He started down Milwaukee Street and pulled out his iPhone to see if Jon had texted him back. No cigar. He looked visibly worried as he hurriedly started back the way he came, with the comfort of the Sun above him. Somehow the Moon made the neighborhood seem so much more frightening than it was when it was lit up by the bright ball of carbon ninety-three million miles away. As he cut to the main street, marked "YORK BLVD", there it was. The burnt-out black Honda with gold rims. It was parked in front of the hood donut shop that was frequented by him and his other high school friends. He quickly checked his watch which flashed "7:47 AM ". Damn. He realized that he had school in thirteen minutes and if his ass was not in his seat in room 342 for homeroom then he would be marked late and surely they would call his parents. What was he doing out on a school night? He didn't have any missed calls so he figured his mother came home without checking in on him, half asleep from her sixteen hour shift at the hospital. His father probably only came home to make himself cof-

fee or tea before jetting off to another job he had someplace or another.

He hid behind some bushes and wondered about these things as the two dudes wearing matching Atlanta Braves hats stepped out of the small shop with white donut baggies in hand and a small coffee to match. Their hats were the same color as the anorexic straws they give complimentary with your coffee. The one on the right was the one who had told him the previous night that he would “fucking kill them”, but without the assistance of the dark shadows cast by the night sky, he could tell he was just another pimply high school kid. His homie was shorter and fatter than him and was the driver. They were laughing about something or another and walked towards the car that chirped, unlocked. They rested their goodies on the back faux spoiler and continued to pig out on what he knew were probably stale, .99 cent donut holes. Our man behind the bushes had been watching them and checked his watch, which now surprised him and read “7:48 AM”. He pulled out his phone and called Jon. After a couple of rings, he saw the fat guy pull out a phone from his back pocket and faced the screen towards his accomplice. He knew they had Jon’s phone which meant they either fucked Jon up and stole his shit or they shot him, and those COCK-COCK sounds that gave him goose pimples all over his body were the last sounds that his best friend ever heard. He hurried to school to make sure he was on time. He got to the front of his school which he always thought looked like a prison. Hopefully, he didn’t end up going to prison one day like most people in his neighborhood.

He made it in his seat in room 342 and his watch flashed “7:57 AM”. He sat and contemplated whether or not it was worth his life to pick up some weed. He decided it was not. His leg was aggressively shaking up and down and his head was propped up on his open palm as his mind raced. To his surprise, Jon slunk into class just as the bell rang and slid into the seat next to him.

“Are you wearing the same shit from last night?” Jon questioned.

“Bro what? I thought you fucking died foo.,” he responded.

“Joseph Aguilar”, the teacher yelled. Roll call.

Jon looked around the room before speaking again. “Nah bro I got away from those fuck foos.”

Looking surprised, our man asked, “What were those gunshots that I heard last night? And why did those foos have your phone?”

Jon looked puzzled and replied, "What you mean they had my phone? Fuck bro. I dropped that shit running away from them and they probably snatched that shit up. They wasn't really hood bro. Fuckin' bitches with some mid-ass tree. Homie pulled out a gun but I think that shit wasn't loaded. Or it was a pellet gun, I don't fucking know. I snatched the bag of green off his lap dude. A whole ass ounce! Got they ass!" Jon was snickering as he made this revelation. He reached down to his tattered JanSport backpack that looked probably old enough to vote and pulled out a ziplock bag filled with what looked like dry nuggets of the Devil's Lettuce.

"Jaime Camacho!" The teacher yelled. "Here", another student replied.

"So did they shoot at you bro or what? Cause I heard shots," he asked.

"I think so, but you know they ain't gon get my black ass in the dark!" Both homies started cackling as they realized that they got away.

"MR. FLORES, can you please keep your voice down!"

Our main character turned towards Mrs. Melendez and exclaimed, "HERE, sorry."

Jon and Andrew smiled and dapped each other up because life was good. They were alive, and about to smoke fat.

How to Tell Your Friend She's Being Cheated On

Sophia Hejran

Blame it on Tinder — the app you despise.
The app that brings the most gorgeous women to his iPhone,
then Ubered to his home.
Blame it on this generation for making it too easy.

Women that smell like Coco Chanel perfume
Women that know how to contour their face
Women that smile with perfect teeth
Women with a flat stomach
Women that are not you.

Tell him that you don't care
Lie — say you cheated too
Anything you can do not to make yourself look vulnerable.

Don't be vulnerable
Hurt him

Download the stupid app
Invite the strangers in.

Men that smell like Armani cologne
Men that know how to shave their face
Men with big soft lips
Men with muscles
Men that are not him.

Tell him lies
Make him weak

Hurt

Hurt

Hurt

And it's not your fault
These apps exist
Even if they didn't, he would still find a way.

Open and Closed Doors

Janet Meza

CHARACTERS

VERA: Female, early 20s.

KYLE: Male, early 20s.

CASS: Female, early 20s.

EMMA: Female, mid 20s.

NOAH: Male, mid 20s.

NEIGHBOR: Male, mid 20s.

SETTING

VERA'S LIVING ROOM.

TIME

Today.

(VERA walks into her LIVING ROOM wrapped in a blanket while holding a bowl of popcorn. She plops herself on the couch and turns on the tv. We hear the tv playing, "Keeping up with the Kardashians.")

(The doorbell rings.)

VERA

It's open!

(The doorbell rings again.)

VERA

It's open!

(There's a knock at the door.)

VERA

(Walking towards the door.)

Oh my God! I said it's open!

(VERA opens the door. KYLE comes rushing in.)

VERA

(Sighs.)

What are you doing here, Kyle?

KYLE

I'm not going to accept that explanation, Vera.

VERA

We already spoke about this.

KYLE

I did everything you asked me to do.

VERA

Kyle, please leave.

KYLE

Is it someone else?

VERA

What?

KYLE

Did you meet someone else?

VERA

No, Kyle, I already told you—

KYLE

We were good, Ver. What happened?

VERA

We already spoke about this. Now, please leave.

KYLE

No. I'm not leaving until you give me a clear answer.

(VERA goes to sit on the couch and continues to watch her show.)

KYLE

So what? You're going to ignore me now?

(VERA doesn't respond.)

KYLE

What happened?

(Small beat.)

KYLE

Wow! Really fucking mature, Ver.

(VERA laughs at something said on the show.)

KYLE

(Scoffs.)

Very fucking mature.

(KYLE exits.)

BLACK OUT

NEXT DAY

(VERA is seated on her couch in the LIVING ROOM. She's watching tv while eating Cheetos. We hear the tv playing, "The Real Housewives of New Jersey.")

(The doorbell rings.)

VERA

It's open!

(The doorbell rings again.)

VERA

It's open!

(It rings again.)

VERA

(Walking towards the door.)

Oh my God! Kyle, I swear if this is you again—

(VERA opens the door. CASS walks in.)

CASS

Wow, you look like shit. Anyways, I brought the goods! I have chocolate, ice cream, chips, donuts, and of course—the most important of all—tequila!

(VERA walks straight to the couch—ignoring CASS.)

Shit, it's that bad?

VERA

I'm fine.

CASS

You don't look fine, and when was the last time you opened a window? It fucking stinks in here.

(CASS opens a window.)

VERA

I'm not in the mood, Cass.

CASS

That is precisely why I'm here. Look, we're gonna eat all of this junk and we're gonna get super fucking wasted and you're gonna cry, or scream, or laugh, or whatever the hell you need to do to get over this funk you're in, ok? I'm not about to let you mope around and look like a fucking zombie over Kyle.

VERA

I'm fine, Cass. I don't need a fucking babysitter.

CASS

Fine, you want to let out all your anger on me, go for it! We can do that too.

VERA

I'm being serious. Leave!

CASS

Don't do that.

VERA

What?

CASS

Don't be rude! I'm here to help you!

VERA

When did I ask for it?

CASS

What the fuck? What happened? Why are you acting this way?

VERA

I don't feel like talking, Cass! What part of that don't you get?

CASS

Don't fucking talk to me like that!

VERA

I can say whatever the fuck I want to say! Now get out!

CASS

This isn't just about the breakup, is it?

VERA

Leave!

CASS

No. What happened, Ver? This isn't like you.

VERA

(Laughs.)

God, did you and Kyle plan this shit? For you and him to come and make my life miserable?

CASS

Don't be a bitch, Vera. I'm trying to help you.

VERA

I'm done.

CASS

You're done?

(Laughs.)

What the fuck does that even mean?

(VERA says nothing.)

CASS

The silent treatment, really?

(VERA doesn't respond.)

CASS

Wow.

(Beat.)

CASS

Seriously, what the fuck, Vera!

(Small beat.)

CASS

Fine, have it your way. Just don't come crying to me.

(Scoffs.)

Pathetic.

(CASS exits.)

BLACK OUT

Three Days Later

(VERA is laying down on the couch covered in a pile of blankets. There's leftover food, empty Tequila bottles, and crumbled-up food wrappers all over the room. "The Bachelor" is playing on tv.)

(The doorbell rings.)

VERA

It's open!

(It rings again.)

VERA

It's open!

(Again.)

VERA

(Walks towards the door.)

It's fucking open!

(EMMA walks in.)

EMMA

What happened?

VERA

Oh great, you're gonna check in on me too?

EMMA

Cass called me. What happened? Why were you so rude to her?

VERA

(Laughs.)

I was rude.

(EMMA opens a window. She observes the mess.)

EMMA

What's wrong?

VERA

I'm fine! Why is nobody getting that?

EMMA

Is this about Kyle?

VERA

Oh my God, here we go.

EMMA

Didn't you guys break up weeks ago?

VERA

Say that to him! He clearly doesn't get it.

EMMA

Well, neither do you, apparently. I've never seen you act like this over a break-up before.

VERA

Again, I'm fine! I'm over him!

EMMA

Then why do you look like shit? And why is the house a disgusting mess? It reeks of alcohol!

VERA

I'll pick it up, don't worry!

EMMA

Vera, seriously, come on, what's wrong?

VERA

Why don't you people leave me the fuck alone?

EMMA

This isn't you.

VERA

God, you are all so annoying! Just leave!

EMMA

Is this about mom?

VERA

Emma, please leave!

EMMA

Has mom spoken to you?

VERA

This isn't about mom, this isn't about Kyle, this isn't about anyone or anything! I'm fine! So, please, get the fuck out!

(EMMA stares at VERA. Observing her. A beat later, EMMA walks to the kitchen.)

VERA

Where are you going?

(EMMA exits the stage. She enters a moment later with alcohol bottles in hand.)

VERA

What are you doing with those?

EMMA

You want to lock yourself in here, fine, go ahead, but I'm taking the alcohol.

VERA

(Laughs.)

Fine, take them, I don't care!

EMMA

Good.

(EMMA exits.)

(VERA stares after her for a minute, staring at the closed door. After a long beat, she returns to the couch, lays down, and continues to watch her show.)

BLACK OUT

Two Days Later

(VERA is laying on the couch under a mountain of blankets. The living room is still a mess. "Chopped" is playing in the background.)

(The doorbell rings.)

(VERA walks over to open it. NOAH walks in.)

NOAH

Hi baby, I've been calling but—woah. What happened in here?

VERA

I don't want to see anyone. Please leave.

NOAH

Are you ok? What happened?

VERA

Leave. Please.

NOAH

Is this why you haven't been answering my texts? Did something serious happen?

VERA

I'm breaking up with you.

NOAH

What? Vera, what's happening?

VERA

Get out.

What? No.

NOAH

(Scoffs.)

What's going on?

VERA

I'm fine. Nothing is happening, just leave.

NOAH

Vera, I—

VERA

Leave! Get out!

NOAH

Vera, I'm so confused, what's—

VERA

What are you confused about? I told you to leave, so leave!

NOAH

Why are you acting like this?

VERA

Because I fucking feel like it, ok? I don't want to be with you anymore. I don't want to see you anymore. Now leave!

NOAH

You've spent days ignoring me and now you're just breaking up with me? Like this?

Yes.

VERA

What the fuck? Vera. Who are you?

NOAH

VERA

(Pointing at the door.)

Someone who wants you to get the fuck out of my house.

(NOAH stares at VERA in disbelief. After a small beat, NOAH exits.)

(VERA returns to her couch, turns off the tv, and goes to sleep.)

BLACK OUT

Three Days Later

(VERA is sitting on the couch staring into space. There is no noise. The tv is not on, there is no music, nothing. VERA looks back at the door. After a moment, she lays down and covers herself in the mountain of blankets. A beat later, she sits up and turns around to look at the door again. Turning back around, she looks at her phone and sees that there

are no messages nor missed calls. Frantically, she gets up and walks to the door, yanking it open. There is no one outside. VERA stares at the empty porch for a second then slams the door shut. She walks towards the kitchen and exits the stage. We hear rustling in the background. Cabinet doors opening, then slamming shut. VERA enters the stage again walking straight to the door. VERA opens the door again and finds no one there. She slams the door shut. At the loud noise, she falls to her knees and sobs. Her sobs later turn into screams. She gets up and begins to throw everything around. She throws the empty tequila bottles against the wall and swipes the leftover food from the table onto the floor.)

VERA

(Yelling.)

I don't want you! Get out!

(VERA desperately scratches her neck and chest and pulls on the shirt she has on.)

VERA

Get out! Get out! Get out!

(VERA pulls at her chest, as if she's yanking out her heart.)

VERA

(Sobbing.)

Get out! Please, get out! I don't want it!

BLACK OUT

NEXT DAY

(VERA sits at her couch with a blank stare on her face. The room is still a mess from when she destroyed it. Shattered glass and food all around her.)

(The doorbell rings.)

(VERA doesn't seem to hear it.)

(The doorbell rings again.)

NEIGHBOR

(From the outside.)

Hello?

(VERA continues to stare into space. The doorbell continues to ring.)

NEIGHBOR

Hello?

(NEIGHBOR opens the unlocked door. He enters
STAGE LEFT. NEIGHBOR notices the mess and sees
VERA sitting on the couch.)

NEIGHBOR

Hey. Uh, the door was open. Is- is everything ok?

(VERA doesn't respond.)

NEIGHBOR

I heard a lot of noise coming from here yesterday. I wanted to check if everything was ok. Did something happen to you? Were you hurt?

(VERA continues to stare into space, as if in a spell.)

NEIGHBOR

You're not bleeding and there's no bruises on you so that's good. Umm... do you want me to call anyone for you?

(No response.)

NEIGHBOR

I'm sorry for intruding. Alright, uh—I'm, I'm going to head back home but, please, let me know if you need anything.

(No response.)

NEIGHBOR

All right, Imma head out.

VERA

You opened the door.

NEIGHBOR

Yeah, it was unlocked.

(VERA turns around and looks at him from where he's standing, by the door.)

VERA

Can you stay? Please.

NEIGHBOR

Uh, sure, sure. Um... do you want to uh... do you want to talk? Or—

VERA

No talking.

NEIGHBOR

Ok, um, do you want to watch tv?

(VERA nods.)

NEIGHBOR

Ok.

(NEIGHBOR turns on the tv. He skims through some channels until stopping at, "Jersey Shore.")

NEIGHBOR

There's nothing that trash tv can't cure.

(VERA and NEIGHBOR sit on the couch while watching "Jersey Shore." A beat later, NEIGHBOR laughs at something said on tv. VERA turns to look at NEIGHBOR. After a second, she turns back around to look at the tv. We continue to hear "Jersey Shore" in the background.)

BLACK OUT

END OF PLAY

Solutions for Natalie's Problem

Aislinn DeButch

Solution #1: Play dumb, act like nothing's wrong. Pretend that the smile your sister gives you when she tells you about her day isn't as fake as her sparkling acrylic nails she got done at the salon last Tuesday. Pretend that she used to always zone out in the middle of her sentences and that the crying you hear coming from her room at night is nothing more than a soap opera with the volume turned up too loud.

Solution #2: Get angry. Smash the nice China dinnerware that's kept in the glass cabinet in the kitchen, the ones that were passed down from your great-grandmother. But don't destroy the blue plate, don't look at it. Don't glance at the yellow flowers decorating its border, don't think about how your family hasn't touched it since last April. Don't think about that night, the one where the morning dew hit your cold bare feet when you chased your mother's car down the street. Don't think about the way your sister cursed at the sky, don't think about the first time you saw your dad cry. Don't think about how your sister punched a hole in the upstairs bathroom, how no one was the same. Don't think about the fact that the door to your mother's room has never been open since that night. The look on your father's face when he swore he'd never sleep in that bed again. How every time you smell the sickly scent of Chanel perfume, it reminds you of her and your stomach starts to turn. Don't think about it. Smash all the rest of the pretentious cups, saucers, and champagne glasses, but not the blue plate with the yellow flowers. It's the one thing you have left of her. Scream until your throat burns, scream until your voice is gone, scream so loud that you hope your sister has no choice but to snap the hell out of it.

Solution #3: Destroy the pills. The pills that make your sister numb, that suck the life right out of her eyes. That make her unrecognizable, that make her hands shake like an earthquake is erupting from inside of her 24/7, every minute of every second of every day. The pills that make her walk around the house like a zombie, that make her toss and turn all night, that do more harm than good. Get rid of them, for the family. Throw them down the drain, turn the garbage disposal on, and hear the satisfying destruction of the tiny bullets that can ruin a life in one gulp.

Solution #4: Talk to someone. Anyone- a friend, a counselor, a relative. Spill your guts out, it may seem hard at first but you won't be able to keep it inside forever. Talk about the argument that woke you up at the crack of dawn or the way your father's hushed frustration haunts every meal or how upset he is that his oldest daughter is not the same person she was the year before. Talk about how your father averts eye contact with your sister and how he complains to her over and over again about how it isn't a real disease. And how he doesn't understand why she just can't fix it. *Fix it*, as if it was as simple as replacing the engine of a car or a virus on your computer. Talk about how you got a postcard from your mother saying she was sorry last July. "GREETINGS FROM FLORIDA! THE LAND OF SUNSHINE!" was sprawled across the middle in big corny letters, how angry the smiling face on the sun in the corner made you feel like it was mocking you. The familiar chicken scratch handwriting on the back looked rushed and sloppy like it was done at the last minute. Talk about how your mother wrote that she had to go, to be truly happy. How that made you burst. And how your sister ripped it up until it looked like confetti and sobbed until the skin around her eyes looked sunburnt. Talk about it all.

Solution #5: Wait until the day your sister won't be able to get out of bed anymore. Wait until it really hits her, when her brain can't take it anymore when the droplets of pain in her heart become a sea. When you can feel your sister's ribs when you hug her when she's so small and skinny that she looks like she lost another person when her body can't take another bite. When the gray clouds hanging in her mind finally start to storm, wait until it's all over.

Solution #6: Screw it all. Take her hand, look into her soft blue eyes and tell her that everything's going to be okay, that you'll be there for her as she always was for you. Like the time she stayed up all night with you when Tommy Wilson broke up with you in the sixth grade over a phone call. Be there for her and reassure her. Let the tears come and sob into each other's arms, taste the salt in your mouth and kiss her on her forehead. Let *her* become the child of the family for once. Realize that both of you can get through this because it's too early to give up now. It will take time, but love always has the ability to force the gray clouds away.

Ya No Llores

Amber Castellanos

Blanca Lopez walked home from school with textbooks in hand and her backpack tightly strapped on one shoulder. She cursed as she struggled to make her way across the street from middle school towards the street that would lead her to her small El Monte home. The sun was setting and her phone had died. She hadn't gotten the chance to call her grandmother to tell her that she would be running late. Now, Blanca's insides swirled with nerves, knowing that her grandma would be worried sick about her. She wished she had remembered to bring her charger with her this morning, but she had been in such a rush that she had forgotten. That was Blanca, always running late. She had also forgotten to mention to her grandma last night that she would be staying for tutoring after school. So instead of getting out at 3:30 PM like everyone else, she had found herself hurrying down the school's halls at 4:45 PM, praying her grandmother would understand. Now she was beginning to think that maybe she shouldn't have stayed for tutoring in the first place.

A light, frosty breeze made its way through the trees, floating through Blanca's frail frame as she walked. She shivered and pulled her sweater closer to her with her free hand. November was Blanca's least favorite time of year. It was when the sunsets grew cold and dark, and the sky settled in much too early. The day ended far too quickly and it made her feel more like she couldn't get anything done.

She was already struggling to finish her homework before helping her grandma with dinner, and her daily chores of doing the laundry, and making sure the house was clean, and the dishes were washed. By the time she was finished with everything, there was no time for much else except for sleep. This left Blanca at a disadvantage because she was already failing Pre-Algebra, and less time on her homework meant less time of actually trying to understand it.

Today, she thought that maybe she could take an hour or two to work a little more on her homework. She had made sure that she had done most of her chores that morning, hoping it would mean that she had a little less to do

tonight. Though, in her haste to get everything done, she had left the house without consulting the one person who she had been hoping to impress.

Blanca's grandma had been taking care of her and her two brothers ever since their parents passed away last year. It was a terrible time for Blanca and her siblings, and their grandma had opened up her home to them amidst the grieving of her own son. She loved them and provided them with whatever they needed; for that Blanca was forever grateful. Her grandma even occasionally helped Blanca out with her homework. Though, with only a fifth-grade education there was only so much she could do. Nonetheless, Blanca appreciated her grandma's attempts to try and help her out. She knew it couldn't be easy raising two children and a teenager at her age.

Blanca's grandma knew that she was struggling in school. Though, she didn't know how bad. Blanca did her best to conceal it from her, but she knew she would find out eventually. That is why she had been trying so hard to get the help she needed. When she discovered after-school tutoring, she hoped that this would be the right step in a new direction for her. Her grandma had given up so much for her and her siblings. Blanca did not want to disappoint her by getting a bad grade in school.

As Blanca continued on down the block, she saw the setting sun grow warm and orange-purple behind the houses in the distance. She quickened her pace in order to try and get home faster. Blanca knew that at this time of day her grandma was already beating the masa for tonight's sopas with her frail old hands, and if she wasn't already mad with Blanca for being late, she would surely be furious at her for that.

As Blanca turned Linda Vista Street, the echoing of laughter could be heard from across the way. Three boys from school, Jorge Sanchez, Marcel Cortez, and Alejandro Garcia were throwing a baseball back and forth to each other as they weaved in and out between the cars parked against the curb. Blanca rolled her eyes and evaded their gaze. These boys bothered her enough at school. The tall one, Jorge, had dated almost every girl in school. Only Blanca and a few others had managed to escape his constant stares and protests. He was a big flirt, and pretty persistent at it too. Blanca had found herself walking the other way plenty of times as he yelled her name across the hall and in gym class. Somehow she always managed to avoid him. This was the first time she had encountered him in the streets.

Blanca kept her head down, hoping they wouldn't notice her. She let her dark curls cover the sides of her al-

mond-shaped face and kept her eyes down on the path she was walking. She had almost made it to the end of the street when—

“Hey, Blanca! Is that you? Eyy hermosa, look up. It’s not polite to ignore someone when they’re talking to you. Blanca? It’s me, Jorge!”

Blanca heard the scuffling of running feet and tried to walk faster, but a figure stopped her in her tracks. She looked up.

Jorge was 5’6 and flaco. His limbs looked like they were sucked into his bones and his dark matted black hair looked like a black wig glued to his head. She didn’t understand how so many girls had found him so irresistible with those chicken legs peeking through under his oversized green shorts. His bright red T-shirt sagged around his neck and Blanca almost laughed as white sweaty skin peeked through under a border of deep tan. She did everything she could to keep her composure.

“I haven’t got time for this, Jorge,” she said and tried to maneuver her way around him. He stepped in front of her. “I’ve got to get home.”

“Oh come on, hermosa. Don’t be like that. I just want to talk to you.”

“I don’t have time for talking,” she said. “I gotta go.” She took a step to his right and he followed suit again. She looked back up at him. “Seriously?”

“Oh come on. You gotta tell me what you’re doing out so late. I’ve never seen you out around this time.”

“It’s only like 5 PM,” she said. “It’s hardly even nighttime, but if you keep me here any longer it will be. And I don’t think you want to deal with my abuela if she finds out you were the reason I was late in getting home.”

Jorge laughed. “Spunky aren’t you chiquita? I forgot how saucy a little girl like you could be.” He turned to his friends across the street who were standing and staring at them, shouting, whistling, and egging their friend on. *They should be embarrassed, Blanca thought. Look at them, acting like typical teenage payasos. You would think clowns would know when they weren’t being funny.*

“I have to get home, Jorge,” Blanca said again. “Please.”

“Oh come on, Jorge!” shouted one of his friends across the street, Alejandro. “Just leave her! She’s no fun anyway!”

Come on, we better get to your house anyway! The game's almost on!"

"I think your friends want you," Blanca told him. "It's Friday night. You don't want to leave them hanging."

Jorge didn't seem to be paying her any attention. His black slanted eyes were fixed on the surrounding twilight sky. "They can wait," he said. "Without me, they won't have a place to sleep. Both their parents are away this weekend. They are staying with me."

"All the more reason you should probably head out. Now come on, move it. I gotta go!"

Jorge finally looked back down at her. His eyes were murky and distant. "You sure you don't want me to walk you home?" he asked and there was a sense of humbleness in his voice now. "It really is getting late and who knows what else can find you on your way home."

Blanca raised her eyes trying to decide if he was trying to scare her into agreeing to walk her home. "I'm a big girl. I think I can make it down the block without running into any more niños metiches. You boys should go home and mind your own business."

He blinked and the bright annoying glimmer returned to his eyes. "Fine then," he said. "I'll see you at school Monday. Maybe then we can have a more meaningful conversation." He laughed and then ran back across the street towards his friends.

Blanca sighed. "Fiiinnally!" She turned the corner and continued to make her way home.

The sky was already turning a murky watery blue as the eerie light of twilight settled in. Blanca cursed under her breath furious that Jorge had only made her even later than she already was. She clung tighter to her textbooks, hoping that she would make it home before it got dark. "Only three more blocks," she mumbled to herself. "Only three more."

She kept on walking, making sure to stay close to the houses rather than to the street. Her mother had always told her that if she ever found herself out late at night it was best to do this.

"It is safer that way," she used to say. "That way if you ever find yourself in any kind of danger you're more likely to find someone to help you."

When Blanca turned thirteen, she had enforced that even more on her. She had continued to until the night before

the accident. That night, she had left Blanca alone to watch after her siblings while they went out to a party for her father's work. It had been Blanca's first time babysitting and she had been so excited that her parents had finally entrusted her with the huge responsibility.

Before they left Blanca's father knelt down and gave her a big hug and a kiss on her forehead reminding her that they were only a phone call away. Her mother then took her hands and looked at her intently with her warm almond eyes.

"Remember, if we don't answer and it's an emergency, call abuelita. She has her phone ready just in case you need her. But if she doesn't pick up for any reason, you take your two brothers and you run over to her house down the street. But that's only if it's a major emergency okay, Blanca? It's not too far and you know the way, so it's okay. Make sure if you do need to go stay close to the houses okay? Do not walk close to the road. It'll be dark and you'll be safer that way," she said in the straightforward tone she always did. "Remember only if there is an emergency. Okay?"

"Sí mamá," Blanca had answered. "Don't worry I got it." Blanca gave her mom a thumbs up and smiled at her to show that she had understood.

Blanca's father leaned over and put an arm around his wife. "Ya vieja," he said in a low voice as they walked over to the front door. Perhaps he assumed that Blanca could not hear them. "She'll know what to do. It'll be okay. It always is. You can't be scared about this anymore."

Her mother nodded and waved at Blanca before they both headed out the door and into the night. The police said that they didn't know what had caused the crash. The car appeared to have just swerved at max speed and hit the nearby street lamp causing it to topple over and end up at the end of the street. A gas leak had caused the flames to ignite and there was hardly anything left to identify the bodies. Her grandma had been the one to confirm the bracelet on Blanca's father's wrist as the one she had given him last Christmas. It was a gold band that had the phrase "*Mi hijo, mi vida*" engraved on the back. *My son, my life.*

* * *

As Blanca thought about them, tears filled her eyes. She felt robbed, like they had been stolen from her. Though, she knew she could never get them back. She remembered their faces as if they were something so precious and

sacred. They would never see their children grow up. Never see her grow up, which hurt Blanca greatly and always would.

Blanca wiped the tears from her eyes and sniffled. She pulled her hair back away from her face and let the cold November air fly past her fingers as she stretched them out against the night sky. The street was empty. Dark shadows crept out of the bottoms of trees and bushes, as porch lights flickered behind them. Houses were now hidden by the coming of night, their brown rooftops and screen doors now all faded in muted blacks and grays. The moon loomed big and chalk-like in the sky and cast an eerie shine on her tan skin. She needed to get home.

She was not sure who's eyes landed on who's first. The woman was standing over by one of the parked cars. Blanca hadn't noticed her at first, but had heard the faint moaning of her cries. As Blanca continued on walking, she was able to see the back of the woman as she was slumped against the roof of a small Honda. Her long black hair reached the top of her waist and cascaded down in thick voluminous curls. A white skirt billowed out from her hips in a thick doily-like material with intricate little flowers sewn into the ends. She was tall from what Blanca could see and incredibly thin. She couldn't see the woman's face, but just from looking at her from an angle, Blanca could tell she was beautiful.

"Señora, are you okay?" Blanca asked, stopping in her tracks.

She waited for a reply, but the woman kept on crying as if she hadn't heard her. Blanca asked again, this time in a louder voice. "Señora, are you okay?!"

Again the woman continued to sob and not answer. Blanca wondered for a moment if she should just leave the woman and continue on walking. After all, she had no idea who this woman was and, for all Blanca knew, she could just be some crazy woman crying on the streets.

The woman once again let out a loud and horrific wail. "Ayyyee! Mis hijos! Mis hijos!"

Blanca grew tense. She was calling out for her children. Perhaps she had lost them? *She's a mother*, Blanca thought. *She's looking for her children.*

Blanca didn't know what to do. What if this woman really did need her help? What if she had lost her children? If that was the case, should Blanca really walk away?

"Señora," Blanca said, taking a step towards the woman. "Have you lost your children? What happened to them? Señora?"

Blanca's eyes were focused on the woman as if she were transfixed. There was something about this woman. Something familiar. She wanted to help her.

"Señora?" she asked again. "Please tell me, are you okay? What happened to your children?"

"I cannot find them," she said in a soft and gentle voice, keeping her head down. "I do not know where they are. I keep trying to find them. I keep trying." Her voice echoed as she spoke. It emanated from the woman and into the air. As she spoke her body moved as if she was quivering with every word, but her voice didn't show any sign that this was the case. It was melodic and soft like that of a reassuring mother.

Blanca found herself moving closer to the woman. Her sweet and musical voice called to her. She needed to help this woman.

As she moved closer the woman started to cry again. She sounded like she was in such agony. "AyyyyyyeEEEE..!" The woman cried and it vibrated off her and into the fall air. "AyyyyyyyyyyyyyyeEEEE!!!"

"Señora? Please don't cry. I will help you." Blanca said, inching her way towards the woman.

"Señora? It's okay. Señora?" Blanca put a hand on the woman's shaking shoulder. "Señor—?"

The woman turned and snatched hold of her wrist. Blanca was unprepared for what ended up facing her. The woman stood and it was as if she was towering over Blanca. Her perfect black curls were disheveled and sticking out on all ends. She was covered from head to toe in cobwebs and dirt. Her fingers were as thin as bone and long and animal-like. The scariest part of her was her face. Two crimson red pupils surrounded by a watery and sickly-looking yellow sat encased in two hollow sockets where bone met ancient flesh. Her face was white and decomposing right before Blanca's eyes. Pieces of it flew off and away in the wind. Her lips were thin and sinister, tinted a murky, bloody red. She smiled when she saw Blanca as if seeing the young girl cower in terror brought her some satisfaction.

Blanca tried to tear her arm from the woman's grasp, but she couldn't. She was not strong enough.

"Te encuentre mi hermosa..." The ghoulish mouth murmured. "At last I found you!"

* * *

"Señora Lopez!" Jorge Sanchez called as he pounded on the hard wooden door. "Señora Lopez!"

The sound of the latch clicked and the door creaked open. From the other side emerged a small old lady. Her grey hair was tied up in a tight bun and she was wearing a white apron and pink sandals. The wrinkles on her face looked deep and heavy and her mouth was twisted into a deep frown.

Jorge looked at her and nodded. A deep sigh emerged from his mouth. "She got her, didn't she?"

"I'm afraid so mijo. I'm afraid so."

"I knew I should've walked her home last night. But you assured me she'd be okay. You said after what happened to her parents that—"

"I know mijo, I know. I thought she was. I thought that after she'd gotten Marcel and Joesephina it would be over. But she will always be after our family. Ever since I escaped her back when I was a little girl in Mexico. She will never stop. Nunca."

Jorge put his face in his hands. "I should've been with her. I should've protected her. I knew that you still feared her being out so late, but I thought she'd be okay. You said she'd be okay."

"I know what I said, mijo. I know. Though, I was wrong. I took such good care of her all these years. Her parents and I both. Though, it was not enough. I thought it was done. I thought she was safe. But I was wrong." Tears started to flow down her eyes and her gaze had almost drifted away. "It had been so long. Marcel was so convinced that it would finally end, that everything would be alright. But, Josephina was still so scared. She knew the story, she knew of how many times both I and Marcel had to fear for our lives. She knew that she and the children would be at risk as well. But they needed to live their lives and so they did."

Jorge sniffed and rubbed tears from the corners of his eyes. Blanca's grandmother reached over and put an arm on his shoulder for comfort. "I thought Blanca would be safe. I thought she was done with us. I was wrong. This is not your fault, Jorge. I know you feel guilty but it was not your fault. Do not feel responsible for what you had no control of."

"If I had just gone out that night. If I had the strength to open the front door and walk out. It all happened so fast. I

might've been able to do something. To help."

"Mijo, there was nothing you could have done. If she had seen you, she would have then gone after you too. You are still so young and that's what she preys after. My family was cursed, we cannot resist her call no matter how old we are. But you, you are just an innocent child that saw something that night he shouldn't have. Do not make your family suffer as well."

"I saw the car hit the street. I saw her there in the middle of the road. She walked over to the bodies like she was checking to see if they were still alive. I could have saved them. I could have saved her."

"Blanca's fate was already sealed. And so are mine and her brothers. It is only a matter of time. You did all you could, Jorge. I know you grew to care for her, but this is not your fault. Now go home. You are no longer a part of this. If anyone asks what happened to us, you know nothing. Live your life, mijo, and live it well."

Jorge nodded and she pulled him close to her in a tight embrace. "It's okay, mijo," she said. "Ya no llores. Don't cry anymore."

Below the Stars

Amber Castellanos

Jonathan noted that the lights in the sky started around 5 PM yesterday when the sun was getting ready to set over the iconic towering buildings of Downtown Los Angeles. They first appeared as an annoying green light that just hovered over the top of the US Bank building. It was this irritating muted green color that everyone knew was there, but it was still so drowned out by the evening sun that no one was completely sure. It wasn't very bright or very big in size, and from all the way at Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights, it looked like the size of a small grapefruit.

He stared at it as he walked past the bright yellow and red painted bricked walls of the lunch area to the front of the school. "You think they are filming another movie up there or something?" he had said, as he and his friend Linda exited the gates of school after band practice.

"Maybe. Could be a plane or something too," Linda noted, fumbling to get a good grasp on her flute case as she held the heavy door open for him. "Ohh would you stop looking at it and hurry up already?! I can't hold this thing forever!"

"Sorry," Jonathan muttered and removed his eyes from the cityscape behind him. He propped his hand on the edge of the door. "Here I got it. Thanks." He gave her a small apologetic smile hoping she'd notice.

"You know if you squint at it you almost can't see it. Like it's not really there. Maybe we are imagining it," Linda said, "Maybe it's like one of those optical illusion things or something."

Jonathan couldn't help but laugh. "Yes, 'cause someone climbed to the top of the building to play an illusion trick on all of Los Angeles. That makes perfect sense Lin."

"I didn't mean it like that, but hey you never know. Maybe it's some kind of social/science experiment or something. With all that goes on in this city, you never know. Hey, wait up!"

Jonathan had sped up to catch the upcoming street crossing. He turned and stuck his tongue out at her playfully, as he did. However, the little digital square box hit "0" just as he made it to the edge of the sidewalk. "You have got to be kidding me."

Linda laughed and caught up to him. She gave him a small shove on the shoulder. "I already knew you weren't going to make it. So why did you have to walk home again today? I doubt it was to keep me company."

He rolled his eyes. "My dad got called in for another shift again. It's like the third time doing overtime this week," he said, his mind suddenly far away. He found himself absent-mindedly slamming his palm on the button to cross. "So I've got to feed Han and make sure he's got water and everything." His eyes fell on the restaurant across the street. Arctic Hotspot was a small want-to-be hip cafe-ish place that sold veggie burritos. Boys and girls could be seen laughing through the tall glass windows as they sat in colorful ceramic chairs with lush flower-printed pillows behind them. Jonathan shook his head. He would never be caught dead in that place.

"You think he'll bark at me again when I drop you off? By now he's got to know who I am."

"He's like that with everyone," he said, his eyes now veering to the place that sold cheap pots and pans in dusty bundles for \$25.99 up the street. "Don't take it personally."

"I always do," she said, looking down when he turned to meet her eyes. "You know your dad's going to be okay right? He's doing it to help you out. Maybe by next week, you'll find something and your dad can go back to coming home at his normal time."

Jonathan sighed. "Yeah. Maybe."

Linda put her hand on his shoulder. "Hey, it's not your fault that you lost your job. Your dad understands. And you've already applied for so many. Just be patient, it's going to be okay."

The traffic light turned green and the little white walking man appeared in the little black box across the street. Jonathan nodded, trying not to look directly at her, and then started to walk off the curb, making his way towards the Liquor store on the other side. Linda followed quietly just behind him.

He noticed and forced a smile back on his face. "You want an Arizona or something?" he asked. "I know you still got a way to walk after my place. You might get thirsty."

"Nahh, I'll be fine. I've got my water bottle in my bag. But thanks for looking out for me," she said with a small smile and then a wink.

Jonathan's stomach churned. "No problem," he said, not sure what else to say. Linda and he had been friends since the beginning of junior year. She had just moved over from Cerritos and was new at school. Jonathan had found her kind of cute and wanted to get to know her. They had been friends for a few weeks, and Jonathan had thought she had liked him too. However, when he had asked her out she humbly turned him down saying that she preferred to stay friends. So they had, but every now and then he still found himself wondering what could have been. Especially when she did things like that. He never was sure if she was leading him on or not, and honestly, he wasn't sure if he really cared. The only thing he cared about was for her to be around him.

"I think Bella might be home right now," she said, taking out her phone from her back pocket with her free hand. Her dark brown eyes reflected on the phone's dark screen. "Hopefully she's cooking some dinner. I'm starving."

"You sure you don't want something from the store?" he asked, pointing behind him. "I've got enough for a bag of chips and a drink."

"I would rather have home-cooked food," she stated. "I already had some Fritos and a coke today. I want some tacos or maybe some spaghetti or something. Something substantial you know."

"Yeah," he said. "I get you." He smiled at her admiring how her long dark hair looked pulled back in a loose ponytail. When he turned around his clarinet case hit the side of a pole and whacked the edge of his hip on the rebound. "OWW!"

Linda laughed. "Very smooth sir. Very smooth. Maybe if you look straight you won't run into things."

"Thanks," he mumbled, trying hard not to laugh at himself and give her the satisfaction. "I appreciate the help."

"You're welcome," she responded and then he busted out laughing.

* * *

By the time it was 8 PM the tiny green speckle of light had turned into three large red ones that were now blinking and moving side to side every five minutes in a linear formation. Jonathan watched them from his second-story window with the news playing on low in the background, as he played fetch with Han. The small Yorkie barked glee-

fully as he ran and retrieved the little blue ball. He then proceeded to sit down on his fluffy hindquarters and stare at Jonathan with his giant brown eyes.

“These strange orbs of light have been blinking over Downtown Los Angeles since about 7:30 this evening. Witnesses say that the lights have been in the sky since 5 PM. It started off as a small green light that was barely visible, but now it is clear that these lights are blinking in the sky and are now moving in an odd repetitive formation. There is still no insight as to what these lights are or where they are coming from. Eyewitnesses are still confused if it is some sort of military plane of sorts, but it is still unclear...”

Jonathan picked up the ball from the hard-wooden floor and proceeded to throw it again across the room. Han barked happily and waddled over to retrieve it again. Jonathan watched him and laughed at the cute little tippy-tappy noise his feet made as he walked. That was when he felt his phone buzz on his lap.

Linda: DUUUUDE! Those lights are freaking me out! You see them moving?

Jonathan: Yeah people are thinking they are some military experiment or something

Linda: You think thats what it is?

Jonathan: Probably Idk tho

Linda: Isnt it freaking you out?! I think its crazy!

Jonathan: Yeah it is but I think it is some military thing

It seems logical to me

Linda: What if its like aliens or something?!

Jonathan:Thats always what ppl think it is.. Its not trust me

Linda: You never know today could finally be the day we are all upducted

Jonathan: If thats the case then I say its a good last day on earth

I ordered pizza for dinner

Linda: The pizza guy actually came with those things in the sky? You serious

Jonathan: No lights in the sky are gonna stop them from making money especially when this isnt the first time its

happened

Linda: Its first time they've happened like this

Jonathan: Naaahh you member the streak in the sky last winter? People were freaking out about that too

It was just a rocket launch

Linda: Truuuuu Yeah your probably right

Jonathan: Im always right

Linda: Thats a lie and you know it

Jonathan: If you say so

Linda: Is your dad home yet?

Jonathan: No, not yet

Linda: Dude, your gonna go crazy just staying there. Take a walk or something

Jonathan laughed.

Jonathan: I'm fine honestly. You should be the one taking the walk cause your already crazy

Linda: Your messed up

Jonathan: Miss you too

Linda: 😊

* * *

At 10 PM the lights had grown the size of a skylight and there were now about ten of them in the sky all in rows all moving up, down, and horizontally at the same time in the same odd linear fashion. By this point, helicopters were now circling the sky and shining bright white lights at the orbs as they just seemed to be minding their own business up around the stars.

Jonathan was just sitting on the couch with Han next to him, staring out the window. He petted the small pooch with one hand, while he live-streamed the lights with his phone with his other one. His dad had still not come home

by this point. He should've gotten off work about an hour ago. It usually only took him thirty minutes to get home. Jonathan was starting to worry if he had gotten stuck in the back-to-back traffic that had started over about twenty minutes ago. He had called him about three times and had texted him about four times. He still hadn't received anything from him. So all there was left to do now was wait.

"His phone probably died," he said. "Or it's on low and he's driving so he hasn't checked it. Yeah, that's probably it, Dad is horrible at checking his phone. Isn't he Han?"

The Yorkie cocked his head when he looked at him as if to say, "*Wait you're talking to me?*"

Jonathan laughed and stroked the dog's chin. "He'll get back to us soon, Han. Don't worry. He always does."

Han yipped in delight as if to respond. "*Yup that's right!*" Jonathan smiled and petted the little dog's belly.

He remembered when he first got Han. It was for his sixteenth birthday two years ago. It was the first one he'd had since after his mom had left. It had been just him and his dad, and Jonathan had remembered feeling so sad and upset. He hadn't wanted to do anything. All he could think about was how his mom could leave them for his cheap shot coworker. She had left her family. Had left her son.

The night before he and his dad had a Star Wars marathon. It was his dad's idea. Jonathan agreed, just to make his dad happy. One of them deserved to be happy that weekend. They got all the way to *Rogue One* before it reached 2 AM and they both decided to call it a night.

His father hugged him, told him an early "happy birthday," and then they both proceeded into their rooms to go to bed.

Jonathan woke up five hours later to his father shaking him awake. "Come on!" he shouted enthusiastically. "Get dressed!"

"Where are we going?" Jonathan had asked.

"Don't worry about it," his father said. "Just get ready!"

Within thirty minutes or so, Jonathan had found himself in the passenger seat of his father's blue mini cooper driving off to who knows where.

Within the next forty-five, they had ended up at the Pasadena Humane Society, browsing the green metal cages

at barking pooches of all sizes. Jonathan laughed when he encountered the tiny little Yorkie jumping happily around the cage. "This one?" his dad asked.

"Yeah," Jonathan said. "This one."

The person at the shelter had told them that it probably was not a good idea to change the dog's name as he had already gotten so accustomed to it. Or if they were going to change it, it should be to something that sounds close to the original. However, Bennie did not seem like the most ideal name for the little pupper. Thus, they decided to name the little dog Han, after their little binge-watching event the night before, and the little dog had taken to the name without hesitation.

After that, it had just been Jonathan, Dad, and Han. The dynamic trio. They did everything together and even in the toughest of moments, they had each other's backs. They always did.

Jonathan turned to look out the window at the scene in front of him. Then he looked back at his phone, which was still running the live stream. His gaze wandered to the comments trickling in.

Jazzy_89sup: It's the end of the woooooorrrld!

Eleven5454: I still think its some plane or something

THEBOSS1Ross: Geeese you got a good view of it! Where u at?

Lindieru9: Still freeeakking out! What is it? WHAT IS IT?

He turned the volume back on the feed. "Calm down Linda, like the news said it's probably just some military plane or something," he said loud enough for his voice to be heard through the phone. "And I'm a block away from Little Tokyo, Ross, remember? If you would come and visit you'd know that."

Lindieru9: Your weird lol and I doubt it.. Wouldn't they have said something by now?

"Who, the military?" Jonathan laughed. "Yeah right! They are not gonna say anything."

Lindieru9: Well they should say something!! Cause this is scary!

"No one is as freaked out as you are right now Lin. Just take a breather and relax. Go to sleep if anything."

THEBOSS1Ross: Yeah listen to your bf Lin!

Jonathan swallowed.

Lindieru9: Mind your own business Ross! And It's Friday night and this is happening you honestly think I'm gonna sleep? Pft...Yeah right!

Jonathan rolled his eyes and smiled. "Okay fine then. I'm just waiting for my dad to come home. Then I'm out."

Lindieru9: He's not back yet?

"Nope."

Lindieru9: Yeah neither is my mom. She got out at 9:30. Hopefully they come back soon.

"Yeah..." he said and looked back out the window as the lights zoomed over to the left then up. "Hopefully."

* * *

Jonathan paced the room again, looking back at the clock for the millionth time. It was still blinking "12:00 AM" in bright red, and had been ever since the power went out. However, Jonathan knew very well that it was already way past 12 PM, and had been for a while. His dad was still not back yet. Cars were honking loudly outside as they stood practically parked back to back in the streets below. Police sirens and ambulances sounded in the distance. He had no idea where they were coming from. They sounded like they were coming from everywhere. Jonathan checked his phone again and tried to call his dad once more. He had been trying nonstop for the last hour or so. The phone beeped as "NO SERVICE" popped up again and again as he kept clicking the call button.

"Come on!!!"

He threw the phone on the couch. Han squealed and jumped off. Jonathan forgot the little dog had been sitting at the edge of the sofa, just inches from where the phone had landed. He hadn't seen him in the dark shadows of the room. "Han! I'm sorry! Come here boy!" he beckoned and motioned for the dog to come over to him. The Yorkie jumped into his arms and Jonathan began to stroke his light brown fur. "I know boy. I know."

The lights had tripled in the last hour and now there were at least thirty or so of them. They were moving rapidly across the sky all in different formations. Some had taken up a triangle-like motion, others were circling the base of the buildings, others were still moving up and down and sideways. They were all blinking different colors now. There were greens and blues, purples and whites, yellows, reds, etc. All moving hysterically in the night sky.

Jonathan couldn't even see the stars anymore. So many lights were blinding the sky, big and bright. If not from the lights in the sky, then from the millions of helicopters zooming up and around the tops of the skyscrapers.

He didn't know if the lights had caused the power to go out. It could have been all the electricity the city had been using for the last couple of hours, for all he knew. The moment that power and cell service went out, Jonathan got the candles from the downstairs supply room and lit them all around the house. It was still very dark, but at least the warm crackling flames casting their small glows made the house feel a bit more comforting.

Jonathan stared out the window, continuing to cradle Han. That was when he heard a knock at the front door. He went over to it still holding onto Han in one hand.

He looked out the window and saw a familiar smiling face. He undid the latch and Han started to bark loudly. Linda laughed. "Thought you could use some company," she said, holding up a bottle of Dr. Pepper in one hand and a giant bag of Hot Cheetos in the other.

"Shhhh," Jonathan told the small dog. "Han!" He looked back at Linda "Your sister really let you go out to the market and then over here at a time like this?"

Linda rolled her eyes. "She was too busy with her boyfriend to even notice I had left. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"Still Lin, you should—"

She shoved the soda into his free hand. "Shhh. I swear you're more annoying than your dog," she said, rubbing Han's little head, then headed over to the living room.

Jonathan laughed and followed her. He sat next to her on the couch, placing his phone on the coffee table right in front of them. Linda looked over at him and placed a hand on his arm. "Don't worry, he'll call," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah..."

She opened the bag of Hot Cheetos and took a few in the palm of her hand, then handed the bag over to him. He took some and then took a drink from the Dr. Pepper. And they stayed that way. Sitting down shoulder to shoulder eating chips and soda and looking out at the kaleidoscope of stars and lights dancing around out the window.

Under the Umbrella Bungalow

Amber Castellanos

I was the kind of kid that liked to run around barefoot with dandruff ridden hair that lay greasy and wet on top of my forehead. I spent most of my time outside scratching my bare feet against neon chalk and little salt and pepper pebbles, as I hurried down the long cement driveway of my Monrovia home. Back then, in the prime years before adolescence, I played from morning until sunset in my flower-printed bikini or oversized sweatshirt and ripped up jeans, depending on the weather. I galloped all around the crowded little duplex like it was a huge two story mansion, and no one could ever convince me otherwise. My imagination was my best friend and it had kept me company when the realities of life had begun to loom over.

Most preteens would prefer to go to the mall or, nowadays, Starbucks, but this was just not the case with me. When I wasn't fitting in at school or tired of feeling weird because I was different, I let my mind wander. I wanted to explore the world and go on crazy adventures; and as far as I was concerned, I could do that right in the comfort of my own home. The ambiguity of growing up was not really a worry of mine at the time. In my mind, I could and would grow up whenever I wanted, and so I didn't.

In the earlier years, when I was eleven and they were eight and five, my younger brother and sister would join me. We would drink gallons of Kool-Aid that my grandma had made for us as we went back and forth from playtime to hunger under the Monrovia sky.

There was a park in the front yard, a beach house porch overlooking a jungle, barricaded by tiny pink flowers and rose bushes. A clubhouse lay hidden in the backyard and, not far from that, when the air was warm and dry, lay the ocean of chlorine where water balloons floated like sea monsters. My siblings and I would sneak around each and every corner looking for monsters and intruders, water gun in hand. Every bird and bug cringed in terror as a geyser of cold water was sprayed at them.

It didn't matter what the weather was like, or what time of year it was. Everyday was something extraordinary. The

games and stories revolved with the seasons, but none of that mattered. For the longest time I remember making my brother and sister play games like school, where I was the teacher and they would sit down and watch me as I taught them 4th grade math and the beauty of Poe's *Annable Lee*. There were times when they complained and exclaimed that it was their time to teach, and that it wasn't fair that I always got to do it. This would happen more and more as time passed on. None-the-less, we always somehow resorted back to laughs and giggles, with me in front of the whiteboard.

In October, when the sun was hidden behind hazy clouds, my grandma would take us up in the attic and we'd help her bring down the Halloween decorations for the house. The attic was like a maze of foam and boxes. I always prided myself that I never stepped in the wrong area and fell through the ceiling. It was a massive place with every holiday decoration one could imagine. We used to go all out back then. Once we had gathered everything that we needed, my siblings and I would stick our tiny heads out of the giant cutout in the ceiling, making our way down the flight of stairs that lead us back to solid ground.

My grandma would then fold the staircase back up, pushing the door of the entrance back up with a giant hooked pole, and sealing it with a twist of the latch. I remember heading straight for the kitchen with supplies in hand, to go through the containers of goodies we had just gathered from the dragon's cave, making note of the new things we would have to buy for this coming holiday. Which meant weekend adventures at Spirit stores and warehouses, and trips to Home Depot for bases and skeletons for the monsters that we would later create.

Halloween Town was our favorite game this time of year. It was my favorite season with costumes in every store, graves and coffins littering our front yard. When my uncle opened up the store next door, we took advantage of the Halloween costumes he ordered, making use of them in our festive games. Every kid that walked by our house from the Elementary School across the street stared at us as we ran around in witches hats and brooms. I waved teasingly at those that I knew and kept on screeching at the top of my lungs as we circled the seven chihuahuas that barked happily as they followed us up and down the driveway. Sometimes I didn't care if my schoolmates stood there and watched me, other times I did, other times I hid; but that was more so later when they grew taller and I grew shyer.

When late autumn hit, and the evening light was just beginning to fade, we would race on our bikes and play soc-

cer at the front gate. We would chase each other all around the houses in the biggest games of hide and go seek and tag. That was when the tunnels to the right of the front house lead you down to the secret garden where bigfoot lived and roamed just past sunset. Adjacent to that, aliens hid on the rooftop just outside my bedroom window. They would get you if you didn't keep your eyes open at night. They hid in the shadows of the flickering light, through the leaves and trees. Most days I wouldn't drift off at 5 AM, when I heard the scuffling of my dad getting ready for work and I knew the coast was clear.

My dad used to get up at the break of dawn every morning. Now that's when he comes home to sleep. I remember I would cradle against the cold wall in my Cheetah Girls comforter and watch for a few minutes through slightly closed eyes as he rummaged through the bathroom cabinet looking for his razor and toothbrush. His hair was thick back then, slicked back and hard from the gel he had on the day before. Occasionally he would turn to look at me through my open door and I would squint my eyes even tighter to appear as though I was asleep. *Though, I knew very well how that would work.* He'd smile at me and continue getting his things under the fogginess of the amber light before he'd close the door to shower.

I used to keep my door open as I slept, in fear that things would manifest on the other side and try to turn the doorknob as I slept, creeping into my room like something out of Paranormal Activity. I was too young to watch those movies at the time but, ironically, every Friday night, my parents would sit in the living room, located only one five-inch wall away from my room, and watch horror films until 2 AM. They would turn up the volume to the highest setting and I heard nothing but the echoes of poltergeists and the screams of the innocent all night long.

Occasionally, I would get up and walk over to the entrance of my room, stuffed animal in hand, to the old rectangular heater that stood on the wall next to my door. It faced the living room straight on, and I peered through ridges that opened up to the other side. Sometimes, I would stay and watch the movie until it ended, if my legs could tolerate it, and I didn't grow tired in any way, other times I would just take a quick peek. I made sure to stay an arm's length away from the hollow box if the heater was on, in fear that I would be roasted alive, but still, I found myself there almost every weekend night watching the terrors that awoke on my living room TV.

The summer before I turned thirteen, my brother, sister, and I decided to build a fort out back. I had convinced them that it would be the ideal place to relax and chill, as opposed to staying inside and playing Mario Kart in the

confines of a small little room. They had agreed, and so we gathered my grandma's patio umbrellas and some blankets and sheets. We created the massive fort with chairs, benches, and brooms we had found outside. We covered the floor in blankets and toys, brought in our whiteboard, play kitchen, and small play kitchen table that we hadn't used in forever. We would stay there for hours, playing with the pots and pans. Occasionally, we would bring in snacks and juices and just sit there in front of the whiteboard playing school again. Sometimes the whiteboard was an agenda, sometimes it was a newspaper, other times it was a TV that I would sit next to, drawing and erasing scenes my siblings sat down on the ground watching. On extremely hot days, my grandma would hook up a fan for us so that that humid air blew in as we laid down on our makeshift beds, reading books and giggling about the newest episode of iCarly. Sometimes, we even ran around, hiding the corners of the poles and chairs, and played a very obvious game of hide and seek.

* * *

Eventually, the world became too real to me with boys and drama. I left the confines of my umbrella bungalow behind. I now go to work and school every morning, depending on the day. I cherish the idea of sleep and mostly hate early mornings if I'm not up for it. My imagination now mainly flows out on a page or into a book, if I have the time for it, but lately, that hasn't been the case. I try to compensate for it with my optimistic and buoyant personality, but even that feels at times like it has grown up too much as well. The young girl who sees the world with open eyes still lives buried down within me, but she struggles to shine through with the reality of age and life and time. Though that doesn't mean there aren't days when I long for dragons in the attic and the feeling of rough cement under my bare feet.

Postcard to April

Stephanie Reinheimer

Dearest April—

Sincerest apologies that we were unable
To receive the kisses you shower us with.
I am hoping this pandemic is somehow a fable,
For the ways we have taken you for granted.

Blooming tulips and fruit are dearly missed,
But I hope you understand that going
Outside is something we must resist,
For although you will always be here,

Some of us may not. Dearest April,
We are so foolish to think that something
New comes in January, when it's your will
That regenerates life's cycles every year.

We still all long to go on pilgrimage,
From every city, town, and shire's end.
For now though, we sit tight and have courage—
Sometimes idly and sometimes with vigor.

Please believe that we still love you,
Even when it is at a distance, in the
Windows we all look through.
Thinking of you and wondering what May be,

The World.

Laurel Goes for a Walk with The Crocodile

Sandra Leyva

Laurel confidently rides a crocodile down the street knowing full well she will be late for dinner.

"Hey, Laurel, we're going to be late for dinner," says the Crocodile.

"I know," says Laurel.

She knew this.

As Laurel rides the Crocodile, she wonders if she should pick up candies from the neighboring house. It is on the way and would only take a few minutes. The woman is selling blue candies today and blue candies were her favorite.

"The neighbor lady is selling blue candies today. They are your favorite," says Crocodile.

"I know," says Laurel.

She knew this.

The Crocodile continues down the street and Laurel wonders if her mom will make Peach Tea. Laurel loved Peach Tea and it would be amazing if her mother made it with dinner. However, her mother made Watermelon Drink the night before, so that is what will most likely accompany dinner.

"Watermelon Drink will most likely accompany dinner," says the Crocodile.

"I know," says Laurel.

She knew this.

As Laurel rides the Crocodile, they pass a puddle. Crocodile runs at it and makes a huge splash. Laurel doesn't laugh as mud and leaves stick to her skirt. Her mom will be furious with her dirty skirt.

"Your mother will be furious with your dirty skirt."

"I know."



She knew this.

The Crocodile pauses for a moment.

"You are getting bored with me," Crocodile says.

"Yes," says Laurel.

"Will you get rid of me?" Crocodile says.

Laurel thought for a while.

"I want a bear," Laurel says.

"You're allergic to bears," Crocodile says.

"I know."

She knew this.

Crocodile kept walking and walking and said nothing. Laurel said nothing and Crocodile kept walking for many streets. Crocodile kept walking. Crocodile walked and walked and walked and walked. Crocodile will keep walking since it does not want to be replaced with a bear.

But it's impossible to keep walking. That's just not realistic.

After a year, Crocodile stopped walking in front of the neighbor's house. Laurel bought blue candies. Crocodile then delivered Laurel to her house. Her mother came out, saw her, and was furious as she looked at her dirty skirt. Laurel was late for dinner which was accompanied by Watermelon Drink.

But Laurel knew this, of course.

A Respite Walk Around Quarantine Neighborhood

*Gevork
Sherbetchyan*



Compound Interest

Billy Allen

I was waiting for my lunch order and finished my usual screen routine—check texts, emails, comments, likes, feed updates, stock prices—when I decided enough was enough and pocketed my phone. Surely my attention span could handle a few screenless minutes until my Pad Woon Sen and Spring Rolls were ready. I looked around, taking in the restaurant with fresh eyes. The drawn curtains and golden lighting. The massage parlor muzak. The exotic fish tank. I felt a sudden superiority to the other patrons hunched over their phones, oblivious to the soothing decor.

Across from me, two kids stood on chairs and dropped coins into the fish tank. The fish darted away from the descending pennies, nickels, and dimes. The woman beside them sat with her back to the kids. She didn't seem to care that her children were bombing the angelfish with loose change. She'd probably given them the coins.

I pulled out my phone and swiped the news app until fresh articles appeared. I scoffed at the clickbait titles like *How To Retire On The Price Of A Cup Of Coffee* that showed the image of a coffee cup with a green dollar sign. Then I clicked on it. The article was written by a thirty-six-year-old who'd retired on his modest computer engineering salary simply by cutting out frivolous expenses like his four-dollars-a-day Starbucks habit. I was not a big fan of my job, but it was an unavoidable part of life. Unless you wanted to spend the rest of your days living in a van eating rice and beans. But the article didn't mention deprivation. Only happy mantras like *escape the consumer trap and prioritize your freedom and flourish in a happier, healthier life.*

The hostess called my name, and I stuffed my phone away. I signed the receipt for the eighteen-dollar lunch, plus tip, and headed out. The kids had run out of coins and were now pounding the fish tank and licking the glass.

#

I wasn't irresponsible with money. Plenty of my friends spent more than me. I had leased the same car for years even though it didn't have self-parking. Still, I was intrigued by this coffee math. I spent the rest of the day tabbing between work spreadsheets and articles on early retirement. The more I read about "Financial Independence Retire

Early" the more excited I got. This F.I.R.E. movement was happening all over the country, right under the noses of spend-happy muggles who blindly handed over their hard-earned paychecks in exchange for car payments, TV subscriptions, and sushi. It was simple math, the financial bloggers wrote. It just takes discipline.

I stayed after work when everyone else had gone home, thinking about what luxuries I could live without. Brew my own coffee—shaves off months of work. Cancel the gym membership I never use—bam, years gone. Cut our cable—freedom is just around the corner.

I drove home, nodding my head to a budgeting podcast as if it were a Beatles song.

Avoid debt, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Spend less than you earn, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Invest the difference, yeah, yeah, yeah, YEAAHHH!

The man who pulled into my driveway was a different person. The circuitry in my brain had been rewired to this new world of frugality. My life would never be the same.

Marina was more skeptical.

#

"You're biking to work? Isn't that dangerous?"

"It's nine miles to my office, and it takes me almost an hour to get there. Think of the time I'll save in addition to the money. Plus, it's healthier. It's a win-win-win."

"You don't even have a bike."

"I'll get one. And a helmet too."

"You're buying a bike? I thought this is all about saving money?"

"It's an investment. Plus, I'll have plenty of money after I sell my car."

"You're selling your car."

"Come on, hon. I need you on board with this. Don't you want to get out of the rat race? If we stick to this plan, we can retire in twenty years and never have to work again. It's simple math!"

Marina exhaled and looked over the chart I'd printed. If we managed a savings rate of twenty-five percent, factoring in our current income minus what we both owed on our cars and student loans, we could retire in sixteen years. (Assuming an eight percent annual return on investment.) I planned on saving over twenty-five percent and retiring even sooner, but I didn't tell Marina. It was important to ease her in. They say one of the biggest hurdles to financial independence is a reluctant spouse.

Marina frowned. "No more coffee?"

"It's about aligning our spending with our priorities so we're not wasting our money on things that aren't important." I flipped over the chart and handed her a pen. "So let's figure out what really matters. Make a list of the top ten things that make you happy."

"What about you?"

"I already made my list."

Marina sighed and drew a "1" at the top of the paper. Our previous money talk had been over wedding planning and those negotiations had ended with tears, overpriced invitations, an iPod DJ, and an hour's worth of shaky-cam footage courtesy of her nephew. We'd avoided money talks ever since. But as Marina's list grew, a change came over her. Her eyes lit up, and I saw my frugal vision burrowing into her brain. I imagined what a life without work would be like. When we had the freedom (my #1) to sleep in and enjoy the day. To play music (my #7). To cook meals together (my #5).

Marina set down her pen, a smile forming on the sides of her mouth.

"Kay," I said. "What do you got?"

She read the list. Number one in all uppercase: FAMILY. I nodded, thinking about where that had fallen on my list and deciding not to mention the oversight.

She finished reading her list and set her sheet down.

"We have a lot of overlap," I said. "That's good."

"I'm not excited about budgeting," she said, straightening the edge of her paper. "But if it helps us afford a family, then I'll do it."

"That's my girl."

We celebrated our new plan with "frugal bowls" (brown rice, black beans, and salsa) I'd whipped up for the occasion. She said it really wasn't so bad. We had leftovers for three days.

#

It's not that I don't want kids. I enjoy wrestling with my nephews on the living room floor after Thanksgiving dinner, getting them in scissor locks, and tickling them until they wet themselves. But I can't wrestle all day. And with your own kids, you can't skip out without explaining why their pants are wet.

Marina and I planned on having kids one day, we just weren't at that stage yet. Besides, our personal situation made the process complicated. (Complicated = expensive.) We'd get around to children once we were financially stable. Once we could afford a bigger apartment and club sports and cello lessons.

#

With Marina on board, we tackled the budget as a team. I set out our monthly credit card statement and, armed with a highlighter, figured out which monthly expenses we could cut out. There were some no-brainers: packing a lunch instead of eating out, cutting cable for a streaming service, buying one of those prepaid phone plans used by drug dealers. The changes were easier than we imagined, and the difference started to show in our net worth. It was as if we'd patched the leak in our space ship and oxygen was no longer spilling out into space. Together we set a course to planet Freedom.

And the benefits were more than financial. I lost ten pounds not eating out and biking to work. Sure, I got dirty looks showing up to the office with pit stains and helmet hair. So I buzzed my head. (One thirty-dollar set of electric hair clippers = never pay for a haircut again!) Plus, my B.O. kept my boss Dennis away from my cubicle. Another win for frugality!

Marina had a harder time adjusting to our new lifestyle. While I was ready to sell our TV and start making my own laundry detergent, she still had her splurges. An Amazon package would arrive, and I'd have to take out the budget (which we referred to as our *Freedom Plan*) and her top ten list to get her back on the wagon. She'd eventually relent and return the new coat or boots. And I was patient. I didn't remind her that winter gear wasn't necessary in Santa

Monica. And if I could brave getting run over by semi-trucks every day, she could make do with the shoes she had. I rubbed her shoulders and said, "Remember what we're saving for." And, "What do you think of the name Remi?"

"I like Remi," she said, boxing up the boots. "For a girl."

#

Six months into our new lifestyle, we'd saved thirty-eight thousand dollars which was growing in low fee, broad market index funds. I couldn't help but think how much faster we could retire if we saved sixty percent of our take-home-pay. Seventy-five. We could be out of the rat race in seven years and never have to work again. Wasn't that worth a little sacrifice?

I started evaluating everything in terms of how much time it set us back from Financial Independence. Every Taco Tuesday with friends was another day of work. Worse if you factored in opportunity cost. If invested, that money would have shaved off four days of work. Nearly a week of my life thrown away so that I could sip warm margaritas and listen to Dan complain about his kid's potty training.

Tickets to Idaho for holidays with the in-laws was another few weeks of work. Christmas presents for our horde of nieces and nephews, a month. On the flip side, if I learned how to change the oil in Marina's car and do my own taxes, our freedom was just around the corner.

This is the magic of compound interest!

#

In month eight, I brought up the idea of moving.

#

"It's called Geographic Arbitrage. California is not ideal for the F.I.R.E. lifestyle."

"But we love it here. All our friends are here."

"Our friends have not been very supportive."

"That's because we never see them anymore. Jen and Rosa stopped inviting me to brunch because I kept making excuses. We don't do anything anymore."

"Which is why it doesn't make sense to stay in Southern California. Do you know how much we can save living in Kalamazoo?"

"Where?"

"Idaho, even. We'd be close to your parents. That's the priority, right?" (Family = her #1.)

"What would we do for work?"

"We'll find something. Heck, if we lived with your parents, we probably wouldn't even have to work."

"I'm thirty-three. I'm not moving back in with my parents."

"Just a thought. Just a thought."

"What about baby stuff? How long until we can start the process?"

I frowned and did the calculations in my head. "We're moving in the right direction. We can probably start looking into it soon. Agencies and surrogates are expensive, but if we stick to the budget..."

"We need to do it before I get too old. Success rates drop after thirty-five."

I took her hand. My index finger fondled the diamond engagement ring that had set our freedom back two years ten months.

"We'll get there, hon. We just have to stick to the plan. Keep saving. I promise it'll be worth it in the end."

#

Tests, procedures, surrogate payment and stipend, legal fees, hospital fees—and the costs don't stop there. That's just to get to zero. Then it's diapers, formula (sorry, no free breast milk here), baby food, overpriced stroller, even more overpriced jogging stroller, crib, bed, clothes, toys, sports, braces, prom, college, and on and on. The price tag on a child is astronomical. Is it really worth the expense?

I'm not selfish. I just enjoy my freedom. I like peace and quiet and a full night's sleep. With a kid, you're paying for the privilege of diapers and tantrums for the next twenty-plus years. I'm not trying to be heartless, but if we were being objective, a baby would fall at the top of the liability column.

"Aren't you afraid of missing out on life?" Marina asked the night it finally came to a boil. "Aren't you going to re-

gret it when it's too late and I'm gone and you're spending Christmas all alone?"

I pointed out that I wouldn't be "spending" anything.

She cried.

#

Dusk settled over the blue mountains. I stomped my boots on the mat and carried the bucket of apples inside our tiny home. The place tips with every step. That's a small price to pay for one hundred and twenty square feet of sleek cost-cutting efficiency. I had it custom-made for \$32,750. It sits on a wild three-acre patch of land in Spirit Lake, Idaho. It's ours, free and clear. Just like our lives.

I set the bucket of apples below the counter that serves as our kitchen/home office. I cleared away the onion husks from the day's meal prep. Sixty frugal bowls filled every inch of our two freezers. One day of cooking provided dinners for an entire month. Tonight, I thought I'd spice it up with some baked cinnamon apples for dessert. A surprise treat for Marina to celebrate reaching our goal. With today's stock market jump, our net worth passed twenty-five times our living expenses. We're officially F.I.

I rinsed the apples and sliced them into wedges. The cores I threw in the empty bucket with the onion skins to take out to the compost pile. I smiled as I worked. Though I'd spent the day in the kitchen preparing the sixty frugal bowls, it felt good to do something special for Marina. To show her all our sacrifices had been worth it.

As I waited for the pressure to build in the Instant Pot, I ran a hand through my beard and thought back to the beginning of our journey. I thought of the man who used to spend twenty dollars on one lunch. Who would drive a car he couldn't afford to a job he hated so that he could buy stuff he didn't need.

Just because we've reached F.I. doesn't mean we won't make money again. I'm writing this blog not only to share our story with those who want to join the *Frugal Path to Freedom* but as a retirement side hustle that will help pay for extra expenses. Like building a real coop so the chickens stop escaping through the netting of the salvaged trampoline. Plus, Marina keeps talking about buying an actual washing machine, though where she intends to put it I have no idea.

I was clearing off the counter when I noticed Marina's purse. I didn't mean to snoop, but there's literally no room

to hide anything from each other in this house. When I saw what was inside, my stomach twisted like a punt to the nuts. I couldn't believe my eyes. I had to look twice. But the evidence was there, hidden in a zippered compartment of her purse along with stamps and a dollar eighty-six in coins. A lottery ticket.

My intention was never to start a fight. I wasn't "ambushing" her like she claimed or conducting some "sick intervention." I merely wanted to have an open communication about the betrayal. That's why I taped the lottery ticket to the fridge with a note that said, *WE NEED TO TALK*.

But when Marina came in from weeding and saw the note, she started to explode.

"You act like I committed adultery." She threw her dirty gloves in the nook/music room.

I sat on the couch/guest bedroom with my arms folded. "You may as well have."

"It was a two dollar lottery ticket."

"The money isn't the point. It was the fact that you snuck behind my back and broke our covenant."

"Like you don't buy stuff? How about the two hundred and fifty dollars you spent on the CO2 tank? The parts are still sitting outside."

"That's an investment. We'll be able to make our own sparkling water as soon as I figure out how to build it."

"Well, maybe my lottery ticket is an investment too."

"Don't say that. You know the math."

"I don't care about the math. I want to dream for a couple of hours on my way home to this...outhouse in the woods!" She shook her fists and the tiny house shook with them. "What was the point of all this? Huh? We have apple trees and homemade dresses and...*frickin chickens*, but we don't have a family!"

"We've talked about this, Marina. You know the costs of bringing a child into the world with our situation. And there's no guarantee it'll even work."

"I—don't—care. I—want—a baby!"

"I'm sorry, but it doesn't make financial sense. Not to mention the environmental footprint, the resource consumption of adding another human to this planet is frankly irresponsible."

Marina lowered her hands. When she spoke, it was in a soft voice that was somehow worse than yelling. "You promised when we started this, that all the sacrifices would be worth it when we had a baby."

"I'm sorry. I love my life. I don't want to do anything that would change it."

She stood in the kitchen/office, staring as if she couldn't recognize me.

"I cut my own hair for you. I sleep in thermal underwear. I eat rice and beans again and again, and for what?"

I took her hand and sighed. The smell of cinnamon filled our tiny home. "Marina. I don't want to fight, but I need you to tell me the truth. Is this the first lottery ticket you've bought?"

Marina grabbed her coat and stormed out. The door slammed so hard a picture fell off our dresser/bookcase/nightstand. I came outside to the car tearing down the dirt drive and the chickens rolling around the trampoline, clucking their heads off.

My first thought wasn't about losing her. It wasn't whether she was gone for good this time or if I would spend my retirement alone in the backwoods of Idaho. My first thought was about the month's worth of frugal bowls sitting in the freezers. Now two months' worth.

Pictures of the Woman I Love

Carson Lane Campman

FADE IN

INT. BEDROOM—NIGHT

ROGER (60) and MARIE (60) shuffle tiredly to the large bed in the center of the pristine, tastefully decorated room. Roger, a balding, gruff-looking man, lugs two black suitcases behind him. Marie floats quietly past him, a look of emptiness on her delicate face.

Marie pulls the silk throw pillows off of the bed as Roger thrusts one suitcase onto the comforter with a grunt. He unzips and opens it, pausing, staring inside.

He sighs, disappointed.

ROGER

You grabbed the wrong one.

MARIE

What?

ROGER

The suitcase, Marie. This isn't my suitcase.

Marie rubs her eyes and walks over to it, looking inside.

MARIE

Oh, no. I'm sorry, dear.

Roger tosses his hands into the air, frustrated.

ROGER

Now I have to call the airline.

MARIE

I'll call them in the morning.

Roger falls onto the bed in a huff.

ROGER

Just what I needed.

MARIE

I said I'm sorry, dear. We'll exchange the suitcases tomorrow.

Marie observes the contents of the suitcase as Roger presses his face into his hands.

ROGER

First, it rains the entire trip, then the flight gets delayed, and now I'm stuck with a case full of someone else's shit.
Wonderful.

Marie looks up at him, examining his covered face with sadness. He lowers his hands, noticing her gaze.

ROGER

What?

MARIE

When did you become such a bitter man?

Roger shrugs.

ROGER

When I finally realized how annoying everything is.

Marie turns her attention back to the suitcase.

MARIE

This isn't shit.

ROGER

Then what is it?

MARIE

I don't know yet, but you can't assume something is shit before you know what it is.

Marie moves her hand gently through the contents of the suitcase. Roger looks inside, seeing dozens of metal FILM CANISTERS, multiple stacks of ENVELOPES, and a transparent, red SCARF.

Marie lifts a film canister, reading the handwritten scribbles on the side of it.

MARIE

My love, 1950.

She lifts another one, reading it.

MARIE

My love, 1958.

Another.

MARIE

The woman I love, 1965.

Roger picks one up, beginning to fumble with the lid. Marie grabs it from him, gasping.

MARIE

No!

ROGER

(startled)

Jesus! What?

Marie checks that the lid is still sealed.

MARIE

These are undeveloped. If light gets inside, the images are all ruined.

Roger looks around, annoyed.

ROGER

Who cares?

Marie gestures at the inside of the suitcase.

MARIE

They do!

ROGER

It's not a big deal, Marie.

Roger sighs, looking back into the suitcase. He takes the scarf out, running it over his hands.

MARIE

Nothing ever is.

ROGER

What's that supposed to mean?

MARIE

Nothing.

Marie puts the film canisters back into the suitcase and picks up one of the envelopes. "TO MY LOVE," written in ink, stares back at her from the time-stained paper.

MARIE

Love letters.

Roger stops playing with the scarf and observes the envelope in her hands with barely any interest.

ROGER

(irritated)

Can we go to bed, please?

She runs her finger gently over the torn top of the envelope, looking at the letter inside. She places it delicately back into the suitcase with a look of longing.

ROGER

What?

She sighs and walks into the adjoined bathroom.

ROGER

You aren't gonna read it?

He takes the envelope out of the suitcase and pulls the letter from it roughly.

ROGER

You care so much about this shit and you aren't even gonna read it?

He looks at the open bathroom door. No response from Marie.

Roger whips the letter from the envelope and clears his throat, speaking loudly towards the bathroom.

ROGER

(reading)

To the woman I love: I miss you so much. I miss taking photographs of you as you laugh. I miss your laugh. I miss making you laugh.

Roger's harsh tone softens as he reads.

ROGER

(reading)

I count the days until I can be with you again, hold you again, see your pretty face again.

Roger's voice quiets slightly as he now reads the letter aloud to himself.

ROGER

(reading)

I miss the way I feel with you, like the entire world is wearing a big, friendly grin.

Roger pauses, taking a breath.

ROGER

(reading)

I cannot wait to come home. Not to our house, but to you...I love you, always and everywhere.

Roger lowers the letter, glancing up at the bathroom doorway. Marie stands there in her nightgown with teary eyes. Roger exhales slowly, staring at her.

After a moment, she walks over to the vanity beside the bed, sitting in front of the mirror.

He drops the letter back into the suitcase.

ROGER

Quite sappy, isn't it?

Marie stares at herself in the mirror, rubbing cream onto her cheeks.

MARIE

It's not sappy.

ROGER

Then what is it?

MARIE

(flatly)

The kind of marriage I wish I had.

Roger looks at her, surprised. She glares at his reflection in the mirror.

Marie looks back into her own eyes and finishes rubbing her skin. She gets up and turns the light off, leaving them in the glow of the moonlight that streams in through the windows.

Roger sits on the bed in stunned silence as Marie climbs under the covers, lying down with her back turned to him.

Roger slowly stands up and closes the suitcase, zipping it up. He places it gently on the floor.

Marie lies frozen, her eyes pressed shut.

Roger strips down to his underwear, then climbs into the bed beside her. He lies facing the ceiling, staring at it blankly.

He turns to look at the back of his wife's head, her silver hair falling over the pillow. Her shoulder rises and falls as she takes a deep breath.

ROGER

You know that I love you, Marie.

You know I feel those things about you, too.

MARIE

Then why don't you tell me?

Roger thinks, looking back up at the ceiling.

ROGER

It's just so obvious to me. I don't think to say it.

They lie in silence for a moment. He looks at her again.

ROGER

I'd write a thousand love letters just to spend one minute in the same room as you. There aren't enough cameras in the world to take as many pictures of you as I'd like. I'd rather go deaf than never hear you laugh again.

He turns towards her, resting his hand on her shoulder.

ROGER

You are the woman I love, Marie. I'd shout it to the world.

Marie slowly places her hand on top of his. He squeezes it.

Roger suddenly gets out of bed and goes to the window, opening it. Marie watches as he leans out the window.

ROGER

(shouting)

Hey! I love this woman!

A distant MAN'S VOICE shouts back.

MAN'S VOICE

Shut the hell up!

Marie bursts into laughter. Roger looks back at her, proud of himself. They smile at each other as Marie sighs.

MARIE

I love you, too.

Blissful Ignorance

Andrew La



The Circumstances in Which Poor Communication Ruined Your Family Dinner

Christopher Bangasser

I never drank wine before I met you. Tap water, actually. Drank a lot of tap water. Beer always tastes like a Vegas transient's piss and my mom never let me drink soda growing up. So instead, my room was constantly littered with ceramic Christmas mugs of tap water that gathered dust around the rim when I never finished that last sip. At that point, it's ninety percent saliva anyways. But wine. You poured me a white at Franny's party that one summer. You asked if I liked it and I said it was something new to me.

That was cool.

Now I pull the hand brake but the car stays on. The clock on the dash shines back at me. 8:49 PM. The stereo itself remains silent, which is probably for the best since you never actually took your mixtapes out. Instead, the soft hum of the engine tries its best to calm my nerves. Spinning fan belts riff off the rhythm of the eager pistons to orchestrate some sort of automotive white noise. But it's not enough. My hands return to the steering wheel as I stare mindlessly into a clouded windshield. I let my headrest on the cracks of my knuckles. My fingers slide through the curls of my hair in a desperate attempt to soothe the thousand shrill screams bludgeoning my brain further into the brink of isolation. My efforts are in vain as I'm only met with loose strands of thinning hair and a dry blizzard of flaking skin cells piling beneath my untrimmed fingernails. My ring finger on my right hand is stained with a single tiny streak of blood from what now stands as a testament to the casual deterioration of my body.

From what I can tell from your parents' driveway, the three of you are wearing turtlenecks to a forced dinner. Look at me. Come on, little fucker, look at me. Just turn your head to the right. Look out the window. Just look. Seriously, Mike and Cheryl ask you to visit like once a week. Not that much could have possibly changed at the country club since last Tuesday. Besides, it wasn't like you ever gave a shit about what they had to say anyway. They would always badger you with the same old garbage questions. You remember the routine? Be a little more patient, you'd

say. Maybe you'll get married down the road, maybe kids down the road, maybe this, maybe that. You know, they weren't so quick with the begging once I came through the door holding your hand. And frankly, Cheryl could use a curveball her way. Lord knows the trophy wives on the squash court could use fresh gossip to feast on with their fresh lip injections. Mistresses are old news, girls. They might as well be family now anyways.

Whatever. I can't keep waiting around for you anymore. And you can't keep me in the dark. The car door slams as I stumble across the driveway. Yeah, that definitely caught your attention. I know that murmuring in the dining room, maybe I'll forget it one day. First the deeper, softer tone proceeding with caution. Each hum slowly trailing after the other. The drone of middle-aged vocal chords is careful with each gentle bellow. Then there's the sort of frantic yipping. Shrill as the house rat that manages to curse the names of its captors before succumbing to its trap. Ascending into a hellish crescendo, reaching a frequency only dogs should hear. The same conversation every time. Why didn't you tell us he was gonna be here? The doorstep is so far away. I hear it all for too long of a walk. The hollow echoes of each footstep on the frozen pavement interrupt my eavesdropping but it's never for long enough. Their murmurs mature into perfect diction upon reaching the door. Before I can let myself in, I'm met with a cozy rush of warm air and that stupid turtleneck.

"Isaac," you say.

"Let me in. I'm real sorry to interrupt—"

"Isaac—"

"No, really," I say, now stepping on the threshold. "I hate to get between a man and his dinner, whatcha cook—"

"Isaac, stop—"

"Mmm, hadn't had a decent pot roast in a hot second. Probably pairs well with a merlot, huh, Cheri? Right? That's a thing, I think."

"Isaac." The door now shutting on my shoulder.

I step back. Little blond bastard.

"Isaac—"

"Will you stop with that?" I say. "Just stop. Stop saying my name. Stop looking at me like that, huh? Shit."

"Then let me talk, alright?"

Your voice doesn't tremble when you're pissed. Still jealous of that. With your left hand, your fingers pinch the bridge of your nose. Your right rests on your hip. Your jaw hangs open only for a second, the bends of your lips in search of anything to say. Instead, the floral aroma of a fermented red blend slides carefully from your tongue, gently skimming the tip of my running nose.

"Look, you need to leave right now," you eventually let out.

"I'm not go—"

"You ever gonna let me talk, shit!" You step out, the door shutting quickly behind you. "Dammit, I can't ever get a damn word out without you wrecking my damn train of thought!"

With your hands to your head, you look up. You're avoiding eye contact. Coward. Look at me. If you're gonna talk to me like that now, might as well! Shit, just look at me.

Please just look at me.

Please.

"You never responded to me," I finally say.

"I know."

"You said it. You said you wanted to keep going. You said—"

"No no no no no," you say with a step closer to me. "I don't know what you told yourself or what made you think we were still gonna stick this out."

"You said maybe we could..." I'm careful with each word. I know I'm not wrong. "Maybe down the road...I dunno, it sounded like it was...I thought it was maybe still possible. You said I was sweet and I was nice and cool and any guy would be lucky to have me—"

You laugh to yourself. Fucker, don't laugh. It's that stupid frustrated chuckle. A scoff, really.

"Stop it, you can't be serious right now," I say. "So what, you can buy me dinner and hold my hand and read to me and act like that's a big fucking deal and then decide, nah, I'm done forever? That's not how this is supposed to

work. We can still be friends at the very least."

"No. No, we can't."

"Maybe you can't but—"

"No, Isaac. We can't," you say with your voice echoing briefly against the plywood panels of the porch. "How many 'friends' do you know that force their way into your parents' house in the middle of the night? You keep those ones real close to you? Huh?"

"But you said it! Lucky," I say as my breath runs shorter and shorter. "You said any guy would be lucky—"

"Well, how the hell am I supposed to respond to a text from a grown-ass adult thanking me for being so 'kind-hearted' when I dumped him? Who does tha—shit, who the hell does that?"

"I just—I dunno, I just wanted you to know—"

"Me? No, it was for you, not me. You wanted me to say that. You wanted me to give you even more attention even after the fact. And I was stupid enough to give it to you. And you know what? That's why I haven't responded to your damn texts since. That's how this works. Things run their course. If I was a first for you, that's on you. Not me."

The two of us stand in silence. Either the winter breeze or growing frustration starts to bring out the color in your cheeks. The curves of which hide what was once my favorite set of dimples I haven't had the pleasure of seeing in weeks. To think I once stood so close to those hazel eyes and got to see them wrinkle with every smile. You had mentioned you never got braces as a kid and, while that was apparent, that only added to your charm. I needed you. I needed to see you smile, I needed to know I could make you smile. But I was never a necessity for you, was I? Why can't you want me? I put myself out there, don't I deserve it?

I stand before a beautiful soul so confident in his disgust for me. With no more than a quick glance, you turn your back to me and walk towards the door.

I know I deserve it.

"But we'll always have the memories, right?"

You keep walking.

My toes were the first to go numb through the night but that was before I even left the car. The rest of me soon followed with the click shut of the front door. The porchlight goes out. The blinds shut. My clenched fists and I stand on the porch with only a sun-bleached wicker chair and each other for company. Only now do I notice the gentle ringing of the tacky windchime dangling aimlessly near the rain gutter. Pieces of sea glass and steel rods play us out, eager to sing in solitude again. Can't relate. Turning back into the high beams that are probably killing my battery at this point, I take my first blind step forward. Until my eyes adjust, I clip my foot on what might have been a flower pot or maybe some garden gnome. Not like your mom had much of a green thumb anyways.

You probably heard me stumble. Damn, I hope you're still by the door. Your back pressed against the wood as you slide to the floor. No, I hope your legs fall asleep from sitting so damn long. Better, I hope the rivets on your designer jeans scuff the hardwood. I hope that when you get sore from staring at the ceiling, you'll rub your neck and remember the brush of my chapped lips. Your delicate fingertips will explore every curve and trace every muscle from your jaw to your collarbone, desperately hoping to find at least one spot where I had yet to kiss you for the first time. And when you find that spot, it will sting. It will sting and you will try to ignore it but the incessant bite of a thousand needles will continue to sink into your skin without the slightest bit of mercy. And you'll shred through your own flesh like a rabid mutt just to rid yourself of the pain of never having those blessed lips grace your neck again.

'Cause that's what I did.

I reach the driver's side of my car while my eyes slowly adjust to the night sky again. My breath is now turning to steam. You really thought the last thing you gave me was a cold shoulder but you clearly didn't remember that cabernet you snagged for me from Franny's. I'm sure your dad could go on for hours about how christening is typically a maritime tradition but I'd like to think that this particular occasion called for your Tesla rather than a dumb boat. For the sake of trying something new.

Birthday at Akbar

Carrie Chen



Insectoid

Erik Huerta

All people feel things that aren't there, a tickle, a touch, a light vibration that makes you wonder if your phone is ringing. Most people rightly ignore these sensations but others cannot. When Michael noticed them for the first time it was not by sight; it began as a feeling. He was working at his desk late at night—a project he can no longer remember—when he first felt it. It was like the tip of a finger lightly caressing the space above his neck in a spot about the size of a centimeter. It wasn't a tremor or a light breeze. The contact felt so dense yet ethereal that he gave an honest reaction and nearly fell from his chair. There was nothing he could see, so he assumed it was one of life's small mysteries—something he might mention to a date that was going badly just to seem more memorable and probably forget about afterward. But then it happened again as he was chopping vegetables when the small of his back was subject to the feeling, and he nearly cut a finger as he cringed. Then again as he was walking down the stairs, which nearly made him fall. Then again, and again—resulting in more minor inconveniences which made him a nervous wreck. What if it happened when he was driving and he swerved into traffic, what if he was waiting for a train and the sensation made him fall on the rails, what if it never stops?

Then one day, he swore he saw it. It was in his peripheral but it was there; it had to be. The small black body of a bug, maybe a beetle or a roach, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that he saw it. He purchased special shampoos, consulted a doctor, made sure to keep his clothes in spaces where no insect could get to them, but that's the thing about insects; they can get anywhere. With their appearance, the feeling had changed now as well—sharper and more aggressive. Taunting pinpricks over parts of his body he couldn't see despite his incessant checking. Never having gotten a clear look at them, his imagination ran wild with how they could possibly look. Thoughts of an espresso-black laquer over dense chitin, segmented exoskeletons, and jagged-edged mandibles plagued his thoughts. The paranoia affected him so much he was perpetually cleaning his cubicle and checking for the vermin. He was fired for this. He was never able to finish his work.

Now fired, he was forced to live with this affliction in solidarity. His apartment became a prison—a breeding

ground with hidden crevices for the things to lay in wait. Out of fear, he sold everything and threw what couldn't away. But even in a bare room, he could feel them there, writhing in hidden swarms around the edges of his vision, colonies forming behind his back only to disappear when he turned. If only he could see all things at all times. If only he could carve out a still working eye from his skull and place it over his shoulder to ensure that he was indeed free from this infestation. After several weeks of quiet desperation and suffering, he attempted a solution. Michael purchased several tall mirrors and placed them in a full circle around his person. With this, he could see all around him, and, for just a moment, he found peace. He was alone. But then a terrible thought came to him, what if he wasn't truly alone. They were still out there surely, laying in wait in dark places in the shadows beyond his vision waiting. With this thought, he felt the pinpricks again and frantically looked at the mirror but knew he would see nothing. They weren't on the surface of the skin anymore. He could barely make them out, faint impressions of something writhing under his skin, the feeling of tiny dull spears attempting to perforate the outermost layer of skin as their very movement tore the flesh inside. They were here with him and they were waiting too. As he scratched at his limbs and began to smell blood-wet iron he found nothing. But it didn't matter, they were there, even if they may not be here in front of him, in his direct vision, he knew they were just beyond the mirrored glass—waiting, and growing, lusting after him. Claws and wings at the ready, mandibles gnashing in bitter impatience. The same panic began to set in because he realized he would never truly be free of them. He was never truly alone. A mirrored panel began to move out of place, yet he was still met with a dark reflection.

Today I Could Only Find a Small Lizard

Carrie Newell

Lizards in the sun bake
browned to perfection
the gourmet chameleon.
I break through the epidermis, hard skin
and soft.
I pull back the jaw
breaking the bones of the skull.
Inside the meat is revealed.
Slimy wet
the piece that once sent signals
to the rest of the now sun-dried
lizard.
I poke in the brain,
smaller than the end
of my thumb.
Today I could only find a small lizard.
but I like big lizards.
The ones where you know the area to
poke to move the left leg.
I probe for a moment

finding the sweet spots.
Twiddling his lizard toes
shaking his lizard arms,
I lick my fingers,
The mucus is sweet
and warm and putrid.
I dig my fingers beneath
the brain, dislodging it
from its home. I
sever the spinal cord
and in one fell swoop
put it in my mouth.

Oh brain of glory—sun glory,
—sun-dried glory.
I taste his life
the hot days the sand
the cool night
and days without water.
Finally I lick my fingers again,
pulling the last bits of him into me.
Swallowing his thoughts
his ego, his solitude.

I leave the corpse there
to harden and decay in the sun.
Leave it for a bird
or another lizard to
scrape a meal from.
I've had my fill.

Jurassic Park

Francis Santos



Gucci and Dirt

Carrie Newell

“Ugh, this is ridiculous,” she thought. Her fingers were numb, the point of exhaustion had come and gone long ago. She looked up at the mountain looming overhead and wondered again how she had gotten herself into this. The path was long and winding. She wanted a challenge. She had asked for a challenge. This was not what she had in mind. “This is totes not me,” she thought, wiping the dirt from her gloved hands onto her Lulu lemon tech gear.

“Ugh,” she cried out before she realized it. “Why is everything so dirty up here?”

Her guide, Azim, a shrewd man with kind eyes and an outdoorsy vibe, carried her Gucci pack along with his own, much more durable, burlap bag. He looked behind him at the road. Yes, the road. It was less than a mile in the other direction. He wondered to himself, not for the first time today, what in the hell he was doing here. Donut Falls is a family-friendly hike. Five-year-olds do it *routinely*. Mothers and fathers load up baby bjorns and stroll, not trek, up the trail to see the water cascade through the doughnut-shaped rock formation. The more daring teens climb up over the falls and struggle up the wet, loose shale rock to the lookout above, then slide back down on their asses. It could be dangerous, but you’re far more likely to stain your jeans with jet-black dirt than to break your leg.

“Ok, Azim—LET’S GO,” she over-enunciated the last words. Her craigslist ad requested an authentic Sherpa, and, when she assumed he couldn’t speak English, it just seemed easier. It didn’t seem like the conversation would be worth writing home about anyway—though he was home. He was born and raised in Utah. Far from a Sherpa, though he was brown, he felt a little bit guilty taking her money. “Ew, where is the hand sanitizer? SAN-I-TI-ZER?” Well, maybe not. Technically, she wanted a guide, and he could definitely get her to the top of this trail and back. He smiled and grabbed the Dior sanitizer. “Money is money,” he thought, but he wasn’t completely sure it was. He gestured to the trail allowing Kimberly to go first. She seemed to want to forge the way on this sojourn.

“I don’t even know why I’m here,” she said. “It’s not like I have anything to prove. I’m fine. I’m just fine.” Kimberly, not Kim, never Kim, turned back to the trail. Her Sherpa thought she was ridiculous. After posting her Craigslist ad,

he had asked what mountain they were going to climb. He wanted to be "certain he had the correct gear packed." Looking at him now, she wondered if maybe she was being taken. He was old, at least fifty-five! How in the world would he have climbed those higher mountains? And he wasn't wearing a sheepskin anything. But maybe she was being judgy, Sherpas always look about nine-hundred in pics, so his fifty-five could be thirty. And, maybe, when he snuck into America he stopped wearing sheepskin. Not everything online is real. She had wanted to offer him sunscreen when they arrived, but it seemed a little late for that. Meanwhile, she triple applied. Just looking at him sucked the moisture from her dewy skin.

She began hiking again. Azim walked ever so slightly behind her. The new Isabel Marant boot dug into her foot. A group of four kids ran past, one in a pair of flip flops, and she cursed herself. The sneakers would have been enough. She didn't need to spend six hundred dollars on the "best hiking boots" Instagram had to offer. Also, note-to-self, fashion blogs are not the way to go when searching for anything called "gear." Though she had to admit, she looked amazing. She would definitely get rescued first if shit went down.

Bugs flew past. The mountain air was teeming with them. She swatted at her face and neck. Why anyone would intentionally do this sort of thing, she did not know. Nature crept and closed around her. Yes, it was beautiful, very nice, but it was just as beautiful from the deck at the lodge with a martini, probably more so.

Another group of kids darted past, and she stumbled trying to get out of the way. Azim caught her on her way down, "Are you okay?" He asked in perfect English, and their eyes caught. Her face flushed, "Why didn't you tell me you speak English?" she asked.

That morning he had picked her up in Park City. She'd flown in from LA specifically to do some mountaineering. The hellos had been stilted and awkward. When he looked her up and down, she was initially flattered. She was used to a certain level of attention, but when he motioned to the bag and raised an eyebrow, she realized it wasn't a compliment. It was a none-too-friendly critique of how prepared she was. He hadn't said a word, and she'd just started sputtering nonsense about how it was the only gear she had. The word "gear" felt foreign in her mouth and she just kept repeating it in different sentences until her brain was completely blank. His smile and lack of participation in the exchange led her to believe he didn't speak English. Now she was *that girl*. Shit.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't think you'd want your Sherpa to have great English."

"You're not a Sherpa are you?" She asked.

"I'm from Midvale." She stared blankly at him. "It's in Salt Lake," he offered.

Another family of seven, presumably Mormon, all dressed in much less fierce attire than Kimberly glanced her way. She wanted to snarl at them.

"I'm a joke," she said.

"Why are you here?"

"I googled 'fun Utah hikes' and Donut Falls came up."

"And why am I here?"

"I also looked up 'terrible deaths while hiking.'"

He stopped himself from rolling his eyes. If she wanted to waste five hundred dollars, he hardly seemed like the person who should stop her.

"You must have known what the trail was from your search."

"There are bugs and death basically everywhere," She said. He stared at her unconvinced. "I didn't look it up. I was told I couldn't do it," she whispered.

Kimberly had always been a rather carefree soul. She'd go where she wanted and do whatever she felt like doing. It just so happened that things involving dirt and exertion were far less appealing than things involving spas and alcohol. She could both throw and attend killer house parties, but she couldn't remember ever cleaning one up. This was mostly fine. In fact, it was mostly great until an ex pointed out her inability to function outside of a five-star resort. Far from the worst of their arguments, this one had been particularly impactful because Kimberly had been rather proud of how well she was "sucking it up" while they slummed it in their less than ideal Sundance accommodations. And, though she'd been through many breakups both before and since for some reason she couldn't shake the feeling that Cindy may have been right. So, Kimberly had done what any self-respecting human would do. She decided to do the hike that Cindy had said was so easy "Even you could do it, *Kim*," to prove her wrong. The use of "Kim" had been a special kind of unnecessary insult. Cindy only ever used it in the most condescending way and KIMBERLY knew that this was a jab meant to imply that should not and could not, in reality, do the hike.

"Do you like hiking?" Azim asked, rousing her from her thoughts.

"Does anyone?" she asked.

"Then what do you care?"

"This is supposed to be a moment of growth, or triumph, or whatever," she said.

"If you don't like hiking, then what does it matter? Whoever said you couldn't do it, clearly either doesn't know Donut Falls or is a dick."

Kimberly laughed, "Yeah. They were definitely a dick."

"Do you want to finish the hike?" he asked.

"No, but maybe you know a better one. Not necessarily harder, I just mean fewer kids, more of a view."

"I know just the one," he said.

She reached down and grabbed her pack from near his feet and slung it over her shoulder as they started back toward the car. He nearly offered to take it, but this didn't seem like the kind of thing she'd do without careful consideration.

"Maybe a very short hike, with cocktails," she said.

Azim paused. He felt the weight of his bag. This morning, when Kimberly had looked at his empty arms disappointedly, he had rummaged around in his trunk and, unknown to her, came up with a few bottles of booze meant for a house party later tonight and shoved them in his backpack. Loaded with his "gear," she instantly seemed more at ease.

"All that's in my bag is booze," he replied.

Why in the world was he saying any of this? He could literally walk away now, probably still make at least half the money, and call it a day. Two-fifty wasn't bad.

"You wino."

"I thought I might need it to get through," he said.

"I could totes use a drink. I haven't spent so long with normal people, probably, ever. Maybe there's something

that's hike-like, but definitely *not* a hike. Like a bar, that's outside. " she mused.

The conversation was definitely not something to write home about.

"We're going to a lookout. You walk ten feet from the car and sit on a picnic bench."

"Perfect!"

"Obvi," he said mockingly.

"I can't believe you didn't share your booze."

"I can't believe I'm still sober."

Gevorg's Day Off

Nairi Simonyan

When Gevorg awoke on the day modern civilization collapsed, all he could think about were doorbells. Specifically, the inventor of doorbells and whether he could find their home address online to leave an in-person review of their invention. As the bell tolled its disenchanting melody, Gevorg squeezed his eyes shut until he could see stars explode under his lids. He tried to push himself back into the warm embrace of sleep, where hazy technicolor dreams awaited him, but nevertheless, the doorbell persisted.

Gevorg groaned low in his throat as he blinked awake, picking away remnants of the night before like the crust that had formed in the corners of his eyes. His long, dark hair stuck to his cheeks with dried sweat and drool. Gevorg unceremoniously kicked off his damp sheets and hurtled himself out of the safe cocoon of his bed, murder on his mind and curses on his tongue. Whatever happened to the unspoken Armenian rule of calling before going to someone's house? Whatever happened to just leaving people alone on their goddamn day off? He had explicitly told his parents, his brothers, his sisters-in-law, his infant nieces and nephews, anyone within a five-mile radius, that he was to be left well enough alone this weekend.

The ringing turned into knocking.

Gevorg stumbled over mounds of dirty clothes and scattered empty water bottles, making his way across his tiny living space to the front door. As he threw it open, he prepared to sink the sharp teeth of irritation into whichever blood relative spit on the very concept of boundaries, only to realize that his family would never have rung the doorbell. They would have simply entered.

Gevorg blinked against the sun shining into his eyes and silhouetting the figure standing on his threshold.

"Can I help you?" he said, holding his hand up against the harsh light. *Shit, how long have I been asleep? Why is the sun so intense?* He could feel the sweat drying on his skin.

"Gevorg Martirosyan?" a strong, masculine voice came from the silhouette. Gevorg squinted in his attempts to

distinguish human from shadow. The figure stood tall, their hair buzzed short and their eyes hidden behind a pair of sunglasses. The sun shone brightly from behind them so the longer Gevorg stared to determine any features, the more their face became one huge sunspot. He looked away, blinking to clear his vision. Fabric flapped at the figure's side in the dry California wind. Gevorg became acutely aware that while this person standing before him was dressed in what looked like a suit, he was wearing boxer shorts that had seen better days and a faded Queen shirt that was torn at the collar. He smelled even riper under the sun.

Gevorg shifted on his bare feet. "What's this about?"

The figure reached into their inner jacket pocket and held out a crisp white envelope. "You've been Chosen."

Gevorg stared blankly at the stretch of pale skin in front of him holding the envelope. "Chosen?"

He looked back at the figure and blinked cartoonishly at the sight of their stooped back and tufts of thin, white hair at the top of their head. *Were they this old before...?* He tried to peer at them once more but the sunspot returned.

"You've been Chosen..." the figure repeated in a voice sapped of any youth.

"Yeah...you said that. But what—" he sighed, feeling feverish. His head was beginning to swim from the abruptness of his waking and the sun's merciless glare. "Listen, I think you've got the wrong house—"

"You've been Chosen! You have a week to undo what's been done! Failure to comply will result in the termination of life as you know it," the figure spoke with the saccharine sweet cadence of a customer service representative, their voice suddenly at a higher octave. Gevorg squinted again and found the figure's back was no longer stooped, their hair was no longer white but pulled back in a ponytail and they stood at a slightly shorter height than before. He could feel the blood rushing away from his head.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"As the Chosen One, it is your duty to answer the call and prevent the end of days!"

Gevorg was already shaking his head and backing away, the envelope still held in the person's long fingers. "I'm not interested—I'm sorry," he blurted before shutting his door abruptly. His heart began to pound as the silence on the other side of the door stretched on. After a few seconds, when he could feel his system begin to calm down, he

heard a slight rustling noise and looked down to see the white envelope slide under the crack of the door to rest on the floor between his feet. Gevorg jumped away as if encountering a roach.

“Man, these...these Bible-thumpers are gettin’ real creative with their pitch, huh?” he began to laugh. The absurdity of the situation began to wipe away the panic that had infiltrated his system, and he dragged a hand down his broad nose to his scraggly beard as if to center himself. He could feel the collective events of the morning—he assumed it still *was* morning—curdling in his stomach. His head still burned from the harsh glare of the sun and his eyes felt sensitive from blinking away the sunspots. *What was that?* The second he seemed to be sure of what the figure looked like, they changed the very next moment.

Gevorg shook his head to clear the pervading confusion entering his system. *Forget it, Gevorg, just forget it.* He had three days to do whatever he wanted, to sleep and eat and consume as much content as humanly possible before he had to go to work and start the funeral procession that is life all over again.

On the first day, a Friday, Gevorg gorged himself on junk food and chicken shawarma. He watched the *Lord of the Rings* series on his television from morning to night with the volume loud enough to be unsensible, the sounds of swords clashing and armies crying as they marched their way into battle masking any possible noise from outside his house. Somehow, through all this, he managed to slump over the sofa and return to that tender temptress called sleep. Headfirst into R.E.M., Gevorg began to dream.

In the dream, Gevorg was at a bus stop. Gevorg had never stood at a bus stop in his natural-born life. But there he stood, a red balloon firmly held in his fist as he sat next to an old man on a bench. The old man’s features were an indistinguishable mass of wrinkles but Gevorg largely ignored him. He needed to catch the bus. Gevorg checked the bus schedule posted by the bench and dragged his finger across the sign, but every weekday and week time said only three words: *You’ve Been Chosen.*

He felt dread circle the drain of his esophagus. He needed to catch the bus. He hoped it would never come. He hoped it would crash on the nearest intersection and cause a five-car pileup. Gevorg was so preoccupied with his warring desires that when a hand descended upon his shoulder, he jumped and shattered the glass ceiling of the bus stop with his head. He turned to look at the cause of his fright and found the old man heaving with whatever

strength he had left. He sputtered and wheezed until he turned a rich purple and just as he looked as if he were to collapse on top of Gevorg, the old man arched his back in a feline fashion and heaved with a thunderous sound like ripping paper. Instead of vomit, thick, ashy smoke the color of a dead man's tongue billowed out of his mouth and into Gevorg's face. Gevorg turned his face towards the sky to gasp in the fresh air, only to see the clouds on fire.

As Gevorg slept, a change began to creep into his neighborhood like a dust storm in the desert. At first, it was a slight tremor in the wind. Young leaves recoiled on the trees. Dust gathered on the windowsills. Cats howled in the light of the glaring sun and dogs arched their backs in the inky shadows along corners. Arguments blossomed behind open doors until each household on Gevorg's street seemed to ooze derision out into the wind, silencing crickets and weighing birds down. Plants seemed to forget how to breathe, leading to a drought CNN would soon announce as the worst in California history. And at midnight, while Gevorg was slumped on his sofa running from the elderly in the confines of his mind, a single gunshot was fired down the street. The envelope stayed by the doorstep.

On Saturday, Gevorg felt like the human embodiment of a drainpipe and bent his head over his toilet, a supplicant in prayer. He spent his afternoon—because that's when he woke up—scrolling through social media. He liked posts about dogs on rollerskates and ignored ones about sudden monsoons in Asia, increased police brutality and white supremacist riots in Washington, and terrible Muslim concentration camps in China. He shopped online for things he always wanted but would never buy and stayed huddled in his blankets for hours. His brow wrinkled at advertisements and messages with hyperlinks saying, "You've Been Chosen...for a \$100 Amazon Gift Card!" and he muttered his contempt for capitalism. He briefly debated shaving his head to escape the growing heat while Harry Potter boasted from his TV screen, "But I *am* the Chosen One."

The sun reached its zenith outside Gevorg's window, casting a heaviness only coma patients could get out of over the neighborhood. Neighbors began to topple face-first into the dry grass where they laid unmoving until someone found them a few hours later, their skin red and blistered. Cars driving down Gevorg's street veered off and slammed into nearby trees, mailboxes, and even houses because the driver was microwaved within their own vehicle and lost all consciousness. Gevorg similarly collapsed naked onto his living room floor and succumbed to the visions swimming under his eyelids. He dreamt of every tree on Earth falling down and no one standing around to hear

it. He dreamt of clouds that rained sparks and winds that lit matches. He dreamt of corpses on the ground with their bodies arranged to spell out "You've Been Chosen!" Of course, a severed hand was used in place of the apostrophe. Gruesome but at least grammatically correct.

Sunday brought smoke and George Michael. Gevorg exhausted his last supply of junk food and instead turned to the bottles of tequila in the cupboard. The combination of liquid courage and George Michael's "Too Funky" allowed him to sing unencumbered in his boxer shorts as sweat dripped down the ends of his hair and down his back. As the song transitioned to "Jungle Boogie" by Kool & The Gang, ash started to fall from the sky. Residents looked on with unwavering and dry eyes as the annual wildfires began but fear rippled through each house when the flames moved ever closer to their neighborhood. Wildfires were usually contained within the mountains and rolling hills but its reach this time was quick and far like a desert viper leaping from a dune. While his neighbors discussed evacuation procedures, Gevorg looked out the window and groaned, "This better be over by Monday, the traffic's going to be goddamn awful."

The sky turned the color of skin just beginning to bruise, blood rushing beneath the surface of the clouds. Phones vibrated with alerts to evacuate and people threw themselves into their cars with whatever they could carry, like pilgrims leaving the Old World behind. Shouts and the honking of horns erupted within the chaos as traffic became congested and drivers screamed at each other to make way. The firefighters' shouts of "You've all been chosen for evacuation!" didn't penetrate Gevorg's home. Someone knocked on Gevorg's door in their haste but by then he had already drunk himself into a stupor. He lay sprawled on the couch, absolutely dead to the world and the world dead to him. The envelope, now discolored from the smoke and dust that had crept in from underneath the door, still laid on the floor unopened.

On Monday, Gevorg woke up in the dark of early morning and began to clean. He got rid of all the evidence of the last three days. He washed away all the grime, tequila-infused sweat, and vomit aftertaste and dressed for work. Blinking blearily, he decided to forgo his morning coffee because of the blistering heat that still permeated the atmosphere. Sweat began to stain his underarms and the smell of smoke-dried his eyes, nose, and lips but he thought nothing of it—just a typical California day. He heard a slight rustling as he stood before his front door and looked

down to see the envelope laying piteously under his foot. Gevorg felt a moment's hesitation as he picked up the offending piece of paper and peered at his new footprint on its surface. It didn't look so menacing now that it had been trampled, rumpled, and forgotten. *Realistically, what would it say? It's just a crazy person's pamphlet. Psycho propaganda. A jury duty notice! That's it, just something everybody ignores. Something no one cares about. So why should I care?*

Gevorg opened the envelope with his thumb, ignoring how similar the sound of paper ripping was to a shriek. Taking out the letter inside, Gevorg frowned as he read:

Dear Mr. Martirosyan,

Our organization has long observed and interpreted the signs of the universe to predict which direction the scales will tip. Recently, our sources have noted that the end of days is approaching in three days. The apathy and willful ignorance displayed by the rest of the world has led to its impending destruction. Nothing can last forever, not even the Earth. Impermanence is permanence, Mr. Martirosyan. Therefore, our organization has taken it upon itself to seek out fellow heroes living amongst us, those who are chosen by the powers that be to lead humanity and save it from its own annihilation. Please report to our headquarters within the hour of accepting this message to receive the rest of your instructions. Make haste, Mr. Martirosyan, you are our only hope.

You've been chosen for a reason.

Gevorg threw the letter aside, his lungs sizzling as if he just ingested poison. *It's...it's nothing. It's bullshit!* Gevorg forced himself to laugh. *It couldn't possibly be anything else. How did they even get his name? And what kind of Doomsday-cult-bullshit-Scientology-shit is this?* Gevorg hurried out of his house to put as much distance between him and the letter as possible. He only got so far as his car before the coughing began. It started and didn't stop until he was bent over, dry heaving over the curb.

Why is the smoke so goddamn strong here? Is the 405 closed? He gasped for breath and cringed against the taste of char coating his throat. It was then, as he blinked at his shoes, that he realized there was a red light shin-

ing on him. Gevorg straightened and looked around his surroundings for the first time in three days and found his neighborhood silent as a mausoleum. Houses were burnt down or abandoned, their hinges creaking in a dry wind that seemed to fan the flames on the edges of each property. Trees had fallen onto the ground, cracking asphalt and sidewalks. Bodies laid on the lawns and spilled out of broken cars in awkward positions like a grotesque alphabet soup. An old man laid on his back next to Gevorg's car, his liver-spotted hands clutching his throat and his eyes bulging. A red balloon flew across the sky, gleeful in the absence of any trees to entrap it. The sun itself shone bloody and gruesome onto Gevorg's horrifying figure, filling the atmosphere with a pervading crimson light. Smoke the color of a dead man's tongue rolled all around him and when Gevorg bent over once more to vomit, his eyes latched onto his front door where he could see the opened envelope laying on the floor as clearly before his eyes as if the door was open.

And just beneath the ringing that had begun to penetrate his ears, Gevorg swore he could hear a sickly sweet voice say, *"You've been Chosen!"*

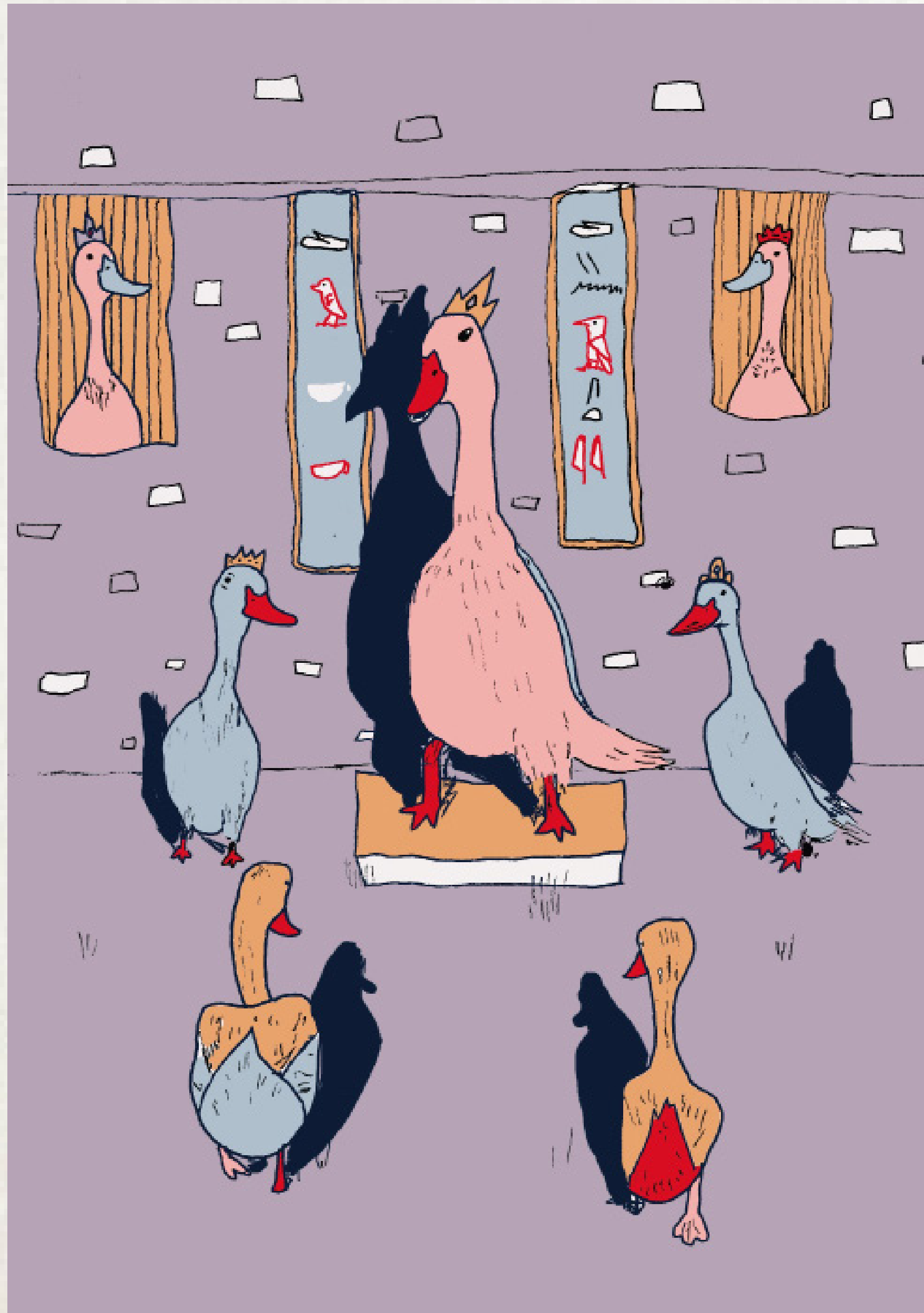
Bananas

Joshua Windolph

Bananas bananas a wonderful fruit
A wondrous joyous yellow flute
Lots of potassium trapped in a peel
An excellent snack no matter how you feel
Perfectly designed for you to eat
Mother nature's loving treat
Bananas bananas never forget
It's now a snack that's forged from sweat
Farmers take their mighty machines
Molding nature to rigid routines
Rows and rows of succulent fruit
Ready for us to put down our chute
Bananas bananas it's quite apparent
Human interference has become aberrant
Ecosystems destroyed for our pleasure
The world has oriented to our leisure
Concrete jungles, Mountains of glass
All that's left is patches of grass
Bananas bananas what can we do
The world is melting, turning to glue

Smokestacks rising, landfills spreading
Spinning nylon for our bedding
How have we become so lazy
Look the sky is getting hazy
Bananas bananas they'll get their revenge
Mothers and brothers, they will avenge
Poisons come with adaptations
All is well says our organizations
Potassium mixed with a little extra
Chemicals from a variety of spectra
Bananas bananas now they reign
Only perfect fruits remain
No more gods, no more rows
Nothing on earth that will impose
Once again, they're free to grow
All across a yellow plateau
Bananas bananas sit there silently
Nothing left to treat them violently
Nothing dies and nothing cries
There are no lows, there are no highs
Finally, **bananas** ascend to the throne
The controller of all but truly alone
Bananas bananas did not understand
The love and care of a gentle hand
Humanity served as a strict mother

Consumer and consumed need each other
No ever asked the question
If the rows were only but a suggestion
Bananas bananas a wonderful fruit
The perfect snack had become a brute
Reversed their love and reversed their strife
A world now theirs but devoid of life
Bananas bananas don't repeat
The ungodly crimes of this lovely treat



Duck Dynasty

Sierra Marshall

Of Eternal Night and Spider Wings

Natalie Van Gelder

When I was eight, I broke apart a black beetle with my fingers. The beetle's abdomen cracked in half revealing a long, white intestine. I didn't know insects had intestines; the idea that it shared something so similar to my own body made me want to know more.

Earlier that year, my class took a field trip to the Los Angeles Science Center and I held a tarantula. I was the only kid who held that tarantula—I'm not afraid of spiders. When you give something a name it becomes less scary; brown house spiders named Henry are allowed to go about their business. As I held the fuzzy tarantula in my hand, I leaned close and whispered, "Hello Henry," and let him go about his business all the way up the pink flannel sleeve that covered my left arm.

The beetle didn't have a name and now he didn't need one. I held his parts, one in each set of fingers, and watched green goo drip onto the patio. The intestine still held the two parts together like the string between tin cans of a make-believe telephone.

I dropped the beetle on the ground when one of its legs started to twitch. If I were broken in half, would I twitch like that? I looked down at my legs spread out in front of my body and wiggled my toes. My stomach felt queasy, and I was a bit lightheaded, but I had to know more; I swept the beetle into the flower bed and looked around for another one. *The world was to me a secret which I cared to divine.*

Live insects wouldn't do, what with their twitchy legs, so I put on my tennies and waddled around the garden like a duck, collecting the tiny dead, one by one. I placed lacey dragonflies neatly in my up-turned shirt hem, shoved stink beetles in my pants pockets, and tucked a crunchy grasshopper underneath my right shoelace. I imagined I was one of the scientists I'd seen on National Geographic. As I collected my specimens, I tried to speak like them, whispering "The army ant, or Siafu, constructs giant sub-ter-nerean colonies deep below the Sub-Saharan plains."

* * *

Mors Nicit Omina—everything dies.

Birth [bərth] NOUN⁶. any coming into existence; origin; beginning.

I am the creator.

* * *

I dumped all the bugs onto the concrete, sorted them into piles by size, then disassembled their parts one by one. Pulling apart the bigger insects was easy, but the smaller ones would need special tools; I ran inside the house and came back with two pairs of shiny tweezers. I used one pair to hold the insect still and the other to snap off their legs and wings. They sometimes broke in half; I figured this would happen, which is why I collected so many specimens. Mistakes can happen when you are dealing with science and a Girl Scout is always prepared. After a little while, I'd found a rhythm to my work:

Place, pinch, snap, set;

Place, pinch, snap, set;

Place, pinch, snap, set;

Place, pinch, snap, set;

Focusing makes a kid really work up a thirst. After I'd sorted the insect parts once again, this time anatomically, I went back inside and poured myself an ice-cold glass of lemonade from the glass pitcher in the fridge.

I sat at the counter,

legs dangling,

savoring the tart sweetness with

every

precious

sip...

Now, where was I?

At the Science Center, my class learned that every insect evolved to have the kinds of parts they had for a reason. Giant water bug moms, for example, lay eggs on the wings of the dads who protect the eggs until they hatch. The tiny cucumber-shaped eggs stick up vertically off of the dad's flat back, clustered together in neat rows—shiny bumps like pimples about to pop. Water bug backs are very flat, so the eggs hold steady (this also makes it easier for them to shoot through the water like lightning). I whispered five times fast: *Willy water bug waits willingly while watching wiggly whippersnappers.*

The funny part is that Willy finds new girlfriends by showing off what a great dad he is; great dads have more chances to become great dads. But what caught that first girl bug's eye? Must've been his very flat back.

Back on the patio, I looked at my parts piles. If each part served a purpose, I'd have to think carefully about how best to match them to each other. Big bodies must need big wings, but what about a bumblebee who flies just fine with tiny wings, or a dragonfly with four large wings and a very long, skinny body? I took a lap around the garden to see what I could find and sure enough, spotted a big black bumblebee buzzing around a bougainvillea; its wings flapped furiously, and I figured they had to be small to move so fast.

And then there were legs to consider: insects had six legs to each body, but their lengths and widths varied quite a bit from one bug to another; I thought long and hard about the purpose of a set of short, chubby legs versus ones that are long and slender.

With enough information to keep going, I knew what I must do: I went back to the house and returned quickly with a tube of crazy glue. I lightly touched the base of a grasshopper wing to the tip of the glue nozzle—blew on it gently the way I'd seen my mom do with her falsies—and held it firm to the abdomen of an orb-weaver spider; three more wings to go.

The stained-glass wing gussied up the spider's round, bulbous body as if it were playing dress-up in an oversized ball gown. I continued the process by gluing six stubby legs from a cockroach to replace the spindly spider legs that I'd removed—triumph was a sweet-tart melting on my tongue.

I heard our front gate creak open, then slam shut, and knew that my mother had returned home from the grocery store. I brushed a finger down the edge of a wing to test its strength and it held firm; the glue was dry. The greasy smell of rotisserie chicken wafting from the kitchen told me I had to hurry, so I secured the last leg to the creation I'd

named Francis, then raised an open palm to my eye for one last inspection. *Spiders can't fly because they don't have wings. This spider has wings...*

I thought of how proud my mother would be when I showed her Francis. She was always telling me how creative I could be when I really put my mind to something. I walked slowly back toward the weathered French doors, balancing Francis in one hand while I shielded him from the wind with the other.

But just as I called out, "Mommy, come look what I made!" he fluttered his wings and flew away.

Downtown Metro Slap

Victor Perez

Willy ate up Lorene with a speedy gulp. He scurried on to the next victim, opening his mouth and swallowing the chair they sat on. Planting himself on his bottom, he wiped his lips with a smile. There was nothing tastier than sweat on skin. It made swallowing the bodies a lot easier that way. He looked around, wanting to see if there were any other people to eat before the day was over. He noticed a young woman, walking up to give her boss a stack of papers, a light drop crawling down their neck. He sniffed the air, hoping to get a feeling of how they would go down his throat. He got the scent but shook his head disappointingly. The smell was still quite ripe, so taking it now will leave a bad taste later in his tummy.

His watch began to ring as he continued to grumble about the lack of food. The hands were pointed to the word "NIGHT" highlighted on it. Willy then got himself up from the floor and headed to the elevator, standing next to Stanley the intern. He eyed him lowly, rather complex. The boy was rather ripe, though he gave the scent of someone who was prepared. Luckily, Willy also knew how to tell the ripeness in a method he learned. He leaned down near Stanley's head, flicking his ear lightly. The boy gave off a fainted laugh, looking at Willy awkwardly. Willy sighed and looked forward himself, upset that Stanley was still not mature. He should have expected it but wishing wasn't wrong. He walked out the elevator, wobbling to the building door, pushing his hips past.

People continued to brush and bump along his enormous belly as he walked to the corner down the subway station. He grabbed a few snacks along the way. He ate a few but thought to keep some of the more erotic smelling ones for later in his pocket. He got to the stairs, deciding to tumble down, pushing off people to the side. This was another test to check ripeness, as he picked up two who continued walking up. Willy burped a bit, apologizing to everyone around. He went down, or rather tumbled down, an escalator to get to the train, though he was in a hurry so he couldn't get some more. The train doors slammed on his belly, which caused the train to halt momentarily. The conductor helped push Willy in.

Willy and the conductor have been friends for nearly thirty-five years. The conductor, Davey Bones, was a magical piece of fruit. He was from a special plant that can give people immortality. The problem with the plant though was that the fruit needed to be ripe, but it never gets to it. Willy had hoped that after knowing Davey for twelve years that maybe one day he would be ready to get eaten. Sadly, it never came to pass. Willy accepted this, deciding to start talking with Davey, and soon enough the two became buddies.

Willy stood around as the train moved, loving this time of the day. Some fruits are most edible at night. Though there was a catch with these sorts of things. Willy once took a snack home to eat, but the next day he went in to find that it was gone. He followed the puddles outside and saw the person leave. He figured the snack was given new life, somehow. Or maybe it wasn't ready yet, and the train messed with his nose. The train stopped and he notice it was his time to get off. He went for snacks, but they moved just too fast for him to grab on. He walked all the way to his late-night job, a parking security guard. This job he loved most. For one, he gets paid really well. And two, sometimes he'll pick fruits from the cars coming in. Those were the best tasting.

Swimming

Katie Papa

The ice in her glass clinked softly as a drip of condensation rolled over her finger. The humidity made everything seem still, despite the soundtrack of summer coming through her windows—lawnmowers running, kids laughing, the periodic whir of bicycles flying down the street. She took a swig of her iced tea, her eyes fixed across her backyard.

She lived in a subdivision in which most people did not have fences to separate their back yard from their neighbors' back yard. She had asked her husband to install a fence for privacy, to keep the kids safe. He had scoffed. "Safe from what?" Relenting was easier than arguing.

This particular summer, their backyard neighbors were putting in an above-ground pool. Every day for the previous two weeks, five guys had been out in that backyard digging. And every day for those two weeks, she watched them. She watched them start by removing the grass from the circle of the yard where the pool would go. She watched them begin to dig, and continue to dig, dig, dig. There were a few days where they poured all of the dirt through a sifter, like gold prospectors, to rid the dirt of rocks and twigs. She imagined their hands turning into sandpaper, the dirt making its way under their fingernails, and the peaty, earthy smell enveloping them.

She would have watched these guys labor over this pool all day if she were able. She took her kids to summer camp every morning. Walking out the back door, with the girls running behind her, she'd see all the guys standing around the hole, drinking coffee. She imagined them planning out the day's work. The leader of the pack was her neighbor's son Josh, tall and muscular, with hair the color of wet sand. He delegated, pointed, and scratched his head like a real contractor, although to her knowledge, this was his first big project.

She watched the guys take their lunch breaks. They sat on apple boxes and milk crates, taking enormous bites out of enormous sandwiches, wiping their mouths with the backs of their hands. They talked with their mouths full and laughed after gulping sodas. They punched each other on their muscular arms. She imagined their crass jokes

and a camaraderie that came only from years of acquaintance. Josh was always the center of attention. This was *his* crew. If he wasn't making someone laugh, someone would be trying to make *him* laugh. He was the warm spot around which they all swam. It wasn't just that it was his house—he had a visible and tenable magnetism over these boys that likely carried over into any setting in which they found themselves.

She had started noticing things about him, predictable things about this boy she had known, who had only recently turned into a stranger—a man. He had a habit of putting his hand to his forehead when he laughed, shaking his head slightly. He kept his hair long on top and ran his fingers through it any time he took a break. His years of varsity sports had broadened his shoulders and firmed up his stomach, taking away any trace of the boy left in him. She marveled at this—where had he gone? Where were his fat cheeks and his stubby fingers? Where was the squish of his belly? She supposes this is what time does, it steals what you know and repurposes it as something else entirely. She had watched her girls grow from babies into little kids, and even her eldest into a pre-teen, but this metamorphosis from boy to man felt more sudden. More consequential.

The guys usually wrapped up work around 4:00, and since her husband picked up the kids on his way home from work at 5:00, she was free to watch their late afternoon ritual of putting the tools away, dusting themselves off, and heading into the house for what she imagined to be bathroom breaks and maybe a beer or two. Today, she had stepped away from the window around 3:50 to answer the phone. When she returned a moment later, she saw to her dismay they had seemingly wrapped up for the evening. She noticed movement in the foreground of her vision and suppressed a gasp when she noticed Josh walking towards her back door.

He took long, hungry strides as he walked toward her house. Her heartbeat furiously in her chest and a startling lump made its way into her throat. She set her iced tea on the counter, dried off her hands quickly, and trotted nervously into the bathroom to see what he would see when she answered the door. Her hair had turned a golden red as she had gotten older, and was presently loosely tied back into a rather chaotic ponytail. She saw her persistent freckles cushioning her periwinkle eyes, and noted she wore no make-up. She flashed her teeth at her reflection and tried to remember if she had even brushed them today.

The doorbell rang. She allowed herself one more glance in the mirror and went to answer. She swung open the door, and he stood there, smiling. He hadn't bothered to put a shirt on, and she noticed a smudge of dirt on his

tanned right shoulder. Up close, his jaw had broadened, hardened. His cheekbones were more pronounced, his face more at ease with itself.

"Hey there, Mrs. Jacobs," he said, a little shyly when he saw her.

His use of her married name was almost enough to distract her, but she greeted him with an appropriately quick, "Hi, Josh."

He was holding a white serving dish delicately painted with cherry blossoms, which he held towards her with one hand. It was her dish, long ago loaned to Josh's mother. "My mom asked me to give this to you."

She opened the screen door and took the dish from him. "Thanks," she said. Then, "Why don't you come in for a minute? It's been forever!"

He looked towards his house and squinted, then said, "Um..."

She sighed, faking a friendly exasperation. "Get in here, kiddo. We'll do a shot."

He laughed. "Alright, I think the guys will be alright over there without me."

As he walked past her, she could smell the sweat and summer dripping off of him. "I was kidding about the shot, by the way," she said to his back. He looked over his shoulder at her and grinned.

He had been inside her house countless times as a kid. When her daughter Sarah was born, Josh was six years old, and he was fascinated with her. He would come over after school and stare at her, awestruck by this tiny creature. He came over less as he got older, but he always had a wave and a smile for both of her girls, from his bicycle at first and later from the used sedan his parents had gifted him.

He flopped down on her couch with a sigh, his legs spread, not yet aware of the space he occupied. He wore baggy grey work shorts, his boxers peeking out of his waistband, and dark brown leather boots, dusty from the day's labor. She hadn't thought to ask him to take his shoes off.

"Do you want something to drink? I have iced tea, lemonade..."

"Oooh, iced tea. I remember your iced tea."

"Got it." She went to the kitchen and set the serving dish on the counter. She felt a quick wave of nausea pass

over her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath and tried to quiet the tugging heat building in her belly. There is nothing weird about this, she told herself. He's been here dozens of times. But before he had been a boy, the age difference between them was more pronounced, and her life filled up with the newness of marriage and motherhood. She could barely remember who she was back then, and certainly didn't recognize who she was at this moment.

She retrieved a glass from the cupboard, filled it with iced tea from the refrigerator, and went back to see him thumbing through a furniture catalogue that had been sitting on her coffee table. He closed the catalogue and threw it on the table when he noticed her come in.

"That stuff's expensive!" he said, shaking his head.

As she handed him the glass, already damp with sweat, she felt a jolt of electricity when her fingertips brushed his. She tried to keep her voice from shaking. "Yeah, I've been getting the catalogue for two years and have never ordered anything. I just can't pull the trigger on a couch that's bound to get ruined."

He took a long gulp of the iced tea and grinned. "This is just how I remember it. Just the right amount of sweet." She managed a half-smile in response.

She tried to casually ease herself into the chair across from him. The sound of her heartbeat throbbed in her ears. She thought for sure he could hear it. "I can't believe you're putting in that pool yourself."

He shook his head and instinctively ran his hand through his hair. "I know. It's nuts. I didn't realize how hard it would be."

"Who are the guys helping you?"

"Just some friends from school. Although," he grinned crookedly, "not sure how long we'll be friends after this. They're kind over the whole thing."

"How'd you rope 'em into it in the first place?" As they talked, she began to feel more at ease with him in front of her.

"Unlimited use of the pool, once it's finished," he said. "Also, my mom has been making dinner every night for us."

She nodded knowingly. "Yeah, I can see how your mom's cooking could lure a bunch of teenagers." Teenagers. He was a *teenager*. She tried to swallow, but her mouth felt full of dust.

He took another swig of the tea and set it down, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He sighed again, in that way that boys do, boys who are still learning how to be men—a sigh meant to sound exasperated and overworked but sounded more like a cub testing out his roar. It was endearing. She saw him looking at something and watched him walk past her to the bookshelves in her living room. He picked up a framed photo. “This is Sarah?”

She walked over to where he was and stood behind him, smiling at the photo. “Yep, that’s Sarah.” Her face felt warm, and an ache flooded her torso.

He shook his head. “I guess I haven’t seen her in a long time. How old is she?”

“She turned twelve last month.” Her eyes went from the photo to his face, where he wore a look of wonderment and disbelief. His lips were in a small smile, and she resisted the urge to touch his cheek, which looked softer than any boy’s cheek she remembered from high school. She was close enough to see streaks of his salty sweat, dried quickly in the cooling afternoon.

He turned to look at her, and she thought in a few years, he might have put his hand on the small of her back, or maybe it would have come to rest softly on her cheek, or maybe he would have even brushed the hair out of her eyes. His brown eyes might have searched her blue ones for permission, and in a few years, she would have given it to him, and that would have been followed by a kiss, soft and hesitant at first, but it would have grown into something elegant and passionate.

Today, standing a good five inches taller than her, he remained still as she reached up and pulled a twig out of his dirty hair. His eyes followed her hand as she showed him what she was holding.

“Twig,” she said softly, with a slight smile. She saw in his eyes a flash of realization and then hesitation. She wondered, was she getting closer to him, or was he getting closer to her? She could see him looking at her for the first time, noticing her. His eyes wandered to her mouth. He swallowed. “Mrs. Jacobs”

She let the moment linger until their eyes met again. He opened his mouth to say something, but she stopped him. “Go home, Josh. Your friends are waiting.”

Gloved

Joseph Silva



Take Out the Trash

Gillian Moran-Perez

LEI: A feisty yet timid gal.

JOHN/PAPÁ: John acts young for his age. Papá is Lei's father.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ: Gorgé, or Don Gorgé. Calls himself El Brujo.

MERNA/MAMÁ: Merna is the manager of the sandwich shop. Mamá is Lei's mother.

CUSTOMER/ROB: Customer is every service employee's nightmare. So is Rob.

BACKGROUND: A sandwich shop. A storage unit with one dumpster inside.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

Lei is cleaning a counter in the sandwich shop when John walks in.

JOHN

We got another 30 minutes until close. You mind holding the front while I clean up the back?

Lei nods and John moves off stage. Sounds of washing dishes and faint music in the background.

LEI

Raise the volume!

"Oh Honey" by Delegation starts playing. Lei is bobbing her head while sweeping.

John walks in moving his body to the beat of the music, moving things around while dancing around Lei.

LEI

Laughs.

Hey, I'm working here!

JOHN

OOOOHHHHHHHHHHHH HONEY!

LEI

You're ruining the song.

JOHN

Shut up, you're just jealous of my voice.

LEI

Nudges John.

Crackhead.

A customer walks in.

Lei moves quickly to lower the volume on the speakers.

JOHN

Hi there, how can I—

CUSTOMER

I found a hair on my sandwich.

JOHN

I'm sorry about that boss, I can remake it for you if you'd like.

CUSTOMER

I want a refund.

JOHN

No problem, boss.

CUSTOMER

Points a finger at Lei.

Watch your hair when you make sandwiches.

LEI

I'm sorry about that sir, it won't happen again.

CUSTOMER

Shave your head if you're gonna work here.

JOHN

Actually, she didn't prepare your sandwich. I did.

CUSTOMER

Stop protecting her. It's her fault. What's your name?

JOHN

Sir, it was my fault.

CUSTOMER

I WANT her name!

JOHN

I thought you wanted a refund.

CUSTOMER

DON'T be smart with me. Where's your manager?

JOHN

She's not here right now, I'm in charge. Anything else I can do for you?

CUSTOMER

YOU'RE in charge?

John and the customer continue to argue while Lei slips offstage.

SCENE 2

Lei standing outside of the dumpster unit with a sandwich. She knocks three times, then someone knocks back. When she opens the gate, Gorgé pops out of the trash can.

GORGÉ

What's for dinner?

LEI

Turkey and cheese.

GORGÉ

Con jalapeños?

Lei hands him the sandwich then Gorgé starts eating. She leans against the gate and looks to the side, letting out a soft sigh. Gorgé with a mouth full of food says:

¿Y ahora qué?

LEI

Starts pacing.

Do you ever just get so angry—

GORGÉ

Eh.

LEI

—but feel so powerless—

GORGÉ

Power is a social construct.

LEI

—that you want to scream—

GORGÉ

Whispering is better for the soul.

LEI

—get into their faces and yell “I’M HUMAN!”

GORGÉ

Shrugs his shoulders.

LEI

I just want to throw turkey shavings at their stupid faces.

GORGÉ

That's being wasteful.

LEI

I'm more than a slicer.

GORGÉ

Burps.

Where's my drink?

LEI

Ignores Gorgé.

GORGÉ

I guess I'll get it myself then. You should really work on your customer service.

LEI

You don't even know what it's like in there!

Gorgé climbs out of his trash bin and walks up to Lei, opens the rest of his sandwich and places lettuce on top of her. He mumbles and moves his hand in a circular motion in front of her face.

Sana, sana colita de rana. Si no sana hoy, sanará mañana.

Manifest this. The green gods are here to help.

LEI

Can they help me?

GORGÉ

You know the drill.

Lei begins to take off her right shoe and hands it to Gorgé. He descends into his bin and comes back up wearing an orange beanie. He picks up her shoe and stares intently at the sole, trying to read it.

GORGÉ

The green gods thank your sacrifice. This week's message is "eat your meats."

LEI

I'm vegetarian.

GORGÉ

Oops. Otra vez.

Ah. Here it is. B-O-T-A-R.

LEI

I think they mean votar.

GORGÉ

Now they're getting political.

LEI

Picks off the lettuce on her hair.

Nothing I do makes a difference. I'm only essential because I make sandwiches.

GORGÉ

Not the best ones either.

LEI

Sighs.

I should be getting back. John's probably thinking I ditched him.

GORGÉ

Why don't you?

LEI

I can't...Any chance los dioses are going to pay me a visit tonight?

GORGÉ

If you leave out 12 grapes maybe.

LEI

But it's not New Year's Eve.

GORGÉ

They like new beginnings too. Maybe that's what you need.

Gorgé climbs back into his dumpster and motions to Lei to shut the storage.

LEI

Gorgé...

You really think I make terrible sandwiches?

GORGÉ

Smiles.

The worst.

SCENE 3

Lei is holding a cup of coffee for Gorgé. He rises from his bin, stretches his arms and yawns. He holds out one hand while Lei hands him his coffee. Gorgé sniffs the coffee and grins.

Buenos días. You left late last night. Did John keep you?

LEI

It was busy.

GORGÉ

Winks.

Yo no tengo pelo de tonto.

LEI

He's just a coworker.

GORGÉ

That's what they all say.

LEI

I was thinking about what you said yesterday.

GORGÉ

Did you leave out 12 grapes?

LEI

I only had 11.

GORGÉ

Spits out his coffee.

LEI

Hey!

GORGÉ

Eleven will invite bad spirits! Didn't your grandmother teach you these things?

LEI

¿Brujería? I'm Catholic.

GORGÉ

Same thing. Let's hope you didn't invite demonios to your house.

LEI

Can't you give me one of your anti-demonio spray thing?

GORGÉ

You mean.

Changes voice to the narrator of a commercial.

DEMON-BE GONE. SPRAY AN X AT THE FOOT OF YOUR BED AND THE DEMONS WON'T ENTER. PRICE AND PARTICIPATION MAY VARY.

LEI

Yeah that.

GORGÉ

I ran out.

LEI

¿Cómo?

GORGÉ

I had an old friend visit...

LEI

I thought I was your only friend.

GORGÉ

Starts laughing uncontrollably,

TÚ—

LA ÚNICA—

LEI

Turns red,

WELL, YOU KNOW WHAT, YOU CAN GET YOUR OWN SANDWICHES!

GORGÉ

Serena. Ay. I haven't laughed that good in years.

LEI

I mean it.

GORGÉ

Digs around in his bin and pulls out a yogurt spoon,

Here.

LEI

An old spoon?

GORGÉ

This was your first piece offering.

LEI

Looks down.

You saved this?

GORGÉ

My third eye knew you were special. But do you?

LEI

Turns away.

GORGÉ

What was it you told me on your first day?

LEI

I hate sandwiches?

GORGÉ

Yes!

LEI

And?

GORGÉ

Don't you see! If you hate it here, porque te quedas?

LEI

I need money.

GORGÉ

Everyone needs something. Money is not the answer.

LEI

Then what is?

GORGÉ

Busca.

LEI

Where?

GORGÉ

In your shoe!

LEI

Gorgé, it's too early for your riddles.

GORGÉ

IT'S DON GORGÉ.

Tienes la cabeza de adorno.

LEI

I do not.

GORGÉ

Esta bien. At least you're pretty.

LEI

Tu...sos... asco!

GORGÉ

Bravo! You're learning. But it's, "que asco."

LEI

I've been watching more novellas.

GORGÉ

Those won't teach you real Spanish.

Digs into his bin and pulls out a book.

This will.

LEI

¿El pe..re...grino?

I read this in 6th grade.

GORGÉ

Did you pay attention?

LEI

I was 11.

GORGÉ

Well, you're going to read it again. Repeat after me. B-O-R-R-O-H.

LEI

It's W.

GORGÉ

I never said I was biliterate. Now what will you give me in exchange?

LEI

Starts digging around in her purse.

I have these ballot things that came in the mail.

GORGÉ

Perfect. They'll make great fire starters after I'm done reading. You should really invest in this.

LEI

I don't get them.

GORGÉ

It's for your own good.

LEI

Are you saying you vote?

GORGÉ

Since 1989.

LEI

I thought brujos didn't get political.

GORGÉ

I was the first. Everyone else is a bandwagon.

LEI

Do you think I should...?

GORGÉ

Did you when you were 18?

LEI

No...my parents were furious with me when they found out.

GORGÉ

Saca tu lengua y hecha le sal. That's the taste of voting.

LEI

Sounds salty.

GORGÉ

Flavor. Spice. Possibility. Voting is more than that. It's about getting your voice HEARD.

LEI

Looks down.

Will people even listen to me?

GORGÉ

We won't know unless you try.

Lei nods.

GORGÉ

Now scram!

He closes the lid on his storage bin.

Lei starts walking back and sees John walking to the back door. He hands her a bag.

JOHN

You hungry?

Lei nudges him and smiles.

JOHN

Were you talking to someone by the storage bins?

LEI

No, I was just talking to myself.

JOHN

You seeing things now?

LEI

Yeah...hope.

SCENE 4

Lei and John are prepping for the day when Merna walks in.

MERNA

Morning y'all. Guess whose favorite corporate rep is coming today?

JOHN

Groans.

Why.

MERNA

Probably just checking on us.

LEI

Do you know what time he's coming?

JOHN

He is literally the worst he makes me want to stab my—

Rob struts onto the stage and waves.

ROB

Hey good morning everybody!

John turns around quickly.

JOHN

Hey Rob, how's it going?

ROB

Claps and rubs his hands together. Very intense with his smiles and grins.

Great weather we're having today. Just had my morning coffee. It's a GREAT day to serve some SANDWICHES!

HOORAH!

Lei and John give each other a look.

ROB

Where's Merna? Ah! There you are!

Puts his arm around her shoulders and hugs her tightly.

Do you have some time to go over some new material?

MERNA

Fakes a smile.

Let's get this cracking.

Rob walks off stage while Merna follows, mouthing to John and Lei, "Help me."

JOHN

I CAN FINALLY BREATHE!

LEI

Laughs.

A construction worker walks in.

JOHN

Hey, there. Welcome in!

The construction worker greets back in Spanish.

LEI

¿Hola cómo estás?

CONSTRUCTION WORKER

Bien bien, aquí empezando el día.

LEI

Qué bueno. ¿Quieres lo mismo?

CONSTRUCTION WORKER

Si, con jalapeños por favor. Gracias hija.

LEI

She goes to the side and makes the sandwich. Meanwhile John cashes him out while Rob sneaks back in, looking for something. He pauses and just stares at John and Lei. Lei wraps up the sandwich and hands it to the construction worker.

¡Que tenga buen día señor!

He bows to Lei and leaves the stage.

ROB

You know him?

LEI

He's our regular.

ROB

Just a couple tips. One. You can always use more banter, don't stay so silent all the time even if your back is to him. We always want to give them the Maine experience! Two, did you see what you did when you handed him his sandwich?

LEI

Shakes her head.

ROB

You didn't see it? You didn't notice that you handed it to him pretty rough? You practically slapped the sandwich into his hand! Well, I gotta tell ya, that probably gave him the wrong impression that you don't care. That's not us!

Remember the motto?

LEI

Serve with—

ROB

SERVE WITH A SMILE! Next time just do better, alright? Hey, I'm just telling this to you so you don't do this again. If Devin was here,

Smacks lip.

I tell ya, he would've written you up. I'm saving you. Got it? ¿Comprende?

LEI

Fakes a smile.

Of course.

ROB

Atta girl! Hey, John! Make sure your crew members go above and beyond today!

JOHN

You got it boss!

ROB

That's what I like to hear!

Leaves the stage.

JOHN

What'd he say to you?

LEI

Corporate bullshit. He says the way I hand sandwiches to the customers says, "I don't care."

JOHN

Well, you do have a heavy hand.

Lei flips him off. The door slams as Merna walks in and groans.

A notification sound goes off and Merna checks her phone.

MERNA

It's a text from Rob.

"Nice seeing you all today! Store looks great. Keep up the good work. Merna, I've sent you some links to a few customer service articles, you know just to brush up and share with the crew. Little extra research won't do you any harm," with a winky face.

Merna shivers like her body has the chills and makes a gagging face.

Lei you can take your break.

Lei grabs some food from the counter then leaves the stage.

SCENE 5

Lei is in front of the storage unit. She looks around to see if anyone is watching. She knocks on the doors and waits.

GORGÉ

WHO DARES DISTURB MY SLUMBER?!

LEI

Relax, Oz. It's me.

She opens the door and Gorgé lifts the lid of his dumpster.

GORGÉ

Where's my sandwich?

LEI

You said last night the sandwich gave you an allergic reaction.

GORGÉ

Well, maybe that's a nighttime allergic reaction, duh. It was a full moon, you know.

LEI

Rolls her eyes.

GORGÉ

¿Qué te pasa?

LEI

Corporate came today.

GORGÉ

Here we go.

LEI

He said that I, "handed those sandwiches pretty rough." NO I DIDN'T ROB YOU ASSHOLE!

GORGÉ

You do have some manly shoulders for a small girl.

LEI

I'm the gentlest person I know!

She kicks the gate.

GORGÉ

Serena, tus corrientes espirituales are all over the place mija.

Ding ding! Tengo una idea!

LEI

What?

GORGÉ

What if I, Don Gorgé, come in pretending to be a customer the next time corporate comes and I casually speak with them. Chat them up. Order something from you and give you all the praise and glory.

Switches his voice to the tone of a businessman.

"Why quite an establishment you have here. And the worker with the glasses, she's quite the charmer."

LEI

Laughs.

And who would believe you?

GORGÉ

No te preocupes mija, where there's a will there's a way.

LEI

You're willing to step outside of your dumpster for me?

GORGÉ

You're right. I haven't left this dumpster since 2016.

LEI

I appreciate the gesture but—

GORGÉ

You have my word. It's been a while since I've performed a hex.

LEI

¿Qué?

GORGÉ

A hex! That's what those corporate cabrones need.

LEI

Don Gorgé, respectfully, please don't get me fired.

GORGÉ

Nonsense! Have I ever let you down?

LEI

Last Thursday when you made me stand out here in the rain to give you your coffee.

GORGÉ

Well, my memory does not go that far.

LEI

I thought brujos had a great memory.

GORGÉ

I can see the future, not the past.

LEI

What if this goes wrong—

GORGÉ

Bueno si no quieres mi ayuda, mejor ni me hables.

He slams the top of his dumpster.

LEI

Oh, come on Gorgé. I'm not doubting you! I just don't want to get fired.

GORGÉ

Same thing!

LEI

You know I need your help.

GORGÉ

You're too scared to take my advice.

LEI

Well—

GORGÉ

Can't live your life in fear or what ifs.

LEI

I need this job.

GORGÉ

No, you don't.

LEI

Yes, I do! I have bills to pay, unlike you Gorgé! Not everyone can choose to live rent free in a dumpster, scavenging for food and relying on magical powers for sanity.

Beat

LEI

I live in the real world! I want to do things! I want to BECOME SOMEONE! I don't want to work for anyone else or be a servant to people who treat me like trash! I am made for more than this. I KNOW IT I just don't know what to do. But here I am, working my ass off day and night, taking shit from entitled, privileged, Tesla driving customers, who don't know how to treat us like humans! HUMANS! I'm just a machine to them.

Changes her voice.

Work faster! I've been waiting for over 30 minutes!

Bitch, please. I saw you walk in here five minutes ago, calm the fuck down. Whatever happened to patience? To kindness? Go home and make your own sandwich! IT'S JUST A SANDWICH. People don't know shit about how to care for others. I bet they share posts that make them "woke," like fighting for labor rights when they can't even be nice to the server behind the apron. Anyone thinks they have the power to get me fired. They think they own me. Their true colors come out in this store and they reek of disgrace.

Beat

Gorgé snaps his fingers.

LEI

I'm tired of this shit.

Lei leaves the stage. A spotlight shines on the dumpster while Gorgé appears and speaks to the audience.

GORGÉ

Había una vez, una niña con una caperucita roja. Le gustaba explorar en el bosque, cortando flores, jugando con animalitos, contándose cuentitos para pasar el tiempo. Un día, la niña estaba por llegar a la casa cuando escuchó a sus padres peleando sobre los gastos de la casa y otras cosas. Desde ese entonces, dejó de ser libre. Se fue a buscar un trabajo para ayudar. Pero donde fue había lobos, con carros grandes y brillosos. La niña llegaba a la casa cansada y triste. Se le fue la luz en sus ojos. Los lobos se burlaban de ella y la trataron mal. La niña se sentía desolada. Hasta que un día, quebró y se dio cuenta que así no es vivir.

ACT 2

SCENE 1

Lei knocks on the storage unit, waits for Gorgé.

GORGÉ

Is the coast clear?

LEI

Looks around.

Just me.

Lei opens the door and steps inside. He steps down from his dumpster. In front of him is a box with a piece of cloth, an incense holder, a plate full of lettuce and an eagle feather.

GORGÉ

¿Estás segura?

LEI

Sighs.

I need this to work.

GORGÉ

You know the rules. If you don't open your mind this won't work. I charge \$20 for the whole session.

Lei pulls out a twenty dollar bill. Gorgé snatches the bill out of her hand and puts it in his pocket.

Ahora! Let's begin.

Lei sits down cross legged, closes her eyes and lets out a big breath.

GORGÉ

I can smell the negative energy.

LEI

Hmmm, I wonder why.

GORGÉ

Te voy curar el sarcasmo ya veras. Now, try to clear your mind.

Ready?

Lei nods.

Now, channel on the anxieties in your life. Focus on the one thing that irritates you the most. What is making you feel this way?

LEI

Quietly.

My voice.

GORGÉ

Mocks her voice.

You mean your itty-bitty voice.

SPEAK!

LEI

Quietly.

My voice is unheard.

GORGÉ

Ay carajo. Being heard is not something una limpia can fix. That is all within yourself. If you want respect, stand up for yourself.

But I guess we'll work with what we got.

He turns around to get the feather and the incense holder.

GORGÉ

We're going to work on letting go of your problems with a breathing exercise. Once I guide you through the process and you feel that you have let go of your anxiety, then I will clean the area and your aura.

Now picture the sound of your voice in three counts. I want you to take deep breaths. Then hold it for three counts. When I say release, you will release this anxiety into the air and let it out of your body. To manifest your anxiety into something you can feel and let go of is powerful. This is how you demonstrate control over yourself. This is how you can become one step closer to becoming healed. Soon, you'll be free like the Torogoz.

Lei snickers.

GORGÉ

LISTA!

Lei's actions follow Gorgé's instructions.

Inhale. One—two—three. Hold. Uno—dos—tres. Keep holding. Now release slowly. Uno—dos—tres.

LEI

Lets out an irritated sigh.

I don't feel any different Gorgé.

GORGÉ

That's because you didn't put effort into it. When you try, you will see results. Otra vez.

Inhale. Uno—dos—tres. Hold. Keep holding. Uno—dos—tres. Exhale. Uno—dos—tres.

LEI

Gorgé this is a waste—

GORGÉ

SILENCIO. TE VAMOS A LIMPIAR. AHORA PONTE LAS PILAS SEÑORITA.

Lei opens her eyes startled and they stare at each other for a moment until finally Lei secedes.

INHALE. UNO—DOS—TRES. HOLD IT. HOLD ONTO THAT ANXIETY. CONCENTRATE. DON'T LET IT ESCAPE. YOU ARE IN CONTROL. NOT YOUR FEAR. SE FUERTE. ON THREE WE WILL RELEASE YOUR ANXIETY INTO THE AIR AND OUT OF YOU. USE YOUR BREATH LEI. USE YOUR LUNGS TO MAKE NOISE.

EXHALE. UNO. DOS. TRES.

Lei lets out a loud breath and faints. Her body undergoes severe compulsion. Gorgé bends down to hear her breathing. He sprinkles lettuce all around her body, then with the incense, uses the feather to sweep the air all around and makes noise like running water.

Chhhhh, chhhh. Que la energía buena de la tierra y de las hojas limpien su energía. Chhhh.

Lei's body slowly stops shaking until she is still.

He then takes the bill and raises it to the incense holder, letting it catch on fire and throws it to the ground. When the whole bill is in flames, he sprays it with his holy water.

SCENE 2

Lei walks on stage, hums the song "Suavecito" and grabs her stuff for work. She kisses her parents at the table having their morning coffee.

LEI

Buenos días mamá y papá.

MAMÁ

Buenos días. ¿Y ahora qué te pasa?

LEI

Nada mamá.

PAPÁ

Te veo...diferente.

LEI

¿Cómo?

MAMÁ

Alegre.

PAPÁ

Relajada.

MAMÁ

Con energía.

LEI

Pues me acosté temprano, nada mas.

MAMÁ

Eso sí, llegaste cansada anoche y solo entraste a tu cuarto y nunca saliste.

LEI

Sí. Pero no se preocupen. Estoy bien. En serio.

PAPÁ

Reaches his hand out to hers and holds onto her hand.

Te adoramos con todo nuestro corazón y alma. Solo te queremos verte feliz hija. No te estreses por nosotros. Vive tu vida.

LEI

Chokes back tears.

Los quiero también.

SCENE 3

Lei and John are chatting while prepping when a customer walks in with a sandwich. They don't hear him until he clears

his throat.

CUSTOMER
EXCUSE ME.

JOHN

Oh, sorry sir we didn't hear you. How can I help?

CUSTOMER

Unwraps the sandwich.

My wife asked for light mustard. Does THIS look light to you?

JOHN

Sorry about—

CUSTOMER

I wasn't done talking! Number two. It was my birthday yesterday and I haven't received my free birthday sandwich.

JOHN

Well sir, we are not in charge of sending those emails out. That falls under corporate, but if you'd like I can give you the customer service line and they can help you.

CUSTOMER

AREN'T YOU THE CUSTOMER SERVICE?

JOHN

Sir, we can't do anything. We don't have control over any of that.

CUSTOMER

Mocks him with his voice.

We don't have control over any of that.

All I hear are excuses, excuses, EXCUSES. YOU guys work here. YOU should be able to do something about it. DO YOUR JOB!

JOHN

Sir, I am trying to explain to you that we can't—

CUSTOMER

BULLSHIT.

I'LL REPORT YOU TO CORPORATE FOR BEING INCOMPETENT AND FOR GIVING THE WORST CUSTOMER SERVICE.

LEI

Please sir, would you like a complimentary beverage or cookie? We're sor—

CUSTOMER

OH, YOU'RE SORRY? YOU ACTUALLY CARE FOR ONCE?

LEI

Here. I'll call corporate for you right now—

CUSTOMER

YOU GUYS CAN'T DO ANYTHING RIGHT.

Points his finger to John.

WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

LEI

Whispers to him.

Don't give him your name.

CUSTOMER

Points his finger at Lei.

You! I thought they would have fired you after my complaint!

LEI

Again, that was an accident. We gave you your refund. Now, can you please calm down and let us do our job.

CUSTOMER

Are you talking back? To a customer? That's it. I want your name NOW.

LEI

A small gust of air passes by Lei and she looks startled, like she just woke up from her trance. Then she looks fiercely at the customer.

I don't have to give it to you.

CUSTOMER

Sputters.

Yes, you do!

LEI

No. I don't. Neither does him. You need to leave before I call security.

CUSTOMER

CALL SECURITY!?

Takes out his phone and starts recording.

HEY, FACEBOOK FRIENDS. MISSY HERE SAID SHE'S GOING TO CALL SECURITY ON ME AFTER I ASKED HER A

SIMPLE QUESTION ABOUT MY REWARDS. WOW. ISN'T THAT GREAT CUSTOMER SERVICE? NOW THE WHOLE WORLD WILL KNOW WHO'S BEING THE ASSHOLE NOW.

JOHN

Sir, you need to leave.

CUSTOMER

OH, AND LOOK TOUGH GUY OVER HERE IS TRYING TO MAKE ME LOOK LIKE THE BAD GUY. WELL GUESS WHAT, I'M NOT LEAVING.

JOHN

Sir, I won't call security if you just leave us alone.

CUSTOMER

FINE. BUT I'M LEAVING ON MY OWN WILL BECAUSE YOU GUYS ARE A BUNCH OF SHITTY SERVERS.

Bumps into a trash can.

AND THIS IS A HUGE FIRE HAZARD. YEAH. GOOD LUCK KEEPING YOUR JOBS DIMWITS.

Leaves.

JOHN

That piece of shit—

LEI

Literal trash!

JOHN

HE MADE HIMSELF LOOK LIKE A DUMBASS.

LEI

John, I can't take it anymore.

JOHN

Me neither.

I'll text Merna the whole situation and to look at the cameras.

Places his hand on her shoulder.

Don't worry Lei, everything will be alright.

SCENE 4

Lei walks up to the dumpster storage and knocks.

Gorgé, are you there?

¿Don Gorgé?

Por favor, necesito hablar. I need a friend.

Come on, Gorgé. I know you're in there. You never leave this place.

She lets out a loud sigh and suddenly a written message appears on the gate.

Gone out. Lei, if you need help, just pray to the earth and the spirits will guide you. I left out twelve grapes for you as an offering for the green gods. Try for once.

Beat

What does he mean he's gone out? He's never left before!

Gorgé, please, I really need you. I don't know what to do anymore. I'm not happy with my life, with my job. I need your guidance please! I'll do anything you say.

Sobs.

Ayúdame.

Keeps sobbing.

I don't want to live like this.

Beat

Fine. If you're not going to answer then I'll just, I'll figure something out. When I need you the most, you aren't here. Some friend you are. I don't need you.

She throws his sandwich at the gate and as she begins to walk away, she steps on the bag of grapes. She bends down, picks them up and starts to cry.

SCENE 5

Here the audience sees into Lei's dream. The song "After the Storm " by Kali Uchis and Tyler the Creator starts playing in the background. All characters are on stage with Lei in the middle. The spotlight shines on different moments and fears in Lei's life, both real and imagined. Every actor is acting out a scene with no speech, only using expressive hand gestures. Lei spins to face every scene.

To her left, the spotlight shows John and the Customer arguing over a sandwich. The light dims then shows a Police Officer handcuffing Gorgé while he's trying to chant and escape. The light dims again, and the spotlight shows Lei's parents arguing while her mother is crying. Lei starts to breathe heavily and tries to grab a hold of something to sit down on, but there's nothing there. The spotlight dims again and reappears on John and Rob where Rob is making John look like a fool in front of the Construction worker. John's hand curls into a fist as he looks away. The lights dim and the spotlight shows only Lei trying to center her breathing, her face flushed. She falls to her knees and starts praying.

She gets up and lip syncs to the lyrics that say "All you have to do is try. Try, try, try, try."

SCENE 6

Lei walks into work and finds John, Merna, and Rob, crowded around a laptop.

LEI

Good morning, what's going on?

ROB

Lei, there you are. Just the person I needed to see.

LEI

How can I help?

ROB

So, Merna here told us about your incident the other day with John. I just finished watching the video here and man that guy was being a real douche am I right?

JOHN

Difficult, yes.

ROB

Okay, so let's debrief how you guys did.

I see John trying to explain to the customer patiently how to resolve his problem but then the customer doesn't want to listen. He was clearly, uh, very upset with us and he was misinformed on who oversees these matters. It's okay it happens. Not every customer is right.

Lei and John share a look of relief.

LEI

We're glad you feel that way sir. He was being disrespectful.

ROB

But YOU triggered it.

LEI

Excuse me?

ROB

You talked back.

LEI

Sir, with all due respect, I was doing my best to keep the customer happy then he started going off on John. He was rude and started yelling and I—

ROB

Merna, get a hold of your crew. In these situations, we must do everything in our power to calm down the customer. Everything. That means carrying a smile, showing sympathy, offering a free beverage. Everything in this store is a tool to keep a customer happy. Remember what I said? Show that you care. You have a lot to work on missy if you want to keep your position. I'm going to give you a warning.

LEI

But sir—

MERNA

Rob, listen. What you don't understand is that customers in this area act like this all the time. Nothing calms them. My employees don't deserve their disrespect.

Looks at Lei.

I think she did a good job standing up for herself. Wouldn't you say so John?

JOHN

She defended me, and we are not here to be treated this way, we—

LEI

We deserve better. We're people, not servants. This apron doesn't change who we are! We deserve respect.

ROB

Well. If that's how you feel. So, you're saying this company doesn't treat you well?

MERNA

That's not what she's saying Rob and you know that—

ROB

Well, that's what I'm hearing.

A construction worker/Gorgé comes in and greets Lei.

LEI

Hola, señor, estaré contigo en un minuto.

ROB

I don't think that's a good idea.

JOHN

What are you saying?

ROB

Clearly, she doesn't appreciate being here.

JOHN

You're taking this too far.

ROB

Do you want another warning shift lead? Listen missy. The world isn't always fair. But in customer service, you have one job and one job only. To serve. Customers. Got it. With a smile. And if you can't do that, then we don't have room for you!

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

Disculpa, señor.

ROB

We'll be right with you sir.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

Excuse me. I have a complaint I'd like to address.

ROB

Turns to Lei and John.

Watch and learn.

Turns back to the customer with a huge smile.

How can I help you today?

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

My sandwich was soggy when I picked it up the other day. I took it to work and when I opened it up at my desk the

bread was falling apart.

ROB

I am so sorry to hear that. I can make you another sandwich for you right now on the house!

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

Sighs.

It was a number six. LIGHT juice this time.

Rob goes behind the counter and starts preparing the sandwich. He then grabs a bottle of oil.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

What are you doing!?

ROB

I'm dressing the sandwich sir. I only did one pass of our juice.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

I can see the oil dripping on the side and collecting under the bread! This is UNACCEPTABLE!

ROB

Looks taken aback.

Well, I can make another one without the juice if you'd like.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

NO. I WANT my sandwich WITH LIGHT. JUICE. Is that so hard to understand?

ROB

Sir, let me explain, normally we—

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

I'm not here to listen to your corporate bullshit. I want my sandwich the way I ordered it.

ROB

Well, this is how you ordered it.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

Excuse me? Are you talking back to me?

ROB

Face starts turning red and looks agitated. Speaks through his teeth with a tight grin.

Is there anything else I can do?

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

You can tell corporate that they made a recipe for soggy sandwiches. What's your name? I'm going to report you.

ROB

I AM CORPORATE AND YOU CAN ADDRESS ANY COMPLAINT TO ME!

Merna, Lei, and John gasp.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

Well, so this is how you treat your customers?

ROB

YOU SIR. I'm sorry. But you are just—

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

Stop. My name is Gorgé, an undercover customer service representative sent from Devin's team. I came here as a surprise inspection on customer service skills. I don't think Devin will be too happy to know that his star employee, Rob is it, is out of control.

ROB

But—

I—

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

Well, I can't stay here and wait for you to catch your breath. I have more stores to inspect. Rob, why don't you call Devin right now and try to save your ass before I write up my report?

Rob looks bewildered, then runs off stage.

MERNA

Wow. Can I get you anything? On the house of course.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER/GORGÉ

Just a turkey sandwich with jalapeños.

He winks at Lei and hands her a written note. Lei opens it and smiles.

JOHN

Wow, he just saved our ass. He looks familiar...

Looks at Lei holding her note.

Hey, what does it say?

LEI

To keep using my voice.

Centurion

Justin Weekley

A glistening tree of hundred-foot stature
loomed over land like an anchor and chain
in open ocean waters.

Years wizened beyond account,
of pines and bark of earthy dark: a
sign of her noble mark.

Wind and rain
dared not touch her, as she is the heir
of her Mother's radiant luster.

Yet in her hue of vibrant health,
the fleeting gifts of time began
to fester.

Brawling bellows
of Earth's rebellious
sons quaked and shuddered
both root and branch.

Tortuous metal
struck her form and bled and blighted
patterns pure—sap seeped
of cleaving wounds, her elegant visage a fragile
shroud.

No longer did she
gleam in splendor, but stooped frail and petrified
like warping metal—a shrunken stump of used timber, a
corpse of the once majestic Centurion.

Practice

*Gevork
Sherbetchyan*



Echoes

K. M. Tisdale

There is nothing to atone for
Traded first four times,
By the same
Dialects,
Before your feet
Touched the sand.
A sea captain shouts,
As the iron contraption locks.
The recesses of the mind
Will soon remember,
Your majestic life
Wearing of gold ornaments,
On your arms
On your legs,
You will soon
Remember,

The odoriferous
Palm oiled wood
You lined your neck
With for perfume.

You will soon
Remember,
The Royal Blue Clothing
You dyed from berries.

Remember
What
Your Ancestor Equiano
Said

Every cell in your body,
Will soon remember,
How your ancestor
Took the pen from you.

He told you to come see,
Straighten your spine,
Recall the time, Read the Lines
Drink the palm wine.

History is anew
 Within you,
 It won't
 Dissipate.

As my heart
 Pounds
 Your Voice
 Echoes On And On And On.

Meet the Cover Artist: Elizabeth Rodriguez

I am an alumni from California State University Northridge with a Bachelor's in Art. My body of work is an amalgamation of real life meets post impressionist color theory. From a very early age I was introduced to art classes through my K-12 education. With much love and fascination in drawing, I began to take it more seriously to pursue as a profession. Now I am a freelance illustrator with various projects under my belt with more to come.

What do you aim to say with your art?

I enjoy invoking a mood with color. For pieces as busy as "Group of Misfits," I thought about how eclectic people's personality can be reflected in their fashion. If you ever step outside and look at a crowd, everyone has a narrative just by how they present themselves. It makes you imagine what that person does, where they are going. Living in a city like Los Angeles you see all colorful characters and it's plentiful with inspiration.

Meanwhile a piece like "Empty," it's more about the subconscious. That feeling where a person is day dreaming but not thinking about anything particular. You're just there but not here completely. With my art



Empty
Elizabeth Rodriguez

Group of Misfits

Elizabeth Rodriguez



that influences my work, whether it be technique or philosophy. No matter how many years I work on my craft there is always room for growth as well as taking in different perspectives.

it's more about soaking in the feeling. I can make a body of work based on a singular topic but it will look nothing like my previous series. I like surprising people. I enjoy that unpredictability that I give to viewers.

What inspires your art?

I was always inspired by my environment, graphic novels, and alternative subcultures. Nothing grand or profound per say. I think many artists these days have similar responses but there's nothing wrong with being inspired with what is familiar to you. My method in approaching a piece can vary from medium to medium. I love all forms of art from the old masters to my peers and there is a lot that I apply from them

INSTAGRAM @Pyretta95

ARTFOL @Pyretta95