



*northridge* ✨  
*review*

✨ *fall24*

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*masthead*   
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“THE BOOK HAS A SHAPE IN PART BECAUSE WE  
HAVE A SHAPE.” - PROF. PESSIN AT SOME POINT  
EARLY ON IN THE SEMESTER

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## *editor's note* ✨

All of us involved in this magazine— editors, contributors, and readers, are part of a vast literary community that has continued to thrive despite the many challenges of life since 1962. While we're centralized in the California State University Northridge community and the San Fernando Valley, we also have ties to past editors and contributors spanning across the country, forming a constellation of our collective efforts. This issue is but a brief snapshot of the larger brilliance of our community—showing a small piece of the exquisite whole.

Within this edition, we have the works of students, professors, community members, and strangers from afar—now friends. These works span across generational bounds, state lines, and differences in identity and belief to create a beautifully diverse collection of prose, poetry, drama, art, and review. Through these pieces, we are able to see glimpses of our community and its members; of the love, friendship, heartache, and grief that we experience. This magazine, this book— allows us to stay connected and to orbit around one another in constant embrace.

Whether you're a contributor looking for your piece, an editor admiring their hard work, a dedicated member of the literary community looking at the newest edition in a long line of history, or a new friend that has wandered over and picked up this book; I thank you for being here, and for helping keep this dream alive. Regardless of where you're from, how long you've been here, or where you're going, keep shining.

Thank you,

Hanna Davis  
Managing Editor





**ETERNITY - MELISSA TERMINI**  
oil on canvas



# MARMALADE LAMENT

BRI STOKES

A blaze of cobalt blue.  
A wingless dragon's  
flame, alchemized into silver  
and set loose in  
seaglass-colored  
rivermouths:

so swells a  
forlorn  
womb,  
so within: babbling tide pools  
rife with remnants  
that glow

and make ornaments  
of mason jelly,  
dutifully  
still,  
achingly  
lavender.

*If I could find an anchor,  
I'd wed myself to it!*

Los Angeles conjures its  
wildfires in the belly of  
a skylit cauldron, where a sleeping  
Aeon yawns and  
fans out Her legs  
to birth god over tangerine hills,

and the anxious  
have called this god  
"Endurance."  
The anxious have abandoned





the scorch of snow  
and deified its fangs under marmalade skies.

I miss the 30-year-psalms  
inscribed under  
the Inglewood concrete, singing like ghosts,  
hidden in the  
hymns wailed by wild parrots up, up  
in the Queen Palms:

we are gilded as  
children of the Milky Way;  
we are  
rudderless,  
without a wing or  
an ocean.



# BLOOD MOON SINNER

MAYA VASQUEZ

Blood moon sinner  
wasted in gin,  
they wandered the night,  
crawling to gutters.

*(Gone. Gone. Going.)*

A bullet and  
a platter,  
the sinner holds  
the trigger-

*(Silence.)*

Sworn in red ink,  
silenced by alibis.  
They're purging  
asunder the sanctions.

*(It's done.)*

Turn to winners,  
taste their pride.  
These half-hearted saints  
feed on their body.

*(Obsession.)*

Choke on the vices,  
breath in the virtues-  
Crumbling-  
Crumbled-  
*(Succumbed.)*





This blood moon sinner  
    turned saint.  
These half-hearted saints  
    turned sinners.

*(Sacred disorder.)*



## AS ABOVE SO BELOW

PHOEBE SMITH

The world comes in all different shades of Blues. Sometimes they're right there. Always common and obvious. Found in the bright blue of the day sky or within the cold and freshly fallen snow. Other times they're more hidden. There are ones that have to be searched for to truly be seen, in the atmospheric haze of distant mountain ranges and in the lightest of blues right in the split between the deepest dark of the night and the warm yellows in the break of dawn. A luminescent blue sign of life that glimmers along the edges of waves, the shimmering gleam of a butterfly's wings, the twinkling highlight along a pair of lovers by the moonlight.

But none are quite so rich, so beloved, as the Blues found within all the oceans and all its seas. A place of sapphires and azure flowing and tumbling along with white horses. A bright one for the calm waters of the Caribbean and the waves beaching with a softness found only within the earliest of mornings and latest of nights. The royal blue of the Pacific, the darkest of navy for the Atlantic, and the cerulean of the Indian are all found within the crashing crescendo of the Drake Passage and the North Sea, the solid stillness of the doldrums, the humid swirling storms of the tropics.

She sings and calls with a mouthless voice that leads travelers into waters that carry their ships and pull them down to her depths, in her grasp for then some, plus ever.

She has layers to Her, to the Blues of Her waters. The lightest and the clearest belong to the ones touched most fully by the Light. Ribbons of it dance through the ever-flowing tides, drifting through to touch down on those who find their lives below. As the depths extend farther and further down, the Light's reach deteriorates—and the darker it gets. The cerulean fades away to navy, the navy to midnight, and midnight to black.

There are layers to Her power, to the pull and push of Her Blues. The calmest belong to the simplest and the most complex of days, where the clouds drift more than rip through. In these moments of blissfully painful serenity is where man





is kept at bay with nowhere to go and nothing to take him away. The horizons and the Blues are all that keeps him company here. Until, of course, the raging Blues are inescapable. Mountains of waves swallow up anything and everything that dreads to cross Her; a vessel as large as had ever been seen by the heavy galactical waters and all its souls taken from the surface as instinctively as a bird takes to the sky.

All is where the calls of men and travelers alike are lost to the roaring waters, their secrets lay to rest and lost to these Blues.

*it's all suffocating, almost is. the weight is heavy, weighing everything down—but the surface! it's just above, within reach! the surface, with all its constellations of seafoam, only one more kick upwards—*

Those that voyage, a people who aimlessly wander through the Blues, do so ferociously and fearfully. They seek naught and want not, launching themselves through the seam between water and atmosphere, allowing only life's push and pull to take them wherever they may go, need to go, end up going. Where their hearts so decide, is where it leads them; they know not what they look for but know what it is when they see it.

The travelers speak of a time it happens, the perfect split second when the waves pause their movement; they're at their calmest, their stillest. Half a blink's time when nothing is happening except the hope for anything beyond the company and the pulsing of the moon. At a point when every member of a vessel's inhabitants is on the very edge of becoming one with the Blues themselves; and yet still their foundations remain solid: untouched.

Then, a flash of green; one step, toes on the edge; one step more, both feet in. Everything in—

*feet drawn—stuck—to the bottom, walking but not attached: floating. through forests of green, skies of dark blue, deserts, and clouds of white horses. splatterings of dancing stars and boiling bubbles. prickling and needling at everything; fear and relief, shaking and trembling. blind even with eyes wide open.*

A constant pressure, a smooth glide through the space around them. Kicking and propelling, swinging and maneuvering through the darkness. The Blues fade from the brightest azure to the darkest of midnights. Everything threatens to compress

their entire beings and bodies.

The cool of turquoise turns to a pale teal; the needles prickling along skin becomes a permanent resident in the marrow of bone. Stuck forever and forgotten never, that feeling.

Found within the darkness—a heavenly warmth. The freeze disappears. A thrusting of hot air scalds the space around it; burning the power of a dying star and boiling a scar into the mind. The smoldering smoke follows like a cloud preparing to cry.

*this is not something to escape. there's a thundering. somewhere far away. somewhere up above? farther below, perhaps? it's somewhere, can't quite find it—*

The Blues yell and gasp and proclaim and speak, screaming and whispering for it all, yet.

Deeper and deeper, darker and darker. A constant pressure pushing and pushing and pushing. Everything threatens to compress their entire beings and bodies. Layers upon layers with every fathom and league, sinking deeper and further.

The dust clears, not settling—disappears. Nothing for it to dance in any longer, no light and no shine. Deafening silence echoes and abounds through, what else is to hear but the thump of an erratic heart and the cracking of bones succumbing to something not even the sun and the moon can reach.

*through the clouds and clouds of dust. the light is gone, the pressure is heavy. difficult to see. difficult to breathe. there's a pulsing here.*

Chests threatening to cave in, lungs burning like a star's explosion contained within them. No muscle strong enough to fight it off, no will or strength powerful enough. All that's left to do is to sink further and farther. Deeper into the midnight and dark, not even an arm's length away from the navy, and the cerulean, and the seafoam.

No crashing waves or stormy turquoise in sight. Looking up, down, twisting and turning to nothing and no one. Then—there. Just there.





*a glowing spec. then more. flying just by. little bits of dancing and glittering starlight. rivers and streams of them, swirling and crashing along together.*

Sinking and drifting, lighter and lighter. Floating into a something.

*the dark is still here, but the pressure—the pressure is gone. it's weightless. there's nothing here, like ti's been sucked up and removed. just floating.*

Then—

*glowing ribbons. bits of shimmering and fluttering refractions.*

Waves of cerulean and seafoam, royal blue and murky turquoise waving and rolling to the moon's beck and call. A place of sapphires and azure flowing and tumbling along with constellations of seafoam.

## 2 MONTHS

DANIEL VALLEJO

Day 1- They told me I have 2 months. I don't know what to even write. I'm only doing this because they said it would help me. It won't. They think I'm sad or something, but I'm not. Everyone I knew already left me so why would I care that I'm going away soon. I always hated them for that. Assholes. I doubt they'd care. What else am I even supposed to say? This was a stupid fucking idea.

Day 2- I woke up today. Brushed my teeth. Didn't bother to get dressed. Stayed home. That's it. Later.

Day 8- I forgot to write the past few days. Just been mindlessly watching TV. Couldn't even tell you what shows they were, I fell asleep through half of them. I see the doctor tomorrow. Maybe things will change. I doubt it.

Day 9- Nothing changed. Bye.

Day 28?- I'm still here. I stopped writing because I can't see who this is for. Nobody's going to read it. Not even me in a few months. So why would I bother? Though, I guess it gives me something to do. Funny how little time I have here, yet nothing to spend it on. Figures. I tried writing poetry, but I suck ass. The only thing I've written so far is:

*"The morning dew of the wilting flower  
Are tears for the incapacity to bloom once more"*

Had to pull a thesaurus for that one. It's probably why I never passed English higher than a C.

Day 30 (I guess)- I haven't eaten much today. I used to eat like a pig before. Now, I eat like a flower that hasn't





had sunlight in weeks. All my favorite foods don't taste the same anymore. Shrimp tastes too crunchy, pizza is too greasy, burgers are too fat, tacos too dry. Something happened to them. So, I've been stuck with oatmeal. Surprisingly, I don't hate it. I don't like it either. It's just there. I guess me and oatmeal are more alike than I realized. Maybe that's why I can stomach it, though I'm not sure for how much longer.

Day 31- I've lost a lot of weight without realizing it. I always said I would hit the gym eventually, but I guess I don't have to anymore. What a gift. I look a lot skinnier than I would've liked but whatever. It's not like I'm going out anyways.

Day 32- It's starting to hit me just how much time I have left. Half of the time I was given is gone. I'm not scared. I'm not. Really. Anyway. I've been up all night. Can't sleep. I haven't dreamt in the past 2 days. Everything has been a black void. Everytime I try falling asleep, I get stuck thinking about the past. Choices. Crossroads. I think about all that could've changed had I just accepted that offer or if I just told them what I felt. I shouldn't worry about this since it won't matter once I'm gone. Still, these thoughts are eating me from the inside out like maggots. I guess they're calling dibs early.

Day 33- I didn't end up falling asleep. This insomnia is what's been killing me. I've been thinking a lot of the dreams I had as a kid. First I wanted to be a cook so I could make tasty meals for all my friends and family. Ironic. Then I wanted to become a famous musician. I quit guitar lessons after a week. Then I wanted to become a lawyer. I didn't know how the law system actually worked. And then it was pilot, engineer, mechanic, artist, and the list goes on and on until I settled something. A convenience store worker. I never wanted it.

Day 36- I fell trying to get out of bed. Guess I'm so skinny now that my legs can't hold my own weight. I had to grab the cane. Now I have to get used to it. Fun.

Day 38- I went for a walk today since I couldn't exactly run with a cane. There's nothing to do out here, so I stopped at the playground I used to go to. It's a lot more rundown and

rusty than I remember, but that's just the way life goes I suppose. The moment I began to daydream, this little girl asked me to play with her and normally, I would be upset and tell her to fuck off since kids are annoying, but her eyes were starry and bright and she had the biggest smile on her face and she was super polite too, saying that her mom was busy on the phone so she had nobody to play with and I would have felt awful saying no so I tossed the ball to her and she would toss it back and sometimes she would throw it too high and my arms were too slow to catch it in time, but she would hop over and pick it up regardless. We played together for about 30 minutes until her mom finished her call, and she thanked me. It was nice. To be thanked.

Day 39- I went back to the playground again. I just wanted to experience that feeling again. But nobody was there. It was only me, just waiting and waiting. They owed me nothing. I didn't even know their names. It was stupid of me to expect them to come back. But I guess being a dumbass pays off sometimes, because they showed up again. And we talked. And I smiled. Her name was Ava and her mom was Carmen. Ava wanted me to play tag with her, but I told her I couldn't. We played catch instead and I talked to Carmen. She practically told me her life story, but I don't blame her. Her life story is much more interesting than mine. More accomplished too. Her husband had passed away because of an illness, and she was left to take care of Ava by herself when she was only a few weeks old. She told me how she was Valedictorian for her high school, perfect GPA and everything, full scholarships paid for her college, got her masters and was going for her PhD until everything happened. I don't know how she managed. I could barely stand my 9-5 job, my GPA was... passable, I got denied from universities (that I couldn't even afford) whereas she moved beyond all of that and had to raise a child by herself. She's way stronger than I ever could hope to be. I even told her this and she told me not to underestimate myself and she's sure I'm stronger and smarter than I think I am. Don't really know how true that is when I don't even have the strength to play tag with an 8 year old. But she pointed out something else too. She asked if I was feeling okay. That I looked pale. But I told her I was just tired and I only had the cane because I was recovering from a football match. Before she left, she asked if I would be back here





tomorrow since Ava had trouble making friends. I didn't even hesitate.

Day 43- I've been nauseous all day. Vomiting what little food there is in my stomach. But on the bright side, I've spent the past few days with Carmen and Ava. She's on summer break so she has all the free time in the world, and Carmen is on a 2 week vacation. I couldn't do much physical activity with her because of my condition, but I taught her how to draw and paint. I showed them some of my artwork from years ago and they were acting as if I was the next Picasso. Since Ava's only 8, her drawings were very simple, like a sun in the corner and a car as a box with circles, but it really took me back to when I was kid. A time where I was happy. I think Carmen noticed a tear falling down my eye because she asked me if I was okay, and I told her there was just something in my eye. I even said I never felt better. That part wasn't a lie.

Day 46- It was Ava's birthday today, and I was the only guest. Carmen told me that her relatives live out of state. She got her a small cake with 9 candles and a pinata. Ava had trouble breaking the pinata herself and asked me to help, but I'm not sure what she wanted me to do, you know, with my frail body and all, so I hit it with my cane, which she thought was funny. Carmen ended up breaking it for her. I asked Ava what she wished for when she blew the candle, but she didn't tell me, because if she told me it wouldn't come true. Maybe that's why mine never came true. Anyhow, Carmen told me my eyes looked yellow. I guess I never really noticed since I stopped looking at myself in the mirror. But I guess I look older. I laughed really hard when Ava told me that she thought I was 50 years old because not even her mom is 50 yet. I'm only 23.

Day 56- I had to go to dialysis again. I hate going. Everybody looks at me with pity, like I'm a walking skeleton. The workers especially. They don't say it, but I can see the "I'm so sorry" in their eyes. It gets annoying. Anyway, after my dialysis, I stopped by to visit Ava and Carmen again since it looks like my time is running out. Carmen's figured out my situation, cause I guess having a sprained ankle for weeks isn't exactly the best lie. She wanted to know exactly what was wrong with me so she

could try and help pay for any medical procedures, but I never told her. "I didn't—I don't want to think about it anymore. Maybe if I don't think about it—if I continue to ignore it, it'll go away". It won't exist. She doesn't know how long I have until I leave, possibly leave that is, but I'm sure she's made her guess because I told Ava I was moving away. Ava thought I was leaving because I hate her, but I told her I could never, and that I was planning on moving away before I even met them. I felt awful, like a doctor telling someone their relative just passed away. I had trouble looking at her face, my eyes couldn't see clearly through all the water.

Day 59- My body feels like hell, especially my sides. The doctors told me I have to stay here. At least I'm able to still write. Only when I'm numb to the pain though. But it's nothing I can't handle. Right? ~~I've made it this far. I can do.~~ No. I can't. I'm scared. I'm scared. I can't anymore. It hurts to live. It hurts to die. I don't know. I don't know anymore. I just. More time. Why couldn't I have it? I don't wanna go. There's still so much I wish I could do here, but I never got the chance. I took too long, then it was too late. I don't want to leave. I don't want to go. ~~I don't want to. I don't want. I don't. I don't. I. I.~~

Day 72????- I'm still here, to me and the doctor's surprise. My body is still fighting to live. Carmen came to visit me after I told her where I was, and for the first time in weeks, I've been able to sleep soundly through the pain. I told her not to bring Ava though. She's been visiting me after work. She shows me pictures of the things Ava's been drawing for her classes. Her drawing skills have gotten better; it's really cute. She wanted to bring Ava to see me, but I had to beg her not to. I hate being seen like this, and I don't want her final memory of me to be what I am right now. My body is in such a pathetic state that I can't imagine Ava would do anything other than cry. But even with how I look, whenever Carmen talks to me, she doesn't talk down to me like I'm dying. She doesn't look at me with sad eyes. She treats me... normal. She was telling me about her favorite movies and shows and I kept making fun of her because she likes Hallmark movies and novelas. She has the worst taste. She tried getting me into learning about sports like football and baseball by putting some games on in the





room, but they're so damn boring. I was half asleep watching them. We also had an argument over whose slang is cornier. It's weird. To feel the experience of having a mom again.

Final Day- It's nice. To not be alone. I wish I could've learned that sooner. Carmen's writing this for me since I'm in too much pain to write it myself, so I hope she's writing everything correctly. Ava still asks about me. She even gives letters to Carmen so she can "mail them" and I can read them. She tells me how much her teacher compliments her art and how good her grades have been and how she beat Jason at handball and how Jenny is her new best friend and how she's considering being an artist. A part of me wishes Ava could forget about me. It feels wrong to say, but I don't want her to feel the pain of losing someone you care about so young. It's an experience I wish I never went through. I forgot to get her a birthday gift last month, so I told Carmen to give her my favorite drawing I made: a blue flower blooming on the edge of the moon, in front of the sun. Thinking about that drawing makes me wish I could've done a lot of things sooner. I'd also be lying if I said I'm still not a little scared. But it's okay. You know, I never really accomplished much in my life and there's a lot of things I may not be able to get to do. I may never be able to have kids of my own, become a grandparent, famous musician or artist, feel the taste of my favorite foods again, see the sunset or see the stars, visit Greece or Paris or Italy. There's still so many things I still want to do and dream of doing. It's something that bothers me, and yet, I don't feel angry, because by the end of it all, I was still able to find them: my family. If by some miracle, I do make it to twenty-four, I'm not going to write here anymore. This journal thing - was for a very specific time in my life, and I don't need it anymore. I want to keep it untouched and look back on it years later, if I get the chance to. But if I don't, that's okay too. Oh, and before I end this, I was able to finish my poem with all the extra time I had. It's not Shakespeare or anything, but I like what I made anyway:

*"The morning dew of the wilting flower  
Are tears for the incapacity to bloom once more  
But the sunlight of the brightest star*

*Dries it and reminds them of the beautiful blossom that follows”*







**ADHD - KAT WIACEK**  
acrylic and oil on canvas

## DANGEROUS SUN

TOMAS GONZALEZ

REN

It wasn't that he couldn't sleep, it was that he didn't want to.

Sleeping was what he should be doing, but it was the last thing he wanted.

Sleep was when the voice came, when it whispered to him, like the slow scraping of metal against the inside of his skull. And so here he was, staring into the glassy monitor with its endless charts and data streams displaying the absolute emptiness of the space around them. The concoction of coffee and other stimulants he had worked on over the last couple of trips keeping him awake, his attention chemically elevated and fixated on the screen.

It was this altered state that at first made him question if what he had seen on the monitors was anything at all. But suddenly it was there again, a blip cascading from sensor to sensor, being picked up by magnetic, thermal, and imaging sensors on the starboard side. But what could be floating out in all this emptiness? Likely just a piece of debris or a stray asteroid drifting alone in the darkness he shrugged as he took another sip of his acrid brew.

But as he panned the camera closest to the object, he knew it was anything but trash.

As he stared at the monitor, scrutinizing the object, he suddenly felt ill. His vision blurred and the voice slowly clawed its way up from his subconscious. He gripped the edge of his seat, losing his grip on consciousness, but then, all at once, every machine in the navigation room lit up. Screens blinked, urging attention as data rolls ticked out streams of information in printed, hard copy form. In the chaos he was able to shake the nausea, but the voice did not quiet; it seemed to sharpen and was clear enough to understand.

"Come..."



It was the only word, repeated over and over. He sat there frozen, the word echoing in his mind. It wasn't until another voice broke through the chaos, the automated staccato voice of the computer, that he realized what a world of trouble he was in if he didn't act fast.

"Priority one, full crew activation initiated," the ship repeated.

He hurried back to the crew quarters, just making it to his sleep pod right as the doors of the other crew members' pods began to open with a hermetic woosh.

## ALICE

It was always a mindfuck waking up from deep sleep. The first feeling was the slow, dull pain of various needles and tubes retreating from the nooks and crannies of your body. It was like mechanical snakes, gently removing their fangs and slithering away to their hiding places within the walls of the pod. But compared to the total loss of self, this was relatively quick and painless. She wasn't sure exactly how it worked but the cocktail of sedatives, antipsychotics, and various other drugs needed to make extended deep sleep possible really messed with your memory. After the general haze of sleep wore off it always took an hour or so for you to fully become yourself again. Your mind was all in fragments and sometimes you couldn't even remember who you were.

Name, where you were born, who you loved, who loved you; these were often mysteries that slowly drifted into place as you stretched your wobbly legs around the crew quarters. As she looked around the rest of the crew was in similar sorts, wiping the sleep from their eyes and looking at the others half suspiciously as their trust formed for the strangers who were slowly becoming familiar; all except one. A tall, lanky guy pulling long strips of paper through his hands and looking them over as it poured out of the bank of computers along the wall.

The tape. Something about the tape suddenly gave her an uneasy feeling, something she was struggling to pull from her memory... "The computer only prints tape during an emergency and digital copies might be corrupted or lost," she recalled.

"What's the emergency? ...Ren?" she asked, his face slowly



becoming familiar.

“You remembered my name this time,” he said with a half-smile that he quickly put away.

“Nothing major, looks like the computer picked up some space junk worth stopping for. Has it ever done this before?”

She walked over to the nearest console and tried to draw the commands she needed from the corners of her memory. But before she could input anything the screen lit up in a wash of green text.

*Congratulations... Captain Alice!*

*You have been selected to lead a special assignment, please standby for your briefing :)*

The message made her stomach sink. This was the pirates all over again.

## **THE SHIP**

The ship did not have a name. At least not the kind that was usually granted during one of those ancient ceremonies where, for long ago forgotten reasons, a bottle of champagne is cracked on its hull. That was an honor reserved for the types of ships that carried some sort of prestige or great purpose. No, this ship was anything but special, only given a serial number: D3MTTR. Nothing but a cog in the machinery of a galactic enterprise so large, it was hard to fathom. A planet cracker, meteor hauler, pirate vessel for a stint and now a cargo vessel for the cheap seats. When whatever splinter nation, religious sect or megacorporation couldn't afford the exorbitant fees of the space gates, the corporation was more than happy to provide a slow boat to “paradise” for a greatly discounted fee. Of course, this included a contract so long you could trail it behind the ship to find your way back once your utopia inevitably failed. Ultimately, the corporation didn't really care what the ship was used for or by whom, as long as the invoices added up at the end of the year and the crew paid their taxes to whatever bureaucrat was sitting at the desk at home office. And it was always the same crew, each ship was coded to its crew and no one else could interface with even its most basic systems if the corporation didn't approve it. Even during the pirate era, they woke up whenever anything needed human



attention, much to the surprise of the pirates who thought they were in control. The ship provided guidance, logged the incident, and when the work was done the crew enjoyed a day or two swapping stories with the pirates and catching up on news, then back to sleep they went. Titles and ranks were never used unless the ship deemed a task dangerous or ethically gray enough to merit a pay bump. Like ejecting hundreds of hapless pirates into the asphyxiating darkness of space for lack of payment.

## JUNK

“So, *Captain Alice*,” Yuri, who always had a twisted sense of humor, asked. “What’s the special assignment? Are we ejecting these cruisers into the closest sun or just turning off the life support and selling the pods for scrap.”

“Lucky for our *Customers* nothing like that.” Alice said, correcting Yuri’s pet name for the over 1 million souls stowed in the vast hold of the ship. Each one nestled in a pod alongside all the trappings needed to settle on their future colony.

“Home office wants us to check out some space junk the ship picked up. Ren, can you give us a breakdown?”

Ren was frantically jumping between consoles, looking over scans of the object in between gulps of sludgy coffee.

“Well, two things,” they said excitedly, “One. I’ve never seen anything like this. From first appearances it’s nothing special. It seems to be metal and it’s likely hollow based on weight, but I can’t penetrate the damn thing. I’ve thrown every scanner we have, even some of the old planet cracker stuff, and it’s like a black hole in there. Maybe some kind of shielding but I can’t really be sure. “...Second, and this is maybe, ok...”

“Just spit it out!” Alice said with a bit of shortness, feeling ever more uneasy about this assignment.

“I don’t know how to explain it but I think it’s from Earth. And likely not just some junk lost by a ship along the same route.” Ren’s widening eyes made the sinking feeling in Alice’s stomach into a dull ache. “I checked the company records twice! We’re the first ship this far out in the sector, And more than that, it’s old. Like really old. Like really, really old.”

“Exactly how old are we talking?” Alice asked as Ren scrib-

bled on a piece of data tape.

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“Best estimate, and this is fuzzy until we can get a closer look because really there are a lot of factors at play here so...”

“Ren, how old?” Alice grimaced.

Ren finished his scribbles, which Alice could now see was a long string of equations, the sum circled in deep red.

“10,000 years.” he said shakily, handing the paper to Alice.

Before she could even structure a response, the hub computer chimed. Alice walked over and read the guidance from the home office. The dull ache broke out into a full cramp.

## WARNINGS

As Alice and Yuri approached the object in the quarantine bay, they couldn't really see anything special about it. It stood about 10 feet tall, rectangular, slightly widened out at one end and completely black, like an upside-down obelisk. But as they got closer, they could see deep scarlet markings etched into almost every square inch of its surface.

“We got a translation here, Ren?” Alice asked as she passed her hands over the obelisk.

“Nothing yet. It's definitely Proto-Romantic according to the computer, so we at least know it's from Earth.”

Yuri circled the object slowly, looking over the inky surface for seams or some kind of mechanism.

“It's sealed up nice and tight that's for sure,” he said, huffing as he grabbed the unwieldy looking cutter from the cart and waved Alice to the side.

“You got that old man?” Alice asked with a smile. You wouldn't know from looking at him, but Yuri was the oldest member of the crew by far. Maybe the oldest person that Alice had ever met. She had lost count of how many other ships Yuri had worked crew on and wondered his real age. He looked to be in his mid-fifties with a tinge of salt and pepper at his temples, but with a crew member you never knew. Alice herself was tipping over 200 Earth years old, even though most of that time was spent asleep.

“I got this,” Yuri said defiantly, starting up the





cutter and laying it on the flat side closest to him. In an instant, he was awash in sparks as the teeth, designed for cutting meteor samples, made quick work of the exterior.

“How’s that?” Yuri asked, appreciating the precise vertical slit cut in the object.

“I’ll need at least a few inches of wiggle room to get a good scan,” Ren chimed over the comms. “Can you give it another pass, maybe cut horizontal a bit so we can pry it open.”

Yuri grimaced at the weight of the cutter but powered it back on and started the procedure from the new angle. Helped by the initial cut, things went smoother this time, until he felt it suddenly begin to catch.

“I’m hitting something here, should I stop?” Yuri pipped.

“Just a little more!” urged Ren over the mic as he watched through the monitors, unblinking and covered in a cold sweat. Yuri continued, smoke beginning to creep out of the object as the cutter struggled on whatever it was catching on. Suddenly the smoke got darker and poured out of the slit from the previous cut, the blade screamed.

“Just a little more!” Ren urged again, the voice scratching at him from behind his eyes.

Suddenly the blade gave one last sickening howl and instantly shattered. Yuri covered his face instinctively, the pieces of blade and destroyed cutter shredded through the many layers of the hazard suit. Alice dove for cover, the fragments flying through the air like a grenade had gone off in the room.

“Yuri!” Alice yelled as she collected herself and rushed over to him.

“I’m ok, I’m fine,” he wheezed as he tried to brace himself on the obelisk; blood spilled out from his hands and arms as the suit struggled to self-seal.

“Just a little nick,” he said with a crooked smile as he collapsed into Alice’s arms.

## THE CONTENTS

“What do you mean it’s empty?” Alice prodded. Ren had been gone for hours and his answer annoyed her. Especially given that Yuri almost died trying to open the damned thing.

“Well, mostly empty; it’s full of junk. Old books and pieces of paper—it’s basically just trash. There’s maybe a handful

of recoverable artifacts, but again, it's all written in that obscure Proto language, and the computer can't get a clean translation on any of it. Especially now that it's all covered in Yuri's blood."

"So, Yuri risked his life for a pile of junk, is what you're telling me?" Alice scowled.

"Basically, well... yes. And the new briefing came in. Head office wants us to dump it. Not even worth its weight in scrap, I guess," Ren shrugged.

"I can take care of it if you want."

"No, I'll dump the fucker myself," Alice said as she stormed off to the hazard bay, Ren ducking out of the way nervously.

"You double-check Yuri's lab work; don't want him catching some space bug from that garbage pile," she yelled back.

"You got it Captain!" Ren said timidly, watching her as she turned the corner. Once she was out of view, Ren's demeanor darkened. Biting down on his lip, he pondered the situation for a moment. Looking down at Yuri, he bit down harder, almost drawing blood, his mind racing. What should he do?

## THE TRAIL

What an absolute mess.

The obelisk now looked even more bizarre than before with a jagged hole on one side and a pool of blood at its base. Fragments of its contents were all over the hazard bay: signed books and torn papers, beads and other bits she couldn't quite make out. But what she noticed most was the smell—a smell of burning metal and herbs so strong, she wished she had worn her hazard suit. After the incident, initial scans showed no hazardous materials or radiation, but the smell was absolutely horrid. As she put away the last of the tools, she sighed with anticipation of a long shower and an even longer sleep. Once she ejected this heap, she would assign the rest of the crew to clean up and try to forget the whole thing. Looking at the long trail of blood from dragging Yuri to the med bay made her spine shiver. They were this close to losing him over nothing.

"He's ok," she thought as she punched in the sequence for ejection and started heading back to the slowly clos-



ing doors of the bay. Once those doors closed, the obelisk would be gone; maybe Yuri might even be awake, and they could laugh about the whole thing. As she crossed the room, she took one last look at the mess and turned towards the doors. But she only took one step before stopping cold. She snapped back around, her eyes laser-focused on a trail of bloody footsteps that led away from the obelisk.

Previously hidden in the shadow of the obelisk provided by focused spotlights, they now stood out thanks to the intermittent room filling flashes of the ejection warning lights.

“Fuck.” She uttered the phrase, motivating her legs to move. She ran back to the console and, with one hand, smashed the “ABORT/EJECTION” button before she got ejected along with the obelisk.

“HUB REPORT, WHO’S IN THE HUB!?” she yelled into her radio.

“Hi Alice, it’s Margot. Everything okay down there? We saw you aborted the ejection..”

“GET EVERYONE DOWN HERE NOW!”

## NOT ALONE

As the room continued to blink with the disorientating hazard lights, against her best judgment, she approached the footprints. The first thing she noticed was the stride, incredibly long and scattered. The shape of the foot was also grotesquely long, more animal than human. As her reason gave way to curiosity, she began to follow the steps deeper into the bay—but suddenly, the trail stopped. Two final steps marked the ground side by side, a spot of blood between them, as if the owner had taken a second to think of their next move and vanished. As she examined the final marks, the room flooded with beams of light from the approaching crew and their flashlights.

“What the hell is going on?” Margot asked.

Alice grabbed her and searched for the words to respond, but then she felt it—a warm, wet tap on the crown of her head, it trickled down the side of her face and hit the floor below her. Looking down, she saw a scarlet drop of blood, and for the second time that, night she froze.

As she craned her head upwards, Margot followed Alice’s line of sight with her flashlight. The beam hit empty air for



what felt like an eternity until it landed on the vent—or what was left of it, directly above them.

“Jesus, that must be 40, maybe 50 feet off the ground. Did Yuri’s blood really go that far?” Margot asked, already knowing the answer. A large gash in the twisted and mangled grates was slathered with blood, strings of hair and filth.

“It didn’t,” Alice answered, looking into Margot’s confused eyes as her stomach twisted.

The others stared at her in silence. Their eyes widening as they followed the bloody trail with their lights and up to the vent, while coming to the same terrifying realization.

“It wasn’t empty,” Alice uttered. The black hole of fear and anxiety where her stomach once was pulled her in...



# THE PLUMBER DIAGNOSES A LEAK

TERRY TROWBRIDGE

The plumber diagnoses a leak as human error,  
but there the humans weren't there to err.  
Invisible puzzles can do that on the second floor,  
especially when they drip into the kitchen ceiling.  
The pipes form a stack of crossroads and elbows.  
Space is pressurized, time is compressed.  
Even years of sedimentary layers can create  
unexpected eruptions around fossilized flotsam.

Plumbing, the profession, is an archaeology  
of the opposite of knowledge: studies the unshared,  
the occulted remains that were not meant to remain.  
Sometimes privacy is meant for what we discard,  
and plumbers intuit the designs of those hidden pathways.

"Tampons and condoms are the most likely..."  
the plumber explains, and I desperately think, "Don't I wish!"  
but how are we supposed to evaluate stained drywall,  
human behaviour, chthonic hard water minerals?  
I disagree, try to rule out the diagnosis, ask for differentials.  
I try not to make this house into an episode of *House*.  
I try not to argue, but the plumber wants to speculate  
and I can't tell how important that is.

"I could tear out drywall all day, for days, chasing the leak,"  
(there are so many *House* puns, e.g. Chase),  
"but your goal is to sell this place," the plumber reminds me.  
We return to problem-based diagnostics. What is the problem:  
in or out, up or down, stop or flow, sink or sell? I suppose  
I am stuck on the problem of the maze, and  
while the plumber analyzes the mind of the previous owner.  
Both of us make inferences, and leaking takes time.



**FRIDAY NIGHT**  
KIMBERLY PARADA

I consumed his vacant chill as  
we kissed. *Are you really 24?* he hummed  
while we laid  
on his mattress. The hollow room  
vibrated a purple plum sweet like  
his lips. The LED lights fed his cavity's ether,  
softening his wrinkled smile.

He asked. Then

My chest  
fell;

my toes  
plunged on his hardwood  
floor; My eyes scanned all around-

no bedframe;  
no furniture;  
no clothes;  
not a thing-

nothing. He  
pulled me in closer while his vestal fridge hummed...

Was he

*Really*  
28?





**URBE | CITY**  
DAMIÁN J. GALVÁN

En la ciudad  
no hay coyotes;  
solo perros.  
Se debe por la  
impaciencia de  
los dueños de  
terrenos robados.  
No hay más  
que el aullido  
del avión que  
atterrice a tiempo.  
Solo aquí ladran  
los perros  
en depósitos  
de chatarra.  
Se asustan cuando  
sus dueños  
no están  
y el smog  
se siente pesado.  
¡Aquí en la ciudad,  
no hay  
espacio,  
solo jaulas!

-para Danny

In the city,  
there are  
no coyotes;  
just dogs.  
It is due to  
the impatience  
of the owners  
of stolen  
territories.  
There is nothing  
more than the  
howl of the  
airplane that  
lands on time.  
Only here  
do dogs bark  
in junkyards.  
They get scared  
when their  
owners are  
not there  
and the smog  
feels heavy.  
Here in the city,  
there is  
no space,  
only cages!

-for Danny



## A CROWN OF FLAMES - *a microreview*

EMMA WILLIAMS

Flaminia Cruciani's collection of poetry, *A Crown of Flames*, intertwines lyrical rhythm and beauty with profound contemplation. Through intricate verses that weave through themes of love and loss, connection and experience, and faith and humanity, Cruciani demonstrates an ocean of understanding, both graceful and significant of language and human emotion.

"I gave birth to humanity, in the woods of indifference" (Excerpt from "We Were Silent in The Same Language"). Through this collection that demands the confrontation of thought and feeling, Cruciani allows readers to go through a self-reflection of personal experience that one can only describe as healing. Each poem in this collection is crafted with carefully brilliant imagery designed to resonate deeply with readers. This excerpt from one of the poems in this collection, "Reporting From A Dig," captures that imagery perfectly: "An olive sleep, the senses hauled down in hemorrhaging millenia // undoing the knit of sacred sleep // a desert tunic without a hem, castle of bones fortified in white // clay sunflowers the cogwheels of your afflictions."

Cruciani's ability to capture fleeting moments and instill them with an air of timelessness without taking away from their modern relevance demonstrates her in-depth understanding of the human experience being just that: felt by all and unchanged by past or present. Cruciani writes like an ocean moves, her words often similar to the calm before the storm. Her poems allow readers to linger over her words and savor their meanings with language that is sometimes subtle at first glance, then powerful as a tidal wave of feeling and understanding.



## GOD OF THE AIR HOSE - *a microreview*

EMMA WILLIAMS

Cesar K. Avelar writes with a raw type of honesty that illuminates life as a stigmatized identity. Avelar's poetry in his debut collection, *God of The Air Hose and Other Blue Collar Poems*, confronts the reality that is blue collar life for migrant workers in America, calls out the system of broken morals, and greed and manages to do so with beautiful lyricism and powerful imagery - "My back is wet because you've soaked it in stigma" (Excerpt from *La Paleta*).

The poetry in this collection works not only as a method of speaking out, but as a written statement of his goal to one day take over and be better. Avelar's words speak to a society desperately in need of effective communication while also screaming at a system which refuses to listen. Each poem is precise, addressing not only the injustices in a factory filled with workers young and far too old, but also the grievances of losing what was once filled with joy. The loss of your love, your children who resent the late nights, the bills piled high on the table. "No more dreams // Just bills // Bills without mercy // Just love // Love without flavor" (Excerpt from *Reflective Breaths*). Avelar's poetry speaks to those who have sacrificed and to those who continue to do so. The poems in this collection are felt so deeply it is as if the words themselves are saturated in the blood, sweat and tears this broken system demands.

*God of The Air Hose and Other Blue Collar Poems* is a testament to the power of poetry, illuminating the complexities of the human spirit. Finding beauty within misery and inspiration within sacrifice, Caesar K. Avelar writes what must be said with necessary emotion and understandable anger. "Blue collar hands create flowers of truth // they come from palms dancing with labor // they are roughness // that threatens power" (Excerpt from *Calluses*).





# THE PROCESS | *a play*

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HANNAH BENDER

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

Casey: Woman, late 20's. AA member, overweight.

Juneau: Main character; man, late 20's; recovering from addiction, not an alcoholic. Earlier in the recovery process.

Morgan: Man, middle aged 40's; AA member.

Andres: Man, mid 30's. AA group leader.

Alcoholic 1/Wife: Woman, middle age 40's; AA member/ Morgan's wife.

Alcoholic 2/Marcus: Man, late-teens, AA member/Juneau's cousin.

\*the symbol “/” will be used to show overlap of dialogue.

### Scene

A snippet from the overall play, focused on hangout after an AA meeting.

### SCENE 3

SETTING:

CASEY and JUNEAU enter to find MORGAN sipping a coffee at the table. MORGAN waves them to come join him.

CASEY

You weren't waiting too long huh?

MORGAN

Not really, just sat down.

(JUNEAU and CASEY sit down)

MORGAN (cont.)

Either of you hungry?

(JUNEAU shakes his head no)

CASEY

What are you getting?

(MORGAN holds up the coffee)

CASEY (cont.)

That's it?

(MORGAN nods, CASEY starts looking at the menu, looks up at JUNEAU and MORGAN)

Hmmm... you're really not gonna get anything?

JUNEAU

I'm just not hungry.

MORGAN

I ate before the meeting, plus this was your idea. I'm just here for the ride.

CASEY

Fine.

JUNEAU

You can get something if you want.

CASEY

It's fine, I shouldn't.

(pause)

Plus, I already had a doughnut at the meeting, which speaking of, what did you think of it?

JUNEAU

Oh umm... I mean, it was fine I guess.

CASEY

Fine?

MORGAN

At least you seem better now, you were kinda' in a space

JUNEAU

(thinks about saying something)

Well...

(PAUSE)

/ never mind

MORGAN

What?

JUNEAU

It's stupid.

MORGAN

Just say it.

(PAUSE)

Fine. Ummm well, I was just thinking about the doughnuts from the church, does that mean they know about us?

CASEY

I'd assume they'd have to for us to use the room.

MORGAN

I think they know about the meetings, but the rest of it is kept quiet.

JUNEAU

So, what about the doughnuts? Who brings them to the meetings?

CASEY

We don't get treats often, they probably just had a bunch left-over.

MORGAN

That's how we know God cares about us alcoholics.

CASEY

Really, I just want to know why it's called "Alcoholics Anonymous" when we must stand up and introduce ourselves in the first 15 seconds of every damn meeting?

MORGAN

That's for/ new people.

CASEY

Think about it, I mean, you go to a meeting with anonymous in the name, and what do you do when you get there? Sign a book, say your name and tell your life story.

JUNEAU

I thought you said I didn't have to do that?

CASEY

Well, I meant, not like that.

MORGAN

You kinda screamed when you introduced yourself.

CASEY

Most people just raise their hand or something.

JUNEAU

Oh.../ sorry

MORGAN

Also, you're not required to do those things, people just, do

CASEY

I mean it's fine.



JUNEAU

.../ so?

MORGAN

Well, I think it's supposed to be like trauma bonding. You know, you drink, I drink kinda shit.

CASEY

Right so why can't we trauma bond without saying our name and our numbers?

MORGAN

It's more about the group feeling, I guess? I don't know. I mean, considering our circumstances I think our names are the least of our worries.

JUNEAU

Do you know most of the people there?

MORGAN

Some of them, but I've been at that meeting for a/ little while.

CASEY

Wait, so why don't you think it's a big deal?

MORGAN

I think we're the last people to judge. I mean, can you think of a more messed up group?

(JUNEAU and CASEY pause to think)

MORGAN (cont.)

A more messed up group that doesn't drink.

JUNEAU

What about...

CASEY

Cult leaders!

MORGAN

Nope! They drink too.

CASEY

Yeah, Kool aid, but not/ "the hard stuff"

MORGAN

(nonverbally agrees, his phone starts to vibrate, realizes his wife is calling)

I meant like... actually hold on, be right back.

(MORGAN gets up and walks outside. WIFE enters on the other side of the stage)

MORGAN (cont.)

Hello?

WIFE

(upset)

Where are you?

MORGAN

I'm at dinner with some friends.

(PAUSE)

CASEY

So, what's your deal?

MORGAN

I don't kn- Well hold on, I can explain.

JUNEAU

Oh, umm, things have just gotten' to a point, And I just keep hurting people. But it's like I just can't stop myself.

MORGAN

I know.

CASEY

No no, I'm asking about the whole walk out thing? That deal.

WIFE

Why can't you just give me straight answer?

JUNEAU

Oh/... that?

CASEY

Andres said something about admittance. Something along the lines of "we don't get it?" so what don't we get?

JUNEAU

If I go home I'll just, drink

CASEY

Drink? Drink and.../ what?

JUNEAU

Hurt people.

WIFE

Hell! Are you drunk right now?

CASEY

You're not... drunk/ now are you?

JUNEAU

What?! No.

MORGAN

No, I promise. You really think after everything... I would be out at some bar?

JUNEAU  
What makes you think that?  
CASEY  
I don't know,  
WIFE  
I don't know/ anymore.  
CASEY  
Maybe the way you were acting, you seemed messed up.  
JUNEAU  
So you just assumed I'm drunk?  
CASEY  
You went to AA meeting and acted like that (gestures). What am I supposed to think!?  
(JUNEAU stops, looks down...)  
(MORGAN stops, looks down...)  
(PAUSE)  
MORGAN  
I love you.  
JUNEAU  
(Head still down)  
You're supposed to think I'm an alcoholic.  
(PAUSE)  
And that I'm fucked up.  
(JUNEAU looks up)  
Tell me, tell me I'm fucked up,  
WIFE  
(PAUSE)  
I don't love who you've become.  
JUNEAU  
that I'm just some addict.  
WIFE  
I'm done listening to your lies about how things are going to change. You're narcissistic going out like this. You're physically and emotionally unavailable, and constantly take your unstable sobriety out on me and the kids. And maybe, if it was just me, fine-but not to our kids.  
(PAUSE)  
and out of everything you have the nerve to say that I'm the one putting a strain on our relationship. When you're the one who's lying about their drinking problem. I just want our family back... I want you back.

(starts crying)

You're sick... and it's hard to love you when you're sick.

(PAUSE)

I called your mother, she said she'd make a room for you to-night.

JUNEAU

Because you get a chip and now somehow, you're "fixed".

(looks at phone, notices the time)

CASEY

... At least/ I'm honest about my addiction.

JUNEAU

I'm out, I'm going home. I'd rather get high off whatever you think I'm on than listen to your horse shit.

(starts putting jacket on and getting up to leave)

CASEY

C'mon, we're trying to help.

(JUNEAU is ignoring CASEY, starts to exit)

Hey, come on!

(CASEY fumbles to put some money on the table before going outside to see JUNEAU leaving and MORGAN near the doors of the diner)

MORGAN

You/ good?

JUNEAU

Next time I'll make sure to drink before our meeting!

(JUNEAU past MORGAN and exits. CASEY comes after him and joins MORGAN outside)

MORGAN

You piss him off or what?

CASEY

I think I came off a little strong.

MORGAN

You think? What did you do?

CASEY

We were talking and I pressed him. I wanted a sense of what he's on. He got upset and left.

(MORGAN gives CASEY a look)

CASEY

What?



MORGAN

...I don't know...did you learn anything?

CASEY

Wasn't drunk, definitely on something though, my guess is meth.

MORGAN

Why meth?

CASEY

(notices MORGAN looking upset and uninterested)

Just a hunch. Thin, emotionally damaged, fits the bill. Granted, he could be mixing, but...yeah, no, I don't know. I mean he had all his teeth.

(PAUSE)

I'm guessing your conversation wasn't much better?

(MORGAN pulls out his chip)

MORGAN

Apparently I'm just a good liar.

(PAUSE)

(CASEY looks at MORGAN)

MORGAN (cont.)

...Yeah.

CASEY

Did she say anything else?

(MORGAN gives Casey a sarcastic look)

MORGAN

She said a lot.

CASEY

About us?

(MORGAN shakes his head no)

(PAUSE)

(MORGAN looks at and flips the coin through his hand)

MORGAN

Y'know, I can count on one hand the number of times I've drank while getting this coin, but somehow it makes all of it meaningless.

(PAUSE)

CASEY

I don't think that's true.

(Casey rests against the building next to MORGAN)

(PAUSE)

(CASEY playfully punches MORGAN on the shoulder, MORGAN softly chuckles. CASEY looks at MORGAN who is looking out into the night, MORGAN turns to look at CASEY)

MORGAN

I told you, were not doing that anymore, I have a wife, remember?

CASEY

I remember you saying something about not being pleased by your wife.

(MORGAN looks down, takes a minute and look back at CASEY)

CASEY (cont.)

And you seemed pretty pleased last time.

(CASEY starts running her hands on MORGAN's leg, MORGAN starts chuckling, shaking his head)

MORGAN

We both know that shouldn't of happened.

(CASEY shrugs)

CASEY

(CASEY pulls her hands up)

Just sayin', offers there.

MORGAN

We should both go, home.

CASEY

(CASEY SHRUGS. CASEY and MORGAN start walking towards their cars)

(PAUSE)

You gonna be okay?

MORGAN

That's a good question.

CASEY

Let me know if you're not?

(MORGAN moves his head in acknowledgement)

MORGAN

(PAUSE)

See ya next week?

CASEY

See ya.

(BLACK OUT)

# HOME

VERONICA LARA JACOBO

## 760 WAINE'E ST.

chorused cries grieving what is gone,  
ashes covering what once was love.  
my soul is set ablaze,  
death by flame  
nothing is ever the same.  
still stuck inside four walls,  
laughter fresh from the day before,  
where the young came to grow.  
the sky has darkened,  
suffocated by shadow.  
six hundred degrees,  
have turned my heart into rubble.  
a rouge-stained sun bleeds into your valleys,  
the smoke has set,  
your beauty now charred with agony.  
weeping,  
your burning open arms,  
now i'm fleeing.  
five years old,  
leaving home for the first time,  
here goes the second try.  
what do i gain from my cries?  
the world is up for grabs,  
but i can't erase from my mind,  
the home i no longer can have.

lullabies of waves crashing,  
ashore, the arc of colors splashing.  
heavenly orange hues of the setting sun,  
all your splendor is now gone.  
i've re-lived this nightmare a thousand times,  
now i think of you when i weep at night.

a *hui hou*, until we meet again

my home, my love,  
for now i will live with the pain.

**APT. A207**

and if i was stranded amidst the orange tide  
would it matter?  
to feel warmth for once in my life,  
from the spark in my heart, long expired.  
turns out the light at the end of the tunnel  
was simply fire.  
so come and dance around my funeral pyre  
if it really, really matters.

but it doesn't, really,  
when the slightest breeze  
feels like a storm.  
suffocate me with air, can't breathe

i'm carrying the child in my arms  
"we're safe from harm,"  
but i see in her eyes  
agonizing thoughts  
as the embers rain on either side

"i wonder how it will feel to die."

and i cry for her  
never had a chance to say goodbye  
to all her childless lullabies

"we might yet survive,"

"but will we feel alive?"

and i've spent a lifetime  
convincing her not to cry





when love was worth a nickel-and-a-dime  
and here we are, nearing our time

“i’m not scared,”  
as i watch hell rise in her stare

“i’ve felt father’s anger burn more,  
more than this orange storm.  
that was the first time i lost my home.”  
and now, she easily lets go  
of every physical thing she owns.  
we both watch the walls crumble down  
of the second home  
where we came to grow

and i hold the hand of my wounded child  
knowing the ashes had piled  
and maybe we won’t rise from the fire.

but maybe it doesn’t really matter.

**LAHAINA, 96761**

and the room reeks of smoke  
as i sit  
unwavering, ever still  
to burn with your memory  
in peace.  
perhaps the flames provided warmth  
to the cold sting of our goodbye  
and my unwillingness to let go.  
then i hear the echoes grow  
from the screams desperate to run  
as the wind carries me far.  
tripping down the steps  
with nothing but the clothes on my back.  
the air was lead to my lungs  
and the heavens weep tears of fire.

deep down  
i was ready to die,

if i wasn't so used to being alive.  
i watch the embers swallow you whole  
against the glass, opaque from smoke  
covering the streets i used to know.  
only shadows now.  
far away, the sun suffocates from ash,  
glowing red from anger.  
hands tied behind his back  
as the bad cleanse their sins  
against the orange tide.  
hell in paradise.  
repentance, please keep me alive.  
i've never seen God cry  
until day became a moonless, starless night.  
so we scream prayers in the car,  
begging, God, i want to be alive.  
atrophied heart in my hands.  
tempting, death was offering me a dance.  
as the world collapsed in a heap of orange  
and the sky regained its blue tinge,  
fighting against the shadows that reigned.  
sighing, we escaped with our lives,  
and throughout the night  
i wondered if you were still alive.  
despite the orange glow i watched  
under a roof that wasn't mine.  
i didn't know you scorched  
under clouds of smoke  
until the morning i awoke.

and i wondered,  
why was i kept alive?  
my heart burned with you as you died.  
and here i am  
shallow with life.





**MENTOR - CLARISSA CERVANTES**  
digital photography

## FEEDING HAND ( ROUTE 15, TEN MILES TO VICTORVILLE)

TOMAS BAIZA

The hand that feeds me has dirty fingernails, broken cuticles,  
and smells of unfiltered Camels.

That hand has worked smooth and shiny the steering wheel of a  
1972 Ford Econoline van which knows better than any hitchhiker  
or coyote the highways between Bakersfield and Yavapai County.

From that hand, I accept fried hash browns, palmed  
from an aluminum tin, wedged between thighs which also prop up  
a battered plastic Prestone container half-full with piss  
that I'll have to empty at the next gas stop.

That hand is hard, calloused, and unskilled in gentleness or  
caresses or anything resembling love. That hand can give you  
the bird both ways—full extension or three-fingered fold.

Just north of Victorville, that hand gestures for the cigarette  
lighter on the vibrating engine shroud.

I hold my breath against the smoke.

The hashbrowns are slippery between my fingers and I try to  
look forward to what my own hand might one day feed.

Dark grease wicks into my jeans as a gray-brown coyote  
darts across the road ahead.

Panting or grinning,

I can't tell.





# GRIEF

STEPHEN RUFFUS

We cannot abide the small nameplate  
pressed like an afterthought  
into the still, dormant grass

while waiting for the stone  
that begins the last step-sun,  
moon, stars-in this journey.

He lies covered with snow.  
I shovel a long path to him,  
brush off the garden lights,

the feathers and wooden stalks  
his sister had arranged  
until the grey flat stone is set

in the fall still far off.  
But come this spring  
when the mower lords over

the land and all will be tossed  
and cut smooth, there will be  
nothing there. Gone will be

what was made with our hands,  
things we wished  
could stay and last forever

gesturing softly in the breeze,  
as he did, things that have held  
throughout the storm.



IN LIEU OF  
STEPHEN RUFFUS

It is a flood, dark waters  
that cannot drown my sadness.

In lieu of flowers make me the dreamer  
who sees him standing at my door.

He will speak to me, say my name  
so I may bear this grieving.

Drop the petals, lay out a path for me  
toward him deep within the wood.

There, I will feel his breath  
in the shaking of the leaves.

The full moon has forgotten to rise.  
I hear the earth turning endlessly.

Night is a hollow bone.  
Let the pain burrow inside me.

The bouquets appear sullen now  
and are returning to seeds.

I still see him as though asleep  
as though he had been praying.

Being fated to memory,  
in lieu of flowers I choose the fire.



# VOWS FOR SINNERS

HOLLIE DUGAS

Let's say your body is the coffin  
I lay our non-truths. And God  
is the grave that holds you,  
holding our crumpled lies,  
our white and shriveled trash.  
Let's say He carries our shame  
in His metaphysical pocket—  
sheepishly—like the girl's  
phone number he jotted down  
from a bar-bathroom stall  
and kissed just once. How long  
can we bear  
to flaunt our imperfections  
at one another? How cavernous  
a cavity does one body need  
to carry on forgiving?  
My impieties fill you, a sharp  
sour gas moving dark  
and unholy through you,  
seeping into the rungs  
of your spine, eating  
new wounds on your wrists.  
You swallow the words  
I feed you, a wad of maggots.  
Tell me, how do you keep  
the crow away  
when you are bursting open  
with rot? There is no other way  
to apologize but to shovel  
your fissuring body from God,  
help you crawl out—  
blackened and worldly.



## WILD ORANGE

JULIA TOMES

In the winter I like to go out in the morning.  
Before the rolling hills and  
gnarled oaks abandon me  
to the windowless white walls.

I sneak behind the great rusted shell  
who had (in his past life) been a bustling green van.  
Then, in the time after, a chicken coop.  
But now only a cheerful monument of bygone times.

I find the orange trees there,  
planted in that wilderness of "the good old days."  
And there I stand, in the quiet.  
And feel the morning.

I feel the burning sun as it wraps around me,  
gentle as kisses on brows.  
To anoint the ridge of the Three-Faced Lady,  
with her golden crown.

I let the dense earthy scent of orange trees embrace me,  
as soft as whispers  
reaching out in languid tendrils  
that coil around my brain.

Among these old friends,  
I linger for just a little while.  
And breathe.  
And talk to God.

Only after I've had my fill  
of the stillness  
do I stretch myself out; extending arm and back,  
To receive the fruit offered by the giving tree.

I sink my thumbnails into the thick skins,  
Not fretting  
about the juice that runs down fingers





or into palms of hands.

Disregarding the delicate  
white membrane separating the meaty sections.  
I close my eyes,  
savoring each savage bite.

After, I wash my hands in the dew of the grass  
and turn my back on those whispering trees.  
The rank of giant guardian cypresses salute me  
as I start toward the sound of the tolling bell.

Later you may see me  
fretting smartly over this and that.  
Smiling sweetly and nodding agreeably,  
Folding hands demurely over crossing legs...

But all the while  
the secrets of the trees still coils around my ears.  
And the sweet acid of the wild orange  
still tingles my lips.

## HOLIDAY

DANIEL FREARS

It was well into the autumn months, but the weather retained a light and refreshing heat, enough so that windows and doors stayed open throughout the shortening days. To a visitor, like Y, these conditions were a privilege, but to those that lived here it was a regular occurrence, and if anything, invoked a dismissive type of boredom; certainly nothing special. X, however, was an exception and whether it was just for the sake of Y or because of a personal passion, he commented regularly and proudly of the year-round warmth, not jaded by the many years of living in it.

The mornings began slowly, and a slight chill in the air sat below a veil of dusty-looking clouds blanketing the sky. Small pockets of sun were allowed to dart through these grey layers as they trudged along slowly in the stillness. Once enough heat had gathered, the clouds would begin to pull apart and turn into smaller floating pillows, until eventually they gave up and let the rising heat burn them away completely, revealing the painfully blue sky. A sweet smell of something new and fresh would fill the air for these early hours, reminding Y of things being born and then the sun would come to have its way and begin baking the ground, causing a thicker, stronger scent to permeate. The smell of age.

Y was visiting for the week and luck had it that X was given an unexpected day off from work, so they decided to drive out to a reservoir that Y had been recommended. The description his friend had given was that of a lush and vast forested area which could be navigated via many different tracks, and this forest enclosed a decently sized reservoir, filled with crisp clear water; perfect for swimming, or just cooling off.

X volunteered to drive after a little back and forth about which car to take and they set off late morning, by which time the sun was already high in the sky and the world seemed subdued by the heat. They wound their way through the local suburbs. Y watched as they passed by countless houses, each different to the last. This wasn't like the neighbourhoods of his youth, which were made up of rows upon rows of identical red brick



buildings, each seemingly cloned from the last, these were awash with character and he saw single storey wooden shacks that looked ready to crumble and fall, sat right next to huge sprawling structures, with first floor balconies that would have swallowed up their poorer cousins next door. The mix of poverty and wealth in such close proximity was a common theme and it made for an enthralling display, at least for Y, as he would often ruminate on the haves and have-nots of different people, eventually looking inward and wondering of his own human value.

Whilst he was daydreaming, they had joined the motorway and were now gliding past a fractured stream of other vehicles, sitting in the outside lane to get to their destination without delay.

"Do you see that up ahead?" X said drably as he gazed forwards.

Y scanned the road in front of him and saw a collection of vehicles spread across the lanes, though nothing caught his eye. He looked upwards, above the cars at the sky and the few trees and distant hills that showed ahead, but again nothing stuck out.

"What are you looking at?" he said finally, glancing at X to see whether he could figure it out from his stare.

X let out a puff of breath and rearranged his lips.

"There's a hearse in front of us, right ahead" his tone remained flat.

"Do you think it's bad luck to be following a hearse?" he added.

Y took a moment, rubbing his chin and his cheeks, either due to a habit of thought or the few day-old beard that covered them.

"Bad luck... bad luck" he murmured to himself. After a moment his tone stiffened, and assuredness entered his voice.

"I suppose it depends whether you believe in luck, right?" and he posed this as a statement with a slight inflection and then went on, "If you believe in luck, then following in the wake of a dead person, or a vehicle for dead people would probably be a pretty sure sign of bad luck, but on the other hand, if you don't believe in luck at all then it wouldn't mean anything. Just another lump of metal on wheels."

Y stopped rubbing his face once he concluded the thought and sat back into his seat.

"You know, we could conduct an experiment" he added.

"Oh yea, what experiment is that?" X said, with little sign of intrigue.

"Well, we'd need to follow the hearse for as long as possible, staying behind it whichever way it goes and then see whether anything bad happens later on" Y took a tiny pause "and if something bad does happen... then I guess we decide whether it was luck or coincidence that caused it. What do you think?"

X looked over at Y and smiled, again rearranging his lips.

"Sure"

So, they stayed behind the hearse as it accelerated and as it slowed down, when it switched lanes and even when the long black vehicle indicated to take an exit which wasn't on their route, they took it, completely true to the cause.

By now they'd decided not to go to the reservoir, though neither had said anything.

"Wow, this hearse is really travelling huh" said Y, after around half an hour of following it

"I hope they've got the body chilled in there" he said, imagining a greying corpse shuffling around in the back of the stuffy vehicle, with the smell of death spreading in the autumn sun.

They were now driving down a narrow country road, snaking between thickets of autumnal trees that held back most of the blazing sun, but allowed thin strips to filter through, dotting and lining the road. There were barely any other cars, and it seemed that they were heading somewhere well out of the way.

X had been silent for a while but now spoke.

"What are we going to do when they stop?" he said.

Y went to rub his chin again but stopped himself.

"That's a good question" he responded and took a moment to carry on.

"How about, if they stop in a public area then we just park nearby and wait to see what happens next. If they pull up to a house, then I guess we just drive on and call it quits... or we could just drop it now, depending on whether you think we've followed for long enough, to build up some really bad luck"

X seemed to be soaking in the options and continued driving without speaking for a while.

"We can go for a little longer, I think" and carried



on like they'd never spoken.

They were mostly silent as they continued, both feeling the weight that the heat held, with X following the target like a faithful hound and Y closing his eyes from time to time so that he could soak in the sound of the road, feeling like he had stowed away on a ride to some indistinct, foreign land.

About an hour later, after climbing some steep and still winding stretches of road the hearse started to slow down and eventually stopped in the middle of the lane, having made no attempt to pull out of the way.

X and Y looked at each other and X instinctively slowed the car and also came to a halt, some 20 meters back from the hearse.

After a moment a man appeared from the driver's seat, clad in a well fitted black suit and with a solemn expression that matched perfectly his mat of dull grey hair. He was every part the archetypal hearse driver. He closed his door and walked steadily to the back of the vehicle, his walk showing no urgency, and his eyes locked forward the entire time, not deviating once to look at X's car. Once he'd rounded the back he leant down to the handle and pulled the rear door wide open.

The mood had become very strange, with Y worrying that they'd pushed things a little too far and as he stared at the side of X's onlooking head, he contemplated whether he did believe in luck. To him, the word 'luck' reeked of excuses and even if he thought that it may be a genuine phenomenon, he'd likely deny it.

No, luck wasn't real.

The sun was still dappling through the trees, and it cast brilliant spots of light which shook against the man's dark suit as he leant into the back of the hearse, seemingly rearranging something.

"Do you want to get out of here?" Y said, sounding a little apprehensive.

"Now?" replied X incredulously.

"You want to leave now, after coming all of this way? Before we even get to see what's happening?" he turned to Y and his eyes were bulging from his head in a mixture of excitement and bewilderment.

As he finished his sentence the man jerked backwards with a dull thud accompanying the action, as something heavily dropped



onto the road.

"What is that?" said Y uneasily, but there was no response from X who was now leant over the steering wheel, watching intently.

The man bent down and picked up two limbs of whatever was on the road and with some considerable effort began dragging it towards them, the scraping of hide on the rough tarmac audible in the quiet surrounds. He moved slowly and methodically, leaning backwards, pulling the creature along in neat little instalments.

"So, you want to just wait for this guy to bring that thing all the way over here?" Hysteria now rang through Y's voice as he fretted in the passenger seat, his hands pressing against the dashboard.

"Let's fucking go!" he shouted, but X was non-responsive, slumped over the wheel with no discernible expression, watching listlessly as the figures moved towards them.

Finally, the man dropped the load that he was carrying and turned around to face the two of them. This time he stared them both in the eye, X first and then Y, before walking the last 6 or 7 paces to the bonnet of the car. The sun was shining sharply onto his face, and it illuminated him almost as if he were aflame, with the iridescent yellows and golds flashing over him with every movement. Once at the front of X's car he raised his arms, spreading them like wings and they could see that the large pale palms of his hands and the cuffs of his white shirt were darkly stained with a ruddy brown. The image brought to mind horror movies of Y's youth and he was frozen with dread.

Throughout all of this X had been reliving a dream that he'd had many years ago. In the dream he was standing by the bank of a vast pond, so large that he could barely make out the low bushes and trees that lined the other side, with the water at his feet a thin mottled green that darkened the deeper it got. His feet were bare and only his toes dipped into the pond as the soles of his feet rested pleasantly in the soft mud of the bank.

Where the water was darkest, towards the middle of the pond, X could make out a collection of shapes bobbing on the surface, moving lazily and good-naturedly, appearing as friendly blobs on the water. Without feeling the urge, X had waded into the pond and once he was up to his waist



had begun swimming a languorous breaststroke out towards the nearest of these dark masses. It seemed to call to him in a low and welcoming hum. He recalled the water being unusually viscous, like swimming through a honey which gave some resistance, but this didn't cause any panic. Once he'd made it to the first shape, he started to tread water and stretched out his arms to reach over it, with a soft and rubbery texture greeting him. The object was heavy and seemed very dense. X leant over it, looking for signs of familiarity, but there were none.

It was like a large, tender rock that had decided to take its leave from the bed of the pond and float up to the surface, to enjoy the calm air that was on offer. As X looked around, he noticed that all the other objects were slowly floating towards him, but again this held no menace as they seemed only to want to be held as well. Gradually they made their way to where X was and one by one, they pressed against the mass that he was holding and merged into it, like drops into a black puddle, making an increasingly huge and misshapen body. As they collected in their dozens, X felt the sensation of it inflating below him until eventually he was laid on top of this thick black plane, some considerable height in the air.

He scrambled to the edge and looked down to see that the pond was an ocean now and from horizon to horizon there was nothing but still, moss coloured water stretching out below. The driver dropped his hands down to his side and turned around, walking back towards the hearse without so much as a glance at the body laid out on the road. He carefully closed the back door and then returned to the driver's seat, started the engine and turned the hearse around, driving back the way he had come. They sat for a few minutes and then X reversed the car until the lump in the road was out of sight, before taking them home.

## TO BE ARDENTLY YOURS

ZOE ENRIQUEZ

### the yearning for flesh

how it is soft,  
and new. so warm.  
the freshness,  
the nimbleness,  
it holds echoes.

the bruises,  
the cuts, the scars,  
remembrance  
of time and age.  
the beauty of esh.  
the wear of life.

the blood pumping,  
fueling the core- a  
heartbeat, the soul.  
a succulent delicacy.  
the rhythm can soothe  
a craving of a desperate,  
awaiting mouth.

the desire of a body,  
the touch of skin,  
can set aflame to the  
darkest mind, the isolated  
individual, the hunt.  
a cannibal that wanders,  
seeking their prey to tame  
their lonely nights.

the yearning for flesh.  
the longing of a cannibal,  
i will devour you completely.



## **ardently**

come into my heart,  
and make it your home,  
before the poison seeps  
and corrupts your beauty.

let it not tempt you, but  
remind you of the depth  
of my love. it holds your  
gentle nature. it cradles  
your warm body.

i love you.  
here, now,  
forever and always,

*i am most ardently yours.*

## **your death is on my hands**

my bloody hands lay  
on your wounded body.  
how still, how unfamiliar  
you feel next to me now.

your voice, your smell,  
your laugh, your cry  
it plays inside my head,  
endlessly, like a violin.

the red hues of your blood,  
soak into the ground below.  
giving back to the earth you  
once danced upon.

i do not feel butterflies.  
i cannot hear birds sing.

the sun does not rise.  
i am restless. i am weak.

i am the cause of your  
demise- a murderer.  
i didn't kill you, but  
your death is on my hands.

where oh where,  
do i put this love?  
please, forgive me.





## “MY GOD”

MAYA VASQUEZ

he stood on his pedestal- cutting a piece of my heart out.  
Biting the fatty piece- blood spurting from  
open artery. I can't

let myself be sacrificed to a God  
who does not love me. Liberating days  
long gone- where they didn't feel like

I was going to drop dead- Am I dead?  
returning and dying  
for the hundredth time-

He was going to kill me again. I could see it  
between razor sharp teeth and lizard eyes.  
*Hunger.* For the fresh taste of

fear and grief- the loss of home  
in those lizard-like eyes. Back when he treated  
home like church.

Back before he chose to be God  
Walking with humble auras, skin that  
kissed sunlight. Our cats nuzzling

his ankles with their cheeks- Now their tails puff  
and they scatter. I can see  
our angry god, vomit-covered wife

beaters and shredded khaki shorts. I blink and I still  
remember him- freshly inked tattoos, germaphobe  
hopeless romantic,

Shots of espresso, a love for dance,  
I open my eyes and see my god-



*Where did he go?*

## THE DAUGHTERLAND - *a microreview*

EMMA WILLIAMS

“The Daughterland” By Margaret Garcia, is a breath of fresh air, one that may be hard to take but once it’s drawn, clarity opens doors and windows to a world you once saw differently. Garcia shares her reality of Mexican motherhood and of what bearing that title entails in a world plagued with COVID-19. The poems in this collection speak to the female experience; the feeling of witnessing your daughter’s trauma and being unable to interfere with it. Garcia writes poetry that feels like a motherly hug when we were young, where it was the safest place to be. “Baby girl, baby girl // Trying to live in this world // Walk on. Walk on // It won’t be long // You will belong // Someday- // to yourself” (Excerpt from: The All American Girl Initiation).

Garcia shows her profound command of language through poetry that breaks barriers and shouts from the rooftops words soaked in sadness, anger, and understanding. Easily visualized imagery and colorful description allows readers to resonate with each poem, feel the weight of the words, and allow them to soak into our very bones. Garcia has allowed through her poetry for those who have not, to experience these things firsthand, to be able to see and contemplate, nonetheless, something more important than words can describe.



# HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MICROREVIEW?

I.J. DONES

The poem “HAVE YOU SEEN THIS DOG?” by Sesshu Foster is part of a collection of poems published in Foster’s book, *City of the Future*. The Japanese-American poet’s collection includes a fusion of cultural identity and thematic commentary on the Industrial Revolution and its twenty-first century repercussions. The book is mainly composed of prose poetry, and while the form is one of the most engaging aspects, Foster does not hesitate to add layers to his composition. “HAVE YOU SEEN THIS DOG?” is an exception to the prose poetry theme, unlocking a deeper understanding of the piece and adding dimension to the book. Foster’s use of content, genre, and form in “HAVE YOU SEEN THIS DOG?” is the key to understanding Foster’s vision, theme, and precursor to the entire collection.

Foster’s use of form is critical to understanding key elements of his vision and theme. The poem is divided into two sections: prose poetry and line breaks. The first half of the poem is written in prose poetry, and every letter is capitalized. The poem’s second half is designed to look like contact slips on a ‘Lost Pet’ flyer; consequently, this section is turned on its side, creating chaos. Additionally, alternating the form creates a submersive effect, helping to portray the poem as a real advertisement. Foster also changed the contact slip format to all lowercase fonts. This detail may seem arbitrary, but Foster is trying to correct the chaos he introduced by making the prose poetry section all caps and by turning the poem on its side to convey sympathy and order. Returning to the traditional line breaks is an attempt to portray normalcy, especially since he separates both sections with “take one.”

Traditionally, ‘Lost Pet’ contact slips do not include any text, but Foster ignores tradition to convey his theme. Additionally, there is usually a picture of the lost pet. Instead, only one message suggests no urgency to find the lost dog. Choosing prose poetry form creates a sense of urgency, giving the poem momentum, but it also deviates from the traditional form of the ‘Lost Pet’ flyer. Collectively, these form choices convey emotional longing. The flyer seeks to reach out but is not concerned with the dog since the diction largely focuses on derogatory terms. Foster uses words like “WONT START”, “DIRTY”,

“DENTED”, “BAD”, “WOBBLE”, “MURKY”, “STOLEN”, “INFAMY”, and “CRASHED” to convey the deterioration of this car that could be a dog (19). In the end, he includes that “THIS DOG MIGHT STILL BE IN IT, BARKING AT PEOPLE,” but there is no picture of the dog. The quantity of the derogatory content compared to the mention of a dog contradicts the narrator’s intent to find it. This conclusion leads to another question embedded in the form. What is the narrator trying to find, and what is the urgency?

The key to this question is in the other half of the form and disclosed by some content. The most notable aspect of the line break section is the indication to take one contact slip. In traditional ‘Lost Pet’ flyers, there is no request to take a number. The number is there for people who have seen or might have seen the dog, but Foster includes the request to take it. Consequently, the narrator longs for contact. This detail may seem far-fetched, but the second half’s diction and content make the conclusion evident. In the line breaks, the narrator pleads through repetition in every line, using the phrase “call me” (Foster 19). These lines are not cohesive, but some stand out more than others. Foster writes, “call me please call me today or tomorrow” and “call me I have something to say to you” (19). Foster is trying to send a message about solitude since the poem highlights a longing for contact within the form and diction. However, the reader might wonder why the contact slips contain different numbers and how this could be a plea for contact and a break from solitude.

Foster’s use of content and genre is critical to understanding key elements of his vision and theme. The genre and content are identifiable by crucial aspects of the text, and they allude to the title and overall collection. Since the collection title is *City of the Future*, it should be no surprise that the poem’s genre is science fiction. The main giveaway is the description of the dog. Foster states, “GOES BY THE NAME TOYOTACOROLLA 1970”, the first indicator that the setting does not fall under realism. This detail may seem like a mistake and subverted by the final statement about the dog, but the poem conveys the opposite within its chaotic form.

Additionally, the sister is mentioned as driving the “THING.” Aside from a fragmented stream-of-consciousness narration, the poem does not use non-indicative lan-



guage, but the narrator refuses to describe the dog as an animal or the car as a car. Considering Foster's entire collection and this "City of the Future", the poem suggests that this may be a futuristic rideable dog created by Toyota. Reaching this conclusion aids in understanding that while there was a dog in the car, the two dogs are not the same, which enables the genre to convey another theme about importance. In this futuristic city, and based on the flyer, it is evident that technology is more valued than organic matter, supporting the theme of solitude. By placing more importance on technology, humanity values itself less, which would generate a need for human contact. Recall the form and how the first half is prose poetry—a non-traditional form which appeals to people who value technology over organics. Then recall how the second half is written with line breaks—a traditional (old) form—and turned on its side, appealing to people that long for human contact. The poem establishes an undeniable connection between solitude and technological advancement.

Others may argue that the poem is a joke since it conveys humor and the contact slips include different numbers but consider each number request as a different need. Foster states, "call me i am looking at you right now in a binocular... i feel soft white fur... this is not a trick or a joke" (19). These lines do not define the same person and even stipulate that it is not a joke. There is no way to argue that the narrator's number is not within those slips. Furthermore, the content conveys an epidemic of solitude within these people. One of the contact slips describes a person looking at a car on fire (Foster 19). The person looking through binoculars could be anyone the narrator may know or see from their apartment, but what they all have in common is that their activities are performed in solitude and a plea for a call.

In conclusion, Foster's use of content, genre, and form is critical to identifying the poem's thematic meaning. Foster's collection and his poems convey underlying solitude within technological advancement. Foster uses prose poetry to subvert the traditional form, depicting change. He uses genre to convey meaning and content to illustrate the theme. Altogether, this creates a symbiotic relationship between the poem and the collection.



## ROTTEN

NICHOLAS BRANAGAN

I was born in a verdant grove, under a cloudless golden sky and a canopy of leaves. Opening my eyes for the first time, the first thing I saw was a sapling nestled in the soil between two withered old stumps. As I grew, the sapling grew alongside me. It was not long before the sapling became a tree, towering above me with its leaves blending into the canopy above. As its tallest branches brushed the heavens, the lowest began to hang low to the ground. Upon these branches, fruits of all shapes and sizes and colors began to grow, ripe and heavy with juice. I marveled at these fruits, captivated by the plentiful choices before me as I finally noticed the growling of my own stomach. I took stock of the fruits before me, wondering where to start or if I'd even have the room for all these fruits in my stomach. At that moment, for the first time in my life, I looked away from my sapling to the other trees in the garden surrounding me.

Not far from my own tree, there stood another—not quite so tall nor verdant as my own, but impressive nonetheless. At its base stood a young girl, roughly my age, deep in thought as she examined the two solitary fruits her tree had produced. I felt a twinge of pity for this girl—she had not been blessed by the same bounty I had, and the measly fruits offered by her tree surely could not sustain her. I contemplated calling out to her, offering to share in my wealth, but there was no need—as I watched her, she began to approach a branch of her tree. I thought she'd decided on the pitifully small maroon fruit with dull gray leaves, but when she reached the branch she did not grab the fruit. She grabbed the branch itself and hoisted herself atop it. Then, she reached for another branch above her and repeated the step, slowly scaling her tree until I could scarcely see her through the foliage. A moment of blurred movements and flashes of her figure through the gaps in the leaves later, and she suddenly jumped down to the ground once more. In her hands rested a shining gold fruit, nearly glowing in its brilliance. With a satisfied grin she sank her teeth into the flesh of the fruit, golden juices running down her chin, and I returned my gaze to my own tree once more. While



beautiful, none of the fruits before me bore that same luster. But the girl did not find this fruit among the lowest branches of her tree, so it was unreasonable to expect so from mine. I gazed upwards.

Above those branches, through the gaps in the canopy above, I saw them—fruits beyond my wildest imagination. Impossibly large, their branches bending precariously under their weight. Some of the fruits were a shimmering gold, like the girl's, but there were countless others just as stunning: some were a polished chrome, nearly invisible as they reflected the leaves around them, others seemed to be encrusted with rubies and sapphires, pearls and diamonds, and a few even seemed to shift with ever-changing patterns and colors. I must have stood there for hours, entranced by the bounty above me. I scarcely knew where to start, so once again I turned my gaze out towards the other trees.

Nearby there was a boy, just a bit older than me, holding the core of a fruit in his hands. As he chewed the last bites the core in his hand began to crumble into ash, leaving a handful of seeds resting in his palm. The boy barely paid any attention to the seeds before placing them in his pocket, then he turned back to his tree to reach for another fruit. As he did so, his tree seemed to shudder from root to branch—then, one by one, the fruits began to fall from its branches. As they bounced on the ground and settled into the grass his fruits began to rot away, their shining skins and rinds rapidly decaying into puddles of black and brown liquid before soaking into the soil, leaving no trace of their existence. The shock I felt was mirrored on the boy's face, who began to look back and forth between the ground and the now-barren branches of his tree as he searched for a sign of any fruits possibly remaining. His efforts were fruitless, he reached back into his pocket and pulled out one of the seeds, turning it over in his hand as he examined it carefully. Then, he looked out at the garden around him, at all the other children and their trees as far as the eye could see, and his fist clenched around the seed. He stepped away from his tree and set out, passing my tree and others, shrinking in my eyeline before disappearing in the shrubbery.

I was floored—the boy's tree had granted him one fruit before shedding its bounty, leaving him with only the seeds of that fruit to sustain himself in the future. I began to panic—

would my tree do the same to me? My eyes shifted back to the girl I had seen earlier, only to find her gone and her tree as fruitless as the boy's. I turned back to my own tree, eyeing the fruit with unease—how could I choose only one?

I sat down at the base of my tree, looking upward to stare at the fruit. I thought for a long while about which one I would ultimately pick, and fruit I would spend my life cultivating. The sun sidled lazily across the sky, setting it ablaze through the gaps in the leaves as it set beneath the hills beyond the grove. As the inferno above dwindled into inky darkness I closed my eyes and drifted into restless sleep, haunted by dreams of rotting fruit.

I awoke with the sunrise and continued my contemplation. Though I hungered, the image of rot burned in my mind and I could not bring myself to make a hasty decision. All around me the other children played in the garden, some picking fruit from their own trees and venturing forth out of the gardens when the rest of their fruits rotted away. I wondered how they could choose so easily, commit to a life of farming just one fruit. I imagined the regret they'd feel, years in the future when that fruit would begin to taste like ash in their mouths, that they hadn't chosen another. I would not be like them, I decided. I would think carefully, and only the best and most dazzling fruit to eat the rest of my life.

And so the days continued—I woke with the sunrise, I stared at my fruit as the children around me played and ate and left, I slept with nightfall, and I repeated the cycle all over again.

One morning I woke not with the sun but with a sound, a soft thud on the ground next to me. My eyes opened and I saw a fruit, shimmering silver and bejeweled with emeralds and aquamarine, perfect for just a moment before shriveling into a gray mass and bursting into a rotten puddle, soaking into the ground. I sat in shock for a moment, staring where the fruit had been, before my gaze shot up to the branches above. Most of the fruits remained intact, perfect as ever, but some now held bruises, patches of dark brown, sagging flesh marring a few otherwise perfect fruits.

As I examined the fruits, another fell just a few inches from my feet—a brilliant gold fruit, emitting a foul odor as it decayed before me and vanished. I began to



panic—this was not a possibility I had ever considered that the fruits might not always be ripe. I didn't know how much time I had left, how long before all my fruits had fallen and rotted away into nothingness. And yet, I couldn't choose. That fear still scorched my chest, my fear of choosing the wrong fruit burning as brightly

as the fear of not receiving one at all. I looked to my left, to my right, but all that remained in the garden were barren trees. No other children remained, just me. Another fruit fell from my tree, and I turned back to the branches. I began to reach for one fruit on a low branch before recoiling, instead gripping the branch it grew from and hoisting myself up. I climbed madly, with no direction, hoping the perfect fruit would materialize before me.

As I searched, each fruit I found too imperfect in some way to commit to, I began to panic more and more. I reached for a branch without looking, and suddenly I was falling. I hit the ground with a dull thud, facing the canopy above. Another fruit fell, landing squarely on my heaving chest before rolling off and rotting into the dirt. I barely registered the impact, as the tears formed in my eyes. I didn't know what to choose. There were too many fruits, too many potential wrong choices, and not enough time. I wish there was more time. I wish I was like the other children, able to simply choose and move on. I wish I didn't have to choose, or that I could try all the fruits and choose after. But now, as I lay beneath a tree of rotting fruit, all I can do is cry.

## DUST TO DUST

NINA MAAR

The crinkly pink flier in his gloved hands had been typed out in Comic Sans. There was a stock photo of a group of people sitting in a circle of chairs engaging in a conversation that he would never know. To the side of the picture the flier read:

*"For dust you are, and to dust you shall return." Genesis 3:19*

*Life's getting you down? Come to Trivia Afternoon! The Catholic Church of St. Thomas is dedicated to bringing together senior citizens in order to maintain community and achieve a better lifestyle. Join Us Every Wednesday @ 3:00 PM*

Over dinner a few nights ago, Bijoux had slid the piece of paper towards him without a word. He'd scoffed in return and Bijoux had frowned and he knew then that he'd have to go at least once just to appease the lovely little fiend he called a fiancé.

"It's just something for you to do, Teo, while I'm at work all day." Bijoux said, elbows deep into the soapy water of the sink. "I think it would be good for you to not hole yourself up so much in the house."

"But I love to sit at home and read. Sometimes I go to the diner with the plastic seats and read there. And I do have friends." Galateo replied. "Living ones at that."

Bijoux had to crane their neck back to look up at him. A set of icy blue eyes tore into him like a chisel. When he first met Bijoux, he thought of them as the most beautiful creature in the world, the most beautiful mortal alive. But that was the thing with mortal people - they had so much energy, so much to do with their limited time. Galateo had happily settled into his immortality like a well worn couch, molded perfectly to fit his aching joints, and everyday it was getting harder and harder to get back up.

Bijoux worked long hours as a nurse, which left Galateo with lots of free time to nap and read and sunbathe out on the back porch and nap and read and sunbathe out on the balcony. Bijoux dealt with the immortality thing like they dealt with everything else—efficiently and without making a mess.

"It's not like you look young anyways, Teo. I knew





what I was getting into, if I had minded the age gap altogether I would have never even given you the time of day.”

In order to look “like you actually want to be there,” as Bijoux had suggested, he stopped by the 7/11 on his way to the local church where the meeting would be held. He would buy some snacks as an offering of peace and a sign of good fortune, and because he did not want to eat the green gelatin cakes with pineapple inside them. On the steps of the 7/11 there were two teenagers passing a joint back and forth. From inside the store came the gentle sound of a radio. Bijoux had done him the favor of putting up his hair into a braid that fell over his shoulder and he wore a coat over his suit because it was chilly outside and old people got cold almost too easily. Perhaps he was overdressed. Galateo walked up the steps to the front door and pulled it open.

“Hey sir, can you buy us some cough syrup?”

He turned around to find two sets of inquisitive eyes looking up at him.

“What?” He asked. The wrinkle in between his eyes deep end. “Cough syrup?”

One of the kids took the joint from the other to gesture.

“Yeah, you can’t get it if you’re underage, but we are feeling kinda under the weather.”

The first boy let out a weak cough. He wore bright green sneakers. Galateo was not stupid, there was definitely something illicit happening here, but he was also not up to date with the drug-scene to know what kind of high involved cough syrup. Neither of these children looked old enough to buy a lottery ticket, much less alcohol or marijuana, yet here they were. He thought about it for a moment—remembered Bijoux’s own tales of teenhood—and then he shook his head. He turned again and opened the door to the store. The two boys dramatically threw their heads back and groaned.

“Aww come on man!” The boy with the green shoes scrambled to his feet.

“Wait! Wait! Can you buy us a Sprite?!” The two teens trailed behind him into the store, still attempting to get something out of him.

Galateo veered directly towards the wall of refrigerated

foods and drinks. The radio played a janky Spanish tune, and behind the counter stood another, slightly older teenager scrolling through her phone. While the two boys bargained for a bottle of Sprite and the cough syrup behind his back, Galateo wondered if he might have turned into one of these apathetic children had he been born now and not a millenia ago. Texting his friends on his phone, loitering around convenience stores—would Bijoux still have fallen in love with him had they been the same age?

As he walked through the aisle with the wall of beef jerky, the door dinged again and from where his head peaked above the stands Galateo watched two other men enter the store. They were chatting to one another in low voices.

The teen with the green shoes tapped politely on his arm. The other boy held two bottles of Sprite, and the joint dangled from his lips. Galateo held up a finger. “One drink. And you put that thing out now, it is not polite to smoke indoors.”

The boys smiled at one another, eyes turning into red half-moons. The one with the joint quickly blowing on it. Galateo turned around, thought for a second, and then turned again to the two boys.

“What food would you buy for a meeting?” He asked, and before they could suggest weed or alcohol he added: “Food that old people would like.”

The two teens looked at one another and pondered their answer for a second.

“I think my Nana likes oats a lot.”

“Yeah well she doesn’t have any teeth. How about one of those plates with all the cheeses?”

“Oh yeah! A charcutlery board.”

“It’s charkushe-rey, dumbass.”

Galateo held up a hand. “It is actually *charcuterie*, which is an excellent suggestion, but this is a 7/11.”

The teens seemed to ponder other alternatives once more. Galateo rolled his eyes and turned around again this time to find a man wearing pantyhose on his head, holding a gun up at him. A harsh voice drifted up to his ears.

“If you wanna keep living, old man, you better not move.” Galateo blinked twice, he looked back at the teenagers who stood behind him somewhere between no idea what was happening



and sudden hyper awareness. Their expressions had changed. They looked much smaller now.

"It is all alright." Galateo said. The teens looked up at him. He tried to give a reassuring smile, but Bijoux always said he looked like he was being held at gunpoint when he did.

*"You have this thing Teo, it's called a bitchface. But it 's hot, so don't worry."*

He didn't feel very hot right now. He looked at the beady little eyes behind the semi-transparent film of the pantyhose and bit the inside of his cheek. He'd only seen robbers wear this kind of garb on children's cartoons and the silliness of a grown man actually putting this on in real life could not escape him. Galateo furrowed his eyebrows and huffed.

"If you want to rob and shoot me, maybe you should do it like a real adult and take that sock off your face."

The robber took half a step back.

Mortals were always intimidated by insignificant things, like when others made fun of their outfits and having to look up at people that were much taller. Galateo took half a step forward. A loud sob came from the front of the store and Pantyhose Head aimed the gun right at Galateo's chest.

"Walk. Or we shoot the kid up-front."

The man with the gun walked all three of them up to the front of the store, where another man in a different pair of pantyhose held the cashier at gunpoint too. Tears ran down her face as she struggled to unlock the register. In between her cries she attempted to reason with the men.

"We've had like three people come in all day. The register is like completely empty."

Pantyhose Head spoke again. "Get your wallet out old man, give me your phone and watch too."

Something heavy settled into the bottom of his stomach, a massive tapeworm gnawing at his insides. Galateo would not grow old. All around him the mortals suffered. They knew Death by many names. He left cities when they fell, closed his eyes when kings were slaughtered. He buried mortals young and old, climbed mountains, drank from rivers, basked in the early morning sunlight. Argued with historians and collectors. He wandered by himself for a while, until he found others like him from time to time, briefly and then never again. Would Death show up if he let these two lowlifes kill these children? And if he killed

these two men, would Death walk in through the door with a smile? The girl behind the register pulled out a handful of bills and coins and she placed them onto the counter with a trembling hand.

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Fights had remained a constant throughout his extended lifetime. He had not thrown a punch in a while because it was not polite to hit old men, nowadays. Though he did believe that perhaps society should return to brawling a bit more freely. In the history books now he read that the Minoans had been the first to invent boxing in the earlier years of civilization, but some books claimed it had been the Sumerians. He could not remember the name of the man who had initially coached him, but he remembered being small and throwing punches at other boys. He remembered the feeling of the leather straps in the palms of his hands. Boxing rules were different now, when he watched it go down on the television it felt nothing short of alien to him. There was one rule, the most ancient one, that he had ingrained into himself. Victory only came when the other boxer could go on no longer.

In the back of his mind Bijoux's voice was nagging him, but before any of his fiance's complaints could really form within his head Galateo strode forward, reached out one hand and grabbed Pantyhose Head by the armpit. His other arm wound backwards, hand balled into a fist. Under his skin he felt all his muscles stretched taut like a bow. When his fist connected with the man's rough cheek he felt as if he'd punched a bowl of pudding, the impact halting somewhere around his wrist - regret flooded his brain at once, but he had a fight to finish now.

Pantyhose Head landed on his shoulder atop the money on the counter, letting the gun fly out of his hand. It rattled somewhere behind the counter to where he could no longer see it. Before he had the chance to get back up Galateo grabbed a fistful of his hair through the sock on his head and lifted him up again, slamming his forehead onto the counter twice for good measure, making the loose change rattle to the floor. It was the kind of move that would have gotten him in trouble back then - and still even now. It had been a long time since he'd gotten in trouble for breaking the rules though.

He let Pantyhose Head go, and the man dropped to the floor at a strange angle. Galateo turned around to the remaining robber. The two teens had edged across the far side of the store, willing themselves to melt into the wall. Galateo



cared little for modern things like the police force and doing time in jail. Time was all he had. He locked eyes with the man. "If you take your friend and go we may call this a day."

The other man sneered back at him and lifted the gun up higher to aim right at Galateo's head. Mortals thought about Death a lot. Too much it seemed. They thought about how it would get them, surprise them one day. Or take a hold of them slowly, painfully. They wished to die without pain, without fear. And yet, and yet - when they looked at Death in the eyes they thought themselves immortal. Galateo watched the trigger of the gun move far too slow.

He had been born with a name that he could not recall anymore. Probably something regarding strength, courage, or the men that came before him. Or maybe something sweet, if his mother had been allowed to name him. He'd changed his name thousands of times over the years, assuming new identities along with them. He plucked the name Galatea from a marble statue he saw once in a museum, and he went by Teo for the most part. A woman made of stone, her skin smooth to the touch, but impenetrable. He'd made a great boxer because it was like fighting a wall. Bijoux liked to hold onto his arm because they liked the feeling of his bicep.

In the summer heat Bijoux made him sit in front of the box fan so that he would not overheat, and in the winter he slept under heavy blankets to try and stop the heat from rising off his body. He kept his hair long because he could only cut it with an electric grinder. He'd pierced his own ears on a drunken trip to the power tool section of Home Depot.

A gunshot rang then, followed by another. He felt the heat for an incredibly long moment and he flinched back. It occurred to him that the bullet might have bounced off of him and hit one of the children. When he opened his eyes the man in front of him lay unmoving on the ground. From his cheek he could feel a small wave of heat slowly rolling across his face. Around him one of the teenagers cried out.

"You shot him! You shot him! Holy shit you shot him!"

When he looked up, he found the cashier shaking and crying. In her hands shook the gun that had fallen behind the counter. He took a deep sigh. Death could not touch you, for the longest time, then it would pull tight on your reins for the hell of it. In that very moment Death had held them all in the palm of



its hand inside a dingy 7/11. She had laughed, and then it had let them go. Had let some of them go, anyways.

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The boy with the green shoes walked up to him, then stopped dead in his tracks when he looked up at his face. He mouthed an 'Oh my god'. Galateo lifted a hand up to inspect his face. Right on his cheekbone there was a sizable dent. Like a moon crater. When he looked back at his hand his fingers came off dusty.

"What the fuck." This time the boy spoke out loud. Behind the counter the other one was holding the cashier's hand and phoning the police.

"What the fuck are you?" He asked.

Galateo opened up his mouth and then he closed it again. The teenager waited, a bright fear shone in his eyes. Galateo spoke this time. "I...I am...very old..."

With the first aid kit that the 7/11 supplied her with, the cashier wrapped Galateo's hand in gauze. She placed a bandaid with a dinosaur on the hole in his cheek. Her tears were still drying, but she had insisted on wrapping up his hand, even though there was no scratch and no pain. Galateo realized that this was what Bijoux called 'going through it'. Life had been this and that, and then it wasn't anything anymore.

They all sat outside on the steps this time, while the two police officers investigated the store. In his hand he held a bottle of Sprite. His coat was thrown over the three teens and inside the pocket of his suit was their joint, so that the police would not ask any more questions than necessary. The three teens on the other hand, kept going at him, probably to fill the empty air. He obliged.

"Will it grow back though or are you just going to have to stay like that forever?"

"I had never been shot before, but I assume it will heal to some degree."

"Wait-you'd never been shot before?"

"Can you fill it in with... like... wall putty and stuff?"

"I could try."

"That's lowkey but highkey hella sick though."

Galateo did not know what any of those words meant. "What. Getting shot?"

"No- I meant like being made of rock and stuff... but yeah getting shot is cool too, I guess. That's like major



street cred.”

He remained there until the children’s parents arrived. Concern, anger, and relief drifted in and out of their mouths. There was some sort of trouble to be had with the store manager, who had left the young girl alone behind the counter even though she was not old enough to do a closing shift and was currently not picking up the phone. And there was some sort of trouble to be had with these two boys who had actually been skipping school since the middle of the day. And there was some more substantial trouble with Galateo sending a man to the hospital. And there was lots of trouble with the man in the body bag on the floor of the 7/11.

Galateo gave all three of them his phone number, in case they ever wanted to speak to him. Still, he reminded them to call at a decent hour, because he was an old man who went to bed early. He made sure to give all three kids a strong hug before they eventually left. After they interviewed him, the police let him go too. They explained that they would be in contact with him soon. For a moment he had the uncontrollable urge to skip town, like he had always done when something happened. He thought about how—once you detach yourself from the idea of permanence—life became easy, when it always kept going on and on and on.

If he were to take the bus right now, he could go anywhere. Beat up some other guys in a different convenience store. Go to every 7/11 in the world and beat up some guy each time. He could not explain the dent in his face caused by a bullet to the police. Not in believable parameters at least. He could not guess what kind of investigation the police would attempt but it did not really matter to him.

Mortals extended their mortality among one another, they shared it like a drinking glass. He could extend his immortality to others too, sometimes. And in the grand scheme of things he knew that it would not matter, because Death would always catch up to them one way or another, but for now it was enough. From the pocket of his suit he retrieved the crumpled pink flier and gave it a once over again. For dust he indeed was, though it remained unclear if he would ever return to it.

He ripped up the flier into tiny little bits and threw it into the recycling bin behind the store. Tomorrow morning he would have a raging headache, an itchy cheek, and a possible

trip to Home Depot in search of wall putty, but tonight he was only mortal. He pulled out his phone and dialed Bijoux's number.

"Hi Teo! What 's up? Are you having fun?"

"I almost bought drugs for a pair of teens and a man shot me inside a 7/11 today. I am hopelessly in love with you, you know this, correct? I think I am going to take up boxing again. When is your shift over? I will go pick you up and we will go get dinner. Whatever you want we will have it. Oh, and I have half a joint in my pocket."



# LEAVING GAZA WITH A WHITE FLAG

LINDA RAVENSWOOD

Have you seen Rami Abu Jamous's film of his family leaving Gaza with white flags made of bath towels? In the streets he walks with his camera on. He sees a neighbour ahead also trying to leave. It's Abu Achmed and his boy on the sidewalk, also with a white flag.

Rami calls out *Abu Achmed!* Abu Achmed is crying. His son lies on cement, turned on his face, long and full of colours like a bull in the sand after a ritual.

On the pavement Abu Achmed is rolling and crying. Rami films. All are in prayer.

Abu Achmed cries in Arabic *kan yanbaghi lana 'an nabqaa fi almanzi* ناك لزنم لا يف يقبن نأ انل يغبنې which means *we should have stayed home*. He cries a hundred times. Suddenly they shout *yatanafas* سفتي he breathes! Abu Achmed lifts up his son to carry him away. Another strong man comes to help. Running in the streets, he holds the boy upon his arms.

Then a reporter says in English *the son of Abu Achmed did not live*. Finally his name is said. *Achmed Al Atbash*.

A reporter says, *CNN has drone coordinates of the family as they fled. It shows how they went from their flat, and the brief minutes it took to go around corners under the evacuation.*

They did not have guns, only a broomstick and towel, and a plastic sack.

Rami films. A man on the road says *Gaza est tombé* in French. It means the city has fallen.



## IN THIS TIME OF PARCHED THINGS: A TRANSLATION OF GRIEF - *a microreview*

JAZZIE HOARE

“In This Time of Parched Things”: A Translation of Grief

Marsha de la O, a poet from California, explores the relationship between an individual’s lived experiences with that of various animals in her poetry. She often connects these lives to illustrate how a person reacts to events in their life. Her poem, “In This Time of Parched Things,” from her book of poems *Creature*, utilizes transfiguration to translate her grief from her father’s death.

Translation, at times, manifests the most accurate expression of a person’s lived experience. Multilingual individuals would understand how saying something in one language does not have the same effect as the translation in another. After working for more than twenty-five years as a bilingual teacher, de la O would know the difference between the Spanish phrase “me arde” and the English translation “it irks me.” “Me arde” translates literally to “it burns me,” but the literal and connotative translations do not capture the intense total-body revulsion that the phrase describes. Only the Spanish version truly captures this sensation. Essentially, expressing oneself through translation leverages its connotative meaning to better capture the described experience, just as “me arde” captures intense emotion better. In *Creature*, de la O frequently utilizes translation to portray her emotions.

In “In This Time of Parched Things,” de la O uses transfiguration rather than Spanish to leverage translation to illustrate her grief. Transfiguration entails the speaker’s embodiment of a creature, which is a lizard in this poem, to translate their lived experience through the described actions of the creature. This poem observes a lizard existing freely, who is compared with “a miniature wild burro in tall grass” (line 3) and by “extending his neck, a bird dog/ gathering scent” (lines 4-5) in the second stanza through metaphor. No, the lizard does not literally transfigure into a wild burro or a, obviously nonexistent, bird dog just as de la O does not morph into a hawk as described in the poem “*Creature*,” but their experiences resemble these animals. The lizard stands tran-





quilly, resembling a burro, and stretches out his neck like a bird or dog might. So, the transfiguration functions as a means to translate the lizard's actions in context with his life. Subverting the notion that an individual can only be one thing; the lizard is related to a combination animal "bird dog." Without specific words or images that can exist in real life, the lizard's existence is skillfully portrayed through the tone and imagery expressed through these two metaphors (translation via transfigurations). Early in the poem, de la O establishes that transfiguration will serve to translate hardships as the Spanish phrase "me arde" would.

This poem's specific hardship refers to the death of de la O's father, illustrated through the transfiguration as translation. Grief can control a person, insisting that anger and bitterness dominate society's expectation for maintaining propriety. To illustrate her grief induced frustration over her father's death, de la O initially makes herself akin to the lizard, then infers that she becomes the lizard. The speaker, who is assumed to be de la O, says, "it's almost kinship I feel. Have I become his mother?" to introduce the notion of herself metaphorically transfiguring into the lizard (line 8). She initially mistakes herself as relating to a mother's instinct, prompting her to remember her dead son. In the following stanza, she expresses how she "wanted" to name and grow "him" into a mythological creature (line 11). It is grammatically unclear if "him" refers to the lizard or the son, illustrating ambiguity in being. Naming him might refer to how like the boy he "never came back" and could not become mythological as she does throughout Creature. The shift to past tense in "wanted" illustrates something that could never occur again, just like making memories with her dead son, her late father. So, through this kinship with the lizard, the specific hardship of her father's unretractable death is revealed as being symbolically connected with the lizard.

This connection segues into de la O's transfiguration to the lizard to express her grief via translation. De la O describes the lizard as "One teaspoon of alligator, a spoonful/ of philosopher, a mouthful of daggers" (lines 15-16). Since the speaker, assumed to be de la O, is the lizard because of transfiguration, this description applies to de la O herself through translation. Consequently, the negativity grief induces could

be de la O's "mouthful of daggers" as she strives for healing through her poetry, the "spoonful/ of philosopher." A line before, the speaker and the lizard exchange knowing glances, essentially understanding one another through commonality in their lived experience, which prompts her transfiguration into him as a craft decision to translate her struggle with grief, instead of words. In this moment, the lizard basks in the sun, symbolizing the optimism that de la O adopts to process her grief. Moreover, the lizard's "armor" scales protect a "private, tender blue" that symbolizes the hardshell optimistic mask she wears to cover her inner struggle (line 17). Since this lizard's described lived experience resonates with her, she claims that "Once, [she] asked for a different body," the lizard's (line 19). "Once" may allude to her poem "Once" that illustrates a moment of happiness. So, she chooses transfiguration to experience the world as the lizard does, feigning optimistic relief from grief in the warm sun. Therefore, her transfiguration into the lizard best expresses her struggle with positivity amid grieving her father because it best translates her conflicting emotions.

Through transfiguration as translation, de la O subverts the usual methods of imagery or characterization through dialogue and action to elicit empathy. Eugenia Leigh's "The First Leaf" illustrates the irrevocable trauma in a father-daughter relationship through reptilian imagery and commentary to prompt empathy towards the speaker, which differs from de la O's usage of transfiguration. Additionally, Terrance Hayes' "Inside me is a black-eyed animal" expresses his struggle against limitations on his freedom through declaring the animalistic chaos inside of him, which resembles de la O's transfiguration while using fragmented dialogue that connects with the traditional mode for depiction. So, innovating with what others experiment with, "In This Time of Parched Things" uniquely uses creatures- the lizard- as a symbol, and a goal, for the speaker through a dynamic identification with it that initiates with vague relatability to metaphoric transfiguration to translate the primary emotion of the poem.

The poem's title indicates a time period in which "Things" are "Parched", yet neither the lizard nor the speaker is depicted as parched. De la O's Creature connects being parched with death as one lies buried in the dry dirt, unable to drink water. Nevertheless, the poem showcases



the speaker observing the lizard, her faint connection to him, and her eventual transfiguration into him to perceive the world through a true, yet out-of-body way. Thus, de la O adopts the benefits of translation for accurate expression of experience with grieving her father's death through her transfiguration to the lizard- who has both tranquility and war in his life.

## AROUND DUSK

JASON LERNER

I don't recognize the number on my phone, but I answer. It's Bob, the manager from my old apartment. This is odd, considering Bob loathes me. When I lived in his building, he only dealt with my ex-girlfriend, the two striking up an unlikely friendship over makeup and George Clooney. We make small talk, I'm polite, and after a few minutes he asks if I'm still living locally.

"I'm over in the Valley, now." I yawn into my arm, "Sherman Oaks."

It's *technically* Van Nuys since I'm north of the 101, but he doesn't need to know all that.

"Listen kid," Bob begins, his voice dropping a level above a whisper. "*I didn't just call to catch up—I need to talk to you in person about something. It's...well, it's strange.*"

Stretched out on my futon, I now prop myself up on my elbows, intrigued.

"Strange how?"

"Could you come over to the building tonight?"

"Am in trouble?" I ask, suddenly suspicious of this impromptu contact—I'm trying to recall everything I destroyed before moving out, but the list of casualties is too long.

"You're *not* in trouble. You know me—I wouldn't be calling you if it wasn't important."

I look around at my spartan apartment: the blank canvas I bought months ago with the paint set still in its plastic, the stack of used philosophy books I haven't opened since the day I purchased them, the tiny television playing Baywatch with the volume off: I can't even pretend to be busy.

"Yeah, I guess I'm free."

"Wonderful! Can you come by around six-thirty?"

"Sure. What's this all about, though?"

"Trust me," he says before hanging up. "You need to hear this in person."

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I pull up to my old place off Hollywood Boulevard just after six-thirty, and Club my Honda. Even in the dead



of summer with the sun still up, the tweakers and freaks are shambling around like the living dead, looking for a score. There's fresh graffiti on the trunks of the dying palm trees lining the street, their angled shadows at this time of day reminding me of mausoleum pillars. That, and the red-tinged sky from the fires up north, lend an apocalyptic vibe to Hollywood that feels... *appropriate*.

My old building looks the same—shabby, slumping, and still an eyesore wedged between two newer, fancier condominiums catering to the influx of transplants. I stroll through the cinder block propped-open gate with a quick glance at the mailboxes, checking for familiar names and recognizing a few. Bob answers his door on the third knock, and I'm taken aback by how poorly he's aged in two years, his hair completely gray now, his gut more pronounced.

The aging queen still projects the same self-assured decadence, though, greeting me in a bright green silk kimono with a yellow dragon curling up the side.

"Come in," he says curtly, a cigarette dangling between his lips. "You're letting all the cold air out."

I enter, then take the fuzzy pink recliner offered to me while he takes the loveseat, tucking his legs under him. He offers me a martini, and I politely decline. He makes some awkward small talk about the weather and some terrible band he saw at the Echoplex the week before, and I finally get fed up with his banter.

"Bob?" I interrupt. "Why am I here?"

He hesitates.

"First, you need to understand that I'm not crazy."

"Fine, it's been established that you're not crazy."

"I'm not making any of this up."

"Making *what* up?"

"Your old apartment."

"What about it?"

"It's haunted," he says, blowing smoke. "I haven't been able to rent it for more than six months at a time since you moved out."

I laugh. He doesn't.

"I lived in that apartment *fifteen* years." I remind him.

"It's not haunted."

“Yes, it is.”

“I never once saw anything resembling Casper the Friendly—”

“It’s haunted by *you*, Justin.”

I consider this.

“By me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m haunting it?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you need to be dead to haunt something?”

“Apparently not.”

“Is the apartment vacant right now?”

“It is.”

“Then let’s go over there.” I invite, standing up. “I want to see my ghost.”

He takes a key from his robe pocket.

“Your timing is perfect—it gets active around dusk.”

We cross the shaded courtyard while the collective hum of air conditioners provides the city equivalent of a cicada buzz. I keep my head down, embarrassed to be seen by my old neighbors—I *am* the former pariah of the building, after all. When I lived here, the cops were called to my place no less than twenty-five times.

We at last reach my old one bedroom at the back of the building, and I’m relieved to see the door has been replaced. At least *something* is different.

Bob uses his key, and we go inside.

It’s hard describing how I feel being back in a place I never thought I would see again. I lived here a decade and a half, experiencing the most important and difficult times of my life within these walls. The apartment stinks of fresh paint, the color a bland eggshell white.

When I lived here, the walls were constantly changing colors, but never once were they *ever* eggshell white. The fist-sized holes I left in the plaster have obviously been patched up, the boot scuffs obliterated, the hundreds of nail holes puttied shut.

If not for my supposed ghost, it’s as if I never existed in this place.

The carpet is a dreadful cream color and new enough that we leave snowy footprints walking into the kitch-





en. There's no stove or refrigerator, and the linoleum, once a groovy 60s baby shit yellow/brown, is now a tasteful checkered black and white tile.

"I've gotten lots of complaints about activity in here specifically," Bob explains as he runs a thumb along the counter for dust, "Dishes shattering, the faucet turning on, people being shoved violently..."

He turns to me.

"Have you talked to Sarah recently?"

I'm blindsided by this question.

"Sarah? No... not for a long time. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Is *she* haunting this place, too?"

He hesitates.

"Yes, it's the both of you."

"Come on..."

"The other tenants are scared!" he suddenly screams at me.

"They want to have a fucking exorcism in here, that's how serious this is!"

At a loss for words, I follow him through the living room and down the hall past the bathroom to the bedroom. Despite the fresh paint and new blinds, it's the same ugly room I remember, with the terrible view of the parking lot and the overflowing dumpsters.

"It's the worst in here." Bob explains, calm again but barely holding it together. "People being shaken awake, objects being thrown, sightings of you and Sarah—I've seen it with my own eyes, Justin."

"This is nuts."

"You'll see." Bob promises, grabbing my hand and placing the key in it. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going back to my air conditioning and my *Housewives of Potomac* marathon. Take your time. There's power if you need light. Drop the key off when you're done. Ciao."

"What do you expect me to do?"

He pauses in the doorway.

"Whatever you can, kid."

I hear him leave, and then it's just me and the ghosts.

I remain completely still, waiting and listening for anything supernatural to occur. After a few minutes I feel really stupid, and go into the living room to find the sunlight quickly

giving way to the encroaching night.

I make sure the paint is dry, then lean against the wall to watch YouTube videos on my phone. I do not like being here—it's painful even two years later. I watch a couple funny dog compilation videos, and that cheers me up a little. I notice that it's seven-twenty.

Dusk.

Again, I wait in anticipation of spirits, my expectations slowly fading as the minutes tick by. After twenty minutes, I'm done waiting.

"Whatever." I mutter, putting my phone away. I don't want to admit it to myself, but I'm pretty disappointed, as if seeing the unexplainable will fill the holes that I carry inside.

As I leave my spot for the front door, I notice a reflection of light gleaming off the bare wall. I look down the hall to see the bathroom light is now on, and my breath catches in my throat—this is getting interesting.

Delighted *and* frightened, I force myself to walk down the hall and enter the bathroom. The walls are freshly painted like the rest of the apartment, but the painter was sloppy in here, the coat uneven, the counter drawers sealed shut.

Behind me is a new toilet, and to my sadness, a new bathtub. I remember *my* bathtub when I lived here: a huge, gaudy antique. Whoever moves in will never know the wonders of a shared bath, or that this wet cathedral can safely hold three dozen burning candles before it gets dangerously hot and hard to breathe.

I remember *her* face emerging from the steam to kiss me in that old tub, and I catch myself beginning to dwell on Sarah, and put a stop to it at once. Realizing my bladder is full, I decide to christen this toilet with its first urination.

I unzip, and I'm in mid-stream and thinking about what to microwave for dinner when the door slams shut behind me, making me scream and spin around, inadvertently pissing all over the bathtub. The sealed drawers begin rattling loudly in their inlets, then something pounds so hard on the door that I nearly fall into the tub.

This interaction stops as suddenly as it began, leaving me quaking and my heart jackhammering.

"Hello?" I manage to say as I zip up with trembling



fingers.

I slowly open the door and peek out, first to my left—the bedroom door is now shut—and then to my right. I opt for the living room, but first I rinse the tub out while cautiously watching the door.

In the living room, I take a seat against the far wall where our TV cabinet once stood. I wait and listen as the room grows gloomier, my thoughts journeying backwards in time.

My mind encapsulates thousands of hours in this room, alone or with Sarah or with friends, watching movies, smoking joints, ripping lines, playing a succession of video game consoles, listening to music...

I think about bands that formed, blew up, and broke up, all within the lifecycle of my relationship with Sarah, here in this apartment.

Sarah... now that's a painful chapter in my life.

You know this story: two kids from Nowhere, USA, fresh out of high school with no grounded plans like college. Just those big Hollywood delusions driving us onward.

This was our first apartment, and we had great and terrible times together in these rooms. We loved and hated each other and forgave one another again and again within these walls, and in the end, we nearly destroyed each other trying to fix something that broke long ago.

Like I said, you know this story.

Sarah escaped first, moving out suddenly one afternoon. I came home from work to find her gone, the place half-empty. Instead of leaving and starting over myself, I stayed another year and died every night in this apartment, missing and hating and loving her in equal parts.

The few lousy friends I had left finally wised up and called my parents to intervene, but only after I had overdosed on Vicodin and whiskey.

I'm sweating profusely now, the room stifling, and I get up and open the window to let some air in. I look down the hall, and to my surprise I notice the bedroom door now stands open. I head back there to crack the window to get a cross-breeze going, and as I'm sliding it open, I catch not only my own reflection in the glass, but a younger me as well: shirtless, blotto, and deranged, watching from the shadowy corner. I wheel around to find the corner empty, then back at the mirror: it's just my reflection.

I despise this fucking room.

I remember Sarah staying in here for weeks at a time during those darkest days: the blinds drawn, the constant crying. I remember our terrible arguments in here as we unraveled.

*I wasted my life with you.*

I remember when she said that to me. I was standing over in that corner, drunk and bare-chested and every bit the failure she thought I was. During that last year without her, this room became **my** tomb, as well.

The sudden shattering of glass in the kitchen snaps me from these terrible recollections, and I rush to see what's broken, switching on the kitchen light to discover nothing on the floor, and every cabinet standing open and empty.

I feel something like cool air brush past my arm, and I see the outline of Sarah over by the counter reaching into the cupboards, pulling dishes that aren't there. I can't make out what she's screaming, but I place this event at once: it's the night we drank too many bottles of red wine following weeks of chilly silence. A night of peace became a night of truths, and she broke every dish we owned when we ran out of words.

As this half-formed specter smashes phantom plates, I focus on the counters behind her, and suddenly recall the better times: the countless meals made on those countertops, and the bottles and drinks covering them during New Year's Eve's, this kitchen packed shoulder to shoulder with laughing, happy friends.

Good times.

Sarah's specter slowly fades away, and I'm alone once again.

Two hours pass without any signs of the paranormal.

It's almost ten, and I'm sitting in the slab of light from the kitchen doorway, recalling my 30th birthday in this room, when a sudden pounding on the front door jars me from my thoughts.

I watch the deadbolt snap right, the door swing open and stop abruptly as if caught by an invisible hand, then slam shut hard enough to shake the walls and rattle pictures that aren't there.



Two figures begin to take shape not five feet from me. I'm sitting rigid and enrapt, reliving this particular event that took place five months before the end. By then, I had been on the couch seven months, and we hadn't been intimate with one another in over a year, passing each other in these rooms like strangers.

Like ghosts.

It was only a matter of time before one of us cheated.

Unfortunately, it was me.

I watch the two ghosts move around the room in partial form, their screaming perfect recreations of myself and Sarah at our worst. I cringe when my phantom shouts, *I only stayed with you because I felt sorry for you!* before heading down the hall, punching the wall and the bathroom door before slamming the bedroom door shut.

That's where my recollection of the argument ends, but now I'm cruelly treated to the unseen aftermath: I watch her shadow in the kitchen doorway, her head down with her hand over her mouth, sobbing into it as quietly as possible. After a moment, the shadow turns and goes to the sink and leans against it, shuddering.

I'm on my feet and in the doorway in a heartbeat, trying to comfort a phantasm from an event long ago.

"*I'm so sorry I ever said that to you, Sarah.*" I whisper to the ghost. "*It's one of my biggest regrets, baby.*"

I don't expect a response, but the shade turns and looks at me as it dissipates, as if hearing me across time and space. At that I drop to my knees, unable to cope with the hurt any longer. I let my tenuous guard crumble as I cry, these bare walls all too familiar with my pain. When I'm done, I pick myself up and wash my face in the kitchen sink and dry my cheeks with my shirt, another long-forgotten ritual relived.

I return to the bedroom and plant myself against the wall where the headboard once was, and make myself remember the good times in this damned room—making love to Sarah in our bed, sharing our dreams and hopes and fears in the dark. Making promises we never thought we'd break.

Realization strikes me hard, and I understand at last what this is all about—of course it is. A single event.

It happened right here.

I hear her before I see her, not two feet in front of me

and laying on her side atop a bed no longer there. A bent shadow sits at the corner of this bed that isn't there, and I know it's me.

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This is it—the moment just after Sarah found out she couldn't have children, and also the moment I realized I would never be a father if I stayed with her.

In the end I *did* stay with her, and I promised her it could work, that the two of us would be enough, and for a while it was enough.

It was, until it wasn't.

"I love you, Sarah." I whisper. "I'm sorry."

When the spirits fade, I clumsily get to my feet and wipe my eyes.

Stepping into the hallway, the bathroom light turns on.

Unafraid, I enter. In the mirror I see how tired I look, yet beneath my weariness... is a peacefulness I never believed I would find again, especially in this place.

The bathroom door slams shut behind me, and I don't even flinch. The drawers begin to violently shake in their paint-sealed slots, and when they stop, on impulse I take hold of the top-drawer handle and force it open, breaking the shell of dry paint along its cracks. I'm not surprised to see a folded note with my name scrawled on it in neat print I recognize at once. I touch the paper to make sure it's real before picking it up and reading it.

*Justin,*

*Bob called me about what's happening here. I asked him to call you, but to not mention me because I didn't think you'd come if he did. I'm leaving this note in this drawer, and in the hands of fate. Maybe you'll never find it. If you are reading this, though, then you've seen what I've seen, and you know we have unfinished business. I don't want to be angry anymore. Bob will give you my new number if you ask him for it.*

*With love, S*

I read the note two more times before folding and pocketing it.

It's nearly midnight—Bob will still be awake, and I'll get Sarah's number from him and we'll deal with this





unfinished business.

Together.

I open the front door to a starless night, and hesitate in the doorway: I'm frightened of the unknown, yet excited by the possibilities. How will this time be any different than before? Does more pain and disappointment await us?

I feel the ghosts at my back, urging me to stay and visit a little while longer, but I resist their invitation—I have to leave them and this place behind. Life demands it.

With a deep breath, I let go.

## SERAPH

BRIANNE COOPER

Open your eyes. Look around. Squint a bit, from the blinding reflections of white teeth and white hair and white walls and white lights. Glance and see the empty, yawning space that stretches so far it turns into a foggy haze, only interrupted by a single white desk. Be welcomed to the family by a couple kindly figures with clasped hands and polished grace. One introduces himself, Michael, and tells you that he and his associates do not like to be called anybody's superiors, although everyone inevitably reports back to them regardless of title. They tell you that you are here to make things better, to improve the lives of the people. *Poor things*, they lament to you, so *unable to help themselves without the guidance of those who know best*.

You do not know much of humanity yet. There is time to learn. For now, just nod and take to heart your new purpose—you are a guide to the path of a better, more honorable life.

You start out being given small tasks. People always need more food, and seeing them bow their heads in thanks for another day without hunger leaves you feeling proud. You welcome weary and struggling people, even if only temporarily, and send them off having listened to their stories. You start collecting ideas for what you and your family can improve.

Lose yourself in helping as many people as you can. Minutes or lifetimes or mere seconds pass for all that you're paying attention, hands now calloused from hauling lifesaving supplies to those in need and toiling alongside them to build better lives.

Societies rise and fall, but you notice that there are always groups coming out of it better off than they should be. Take your concerns to Michael, asking why there is such inequality between the people who are growing fat and lazy in their greed, and others who claw and struggle just for scraps. That's just the way it is, he says, shaking his head in tepid disapproval. *Some people just take advantage of their opportuni-*



*ties and improve their lives in greater quantities than others. No use worrying about it when you're busy guiding others.* He pats your shoulder and gives you a smile, asking instead about what you've been up to recently.

You've lived amongst humanity now. You've seen the shining eyes and smile-lined mouths of a couple laughing with each other, youthful joy just as apparent three decades into their marriage as it was at the start. You've witnessed the soft beam of a mother looking down at her child in awe, as small and precious as the life she just brought into the world while death rages around her. You've seen the reassuring upturn of lips from a father as he told his children to eat, knowing that he could not afford enough food to feed them all.

You've seen many smiles, so it is clear to you now that Michael's is fake.

Despite your best efforts and those of your family, the world only seems to get worse. You're forced to bear witness to the accumulation of wealth among those who misuse it with wrath and greed at heart. You've tried talking to Michael again, tried contacting other superiors of yours, but have been dismissed each time. Violence has become prevalent to a wasteful degree. The loss of life is not something you can easily ignore, like the others.

It is by mere chance that you see a flash of white while offering your help in a war-torn, bleeding city. You've wandered away from their refuge, searching for any injured or dying who need help among the rubble. The dusty wind blows copper and smoke into your nose until you can smell nothing else. Your clothes were stained gray long ago, but you know the grime will settle on them in a way you won't be able to fully get rid of after today.

The noise clues you in first. The thundering of a tank or several coming down the adjoining street, followed by the marching of heavy boots. Press yourself against the wall, peering out as much as you dare. Behind the tank, in an armored vehicle, sits white teeth and white hair and white suit. Pristine and out of place, compared to his surroundings. Next to him, the

warlord of the region, malevolent smirk on full display as he takes in the leveled buildings and plumes of dark smoke polluting the sky. The parade passes by. Without thinking, follow on unsteady feet.

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Stay hidden, and wait for them to retreat back to the warlord's palace. Listen to them discuss profit and loss, planning a future around the suffering of a dying people wiped out by their hand. *Of course this needed to happen, Michael simpers, it's all so you and your people can have better lives.*

You've heard enough.

Return to where you were once welcomed into something you thought was just. Look at where the shadows now seem to creep around corners farther than they should be able, look at the hint of fang and malice beneath pleasant veneers.

Look back at what you're leaving behind, one last time. Look into the eyes of those who claimed to be family and see them now for what they are, so unlike how they see through you, ravenous for their own self-importance and veiled greed.

Turn back around.

Jump.

Set your wings ablaze on the way down—better the pain than the reminder of your association to them.

Scream amidst your agony. Let the ash and smoke bleed them black, half branded and wholly monstrous.

Become better.



# CRYING AND THINKING IN A STREAM OF CARDIGANS

MARIA DUNLAP BERLIN

I just want to pick off every little loose fiber from his fuzzed up cardigan. Pick them off like little ticks and snack on them as I go, like those little monkeys I saw at the Atlanta Zoo the other day. Spreading the hairs, exposing the scalp, picky, picky, poo. I think he has one in every color. At least the fabric is thick enough for the tears of my childhood. For the spit of my S's. Remember drugs? Remember the weed store that looked like an Apple store? Sweet Flower, I think it was. You could browse the rows of shiny pinewood tables, check out the buds, the creams, and the accessories. Now *this* is all the craze. This is the new addiction and escape from our problems. The gateway drug to it: depression, anxiety, life. Still, only a temporary relief, like a phone call to get out of a bad date. But in order to escape your problems, you have to talk about them. It was the way that everyone tricked themselves into feeling safe and secure. Just take a hit of *I'm working through my problems! I'm facing my demons, my shadows, my trauma, my nose hairs!* Oh, how we lust after the opportunity to pay another human being to sit there, shut up and talk at them for an hour, or 30 minutes if you need that quick fix. Except for the occasional affirmational moans to keep us coming back, you just purge your feeling guts and feel the dopamine hit on the inhale. On the exhale.

I can feel the ants climbing my ankle hairs. I can't sit on this couch any longer across from cardigan face. I wonder if he's still listening. I can hardly hear him through the smell of his teakwood and tobacco incense, dripping ashes on the table in front of us. I walk over to his bookshelf, pretending to be interested, though you can actually discover a lot about a person based on the curation of their bookshelf. This one is built into the wall, which means he had an obligation to fill it, not a compulsory pleasure to. There's the unsurprising psychoanalytical texts, of course. A framed degree here, a framed degree there. Some kind of spherical sculpture. Actually one here. Cement balls there. Just balls everywhere? Black balls, balls with speckled paint on them. Balls in a trio, balls by

themselves. Jesus balls of Christ! Out of an uncomfortable reflex, I pull a random book like a slot machine lever:

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*Great Essays in Science*. Seems pretentious and I take it. I like the bend of the softcover. It's heavy but malleable. The lamination is ripped at the corner and starting to peel away from it. Charles Darwin, Bertrand Russel, Oppenheimer, Sigmund Freud, (explains the balls) Albert Einstein. It looks old, from the 1980s, with its fat inky font, maybe a bold serif, like a Times New Roman wannabe, maybe Garamond. *Can we know the Universe?* *Reflections on a Graing* by Carl Sagan. I bring it with me to the couch and sit. Don't want to waste my remaining time dilly dallying. I glide my thumb over 2 the edge of the book and it sounds like a hundred typewriters bustling in the distance with tiny little pops at the end of each bar. Cardigan face watches me as the smoke of the incense makes baby tornadoes from my book wind in between us.

He knows the exact angle his head must be tilted to show listening. It's like they keep protractors in their pockets in training to get it just right until it's ingrained in muscle memory. I've memorized all of the angles. Ninety degrees is neutral, then shifts to the left, his left, to signal that the session has begun. An obtuse angle, away from the right shoulder, is the cozy angle that shows the sufficient amount of acknowledgement to make you feel heard. Anything less than forty-five degrees and they've zoned all the way out and cleared their swimmer's ear. In that angle, each word that comes out of your mouth starts to feel distant from yourself, shaky and inaudible. It increases the heart rate, sends signals to the brain to prepare for disappointment and devise a plan to get your money back. But there's a certain a gle of the head tilt that's just right. It's just enough affirmation to keep you satisfied and just enough curiosity to make you want to prove something more - to signal to yourself that you're hitting the ultimate climax - the breakthrough.

The thought of it brings a smile to my face. I squeeze the book in my right hand and it starts to melt behind my knuckles. The angle of his chin is almost right there but could use a slight adjustment. I know he hears me, but is he listening? Just a little tap in the right direction. Maybe a big tap. Maybe a *Great Essays in Science* to that rosy cheek. I pull my elbow back and raise...





“And that’s our time. See you next week?” he says.

“Yep, see ya,” I place the book down on the table, next to the stray ashes. A little bit of it gets swept up in the wind and scatters. That was a good one. Inhale. On the exhale.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF 'BECOMING MUD'

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- *a microreview*  
CAMBRI MORRIS

The poetry of non-speaking autistic poet Hannah Emerson engages her readers in a conversation regarding cosmic identity and community liberation through self-love. This conversation is less a philosophical interrogation, or even a reckoning, but rather an invitation and a celebration. That's probably not what you would initially expect given the poem's title—mud classically evokes debasement and uncleanness rather than transcendence—but as teacher and poet Chris Martin, puts it, Emerson's poetry "creates a pattern of reaches and roots... to authentically reach—in the direction of thoughts, dreams, or connection—one must also authentically root" (Martin 20). Nestled within her collection *You Are Helping This Great Universe Explode*, "Becoming Mud" accomplishes what Emerson calls a "grownding—" an act of growth that must begin with an honest grounding of identity.

"Becoming Mud" is composed of eight unrhymed, two-line stanzas that lead the reader through this unexpected manifesto of liberation. The poem is narrated in a stream of consciousness with little punctuation to guide the reader, expanding upon this sense of freedom and tilting of existence. Though each line visually takes up relatively equal amounts of space on the page, there is a crescendo of thought into the exact center of the poem that then builds into its final cadence. In its movement, in its allure, it is an unexpected dance of language that begs connection to one another and to the earth: where are you going? This is where I am and here, there's room for us all.

The poem begins with a simple "Please"—more a beckoning than a request. In the first stanza, readers are drawn in with the language of liberation: "free," the repetition of "great" and reference to "beings of light." Emerson offers familiar words and images to frame this theme before her language takes an unexpected turn. The second stanza contrasts with the first as the repeated "great" bleeds into the thought "nobody nobody nobody hell animals" (line 3). It's a rather jarring shift from the "great free animals" of the first line, something that feels more like an intrusive thought,



or at least a voice other than the narrator's own. Perhaps this is the voice of the "helpful keepers of knowledge" in line 4, to whom these animals are "trying to go" (line 3). She does not say who these "keepers" are, but it's difficult not to read without a certain amount of cynicism, "keepers of knowledge" being reminiscent of the term "gatekeeping" or the mythological tree of the knowledge of good and evil from which we are forbidden to eat. However, the slip into the present tense "trying" is only momentary, not so much of a concern for the speaker as it is meant to help us locate ourselves within the poem before she moves back into the imperative: you are trying to reach for knowledge, try to go down instead.

Tension builds into the center of the poem as this destination of "knowledge" in the second stanza is contrasted with "the place in the mud" of stanza three. Consider, if you will, the physical process that one might go through in becoming mud: the reaching, the digging, the "kissing" sounds as it squishes between fingers, the immersion of belly and face—the imagery recalls the joy of a toddler after first rain. She describes it as a place of "peace," but the effect is more like this toddler-in-the-mud explosion of joy as Emerson mashes together a run of contradictory verbs and adjectives: "great kissing loving// earth lovely messy yucky" (6-8). Can you feel the mud squishing through your fingers? The intimacy of the words "kissing" and "loving" lend to this sense of "becoming" from the title; the reader begins to feel a sense of liberation in embracing the mud. What was once debased is now a destination of transcendence. Here, spanning the exact center of the poem, Emerson models this grownding as she calls herself "the great animal// that is named Hannah" (ll. 8-9). The full descriptive phrase along with "kissing mother loving me is" strengthens this assertion of her identity by pulling in the image of a nurturing mother. Not only is her being there in the mud a celebration of identity, but her place in the world has been given a blessing.

Finally, the final stanza deepens the urgency for this grownding as she advocates for her fellow autists. She tells us "Please get that all great animals are//autistic. Please love poets we are the first//autistics. Love this secret no one knows it" (ll. 15-16). This relationship between poetry and autism is the basis of the work of her teacher, Chris Martin, who ex-

plains in his book *May Tomorrow Be Awake* that many of the characteristics typically associated with autism are considered deficits within the medical community while “in poetry circles where intellect is generally presumed... [they are] intentional and fundamental tools” (Martin 35). He provides the example of the autistic preference for repetition called “perseveration” within the medical community and “anaphora” in poetry. This characteristic is particularly prevalent throughout Emerson’s body of poetry—in “Becoming Mud,” her repetition of “please” that would feel out of place in a typical conversation here lends to the poem’s allure and sense of beckoning. Martin explains the larger implications of this disparity—that Emerson and her fellow autists “have been struggling against the constraints of a society built to minimize the complexity of their intellect and expression...these [poets] are often held back by a dam of societal neglect” (12).

Emerson addresses this issue head on, subverting widely held ideas of autism and poetry in two lines. Perhaps the keepers of the knowledge from earlier in the poem are the doctors and medical providers who would dismiss her with the label “disabled”? Or possibly a literary community that has failed to create a space for voices that lacked their same credentials? Emerson’s answer is empathy and connection “please get...please love poets...the first autistics.” Grounding necessitates an honest acknowledgment and respect of others. “Becoming Mud” will not only set you free, but will in turn set all of us free.



## ANGEL OAK

BABAK MOVAHED

On a Sunday under a dusk rust, I buried my father. I was the last to leave, not out of an intrinsic obligation to mourning. No. I was too tired to go. Preparations for a burial are more taxing than the grief of the loss. I still cried during the snippets of speeches caught between drifting. Phrases you expect to hear at a funeral take a tragic tone when they're about your own father. It doesn't matter the nature of death; my dad was an alcoholic smoker that miraculously made it to eighty-nine. Staring at a descending coffin was unnerving. I watched reels of us pass before my memory in the waning minutes of the box being lowered. The tears were streaming then. Maybe they were the same from the service, I couldn't be sure. Then the slow shuffle and sniffles with customary sorrys. There weren't many paying our respects, my dad preferred it that way, so it was quick. I was alone gazing into a void of loose dirt. A breeze crept by, breaking the silence. Time took a reprieve from its persistence and left me alone. I was there for a while, but nothing changed, just a deeper fatigue. The grass seemed comfortable enough. There was a passing concern about the decorum of resting. It didn't mean anything, so I sat down and leaned back, propped up on my elbows.

Adjacent to us was an angel oak with a wide trunk, worn from decades gone. Its mangled limbs spanned across the grass and air reaching for something beyond its grasp. The tree was outside the fence surrounding the cemetery. I wished it were against my back; it would make for a serene resting place. I closed my eyes imagining the leaves shrouding me, keeping me tucked away in their mystery until I was ready to look. The languor was creeping throughout me. I've heard that anguish can manifest as sleepiness, a pain so profound a body's instinct was to escape to slumber. That wasn't it. My sentiment was far from sorrow; it should've been at least sadness. I was tired.

The largest branch of the oak had taken its own journey. It lay partly on the ground with extending boughs reaching for glimmers of light. The branch must've been one of the first sprouted. Its grooves, twists, and divots looked etched on

with a pencil. I wanted to slowly pace beside it, tracing my finger through its patterns formed over the years. But I didn't have the energy to stand up.

It should've been natural, an overwhelming, or at least numbing, sensation of pain. There, incapable of listening, holding a conversation, lay my dad. Despite the merits of the man, my dad was gone. I didn't need to pose the question because I had the answer. I had no will to feel devastated for a man who lacked remorse. The debilitating fatigue that bore into me was familiar. It had weighed me down since I was a child, expecting more from a father that had nothing to offer. The evenings gone waiting by doors that never opened. The routine phone calls of lines I'd heard before. The stories with holes the size of oceans. The everything he was, made and kept me drained. I rubbed my eyes.

The leaves on the oak blended together into a weave of green and formed a brilliant awning of foliage. I was aware that each leaf was unique, but the distinctions were impossible to discern from afar. I mustered the strength to stand up, and walk toward the oak. It was a relief to be away from his plot.

My dad used that word, relief, when his father passed. I never knew him beyond the vague tales of violence. My dad struggled to share those moments, and on the edge of a reveal, he left me at the cliffhanger. The one consistent theme in his recollections remained the same: he would never be his father. He never was. No. My dad didn't raise his hand in a blind rage, no matter how intoxicated. Even if he was born from it, that wasn't him. The experiences of us were painted in opaque hues, but beneath the shade was brightness. Despite the lack of visibility, it was there. I just grew weary straining my eyes looking for those experiences. It was just that. No relief because he had his demons, some of which became mine. No relief because I can't say the it's alright he longed to hear with his waning breaths.

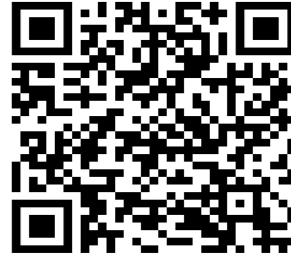
By the time I reached the angel oak, I needed to sit. I situated myself close to the trunk, but with enough distance to appreciate its expanse. Every inch was its own, yet the infinite details were unified in creating the one tree. It was the most beautiful object I'd ever seen. I lied down and gazed transfixed at the newest leaves, hanging from the tallest branches, connected to the weathered trunk.







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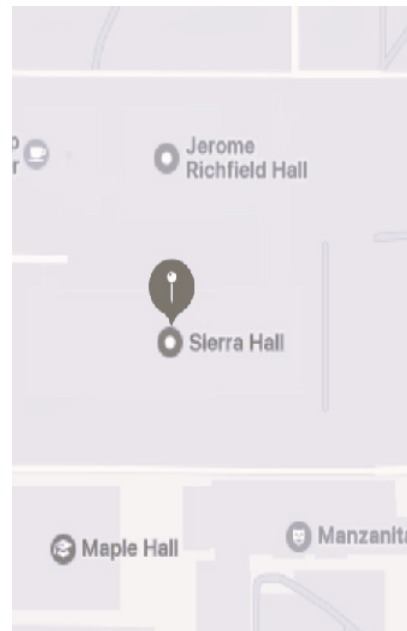


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### *about the type -*

This issue of the Northridge Review was set in Monaco for body text, Liberation Serif for titles, Calibri for Arabic Script, and Gill Sans Nova for italics. Liberation is one of four original TrueType font standards outlined by Apple, in the late 1980s. Monaco was designed as a monospace, sans-serif typeface by Susan Kare and Kris Holmes for MacOS. Gill Sans is a sans-serif font designed by Eric Gill, inspired by Edward Johnston, the father of modern calligraphy. Calibri was designed by Luc de Groot for Microsoft and Windows Vista. Page numbers have been set in Flyswim, an Adobe font family designed by Ray Larabie. Special character fonts include Charcuterie Ornaments, HWT Star Ornaments, and vector images found in Adobe Illustrator.



