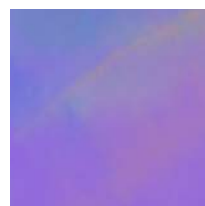
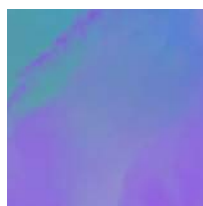
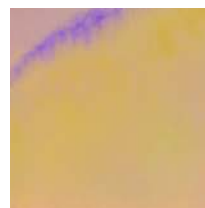




**NR**



# *How to Interact with this Book!*

In this issue of the Northridge Review there are some alternative ways to interact with the book:

1. If you didn't notice by now, the squares on the front page are clickable and will lead you to a random work in the book. This allows you to break away from navigating this issue in a linear way.

2. See those colorful buttons on the side? Those arrows let you go to the previous, next, or a random page of the book! Finish a poem? Hit that circle and you might end up seeing some art! (You can also navigate in the traditional way by hitting the left and right arrows on your keyboard.)

3. Ever get lost? Hit that "NR" button at the top right of the page to head back to the "Table of Contents" page, where you can click on any story to lead you directly there.

We hope you enjoy this fun little addition! Happy reading!



# Acknowledgments

*The Northridge Review* thanks the Associated Students of CSUN, the English Department, including the Creative Writing Program faculty and Dr. Beth Wightman for all their wonderful aid and support. Special thanks to Frank De La Santo and Wendy Ventura for all the behind the scenes work that makes a magazine possible. Thank you to all of the wonderful humans who submitted to our magazine. Your talented voices bring life to our publication. Thank you to Ellen Jerosz for taking the time to organize and facilitate our virtual visit to Special Collections. The rich literary history and knowledge shared with us inspired this issue greatly. A special thank you to Marina Mularz for visiting us and giving us valuable insight in the world of writing and editing. Your expertise and passion helped us craft this issue of our magazine. Lastly, thank you to Sean Pessin for your unwavering passion, guidance, and knowledge that make you the incredible person and leader you are.



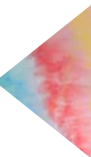
# Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

In a world that is ever changing, we learn to adapt, grow, and create. This edition of our book represents that journey. Started in 1962, *The Northridge Review* has withstood the test of time because of fierce passion and ability to overcome extraordinary circumstance. With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that our team has worked resiliently to bring this magazine into existence. Our team has worked countless hours to keep this tradition alive and showcase the CSUN community. In our 59 years of publishing this anthology, this will be the second issue produced in a global pandemic.

I thank you as a reader of our book and a supporter of the literary community. I know you will enjoy the time spent reading the works of our lovely, talented contributors. I hope the contents provide you with hopeful inspiration that even in this ever changing world, creativity and passion will always persist.

Emily Foytek  
Managing Editor



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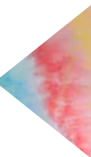
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# Poetry



## City Lights

On the outside looking in,  
 Lights ablaze.  
 Colorful flames on pins,  
 Rainbow haze.  
 Flooding the night sky,  
 Light reigns.  
 Embers learn to fly,  
 Moonlight's bane.  
 A sight to behold,  
 As a bystander.  
 Inside stories untold,  
 No answer.  
 The multicolored fires  
 Don't burn,  
 The city's dark choir,  
 Voices of concern.

A discordant sound  
 Off pitch  
 A crescendo bound  
 Found in a ditch  
 A uniquely dull melody  
 Flat noise  
 Song fighting desperately  
 Not to be destroyed  
 A threnody not yet written  
 Unheard  
 Roams 'round madness stricken

Hymn blurred.

Sickening sour notes,  
 Mistakes.  
 Disguised and rewrote,  
 Betrayed.  
 A false masterpiece noticed,  
 But unexplored.  
 Vivid lights steal the focus...

Darkness ignored.



## I Wonder...

I wonder what it's like...  
 What it's like to go on a jog,  
 Feel that fresh morning fog...

Without fearing being shot down like a dog.

I wonder what it's like...  
 What it's like to walk outside,  
 To take those strides...

Without having to look side to side.

I wonder what it's like...  
 What it's like to walk in a store,  
 Prance around that sales floor....

Without being watched from the door.

I wonder what it's like...  
 What it's like to experience emotion freely,  
 Have anger not be a luxury....

Without worrying what stereotype they see....

But I'll never know what it's like,  
 'Cause I wasn't given that life

No....

See mine's more filled with plight  
 'Cause the world said my skin wasn't right.

But if I had been white  
 I wouldn't have to wonder what it's like  
 'Cause I'd be living a more privileged life.

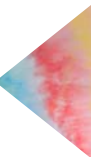
Now don't get purposely confused.  
 I don't want to be misconstrued,  
 'Cause y'all have your hardships too,  
 But you'll never have it as hard as I do  
 'Cause this country was built for you....

By people who look like me,  
 Ironically.

And don't get it twisted.  
 I don't want you to miss this,  
 See, my black it is gifted  
 Topped with a bow like it's Christmas,  
 And my power, it is mythic.

Wouldn't trade it in at all,  
 Wouldn't hit uninstall.  
 Even with the world's recall,  
 My Black still stands tall  
 'Cause it wasn't meant to be small.

So I'll keep wondering what it's like  
 To live that more privileged life.  
 I'll keep all my strife.  
 Now watch my black ignite,  
 And set this world alight.



## Temple of Crows

This wrought-iron bird searches,  
its unblinking black  
marble gaze  
plows the cloud-cluttered sky.

Its cold, dull wings  
flat against its sides.  
No perfect wire feather  
ruffled by the coming storm.

The crows mill  
beneath the windowsill,  
revering its majestic stillness.  
They offer prayers,

rattled knucklebones in a lacquered cup,  
to the sentinel staring defiantly up  
at the roiling heavens.  
Rain pocks the dust at their feet.

In ones and twos, they cast  
their fragile bodies into the wind.  
Their silent iron idol  
searches between the raindrops for their return.



## Hill Country Picnic

Mosquito-bitten boys  
swinging buckthorn switches  
hunkered down in the grass  
over a dead rat snake.

While the grown-ups talked small  
and the little ones tagged,  
they poked at the strange swell  
in its glossy black scales.

It burst. Out slid a lone  
long limp jackrabbit foot  
bridging wound to earth, its  
claws gouging the topsoil.

*Listen, children, whispered the snake.  
The difference between want and greed  
is what you take beyond your need.*



## Untitled

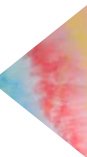
Down in the mossy dark,  
fingers cold, feet sodden,  
shivering, you scratch time  
in fencepost blocks of five,

marking the pinprick dawns  
and twilights flickering  
high above; a cascade  
of hours pouring down,

rising to your ankles,  
your shins soaked in idle  
moments, and still it rains.

You call a tremulous  
“Is it safe to come up?”  
Days pass with no answer.

But even in the chill,  
rising waters of time,  
just one more tomorrow  
is cause enough for hope.



## feeling is a band-aid

what sound would I make  
 kissing the front of a speeding  
 unmarked car do you think it  
 might be beautiful make no  
 mistake I am scared there are  
 certainties to be inherited and  
 kept behind the ear to chew  
 on later people are supposed to  
 die slowly and eventually like  
 sips at dinner taken by whoever  
 is in charge not a kid who found  
 the cookie jar with step stool and  
 opportunity I refuse to try and  
 be safe landing naked inside a  
 fire pit your condolences for  
 burnt skin will not help me  
 become someone I am ground  
 up birthday cake marrow hiding  
 in bone I'm not sure is mine I  
 am questions collected in dark  
 circles you cannot hear mosquitos  
 slowly sipping you gone with  
 cigarette tongues do not smack  
 them and end *their* search for  
 a few more minutes I turn off  
 the lights and nothing will ask  
*what do you miss* ghosts do  
 not haunt what they do not  
 recognize leave me a message in  
 case I come back from wallowing  
 in my bullshit or leave a vice that  
 will leave them shaking down  
 their heads misery loves everything  
 I shouldn't feeling is a band-  
 aid pickled in blood I have thrown  
 the glass against the wall screamed  
 loud enough to burst I will dip my  
 head deep in clear and sip myself gone



## The Obvious

Reality doesn't smack, it pierces:  
a needle pushing through folds of brain  
like breaking blackberry skin, a familiar rip  
as flesh makes way for metal. No one  
told me it would act as an antenna  
picking up the buzzing of a voice you don't want  
to hear. No one told me that getting older meant walking  
past convenient cliffs on the road back home,  
and that most adults spend their nights  
licking their wounds alone.

But even ghosts have a forever home. And we know gravity will  
never fail us, even when choices  
hang like nooses in our empty tombs.  
The more empty we are, the higher we bounce  
up. When the world you're surrounded by  
becomes oatmeal, eat in fistfuls until you are sick,  
full of sludge, but can hear a faint *I'm proud*.  
It will come from the wet fire pit of ideas you don't bother to believe  
anymore. But it isn't charity, it's competence, it's an assignment;  
it is ripping out the needle, and living with the gaps.





## Tortoise

“...and do not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not something else...”  
- Walt Whitman

I have a need to remind the world that Walt Whitman  
loved a tortoise. But she looks  
the way cough syrup tastes.  
Truth is the coin you're left sucking after the honey's  
all gone. The sinners  
are on a carnival cruise, drinking to forget  
themselves. The first cookie always tastes better than the rest:  
the more you stare, the picture only gets worse.  
Better wink back quickly even if  
you're not prepared to entertain them.  
Who's to blame if ducks can't read  
where you want them to cross. People only want  
the banana if they can take the peel  
off. Some hugs, well-intentioned, are a closing  
iron maiden. Poison frogs console each other  
the best they can; and the tortoise tries her best  
not to remain inside.



## Morning with my Sister

I lick golden kiwi juice from my fingers  
as you laugh at the faces I make—  
You told me to stay  
and for once  
I did.

Lego pieces litter the table  
but you can't find the one you need.  
"People Watching" plays from my phone  
and we sing along to traffic  
and crowds  
and loneliness.

In thirty minutes, I leave for Bio class  
and you'll still be here,  
doing childhood.  
When have we sat together in harmony?  
Tomorrow, will we rear our ugly monsters  
and display them once again?

For now, though,  
I'll help you find  
that gray two by three.



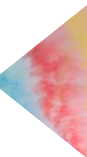
## Evening Walk in the Park

pebbles crunch beneath;  
i glance up through poplar trees—  
orange moon hangs low.



[The next 4 pages are a collection]

Salton Sea





Be sure to stop at the Salton Sea on your way. I've always wanted to see it.



## CURRENT LOCATION

67 years of life  
339 miles away  
a 5 hour and 22 minute drive  
(without traffic)  
and he's never visited the Salton Sea.  
It's nothing special really  
but the 1950's postcards  
show something else entirely.  
His eyes still cradle those visions  
when he fantasizes:  
the yacht club with the classic cars out front  
the blatant sun  
the palm trees  
the ivory rounded bodies  
in yellow and pink bikinis.

It scares me  
that a person can live their whole life  
without traveling the 339 miles  
to visit a destination they've always dreamt of.  
It scares me  
that surviving  
oftentimes gets in the way  
of living  
that all the others  
stopping by  
are thinking to themselves  
*It's nothing special*  
before they take a photograph.



## WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

We stopped at the Salton Sea  
it was our final trip together  
I staged a few pictures  
we hardly talked  
and the eerie silence reminded me  
that the life is eventually drained  
out of most beautiful possibilities.  
There were washed up fish  
unable to withstand the high salt levels  
and then there was us:  
barely touching each other in the night  
afraid that a flame might be ignited  
and neither one of us would be able to keep it lit.  
Unable to withstand the ebb and flow  
of your current mixed with mine.

I never loved you more  
than I did in those dark painful moments.  
Far away  
on the other side of the king bed  
snoring softly  
as I journeyed my waist the 7 inches across  
pressed it firmly against your groin.  
You wouldn't kiss me because I tasted like whiskey  
I didn't know how to pretend that didn't bother me.  
You didn't know how to get over it  
kiss me anyway  
so you didn't  
and the pilot went out.



## HOW WAS YOUR RIDE?

You were more  
than your choice to stay stagnant in order to survive.

The salt didn't kill us  
but the 3 seconds between your lips and mine  
was just too far for you to cross.

It's nothing special really  
shallow  
that the life is usually drained out of most beautiful possibilities.





Yo, I'll tell you what I want, WHAT I REALLY REALLY WANT:

*I want really fat crinkle fries.*

I want to fall into the arms of a man who can hold me  
one who has experienced being held by a man  
who perceives them to be a woman.

I want to fall into the arms of a man  
who doesn't perceive me to be a woman  
who knows how harmful that can be.

I want the softness that comes from being trans  
with all the rugged edges that accompany having survived that existence.

*I want really fat crinkle fries drenched in ketchup.*

I want to be drenched in the absence of gender  
or the vastness of it.

I want it to ooze from the creases.

I want to hold hands with a man who wears nail polish unironically.

I want to be loved for not being a woman  
rather than loved for the ways I resemble one.

*I want really fat crinkle fries that sparkle with crystals of salt.*

I want to kiss the skin of every body that is reduced to itself.

I want to count the ways our bodies abuse us  
celebrate how they express us.

I want to be decorated in trans love.

*I want really fat crinkle fries.*



## Yellow and Green on Our Last Harvest Night

This eve before  
the reivers arrive, I  
shiver at the water's edge.  
A burst of tepid air dries my face.

Hidden in the river reeds  
a green heron croons  
for his mate.

The crisp night nips  
my fingertips  
as I walk this Florida dirt road.  
A sweet pineapple scent  
wafts from the prickly  
fruit in fields along  
the Indian River  
and hugs my quivering lips  
like the sugary vapor  
of your mouth.

In tomorrow morning's harvest  
the robust yellow-flesh  
armadillo-clad pineapple  
will loosen its grip from the rich loam  
and abandon Florida forever.



Fiction



## Crafting on a Sunday

Miranda chewed her cereal slowly and deliberately as the sun crept out early on Sunday morning. Since her leave from work at the local elementary, she had taken the most time she could completing even the most basic tasks. The days did not feel so long and useless if she chewed every bite exactly thirty-two times before swallowing, as her doctor suggested, and if she flossed and brushed after every snack and meal. Her digestion had never been better and her teeth had never been brighter, but her mind felt as if it continually shrunk. It expanded and shifted inside her head, giving her thoughts and mood swings that produced anything from crying spells to utter and absolute emptiness. She scanned the word search on the back of the cereal box in an attempt to gain full alertness when the phone's loud and acute ringing did just that. She contemplated just how much energy it would take to get up and walk the five steps to the wall mount, and whether the call would be worth it, before she remembered her mom saying: "If I need you to pick your brother up from practice, I'll call to let you know." Miranda thought having her license would involve more thrilling endeavors. In her head, she had seen herself offering the most attractive underclassmen rides while they waited at the bus stop. If a male senior could go out with a junior or sophomore, why couldn't she? But instead, she found herself driving to her therapist's office twice a week and her psychiatrist's once a month. At least her pharmacy delivered, because if anyone familiar had seen her pick medication up, they would poke and prod around until they found out just which ailment Gonzalez suffered from and which medication they were taking to aid it, and if that happened, her family would be absolutely mortified, and her brother Diego would probably be chased off the lacrosse field with kids badgering him about his crazy sister having finally



cracked and being locked up at home. She finally rolled her eyes, leisurely stood up, stretched until her back cracked, adjusted her lilac bathrobe, and made her way to the phone.

“Hello?”

“Miranda!”, a nauseatingly cheery voice boomed on the other end.

Miranda grimaced. “Yep, who’s this?”

“It’s Debbie from church. Listen, is your mom home?”

This was no help. Miranda was four the last time she was in a church. “No? Can I give her a message?”

“Well,” the woman hesitated before continuing, “I just wanted to let her know that your dad was in my neighborhood this morning.”

Miranda’s eyes narrowed. She swallowed hard and felt remnants of cereal go down the back of her throat. The line was silent.

“Hon, you still there?”

“You live on Maple?”

“Yeah, I just thought I’d give your mom a call. She’s been through so much this year,” the woman lamented.

Miranda shut her eyes and let out a livid breath. “Sorry, who is this again?”

“It’s Debbie! You all came to my place for New Year’s.”

Silence.

“You took off with my Alex and kept him till two, remember?”

Miranda finally remembered, but wished she had not. “Right.” She tightened her grip on the pearl-colored phone and asked, “Is he still there?”



“I don’t know, doll, maybe. I just saw him go in.” The woman paused, then added, “I’m really sorry.”

“Yeah, well, thanks for letting us know, *Debbie*.”

Miranda hung the phone up with a loud clang, paused with her hand on her hip, then sped to the kitchen drawers. Once there, she leaned over the counter with her head hanging low and breathed in and out. “*One flew east, one flew west,*” she whispered to herself. She stood up straight, staring at one drawer in particular. “*One flew over the cuckoo’s nest,*” she said aloud, and pulled the drawer out. From it, she grabbed a large, slender knife. She held it in a stabbing position and looked at her reflection on the small microwave door, holding her chin up with purpose.

“No, that’s ridiculous,” she murmured, and put it back.

She grabbed a cleaver, and thought it was even more ridiculous, but made a mental note of the fact that she liked the way she looked in a bathrobe holding a cleaver, and that it would make a good concept for her and her friend Emily to write around and shoot later. She placed the cleaver back in the drawer, just about ready to abandon her plans, when she caught sight of her mother’s large orange coupon-cutting scissors. Her eyes lit up as she picked them up, gave them a trial *snip snip*, and slipped them into her robe pocket. She grabbed her keys and headed out the door.

Her dirty bunny slippers’ ears flopped furiously as she treaded through the snow and slipped into her inherited ’84 Jetta. The engine struggled to start and for a second she feared the Colorado temperatures might keep her from exacting revenge. It started, though, so she peeled out and headed toward Maple.

She knew exactly which house to look for. It was bigger, nicer and cleaner than the Gonzalez home, and Miranda remembered lamenting the cleanliness



because she knew it was something her father appreciated and couldn't get at home. Miranda's mother was immensely sweet, but not very tidy, and though Miranda tried her best to keep the house in basic order, her mother's manic tendencies made it difficult for it to remain that way. She considered this a personal failure and for the first time felt partly responsible for her father's affair. The last time she had been to the home it was decorated for Halloween. Her older sister, who no longer lived at home, had torn all the pumpkin garlands from the bushes and mailbox after catching her dad inside filling the poodle's water bowl. He never filled the water bowl at home.

Miranda left her Jetta at an angle in the driveway. She slammed the door shut and treaded even more furiously to the house's front door, which she knew would be unlocked from experience. Her dad had always taught them to be suspicious of the world, but how did he end up in a house with an unlocked front door? She couldn't understand it. She stepped inside and marched directly upstairs, sure of where she was headed. She was just beginning to feel the creeping cold and wetness of her slippers on her feet when she heard her dad and the woman speaking lowly from behind the slightly open master bedroom door. Miranda pushed the door open all the way slowly, and when they saw her, the woman shrieked and pulled the covers up over her chest, leaving only her tacky green nightgown's straps visible. Her dad immediately crawled out of bed, also tugging at the sheets to cover himself, and Miranda whispered, "Perfect."

She went straight to the woman's side of the bed and grabbed her by a chunk of cheaply-dyed burgundy hair. It was brittle in Miranda's hand, but she was grateful, because it only helped tighten her grip around it. The woman shrieked in disbelief.



“Miranda!” her dad yelled. “Leave her, please!” He wasn’t dressed and therefore could not, or rather would not, move to stop her.

“Chivalry really is dead,” Miranda scoffed, looking directly at her father and his inaction, but later, she would have the fleeting thought that maybe his lack of action meant he cared more for her comfort than his mistress’ safety, but Miranda would then rationalize that her dad could never respect her even that much, and that he was just a coward.

Miranda ignored him and tugged on the hair as hard as she could to bring the woman up from her knees to a standing position. Once this was done, she yanked and dragged the woman down the stairs, the woman shrieking and grunting all the way. The burgundy broad tripped halfway down, momentarily halting the ordeal, but Miranda used her free hand to grab the woman by the elbow and get her back up so they could continue. During the pause, Miranda caught a glimpse of a family portrait hanging on the wall. Two daughters and a husband. Where were they? Probably living their lives thinking Mom was in spinning class. A sham. They made it through the front door and onto the front yard, where Miranda promptly threw the woman to the relatively fresh fallen snow and pulled the scissors out her pocket. She grabbed a new chunk of brittle burgundy hair and snipped it as close to the scalp as she possibly could. The woman clawed at Miranda’s hands with rhinestone acrylic nails, but Miranda was unflinching in her execution. She grabbed the chopped chunk, left the woman on the ground, and marched back to her car. By then, her father had appeared half-dressed at the front door and the woman yelled back at him, “She cut my hair! Do something!” Miranda’s dad called after her, but she was already busy making sure no cars were behind her while she backed out the driveway. She turned her head right and whispered, “*One flew east,*” turned her head left and said, “*One flew west,*” and as she heard her dad yell her name





one more time over the lady's obnoxious sobbing, she exhaled, "*One flew over the cuckoo's nest,*" and pulled out. Her instructor had always reprimanded her for forgetting to actually turn and check for cars instead of just relying on her rearview mirror. He would've been proud if he had seen the way she left.

\*\*\*

Dinner was silent that night. Miranda's mom made trout, steamed rice and veggies to satisfy her husband's low-calorie diet, so Miranda and her brother shoved the plate's contents around back and forth without actually eating much.

"This shit sucks," Diego whispered to Miranda.

"Shh! It's your dad's favorite. It's good for you too," their mom whispered back, and shot a sheepish smile in her husband's direction. He sat motionless with red-rimmed eyes at the head of the table and paid her no mind. She sighed.

"So," Miranda's mom started, "anyone wanna talk about how their day went?" She looked around the table, but no one so much as made eye contact with her. She patted her greying, messy curls that sat like a bird's nest atop her head self-consciously, but kept trying.

"Miranda? That's an... interesting necklace you have on. Did one of your students make it?"

"What, this?" Miranda pointed at the piece of yarn around her neck. She'd knotted tufts of burgundy hair to it and separated them with colorful beads she'd stolen from her brother's old craft kit. She was still in her lilac robe.

"I was feeling creative today," she answered, and shoveled some rice into her mouth. Her father cleared his throat, sniffled, and brought a small spoonful of rice to his mouth. Miranda watched him intently. He stopped chewing abruptly



and brought a napkin to his lips. From them, he expelled a partially chewed rice wad with one long, burgundy hair attached to it. He pulled the rest of the strand out from his mouth with his thumb and index finger and looked up at his daughter. She smirked. He gagged.

“Santiago, what’s the matter?” Miranda’s mom asked and placed her large, worn hand on her husband’s. Decades of factory work had stolen their youth long before the Gonzalezes could afford to live in the house they had now, and she refused to treat them with manicures and acrylics because she claimed her chores wouldn’t let the effect last, anyway.

Miranda casually gnawed at a sautéed snow pea. “Yeah, Dad, what’s the matter?” she asked, and kept chewing while awaiting a response.

He looked up at his daughter with betrayed, swollen eyes and stood up from the table. Everything was still. “This house is a fucking pigsty,” he finally said after a few seconds, looking directly at Miranda. She met his gaze with equal, if not deeper, disdain and contempt. He marched upstairs, and the remaining family members sat motionless.

“Miranda,” her mom whispered after the footsteps had disappeared into the master bedroom. “What did you do?”

Miranda nearly choked on the half-chewed pea still sitting in her mouth. She cleared her throat and croaked, “What did I do?” She felt the heat of rage rise to her ears. “I didn’t do anything. Why don’t you ask your husband what *he* did, for a change?”

“Your father’s going through a really tough time at work right now, and he doesn’t need you kids making it harder for him.”

“‘Kids?’ What did I do?” Miranda’s brother asked defensively. “Miranda’s the one



who bums around the house all day.”

“Hey, your sister does plenty, and you could have picked your shoes and backpack off the living room floor today, mister,” their mother responded.

“I was going to do it after dinner!” Diego rebuffed while Miranda shut her eyes and tried her best to breathe steadily.

“Your dad just wants to come home to a clean house, Diego,” his mom explained.

Miranda’s eyes suddenly shot open, sick of the words that had turned to white noise. She felt her mind teeter.

“Enough!” exclaimed Miranda. “*You* didn’t do anything. Diego and *I* didn’t do anything either. We’re not taking the blame for dad’s bullshit and your marital problems anymore.”

Miranda’s mom’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“Oh, *excuse me*,” Miranda corrected herself with eyes rolled so far up they looked as if they might go all the way back. “I meant *cleaning* problems. If you two are having *cleaning problems*, work it out amongst yourselves or get a *fucking* cleaning lady. But then dad already might have, so check in on that.” She was agitated. “How am I the only sane and sensible person in this family? It can’t be possible,” she said, and stood up from the table leaving strands of dyed hair by her plate and on the floor.

Her mom and brother sat stunned.

“It can’t be possible!” she yelled again while stomping up the stairs.

Everything was silent.

“Well,” Diego said after a moment. “It really was an interesting necklace.”



“Yes,” his mom responded after a beat, her eyes far away. “Your sister’s very talented,” she said, and she began to sob over her trout.



## Darkness Is Your Candle

I held her hand for the last time, it was cold and still. Underneath the white cloth her young body was naked. She had been thoroughly washed and prepared right before we came in. Even in death she was beautiful. Her thick eyebrows were arched perfectly. She was skinny, as expected for a preteen. Her body had not yet begun to develop, but the cancer did. This was all for her: America, our new life. I just wish she was here to see it, to see me.

The funeral was similar to the ones we had in Kabul. The cemetery was a landscape of dirt, no grass in sight. No perfectly manicured lawns. Just dirt and death. The sun was brutal like it had been since the day we arrived. Late August in Los Angeles reminded me of home, the sweltering heat gave me hope for a new life here, over 7,000 miles away from Afghanistan.

After the service we loaded up into our cars to head to the local mosque. The parking lot was small, only about fifteen cars could fit. Fifteen cars were all we needed. We didn't have people here, no family or friends. The few people that showed up were our neighbors, mostly from countries like Pakistan and Iran. We didn't share much, but we shared a religion and that was enough for them to take a day to pray for the twelve-year-old Afghan girl that died of cancer. I scanned the room and I noticed Omar was missing. He lived on our floor, I remember he said he was a Muslim, I guess just not the type to come to a mosque.

Inside, the mosque prayer was segregated by gender: men prayed downstairs, and the women prayed upstairs. I took off my black dress shoes and placed them on a shelf. I started walking towards the men's section alongside my father, as I always had. I was stopped by my mother. She grabbed my arm tightly, ushered me upstairs with her, and pulled a black hijab out of her purse and motioned for



me to wear it. Now I was more confused than ever. This is what she wanted, her son. Now Laila is dead and she wants her daughter back.

Laila was the daughter my parents had wanted, and I was the son. Except I was not a boy. My birth came as a great frustration for my parents. They had already suffered three miscarriages. Then my brother was born, the son my dad dreamed of, and then he died naturally as a baby. In his sleep, not even a week after his birth. Then they went through it all again with my next brother. When I arrived, they decided they wouldn't count on me to survive, but I did. The only issue being I was not the preferred gender. But this was an easy fix, my father simply decided to raise me as a boy, a *bacha posh*, as is common for families in Afghanistan. For my entire fourteen years of life, I've been known to the world as Abdullah, only known as Mena to my parents and Laila.

Upstairs I felt out of place, everyone knew what I was. Rumors about my gender passed through the hallways of our apartment complex like wildfire. They all thought I was strange, they all were upset that I was clearly a woman now, and yet I still pretended to be a boy. I looked so masculine in front of these staring eyes. I wore a black button-down shirt, my breasts tightly pushing against the buttons that were made for a man's body. I wore black skinny jeans. My hair was cut short and slicked back the way I liked it. My eyebrows were thick and untrimmed, my light mustache also made an appearance, I never bothered to shave it. Man or woman, I knew I was about the ugliest thing in this room, on this planet.

The session upstairs lasted too long. I was sweating too much. Sweating because people were judging me, sweating because it was 100 degrees outside and the A/C inside broke. I ran out to the underground parking garage for an escape. The caterers were preparing lunch. I could smell the fresh kabobs, rice, various stews; my stomach grumbled, and I quickly forgot about the people



upstairs. I stepped out into the sun, looking for my father. I found him sitting in our rusty green minivan, the A/C blasting. I had an ice-cold water bottle ready for him, but I saw that he already had a drink in hand, whiskey. I was shocked. I've never seen something like this before, especially not in the parking lot of a mosque. He pleaded with me and I promised not to tell anyone. I rushed back inside before he could say another word.

After lunch it was time to leave. We packed up the rest of the leftover food and headed home as a family of three. The drive was less than pleasant. The van swerved in and out of the lanes. Dad drove too slowly, then too fast. My mom was too occupied with her own thoughts to even notice. I wondered if this was the first time he had driven drunk—the first time he had a drink. For my family's sake, I hoped this would be the last time.

We came home and I ripped off my thick black hijab that I wore to the funeral. My first hijab. I still wore men's clothes. I felt comfortable in this state, half-man and half-woman. I stared at myself in the mirror. I really did look like a man. Tall and gangly. Short, thick black hair. Thick eyebrows, even a slight mustache that I refused to shave. I stared at my ears. I wanted them pierced soon. A knock at the door drew me away from my reflection. It was our neighbor, Omar. A small, dark Pakistani boy. He was one of the few friends I had here, I was sad that he didn't come to the funeral.

"Hello," I said to him as I opened the door.

"Hey, I just wanted to say I'm sorry for your loss, your sister was a very nice girl. I lost my parents at a young age, so I know what you're going through," he told me as he handed me some flowers.

"Thank you, Omar. Would you like to come in for some tea?" I looked at him and wondered if he knew what I was. Right now, I seemed like a boy. If I were a girl, would he feel differently towards me?



“No, I’m okay, thank you. Let me know if you need anything, Abdullah” he replied and I had my answer, to him I was just a fourteen-year-old boy. He heard me being called Mena enough to know I’m a girl. Maybe he just saw me as a boy like the rest of the world had.

I decided after Laila’s death and after Omar’s unwillingness to accept me as a female that I should finally act like one, but the idea of it scared me. It also scared my parents who had known me as their son for so long. My mother supported the idea, but my father was gravely against it. I was told to keep pretending, for just a bit longer. My father just lost his daughter and he did not want to lose his son as well. So, I sucked it up, I kept pretending to be a boy, to be something I’m not.

#### Four Years Later

“Abdullah wake up! Your baba is in jail!” my mother woke me up screaming.

“Jail? What happened?” I asked, but I knew the answer. It was the damn alcohol.

Six months in jail. My father was locked up for six months for driving under the influence. This had a big impact on my family. My mother couldn’t work. She failed to assimilate. She could barely drive, barely speak English, barely be American. What that meant for me was that I had to put my college plans aside, I needed to work so we could survive. I was upset but at least it was only temporary. I picked up my dad’s shifts at work, sixty hours a week working as a minimum wage parking lot security guard. It was a good thing I was still a boy. His supervisor, an old Afghan man named Kanishka, would have never hired me if he knew I was a girl. So, the *bacha posh* facade kept going, years after I began puberty, years after we came to America; I was still a boy.





The neighbors gossiped about my family once again. Although now the focus was on my alcoholic father, not my gender. Everyone but Omar participated in the gossip. Probably because he didn't live under his parent's influence, he was all alone. After college he got signed by some big movie studio. Apparently, he's a big deal in Hollywood but he never talks about his work life. He offers to help my mother and I, but we know better than to accept anyone's help.

Life continued this way. I worked. My mother complained. My dad stayed locked up. This wasn't the American dream I had hoped for. I wanted to be a young beautiful girl. I wanted to be in college. I wanted to be away from my family for once. This was just a dream. Reality sunk in and the overnight shifts kept piling up. Men treated me as one of their own. Women were reluctant to be my friend. This life also kept me safe in a way. If there was one benefit to this life, it was that everyone was repulsed by what I was. It was my greatest shield against the harsh world.

Everything changed when we got the phone call. Only two weeks shy of my dad being released, we received a call from Kabul. My grandmother, my Bibi Jaan was gravely sick. She was my father's mother, but also a distant relative of my mother. Like Laila's sickness bringing us to America, Bibi Jaan's illness would bring us back to Kabul, forever. After hearing the dreaded news, I ran out to the shared community balcony. I could smell the distinctive scent of lit cigarettes. I looked over and saw Omar leaning over the railing with one in his hand.

"I didn't know you smoked," I said as I stared at his face in the moonlight. His glasses shined as he looked up.

"I just started actually; do you want one?" He asked me as he held one out for me. I had nothing to lose so I accepted the offer. We stood in silence. The balcony overlooked the courtyard. From across the way, we could see all the neighbors in their own apartments. Some cooked in the kitchen under the



glow of orange-colored lights. Some sat in the darkness of the living room, the only light coming from the TV. I thought about life in those apartments, each probably better than my own. My thoughts were interrupted as Omar spoke up, breaking our peaceful silence.

“I heard your dad’s coming home soon. That’s good,” he spoke without looking at me, his eyes fixed on the woman in the kitchen.

“It’s not really,” I replied.

“You can finally quit that stupid job. It’s not safe for a young girl to be out working security,” he flatly stated.

“Only I’m not a girl, remember?” I questioned him.

“You are. I know you can’t be Mena right now, soon you can,” he tried to reassure me.

“No, I can’t. At least not here. We’re moving back to Kabul when my dad is released. My grandmother is ill. My dad is a drunk. My mother hates this country,” I replied with tears flowing confidently down my face knowing Omar wasn’t paying attention.

“They can go back, you can stay. You’re old enough. Just get a job, go to college, live your dream,” he said as if dreams come true for people like me.

“Where would I even go? What would I do?” I questioned him as I began considering the idea.

“Go to some college on the beach. Then get a job in a mall. Apply for scholarships. I did it all on my own, my parents left me too. Only their death brought my independence. You can do the same,” he stated and for once I began to believe in myself.

“Okay.” I smiled as I stared at the man on his couch watching football.

“Also, Mena, I don’t mean to offend you, but you need to cut it out and start acting like a woman. No man will want you the way you are now.” His last



remark was like a knife jabbed into my heart.

“You don’t know how hard it is for a person like me. You don’t understand because you were actually born as a boy!” I screamed now taking my attention off the man in his apartment and towards Omar.

“I know, but you can’t keep dressing like a boy. You need to take care of yourself, wear makeup, fix your hair, shave that goddamn mustache off!” He replied back, now looking away from the woman in the kitchen and staring back at me.

“It’s not that easy! You don’t understand. Why don’t you worry about yourself for once? You claim you’re some big Hollywood producer, but you don’t even own a car! You lock yourself in that apartment all day and rot! We are the same, you’re no better than I am,” I muttered and felt I was being too harsh to him. That’s what happened when I got too comfortable with a person. I walked away before he could reply, tossing my lit cigarette towards his direction.

The bags were all packed. I stared at the tiny one-bedroom apartment that we called home for four long years. I took it all in as I grabbed the rest of our stuff to move out. My dad had the least amount of stuff accumulated. He could fit his entire life into one suitcase. I managed to fit mine in two. One for Mena, one for Abdullah. I didn’t know what I would do with the numerous amounts of men’s clothes stuffed into my suitcase, there was simply no use for them anymore. I hauled it out to the front porch and saw a familiar face approaching me. It was Omar. I hadn’t talked to him since that night on the balcony. It felt so long ago, more than a month had passed but it felt like a lifetime.

He had seen me, and I knew what he thought. He was happy that I finally took his advice. I was a proper woman now. He stared at my revealing outfit. I wore a tight white turtleneck top that displayed the large shape of my breasts. I had on a short plaid mini skirt that revealed my long legs and thick thighs.



And to complete the look, tall black thigh high boots. I felt good. I felt sexy. My face was lightly covered in makeup, my hair curled with blonde highlights. I no longer felt weird; the new look was freeing. I hated to admit it, but Omar was right. I never got this much positive attention in my life and I couldn't stop now. My parents lowered their heads as they walked past me and headed towards the car, ashamed of the type of woman I had become.

"Hey Mena," Omar said as he looked at me, really looking at me for the first time.

"Hi Omar," I replied quietly. Suddenly feeling naked in front of his staring eyes.

"So, you're leaving for Kabul? Dressed in that?" He questioned me.

"No, I'm not. My parents are going. I took your advice. I threw a fit until they agreed to let me stay. I'm going to Santa Barbara right now, I'm attending UCSB in the fall," I explained to him.

"UCSB, wow that's a great school. Right on the beach too. I'm proud of you" he responded genuinely smiling.

"Yeah, well I guess I have to go. Bye, Omar," I responded as I started heading down.

"Wait! You have my number, call me if you need anything. You're all alone in America now, no family or friends in Santa Barbara. You also need to remember you're a woman now, a very beautiful one. Take precautions to protect yourself, you're not as safe as you were being Abdullah," he sternly warned me.

"I know. I'll call you if I need anything," I replied as I headed out. I knew I'd never call him again. Moving was a fresh start for me. I didn't need anyone in my life that knew about my complicated past.

The best version of myself came about after my parents left for Kabul. I was finally on my own as a free woman. A free woman. Something I never could've



had if I moved back home. Life wasn't amazing, but it was so much better. I lived in a tiny two-bedroom beach house in Isla Vista. I had five roommates, all women. There was Janice, my closest friend and bunkmate. The rest of the girls and I became good friends. They were very feminine, which I liked. They always helped me get my hair and makeup ready because I had no idea how to do it. Every weekend we would go to parties. We would get drunk. We would go to the beach and I'd wear bikinis. Forgetting all modesty my past had taught me. I went crazy for this new life, because I knew back home, I'd either be a wife and mother, or worse, a social outcast based on my expanded time as a *bacha posh*.

No one in the house knew of my past, any of it. My dead sister, my alcoholic father, my pushy mother, my dying grandmother. No one needed to know what it took for me to get where I am now. I fit in relatively well given my circumstances. My roommates noticed how comfortable I was around guys, having been surrounded by them my whole life as a boy it wasn't strange to me. They noticed how I was much stronger than them, how I was more willing to do the tedious jobs around the house that they didn't want to do. I was clearly bigger than all of them, I towered over them at 5'9". Sometimes I forgot I even was a woman, only to be reminded when strange men would approach me to flirt with them. I always turned them down, I was waiting for the right one to come across my way.

Six months of living on the beach with the girls and they still didn't ask any questions about me. I began to wonder if they even cared about me. They never offered to go to campus with me, they didn't even know what I was majoring in. I slowly began to feel like less of a roommate and friend, and more of a house servant. I was the one that carried Sheila home whenever her tiny body became too drunk. I was the one that took out the trash, did the dishes, swept the floors. I made sure the girls didn't go home with the wrong men, and if they



tried, I would step in the way. I did so much for these girls, but at the end of the day, I still felt so different from them, even though I tried so hard to become one of them. I grew tired of it, so I slowly cut them off. Instead of spending my weekends partying, I stayed home. I got a job at Target and worked as often as I possibly could, sometimes thirty hours a week. Knowing all my efforts would soon pay off.

This weekend there would be a big party for the students of our college. The girls looked forward to the event for so long. I shrugged it off, knowing I would pull a late-night shift at Target instead. Everyone else needed the weekend off to party which meant more money for me. As they lived it up on the beach, I restocked shelves, marked sale items, and helped customers. I worked until my knees ached. This job was much harder than the six months I worked security. Here you actually had to work; security meant sitting on your phone for ten hours. Finally, it was midnight and I was ready to clock out. I grabbed my stuff from the breakroom and started my walk home. It was short, only about fifteen minutes. I was never scared walking alone at night, I was used to it. As I walked with my headphones in, I stared at the palm trees that surrounded my tiny city. I thought about the meal I would eat when I got home, frozen fish sticks with French fries. My mouth watered at the thought. I picked up my pace and suddenly, I felt hands grabbing my body, I was being taken away.

There were three men in total. I screamed out for help, but no one came to my aide. I was shoved into an old green van that resembled the one my father bought when we first came to America. I longed to be back with my family. My mouth was taped shut. I got a look at my captors, there was one older man that looked about forty. He had graying hair and blue eyes, and a long beard. There was another man that looked to be about my age, maybe in his twenties. He had long dark curly hair and dark eyes. He looked just like a college student, or



maybe one of the guys my roommates would bring to the house from time to time, but not the kind that steals a woman off the street. The last one was quite surprising because he was not a man, he was a young boy. He looked about twelve years old. What would a child be doing here with these men? With me? He looked identical to the man in his twenties, probably a younger brother. The odd pairing confused me. Mentally I prepared for what I knew would happen next.

All the seats were down in the van. My body lay flat as they began beating me, preparing me to be weak when it happened. The oldest man kicked my head with such force that I thought he wanted to kill me. I think I would rather be dead. I pretend that I was knocked out so he could finally stop. He did and then ripped my pants and underwear off. He ushered for the young child to rape me, which he hesitantly did as I struggled against him. My whole life had gone by without even kissing a man, now my innocence would be taken by force. I pushed against the boy, kicking him hard in the chest until finally one of the men hit me so hard that I knocked out.

I woke up and it was early morning, probably 5am. They still weren't finished with me. The seats were soaked thick in blood and all other fluids. I was knocked out once again. I woke up and was instantly covered in water. I opened my eyes and instantly saw I was on the beach, alone. They must have dropped me off here when they were done. I stood up but grew very dizzy. It was difficult to walk, difficult to stand. I laid back down on the cool sand to catch my breath. I was still wearing my red Target polo, but my jeans were no longer on. I looked down and saw I had on a pair of men's baggy red basketball shorts. The red concealed the blood that pooled at the crotch. I began crawling now, looking for my backpack, hoping that the men that did this at least had the decency to let me keep my backpack. I found it fifteen feet away from where I woke up. Inside



was untouched, I pulled my phone out as I tried to figure out who to call.

First, I called Janice because of all the roommates she was my closest friend. No answer. Then I called each of the roommates individually, Sheila, Marie, Lucia, and Grace. No answer from any of them. They probably got really drunk from last night's celebrations. I sent out a text in the group chat saying, "Call me now. Emergency" and hoped they would respond. Then I called my mother on WhatsApp, not even bothering to check what time it was in Kabul. Then after she didn't answer I left her a message too. I was running out of people to call. I debated calling the police, but I knew if I did, I would have to tell them exactly what happened. I was too embarrassed to even think about it. Then I decided to text Omar. Only I didn't know what to say. I simply shared my location with him, and he didn't answer either. I took note of what beach I was at and began the walk home, in shame. Others were beginning to wake up and smiled at me because to them looking like this signaled, I had a good night. If only they knew.

I made it home and pulled out my phone. I received one text, from Omar reading, "Do you need me to come?" and I simply responded "Yes", and walked into the shower. Our house only had one bathroom that was usually occupied with six girls in the home, but this morning it was empty. No one was home. I grew worried that what happened to me last night also happened to the other girls. I pushed the bad thoughts aside as I turned the shower to the hottest setting and began to cry, finally processing what happened to me. I laid in the shower for over two hours until I finally heard a knock at the door. I shut the water off and began to walk out. My skin was red and raw from all the scrubbing and hot water. I still felt dirty and violated. I opened the door and saw one of my roommates, Lisa.

"Hey! Are you done in there, it's been a while," she said to me.

"Yeah, all done," I replied as I climbed into my bed, still naked and wet. I hid





under the covers until I fell asleep.

“Mena, wake up, your boyfriend is here!” Janice said as she shook me awake. I instantly shot up, scared it was one of the men from last night.

“What? Who is here?” I demanded.

“Some guy said he’s your friend, his name is Omar?” She replied as if I knew he’d come.

“Right. Okay. Tell him I’ll be out soon,” I told her, and I instantly began to regret texting him. I didn’t want anyone to know, but now he’s here in my home, over two hours away from LA. I needed him to go away.

I searched through my closet looking for men’s clothes. It was the only thing I could feel safe in. I searched past the countless number of dresses and tight pants and came back empty handed. All I had were the red basketball shorts from last night that I already threw in the dumpster. I walked into the other room to try my luck with Lisa.

“Hey Lisa, do you have any clothes leftover from your ex-boyfriend? I really need to wear some men’s clothes today,” I prayed that she didn’t think the request was too weird. She stared at me blankly before going into her closet. She pulled out a large dark blue hoodie and basketball shorts. I accepted the hoodie but turned down the shorts. She returned with sweatpants and I thanked her profusely.

“You don’t have to return them, I only kept them because he was a jerk that cheated on me,” Lisa replied laughing. I smiled at her and walked off to change.

I walked into the living room and saw Omar sitting on the couch staring at his phone. He looked the same. Same glasses and short haircut. Same clothes. He awkwardly stood up to hug me and I instinctively backed away. I realized we have never hugged in the almost five years we had known each other. I apologized, feeling embarrassed now. He didn’t look offended.



“So... what’s up?” He questioned me as my roommates in the kitchen stared at us as they prepared a very late breakfast.

“Not much” I responded, feeling all the staring eyes on us. Omar noticed too as he ushered me to step outside with him. I stared at the ocean as he began to speak once again.

“Did you eat? I saw a nice brunch spot; we should go and talk,” he said, and I realized it had been over twenty-four hours since my last meal. I didn’t even think about eating.

“Sure,” I calmly responded, and we began the short walk to a restaurant I had been to a few times with my roommates. It was an outdoor restaurant that had a view of the ocean. We were seated instantly, and he began to start a conversation again.

“So how are you doing?” Omar questioned. I didn’t know how to respond.

“I thought I could do this, but I can’t,” I replied, telling the truth.

“Do what? Attend college? Live in America?” He questioned as he began to open and stare at his menu.

“Be a woman,” I flatly stated. Unsure if this was the right move, but knowing it was the next move.



## Instructions for Looking at a Mirror

It must be known that when we look at what we call a “mirror,” we look at something that we are never going to understand, something that exceeds any possible conclusion. Although as an object it is just a piece of glass with crystalline silver paint resting on its back, it is also a magical and sinister instrument that turns us into objects as well. Everything this silver foil faces will be enclosed in it, immediately transforming it into a part of the mirror.

Mirrors are the inverse of fire. Everything that reaches the fire turns into fire, while a mirror becomes everything he observes. Therefore, I wonder which one would burn the other if we place a mirror in front of the fire. I declare myself incompetent to determine the outcome, but what I do know is the four proper instructions for looking at, and looking into, a mirror.

1<sup>st</sup> Lower-Level Safe Instructions (transforming “look at” to “look into”):

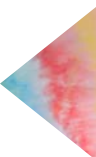
You should load yourself with enough patience to endure the infinite amazement of beholding the object we call a “mirror.”

Since you are going to see yourself reflected in it (or an image very similar to you), you must face it with extreme caution. Statistics have proven that that image is never going to match what you know/assume about yourself. When you look into that space, you will realize that your environment is reflected in the mirror, reappearing on the other side with less depth and with more mystery. That is because the mirror is watching.

Notice that there are two of you in the same room where the mirror is. That is the consequence of this object being a door to unexpected places.

2<sup>nd</sup> Medium-Level Instructions (getting seen by the mirror):

If you get within two inches of *him* and lock eyes with your image, you



will suddenly become eerily less familiar with yourself. You will even scare yourself. At that point, a sense of being watched by a stranger will overwhelm you. Since you will be glimpsing at the perishable quality of life, you will feel the presence of your death. Yes, the ancestors of human beings did not know that they would die until they found their images reflected in a natural mirror. Probably a lake.

In this step, it is advisable to do all kinds of silly grimaces to de-dramatize that mortal feeling. Thus, laugh at that imperfect image; the same one that others inaccurately see of you.

But, if instead of de-dramatizing you prefer edging on the madness of trying to understand several planes simultaneously, you must proceed to the next level of instructions.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Dangerous High-Level Instructions:

Place two mirrors of similar dimensions to face each other. Then, stand between them. You will have reliable proof of what it is like to look at the face of infinity, being you the only obstacle to it. In that instant, you will be getting a glimpse of the Infinity-Non-Eternal. Why not eternal? Because there will always be something between you and that chain of countless successions. What always stands between you and infinity is nothing but your own sight. Just to be clear, the more you pretend to observe infinity, the more you will be a hindrance to that. Now, if you are determined to get into that rift at all costs, follow the instructions from the upper-level.

### 4<sup>th</sup> Upper-Level High-Risk! Instructions:

At this advanced level, it is highly recommended to rip out your eyes one by one before entering the intersection of the two mirrors watching each other.



## Life as Harold

Harold is unable to organize his memories in chronological order. He was not dropped as a baby or hit by a bus. He was born without the part of your brain that's supposed to act as a filing cabinet. All his memories exist at the same time. His brain picks and chooses the order at random. It's just "one of those things." People point and laugh because he'll sometimes forget he isn't a two-year-old baby that doesn't know how to walk. Other times, he forgets how to think in words. Harold is a 46-year-old man. For the time being. Harold often forgets where he is and what he's doing. Or when it is. You only know it's the present because the past already happened. Harold doesn't get that luxury. This is how Harold currently remembers his life, in sequential order:

1. 16-years-old. Danny Elfman wins a Grammy for writing "The Batman Theme." Dinner's cold. Mom's pissed. Not about Batman.
2. 44-years-old. You're on the phone with a woman. Don't know who. You think you recognize her voice. She sounds worried. That's why you recognize it. She says you haven't called in a while. Did you call her? She tells you she loves you. You tell her you love her too. You don't know who she is. But you know you love her.
3. 35-years-old. Just got a haircut. You show the barber the same picture of you every time because that's how you like it cut. You're 14 in the picture. You think mom took it. You just introduced yourself to the barber that you've been going to for the past two years. He went along with it. There was something you were supposed to do today...
4. 8-years-old. In your room. Talking to the walls again. You talk to the walls because the walls are nice to you. You know it's sad. The walls are your friend. You hear yelling from the other room. What's the problem?
5. 19-years-old. Dodger game. You ate three Dodger Dogs and threw up in the bathroom. You lost count. You're with Dad. Mom's not there. Dad's not wearing his wedding ring.
6. 23-years-old. You're with dad in the bathroom. You're sitting on the floor.



- He's wiping the blood off your scraped knees. Forget how to walk again? Must have embarrassed him. You feel sorry for Dad. You feel sorry you are the way you are.
7. 20-years-old. Everything's black. What's going on? You open your eyes. Everything isn't black anymore. You're at a wedding. Dad is up there with a woman. Not your mom. You close your eyes. Everything's black. What's going on? You feel the letter in your pocket.
  8. 42-years-old. You smell sausage. The nurse is making breakfast. You aren't allowed to be near knives. Dad is sitting on the other side of the table. He's getting old. You like to think the nurse is for him. You get an at-home nurse because you were born well-off. You've never had a job. Who would hire you? You can't get anything done. You can't make your own sausage for breakfast.
  9. 12-years-old. Mom's teaching you math. You don't get to go to school with the other kids. You don't have any friends. Or maybe you do. You don't remember. You don't know math either. But she tells it to you anyway. It's for her too.
  10. 21-years-old. Watching a movie with Dad. *Dazed and Confused*. He says it's your favorite movie. There's no real plot. You like that. It is your favorite movie.
  11. 32-years-old. You're standing on the street. You're lost. You don't know if you've been there before. You feel scared. You don't want to embarrass yourself. You want to run. You think about running. Dad walks out of the house. He says he left his jacket inside.
  12. 18-years-old. Mom's writing a letter. She's crying. Dad's standing by the door. She puts the letter in an envelope and doesn't seal it. She writes on the back of it "Read me – Mom." There's a phone number written on the bottom. She tells you not to lose it.
  13. 10-years-old. You're laying down on grass. You look up at the sky. You don't know when. Or where. Or why. The clouds move. That's what clouds do. You wonder how far they've traveled since you started watching them. You wonder how long you've been there. You dig your fingers into the earth. Dirt gets in your fingernails. You don't mind. You feel at peace.



## Music from a Broken Record

### **Everything is greasy.**

Grease on the gloves, on the plates, on their skin, on the pots and pans, and in the food. Fat drips off the raw meat patties on the grill top and sizzles, popping oil onto greasy napkins sitting on the countertop. Fried potatoes gurgle in the oil, while slimy customers complain of undercooked meat and melted smoothies. A salad sits on the greasy bar top and becomes a landing spot for flies, as dressing too salty for anyone's liking drowns the wilted lettuce. These sounds reverberate about the hamburger shop like a horrible beat sample. The clinging of dishes, searing and popping of French fries, mix the silverware-scraping hymn of her morning.

Six hours later, she saunters home through a golden doorframe etched with Gods.

She sits as liquid beads materialize in pools between the pink innermost junctions of her eyes. They drain beside a sloped bone

& drip  
upon  
dirty



jeans and graphic tees suffocating the  
hardwood.

She echoes stories told on icy nights to a mirror beside an unmade bed.  
Reflecting on two women:

Bachan is a great grandma whose house meant spaghetti and the smell of wood. Bachan is gentle laughs, knitting yarn blankets that shelter the couches. Reminders to not use straws and fresh mauve nail polish. Bachan is my dad's kiai getting off her chair. Japanese-American woman. Is playing the drums with a smile in the internment camp. Pale glassy skin and young eyes in a black and white photo. Bachan is rose garden-keeper and a mother who lost her son. Cards on every occasion and a kiss goodbye.

A smile assembles upon an olive toned and unblemished face. The second woman appears in her mind and the miserable story scratches at her skull like a caged rodent.

**Over**

**And**

**Over**

Huddled in a room six years old  
& confused. Marched from home,  
into a world whose lens is veiled  
by a milky film of  
grey.  
Her father, captured & tiny eyes  
still lost. Currency:  
obsolete in the despair. Lives  
struggle hopeless in the wickedness of  
homeland.





The innocent suffer in heartbreak. Bartering for life.  
Teeth rotting—she's hungry. No one knew how  
horrific it was. But we know now.  
We have seen what happened.  
We cry.

~~She's distraught at the cyclical nature of man and scrapes a tear wedged  
between cavernous eye bags. PRAY PRAY. There is time and everything can  
be **heal**ed in time and through Him, who hears **our** voices. Clear fluid oozes  
from brown eyes and drips from a pointed cupid's bow, **land**ing on a Magnolia  
coffee table book.~~



## One Family's Scars

She rode bikes with her friends and bought Charlotte Bronte and Victoria Holt novels at the school's book fair.

He established himself as the neighborhood uncle and lived in his sister's garage.

She spied a seat in the living room and watched as the adults danced at a family party.

He flashed a calculated smile at her young personage and recognized her inadvertent response.

She pitched the softball over the plate and her school's team won another game

He parked his current wife in the new house in Utah and tethered his airplane at Van Nuys airport.

She marveled at the view from 10,000 feet of the Christmas lights in the L.A. basin.

He took the neighborhood kids flying and especially her, saying, "You're a she-devil."

She took classes like German and Accounting.

He worked in construction and offered the kids work wielding a wheelbarrow.

She liked a boy on the football team and crushed on him from the shadows of her shyness.

She listened to her dad say, from under their family car's engine, "What the hell's the matter with you?" and she looked harder inside the toolbox for a screwdriver that wasn't there.

From Carl Jung's studies: "The archetype of the father is associated with gods, kingship, and other images of authority and order. As the image of a "personified affect" fueled by an archetypal core, the father complex is powerful. In its negative aspect it may arise from a father who was experienced as absent, emotionally unavailable, passive, critical or abusive." --- *This Jungian Life*



She fought with her older sister and listened to albums and was known for her honesty which only just now would crack a crack that could crumble Hoover Dam.

He drove her in his construction truck to Four and Twenty Pies and parked nearby under leafy branches and in front of closed blinds, and their breathing was faster and the windows fogged.

She was 16 years old and had kissed one boy for three seconds at spin-the-bottle at a family pool party.

He was 41 and the father of two sons and was overheard talking about little girls' underwear with his like-minded friend and he was not against statutory rape.

She in her youthful ignorance gave in one night in the co-pilot's seat and put her fists against his shoulders, pushing him backward to protect herself from the knife-like stabbing of pain.

He proposed a new plan and chose the place and led her to lie and beg a ride from her older sister.

She walked into the Thunderbird Motel on an industrial road in the middle of the day some minutes after he had walked in and the knife finished its work leaving the sheets spotted with blood.

He dated her, followed her, screwed her, controlled her, and his crippling yoke around her neck stole her serenity for six years leaving long irremovable splinters.

She, on the ski trips, would stash a Snickers bar and a Coke in her down jacket pockets before they got on the lift and enjoyed the steak dinners in town and laid out a sleeping bag on the floor of the rented cabin in case her parents might drive up from their home five hours away.

He ordered her to serve him ten Oreo cookies and milk in the nude when he got back from work and yelled at her to never lock the bathroom door.

She was overcome with excitement when Steve slipped a note inside her locker and dumbstruck and heartbroken when she realized that she would never be able to reply.

She braved his wrath and asked his permission again like she had often done to break up with him and this time he acquiesced, "Go. Now." He sat on her



couch in her apartment and watched her leave and got in his car and followed her walking down the street to her parents' house and shouted every name he could think of.

It would be learned, a decade later, that he had also inflicted crimes on the lovely jewel who was her ten-year-old sister. His depravity had killed her innocence and introduced her to fear and subsequently darkened her horizons.

Definition of Pedophile: "Pedophilia, also spelled paedophilia, also called pedophilic disorder or pedophilia disorder, in conventional usage, a psychosexual disorder, generally affecting adults, characterized by sexual interest in prepubescent children or attempts to engage in sexual acts with prepubescent children." --- *Britannica*

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In memory of all sexual abuse victims, known and unknown.

On sunny tree-lined streets, in childhoods not that long ago, they played card games and climbed trees, and spent their allowances on Matchbox cars and comic books, secure and happy.

\*\*\*



## Transphobmagoria

Pace the perimeter of your four-by-four concrete floor, running your hands along the bars. Find the bar with a small crack. You may need to run your hand over the warm metal until you locate that abrasion you found seven years ago. Once you feel the sharp edge, continue to pick at it like you sometimes do the boils on your face, puss dribbling over your cheek. Increase the pressure of your finger over the spec. Be persistent. You need to get to the inside. Once you finally start bleeding, lift your hand up and let the blood form streams down your arm. Wait for them to dry. Step to the center of the space, and fold your legs, one over the other. Close your eyes. You've done this before. Take a breath. Then two. Inhale smoke. Cough. Then stop breathing. Stop. Stop. Start again. Let the smoke from the open window sting your eyes. Breathe as much as you need to now. Feel your consciousness abandon your body. The shape remains amorphous, and you can't forget to consider your audience or you'll just lose it completely. It changes daily, but if you're not sure what to go with, fall back on the basics.

Pick an obvious gender.

Nothing ambiguous. You could go ambiguous, and very rarely you should, but most of the time your form will just crumple up again. Classically beautiful.



If you go with a woman: something skinny, big breasts, wide hips, and comically large eyes (refer to the Barbie doll you never got as a kid). Going for a man (which you almost always should except in a few choice circumstances, like the time you were driving without your license because you got raped after the parade in San Francisco seven years ago. He took your wallet and a cop pulled you over on the 5 and wanted to give you a ticket while globs of something sticky and white were still drying in dribbles down your leg. It was paying that ticket or rent, and whichever you paid you were fucked, but none of that would have happened if you hadn't been a woman in the first place, so ignore this entire parenthetical): you need to be strong, lots of muscles but not too bulky, tall, imposing, but not so imposing you scare ladies away. Don't worry about your voice. No one hears it.

Once you form, the rest is downhill. Go to college. Doesn't matter how. Drive with your friend who always smells like his pit stains look. Comment on the orange sky. Ignore his question. The sun seems so far away, so dim through the ashy windshield. He almost yells. Promise you'll text him later about the party tonight. You won't. You know your avatar won't last that long. Say anything he needs you to.

Flirt with that pretty girl at the front of the class. Make sure you're a man when you do. Remember the day when the decision came down from the Supreme Court, how she twirled her hair with her lead-stained index finger



and looked right at you, how you forgot and flirted with her when you were a pretty little girl with long blonde hair and glasses, how she smiled back and tried to talk to you after class. You know she means it, so stop screwing it up by meaning it back.

Tell everyone you're going to the library, but go to the drug store on the corner instead. The polluted air is making you hyperventilate. It's the smoke. See the pudgy teen about a pack of Marlboros you wanted yesterday. Count the acne scars on his face while he contemplates the effort involved in calling his fifty-year-old manager back from lunch just to comply with the law.

After about a minute, start tapping your foot and pursing your lips. You're not actually impatient. Watch his fingers drum on the counter in time with your foot. Give up and leave. You don't have much time left.

Visit your mother.

Walk in the door and say hi from a few feet away. Don't hug her. Try to answer all her questions in a dozen words or less. When are you going to settle down? Stuff the rest of the snickerdoodle in your mouth, as quickly as you can.

Leave.

Drag your feet along the sidewalk. You don't need to lift them high, just enough to take that next step. Notice your fingers blur together into a blob, a blob that flows like mercury creeping up your shoulder. Your entire right arm becomes fluid, dribbling in your wake.



Start running.

Pieces of you flying in all directions. Some of your fingernails embed into the local McDonalds that some mother is suing for negligence. A glob of your shoulder sticks in the shiny, blonde hair of a five-year-old girl holding her mother's hand. It creates a snarl in her braid. Arrive at your house, almost completely dissolved.

Flames lick the foundation.

Dribbling saliva is smoke floating away. Open your eyes and let yourself disappear. Stand up inside the bars again. Cracks. Fissures. Abrasions. Pock marks getting more by the day. Metal weakening, orange with heat. Pick at the bars. Chip away. Just a little bit more. Even if it burns your thick, dainty hands.





## The Knight

“You’re like Cinderella,” Larry said to his fiancé as she handed him a sandwich. The desert sun radiated between them inside the car. The air conditioning was out again. Larry kept one eye on the road as he looked at Lena with appreciation, not just for the sandwich, but for all she had given him. Lena smiled good-naturedly as Larry picked at the sprouts.

“I’m like the coachman,” continued Larry.

“What do you mean?” asked Lena. She saved him from the sprouts, adding them to her own sandwich.

“You belong with a prince or a knight,” Larry answered, placing the sandwich on the dashboard and reaching for the road map. He did not explain that he was not a prince, that he didn’t even have princely aspirations.

“It’s just a sandwich. Cinderella? Any minute I could turn into a pumpkin, just like the carriage. I love you too.”

Larry looked out the window at one cactus after another, imagining them to be saying “stop, wrong way” or “welcome, nice to see you” with their arms in the air.

“Did I ever tell you those glass slippers are a little tight?”, Lena laughed.

Larry signaled back into the slow lane after passing two semi-trucks. He returned Lena’s smile. They would have had cool air if they’d taken Lena’s Prius, not to mention the savings on gas. They decided to save that argument for another day. Luckily, it wasn’t summer yet.

His knee was feeling better thanks to the physical therapy. It was a bullet ten years ago that first injured his knee. The second knee surgery was last month. Newly forming scars crisscrossed with the old scar ridges. The pain had been unrelenting afterward. One night, Larry was yelling out in agony. Lena rushed him to the emergency room. A stent was surgically placed inside a vein to keep blood clots from traveling to Larry’s lungs. Lena, his savior.

Larry put on his sunglasses and rolled up his shirt sleeves. He felt at the front pocket of his jeans to be sure the letter was still there.



“How’s your knee?” asked Lena, as she handed him some water. She leaned over and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You should have let me drive.”

Larry could feel his knee throbbing a little. It was his right leg where the surgical battles had taken place. He thought he’d be able to drive okay. She was right. Rest.

“I’ll stop up the road here for a break. Time for another walk. Hope I don’t have to run from a snake. You’ve got the wheel next,” Larry said.

The bullet in his knee had been the least of it. That day turned his mind into a twisted torrent of doubt and remorse. *Do old ghosts ever leave you alone?* Larry looked at the tumbleweeds scurrying in both directions across the highway in front of him, like the wind couldn’t make up its mind either.

He eased the car off the highway at a roadside rest. Lena got out of the car and struck up a conversation with a married couple, with twins and two dogs. Flat, dry land stretched to brown hills on one side and a mountain range on the other. Larry stepped carefully on the uneven dirt.

In the high shadowed crevices of the mountains, he saw something unexpected. *It can’t be.* He narrowed his eyes as if that would better focus his vision, and determined that, yes, what he saw was snow. It didn’t look very far away. *Snow in the desert. Amazing.* Looking toward the San Gorgonio pass, he spotted something else unfamiliar to him. *Giant white aliens?* Dozens of high cylindrical towers, with their three-pronged rotating blade arms. *What? Is this place on my map?* On this barren yellow land, all around him, reptiles with skin as hard as the rocks they scurried under, watched and schemed against him with their marble eyes. Larry allowed himself a smile and relaxed distractedly. When Lena sneaked up behind him, he nearly fell over.

“I startled you,” apologized Lena.

“No, I was on another planet,” Larry mumbled.

“Let’s get moving. Our house adventure awaits us,” Lena gently urged.

Sitting on the passenger side now, Larry wondered how much longer he’d be able to feign his interest in buying a house in the desert. He glanced guiltily over at Lena, who was deftly maneuvering his 1976 Cadillac Coupe, his baby, in and around the big trucks, her back relaxed against the seat. Larry closed his eyes and imagined her back pressing warmly against his chest. Larry had begun to wonder if it was Lena’s essence alone which effortlessly pulsed both of their



hearts. Often, she seemed to be the one who sensuously held them together, in their love making and otherwise. A vehicle's horn blasted nearby, so loud and close Larry instinctively braced for impact.

"How 'bout one of those date shakes the signs are bragging about?" Larry suggested.

"Can we please wait until town and get the good ones with soy?"

She was driving him to the future. *How would he tell her he didn't want to go?*

Cruising along Palm Canyon Drive, Larry felt his mood shift a little. He was back on earth amongst brilliant pastel buildings and gleeful people sitting in sidewalk cafes with cool mists of water. Green oasis promises surrounded him. He and Lena ate at a vegetarian restaurant. Larry poked at his veggie burger dubiously. Soon they were back on the road to the realtor's office, with Lena determined to see a couple of the houses on the list before nightfall.

Inside the first dwelling, they followed their fast-talking realtor. The current owners were not at home. While Lena inspected the backyard, and the realtor fired off details of square footage and copper pipes into Lena's eager ears, Larry doubled back to the kitchen. Still hungry, he pulled open the refrigerator. With silent thanks for the abundance inside, greedily he grabbed a fried chicken leg and gulped milk from the carton.

Larry rejoined the women. Lena looked at him with something between a question and a frown as if she could smell the meat. He moved to the window pretending to admire the framing, and looked past the sage brush, and their lengthening shadows, toward the setting sun. *Ghosts, like shadows, are impossible to escape.* The bloodshot yellow eye stared back at him.

Answering her phone and walking toward the front door, the realtor gave them a nod. "Take your time." Lena tugged at Larry's sleeve. After her reminder, he checked out the backyard.

Meanwhile, Lena grabbed his jacket, and she swept up Larry's twice folded realtor's sheet from the floor.

*How do you confront a ghost?* Sitting in the back of the realtor's car, Larry kept ruminating about the past. The passing of time had only empowered the ghost. The faster and farther he ran, the larger and closer the ghost's image grew until his own shadow was two shadows...until every thought in his head



was two thoughts. One belonging to himself. One belonging to the ghost. He tried to escape by closing his eyes. Before long, he was asleep. Lena noticed his fitfulness.

Lena was about to transfer the papers in her hand to her house hunting folder when she saw the letter Larry had folded inside his realtor's sheet.

Lena read the contents. It was dated recently, on the tenth anniversary of the shooting. A woman named Carol was thanking Larry again for saving her life and that of her unborn child on that fateful day. She also pleaded with him to understand that he couldn't have saved the boy on the bicycle. He couldn't have saved everyone. Everything had happened too fast she said. She asked him to please forgive himself because there was nothing to forgive. She wondered if one day they might yet be friends. Let me remind you of the good of that day, she implored.

Larry woke just as the realtor pulled in to drop them at their hotel. After she left, Lena handed the letter to Larry and confessed she had read it. His yearning poured out, "I've been wanting to share..." but Lena caught him in a tight embrace. They stayed like that on the boulevard under the hotel's neon for a long time. He felt her love for him. He felt his love for her too. Lena whispered softly, barely audible, in his ear, "Not a knight, huh?"



# Drama



# Missing Personalities

## Scene 2

### Characters:

**Mr. Pen:** Early 50's, wearing a brown sweater-vest and a green dress shirt.

**Lemon:** Late teens, short, wearing a yellow sweater and jorts.

**Peel:** A robot, about Lemon's height.

**Saber:** Mid to late teens, wearing a bike helmet and brown satchel.

*The stage is a large house with a door leading to a room centerstage right. A desk with several stacks of paper littered within the room, with Mr. Pen sitting in a chair facing the computer on the desk. In the living room, centerstage, Lemon paces back and forth, chewing gum. A chair and table are situated at the center. Peel stands idly behind the table. A chimney stands near the front door of the house. Another door centerstage right leads outside the house.*

*[Lemon enters the door to Mr. Pen's room and creeps up behind him. She pops a bubble in his face]*

**MR. PEN:** Hwaaa!

**[MR. PEN** swings his arms in the air and looks at Lemon]

**MR. PEN:** Lemon! I told you not to come in here when I'm working!

**LEMON:** Yeah, well you also told me never to become an adult, and yet here I am.

**[Mr. Pen** swivels his chair toward Lemon]

**MR. PEN:** Adult? How old are you anyway?

**LEMON:** [sarcastic] My own grandfather doesn't know my age?

**MR. PEN:** Of course I know...but tell me anyway.

**LEMON:** It's more fun to leave people guessing. [she looks toward the computer screen] Watcha working on?

**MR. PEN:** My next story. I got into a hard spot and left a few things unexplained. I don't know where the story should go from here. I need an inciting incident.

**LEMON:** You haven't even gotten to *that* part of the story? Why do we call you *Mr. Pen*?

**[Mr. Pen** leaps from his seat]



**MR. PEN:** *Because...*[he grabs a pen and raises it in the air]...this is my weapon in a world of frustration and torment. *This* is one of my only tools for combating the edges of insanity and solitude that creep into my life. [he approaches Lemon, she retreats to the wall] *This* is one of the last few things that I have at my disposal that doesn't talk back, doesn't disagree, and doesn't even *think* about betraying me! [he steps back]

**LEMON:** But don't you use a keyboard to write?

[Mr. Pen flings the pen onto the floor]

**MR. PEN:** That's not the point! The point is, I want to be known for my passion and nothing else. [Mr. Pen sinks into his desk chair] Besides, there's not much left for me to be remembered by.

[Mr. Pen grabs the computer mouse and silently scrolls] [Lemon leans toward the screen]

**LEMON:** Who's that? [she points at the screen]

**MR. PEN:** I did mention I started some artwork on here too. It's one of my characters. It helps me to focus on their personalities when I have a visual, I try to come up with these first.

[Lemon tilts her head in analysis]

**LEMON:** You know who that looks like? Haro Fourswords.

[Mr. Pen waves his hand in the air]

**MR. PEN:** No...I mean, there wouldn't be any problem basing my character on someone like him...it's just...that's not the case...you know...as writers we sometimes need to take inspiration off of people who we know in real life just so we can...

**LEMON:** No, I know that. I just wanted to know why you based a character on *him*.

[Mr. Pen turns toward Lemon]

**MR. PEN:** Would that be a problem?

[Saber enters stage left and knocks on the front door] [Peel wakes up and opens the door]

**LEMON:** I just don't know if he's much of a role model. A vigilante figure who we know almost nothing about...walks around in a ninja costume and uses weapons to...

[Saber pulls out a newspaper from his satchel and hands it to Peel]



[Peel shuts the door on Saber]

**MR. PEN:** I didn't say he was a *role model*, and I don't actually know him. I just liked his look, it fits well with my character. Besides, he's done plenty for this community already. How many missing people has he found already? Many more than the police have. I just need something to kick off the story.

[Peel walks toward Mr. Pen's room]

**LEMON:** What has to happen for it to start?

**MR. PEN:** He must learn something that he has no idea about, something that will give him a case to follow. But it's going to take so *long* to develop that.

[Peel opens the door to Mr. Pen's room]

[Lemon swipes at Mr. Pen's shoulder]

**LEMON:** Then just have something abrupt happen! Like...have a newspaper hit him in the face! Then he figures something out that others couldn't see!

[Mr. Pen shakes his head]

**MR. PEN:** But that kind of thing doesn't happen in real life, Lem...!

[Peel throws the newspaper at Mr. Pen's head]

**MR. PEN:** Ouch! What the--?

[Mr. Pen looks at Peel]

**PEEL:** You've got mail.

**LEMON:** Oh, that's Peel. I made him. [she pats Peel on the head] He's meant to be a bit more gentle. [Lemon peeks out through the door to the living room] Wow, this place really is built like a bunker. I didn't even hear the door shut.

[Lemon and Mr. Pen enter the living room] [Mr. Pen throws the newspaper onto the table]

**LEMON:** Looks like someone was at the door.

**SABER:** ...And I'm still here! Can I please have a moment?

**MR. PEN:** Your bot just closed the door on the mail boy? Now why would he do something like that?

[Lemon shrugs]

**LEMON:** I dunno. Maybe because I programmed him to do that. [she opens the front door] Hi, I'm not the head of the household so I'm going to close the door and hope that your impression of us is not completely based on how I treated you. [she closes the door and pulls out her phone]

[Mr. Pen walks toward the door]





**MR. PEN:** You teenagers have *no* respect.

[Lemon looks up from her phone]

**LEMON:** Huh?

**MR. PEN:** You really are a product of this generation.

**LEMON:** Actually, I'm a product of the *last* generation.

[Mr. Pen swings the door open]

**MR. PEN:** Yes?

**SABER:** I'm the paperboy...

**MR. PEN:** Funny, you don't look like paper. Heh, I'm kidding. But that was pretty good, so I'll just make a quick note of that.

[Mr. Pen pulls out a notepad from his pocket and scribbles away]

**SABER:** I was wondering if you had a second to talk.

[Mr. Pen pauses for several moments]

**MR. PEN:** So, what's your question? Heh, sorry, I couldn't resist. [He gestures to Lemon] Blame the yellow one, her humor rubs off on me.

**SABER:** Right, well as you know there have been many disappearances going on in the UCRCCBS area. I just wanted to know if there were any people in your household who were of university age...[he looks around the room] Like her? [he points at Lemon] How old is she?

**LEMON:** It's *not* that hard to tell!

**SABER:** I'm just trying to see if there's any reason to suspect...

**MR. PEN:** What's UCRCCBS?

**SABER:** The university...at the center of town...?

**LEMON:** [irritated] It's where Kesler was going.

[Mr. Pen swings around and points a finger at Lemon]

**MR. PEN:** Don't say that name! [he turns back toward Saber] Sorry. Well, she isn't currently attending the university, so I'll keep it in mind.

**SABER:** Yeah, but...

**LEMON:** I have your inciting incident! Someone comes to the main character at the beginning of the story with a warning!

**MR. PEN:** And who would that be?

**LEMON:** We wouldn't need to know that until later. Gives you time to think.

**MR. PEN:** That's it! [he slams the door]

[Mr. Pen throws his fists in the air]



**MR. PEN:** Wait...you said *was*.

**LEMON:** What?

**MR. PEN:** You said Kes...you said he *was* attending the university. [pause] There's a reason you came into my study today. You want something from me. Is it about your brother?

**LEMON:** Well, I figured as much.

**MR. PEN:** You can't fool a writer.

**LEMON:** Kesler...

**MR. PEN:** I don't want to hear that name in this house.

**LEMON:** What name?

**MR. PEN:** Kes...stop toying with me, I'm old! [Mr. Pen sits down at the chair by the table]

**LEMON:** You haven't been talking to him, but I have. He hasn't responded to any of my messages in the last three days, and you know how much he likes to talk. Maybe that mail kid has a point.

**MR. PEN:** Well maybe you should have grown a few inches since childhood.

**LEMON:** Well, *maybe* you should have gotten something published by now.

**MR. PEN:** That's a bit too far...

**LEMON:** Sorry, but look. I already lost my parents. I don't want to lose my brother too. Let's at least go over to his place and check on him. It's the decent thing to do.

**MR. PEN:** Why do *I* have to go?

**LEMON:** It's too far for me to walk, the public transportation system is in shambles, I have few friends who would be willing to lend a hand, and I can't drive on my own.

**MR. PEN:** This seems oddly thought out. Aren't you old enough to have gotten a license by now?

[Lemon shrugs sarcastically]

[Mr. Pen hops in the chair toward the wall and hunches his shoulders]

**LEMON:** Fine, I'm going alone then.

**PEEL:** I will miss you, Lemon.

[Lemon pats Peel on the head]

**MR. PEN:** You just gave a whole spiel about why you *couldn't* go alone.

**LEMON:** Well, I'm going anyways. [she marches toward the door] I hope no one



kidnaps me!

[Mr. Pen picks up the newspaper and pretends to read it]

**MR. PEN:** Me too kid, have fun.

**LEMON:** You're not going to let your own *granddaughter* out on her own...?

**MR. PEN:** You're old enough.

**LEMON:** Am I?

**MR. PEN:** I'm *not* going.

[Lemon backs away toward the front door, still facing Mr. Pen]

**LEMON:** Ok, *grandpa*.

[Lemon opens the door and steps outside]

[Mr. Pen throws down the newspaper and approaches the door]

**MR. PEN:** Wait just a minute...I am *Mr. Pen*.

**LEMON:** Just because you want a pen name doesn't mean *Pen* has to be your name!

**MR. PEN:** In this house, you call me Mr. Pen.

[Lemon gestures to her surroundings]

**LEMON:** I'm not *in* this house.

[Mr. Pen steps outside]

**MR. PEN:** Well I am, kid.

[Mr. Pen shuts the door] [Lemon disappears backstage] [Mr. Pen realizes he's stuck outside]

**MR. PEN:** What?! Let me in!

[Lemon appears in the living room and locks the door]

**LEMON:** I hope you remember your characters well because I'm going to give them sex changes!

[Lemon walks toward Mr. Pen's door]

**MR. PEN:** Don't you dare!

[Mr. Pen shakes the doorknob]

[Lemon opens the door to Mr. Pen's room]

**LEMON:** I'm going to write a very anticlimactic conclusion!

[Mr. Pen pounds on the door]

**MR. PEN:** I'm still at the beginning of the story!

**LEMON:** By the time you get in here, I'll have the whole story finished for you!

[Mr. Pen looks around wildly]



[Lemon sits at Mr. Pen's desk]

**LEMON:** Haro Fourswords will know you're one of his fanboys!

[Mr. Pen looks toward the chimney]

**MR. PEN:** Screw *that*.

**LEMON:** They're all going to die in the end!

[Lemon pretends to type on the computer]

**MR. PEN:** Fine!

[Lemon stops typing and walks back toward the living room]

**LEMON:** What?

**MR. PEN:** Are you going to put this on YouTube? I said fine!...I'll go...

[Lemon opens the front door slightly]

**LEMON:** Actually, I wouldn't know how to caption a YouTube video like this. But alright.

[Lemon swings the door open the rest of the way]

**LEMON:** Let's go get him.



## EDGES

FADE IN:

INT. DOÑA CECILIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

SUPER: "EDGES"

(NOTE: The dialogue is spoken in Spanish and is subtitled in English)

On an old night table, an old analog alarm clock SOUNDS. It is 4:00 AM. The skinny wrinkled hand of DOÑA CECILIA, Mexican, 93, turn off the alarm.

Doña Cecilia is a 4'11" indigenous-looking woman with wrinkles all over her face.

She moves very slowly, and her spine is curved.

As in slow motion, she sits up on her bed and looks at the floor. Breathing deeply, she stays quiet on the edge of her bed and looks across the poor room.

The tiny room is her whole house. The floor is made of gray concrete. On one side of the room, there is an old night table next to a small bed. On the other side, there is a table with two chairs, a little oven, and a rotten sink full of plates.

Doña Cecilia uses her hands to push herself and stand up.

DOÑA CECILIA

Ay, ay, ay... Diocito.

SUBTITLES

Oy, oy, oy... my sweet Lord.

Dragging her feet, she walks to the sink and opens the tap. She splashes her face with the cold tap water. A rooster sings.

She closes the tap but a sound of falling water continues. As she glances at the rotten tin roof, she sees water leaking from a hole.

DOÑA CECILIA

Válgame Señor.

SUBTITLES

Be with me, Lord.

Cecilia draws a little curtain beneath the sink and retrieves an iron bucket. She sets the bucket underneath the water leak.

She sets an old kettle over the oven and heats water. As the water boils, Cecilia walks slowly to the corner of the room. She draws a curtain and sits on the toilet.

AT HER TABLE - MOMENTS LATER



Sitting at the table, Cecilia eats a piece of white bread and drinks tea in an old plastic cup. She wears a shirt and a large skirt.

Cecilia finishes her tea, stands up and puts on a jacket. She takes an elongated suitcase and an umbrella. Then, she looks across the room, turns the lights off, and exits.

EXT. DOÑA CECILIA'S HOUSE ENTRANCE - DAWN  
SUPER: "LA JOYA - MEXICO"

In the unlit early dawn, it pours. As Cecilia steps outside, she stands on the edge of a long concrete stairs and looks down across the poor neighborhood.

Few PEOPLE are on the street. DON JACINTO, 70s, opens the little market in front of Cecilia's house. Cecilia opens her umbrella and, step by step, climbs down the long stairs toward the unpaved street.

DON JACINTO

Buen día, doña. Baje con cuidadito.

SUBTITLES

Good morning, ma'am. Be careful getting down the stairs.

DOÑA CECILIA

Gracias Jacinto. Me lo dice cada día. No se preocupe que ya es costumbre.

SUBTITLES

Thanks Jacinto. Every day you tell me the same thing. Don't worry. I'm used to this. Don Jacinto smiles and enters the market as Cecilia continues climbing down the stairs as if in slow motion.

EXT. UNPAVED STREET - MORNING

In the rain, Doña Cecilia walks on the street. Trying to avoid the rain, a young MOTHER, holding a little backpack and the hand of her 7-year-old SON in a school uniform, leave their house and run. Doña Cecilia is much slower.

EXT. PAVED STREET - DAY

The rain continues. As the day is growing, there are more CARS on the street. A MAN opens his store. CHILDREN run toward their school. After a slow walk through the long sidewalk, Cecilia finally arrives at the bus stop.

Tired, she sits on the small bench and shelters herself from the rain. She covers her suitcase with her umbrella.

When a bus arrives, Cecilia closes her umbrella and stands up. The bus opens the door, and two YOUNG MEN get off the bus to help her.



One of them takes the suitcase, and the other takes the umbrella. Both help Cecilia in the difficult task of getting on the bus.

INSIDE THE BUS - CONTINUOUS

The bus is packed with wet and sleepy PEOPLE. Cecilia has a hard time trying to grab the handgrip, but her tiny body is contained by the packed crowd.

After a couple of stops, people start to get off the bus. By waving her hand, a WOMAN offers her seat to Doña Cecilia. Grinning, Cecilia accepts and sits down.

DOÑA CECILIA

Gracias, mijita.

SUBTITLES

Thanks, young lady.

EXT. TIJUANA BUS STOP, MEXICO - DAY

The rain is gone when the bus arrives at its stop. Slowly, Doña Cecilia gets off the bus. Someone from inside the bus passes her the suitcase. She walks to the corner and gets in a cab.

INSIDE THE CAB - CONTINUOUS

Four people are sharing the cab. In the back seat are a FAT WOMAN, a TEENAGE GIRL, and a male CONSTRUCTION WORKER. Uncomfortable with her umbrella and her suitcase, Cecilia is in the front seat next to the cab driver, a QUIET MAN.

The fat woman eats some cookies loudly, the teenage girl is absorbed by her cell phone, and the construction worker looks out the window. Nobody talks. One by one, Doña Cecilia looks at them, but nobody notices her.

EXT. CAB STOP - EARLY AFTERNOON

The cab stops, and Cecilia, very slowly, gets out of the car.

EXT. HUMBLE MARKET ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

At the entrance of a humble market, Cecilia sits at a plastic table. She rests her head on her right hand as a male SERVER, 20s, comes from inside with a plate of food and a juice.

SERVER

¿Lo mismo de siempre, no?

SUBTITLES

The usual, right?

DOÑA CECILIA

Por favor, mijito.



## SUBTITLES

Please, son.

The server leaves the plate and the glass on the table. Cecilia eats and drinks as she looks at CHILDREN playing on the street, she smiles.

INSERT - Her wrinkled hand caresses her suitcase.

The server comes outside with a big and thick yellow candle and gives it to Cecilia. She opens just a bit of the suitcase and puts the candle inside as the server cleans up the table.

## SERVER

Me dijeron que anda tranquilo por allá adentro hoy.

## SUBTITLES

Someone told me today it is quiet inside the place.

## DOÑA CECILIA

Dios quiera, mijito. Vamo' a ver.

## SUBTITLES

It's up to God, son. We'll see.

Doña Cecilia leaves a bunch of coins over the table and tries to stand up. The server assists her and gives her the suitcase.

## DOÑA CECILIA

Todo muy rico. Gracias.

## SUBTITLES

Everything's very tasty. Thank you.

## SERVER

Me alegro. La veo hasta mañana, abuela. Ándese con cuidado.

## SUBTITLES

I'm glad. See you tomorrow, granny. Take care of yourself.

Doña Cecilia slightly waves at him and leaves the place. With a tender smile, the server looks at Cecilia's slow pace.

## EXT. GARITA INTERNACIONAL - NUEVA TIJUANA - AFTERNOON

Doña Cecilia walks on Blvd. Garita de Otoy through the Garita International toward the US-Mexico border.

## EXT. CUSTOMS AND BORDER - CONTINUOUS

Doña Cecilia arrives at the border. There is a long line, but she cuts the line and walks toward the control point. Cecilia waves at the OFFICER IN CHARGE and he





opens the gate, allowing Cecilia to cross.

EXT. OTAY MESA PORT OF ENTRY, US - CONTINUOUS

A border patrol car arrives, and Doña Cecilia gets in.

INSIDE THE CAR - CONTINUOUS

Driving, the PATROL DRIVER looks at Cecilia through the rearview mirror.

PATROL DRIVER

How are you today, Mrs.? Doing great?

DOÑA CECILIA

Yes, yes. Tank yo.

Uncomfortable with the chat in English language, Cecilia looks out the window and stays quiet.

EXT. DETENTION CENTER ENTRANCE - LATE AFTERNOON

The patrol driver helps Doña Cecilia from getting out of the car. She enters to the Detention Center.

INT. DETENTION CENTER CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Doña Cecilia walks across a long white corridor. She passes by a TV showing the news. She glances at the TV and sees PRESIDENT TRUMP giving a frenzied speech.

INSERT - Trump struts around the microphone.

Doña Cecilia shakes her head in disapproval. At the end of the corridor, TWO FEMALE OFFICERS open a double door, and she walks through.

INT. DETENTION CAGES - CONTINUOUS

Twenty-five CHILDREN, between four and nine years old, CRY inside a cage. The noise is DEAFENING. Some children hug others, but some of them prefer being apart.

INSERT - A four-year-old LITTLE BOY cries and shouts against the cage. His face is full of tears.

LITTLE BOY

Mami...! Mami...!

From the other side of the cage, just in front of the boy, Cecilia takes a chair and sits. She lays the suitcase on the floor and opens it.

With curiosity, a couple of children step closer to her. Cecilia takes the big yellow candle out of the suitcase, pulls a match box out of her pocket, and lights the candle.

When the candle starts to burn, she takes from inside the suitcase a small white



acoustic guitar. She closes the suitcase, puts her right foot over, and sets the guitar on her leg.

She plays the guitar and sings Mexican boleros. Gradually, the children get absorbed by the music and stop crying. As the shouting ceases, the sound of the guitar and Cecilia's voice sounds louder.

BEGIN MONTAGE - DOÑA CECILIA SINGS

-- INSIDE OF THE CAGE -- The children come closer to Cecilia and sit in a semi-circle in front of her.

-- DOÑA CECILIA -- With her eyes closed, Cecilia sings with her heart.

-- INSIDE OF THE CAGE -- The four-year-old little boy stops crying as he beholds Cecilia. He gets calm and sleepy.

-- DOÑA CECILIA -- Cecilia's hands play the guitar with grace.

-- THREE OFFICERS -- Next to the double door, THREE OFFICERS look at each other and smile. They enjoy the music as well.

-- INSIDE OF THE CAGE -- Very calm, the children sleep.

-- YELLOW CANDLE -- The candle is consumed.

END OF MONTAGE

INT. DETENTION CAGES - CONTINUOUS

Cecilia stops playing and puts the guitar inside the case. She beholds the sleeping children across the cage. No one is awake. Misty-eyed, Doña Cecilia grins at the calm ambiance.

DOÑA CECILIA

Sueñen con los angelitos.

SUBTITLES

Dream with angels.

Cecilia puts her left hand on her hip and stands up with difficulty. One of the three officers assist her.

EXT. CUSTOMS AND BORDER - EVENING

At the border, the patrol car is parked next to the route. A big Vallarta Supermarket truck parks behind the patrol car.

In the unlit route, Doña Cecilia gets out the patrol car with her suitcase and her umbrella. The patrol driver helps her with the difficult task of climbing to the cabin. The truck leaves.



INT. TRUCK CABIN - NIGHT

Driving, a friendly TRUCK DRIVER talks with Doña Cecilia.

TRUCK DRIVER

Próximamente le voy a tener que poner un ascensor para que pueda subir al camión, Doña Cecilia.

SUBTITLES

Soon, I'll have to put an elevator for you to get on the truck, Doña Cecilia.

Quiet and sleepy, Doña Cecilia grins.

TRUCK DRIVER

¿Me va a cantar algo hoy?

SUBTITLES

Are you gonna sing something for me, today?

EXT. CORNER OF CECILIA'S BLOCK - NIGHT

The truck sounds the horn and leaves the corner. Cecilia walks among the cloud of dust stirred up by the truck. She walks the unpaved street to her house.

EXT. DOÑA CECILIA'S HOUSE ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

Taking a deep breath, Doña Cecilia gazes up the long stairs. Step by step, she begins to climb it.

INT. DOÑA CECILIA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

In her sleepwear, Doña Cecilia drags the iron bucket full of water and pours it into the toilet. Exhausted, she sits on her bed and takes the old alarm clock from her night table.

INSERT - The clock displays 11:35 PM. Cecilia sets the alarm to 4:00 AM.

She crosses herself and lays down on the bed.

DOÑA CECILIA

(under her breath)

Ay, ay, ay virgencita.

SUBTITLES

(under her breath)

Oy, oy, oy... holy mother.

Doña Cecilia turns the light off and exhales hard.

BLACK SCREEN - The old clock alarm sounds.

FADE OUT.

THE END



ART



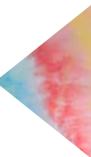
# Dinner Party





Sierra Marshall





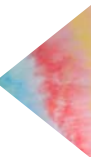
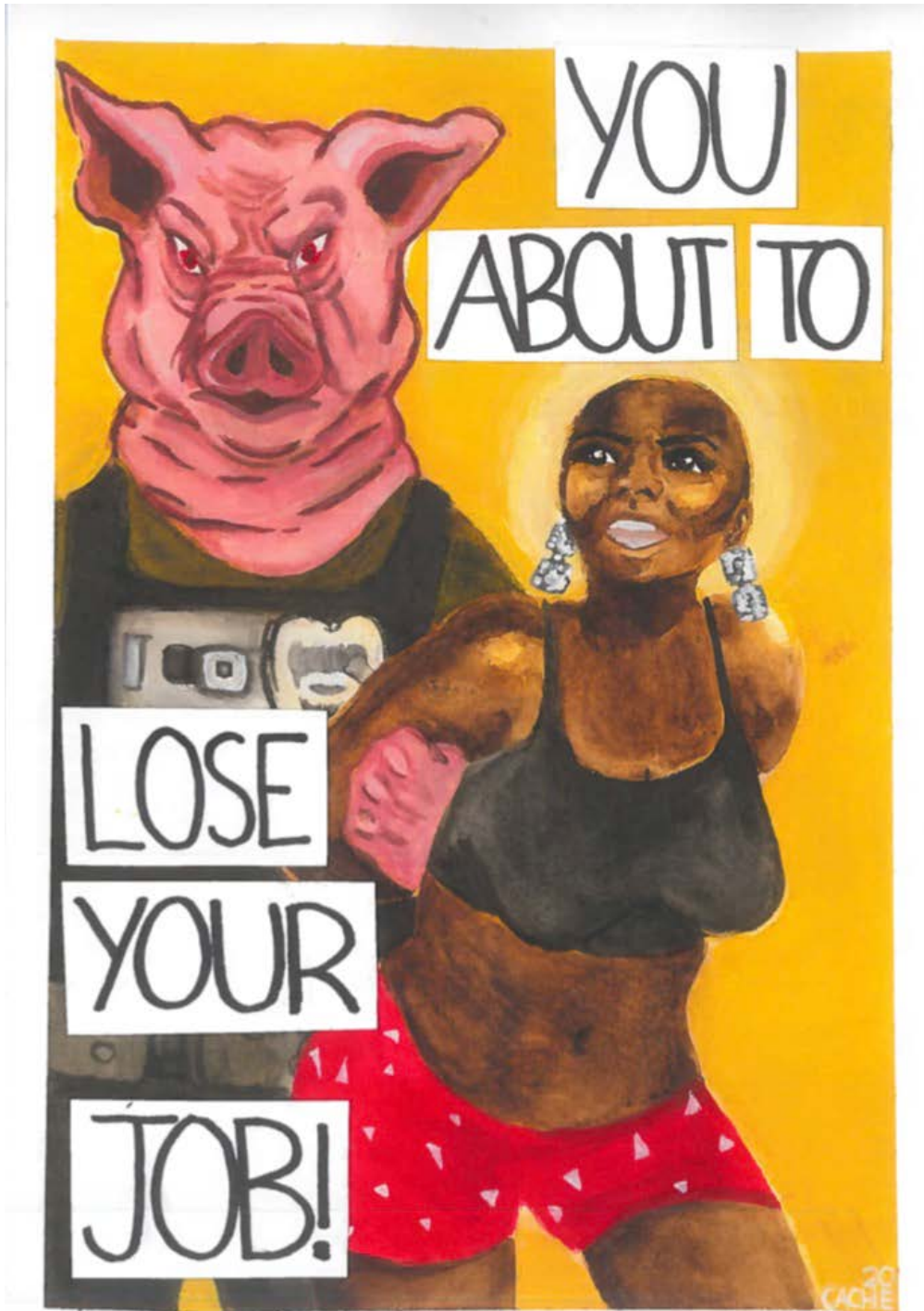
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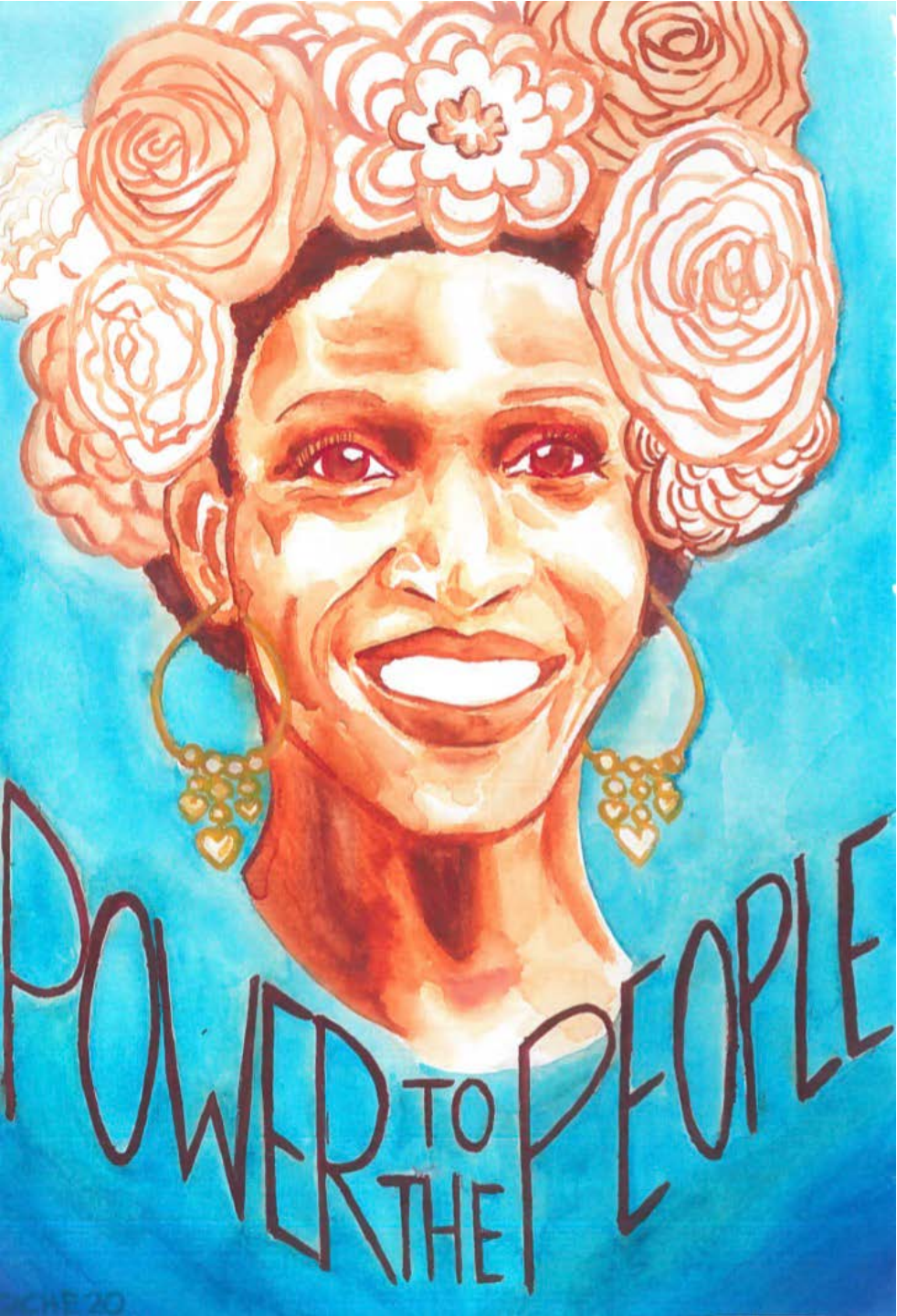




Get This Dance!

Carrie Chen

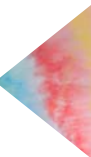




I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to be Free

Carrie Chen





# She Kept Things to Herself

Adrienne Kinsella



# Mother Armenia Defending Her People

Sophia Channessian





# Smiling in the Rain

NR

Mariana Reyes

