

Northridge Review

Spring '25

stop and smell the flowers



Stop. Take a deep breath. Feel your lungs inflate, and exhale that breath into the world. Stand tall. This is your moment.

This publication is for you; its purpose, to uplift our community of writers and artists to use their voice and shape conversations in the literary and art worlds. With diverse identities across our contributors, we believe every story matters—now more than ever.

Presence is not just about being in the moment, but rather recognizing the importance of every moment, and giving space to your voices that cannot—will not—be silenced. Just as wildflowers grow with reckless abandon, we too will sow seeds to create widespread change. Stop and smell the flowers. Plant your creativity and let it take root. Take up space and make your presence known—spread it like wildflowers.

PRESENCE



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Masthead



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Masthead



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Markie Metzlar, Robert Jones, Ray Birdsong, Grace Muller,
Joeseeph X Casillas, Brianna Estrada-Pimentel, Sophia Garni-
ca, and Susana Hernandez

Special Thanks to the Fall '24 Class
Hanna Davis, Madison Trujillo, Saige Boddy, Christina Mar-
riott, Matthew Mieke, Taylor Clark, Paul Herrera, Andrew
Isagulyan, Ruben Lozano Celedonio, Jazmine Agregado,
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Editors' Note

Take a moment and breathe. Inhale, as spring comes upon us. Exhale, and witness the beauty of this moment.

As the *Northridge Review* editors, we recognize the importance of presence and how our CSUN community takes pride in the magnificence that emerges from planting seeds—words on the page. Presence is about taking in each moment and voices that flower like royal California natives. A budding beauty forms from watering and maintaining the literary craft our talented authors have contributed by being present. We made this spring issue so we can see it grow with you. Take time, ground yourself, arrange your roots, breathe through these pages, and absorb the sunlight. Close your eyes and picture California's natural landscape.

Recognize your presence in this issue. Fuschias bloom amidst the cracks of a rocky slope. A wrinkled, lifeless Collard Annual Lupine, resuscitated by a single drop of water, golden Poppies outline the 101. Flowers flourish in the most unimaginable places. Echoing similar sentiments, this edition illustrates these native flowers.

As editors, contributors, and readers, we are all petals combined into one flower, propagating our existence in the *Northridge Review*. Like California natives, our literary journal embodies different shapes, shades, sizes, and sentiments, growing and changing since 1962. Our blossoming symbolizes the strength and renewal of California residents—past, present, and future. Take this issue, rip the seeded paper from its root, and plant yourself in the moment.

Now that you've stopped, remember to smell the flowers,

From our garden to yours,

Caroline Urbina, Ismael Dones, Maddy Trujillo
Co-Managing Editors

Chipped Wood | Guadalupe Miranda

Young willows in the light of a stage,
 crimson curtains carrying whispered promises
 of baby birds in the nest
 blowing to the moon, cooing
 to an empty sky for their first flight.
 Young willows resemble baby birds
 chirping for mother, chirping for world outside
 of mother.
 Their feet cross the stage in a dance
 silent noise with silent prayers,
 for what waits outside the doors.

Young willows in the light of a stage,
 knees to seats, eating lunches
 swiping fries with ketchup
 intense sketches of scared children,
 painting good luck to wait outside the doors.

Young willows sitting across a screen,
 whispering lives wishing to be lived
 running laps in the make-believe
 apocalypse brain, zombie eating idiots.
 To survive, will we survive?

Young willows kissed with wind,
 mouth agape, swallowed
 spit back out, splintered on the ground
 counted by age.
 And now we are withered,
 wilted willows begging for the sun to return,
 for the crimson curtains to rise once more
 begging for the mercy of the wind outside the doors.

The Sky Bleeds Pink | Kayla Luis

“I think it loves me,” the little girl said with a missing front tooth as she slobbered on the cherry flavored lollipop that she plopped back in her mouth.

“Who loves you sweetie?” the mom questioned, at her daughter like the stars were in her eyes and galaxies strung into her slightly knotted hair.

The girl moved her hand, flinging the sweet treat forward like a sparkling wand, waving towards the expanse before her. Crashing waves erupted in the distance as the pair sat on a hill, finding comfort upon the soft blades of grass beneath them and the company of a shared heart. The girl's remained raised, pointing at the setting sun as it winked goodbye before the stars could sing.

“Mommy! Look!” the girl screamed, excited at the shades of color painting the sky. The world was a canvas of creativity and hope, casting a gradient of pink hues and specks of orange, like cotton candy and tangerines swirling in the sky.

“It's pretty, isn't it!” the mom reassured, watching her daughter's amusement more than the universal beacon before her.

“It's—it's my favorite color! I love pink!” The little girl yelled to the heavens while she was dressed in all pink. Her shoes dusted with dirt, hiding the rosy tint of her ballerina slippers. Hot pink frills at the end of her dress contrasted against the vastly different blush shade of her jacket, which was zipped up all the way to keep her cozy amidst the chilly breeze.

“I know!” the mother squealed, reciprocating her excitement with excessive vigor.

“The world loves me mommy!” She smiled a wide grin, revealing a little dimple carved on her chubby cheek.

A dimple just like her mother's. Two crescents of a single moon. "It chose *my* favorite color. Not yours. Not Daddy's. It's mine."

The mother's expression dropped at the mention of him, but she didn't let her daughter see her faltering smile. If strength were a mask, she wore it well. She always did.

"See, sweetie," the mom said, holding her daughter closer as they watched the pink sky. "Always remember that the world loves you just as much as I do." She peppered kisses on her cheek and forehead. The little girl laughed with delight, squealing a melodic cacophony of giggles.

"I love you too, Mommy"

Like all things change, so did she. If she could buy glasses with the rosy tint of her childhood, she would, but not all things could be bought. Not everything could freeze like the memories encapsulated in her mind. Forever frozen in what used to be.

As she grew up, she never once thought about the wonders of the universe or the hope that lingered in the atoms she breathed. The natural beauty that highlights the light bordering the dreary shadows of disaster and in no way, to be seen by her again. Like a tornado, she was caught in the darkness, wondering about other things that composed the world.

When was that assignment due? Does this outfit make me look bad? Maybe it's too much? Too little? Was I supposed to go practice today? Is dad coming home? Will he ever come home? What did I do wrong? Did I do something wrong? Of course I did. Why am I like this? Why am I here? Why does everybody leave me? Why?

If her thoughts were a maze, she would be trapped for a lifetime, yearning to escape the endless tunnels of pressure carved by society and the feeling of abandonment that was scarred amongst her arms. People passed by, snickering comments in her direction or allowing their bubbles of laughter to haunt her. The girl

who was trapped in her own head was a funny story—for everyone but the one living it.

Now, the girl sat on the dead grass, watching the waves crash before her from the shore below. It's been years since she came back here—the memories too painful to relive. But all she sees is the record of her life being played on repeat. She watches a younger version of herself dancing in the grass barefoot with her mom and they hum a gentle song as the dizziness sets the darkness of the world on a carousel of color. Singing of the past is presented in the subtle sound of the ice cream truck veering up the road. Watches with tears blurring her vision, trying to grasp onto the illusion of what was. The illusion of who used to be there. Of what used to live there.

"I miss you," she whispered into the wind, hoping it could find a path to the past where the world was brighter. A world with two bright souls and not just a fading half.

Tears were a warning to the storm brewing in her heart, she stood up on shaky legs, fallinwg on her knees in a failed attempt to showcase her strength. Once again, she rose, finally finding stability from the cold earth beneath her. As she stood up and wiped the dead weeds off her baggy gray sweats, and turning her back to the past—walking away.

She never looked back to watch the universe blossom behind her. The dull shade of pale blue transformed into a stunning pink, reminding her of who she was...who she still is. The sun screamed for her attention, but she didn't realize how much the world missed her. Yet, every day without fail, the sky still bleeds pink.

No Escape | Grace Muller

In my confining walls
I map your eyes
through dents and cracks—
in patches of shadows

so through slumber
your eyes are watching

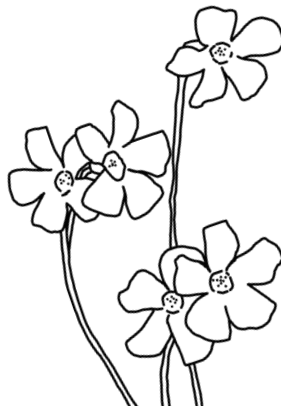
me:

my breath slows as
you sink in the wraith of mine

designed for you.

Because my name blossoms my bisabuela | Angelina Leaños

i root / myself / as a mother's reincarnation mission / to
reinvent / what words graved my grandmother / no
más gritos / no más abuso / no más descuido / i
/ vessel / my great-grandmother's volcano / tongue /
earthquake / el amor / mi abuela so rarely slumbered /
Jamás temas / hija / te voy a cuidar / en esta vida



Dum Dum | Sean Ahern

I crack another Dum-Dum between my teeth,
this one felt filling
welded to enamel,
the unholy synthesis of blueberry
and banana bathing gustatory cells reminds me
of the third round of carboplatin chemo
it took to tear out the wet soggy lump
from the back of my throat.
I answer the door
with a rope tied around my waist,
sometimes I lose my grip
sometimes I don't open the door
unless it's mother,
she brings the best spaghetti over
and a bag of Dum-Dums.

you both wonder if your abuelos felt
 the queerness between you if they saw you kissing her
 inside the car and you silently pray if so your
 abuelos don't judge you but two years later
 your abuela recognizes your SO at Walmart and
 despite her broken Spanish your abuela smiles
 small talks and before adiós she promises
 that no matter how far you are you two will always
 be reunited

save your death | Angelina Leaños

let this year close not with your casket
but with sueños del Año Nuevo — dream not of heaven yet.

when Death visits you in el hospital, tell them to wait in the lobby
where I will be because no one believes I am yours.

prove the doctors wrong and call my name —
coat your voice in sugar for this spell I'll cast to bring you home.

when you return with me, embrace mi bisabuela —
fill a well with all the tears she spilled in your absence.

parade the streets scented by barbacoa y carne asada
shine in your survival, God's answer to our prayers.

*no se llore por lo que perdió pero celebra con el valle —
ahorra celebramos, let's dance your breath entre la tierra*

and when you look longingly to the heavens I'll say
ahora no es su tiempo — save your death for another day.

Ghosts of the Streets | Guadalupe Miranda

A blistering day—
 my skin red, hairs singed from the sun
 cooling off in the car as the streets seem to stretch
 past the tunnel of life.
 A woman lies on the ground
 sweltering under heat, under watchful eyes looking away
 skin to bone, bone to dirt, blood to cement
 searching for soft hands
 crying for soft limbs
 begging for the soft caress of life to accept her.

A blistering day—
 my skin raw, with something to itch
 furrowed brow with nothing to eat
 stretching past the tunnel of life
 watching, waiting for the woman to lift her head.
 Green shirt, green pants blending with nothing but air
 next to the steps of a home that is not her own
 blending with the leaves, the green of the trees
 blending, until air washes her away
 and nothing is left
 and nothing is seen.
 Green shirt, green pants like a leaf, green of the trees
 shunned to silence, shunned of beauty
 shunned to cruel powers of invisibility.

Keep Clear of Moving Parts | Jennifer Yung





Twin Suns | Sophia Centurion

Your hand hasn't left
my temple, wisps of hair
suspended on

your fingertips.
You push it behind
my ear, your pawn

forward. We play
for the thrill of strategy,
and choosing not to think

at all—squandered gifts,
our downfall.
The only way to stack cards

is managing not to fall,
but we tend to occupy the same spaces. Knocking
into the next,

our pieces over and under
each other,
making a mess all over

the living space. You don't
finish my sentences,
you race me to the words.

This solar system
ain't big enough
for the both of us.

We fucked up and I tried
to walk away,
as you took another piece.

How are we still losing?

We are two broken thumbs,
neighboring houses
burning

from the shared wall.
One flipping coin
always landing

one on top of the other.
Get out of my head,
I'm forgetting

this is the game. Stop hiding
small kisses
where I'll find them

much later.
Stop making me laugh,
and listening

and remembering.
There is no technicality,
time machine,

or moments for ourselves.
But I'll keep your hand
where it is

because you cannot fully leave
without it.

Tap my knuckles with yours.
Maybe the next game
will be gentler.

Sunday Morning | P.J. Smith

I walk through the forested park and let the sun greet my face and arms just like it always has. A choir of birds and yapping ducks chime through the background, the signature sound of our small Tennessee town.

I listen closely to the melodies of the birds, hearing their intricate and delicate and sometimes brash songs. They sing and cackle gleefully and angrily but I don't hear the bright and lively high-pitched notes I'm looking for.

The calm, algae-covered lake breathes in soft, even ripples and a cool breeze offers me that all-too-familiar scent of wet dirt and lakewater. I breathe in what feels like nostalgia, and old memories pour over me like a summer rain.

I flip open my bird-watcher's guidebook and stop on the Indigo Bunting, reminding myself of the male's vibrant indigo plumage splashing out from its cool gray beak, and then how it fades and bleeds into royal blue and cerulean.

Suddenly, a quick splash of blue darts past my peripheral. I snatch my binoculars and unkindly press them to my eyes and search the sky, not noticing I'm holding my breath. Seconds pass like minutes. Then I spot a hopeful speck of blue bobbing through the drooping vines of the old Willow that engulfs a small hill on the lake's edge.

My feet are forward before my brain can process I'm moving. I close in on the tree, my eyes darting faster and faster, searching for that bobbing speck, when a harsh crack snaps under my foot.

The head of a man in a brown, tattered hat lifts up behind the tree. I think I see the blue dot flying back over the unbothered, rippling lake. Great. I have half a mind to try and sneak out of sight and chase after the bird, but that's not how I was raised.

I'll apologize and be on my way.

"Sorry to wake you, sir," I offer quickly and delicately, "I thought I saw a bird in this tree and I - "

"You talkin' 'bout that little Indigo Bunting?" The man yawns.

"Yes, actually!" My binoculars are back to my eyes and I'm scanning the edge of the forest again. This bird isn't a common sight.

The man sits up, stretches his arms, and peers through the brim of his hat, taking in a quick scan of me. "You one 'o them birdwatchers?"

"Something like that," I say hesitantly, "my dad was really into it."

"Was?"

I pause, let the binoculars dangle around my neck, and look down at the lake. "He died ten years ago." I hold up the book, my eyes are heavy looking at it, and it's heavy in my hand, too. I'm suddenly feeling embarrassed, and I wonder if my arm is shaking, but I don't care. It feels good to talk about him nowadays, especially here. "I'm trying to finish this book he was working on. That bird is the last one I need."

"Oh," he says, "sorry to hear it, kid." His head turns out over the lake. "That's mighty noble of you, finishin' what yer old man started."

"Yeah... I mean, thanks," I say, shifting my gaze out over the still lake. "Anyway, uh, sorry to have ruined your nap. I'm gonna go see if I can still spot it."

"Hang on, what if I told you I could get the bird to come back?"

I'm not sure what to say. Is he joking? "Uh... I'd have

to ask how," I chuckle, my eyebrow raised. I'm trying to search his face for an expression but the light and the hat and the shade from the tree make it impossible to see his features. The only thing I can tell is that he's an older guy, probably in his late forties, early fifties.

"I'm serious," he says, seeming to acknowledge how crazy he sounds, "It'd be no problem, just come back here Sundy mornin'."

I'm lost. I don't know what's happening, but there's something I can't put my finger on, so I don't answer him. I just stare blankly, expectant. Did this guy know my dad or something? I remember his online community group, the one he'd share his bird shots with. I don't photograph them like he did, but I know he was involved with a fairly decent sized community of bird watchers around here.

Without me having to respond, he says, "Warms me up seein' a young man, missin' his old man, lookin' for birds, that's all." Then he pushes himself up, places his tanned hand on the base of the tree, looks out toward the lake, and starts walking. "Just come over to this here willow," he says, "Sundy mornin'." And he walks behind the tree.

I stand there, unsure of what's happening, a little annoyed. What the hell is this? I wait, expecting him to reappear on the other side, but he doesn't show. I lean to my left, trying to see what he's up to, but I can't see any sign of him. I keep my distance as I walk outward toward the lake. There is no man behind the tree.

"What the...?" I can't stop myself from the words escaping me, but then I stumble over a large root curling up from the ground and drop my book. I scurry up off the grass and approach the tree. I look up into its vibrant green branches. Nothing. I scan the vicinity, poking my head around both sides of the large, coarse trunk. Nothing. I knock on the trunk, and my knuckles sting against the bark.

Just a tree.

Did that just happen? I back away, starting to question

my sanity.

Of course it happened! I'm not crazy. Not that crazy, anyway. But there's no way that just happened! Something strange is going on. A magic trick? Sorcery? No way. I press my hand to my forehead. No fever. I look around. Everything is normal.

I drop my heel on the grass around the tree, prodding for a secret door or some kind of sound that might cue a hidden hollow space. Nothing!

I see my dad's book laying in the grass over by the edge of the lake. I walk over to retrieve it and notice my reflection.

I've stood in this spot many times as a boy, catching minnows and tadpoles and playing in the mud, but this is my first time looking down as a young man. Everything seems smaller. I'd been avoiding this spot for years without even realizing it. Soft ripples dance and break on the small shore just as they always have, but the face I see doesn't look anything like it used to. It's the same lake, but it looks somehow distant and smaller, its water darker and less deep. Its reflection is mean. The boy that used to look at this lake smiled and laughed all day but the person looking back at me now doesn't look like a smiler or a laugher.

The ripples seem to float right off the surface and into my skin. At first they're cold, and it feels like they're knocking me back. They flutter up my arm and neck until I can feel them pouring out of my eyes and down my cheeks.

If only I could've said goodbye. I look over my shoulder, expecting to see him. Because from this angle, that's all I ever saw.

"Hey buddy, what'd ya find?" I can still hear him say it, sipping his beer, sitting there in his chair, his rod at his side.

And then the rippling stops, and my cheeks turn hot, and in an instant I realize I'm mad. He left me when he died, and he took those memories with him. I brush the

back of my hand across my face and I chuck the book out onto the lake.

And then my cheeks are wet again, and I'm sitting there on the edge of the lake. I'm mad and sad, and I miss him, and I hate him. I watch the book disappear beneath the surface and close my eyes.

I open them again to look at my reflection again, so I can see my tear-stained face and hate him more.

And I'm looking at myself, my puffy eyes and pathetic reflection breaking into focus between the ripples. The minnows dart through the water without care. And then the man, with his tattered hat, is standing over my shoulder. I lash my head around, but he's gone. Like he was never there at all.

Just like my father.

Just like his book is now. Lost to the lake.

I gaze out, the sun is lower in the sky. It shines and skips across the surface, blinding me for a moment. I stand up and I look at the indifferent scenery. The lake ripples on, the willow continues to sway, and the birds chirp their ancient songs.

I see a flash of blue, but I stand up and I walk home.

After I eat, brush my teeth, and have a shower, I walk over to my dresser to grab a pair of boxers from the top drawer. I'm drained, and today feels like it was all a fever dream. I don't know if I'm going crazy, but I try to ignore it all. I thought I'd grown past all of these complicated feelings. I pull my boxers over my feet and up my legs and notice the frame sitting on my dresser.

There we are. Me, smiling, probably five or six years old, and my dad looking down at me, probably in his mid to late thirties. He's carrying our fishing rods in one hand, a

tackle box in the other, and a couple of chairs and a cooler are strapped around his shoulders. Mom says we were always running away to the lake, but she took the photo with his camera because he “needed something other than birds in there.”

I'm staring at my young, foreign face, and at his, which appears happy enough, searching for the feeling in my chest, when I notice the tree behind us and see a still, blue dot perched behind the grainy leaves. I look up, out of my window. It's dark now and I can hardly see the tree from the photo. I look back at the frame, and it all floods back to me.

That day was particularly windy. I remember arriving at the lake, the surface was rougher than I'd ever seen it before. The ducks weren't bobbing and splashing in the middle like usual. Dad said fish didn't particularly like windy days either, but he said the spot under the old Willow tree would be calmer since it and the hill it canopied would shade and shelter the water. We set our equipment up as usual, and sure as he'd said, the water was calmer there. My hands were immediately sifting through the water with a small net, my eyes set on a particular amber, gold, and crimson colored minnow, when I was hit on the head by something soft and watched as my dad's hat flew out over the water, riding the wind for a moment, landing on its surface, and then sinking, lost to the lake.

The hat was worn, brown, and tattered. And in the picture I'm squeezing tight in my hands, it's snug on his head.

An overwhelming sensation breaks over me like a wave, like an epiphany, but more like the feeling of realizing something obvious that's been right in front of my face. An image of the old man from the park pops into my head, his shadowed face looming over my shoulder.

My eyes are not sure where to go. I can feel my mouth twitching into a smile, exercising muscles that hadn't been used genuinely in a very long time. I want to drop everything and run over to the old Willow right now. I want to see my -

I come to my senses before I can finish the thought. I wipe tears from my cheeks and sit down on the edge of my bed, staring at the picture, studying the hat and everything else around it, my grip loosening.

My dad is dead. That's real. I remember wanting to stop his funeral when they lowered his casket, to open it one last time to try and shake him awake. Because it had to be a fucking mistake. How could he have left me like that? And mom. We were never the same after that, and *that* was real.

That man at the park today was not. I feel stupid. I feel sick of myself. I feel pathetic. As if my dad's ghost would just be hanging around that old lake, taking naps in the grass and watching birds. That man had to be at least ten years older than my dad, and he probably just happened to have the same stupid hat. I'm so exhausted. Being there today, in that park, hearing the birds sing, smelling the wet dirt and lakewater, feeling the sun bite my skin and the soft breeze cool it down, must have triggered some weird hallucination.

I place the picture back on my dresser and take one last look. It's the first time I see it with a feeling of disappointment. I lay my head back on my pillow, close my eyes, and let my mind slip away into darkness.

Sunday morning, I wake up and look out my window. The sun is shining, and the leaves aren't blowing in the wind. It's calm. I pull on the pair of cargo shorts lying next to my bed and grab a clean t-shirt from my dresser. I haven't been able to think about anything else for the past two days. I know today is impossible. I know I'm going to be disappointed, but I'm going to the park. I must have played hundreds of scenarios in my head, but I kept them all to myself. Mom has been a little worried, but today it all comes to rest and I can finally put it all behind me.

I expect to find an empty park. Either that, or a really weird man. One who somehow managed to disappear into thin air and was planning on kidnapping and killing

me. Or more logically, one who was part of my dad's old birdwatchers group and had some way of catching one of these birds and was going to show it to me. I skip breakfast. I'm not hungry.

I turn the corner with such anxiety that I feel like my chest is going to explode. My pits are damp, and I can feel my heart throbbing in my throat. I look out at the still lake, at the old Willow tree on the other side, standing, unyielding, and green.

I make my way toward the spot. No man. No bird. Nothing.

I stand there, staring up through the leaves of the towering tree, watching the branches shift and breathe, protecting this dome from the sunlight trying to peek through like a time capsule. It's all the same under here. Everything except for me, that is.

I'm disappointed, confused, sad, angry. But also, indifferent. What did I expect?

I gaze out over the rippling lake, the sun glazing over the spot I saw his book splash just two days ago. It seems like the same place I saw his hat hit the surface all those years ago. The morning dew sparkles and glistens on the opposite side of the lake, a few of the Willow's leaves dipping into the lake with those same wilted fingers. I feel guilty for throwing the book out over the water, and I hate myself for it.

How could I be so stupid? Winding myself up into thinking I was actually about to see my father! For the past couple of days, there was this buried feeling I hadn't felt in such a long time. It was peeking through, like it was just waiting to pop out. It felt like a smile, like a deep laugh. Like a full, clear breath that didn't dwindle away with the exhale. I felt closer to that young boy more than I ever had before. But that feeling is gone and I'm afraid I won't ever feel it again.

I sit down with my back against the tree. The ducks bob

up and down into the water, pulling up laces of algae in their beaks, ruffling their feathers in the lake and stretching their wings with quick flaps. I close my eyes and let one final tear fall from my eye, as I wish and wish that it had just been real, and accept that it never could be.

I hear the ducks squabble for a moment, and a sharp, lively, high-pitched note whistles above my head. Leaves rustle and I whip my eyes open and look up. The sun is shining through the branches, distorting my sight, but within a few seconds, my eyes adjust.

There they are. A pair of Indigo Buntings, perched in the old Willow. My eyes well up almost immediately, but I'm careful not to make a sound or move a muscle. I just watch them cock their heads, and take in their never ending song. Then I smile.

When You Listen | Casey Matthess

My feet, bare and calloused, dig into the sand while the breeze lifts smaller particles to dance off the cliff's edge and fall into the salty water. The skin that separates my bones from the earth, hardened and torn from listening to the stories of the soil that a year's worth of land may cover. The whispers of the wind fight against my straining muscles, aching, to prevent me from plunging into the frantic waves of the water beneath me.

I stand and *breathe*. Breathe in what the world sings to those who listen. I breathe in those long, grueling stories. And she tells me everything I need to hear.

The wind is more than a current that pushes and pulls, or a force destined to make leaves dance and water ripple. It is more than a breath that we draw into our lungs only to expel soon after. Likewise, the water is more than a force eager to wrestle and drown. It is more than a deep, unknown, and dark body. The water is more than a reflection. Fire is greater than destruction, heat, and burns. Fire feeds, it does not only devour. The soil is home to thousands of plants and animals alike. The soil is fuel and creation, never unwanted, never unused.

The world is a spirit and she has been calling my name for years. I can finally understand her. I can finally answer.

As my eyes rest and flutter shut, the melodies of the wind grow louder, transforming into a song so beautiful no instrument nor human could replicate, "I have waited for you, my darling."

An unforgiving tear rolls down my cheek. Sorrow does not weigh down my chest. Anxiety does not burrow in my stomach. Anger does not burn my ears. Yet, an unknown

relief rumbles through my spine, escaping through my fingers and my toes. The roughened skin on my feet feels no resistance from the sand anymore. My body— my soul— feels free.



Fragmentation and Reunification in Justin Torres' *Blackouts* | Michael Fagnani

Consider the nature of a collage. Through altering and combining, pieces of found media are divorced from their original context and granted a new, unified meaning under the artist's vision. The idea of recontextualization runs to the core of Justin Torres's *Blackouts*, reflected in its character's actions and in the very structure of the novel itself. Characters bounce back and forth from past to present, expanding and editorializing their lives. The narrative of *Blackouts* is presented in a broken nature, slivers of story delivered between interjections of historical images and poetry. Through the use of fragmentation, Justin Torres's *Blackouts* acts similar to a collage in the presentation of its narrative.

Blackouts is primarily a story between the unnamed narrator and his friend Juan Gay. The two met a decade ago while both were institutionalized in a mental hospital. Juan is old, and dying, and so the narrator has come to stay with him in a place known only as "The Palace." The narrator is plagued by fugues, or blackouts, resulting in memory loss and absences of time. With these in mind, the two men share remembrances of their lives, hoping that diving back into memory will help bridge gaps over lost spaces. Through memories, Juan details his relationship with historical figure, Jan Gay. Here, Juan references *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns*, a medical book that used her research on gay and lesbian people as its basis yet effectively erases her from its final publication. The narrator reflects on his own queer identity and how the blackouts he experiences leave him feeling divorced, or "gone" from his own life. Ultimately, Juan's story leaves the narrator considering how he can move forward and dictate the narrative of his life on his own terms.

Like a collage, the life of *Blackout*'s narrator is detailed

through a composition of chosen fragments. Playing into the idea of remembrance, Justin Torres fleshes out the narrator through diving in and out of his memory in a fragmented fashion. The novel begins with the narrator's arrival at The Palace but does not stay there long, instead jumping into a memory of when the narrator experiences a blackout. From there, the novel jumps again and details when the narrator and Juan first meet. In these jumps back and forth through time, Torres establishes that the narrator's life comes in fragments. There is no play-by-play of the narrator's life, rather the reader is left to fill in the gaps between each memory. By arranging the narrator's life in this fashion, Torres is placing the reader into his mind. The gaps in his life are not just Torres withholding information from the reader, they are the lived experience of the narrator. The narrator comments on how he lives in the absence of linear structure, claiming:

...I'd spent many years pretending: either to be younger and more innocent, more oblivious, than I was, or else to be unafraid, or sluttier, or more radical—a *provocateur*—and many times I'd be tripped up, or caught out, and burnt by the exposure. (Torres 52)

In the absence of a definite meaning, the narrator is left to try and craft one for himself.

One of the novel's best examples of fragmented storytelling is when the narrator details the relationship between him and Liam, his former lover. The story begins at the end, the relationship is already over, and they've reconciled. The narrator dives back into memory, detailing his attempts to move on from Liam, then the breakup and its aftermath, finally ending with the beginning of their relationship. Though the story comes in non-linear fragments, the full picture is unified by the end. At the end of the passage, the narrator says "...we're on the slope of a mountain, in the dark, wondering what in hell we've signed ourselves up for, and how it's all going to play" (Torres

247). This quote exemplifies Torres's strategy for character development in the novel. The reader is thrust into an unfamiliar situation without all the pieces, and yet what they are given engages them enough to press on to see how they'll fit together.

Blackouts is presented as a story rooted in reality and Torres helps solidify this idea with the inclusion of historical images and poetry. These inclusions add layers to the story, making the story feel all the more real. Many times throughout the novel the narrator will describe a memory, such as another person or a location. Turning the page, the reader will find a photograph that matches the narrator's description, giving the narrator's words a sense of validity. The original context of the image is stripped away and they become re-signified as markers of the narrator's existence. These images also lend themselves to the mysticism of Juan Gay's character. As he details his life story, he reveals that at one point as a child he was under the care of Jan Gay and her partner Zhenya. Turning the page, a photo of Jan and Zhenya with a small child appears. Suddenly, the reader is left wondering whether or not Juan was a real person or not. While he is ultimately revealed to be a work of fiction, Torres's inclusion of images into the story helps to pull the reader into the world.

Poetry also plays a role in grounding the world of *Blackouts*. Much of the novel concerns Juan's feelings towards *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns*. Juan dislikes the book, owing to the fact that it editorializes a study of gay and lesbian people, framing them as perverse and immoral. Juan wishes for *Sex Variants* to be reinterpreted to highlight its original intent: to display the lives of people as they are. Torres takes this wish upon himself, injecting sections of blackout poetry he created from real pages of the *Sex Variants* study. The inclusion of these poems further amplifies the reality of the novel by connecting its fiction to the real world.

In conclusion, *Blackouts* is a narrative of fragmentation and unification. The story is told in pieces, bouncing back and forth from past to present, dwelling in memory and the gaps in between. The inclusion of historical photos and blackout poetry adds additional pieces, and like a collage, Justin Torres ultimately combines them to create something new.

Reluctance | Jennifer Yung



Romanticizing a Slap in the Face | Sophia Centurion

I'm a bard, a storyteller,
daydreamer rewriting

as it serves me. It's a skill
to make anyone a collage
of does-he, does-he-not petals
and amateur prose

to make out with in a backseat,
but it takes sadistic editing

of my psychology and theirs.
Indulging the backspace,
so close to other letters.
I can charm the sky into falling.

Wield fate like a performer's trap door.
There is violence in separating

and reweaving Mr. Right
when I need the distraction. Explain
away the hurt they give with
the hurt I discover.

I could romanticize a slap in the face,
and I will. They chose me

to fuck over. When my naivete is too much,
I hike the lengths I'll take to overlook
anything, mountaintops,
declare myself the villain. Better than believe

he fooled me first. All is forgiven because I hallucinated
good intentions in the brown of his eyes.

See how he can't help
but be selfish with me?
How romantic it is
to be wanted.

This is not empathetic maturity,
it's an attempt to keep control of the distance

I maintain. Keep far
enough that I keep fabricating.
I'll return like a neighbor's cat
pretending this is home

for a second dinner.
I am starving.

My body is sworn to what-is,
but my mind wraps around what-ifs
until it is tangled and exhausted.
All consuming,

like the stretch into the black hole
that forces any shape inside it.

Like a teen under strict rule, evades all sense
and benevolence just for
the high in the park.
It isn't impressive for me

to be interested,
I can look at a flame for hours.

But sometimes
I'll close my eyes
and stay for the warmth
I can't concoct on my own.

What fun to create my own heartbreak.

Again and again and again.
What fun to be invulnerable.

I Would Not Be A Poet | Amy Barnes

I would not be a poet
If side-by-side we walked.
Nay, I'd never pen a rhyme
Were our fingers interlocked.
The sky's soft fade from pastels
To Twilight's speckled, navy blue
Would sadly miss my eyes
As they'd be fixed solely on you.
Even my beloved moon and
Orion's thrice-strung belt
Would stir no wonder in my soul,
As I'd have grander feelings to be felt.

So I suppose I love the fact
That as the day yields its light
'Tis but one figure's shadow
That is cast upon the night.
I cherish all the days that end
With my entering my home
And freely taking up my pen
Because I am alone.

Theseus and Icarus Are Waiting | Drew denDulk

Characters

THESEUS: a young man, maybe in his twenties, outgoing and a little brash. He isn't afraid to speak his mind, even if he isn't always right. He doesn't know how he got here, only that Icarus was here first.

ICARUS: a younger man, barely twenty, calm and carefree. He isn't as loud as Theseus, but his thoughts are deeper, wiser for his age. He doesn't know how he got here either, only that he was here before Theseus.

Setting

Bench in the open. There is an overlook to the right with an implied cliff drop and a streetlamp to the left. Everything is white. The only sound is that of wind rushing past.

It is dark. There's the faint sound of wind rushing past. The sound of wind rises before fading back down again. The lights rise suddenly, illuminating a white bench, sat next to a white streetlamp, a long white string tied to the base and stretching out into the wings. A white overlook fence sits to the other side, supposedly overlooking a cliff drop. There is a young man sitting, his legs crossed, on one side of the bench reading a book. The book has no title on the cover. This is ICARUS. He is dressed casually in grays and light blues; nothing too fancy. He looks up idly, glancing around at the audience. He can see them. He smiles kindly.

ICARUS

Oh, hello. Glad to see you've made it. I've been waiting for you for a while.

A pause. His smile does not change. It isn't unkind or disingenuous, but there is something

about it; something that does not sit right. He closes the book, keeping a finger in the pages to hold his spot. He leans back against the bench, looking at ease.

ICARUS

I'm waiting for someone else, actually. Well, I was told I was. You can wait with me if you'd like, it shouldn't be much longer.

He returns to his book. There is a long moment of silence, only the wind and the occasional flip of ICARUS's book. Then, footsteps. Another young man walks onstage approaching the bench. He holds a bundle of string, one end trailing long behind him. This is THESEUS. He stops next to the bench, waiting for ICARUS to notice him. When ICARUS doesn't look up from his book,

THESEUS clears his throat. ICARUS startles, looking up. When he sees THESEUS, he smiles.

ICARUS

You're here!

THESEUS

I am, yes. Where is 'here,' anyways?

ICARUS ignores his question, patting the empty bench next to him.

ICARUS

Please, take a seat. I'm sure we don't have much longer to wait, but sitting is far more comfortable than standing.

THESEUS

But-

ICARUS

Sit, please!

THESEUS relents, taking a seat. ICARUS goes back to reading his book. THESEUS watches him,

fiddling with his bundle of string. There is silence, awkward on THESEUS's part but completely missed by ICARUS. After a long moment—

THESEUS
I'm Theseus.

ICARUS
I know.

He returns to his book. THESEUS watches him, confused. He tries again.

THESEUS
I'm Theseus. What's your name?

THESEUS holds out a hand. ICARUS looks up, confused.

ICARUS
But don't you know?

THESEUS
No? How would I know? Have we met before?

ICARUS thinks for a moment before shaking his head. He reaches out, taking THESEUS' hand and shaking it.

ICARUS
No, I suppose not. I'm Icarus. It's lovely to meet you, Theseus.

THESEUS
Likewise.

ICARUS nods, smiles, and returns to his book. THESEUS looks around, fiddling with his string, clearly bored and trying to find a way to entertain himself. After a few moments he gives up, turning back to ICARUS. He's impatient.

THESEUS
How long are we here for?

ICARUS
What? Oh, um, I'm not sure exactly. Can't be too much longer now, though. I mean, I've been here for—

ICARUS's voice trails off and he looks out over the overlook, eyebrows furrowing. THESEUS pokes him gently in the arm to regain his attention.

THESEUS
You've been here for how long?

ICARUS
Oh, not that much longer than you, I'm sure. Why, when did you get here?

THESEUS frowns. He is clearly confused.

THESEUS
I just got here a few minutes ago.

ICARUS
Alright, I've been here for longer than a few minutes then!

He returns to his book. THESEUS is very confused, but he lets ICARUS read; continuing to try to find things to occupy his time. Again he grows impatient, letting out a sigh and turning back to ICARUS.

THESEUS
Listen, Icarus—

ICARUS
That's my name, don't wear it out!

THESEUS
Don't you think it's rather boring here?

ICARUS looks confused.

ICARUS

I mean, not really? I have my book, I'm satisfied.

*THESEUS looks very impatient now. It's clear
ICARUS is wearing him out.*

THESEUS

Well that's all fine and good for you, but if you haven't noticed, I don't have a book. I just have this— he waves his bundle of string around -and it's not very interesting.

ICARUS

What are you suggesting, then?

THESEUS

I don't know, we could talk? Tell each other about ourselves? Pass the time?

ICARUS seems to consider that. Eventually he nods, smiling.

ICARUS

Alright! Would you like to start?

THESEUS

Sure.

A pause. THESEUS looks like he's searching for something, words or a story. A starting place.

THESEUS

I'm not sure what to say or where to begin.

ICARUS

Well your name is Theseus, you must be a certain age, which means you have a birthday. You certainly have parents, since you need parents to have a birthday. Maybe you even have siblings, or maybe a partner.

THESEUS

I suppose you're right. Well, I'm Theseus. You already know

that. I'm 25?

ICARUS
Are you unsure?

THESEUS
No, no. I'm 25. My birthday is March 7th. My mother's name
is Aethra, and my father is—

A pause.

ICARUS
Yes?

THESEUS
I'm not quite sure. Do people normally only have one
father?

ICARUS
Traditionally, yes.

THESEUS
I think I have two.

ICARUS
Oh. Well, doesn't that make you special!

THESEUS
I suppose, yes. My fathers are Aegeus and Poseidon.

ICARUS
Like the god?

THESEUS
What?

ICARUS
You know, the god. Poseidon, god of the oceans and
earthquakes? He's quite the big name, I'm surprised you
haven't heard of him.

THESEUS
No, no, I think I do know of him. Oceans, yes. What would

that make me then, if my father's a god?

ICARUS

Even more special than I thought!

THESEUS

I suppose, yes.

They fall back into silence for a moment.

THESEUS

What about you? Who are your parents?

ICARUS

Oh! Well, my father is Daedalus, and my mother is Naucrate. I never really knew my mother, but my father was a great inventor. You see, he designed the Labyrinth!

THESEUS is startled by this. He holds his bundle of string closer.

THESEUS

The Labyrinth??

ICARUS

Yes, have you heard of it?

THESEUS

Heard of it? I was in it!

ICARUS

Oh, well me too! I mean, me and my father lived inside for many years.

THESEUS

I was just there, I swear it. How come I never saw you?

ICARUS

Well, probably because I was already gone.

THESEUS

Gone to where?

ICARUS
Here.

THESEUS
Right. And where is 'here' again?

ICARUS opens his mouth to answer, but there's a new sound suddenly, cutting through the wind. It sounds like breaking metal, gears jamming together, the sound of something very heavy falling very far. THESEUS jumps up, looking up into the sky at something we cannot see. He moves suddenly, striding to the overlook, placing both hands on the rail and leaning out to get a better look. ICARUS watches him from his spot on the bench. He seems unsurprised by all of this.

THESEUS
What is that?

ICARUS
You'll see.

THESEUS watches as the unknown something falls past him, down into the abyss below the outlook. He leans dangerously over the railing, trying to watch it until it hits the bottom.

THESEUS
Was that you?

ICARUS
In a sense.

THESEUS
What does that mean?

ICARUS sighs, setting his book down on the bench and joining THESEUS at the railing. He leans casually against, uncaring of the sudden drop on the other side.

ICARUS

It means yes, but also no. That was certainly me at one point in time, but now... well, you could argue that, since I'm here with you, that really isn't me at all.

THESEUS

It looked like you.

ICARUS

It did.

THESEUS

But it's not you?

ICARUS

Maybe not.

THESEUS

Oh.

ICARUS returns to the bench. THESEUS continues to look out over the edge, leaning with both his arms propped on the railing.

THESEUS

I think I fell once.

ICARUS

You did.

THESEUS

How do you know?

ICARUS

Because you told me.

THESEUS

Just now?

ICARUS

Well yes, but also before.

THESEUS
When?

ICARUS
Never you mind. What were you saying about falling?

THESEUS
Well, I think I did it. Fell, I mean. Once. Like you did, like that.

ICARUS
Right into the ocean.

THESEUS
Right. Did you land in the ocean too?

ICARUS
I did. Most people do, I find. So, do you remember anything else?

THESEUS
I remember... I jumped? Or maybe I was pushed?

ICARUS
It does tend to vary, with you

THESEUS
What? How I end up falling?

ICARUS
Yes. Depends on the story, who's telling it. Some people like to make it your fault. Some people like to say you jumped.

THESEUS
What people?

ICARUS gestures out towards the audience.

ICARUS
Them.

THESEUS looks, but he can't see them.

THESEUS
Who?

ICARUS
You'll see them soon enough. Would you like to know why I
fell?

THESEUS
If you'd like to tell.

ICARUS
I would. I was flying, you see.

THESEUS
Nonsense, people don't fly.

ICARUS
Special people do.

THESEUS
Well you said I was special, why can't I fly?

ICARUS
You're special in a different way. Anyways, I was flying. I
flew too high, my wings melted together, and I fell. Right
into the ocean. Most people assume I died falling, but I
didn't. I really died drowning.

THESEUS
Sounds unpleasant.

ICARUS
It was.

THESEUS
Wait, so you're dead?

ICARUS
Well, yes, in a sense.

THESEUS
You keep saying that!

ICARUS
Saying what?

THESEUS
"In a sense." It doesn't mean anything. You keep saying it,
but it doesn't clarify anything!

ICARUS
Well maybe I don't want to clarify anything.

THESEUS
Ok, fine. You're dead. Does that mean I'm dead?

ICARUS
Well—

THESEUS
Don't say "in a sense."

ICARUS
Fine. You're only most of the way dead.

THESEUS
And what does that mean for me?

ICARUS
It means you have choices. Options. Not many, but options
nonetheless.

THESEUS
Well, what are they?

ICARUS
I can't tell you that.

THESEUS
Why not?

ICARUS
It's not my place.

THESEUS
Gods, you are the most unhelpful person I have ever met!

THESEUS stalks over to ICARUS, grabbing his book and tossing it over the overlook and off the cliff. ICARUS watches it go, looking sad.

ICARUS

Well, now you've made your choice.

THESEUS forgets his anger, suddenly taken aback.

THESEUS

Have I?

ICARUS

One of them.

THESEUS

Well what do I do now?

ICARUS

Your string.

THESEUS

Yes?

ICARUS

Can I see it?

THESEUS cautiously hands over his bundle of string. ICARUS examines it, winding it between his fingers a few times before handing it back, seeming satisfied.

ICARUS

It will do.

THESEUS

It will do for what?

ICARUS

For a guide, like before.

THESEUS
Before?

ICARUS
Never mind. Do you want to try again?

THESEUS
Try again?

ICARUS
Do you want a second chance? A restart? Would you like
to try again?

THESEUS
Oh. Is that an option?

ICARUS
Here, yes. With me, yes.

THESEUS
Then—yes, I'd like to try again.

ICARUS
Good.

ICARUS stands, crossing to the streetlamp. He swings around it once, neatly removing the string that's currently tied to the base as he goes. He walks back to THESEUS, holding out the end of the string.

ICARUS
Tie this to the lamppost. As long as this is tied tightly and you hold on to your bundle, you won't get lost.

THESEUS does what he's told. Once he's done, he turns back to ICARUS, who has moved back to the overlook.

THESEUS
What now?

ICARUS
You can go.

A pause.

THESEUS
Go where?

ICARUS
Anywhere you want. Anywhere the string will reach.

THESEUS
And that's how I start again?

ICARUS
In a sense.

THESEUS snorts. He turns, starts walking back offstage. He pauses. He looks out at the audience, finally able to see them. He understands, suddenly. He understands all of it.

THESEUS
Oh. Well, hello there. And goodbye, Icarus.

ICARUS
See you later, Theseus.

THESEUS walks offstage, the string trailing behind him. The sound of wind remains, and ICARUS stares out past the overlook. Finally he sighs, running a hand through his hair and down his face.

ICARUS
And so it begins again.

He begins to walk back towards the bench, turning back to give the audience a rueful smile as he sits down.

ICARUS
One must assume Sisyphus to be happy.

He pulls a book from behind him, an exact copy of the one he had earlier. He crosses his legs then opens to the page he left off at.

ICARUS

I would love to have Sisyphus come through here, now that would be an interesting conversation. But no, I suppose he's not part of my job. I've just got—

ICARUS looks back to where THESEUS disappeared, following the string for a moment before turning back to his book with a sigh.

ICARUS

Well. He'll be back. And I'll be here waiting.

Lights fade.



Vanilla Perfume | Braeden Percy Huereca

Sickly sweet perfume hits my nostrils in a wave
 It's familiar, familial
 and again, it coats my lungs
 until I'm coughing and bleeding.
 it's tight and all-consuming
 your signature scent.

I give bread and blood
 to keep this light and happy.
 Brush my hair in thirty six strokes
 and sit still when the dishes go flying.
 If I inch, if I move, you'll go canary
 and your voice will shatter my innards.

Carved from ceramic, your mouth doesn't move
 the frown engraved in your skin
 beneath a creamy-soft foundation.
 What do I have to do, to think,
 for you to finally crack apart
 and smile at me?

I would dance to it, this life.
 Los boleros y golpeadas
 con bachata y sangre sagrada.
 I would be the good child this time,
 mys oles and spirit bruising blueblack
 and settling only when your eyes shift and crinkle

Finally, there,
 for a second or more:
 a movement,
 a break,
 a light

a sign of feeling

The Fallout | Max Gershon

Two teenage girls sat on a rickety doorstep, passing a joint back and forth under the safety of the night sky. Uneven wood pressed into their skin but both of them ignored any discomfort. They paid no mind to the bite of the chilly November air that had long since made their noses go numb. They listened to the rush of passing cars that could be heard from their backyard, if it could even be called that. A miniature slab of weathered concrete and empty pots where flowers used to need tending. The older sister watched her younger sister and laughed when she coughed, after taking too big of a hit, or too little.

"Poppy, be quiet." Lina warned her. "Just because it's your first time doesn't mean it won't be your last if *they* hear us," she warned in a hushed tone, not bothering to pat her back.

In between choked gasps of air, Poppy managed to get out an "I'm trying," which earned another lopsided smile from her older sister. Poppy's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She composed herself and shook her head. "I don't understand how the taste doesn't affect you, Lina."

"You get used to it," Lina laughed again and took the joint back, forefinger, and thumb to her lips, inhaling deeply as if there wasn't ever enough to go around. Maybe for her, there wasn't.

Poppy's eyes widened and her eyebrows shot up. It might be easy to keep secrets from parents, but sisterhood is funny like that. Lina slipped lighters into socks, acting as if she was putting laundry away while Poppy saw from the hallway. Lina carried the step ladder into her room when their parents were still at work, Poppy noticed her taking a screwdriver to the smoke detector, "Checking the batteries like Dad asked me to," Lina would say casually when Poppy had asked what she was doing. Soft scuffle of cautious footsteps and delicate tucking of a faded Winnie the Pooh towel against the locked Jack and Jill bathroom door at night. Countless times, Lina returned home in

different clothes than she'd left in her patchy dark hair wet from a fresh wash.

Whatever the reason for this sudden change, Poppy was glad to have her sister's attention for now. "How many times have you smoked?"

"How should I know? I've lost count over the years, I guess," Lina shrugged and offered it to her little sister again. The smoke trailed off the end like tiny ghost hands reaching out of the warmth within. "Tommy's the one who did it first, but no one remembers that tiny detail," Lina mumbled under her breath.

Poppy wrinkled her nose up but took it anyway. She tried and sputtered again despite the effort. The bitter wave of smoke crawling down her throat made her stomach churn. Poppy had always heard weed was supposed to make people feel good. Just having her sister include her in something for once felt better. "I'm not sure I like this. I don't see the point, I don't even feel anything," Poppy said.

"You will," Lina chuckled, reaching for it again. She let her lungs expand fully and tilted her head back skyward to admire the stars above them. When she exhaled, she pursed her lips and released the smoke directly upward. Poppy watched it disperse into the air, disappearing and losing shape in only a second or two before becoming one with the night.

Poppy followed Lina's gaze and did the same as little sisters often do. She waited for her sister to say something, give a reason, or explain how it might affect her, or what was supposed to be so great about it as her head began to feel light, her body buzzing softly. "How will I know?"

"You will," Lina repeated in a far-away voice. Poppy drew her legs onto her chest and rested her chin against her knees, unsatisfied with the response but knowing she wouldn't be offered anything better. "I like to think that wherever we go after, we're somewhere up there," Lina said then went quiet as she often did and Poppy resisted the urge to touch her shoulder. Instead, her forefinger dug into her thumb as she fiddled with torn skin.

Poppy tried to play along, hoping her sister wouldn't begin her usual cycle again. "Like he's looking down and watching over us how they say in movies?" Poppy lifted her head and brought her hand to her mouth, chewing her thumbnail cautiously.

"Yeah, exactly. Hey, big brother!" Lina tried a joke that fell flat between the two of them. Lina's dark eyes turned hazy, and a lump in her throat became audible. Poppy noticed Lina's fingers itching ever so slightly toward her hairline before she caught herself.

"You think so?" Poppy watched Lina's expression shift and regretted the words as they left her mouth.

Something had told her this was just wishful thinking but maybe her sister had needed to believe it. Or at least be given some sort of validation that Poppy failed to give her.

"I have to," Lina swiped her sweatshirt sleeve across her face and hid her snuffle with another hit.

Poppy scrambled to redirect Lina's attention with one of their stories. "It's over a year now since the crash, Thomas is twenty-two now. He's in his last year of college playing football at UCLA—"

"He didn't want to go," Lina interrupted their usual game. She looked as if she was going to offer Poppy the joint back but decided against it. Lina kept it for herself for one more hit before putting it out on the concrete. She stared at the ground now, maybe lost in thought or memory, perhaps both.

Poppy stalled, unsure of what or how to say it next. After a while, she broke the uncomfortable silence that even singing crickets couldn't fill.

"To school?" Poppy wasn't expecting an answer at all but was still hoping for one.

Lina shook her head slowly, appearing to choose her words carefully. "No. That night."

Poppy had been told next to nothing that night and ever since. Recalling the memory now, she remembered hearing Tommy and Lina talking. After a late family dinner, she'd returned to her bedroom to continue reading *The Hunger Games*. The familiar tap of buttons Tommy made while playing one of his games. The broken sound of Lina's hushed voice as she asked him something she couldn't make out before the door closed. Long after her mom and dad had made her put the book down, and said their goodnights, Poppy had fallen asleep and startled awake at the sound of the landline's shrill ring. Poppy had turned over in her twin bed and pulled the pink ballerina sheets closer with a groan before she heard the slap of a light switch and her mother's frantic voice directed at her father in the other room.

Poppy willed herself back to the current moment.

"He didn't want to, but I made him go anyway," Lina said while avoiding looking her in the eye.

"Why?" She asked, knowing she likely wasn't going to get another opportunity with how her parents refused to speak with her about what had happened and how Lina would go back to barely acknowledging her existence after this.

"Because I needed a ride to Nelle's party."

The girl Poppy knew their parents liked to pretend didn't exist when it was convenient for them or tried to keep Lina from seeing when it wasn't. Poppy had watched Lina struggle with a lack of acceptance for years. The grudges Lina held against Tommy and his girlfriend who their parents already treated like a daughter-in-law. Endless invitations to dinners, movie nights, weekend trips, always finding ways to encourage her to stay the night. Poppy had lost track of how many times she'd seen Lina shut herself in her room, clearly attempting to avoid it all.

All those months ago, Poppy watched her parents giggle with the happy couple over comedies or action movies on the sofa with nothing better to do. As the hours ticked by, Poppy kept herself distracted by dystopian YA novels while she waited for the crack of the window

opening when everyone else had presumably gone to sleep. She recalled the anger on her parents' faces when they used the spare key and found Lina's room empty in the morning. In the kitchen, their golden child, eldest, only son made coffee while happy-go-lucky, rosy-cheeked, didn't even know how good she had it, girlfriend used the stove like it was hers for pancakes and eggs. Poppy had set the table, silent and unsurprised though she would never have admitted that much.

Poppy shook her head in an attempt to clear the memories that threatened to overtake her. Lina cleared her throat, "I convinced Tom to drive me so I didn't have to take the bus," Lina said in a tone barely above a whisper. Poppy could see the tears forming in her eyes even though she tried to hide it. "He dropped me off but he wasn't meant to come back to pick me up. I was going to spend the night there."

Poppy understood without her sister needing to say it. Lina's relationship had ended that night and the look on her face said she was going over in her head how she should've seen it coming.

The rest of Poppy's memory was bits and pieces of running to Tommy's empty room, jumping into the car, seeing Lina in the hospital bed with a broken leg, the look on her parents' faces, the ringing of their cries that can't be described with words, the dull thump of her heavy heart when Tommy's car never came back home and neither did Tommy. She recalled the fallout in scattered details, a funeral with his football photo, teammates, new friends from college, his girl losing it in her gasping attempts to read her speech, dropping her fistful of dirt on the white casket.

Poppy still felt numb. What she remembered most was the increase in Lina's self-isolation. Seeing her ex-girlfriend approach at her locker between classes, trying to offer shreds of sympathy or support and the way Lina brushed it off, walked, or as much as she could on crutches, away like nothing between them had ever existed at all. Only a week before she'd heard the two of them making plans for after graduation a few months away.

At first, Poppy and Lina rode the bus to campus every day as they had all those times before but she quickly ended up riding it home alone when her older sister never joined her. Until Lina stopped showing up altogether, this was when worried teachers and the stressed vice principal came to Poppy asking about Lina since they couldn't reach their parents. Lina denied herself a diploma and traded it for all the hours Mom and Dad made her put into therapy. Poppy watched her sister go in and out of in-patient programs, gone for months, home again, and back. Pretending to have changed this time, talk big around the dinner table about what she'd learned, how she was going to enroll at community college when Poppy had already found the stash in the back of her closet again.

She never had any intention of turning things around, Poppy saw through Lina's pretty lies her parents were too eager to believe. It stung at first, broke her heart a little more but in time she understood how she couldn't help someone who didn't want to be helped, even if that someone was her own flesh and blood.

"It's funny how everything important fades. How people say they'll never leave but can't seem to stay." Lina brought Poppy back to the current moment. Poppy wondered then if she was talking about Tommy or herself, though she'd probably never know.

"Tommy didn't want to go," Poppy nodded more for her own sake than Lina's.

"No, he didn't," Lina turned away. Poppy watched her sister grow quiet and begin to shut down or rather shut her out as she always did.

"You did," Poppy whispered while that thing in her chest quickened, threatening to break from its cage.

Lina didn't hear her, or if she did, she didn't show it. "Come on, let's go inside. I'm freezing my ass off out here, sis," Poppy fixated on the last word. Lina never called her that. Being part of the same family was something Lina never acknowledged.

Poppy looked at her sister. "Will I see you in the morning?" She asked, already sure of the response she would get but asking anyway. She held out hope that maybe she was wrong or, at the very least, begging her to reconsider.

Lina's lips formed a small smile. She put her hand on Poppy's shoulder, drawing her in for a hug. Poppy stiffened for a moment, not sure what to do with it, before she wrapped her arms around her sister. Poppy squeezed her skeletal frame as tightly as she could but was reluctant to let go even when Lina already had.

"Of course, I'll see you bright and early." Lina's voice rose slightly at the end as she opened the back door. Poppy waited for Lina to go inside before following her. The following sounds were ones she wouldn't forget. The soft creak of the door, the click when she locked it behind her. Another sniffle as Lina wiped her nose on her sleeve again. The sound of Lina's clammy hands rubbing together before she pushed them into her pockets, hiding the evidence in one of them. Her black and white striped socks padded across the wood floor. Poppy's breathing was heavy in her ears while she watched her sister go from her room to their shared bathroom. The door closed, and the sound of the faucet starting made Poppy jump. She could hear the curtain's rings complain as they were drawn back. The drain groaned, taking its final breath before deafening silence like a dying clock.

Lily | Gabrielle Halim



Hades | Emma Carroll

Inspired by Franz Kafka's "Poseidon"

Hades stood in his study, reading documents that closely examined the new operations budget, blueprints for the upcoming room remodel for Persephone, and the pleas of the dead which would never be granted. As he flipped through them all, he paced his rounded study with a silent *click clack* of his black suede loafers. The rare red Brazilian rosewood flooring echoed, a constant reminder that his domain extended far down into the depths of the Earth and beyond.

Hades set the stack of papers down with an empty thud and pinched the bridge of his nose. The eternal grunts and heaves from Sisyphus could be heard even in the study. Charon requested yet another pay raise and a new boat. Orpheus' songs were constantly on a loop as he called out for Eurydice on the opposite end of the Underworld.

Hades didn't necessarily *hate* his work, he was just tired of it all.

It's not like the other Olympians would offer him other positions under their cabinets or above ground for that matter. His younger brothers with all of their glory and busy schedules never had time to meet with him. He would often hear of Ares' unchanging brutality through his fallen comrades and enemies. And Demeter...well the two of them were obviously never going to be on solid terms. The only Olympian Hades truly had contact with was Hermes when he delivered the occasional mail from above. Even then, Hermes didn't dare stay a moment longer than he had to in this wretched heat.

It's not like Lord of the Dead was a position everyone was applying for. Hades just had a knack for it, albeit he didn't know why. He never despised his work; most millenia he was quite proud of it.

No one understood the intricacies, the detail, and the

stakes of it all. More than that, no one understood how heavy the eons of death and molten heat weighed on him.

He rarely felt the breeze and mists from his brothers' domains. He would never admit it, but Hades sometimes wished his nostrils would tickle with the pollen from fresh flora and to bask in the intense rainfall from a hurricane. These odd yearnings would only arise when Persephone would arrive and leave. He blamed her for the small chips in his heart. He didn't love her, he simply loved her stories—her freedom.

Hades collapsed onto his oxblood leather chaise, the material squeaking in the silence of the room as the leather molded to his body. He began to sink further into the cushioning, his eyes fluttered to a close. He could still see through his eyelids, casting a reddish pink glow in his closed view, the overhead light creating a central point against his lids.

He much preferred his human form rather than his true form. He liked feeling the paper cuts on the moist pads of his fingers, the saliva swishing between his fleshy cheeks, and the burns from the fierce heat surrounding him whenever he went. His ears popped as he went further into his domain and the headaches from all the tortured screams reminding him of this fate they share.

Sometimes, he thought about asking his brothers for more flexibility when visiting them or the mortal world. He thought about asking them to reprieve him of this position. But then he remembered that no one would want to be the Ruler of the Underworld. Too many souls to be responsible for, too many cries and shouts for mercy, too small of a budget to work with.

A polite knock at the door chided him from his respite. A skeletal man in one of the Underworld's volunteer uniforms softly creaked the door open, allowing the wails of the undead and bursting celestial flames into his study.

Hades sighed and got back to work.

L'Homme au Masque de Fer | Arche

Unidentified beyond this mask,
You've forced your thoughts upon this steel.
Calling me your precious daughter,
But have you ever once known me?

I remain trapped in your prison,
Your little box of assumptions.
Calling me your best friend,
But have you ever once seen me?

For years, I have only known these bars of steel,
Your warped expectation of my existence.
Calling me a warrior because of my scars,
But have you ever once pitied me?

I try to carry this heavy burden,
But it is not my true skin.
Calling up my disguise,
The metal face you so desire.
Thanks to your twisted minds,
I know not who I am.

Nor will I ever be seen or feel pity.
You've stolen my identity from me,
Creating the mask I am sworn to bear.
Held captive in your ideals and dreams,
Locked away in my place of confinement.
Never to reveal the true face of what I could have become.

Sunflowers | Brandon Robak

There were salt mines under Scout's hometown. She never thought about how far they reached; she lived on the north side of Hutchinson, but they could span the city. No one really knew. She learned about them in elementary school and like everyone else in town pretty much forgot about them. But it's not like there was anything else interesting about Hutchinson. Sunflowers, cattle, a community college. The same as any city in Kansas. She wished she was from Wichita, the home of America's airplanes and legendary frontiersmen. People from Wichita probably wished they had salt mines under their city so what good did it do to wish.

Scout's younger brothers thought about the mines more than her. They were in that unit of school now. Brady was determined to find one in the backyard. He dug holes all around the property. Sometimes in the neighbors' backyards. Dad had to go to every house on Random Road and apologize. No one really minded. Kids will be kids or something like that. Scout was never like that but she found herself wondering what would happen if Brady actually found one.

Brady was working on a new hole by the Fairgrounds. It was bigger than any he had dug before. He said he had a sense. A vision. A prophecy. He was an eight-year-old with an active imagination, but Scout wouldn't be the one to stop him. She wondered if he'd ever find a mine. She hoped so. What a story it would be to tell at school the next day. Not as cool as if she'd been the one to find it.

Scout stood out in the field by the Fairgrounds with Brady to her left and Carson to her right. All three had shovels with red handles. The boys continued digging while Scout stood with her right foot planted on the shovel's head in the ground. She wanted to give them orders, it was only natural with her being the oldest sibling. She restrained.

She dug. And dug. She worried about powerlines but saw them overhead. She dug.

The boys dug too. And nothing happened.

That night at dinner Brady couldn't stop talking about the hole. It was getting bigger now. It was wide enough that you couldn't jump over it and deep enough for Brady or Carson to hide in. Scout was still too tall for it.

Her friends at school asked her about the hole. Not so much asked as teased, she felt. They didn't see the vision.

She stopped talking about it to anyone outside of her brothers. The deeper it got, the less she'd say about it. Until she could stand in it and not be seen. She at least told her parents then.

They thought it was interesting but stop digging on the Fairgrounds or the cops will get you. What really was the worst that they could do? Sure, maybe she knew better but her brothers were young. They were just kids. They didn't know any better or something like that.

Scout kept digging. Even when Brady and Carson started to lose interest, Scout kept digging. It felt like her life's mission to dig that hole. Something would turn up if she kept going, she just wasn't sure what.

The sun started going to bed later. It sent fire through the sky. That was her favorite time to work. No one bothered her because no one knew she was there. There was one time when Mrs. King walked her dogs nearby, but she didn't question it. That was the good part about being weird, Scout thought. No one would bat an eye if she did something out of the ordinary.

She liked digging. It cleared her head. The leaves started changing colors and she kept going, now making a cubby on the side. The earth was cold when the sun wasn't shining directly on it. Besides the ladder she borrowed from her parents, she started taking smaller items down with her. Eventually there was a table and two chairs, a cloth, a kerosene lamp from her grandpa's chest. She made a bookshelf with plywood and brought down her favorite adventure stories. She liked decorating the hole. It became her very own escape. An underground treehouse.

The snow started melting and Scout started feeling older. Brady and Carson celebrated their ninth birthday over winter break and Scout her thirteenth by the time the ground got softer. No one came to her party. She started digging again that spring, searching for something, but she didn't know what. Someone must have seen her out in the field because rumors started swirling around school. She was trying to dig up graves to use in her satanic rituals. She lost a bet to some upperclassmen, and this was her punishment. She was slowly going insane, and this was the only way to keep her from murdering everyone in the town. She didn't mind what they said.

Brady and Carson came to visit her one day that spring and they were there to witness it. If they weren't, it was unlikely anyone would've believed her. Scout had found a salt mine.

She made the boys run back to the house for flashlights, and by the time they came back she had dug a space wide enough for them to get through. She led the way in, light filling each crevice of the tunnel and exposing the grey tint of everything. It was remarkably cool and dry in the old mine. Brady asked to lead the way; it was his idea after all. Carson suggested they split up and report back to each other. Scout ignored them both and kept exploring.

The kids were late for dinner. It wasn't like them to be late. They came home a few minutes after six, each covered in a white dust. Mom figured out it was from the hole and forbade Brady and Carson from going anywhere near it. Scout just got a stern talking-to, but it was enough for her to leave it alone for a few weeks.

She returned after she found out that Brady and Carson began telling their classmates about what they had found. There was a little boy there standing on the edge and peering down into the darkness. He had to be younger than her brothers, maybe a second grader. She asked what he was doing, and he just said that he was looking. He heard about Brady's vision, something she hadn't heard since last year. It was her vision now. It had consumed her. It was her life's mission to find what secrets lie in the hole.

She told him that and he understood. It still made her angry that Brady thought it was his idea. Maybe it was once, but he couldn't claim it anymore.

The little kid left and Scout went into the hole. She made it to the mine entrance and rubbed the little bit of dirt off her t-shirt. She was about to enter when she noticed a boy in the tunnel. His back was turned to her but he looked to be about her age. Scout didn't know what to do. How did he get down here? How did he find out about this place?

"Hello?"

The boy whipped around, a terrified look in his eyes. "How did you get down here?"

"What do you mean? I dug this hole..."

"You're Scout?"

"Yeah."

"I've heard so much about you."

The boy motioned for her to follow him deeper into the mine and took off without seeing if she was coming or not. She followed closely behind. He started by telling her what everyone was saying about her. A mix of stuff she heard before and things she was certain that Brady or Carson started. She asked where the boy went to school. Trinity was his answer. No wonder she didn't recognize him. He turned down an off-shoot of the main tunnel and settled down in the space. Scout followed his lead and sat down on the salty floor.

"How long have you been coming down here?"

She thought for a moment. "I could ask you that same thing."

"A week."

"How come I've never seen you?"

The boy shrugged. "Good at blending in, I guess."

She made a noise somewhere between a scoff and a laugh. "Me too." They caught each other's eyes for a split-second. He looked away first. "What's your name? You know mine."

"Benedict. Most people call me Benji and I don't know why."

"I won't, don't worry. Ben okay?"

"Hm, yeah."

They sat in silence like that for what seemed like hours.

Scout was the first to break the silence. "Why do you come down here?" Apparently that took a lot of thought for him. When he finally did get the courage to speak, it was not what Scout expected.

"I should go."

"Did I say something?"

"No, I just need to go." Ben stood up. "Can you find your way out of here?"

"Uh... probably."

"Okay, cool." He walked towards the exit. "Same time tomorrow?"

Scout followed his movements unsure what to say.

"Uh... yeah."

"Bye, Scout," and he was gone.

Scout scolded her brothers for starting rumors about her, but they pretended to play dumb. Plus, they were

starting to die down anyway. A new family would move to Hutchinson, or some high schooler would be busted for putting vodka in their water bottle and that's what everyone would talk about. Scout was old news and she liked it that way. Each day after school she would go directly to the hole and meet Ben there. It became a routine and Scout liked routines. Her parents thought it was part of her weirdness.

He started bringing his favorite adventure novels to add to Scout's collection. Sometimes they would pick out books for each other, venture deep into the mine with the kerosene lamp, and read for hours. These were Scout's favorite days.

The schoolyear ended but the arrangement with Ben continued on through the summer. Scout felt closer to him than anyone before. Every day when she walked up to the hole she saw Ben in the distance surveying the sunflowers. She asked him why one day when they were in the mine. He said he thought they were pretty and asked if she knew that they can absorb radiation. They'd be helpful for the nuclear fallout. They shared a laugh about that. He asked what her favorite flowers were, but she wouldn't say.

The next day when she arrived at the hole Ben was nowhere to be found. She descended the ladder and went into the cubby to pick out a book for the day when she noticed two large sunflowers waiting on top of the makeshift shelf. She grabbed them and called for Ben as she entered the mine. She found him in their usual spot and he was excited that she found the flowers.

"Did you pick these for me?"

"Yeah. They're on public property, though, so don't tell the State of Kansas."

"My lips are sealed."

Scout settled in and opened her book but found herself rereading the same paragraph over and over. She readjusted herself so she could watch Ben and pretend to read. His brows furrowed, he gasped, he couldn't turn the pages fast enough.

The day after there were more sunflowers waiting for her. It continued on like this for a week until Scout finally asked him to stop or he'd accidentally kill all of them.

August was always the hottest month on the plains. Scout and Ben would meet at the hole just as the sun began peeking over the grain silos and mid-century ranches that made up the Hutchinson skyline. They would spend the whole day in the mine; it always seemed to stay a cool 65 degrees no matter how hard the sun was shining.

Eventually they ran out of books but neither of them minded. It gave more time for Scout to ask invasive questions and Ben's palms to get sweaty as he tried to wriggle his way out of answers. She would tell him not to fight it and eventually she began to crack his shell. Occasionally he would ask a question back. Like today:

"Have you ever been in love?"

It was Scout's turn to try and avoid the question. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? You have to know. I know."

"Well, have you ever been in love?"

"I'm not telling. I asked first, Scout."

Scout looked down at her shoes against the white salty floor. She tried to dig a hole with her heel. "Maybe." She looked up at him and his eyes were on her. She looked down at her shoes again.

"That's not an answer."

"That's the best answer I have."

The next day when Scout arrived at the hole, she found two sunflowers on the bookshelf. She smiled and grabbed them before running into the tunnel calling for Ben.

She made it to their special hideout, but he wasn't

there.

“Ben?” Scout called frantically, searching around the abandoned mine for any signs of life. All she found was a moth. Maybe he was just running late.

She waited in the tunnel for hours. She refused to read her book until he was there; it just didn't feel right. She didn't go home for dinner. She would wait as long as it took for him to show up. He could always just be running late. Eventually she fell asleep. When she woke the kerosene lamp had run out. She grabbed the backup flashlight out of her backpack and set off towards the exit of the mine. She needed food and they had begun to build a stash in the hole in case of emergencies.

She reached the exit of the mine and before she was out, she noticed it. A letter where the sunflowers were left yesterday. She rushed over to it and tore it out of the envelope. She read it. And reread it. And reread it again. And finally put it back on the shelf where she found it. She grabbed a granola bar out of the stash and her shovel out of the corner. She walked back towards the salt mine and ate the granola bar as she stared up at the sky. She took the sunflowers out of her backpack and carefully studied them. They were dying, but still beautiful, she thought. When she was done eating, she picked up her shovel and began digging. She dug. And dug. For what seemed like hours. The hole was getting deeper but she didn't care about that anymore. All she wanted was to close up the entrance to the salt mine. That's what she did.

The Cipitio (and his Haircut) | K. Alexander Perez

On a Thursday afternoon, Wilson “Willy” Medrano saw a large, conical hat swing past the window to the shop. The hat obscured the small figure’s face, but Willy already knew who it was. His eyes peaked beneath his hat as he pressed his nose up against the glass. A child no older than ten smiled wide before pushing the door open. As the bell to the barbershop rang, he said, “Hola, compas. I’m back!”

All eyes in the barbershop turned to the Cipitio, the child damned to immortality by the gods. The wild child stretched his arms wide in the air as if to embrace everyone in the shop. Willy and the staff at Ramiro’s Barbershop and Beauty Lounge nodded at him before returning to their work or their phones.

By the door, Ramiro trimmed the sideburns of his customer. Without looking at the child, Ramiro said, “Qué onda, Cipitio?”

The regulars in the shop turned away just as quickly at the Cipitio’s entrance. The guys getting freshened up looked back up at the side-by-side monitors playing Dodger highlights and an ‘80s slasher flick. The señoras in Doña Clara’s beauty corner traded chisme while Clara styled one of them. One of the barbers played Soundcloud tracks from his Bluetooth speakers, while Doña Clara played an old cumbia CD on her stereo. As the Cipitio took his usual seat by the door, the non-regulars made themselves known. The young man sitting next to the Cipitio bolted out the door. One of the ladies in Doña Clara’s corner began to hyperventilate before her friend grasped her hand and explained the situation.

Willy shut one eye as he lined up the half-asleep customer in his chair. Roused by the rumblings in the shop, the man in the chair opened his eyes. When he saw the Cipitio, he shifted back in horror, and Willy’s clippers zagged past

the line-up.

“What the fuck is that?” the customer asked. “What is—what’s wrong with its feet?”

Willy looked back at the Cipitio. Through the centuries, the small, pot-bellied creature had maintained the same cherub grin even as the rest of him faded. The grimy child wore a soiled white smock and smelled more like a dog than anything human. When he stood too close, a musty odor wafted through his teeth, giving the impression he had the diet of a dog too.

Only his wizard-like hat remained immaculate. Braided from palm leaves somewhere back home, it never collected a speck of dirt. It briefly drew eyes away from the rest of the child, but below the ankle is what really set that poor thing apart. In their cruelty, the gods had cursed the Cipitio with hairy, calloused feet twisted backwards to the rest of his body. Varicose veins ravaged his decrepit feet and were the only hint of an unnaturally long life. When he walked, he didn’t teeter but defied gravity, as his heel somehow balanced the whole front of his body.

After enough of his visits, Willy stopped wondering how he walked. Of course, the first time, the Cipitio startled Willy, who was uninformed about him. Although his mother was Salvadoran, she regarded the Cipitio as *brujeria* better left untalked about. Willy only learnt a bit about Cuzcatlan and myths like the Cipitio from a few junior college classes he took before the barbershop. It was around that time that his mother decided that his new job, and Willy by extension, was better left untalked about.

As the Cipitio waited on the couch, he crossed one of his crooked feet over his knee, and he opened one of the magazines on the end table nobody ever read. Willy swiveled the customer in the chair away from the Cipitio and towards the mirror.

“He’s alright, man,” Willy said. “Don’t worry about him.”

The customer looked back at the Cipitio and said, “No,

for real. What the hell is that?"

Willy sighed and said, "He's some kid from way back when. His mom was married to the son of Tláloc, god of thunder, but she stepped out on him. So, Tláloc cursed them both with immortality and deformations. She got a horse face and became the Siguanaba, and he got his feet turned around and became the Cipitio."

The customer looked at Willy in the mirror and said, "Bro, you got five seconds to let me pay and get the hell out."

Willy frowned and said, "I gotta fix that weird line on your head, foo."

"Four!" the customer yelled.

Willy muttered, "Damnit." He undid the barber cape and led the customer to the cash register. The customer slammed his cash down and didn't leave enough small bills for a tip. As he left, Willy cursed the customer under his breath and slouched in his barber chair. While he scrolled through his phone, he saw a new text from his mother. Barely glancing at it, he typed in ok. At the front of the shop, he noticed Doña Clara whispering to Ramiro. When Doña Clara walked away, Ramiro gulped and hastened his work. Clara went down the shop whispering to all the barbers, and they hastily put the final touches on their customers. When she reached Willy on the other side of the shop, she folded her hands together. Willy put his phone back in his pocket without hitting send.

"We have a problem," Doña Clara said.

Willy peeked behind her and looked at the Cipitio. The creature scratched his toes against the couch, and he unfolded a panel from an auto magazine. The Cipitio stared at a car for a few seconds before tearing the page out, balling it up, and chewing on it like gum.

"Somebody's complaining?" Willy asked.

"No," Doña Clara said, "but Sandra's out sick."

"Yeah," Willy said, "but you got the lounge covered, right?"

Clara massaged her forehead and said, "We need someone to cut *his* hair."

Willy scratched his head and said, "I mean, Carlos hasn't had anyone in a minute."

"Willy, pon atención" Doña Clara said. "You're the only Salvadoran in the shop right now. I need *you* to cut his hair."

Willy leaned forward in his chair and asked, "Why does that matter?"

"You haven't noticed he only gets his haircut from Sandra?" Doña Clara asked. "Sandra told me he likes bothering other Salvadorans."

"You think he really cares who cuts his hair?" Willy asked.

"I don't know," Doña Clara said. "But I don't want to find out. We keep everything the same for him, antes que haga travesuras."

Willy rubbed his chin and said, "I'm half-Salvadoran though."

"I don't care if only your cuñado is Salvadoran," Doña Clara said. "You're what we have."

Willy crossed his arms and said, "I don't like it, Clara. I'm not on the best terms with ma or pa. Maybe I don't have ... the type of reference I need here."

Doña Clara rolled her eyes and said, "Keep him busy while Carlos gets Sandra here. She'll take over if she needs to."

Willy watched the Cipitio put down the magazine and stretch out over the couch. He angled his feet horizontally over the leather to fit them, and he pulled his big hat over his eyes.

"What's the worst he can do?" Willy asked.

At that instant, everyone in the barbershop heard it, but not with their ears. The sound of a torrent squeezing through the eye of needle filled the crevices of their minds. A distorted melody like a nursery rhyme scraped of comfort could be parsed through the harsh noise. It drowned out the music on the speaker and the stereo, and the longer it continued the more it drowned out their own thoughts. The remaining customers stumbled out of the shop, and the staff covered their ears to no avail. Willy curled up in a ball in his chair and writhed in agony. Only the Cipitio, stretched serenely over the couch, did not stir.

Carlos crawled over and mouthed out to Doña Clara, *What the fuck is that?*

Doña Clara clutched the arm of Willy's chair and mouthed out, *He's whistling!*

Ramiro used the couch to raise himself up off his knees, and he lifted the hat off the Cipitio's face. The creature had closed his eyes and puckered his lips for his soundless whistle. Ramiro tapped on the Cipitio's shoulder, and the whistling inside their heads ceased as the creature stood up straight. The child cocked his hat back in place, and he smiled with a look of anticipation.

Out of breath, Ramiro said, "We're ready for you, Cipitio."

The Cipitio looked around concerned and asked, "But where's Sandra?"

Ramiro brushed himself off, pointed at Willy, and said, "My friend over there is going to take care of you."

The Cipitio beamed and said, "I get to make a new

friend? Yay!"

The child hopped off the couch and swung his arms as he strode to Willy. Doña Clara leaned into Willy's ear and said, "Do whatever you have to. Just do it."

She led Carlos by the shoulder out the door, and she strained a smile at the Cipitio as he passed. As Willy tidied up his station, he heard Carlos's car squeal out of the parking lot.

"Cómo estás, querido Cipitio?" Doña Clara asked. "You ... whistled such a nice song."

"I'm doing great, Doña Clara!" the Cipitio said. "Mami showed me that song. She told me to whistle whenever I got bored."

"That's ... really good, what you did, Cipitio," Doña Clara said, "but my friend Willy will keep you from getting bored."

The Cipitio tipped his hat, and he continued to Willy's chair. Willy had never said a word to the creature, as he always went straight to Sandra to receive his cut. Sandra was something of a Swiss-Army knife, although she rarely picked up a pair of clippers. The thirty-something Salvadoran colored, styled, worked the scalp, and did makeup and nails, establishing a steady roster of clients during her two years in Los Angeles.

The Cipitio picked his nose and said, "Do you want to be friends?"

Willy gulped and said, "Yeah, sure. My name's Willy."

He unfolded the cape, and as the Cipitio took his seat he said, "My name's the Cipitio, but all my friends just call me Cipitio. Without the *the*."

Willy draped the cape over the Cipitio, swiveled him to face the mirror, and he said, "Cool. So ... what'll it be today?"

The Cipitio pulled his hat off his head and slammed his palm over it. The enormous hat flattened and disappeared entirely. "I'll have the usual!" he said.

The Cipitio had a wild mane of curly hair that reached to his shoulders. As big as the hat was, it didn't cover past the neck, and the bounty of tangles appearing out of nowhere threw Willy off. It couldn't have been more than a month since he saw Sandra at the shop, but it already looked as if the child had spent a year in the wilderness.

"What's the usual?" Willy asked.

"Whatever Sandra does," the Cipitio said. "Has Sandra told you what I usually get?"

"No, not really," Willy said.

Willy always talked to Sandra in passing, never really considering they were both Salvi. The hairdresser had several years on him and clung to her corner, to her clients, and to Doña Clara. That was not to say Sandra wasn't friendly. If anything, she had an effortless charm with everyone. Whenever the Cipitio stopped by, Sandra would drop whatever she was doing and gently rib the creature as her *salvaje amigo*. While Sandra lathered and snipped, the Cipitio would melt in her chair like a street cat suddenly dozing on a person's lap.

Willy held up a hand mirror to the back of the Cipitio's head and asked, "What would you want me to do?"

Willy himself hated small talk, as it always threw him off his game. In silence, he ignored the shop's noise and sculpted. Before he pulled off the barber's cape, he would ask for a picture on his phone. To pass the time between clients, he would scroll through all his photos like a flip book animation, watching the profiles morph as his work became stronger and stronger. He waited for the day when his last photo would be *the one*, his opus, a haircut so fresh he might just hang up his clippers and get the real job his mother badgered him about.

The Cipitio turned to face him and asked, "What do you want to do?"

Willy realized no one had ever asked him that question. He took a few steps back, and he spun the Cipitio, inspecting him from every angle. In the chair, the Cipitio muffled a giggle.

"You'd be good with ... anything?" Willy asked.

"Yup, whatever you think looks good!" the Cipitio said.

Willy knew he had a rare opportunity here. He pictured all the exotic shapes and designs he could unleash, but he knew he could do better than that. He had to do something simple, yet challenging. Classic, though rare. Bold, but refined.

"Do you know what a flat top is?" Willy asked.

"Is that popular?" the Cipitio asked.

"30 years ago," Willy said. "Thinking a flattop with a skin drop fade."

"Sounds good to me!" the Cipitio said.

At his station, Willy laid out his custom equipment budgeted from the scrawny tips he collected. As he picked up his modified DAHL Wizard X "Tyrannosaurs" Clippers, he felt his heart racing. In the mirror, he could see the panoply of reflections of everyone in the shop, and he realized everybody was staring at him anxiously. He put down the clippers and shook his hands to loosen them up.

"You ok?" the Cipitio asked.

"Yeah, I'm ok," he said.

He picked the clippers back up, attached the guard, and turned it on. He felt the tremors of the tool shake up to his wrist, and he took a deep breath to steady his hand. He

elevated the barber chair carefully, mindful of the Cipitio's feet tucked inside beneath the seat. Willy slowly pressed the machine against the Cipitio's mane, and as the first clump of hair fell the child yelled, "Hey!"

Willy turned the clippers off in terror, and the Cipitio said, "Where are you from, Willy?"

"Um, here," Willy said. "Sun Valley."

He turned the clippers back on and continued to debulk the creature's hair. As the clutter accumulated at the base of the seat, the Cipitio narrowed his eyes at Willy. He widened his nostrils and sniffed the air, and the scrutiny on his face softened to warmth.

"You're from Suchitoto, maje," the Cipitio said. He sniffed the air again and said, "And somewhere else. Close to the ocean."

Willy froze for a second before continuing steady strides with his clippers. "My mom's from there," he said. "My dad's Mexican, from Salina Cruz. How do you know that?"

The Cipitio scratched his nose and said, "I can smell the water on you. Somewhere fresh and somewhere salty."

The child rubbed his belly under the cape and uttered a satisfied laugh. The motion drew Willy's clippers in too close, and a larger chunk of hair than intended fell off.

"I caught the tastiest fish in Suchitoto last week," the Cipitio said.

"That's great," Willy said. "Can you stay still while I work?"

"Oh, sorry," the Cipitio said.

The Cipitio closed his eyes, drooped his shoulders and coughed softly. With most of the Cipitio's hair significantly neater, Willy switched guards to get down to the real work. He made a few guidelines in the child's hair, and as he

began to blend the sides, the Cipitio pulled out a days-old catfish from beneath the cape. He made a full turn, and Willy's clippers zigged past the guidelines.

The Cipitio held up the smelly fish and said, "Hey, do you wanna take one home with you?"

Willy stepped back, gritted his teeth, and threw his hands behind his neck. He shook his head no without a word, and the Cipitio blithely disappeared the fish under the cape. Doña Clara saw the frustration brewing and walked over.

She leaned into his ear and said, "Keep him busy. Talk to him like Sandra does."

"I can't," Willy said. "It throws—"

"It throws you off your game," Doña Clara said. "No me importa!"

Doña Clara walked back to her corner, where by now the rest of the shop had gathered to bite their nails and clutch their rosaries. Willy sighed and tried to clean up the zig on the back of the Cipitio's head. The child's knee bounced beneath the cape, and he hummed to himself a tune that felt familiar. Suddenly, he began to purse his lips to whistle. Thinking fast, Willy blurted, "Uh, so how do you know, Sandra?"

The Cipitio beamed and said, "Sandra's been my friend for forever! Ever since we were both cipotes in Cuzcatlan."

Willy switched to his trimmers and asked, "What's a cipote?"

The Cipitio raised an eyebrow and asked, "You don't know what a cipote is, maje?"

"No, should I?"

The Cipitio wrinkled his nose and said, "Almost all the Cuzcatlecos I've met know what a cipote is."

Willy brushed the Cipitio's head and wondered whether he'd said something wrong. He thought back to his mother, who'd moved to Virginia to be with his aunt after the divorce. He ran through some of his mother's lexicon: *chucho*, *puya*, *babaso*, *bicho*, *maje*, and of course *puchi-ca*. He remembered running around the house when he was little, and he fell in the living room and slid far enough to hit his head on the kitchen table. His mother had made *sopa de res*, but his father would of course be coming home late again. When she saw him bruised on the floor, she balled up her apron, threw it into the cold soup and said, "Este cipote torpel!"

"Cipote's a little kid, right?" Willy asked, angling the trimmer around the ears.

"Exactly!" the Cipitio said. "I knew you would know."

Willy finished on the sides, and he moved the trimmer to the top of the Cipitio's head. He asked, "How come you followed Sandra when she moved here?"

"Me?" the Cipitio asked. "I was already here."

Willy carefully flattened the top of the creature's head and asked, "I thought you lived in El Salvador."

"I do," the Cipitio said. "I live in Cuzcatlan and here. I live everywhere where I have friends."

Willy felt a rush as the haircut he envisioned took form. The top of the Cipitio's head looked as smooth as a sidewalk in a nice neighborhood. He moved the trimmer to the Cipitio's hairline, and as he carved an immaculate line across the child's forehead, the joy of craft enveloped him. He felt unbound but focused. He felt so free that a question escaped his lips that he didn't even know had been gnawing at him.

"You ever know a Teresa Medrano?" Willy asked. "Teresa Portillo, I mean."

The Cipitio stared ahead blankly as if processing an

equation, and he asked, "Teresa Portillo in Oakland? Richmond? Houston?"

"Richmond," Willy said.

"With the gold tooth?" the Cipitio asked. "Or the five cats? Or—"

"She has a gold tooth," Willy said.

"Oh yeah!" the Cipitio said. "I know her!"

Willy finished the line up and realized there was little left to do. He took a brush and slowly swept through the creature's head. "Tell me about her," he said.

"She makes the best sopa de res!" the Cipitio said. "I first met her as a cipote in Suchitoto. I was throwing rocks at her by the lago and she got really mad. Then I saw her again when she was cleaning a house in Brentwood, and I threw more rocks at her by the pool."

Willy ran the trimmer down the Cipitio's neck. "How is she doing now?" he asked.

"She's doing great!" the Cipitio said. "She lives in a cozy house with her sister's family, and she goes for a lot of long walks by herself. She talks to me a lot more than she used to. I wonder why?"

Willy brushed the Cipitio's neck, and he realized he was done. A flawless tower topped the Cipitio's head. The fade was so gentle it could calm a bull, the lineup was so sharp it could cut through a diamond, and the flattop was so flush it could balance a marble. Willy marveled at his work, and from the corner of his eye he saw the shop exchange relieved high-fives. As he grabbed the aftershave spray, a sinking feeling stunted the satisfaction he anticipated for this moment, the fulfillment of his opus.

"She talks a lot about her son, Wilson," the Cipitio said.

Willy held the aftershave bottle in the air. "What does

she say?" he asked.

"She actually said he cuts hair too," the Cipitio said. "Just like you, Willy! She said he gives the best haircuts. That she wanted him to be a doctor or lawyer or something fancy, and it took her a while to understand that's what he wanted to do."

Willy sprayed the back and sides of the Cipitio's head, and the child squealed and said, "Puchica, that stings!"

As Willy grabbed the hand mirror to reveal his final work, the Cipitio said, "But mostly she talks about how much she wishes he called more."

Willy lowered the hand mirror and covered his face. Something building outside of the barbershop, when he was tossing and turning on his best friend's couch, or whispering sweet nothings to his ex to sleep in a comfy bed again, or microwaving frozen meals and catching his reflection, or scrolling through photos of his father's other family, intruded the space where he thought he could feel safe. Suddenly, the opus on the Cipitio's head no long mattered as much as the message on his phone that read, *Cómo estás, hijo? Call me.*

"I think it'd be nice if he did," the Cipitio said. "Don't you think?"

Willy heaved a deep sigh, rubbed his forehead and said, "Yeah, you're right. I think he should."

The Cipitio raised his feet from beneath the cape and wiggled his dirty toes. As the legend went, the Siguanaba could only reverse the curse on her and her son by reuniting with him. Because she always followed his backward footsteps though, she would always follow where he just left and not where he was going. Before he met the Cipitio, Willy wondered if the kid could just stop walking. After he met him, Willy understood how hard it was for the Cipitio to stand still. A myth cannot budge as easily as humans from habit.

"I wish I could talk to my mami," the Cipitio said. "Everybody says she's really scary, but I think she's a nice lady. I think I'll probably see her soon."

"Yeah," Willy said. "She'll catch up eventually, Cipitio."

As Willy got ready to swivel the chair to reveal his final product, the Cipitio covered his eyes and said, "I can't wait to see it!"

Willy turned the chair so the Cipitio could face the mirror at his station. He held up the hand mirror behind the child's head, and Willy remembered he had to commemorate this occasion. He reached into his pocket to take a picture with his phone. As he fiddled with the settings to make sure he took the perfect shot, the Cipitio's flattop began to unflatten. From every angle, the creature's hair grew and curled into the knots and tangles he came in with. Like a timelapse of wild grass overrunning a field, the fade, the lineup, and the flattop disappeared. The dry, matted mane once again covered the Cipitio's head.

Willy was too stunned to lower the mirror, and when the Cipitio opened his eyes, the creature took in his hair from every angle.

"Wow!" the Cipitio said. "It looks great!"

The Cipitio undid the barber cape by himself, and he reached into the pockets of his threadbare pants. He pulled out a small piece of folded-up straw that unrolled into his enormous hat, and he hopped off the chair and walked to the cash register. Willy listlessly followed him and typed in the amount owed.

"It's gonna be ... do you even know what money is?" Willy asked.

"Oh yeah," the Cipitio said. "I use money all the time!"

The Cipitio reached into his hat, and he pulled out some banana leaves, cigarette butts, and bird feathers. He laid them all neatly by the register.

"Keep the change," the Cipitio said.

The Cipitio fixed his hat back on his head, and the bounty of curls disappeared underneath the hat. He extended his hand to Willy, and Willy shook it limply.

"You've got a friend for life, Willy," the Cipitio said. "I'll be seeing you around now!"

"That's ... really good," Willy said. "C'mon, I'll walk you out."

The Cipitio's mangled feet pattered against the tile as they walked towards the door. The barbers huddled in Doña Clara's corner hugged each other as if they were mission control for a moon landing. Ramiro reached into his mini-fridge and pulled out beers for the shop, and Doña Clara slouched in her chair overcome with relief.

"Would you have cared if anybody cut your hair besides me and Sandra?" Willy asked.

"Nope!" the Cipitio said, "but I'm glad it was you!"

Through the windows of the shop, they saw Carlos's car had parked back in the lot. Carlos and Sandra stepped out of the car and entered the shop, and they saw a severe cold had gripped Sandra. She hadn't changed out of her pajamas, and she kept sniveling through her face mask. Her big bright eyes had sullen but mustered a quiet joy when she saw the Cipitio.

"Hola, mi salvaje," Sandra said. "Cómo fue tu corte?"

A fierce cough came over Sandra, and Doña Clara mouthed out to Carlos, *What did you do?* Carlos shrugged his shoulders as if to say *just following orders*.

Cipitio's hat shrouded his face, but the shop noticed a change in the creature when he said in a quiet grumble, "You made my friend work when she was sick?"

Sandra lifted her face mask down to blow her nose and

said, "No, no it's ok, bicho. Solo ... quería ver te ahora."

The lights in the shop flickered on and off and the Cipitio growled, "*Mentirosa!*"

Willy backed away from the creature towards his station. When the Cipitio lifted his head to stare eye-to-eye with the rest of the shop, a grimace of revulsion had replaced his genial, blithe smile. In one sweeping look he interrogated the crew of the shop and judged them all guilty. He began to huff and puff, and all the plugged-in appliances, the clippers, the dryers, and even the register, began to whirr and move on their own.

"No, no," Doña Clara pleaded. "Es un malentendido, querido Cipitio!"

The Cipitio sneered and said, "You guys are—you guys are ... **MEAN!**"

At this last word, the door to the barbershop shut without being pushed, and the blinds by the window closed on their own. The lights turned off, and they found themselves in total darkness. They fell to the floor in agony as the Cipitio's final condemnation reverberated deep in their minds. **MEAN! MEAN! MEAN!** In the darkness, they could hear their machinery going haywire and falling off their counters, and the two monitors displayed brief flashes of light from empty static. They felt water soak through their clothing, and they realized their sinks had turned on and had begun to flood the shop. A force like a gust of wind pushed them back and pinned them to the walls of the shop. From the flashes of light, they could see a torrent materialize in the shop and sweep up all the tools, trash, and belongings into a spinning gale that approached them on the walls.

As a pair of scissors flew inches from Willy's nose, the lights in the shop turned back on. The appliances turned off, and everything and everyone fell to the floor. Willy looked up, and he saw the Cipitio had disappeared. The shop looked as if a hurricane had washed exclusively into their corner of the plaza. Their electronics were dead, their scissors were dulled, and all the money in the register lay on the wet shop floor. The barbers lumbered up, picked Doña

Clara and Sandra off the floor, and sat them down. Doña Clara threw her face in her hands and screamed, "Hijo de puta, malcriado brujito niño!"

She looked up at Sandra and asked, "You think he'll be back?"

Sandra blew her nose into her mask and said, "He'll forget everything by next week."

Doña Clara shook her head and said, "Por supuesto."

She stood up, clapped her hands together and said, "Ok ... everybody get a mop, broom, lo que sea. We got a lot of work to do. Ramiro, call the insurance and ... think of something. Carlos, go take Sandra back home, and then drive to the supplier."

As the team began to pick apart the mess left by the Cipitio's tantrum, Doña Clara walked up to Willy surveying the damage to his station. All his custom equipment lay ruined, and his DAHL Wizard X "Tyrannosaurs" Clippers had shattered the large mirror on the counter during flight. As Willy tried to straighten the teeth of his favorite comb, Doña Clara put a hand on his shoulder.

"You can go home if you want, mijo," she said. "You did a good job today, a fin de cuentas."

"Thanks," Willy said. "I'll stay and help clean though."

"You sure?" Doña Clara asked.

"Yeah," Willy said, putting the comb back down. "I'll take my break now though. I've got a phone call to make."



Sailing Off the Edge of the World | Brianna Darlene

Can you truly dive into the depths of another person?

Swim inside the waters of their consciousness,
or do we merely gaze upon strands of light refracted off the
surface?

Writing impressions as gospel.

The lovers we take inside ourselves,
the family we cherish, barely scratch the
firmament of our soul.

The paramours we've held and bound so close.
Shadows of light—dancing off their shores.

Refracted; dazzling—
shallow impressions of them all.

To know oneself,

(bodies yearning to be close—)

is to know nothing at all.

Can we reach the shore of our-self?
I pray for a soulmate to meet me there.

Where we will embark on a voyage of endless self-discovery.

Côte d'Azur | M.J. Lopez

FADE IN:

INT. PASADENA MANSION - MASTER BEDROOM - DAY - APRIL
1922

A lavishly spacious Art-Deco style bedroom with pink silk-covered walls and Palladian windows that cast an afternoon shadow. A chandelier hangs high.

CATHERINE HILL, 22, a blonde woman with striking blue eyes in a satin wedding dress, stares out the window as elegantly dressed people take their seats in the courtyard outside.

She struggles to clasp together her pearl bracelet. Catherine's maid, NORA, 16, rushes over. She wears a black dress with a white apron and a ruffled, lace headpiece.

NORA

Please, allow me, Miss?

Catherine completely unaware of Nora, starts to pace barefooted around the room. Nora follows.

Catherine's breath becomes faster, with every failed attempt at closing her bracelet. Her breath becomes faster, faster, faster, until...

Catherine's older sister, ROSE, 26, swings OPEN the door. She has a strawberry-blonde, wavy updo and a cream-colored beaded dress on.

Startled, the bracelet snaps, causing all the pearls to fly all over the room.

CATHERINE
Oh, my god.

ROSE
Is this a bad time?

Catherine sits at her vanity. She buries her head in her hands.

CATHERINE
I don't know what I'm doing.

Rose closes the door. She looks over at Nora, who carefully picks up the scattered pearls. She kneels down close to her sister.

ROSE
It's your wedding day!

Catherine looks into the vanity mirror and studies herself in her wedding dress. She doesn't like what she sees.

CATHERINE
Then, why am I not happy?

ROSE
Who says marriage equals happiness?

(beat)

I surely didn't marry Harold because I wanted to be happy.

CATHERINE
Then, why did you marry Harold?

ROSE
Because I didn't want to die alone.

(beat)

That, and Harold's not so bad.

CATHERINE
I wish I could say the same.

ROSE
Oh come on, David's not so bad. You'll learn to like him.
Give it time.

Catherine sighs.

ROSE (CONT'D)
I mean really, Catherine, what other option is there for us?
Become an old maid?

They laugh.

ROSE (CONT'D)
If you really want, we can call the whole thing off.

Rose strokes her chin, like she's thinking about this.

ROSE (CONT'D)
Mother will be so devastated, though...

CATHERINE
(sarcastically)

Can't have that now.

(level-headed)

No, all the guests have arrived. It's alright. And like you said,
I'll learn to like him.

ROSE
Yes! You're just experiencing a little cold feet, baby sister.

(beat)

Looks like you need a little warming up!

Rose playfully tickles her sister's feet, which causes Catherine to laugh profusely. Nora looks on with delight.

Catherine's oldest sister, MARGARET-ELIZABETH, 30, OPENS the door. She has a black bob and a peach-colored lace dress on.

MARGARET-ELIZABETH
What are you two doing?

Everyone stops laughing.

MARGARET-ELIZABETH (CONT'D)
We're in need of a bride. Everyone's downstairs waiting and you two are up here laughing.

Rose gets up.

ROSE
I'll go and get her veil.

MARGARET-ELIZABETH
(sarcastically)

That would be nice.

Margaret-Elizabeth looks at all the scattered pearls.

MARGARET-ELIZABETH (CONT'D)
(to Nora)

And you can do your job and pick up this mess.

*Margaret-Elizabeth SLAMS the door shut.
Catherine mouths the words "sorry" to Nora.*

Rose grabs the veil out of a box.

ROSE
Who does she think she is coming in here and barking orders like that?

Catherine puts on her heels.

CATHERINE
You know how Maggie is.

*Rose places the veil on top of Catherine's head.
She gasps.*

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
What is it?

Rose turns Catherine to look in the mirror.

ROSE
You're stunning.

Catherine doesn't know what to make of it.

EXT. PASADENA MANSION - COURTYARD - DAY

*Violinists begin to play classical music, as people
stand to turn towards the back of the aisle.
Catherine walks slowly down the aisle with her
stern-looking father, FRANKLIN HILL, 52. He's a
silver-haired man with a handlebar mustache.*

*She looks at all the faces staring at her. Some
are serious.*

Some are smiling.

A kid sticks his tongue out at her.

*She quickly looks up at the front of the aisle
to a 6-foot tall man in a tuxedo, with a pencil
thin mustache and jet black hair. This is DAVID
BOURNE, 25.*

*The closer she gets to David, the more his
presence appears towering.*

*She arrives at the wedding arch, she shyly looks
up at him.*

The MARRIAGE OFFICIANT proceeds.

MARRIAGE OFFICIANT
Dearly beloved...

CUT TO:

INT. PASADENA MANSION - BALLROOM - NIGHT

Catherine and David BURST through the doors hand-in-hand, out into a room full of people standing and applauding at their dining tables.

A TRUMPET PLAYER plays a LOUD note, as the rest of a Jazz ensemble join in on playing a lively, dance number.

Guests begin to make their way to the dance floor. They dance the "Charleston."

David nudges Catherine over to the dance floor. She smiles, but shakes her head.

DAVID
Come on, just one dance.

CATHERINE
I get nervous.

DAVID
Well, I can help that.

David forcefully takes Catherine and dances with her.

Catherine sees people staring.

She breaks away from David, then walks away.

DAVID (CONT'D)
Touchy, touchy.

David sees people staring. He does a mock of the "Charleston" dance. People laugh and cheer him on.

INT. PASADENA MANSION - BALLROOM - TABLE #4 - NIGHT

Catherine approaches "TABLE #4," where the HILL family sits.

Catherine kisses her mother, SUSAN HILL, 48, on the cheek.

She wears a lavishly beaded dress and a diamond headpiece.

SUSAN

Don't leave lipstick, dear. It's very unsightly.

Catherine rolls her eyes. She approaches her father.

CATHERINE

Hello, father.

Franklin is busy lighting his smoking pipe. He mumbles to himself.

SUSAN

Franklin, your daughter is talking to you.

Franklin looks at Susan.

She nudges her head towards Catherine.

Franklin looks up at Catherine.

FRANKLIN

(coughing)

Oh! My sweet girl.

He smiles, then returns to fidgeting with his smoking pipe.

Catherine lets out a little laugh, then kisses her father's forehead.

She sits next to Rose.

SUSAN

Darling, where is your husband?

MARGARET-ELIZABETH

Yes, mother, that's a very good question.

Margaret-Elizabeth looks up and sees David smoking a cigar with some YOUNG MEN and a FLAPPER near the jazz ensemble.

MARGARET-ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

Found out his wife doesn't put out, so he found himself someone who does.

SUSAN

That's enough!

ROSE

Really Maggie, sometimes I forget that you're related to us.

Maggie shoots Rose a fake smile.

CATHERINE

I wish you two didn't fight. Today's been too much already...

SUSAN

How so, dear?

ROSE

Mother, she just married someone she doesn't love.

SUSAN

(scoffing)

Love!

Susan sips her champagne.

MARGARET-ELIZABETH

Mother, why didn't you find me a suitor? At least, I would have been more grateful.

SUSAN

Because you're too dowdy, my dear. If you put a little more effort into your appearance like Catherine, then, maybe, we can find someone for you too.

Margaret-Elizabeth looks down in embarrassment.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

Anyway, I think we'd better be going now.

Susan stands up.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

I can't stand to be around an ungrateful child.

(beat)

Catherine, you married into a great, noble, family. I'm really sorry that doesn't fit your standards, I really am. Sorry to have disappointed you.

CATHERINE

Wait, mother.

Susan nudges Franklin.

SUSAN

Franklin, we're going.

FRANKLIN

Yes, yes.

Susan and Franklin leave the table.

SUSAN

(calls out to Margaret-Elizabeth)

Maggie!

MARGARET-ELIZABETH
Yes, mother. Coming!

Margaret-Elizabeth leaves the table.

Catherine and Rose look at each other and sigh. Catherine rests her head on Rose's shoulder. Rose pats her sister's head.

CATHERINE
Mother cares about status. Always has, always will.

ROSE
What do you care about?

Catherine raises her head. She looks at Rose.

David approaches the sisters.

DAVID
(to Catherine)

This is where you've been hiding! I've been looking all over for you.

CATHERINE
I haven't been hiding, David. I was just--

DAVID
—Mother would like to see you.

CATHERINE
Oh, yes, of course.

Catherine gets up and endearingly grabs Rose's hand. Their hands break away from each other, as Catherine leaves the table.

INT. PASADENA MANSION - BALLROOM - TABLE #11 - NIGHT

Catherine and David approach "TABLE #11," where David's mother, GERTRUDE BOURNE, 58,

sits. She wears extravagant furs and smokes a cigarette with a long holder. She stands up.

GERTRUDE

(in a smoker voice)

Catherine, let me look at you.

She grabs Catherine's hands and checks out her dress.

Catherine looks uncomfortable.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)
Marvelous, simply marvelous.

She releases Catherine's hand.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)
Oh, the wedding today was splendid. Catherine, you looked stunning walking down that aisle.

CATHERINE
Thank you, Mrs. Bourne.

GERTRUDE
Please, call me mother. We're family now.

Catherine fakes a smile.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

(touches David's face)

And my son, my handsome son—

DAVID
Mother...

GERTRUDE
—takes after his father's good looks! God rest his poor soul.

(beat)

Where are you two lovebirds spending your honeymoon?

CATHERINE

We're headed off to the French Riviera.

GERTRUDE

Oh, how grand! In all my years and I've never been.

CATHERINE

It's so lovely!

Catherine blushes.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Well, at least from what I've seen in my travel books. I can't wait to visit Aigues-Mortes. It's a medieval walled city that dates back to the 13th century...

GERTRUDE

The French have such a rich history.

CATHERINE

And the wild horses of Camar—

David snores.

Catherine looks over at David.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Am I boring you?

David laughs.

DAVID

I'm sorry Darling, but what is this about horses and ruins? I'm going there to write and relax. Take a dip into those big, blue seas, get as fat as a pig, and drink every last cocktail in the Riviera.

GERTRUDE

David!

DAVID
Sorry, mother.

GERTRUDE
Think of your father. Alcoholism runs in the Bourne blood,
you know. Keep it up and you'll end up in the grave with
him!

DAVID
Yes, mother.

GERTRUDE
I do worry about you dear boy.

(at Catherine)

Catherine, please tell me you'll take care of my David.

CATHERINE
Yes, Mrs. Bourne. I mean mother.

Gertrude smiles.

DAVID
I'm not a child anymore, mother. Besides, Catherine won't
have to look after me since I'll be busy writing my next
novel.

*David puts his hands on his hips, in an
overconfident way.*

DAVID (CONT'D)
Can't disappoint the fans with this one.

Catherine rolls her eyes.

DAVID (CONT'D)

(at Catherine)

No, Catherine won't be bothering me.

He pulls in Catherine tightly beside him.

DAVID (CONT'D)

(to Gertrude)

She'll be a supportive wife. Nothing comes between a man
and his work.

GERTRUDE
Very true.

*Catherine looks like she wants to scream on the
inside, but, instead, smiles at her new husband.*



My hands—I haven't been able to feel them since enemy contact back in Edwards. They ambushed us from the sky, like a swarm of locusts on a crop. We lost most of our platoon, and they destroyed the only route back to base camp. So we're forced to walk the Mojave Desert on foot. Seven demoralized soldiers wander, everywhere we look is a remnant of our mistake, miles upon miles of Joshua trees, rusted-out wind turbines, and an ocean of solar panels. Above all, the mockery of our curiosity casts its punishment on our backs as a reminder of our humanity. Cesar took what belonged to God, and now we are paying for it. The price? Our liberty. We now drag our feet across the desert floor in bondage to knowledge, slowly rotting from the inside. I'm trying to convince myself to continue to walk, but there is nothing left to fight for, all is lost.

Time's Mouth: A Review Of The Novel That Will Sweep You Into The Body Of Time— *a microreview* | Cali R.

Time's Mouth by Edan Lepucki takes a unique approach to time travel that sweeps readers off their feet and into the body of time. Lepucki uses specific craft elements to deepen the impact of the novel's many themes, the main one being the use of time-jumps to enhance the idea of one generation's trauma rippling into the next. She also utilizes her knowledge of California and its lush landscape, adding to the reader's understanding of the setting and using place to contextualize each character within their own situation. Lepucki employs a multi-generational narrative structure to demonstrate that each character has been impacted by things that had happened before their birth. These craft elements add to the themes of trauma, family, parenting, and self-discovery that Lepucki aimed to convey.

Time

While the story is told in chronological order and we see the events unfold from beginning to end, Lepucki uses her characters' magical gift of time travel as a means to show readers glimpses into different moments in time, moments which may come back and be important later. This is one of the main reasons I was so deeply impacted by this book—Lepucki uses methods that other time travel stories have only scratched the surface of, planting the seeds within the reader by letting us see into her characters' minds in a new way, by letting us travel with them through time. This element largely contributes to a deeper understanding of not only the narrative itself, but the characters and the way they think and process emotions. We get to know each character in distinctive ways through intense focus of certain events, allowing us to compare how each person reacts to the situation at hand. We also get to see how one moment in time can change a person's future and impact their family. It reminded me of the film *Interstellar* in this sense, but felt more intimate and let us get closer to each character. Jumping around

in time lets readers see a side that would not have otherwise been revealed, allowing them to come to their own conclusions about the situations the characters find themselves in. It can be overwhelming to jump between so many characters within different times, but Lepucki does it seamlessly and uses this technique to allow readers to explore her world from multiple angles and perspectives. Through these characters, we see relationships develop that transcend time and space and pass through dimensions.

Trauma

The idea of multi-generational trauma is addressed in this book through the use of different protagonists and the aforementioned time-jumps. The reader is led to believe that Ursa will be the main character and we will be rooting for her throughout, but she actually becomes the perpetrator of much of the abuse that impacts her son and his family. Ursa's bitterness towards her son's happiness comes from her own inner struggles and the hardships that she's faced, and she allows it to directly cause harm to his family. The use of telling this story throughout multiple generations showcases these concepts of unhealthy family relationships and the passing down of trauma from one generation to the next. Not only do readers get to see exactly where Ursa's trauma comes from, but they get to see how her responses to this trauma has caused a ripple effect to pass the trauma down through the generations. In real life, we don't get to see how our trauma will impact our children or our children's children, but Lepucki has made this possible using time travel as a means to give this concept a physical representation.

Place

The setting of *Time's Mouth* largely contributes to the novel's theme of family trauma by introducing the idea of escapism. Ursa uses California as the place where she can disappear and hide from her parents, and the same state becomes the hiding place for her own son when he runs away from her years later. The setting and rich history of California play into the importance of the story, with the state acting as an enticing force and shifting into a vastly

diverse landscape that can become home to all different aspects of one unique family. Not only is Ursa pushing her son away emotionally, but she physically pushes him away too as he moves further down the state to get away from her. The vast change in setting emphasizes how drastic this change was to the characters and what it means for them in the context of the story. If you live in California and are familiar with its scenery and landscapes, you'll appreciate Lepucki's description of the Santa Cruz and Los Angeles areas--and no matter where you're from, you'll get the sense of home that Lepucki is trying to portray through different parts of the golden state. The idea of place wasn't something that always stuck out to me in books, but once you start to look at it on a deeper level, you will begin to realize the impact that a particular setting can have on the way a story is told.

Time's Mouth proves that the concept of time travel can be expanded on to explore several themes at once, and that it can do so effectively while moving quickly through time and space. Lepucki also reveals details through the use of time travel, jumping around in time and using these moments to reinforce her overall theme of generational trauma and unhealthy family dynamics. This book had me physically yelling at the pages with tears in my eyes, and it gripped me this way by connecting me to each character, letting me see into their mind and feel the way they feel. Whether you laugh, cry, or just enjoy the ride, once you're pulled into the mouth of time, you may not want to come out.

There is a legend that the well found in the garden of a rotting cottage house can grant wishes. I'm not sure who came up with such a nonsensical rumor, nor how anyone would be foolish enough to believe it. However, just like clockwork, at least one person daily would come to the dry well to tell it their wish. I'd end up watching from the window or the sideline, observing how people would hurry to the well as they trampled over peonies and daisies, how they'd wish so desperately with all their might.

You can learn a lot about a person and their beliefs from what they consider unnatural. When you're as attentive and as bored as I am, you begin studying those around you to understand them. And I can see their faith in the supposed magical well. It's in the way that pregnant mothers hobble over to the rotting cobblestone, dropping pearls and coins for a healthy term. Or how the children toss the flowers down, laughter on their faces as they ruin my hard work at gardening. I try to pay them no mind, only ever coming out to collect my gifts.

Perhaps my involvement causes the town folks to believe in such absurdities, for items do not simply disappear into thin air from my molding box. Must be a witch, they all whisper in the streets. Others like to call it the work of a fae or a djinn. I cannot blame them, but I can't earn my keep if the rumors go away. So, I let them continue to talk. After all, why would I ruin such a good thing when their wishes come true in the end?

One day from the comfort of the roof, I watch as another person appears to make a wish. How delusional is he, this elderly man who approaches my treasure box. I've never seen someone so old believe in magic before, nor has anyone gifted me strawberries, of all things.

I wouldn't call myself a greedy woman, as many people have given fruit as an offering. It's how I keep myself fed, but I had never received such a small item... and so little! That man had left me two measly pieces. How

am I supposed to survive off that?

And what a strange man he is. He comes with no wish, only uttering the name Laci between his dried lips. He speaks her name with such love, with such sorrow, offering the fruit to this woman. I get closer to him and inspect his all-knowing eyes. How many years had this man seen? Has he seen how time is slipping from him, how his cracking bones are reaching the end?

How soon will he succumb to his demise, I wonder.

He comes to visit my well for weeks, his familiar cane clicking against the path every day as he comes, always dropping the familiar sweetness of strawberries and calling for her. He'd remain there for hours and talk to no one but himself. At first, I had ignored his blabbering, watching from a distance as he rattled on like a crazed man. But eventually, curiosity got the best of me, and I took the place beside him. Perhaps he had sensed my presence or felt a shift in the breeze as I floated towards that fading well. But he began to speak through me and into the air as I listened to him speak about Laci, his soulmate.

He spoke with reverence about how he had first loved her from afar, that he was too poor to provide for her. And how, despite the opposition, they earnestly longed for one another. He adored her—she was the end and beginning of his world. He spoke about how he had planned a future for them here at this house. How both he and Laci had wished at this very well for a life together with children of their own.

But life was cruel to his precious Laci, whom he had lost during the birth of his only child. It was why he recently began to frequent this location, the cottage and the well that had clearly been abandoned. He has held himself back from making it his home, unable to live his dream without her. He sought for even a spark of Laci, of her warmth.

I wish I could have asked if he would have chosen this path if he knew he'd lose her. Why did he long for her to come back, even for a moment, so that he could see her

smile, catch a whiff of her perfume, or hear the chime of laughter? I pitied him, the man who lost his first love and went decades without her, the man who clung to her memory with such loyalty.

I should have asked him how he could still love her.

Alas, I never found the courage to call out to him. I feared that revealing myself to him would have been too harsh to the man. As the end of summer approached, I began to see him less. Perhaps his age was catching up to him, his limbs creaking louder by the week. He was slowly becoming a fading memory in my mind, a ghost of who I thought him to be. He was slipping away from me, and I only could wish that I'd hear his whisky-warm voice again.

Just once more, to remember his warmth after so many years.

It is not until I sense the familiar offering of the sweet fruit that I'm hopeful of him.

Perhaps I can finally ask him, reveal to him my truth. But to my disappointment, a young mother and her toddler appear instead. I watch as she clasps her hands together, shuts her eyes, and tells me her wish.

To the goddess, I wish for my father to reunite with his Laci.

Sorrow took over my soul over the sincerity, over her desire. I dreaded the news of his demise, of the man whom I had bonded with. And for the one wish, the one, I will forever yearn to grant. I lay beside his gravestone and wept for my husband, who I'd never see again.

End the Siege | Romina Estrada



Six Shots | Kiara Braden

Dana Harrison was 17 years old the day Teddy Bates died. Or at least, she was 17 the day that they found him dead by the train tracks. He had six bullets in his back, a broken nose, and jaw locked in a scream from rigor mortis. No indication as to why he was out there; the only thing he had on him was his wedding ring and a pack of spearmint gum. Whoever had done him in had even stolen his blazers and loafers, as well as broke his dollar store wristwatch into twenty pieces. They were all strewn about by his head, covered in flaky dry blood.

Dana's dad woke her up that morning and told her that school was canceled for the day. Bleary-eyed and half bundled in her blankets, Dana listened to him tell her how the town was in an uproar over his death. This was a small town, after all, one school with less than 100 kids. One of which was Teddy Bates's son, Theodore Jr. He always went by Theo, never Theodore, and definitely never Teddy. Theo always showed up to school blitzed out of his mind from the weed that he'd buy just outside of the school gates before first period from the kids who graduated but had no other plans in their life but to hang around their old high school.

Theo's dad used to get on his case for hotboxing in his car. Dana never understood why, the thing was a rust bucket, some old Suzuki X-90 with peeling purple paint. It only had two seats with ugly blue upholstery and a horn that sounded like a dying goose. Theo and Dana would spend a lot of afternoons cramming into that car to skip class. They'd drive off into the empty desert, past the newer houses, all the way over to the train tracks—something that their parents always scolded for.

Her dad wasn't the biggest fan of Theo, always said he was a bad influence— that he smoked too much and had no respect. Nor was he the biggest fan of Teddy. Teddy was a dancer, or at least he used to dance back when he and her dad went to college together. Took the girl of his dreams, Vera McDougall with his swaying hips and full

dips. Her mom always said her dad had two left feet, and that he couldn't follow a beat even if it hit him square in the jaw. Her dad was always the type to be jealous, even years after he had moved on. Hell, just the other day, he was jealous of the Bates's pristine lawn that definitely broke the county's water restriction laws. He bragged about complaining about it anonymously on the town's Facebook drama page.

Still, when he told her that old Teddy Bates died, it was as if he had lost his closest friend. His hands trembled, his voice wavered, and sweat was slick on his wrinkled skin. His tired eyes were welled with tears, but Dana knew that he would never dare to let one fall.

He told her to get some more sleep. After all, school was canceled.

Though it had been over three days since her husband had died, Vera Bates was still convinced he was skulking around her home. It was too strange to think that he'd be finally gone for good, not when she had spent years trying her best to drive him away. It was as if she was seeing ghosts of him in every corner of the home, hearing his wobbly gait on every staircase and seeing his smug face in every smile her son gave her.

Theo looked just like his father; it was almost a shame. Still, she managed to bless him with her own thick brown curls. Hopefully, he would get to keep them. His father was bald by 27, his jet-black hair gone after just two years of marriage.

To say she was devastated would be an overstatement, but to say she wasn't grieving would be a lie. When Vera found out, she was sitting with her newest partner, a tall man named Geoffrey that she had met at the small sports bar by the grocery store. He smelled like sandalwood and had a laugh that sounded like a crackling fireplace. And when they danced, she melted into his grasp, his hands on her waist, her head on the crook of his shoulder...

Teddy and Vera hadn't danced like that in a very long time.

Not since before Theo was born.

Geoffrey had heard the news from a friend who had heard it from the cashier at the local liquor store. Teddy had been out since the night before, after another fight about finances and Theo's grades, and God knows what other silly grievances that didn't matter in the face of his death.

The last thing she said to him was that she'd be better off if he was gone.

How could she have known that her wish would come true?

The guilt ate at her conscience. What if he knew she had been unfaithful?

Geoffrey wasn't the first affair she had in their bed, and it was likely that he wouldn't be the last. Before him was Peter, the auto mechanic who could lift her with one hand, and before Peter was Joseph, an older gentleman who would lend Vera his coat for the cold winters and always made sure her wine glass was never empty. And before Joseph was Henry, and if Teddy ever found out that she had slept with his cousin of all men, well...

Vera couldn't go on if she had been the reason Teddy was dead. Maybe she didn't love Teddy anymore, or at least, she didn't love him in the way that she used to, but Vera wasn't going to be a murderer.

Upstairs, they kept a gun in Teddy's office, in the lower drawer of his desk. The drawer had a combination padlock. The password was 03-14-81, Teddy's birthday, as decided by a coin flip. Personally, she thought her birthday, 05-20-82, would have been a better password—it was easier for her to remember. She would be the one using the gun anyway; Teddy was a horrible shot.

Vera couldn't remember when the last time they celebrated Teddy's birthday was. Definitely before Theo was born. Their birthdays were so close together that they never bothered. What was the difference between a birthday celebrated on the 13th and one celebrated on the 14th? As she rushed up the stairs, she passed by endless rows of birthday photos—photos where they painted on those forced, happy, tight smiles.

When Vera reached the top of the staircase, she could tell something was off.

The office door was ajar, and through the gap, she could see that the bottom drawer was open. As she stepped inside the room, the situation became more unnerving. Teddy's desk was a mess—his notes were scattered all over the surface. The lock of the drawer was missing.

The gun was gone.

Panicked, Vera began scrounging around the room. The bookshelf was sparse, only a few water-damaged novels were on the shelves. There was nothing in the closet, other than a few boxes full of old Christmas decorations that never got donated to the church. The upper desk drawer also did not have the gun, but it did have a few overdue bills that she remembered yelling at Teddy to pay.

The rest of the night, Vera was all out of sorts, searching every nook and cranny in her house for the gun. It was going to nag at her until she found it, the endless thoughts and fears worming their way into her mind.

Did she move it? She hadn't touched that gun in months, not since the false burglar alarm back in February. Did Teddy really off himself? But he couldn't have shot himself in the back, right? Did Theo somehow get his hands on it? She loved her son, but she knew that he would probably be stupid enough to show it off to that Harrison girl he always hung around.

Geoffrey was over again. He'd been anxiously pacing

around the Bates's living room, as if it was his husband who had mysteriously kicked the bucket and not her. Every single pop and crack set him off, as if he was waiting for someone to come and shoot him next.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when there was a knock at the door. Started blubbering faster than Vera could keep up with. Spilled his guts out like he was guiltier than Teddy's murderer himself.

He had hidden the gun. He was sorry he didn't tell her. Didn't want the police figuring that she had done poor Teddy in. It was mighty suspicious, he said. Cheating wife tired of her loveless marriage offs her balding overweight husband for the sweet taste of insurance money.

He couldn't bear to see her go to jail, even if she did kill Teddy.

It was a sweet thought that someone was willing to go to such lengths for her. It was more care than Teddy ever had for her.

But one thing was bothering her.

How did Geoffrey know about the gun?

The day of Theo's dad's funeral, he had brought out the old record player from the garage. Like most of the junk his dad owned, it was rusted and halfway broken. His dad was always bad at keeping his stuff nice and intact. Even his blazer was riddled with holes in the back and tears in the shoulders—he never knew how to sew, and Theo's mom thought it was something beneath her; poor people pretending to be rich didn't have time to sew. Home Ec taught Theo the basics; just throw some patches over the small holes and no one would be the wiser.

Theo's mom wanted to play some old records of Teddy's, in honor of his old dancing days. Some niche ballroom tracks, boring, slow, and dusty with age.

A lot of the music his dad listened to was slow. All the CDs in his glove box were always ballads, songs about lost loves and tragedy. It was perfect music to fall asleep to while Theo was playing passenger princess. His friend Dana would drive them out during third period, the trig class that they were both failing. Dana was always the better driver; she said it was the only time she ever felt free, seeing that empty road ahead of them. Theo hated looking out at the empty road. Reminded him of those long drives he and his dad used to take where Teddy'd end up screaming at him for being an idiot, for ruining his life, for killing his dreams.

That he wished Theo was never born.

Shame that Dana's dad fucking hated him. Mr. Harrison said Theo was a bad influence on his kid because he smoked weed sometimes. Pretty rich from the guy who would buy loose cigarettes from him after school. He and Theo's dad had that in common, bunch of chain smokers. The day his dad died, Harrison was asking him for a whole pack. Calmed his nerves, he said.

Theo never saw the appeal of nicotine.

The torn blazer was thick with the musk of old smoke, and in a way, it felt comforting. Like the asshole was still here. Like he had Theo in a choking embrace. Looking in the mirror, with his shoes that were a size too big and a shirt Theo's mom got at a thrift store, Theo felt like a right gentleman.

His mom said that he looked just like Teddy.

Theo hated when she said that. It made him wish he was the one being lowered into the grave.

It was almost like a party, the way the music was blasting. There was food inside the chapel, dollar store cheese plates, and cold cut sandwiches from the local liquor store. Theo didn't see any real tears, and he didn't expect any. It wasn't like he was crying either.

But, he did hear whispers.

Some of his dad's drinking buddies talked about the good times. He loved golf, loved his putter, and loved pretending their backyard was a golf course, like the fancy one a town over. But Theo couldn't play soccer because his cleats would "ruin the lawn." And what would the neighbors say if they found out that their lawn was less than pristine?

A coworker, Geoffrey, was talking about his additional workload. He hung around their house a lot, talked with mom, made himself way too at home. Theo always found him slinking around, drinking beer, and watching TV. He was never around when dad was around, but honestly, neither was mom.

His mom was in the corner of the chapel with her friends, in a nice black dress that he was sure was new. She looked like the perfect widow, veil over her face, black tear streaks on her cheeks. But none of that could mask her bright veneered smile.

Dana came up to Theo and gave him a pat on the back. Her dad was nowhere to be seen. Probably off smoking far away from the processions. Dana offered him a hug that he refused—he felt restricted enough. She hoped that they'd figure out who did it. Even though Teddy kind of sucked, he still needed closure, right?

Seeing the casket close was enough for him.

Dana was beginning to get a little sick of hearing about Teddy Bates.

Every morning, before she went to school, her dad would tell her something new about the case. Speculations from the town's Facebook group, wondering who might have had it out for Teddy, where the murder weapon was, if he deserved it or not.

Teddy seemed to have a lot of enemies. Servers who he stiffed for tips, kids he chased out of his house after

another fight with Theo, old classmates who remembered his pompous attitude. Even her dad still had a lot of negative things to say, mostly about his money or his big house, but instead of ending his thoughts with bitter jealousy, he would talk about how Teddy's death was such a shame.

It was bad karma to talk poorly of the dead.

He had enough weight on his soul as it was.

Dana's mom said that her dad had a guilt complex larger than the Empire State Building. He would probably die feeling bad about talking behind old Teddy's back. She had only hoped that he wouldn't die with bullets in his back too.

Terrified, Dana asked her mom that night if she believed in karma. She told her that people got what was coming to them. Put bad out into the world, and bad will come to you, she said.

Teddy had the ending he deserved.

She knew her dad agreed with her. It's why he spent so much time at Teddy's grave. He would tell her stories from his visits. A few old friends would visit and reminisce, as if they hadn't also been shit-talking the man behind his back. The groundskeeper was always friendly, glad to see someone grieving a man gone too soon. There were never any flowers at the grave, he would bring some himself. Apparently, Teddy loved daisies, always had a bunch of them in his window when they shared a dorm.

It was the least he could after years of animosity, he said.

Maybe a good gesture would save him after all.

One day he stayed out all night and when he came back in the morning, he was near silent. No updates. No silly stories. No conspiracy theories.

Just some dirty shoes and a haunted look.

Just a handful of broken glass and three loose cigarettes.

Just another canceled day of school.

Just another warning to stop hanging out with Theo.

Dana gave him a warning in return, to stay away from the train tracks. Nothing good happened there. Even before the death, it wasn't safe out there. Too many coyotes.

Vera couldn't bring herself to visit Teddy's grave. The funeral was hard enough on her, pretending to be the sobbing widow. Pretending her life was ruined, in shambles, destroyed for a man who couldn't be half bothered to even say good morning to her before he headed off to work. Pretending that she was a loving wife who would pour him coffee in the morning, kiss him goodbye, and pack his lunch for him.

Pretending that she didn't feel responsible.

People around town gossiped about her. When she went to the store, the other moms would watch her every move. How could she be so calm when her husband died? She must be broken, poor thing. She was a terrible wife, she was a grieving mess, she was the reason it happened, she couldn't have known. Worst of all, she believed them. Believed every mixed-up contradicting word.

If she visited Teddy's grave, what would she even say? Would she talk about how life went on without him? How his son spent his days rifling through his old boxes stored in the garage? How she jumped every time she walked past the living room, thinking she saw a glimpse of him? How his gun was still missing? How Geoffrey still slept in his bed and wore his shirts, like he was replacing him?

Would she apologize for any of it?

Even Geoffrey was scarce around their home these days. She would see him on the odd night or so, but he'd always be quick to leave. He never stuck around for breakfast anymore. Never said hello to Theo either. The look in Theo's eyes unnerved him, he said.

Like a dead man walking.

Theo was quiet these days too. He wore his father's old blazer like a security blanket and went to school every day without so much as a fight. He didn't want to talk after school, nor at dinner, nor when they passed each other in the halls. Vera wanted to do something to make it up to him, something that would actually have him happy for once.

One of them should be happy in this house.

God knows Teddy wasn't.

She was planning a trip, just the two of them. It was about high time that she made an effort to connect with her child, without the distraction of resentment and lies. Teddy had always wanted to travel. He'd talk about flying to Barcelona, visiting El Liceu, spending time at Henry's villa. It had been years since Theo had seen Henry.

Vera wasn't even sure if Henry knew his cousin had died.

She wasn't even sure he would care. They weren't close.

Teddy wasn't close to many people.

She set aside most of the life insurance money towards Theo's college fund. She didn't know if he was going to college—she didn't know if he wanted to do anything other than hang near the train tracks after dark and run off with that Harrison girl—but she didn't want to crush any futures more than she already had. Another part of it went

towards the shiny blue pearl headstone that Vera knew she would never see. Upright, granite, and 4 feet tall. She made sure to keep the inscription sweet and simple.

Theodore Bates Sr.

Loving husband and father.

A lie until the very end.

Teddy Bate's body was buried six feet under at the Maple Memorial Park, Plot G-16-33. But Theo knew his spirit was face down by the train tracks, rotting in the boiling sun. He wondered if crows scavenged more than just the rotting skin of a freshly deceased corpse. If they dug deep and tore out the soul, tore out the essence, tore out what lay behind a beating heart.

In place of where the body had been, Theo had left a pack of spearmint gum. Theo hated mint. It tasted like toothpaste. But his dad loved it. Mint chocolate chip was his favorite flavor. It was all they had stocked up in the freezer during the summer. It was cheaper, he said.

But one scoop of vanilla couldn't have been that much more expensive.

Springtime leads to rising temperatures, and rising temperatures lead to hallucinations. Even when he wasn't blitzed, sometimes Theo'd see things in the distance. He and Dana used to argue over whose hallucination was more real. To this day, he still thought that a shambling man was more likely to be hanging out by the tracks than a coyote. Too much noise around here for any animal to be comfortable.

Theo himself felt uncomfortable here, but there was something that called him back to the tracks. Nightmares, night after night since his dad had kicked the bucket. He was sure Teddy's spirit was haunting him. That bits and pieces clung to his shitty blazer. He needed to put this

weight to rest.

His dad's spirit needed to rest.

A smoky specter began to form near the stray pack of gum. It was a large, dusty cloud of grey and smelled heavily of musty old cigarettes and cheap liquor store cologne. It opened its mouth to speak, but all Theo heard was the sound of a harsh breeze and the crackling of a tumbleweed in the distance.

The gun in his blazer pocket weighed heavy as he stared at the hallucination. Balding, but wisps of jet-black hair clinging on for dear life. A button nose with high cheekbones, and a thin angular face. A thin-lipped scowl that never left.

With an unsteady grasp, Theo aimed at the hallucination and pulled the trigger. His dad never taught him how to shoot, and his mom never told him where the hidden gun was, but sometimes you needed a nosy doormat of an outsider to show you these things, one who was too scared to rat him out and one that probably wouldn't stay around long.

Theo could only thank Geoffrey for snooping around his dad's office.

He shot once.

Teddy stood there standing in front of him, eyes as hollow as when he was alive. Had Theo ever seen him smile? Had he ever heard him laugh? Had Teddy ever been happy when he was around?

He shot twice.

His mom wasn't as subtle as she thought she was. Dad had asked him about Geoffrey that night. Asked and begged. Offered him two whole packs. Spending money, he called it. Theo had made about half his money's worth that night.

He shot three times.

Theo tried to ask him about dancing once. About when he used to dance in college. His mom had some old tapes lying around. Theo wondered how many competitions his dad had won. How many times he had practiced his steps to those shitty old records from the funeral. How many times he wished he could trade his son in for a nice pair of wingtips. Teddy had told him never to bring up dancing again.

He shot four times.

Theo asked Dana what her relationship with her dad was like. He was strict but forgiving, she said. Always told her stories. Always woke her up every morning. Always wanted to know where she was going and who she was with.

She called him lucky. That he had a bit more freedom.

He didn't know how to tell her that he thought she was the lucky one, to have someone care about her like that. To have someone who would actually blink twice if she dropped dead.

To have someone who didn't consider her his life's greatest mistake.

Theo wondered what her dad told her after he bought that pack off of him that night. He wondered what Mr. Harrison actually saw. He wondered why he came down the other day to pick up the broken watch. Maybe those two might have been friends in another lifetime.

He shot five times.

Theo always wondered why his mom and dad stayed together. His mom was a cheater. He never understood why she didn't just leave. Why hide? Why lie? He didn't know who she thought that she was protecting. Theo? Herself? Teddy resented her. Teddy resented him too. Teddy resented everyone and everything in this town to the point

where most people didn't care he was dead, just cared about what his death meant for the rest of them. Would the town collapse? Would its reputation be ruined? He wondered if it were just the two of them, he and his mom, would they have been happier? They weren't happier now.

He shot six times.

The specter dissipated, leaving only the echoes of gunshots and the sound of the oncoming train.

He was out of rounds.

And he was definitely out of time. Theo couldn't be out here all night; his mom would get worried. Even all the way out here, someone might have heard the gunshots. Maybe they'd get worried that another old man was shot in the back. Another old man thinking of stowing away on the train headed upstate. Maybe that man would have lived. Made it to Barcelona. Took his wife and kid with him. Maybe he'd get the jitters but still slip on his nice blazer and throw on a daisy-patterned tie.

And he'd dance on the stage of that fancy opera house, dance like the world was watching.

Angel, before you fly down | Sophia Centurion

look at me as I am, an apathetic lover
white knuckling every goodbye.

See a rival worthy of fight
or flight. Heed the wanted signs listing

the names I was known by and all my
reckless crimes. They were scattered by

good men and women who expected better
from me. Not this screeching siren,

swimming the Styx against fate,
crawling out

covered in pieces of saints.
Invite disdain, for your sake.

If you hold me I will bury myself deep
in your chest to live forever. Prepare

before you fly down. Let your heartbeat pick up,
and your eyes blur red until you're buzzing, unsure

where to aim your fists or hands or breath. Hate me
first, to make love possible. That line is

fragile and crumbling—a match
burning until it only leaves behind the fire.

Before you mistake me for someone who
will bring you peace, study the scratchings

on the walls of my tower
only decipherable through a fever.

Sir Brave and Bright, fit your jagged
edge to mine, see if you can save
a ghost, hold her hand
in a playground. We will

find solace in the silence
on swings. In the dark

I tell you the chronicle from
the beginning, and you deem me good.

So I join the rabble of selfish narcissists you can't help
but love.

The ones that would ruin the world,
for that little bit of heaven.



I always go by Eve's house first. It's closest to mine, only three doors down. She has a green bike, her favorite color. My bike is blue and red. I think it's ugly, but Mom and Dad refuse to buy me a new one. They say my brother's old one is "just fine." They're the only ones who think so. At least they got me my own backpack for school. It's black with stripes on it, and I love it. I adjust the bag on my shoulder as I pull up to Eve's front yard.

I yell her name until she finally comes outside. She slams her front door shut and grabs her bike off the porch before joining me on the street.

"Hi, Harper. Ready?" Eve asks me as she mounts her bike.

I notice Mrs. Williams, Eve's mother, waving to me through her kitchen window. I quickly wave back, then hop on my bike.

"Ready."

We ride towards Sarah's house together, Eve on her green bike, and me on my ugly one. Sarah's house is always such a pain in the butt to get to. She lives on Big Hill. We call it that because it's the biggest hill in the neighborhood. The name of her street is actually Cherry Hill, but no one calls it that. It's always just Big Hill.

I pant heavily as I try to pedal all the way up the street. Eve has given up and decides to walk her bike, watching me as I struggle next to her. Sweat trickles down my forehead and armpits. I have only ever made it up the hill once, and that was in the third grade. I was very little back then. Now, as a sixth grader, things are very different. I'm older, more mature. My grandma tells me I'm turning into "quite the young lady." Whatever that means.

Eve is already way ahead of me and waiting on Sarah's lawn by the time I make it there. I don't even care that I

made it all the way up the hill without getting off my bike. I'm so exhausted I lay down on the grass next to Eve and close my eyes. Too tired to think, too tired to move. Sarah sees us from her bedroom window and comes running outside. She's dressed in a frilly, pink tutu and bedazzled shirt that reads Princess across the front of it. I roll my eyes as I prop myself up on my elbows. It is the ugliest shirt I have ever seen.

"Sarah, that's the ugliest shirt I've ever seen!" I yell from her lawn.

She stops on her front porch and looks down at her outfit. Then she shrugs.

"My mom said I look cute!" she yells back.

"Whatever." I say. I wasn't going to argue with her. I look over my own clothes that I chose to put on this morning. Jeans and my brother Aden's red baseball jersey. Mom and Dad won't buy me new clothes either, but I don't mind. I can get Aden's hand-me-downs as dirty as I want.

"How are you going to ride your bike in a tutu?" I ask Sarah as Eve and I follow her to the garage. I put my hands on my hips, watching her.

"Same way I always do," she replies.

"What if you get it dirty? Won't your mom be mad?" Eve asks, her head cocked to the left. Her long braids fall over her shoulder. She recently got her ends dyed green. They match her outfit. Today she's wearing overalls with her favorite green t-shirt underneath.

"She doesn't mind. She says that's what our heavy-duty washing machine is for," Sarah grins.

Eve and I exchange a look. Sarah's mom is always buying the newest technology. Mr. Evans, Sarah's dad, is a doctor. I always tell Eve that I think it's the only reason Sarah's mom married him. Eve says that's a mean thing to say. Am I wrong? Mrs. Evans loves fancy things. She even

calls herself "high-maintenance." Whatever that means.

Once Sarah hops onto her brand-new pink bike, completely engulfed in ribbons and lace, the three of us ride down to the river. Well, it's not really a river. Some people call it that, but it's really just a creek. Though a decent sized one at that. I throw my bike down into the dirt, and Eve does the same. Sarah props hers up nicely against a tree. We take turns leaping from stone to stone across the water to the bank on the other side. We begin walking to the edge of the dense forest that surrounds our neighborhood.

"Do you think he'll be there today?" Sarah looks worried.

"He's always there," I say. "He never leaves."

"But... what if something happened? We don't even know where he goes at night. Oh, I know I should have brought him to stay with me." Sarah bites her nails, though they've already been bitten down to stubs. I groan, throwing my head back dramatically.

"Sarah! Do you want to go home?"

"No..."

"Then stop acting like a quitter. Besides, your parents would kill you if you brought him home."

"Harper, don't be mean," Eve cuts in.

I open my mouth to argue back, but when I look up, I notice we've made it. The air is quiet as we enter our special spot. The morning sun struggles to shine through the branches overhead. The crunch of leaves underneath our sneakers fills the silence. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Sarah slip her hand into Eve's, and the two edge closer together.

"Jojo?" I whisper into the trees. "Jojo!"

There's a soft rustling in the bushes nearby, and the

three of us hesitantly approach the mysterious movement. My hand brushes Eve's, but I don't dare hold it. I couldn't be labeled a scaredy-cat. It would ruin my reputation. We all hold our breath. Suddenly, a ball of fur lunges out of the bushes, right towards the three of us. We scream and fall to the ground, giggling as Jojo licks our faces. The large dog looks as happy to see us as we are to see him. Once he settles down, I pull a bag of dog food out of my backpack.

"I bought it yesterday when I went with my mom to the store. She didn't even notice."

"You've got the money for that?" Eve asks in amazement.

"Yup. Took all my twelve dollars."

"But, Harper, what about the new bike you're saving up for? The black one?" Sarah asks.

"Yeah! You were really close," Eve adds with a frown.

"I needed almost a hundred more dollars. That's like a million lemonade stands. It was going to take forever. Plus, I can use the reward money we get for Jojo," I remind them.

Jojo bounces around happily as I pour his dog food onto the ground. We found him only two days ago when we were swimming in the creek. We didn't know how he got there, or from where, but then we saw the posters. Jojo belonged to the Jetsons. They're an old couple that live a few streets over from Eve and I. Jojo must've gotten out and ran all the way to the edge of the woods. The reward for his return was two hundred dollars. Two hundred! I told my friends I thought I should get all the money, because I was the one who saw him first. But, of course, Eve and Sarah were both quick to argue that they saw him first, so we've been stuck deciding how to split our reward.

"I was thinking, actually," Eve starts, glancing at Sarah. "Maybe we should reject the money?"

"WHAT? Reject the money? Eve, are you insane!? Two hundred dollars!" I exclaim, standing up in frustration.

"Harper, let her finish!" Sarah tells me as she tugs on my arm. I sit back down.

"You're in on this too?" I ask her.

Sarah gives me a look, telling me to be quiet, so I do. I turn back to Eve. I cross my arms. "Keep talking."

"Because we've been taking care of him for a little while, that's kind of like our reward, you know? Pretending he's ours. It's too hard to split the money, anyway," Eve says.

"I like the idea," Sarah smiles. "I think it's nice."

"Yeah 'cuz you're rich," I mumble under my breath.

Sarah turns to me. Her voice rises an octave, a clear indication of her annoyance. "I'm not stopping you, Harper! So, take the money if you want. You can choose to be selfish while Eve and I choose to be nice."

I sense Eve's worry as I watch her wrap her arms around Jojo, who also seems alarmed by the sudden tension in the air. I avert my eyes from Eve and turn to Sarah. Slowly, I rise, taking a step towards her. She stands too. She's taller than me. This is only something I notice now, as it feels as if she towers over me. I can smell the Glitter Rainbow Dry Shampoo Mist she douses herself with every morning as it emanates from her sleek blond hair. I scrunch up my nose. I hate that smell.

"If you're only doing it so people will think you're nice, then you're being just as selfish as me," I tell her.

"No we're not."

"Yes, you are."

"Guys, please..." Eve whispers.

"I want the money!" I yell. I turn my attention to Eve, who is still sitting on the ground. "Eve, don't you think we should take the reward? We're returning Jojo to them. We

deserve it." Eve's eyes widen. I feel a twinge of regret. I know she hates being pulled into our fights.

"I don't..." she stammers.

Sarah steps in front of me, blocking my view of Eve. "Eve already told you what she thinks. And we agree that we should decline."

"But that's not fair!" I cry.

Eve stands suddenly. Jojo barks at the sudden movement, and begins running circles around her ankles. Eve steps towards me. There is a determination in her eyes I've never seen before. Sarah quietly steps out of her way.

"Fair to who? To you?" Eve asks me. I say nothing. "We're giving the Jetsons their dog back. That's called being a good person, Harper."

Eve puts her hands on my shoulders. I feel the urge to shrug them off, but I don't. She looks at me with such seriousness, I have no choice but to listen.

"We don't need the money, Harper. Trust me. Besides, we can't keep him forever. We can't take care of him. We'll miss Jojo, but I think his owners might miss him even more right now. Don't you want him to be at home? Isn't that enough?"

The sincerity in Eve's eyes tells me to think about what this might mean. No new bike? Probably. Me being really annoyed with my friends right now? Definitely. Getting to see Jojo return home, though? I guess Eve is kind of right.

"It's two against one," Sarah reminds me, crossing her arms.

I glare at her. Sarah could get anything she wants. In fact, she never wants. Because she already has everything. This makes me want to slap that smug look right off her face. I know why it makes me angry. I can never have what she has. And that is unfair.

But it is two against one. We established this rule a long time ago. It means they win. My anger is not going to change anything about that.

I sigh. "Fine." I say, pushing Eve's arms off of mine. "Jeez."

"We'll take him back tomorrow?" Eve asks.

"Tomorrow," I huff. "But I'm doing this for you. Not Sarah."

Eve sighs and exchanges a look with Sarah. I don't like when they speak to each other with their eyes. I don't know what they are saying. But I don't care.

We spend the rest of the day at our spot in the woods. We say goodbye to Jojo and ride back to our houses.

The next morning, Sarah, Eve, and I walk towards the Jetson's house. I hold Jojo on a leash, his tail wagging as he happily walks beside us. I wish we were as happy as he was. He's probably excited to see his real owners again, but the three of us are miserable. Sarah even decided to wear black today. Granted, it's still a tutu, but it is black. She said she's in mourning. Whatever that means.

As we near the front porch of the Jetson's large white house, we all suck in a deep breath.

"Ready?" I ask them.

"Ready," they reply.

The door is flung open before we even get the chance to knock. Mrs. Jetson runs out onto her porch and wraps her arms around Jojo.

"Oh, Jojo! You're okay!" she exclaims. "Oh, girls, thank you!"

Mr. Jetson comes out behind his wife, bending down to hug the dog, too. We watch them, our lips curving up into smiles as we see how happy they all are. Especially Jojo. He

jumps and barks, his tail wagging wildly. I hand the leash to Mr. Jetson as he stands up.

"Where did you girls find him?" he asks us.

"The woods. He was probably hiding in there," I tell him. He must sense the sadness in my voice.

"Well, thank you, girls. Truly. We are so happy to have him back. I'll grab your reward from inside," he smiles, a sure attempt to cheer us up. I glance at Eve. She nods.

"Mr. Jetson, wait. We... actually don't want the money," I try to smile, but it comes off more as a wince. "Knowing Jojo is safe back home is enough of a reward for us."

The words feel strange in my mouth. Mr. Jetson looks surprised, but then he smiles warmly. He tells us how kind we are. We tell him we know. Mrs. Jetson tells us to feel free to visit Jojo any time. We tell her thank you. Both Mr. and Mrs. Jetson thank us one last time, and then the three of us turn and start the walk back towards Big Hill.

"So, are you gonna tell me I was right?" Eve asks me, nudging my shoulder.

I smirk. "Never."

My Father's Ranch | Susana Hernandez

It Was A Battle

Nestled nicely and openly on the side of the road surrounded by luscious wild grass lies my fathers' childhood home. It's now painted a dull but still appealing brick-orange. The front yard consists of white and beige colored rocks that make a satisfying crunch as you walk towards the front door.

Many renovations have been made to the house since my father's upbringing; I'm sure it has little semblance to the one he grew up in. For one, it looks like a proper one-story home, similar to the other houses in the little village of Santiago, Aguascalientes. Two, there is now running water, electricity, and a working sewage system; utilities my father says he didn't grow up with at all. Back then, he would tell me, his house consisted of only one room, one bed, and one opening. That room just so happened to be the one he and his older sisters were also born in. Whatever his home looked like when he was growing up is now a distant memory, one only he and his siblings could see in their minds' eyes.

My father, like most every other family in Mexico during the sixties, had a large family and was one of nine siblings; seven sisters and his younger brother. All eleven members, including their parents, lived in that one room. The only bed was reserved for his mom and two younger siblings since they were still small enough to fit on the bed. The rest of the family would sleep on grass-woven bedrolls called "petates" which were spread out evenly around the house. There wasn't a kitchen or even a sink, much less a bathroom, but there was technically an entrance; only, it didn't have a door. One summer afternoon, I asked my father if they used a curtain for privacy.

"What curtain? We had an old, dingy blanket that no one used as our door," my father told us in Spanish.

"What would you do about the intruders?" My younger sister asked. She'd stopped doing her homework on the

family desktop, intrigued by my father's origins, and walked on over to the kitchen island where my dad sat.

"Or the animals?" I asked since they seemed more likely to enter the house.

"There were no intruders," my father said, tearing off a piece of tortilla. He was looking down at his dinner, beans and a pork chile my mom had prepared for him earlier that day, but I could tell he was hundreds of miles away in a different country and a different time. "We'd kick the animals out," he started again, "throw rocks at them."

"Grab them by their tail," I turned and repeated to my sister who said, "No," and pouted at me. Our dad had joked before about how he dealt with stray cats who would tumble into his house when he was younger the exact same way. Maybe he wasn't joking? My younger sister loves animals and every time our eldest sister visits she brings her two cats Meeko and Lola along, much to my father's dislike.

He never allowed my older sister and me to have any animals inside the house when we were younger. Dogs and cats were strictly kept outside as the home was meant for humans. "The only animals allowed inside the house are the roaches and the ants!" He very seriously told my older sister once. I couldn't stop laughing when she repeated this to me. I knew how strict my dad was with animals in our house but to hear him say only pests could enter was hilarious. Of course, my father didn't want roaches and ants or even spiders in the house, but they were the only ones allowed before he caught sight of them and exterminated them with a bug poison he'd purchased from Home Depot.

I used to think it was cruel to leave pets outside to fend for themselves in the natural elements. My once naively-generous and kind heart just couldn't fathom it and I would often get into heated arguments with my father about letting our first family dog, Scruffy—a mixed lab and Australian cattle dog—roam inside the house. "Wait until you have your own house, then you can do whatever you want!" I couldn't understand then why my father wouldn't just let Scruffy in for a few seconds just to let him know what

our house looked like, where the humans lived. It was a one-story house: three rooms, a master bedroom, an office room (which we later converted into a guest room), two bathrooms, two living rooms, a kitchen-dining room, a wide garage equipped with two cars, a front and backyard (one my dad tended to almost daily), and even an attic! One day, I did allow our then-puppy to enter the house. In mere seconds, however, I understood why my father never wanted any animals inside; Scruffy began marking his territory all over the living room carpet. I remember my nine-year-old self panic-grabbing Scruffy mid-pee and shoving him out through the sliding glass doors, a trail of pee leading outside. That was the last time Scruffy ever stepped paw inside the house. Traumatized by the events, he never dared to pass the sliding glass doors again, even when we opened them. Hopefully, one day, Scruffy can forgive me for that incident— wherever he is in doggie heaven.

When my father mentions growing up on “el rancho” he often talks about the animals he and his siblings were tasked to look after: fifteen cows, two mules, one horse, twenty chickens and turkeys, and two – sometimes three – pigs. “I never want to do that again,” he would tell me. “Era una batalla,” it was a battle. My father often recounts stories from that time. He would traverse vast green pastures with mesquite trees, nopales, streams, rivers, and water dams on foot to retrieve his family’s cattle. They would let the cows graze in “ejidos”, or community lands distributed by the government after the Mexican Revolution to quell civil unrest, so long as someone came to collect the cattle at the end of the week.

“One time we let a cow that we knew was pregnant out to graze in el cerro (the hills) in the morning. When me, Antonio,” his brother-in-law, “and my brother went to bring back the cattle, we couldn’t find the cow. We searched for her up hills, down hills, upstream and downstream until our feet were so sore they burned. We walked all day, knowing that she had strayed away from the herd to give birth. We started getting worried. What if a puma or a mountain lion got to her and the newborn calf? Packs of coyotes? The sun was starting to set and we were panicking.” It gets pitch black in el cerro and light pollution back then wasn’t a thing. Santiago was a small Mexican village in the seventies where electricity in every household was unheard

of. Even just owning flashlights was rare. "We had to wait till the following weekend because we just couldn't find her and it got too dark too quick."

"Once the weekend rolled around, we kept up our search. We kept looking until we came upon a cliff. Suddenly, we heard what we thought were small moos. 'Look! Listen, do you hear that?' I asked them. We decided to scale the cliff and climb to the bottom where we found the week-old calf. We could tell he was about a week old because he was fast. Every time we tried to catch him he would dart past us. After cornering him against the wall of the cliff, we grabbed him. Me and Antonio would take turns carrying the calf up the cliff with the cow following patiently behind. We didn't own any horses at the time so we had to do everything ourselves."

"And the cow wouldn't get violent with you?" My mom asked.

"No," my father shook his head, "they knew we were helping."

Looking after the animals wasn't the only thing he would do. He also made sure to plow the land, plant the seeds, and water the crops. He said it was tough work that was never-ending.

Although they had an abundance of animals that could feed their family, they didn't have many luxuries. Much that is common in today's America was unheard of in my father's world in Santiago. I still remember when he told my mom over dinner about a conversation he had at work with his coworkers about cereal.

"En el rancho," he would start, "When? When would you ever hear about Frosted Flakes or Cap'n Crunch?" My dad's diet consisted of more humble ingredients: tortillas, milk, beans, eggs, rabbits, and wild birds that he and his father would hunt in el cerro. They never ate beef although they had an abundance of cattle.

"Would you ever butcher the cows?" I asked him. "And eat their meat?"

"No," he'd shake his head.

"Not even the bulls?"

"It was too expensive." It made more sense to keep them not only for their milk but for their dung, which would fertilize the crops. Every resource was recycled; the dung for fertilizer, leftover maize for chicken feed, corn husks for the pigs, milk to make cheese and various other dairy products.

"How would you store the cheese if you didn't have any refrigerators?" I asked.

"Cheese wasn't something that was kept for a long time." He shoveled a small scoop of frijoles from one tortilla piece to the other then ate it, chewing it slowly and carefully.

"So you would eat it all that day?"

"No, it would be put into little rings that would give it its shape." He made a little circular shape with his thumbs and index fingers.

My dad told me that there was an inexpensive pill that people would buy to put in the milk for it to curdle. After the curdling process was finished, they would grab a cheesecloth and squeeze all the liquid out. But the process still wasn't done. Since the milk was still chunky and coarse, they would knead it like dough and mold it into circular balls, then place the little cheese balls into metal rings called aros, or hoops. These rings varied in size, he'd tell me, but more often than not they were about the size of your palm.

American Jobs

When my dad's sisters were old enough, they went to the city of Aguascalientes— about an hour away— in search of jobs to support the family. His two older sisters, my Tía Lupe and my Tía Maria, were the first to move out of their one-roomed-house and into the city in their early twenties. They were soon followed by the other girls, my

Tía Andrea and my Tía Marta. They all worked in various occupations: picking fruit in the fields, working in factories in the city, and cleaning houses, where they would then meet and marry their respective husbands. Later, in their mid-thirties, my Tía Lupe and my Tía Maria, left the country altogether for a better life in what they call 'El Norte,' otherwise known as the United States. My father would also soon follow in his sisters' footsteps and leave the world he knew behind.

My father went from good ol' country boy to certified city boy... Sort of. He was around eighteen when he made it to America and although he had successfully made it to the country, he was stuck working agricultural jobs that only paid him pennies. His first job in the States was none other than in California, specifically Lancaster, the city where he would go on to buy his first house, that he got his first job picking onions.

"Purple onions, white onions, garlic too!" He recounts. I've heard this story several times growing up. He'd tell it often when we would drive around the dry desert where acres of onions or garlic plants were growing. He would mention that it was tiring and that he, and several other of his co-worker/roommates, would get home so dirty.

"One time, after work, we had a cop car follow us," he sat telling us on the kitchen island over lunch. My dad didn't have his papers during this time and just the sight of a police car was enough to send everyone into a frozen state.

"Ampelio," his brother-in-law, "drove the truck. We didn't know whether to speed off or not, since none of us had our papers and the cop seemed to be following us. We really thought he was, but Amepelio slowed down and stopped at a stop sign. The cop passed us and kept going. The sigh of relief we all let out!" he sighed exaggeratingly. "Man, we were scared. We thought we were done."

There were other even scarier encounters with cops during my dad's time as a young undocumented worker in the States. Often, they would stop him only to ask for identification as my dad is very clearly indigenous-looking with russet-brown skin and a high nose and was easily

targeted as a result. For the most part they would let him go. He always would retell these stories whenever issues concerning other family members and their paperwork would come up during breakfast, lunch, or dinner. He'd sit comfortably in his designated seat on the sofa, or on the left side of the kitchen island where he would always sit closest to the kitchen stove to eat, and lay into his story.

We all still live in this house, except for my older sister who inherited our father's hustler mentality. I don't think he purposely purchased the house with the idea of it being in the same city where he got his first job, it just so happened to be the one he found affordable. Fortunately, we lucked out. The house was originally going to another family, they even designed where each room and bathroom would go, but they called it off at the last minute and we were next in line. And so for the past twenty years, it's been the place my family has resided. My siblings and I have had countless memories of our house, now grateful for all of my dad's sacrifices. I'm sure he too has countless memories of his second home.

Little Bird | Guadalupe Miranda

Scene 1

PEDRO sits in his cell, shamelessly hitting on the GUARD.

PEDRO
I'm looking at your fine ass.

GUARD
Chum it up with your cellmate.

PEDRO
He was bailed out.

GUARD
Wait for another.

PEDRO
But I'm looking at your fine ass right now.

GUARD
Go suck a dick.

PEDRO
I'd like to be sucking on yours.

GUARD
(hits baton on the cell bars)

Hey!

(Beat)

Has your grandmother come to visit?

PEDRO
Yesterday. She brought over these fine ass enchiladas.

GUARD
Why do you always have to use those words?

PEDRO
Because I love seeing your fine ass react in the way that
you do.

GUARD
You've only been here a month, Pedro.

PEDRO
I love easy.

GUARD
Get your shit together, man.

PEDRO
I'm just getting comfy.

GUARD
Your grandmother will bail you out.

PEDRO
My abuela ain't got that kind of money.

GUARD
Any rich relatives?

PEDRO
You think I'd be in this joint if I had any?

GUARD
Why are you here, anyway?

PEDRO
(blows the GUARD a kiss and winks)

If I told you, I'd have to kill you.

GUARD
Was it murder?

PEDRO

What would you give me if I told you?

GUARD

(tries to be menacing, but fails)

You'd save yourself a beating.

PEDRO

A little sucky suck?

GUARD

Man, I told you—

PEDRO

How about a little kiss?

GUARD

Pedro.

PEDRO

On the cheek. We'll take it nice and slow, baby.

GUARD

Slow? A second ago you wanted to suck my dick.

PEDRO

I'm warming you up to it.

GUARD

I ain't gay!

PEDRO

Maybe a little bi-curious?

GUARD

(hesitates, adjusting his belt)

I'm married.

PEDRO
To a woman?

GUARD
No, to a burly man. Chops up some real good wood.

PEDRO
So you like em' buff? Okay, no problem. Give me a little
time to bulk up. I ain't sweating it.

GUARD
Yes, a woman!

(Beat)

I've got a little girl.

PEDRO
You got a kid?

(GUARD nods.)

It's alright, baby. I'll love her like my own. I'll cook her up
some real good food. Teach her how to make my abuela's
fine ass enchiladas. Drop her off at school so you can rest
and prepare yourself for this big, fat—

GUARD
Quit it!

PEDRO

*(laughs and places air quotes around the word
wife)*

What's your wife's name?

GUARD
Don't put my wife in quotations!

PEDRO
Sorry. Her name?

GUARD
Beatrice.

PEDRO
How young we talkin'?

GUARD
None of your damn business.

PEDRO
Young like old people kind of young, or young like you
could be in the next cell over?

GUARD
She is well over eighteen!

PEDRO
So twenty-one.

GUARD
Don't you have something better to do?

PEDRO

(walks around his cell with arms outstretched)

Got nowhere else to go. Unless you want to use those
pretty little fingers to slide that key in and let me out?

GUARD

(shakes his head, ignoring his request)

You got anymore of those enchiladas?

PEDRO
Should be getting some more today.

GUARD
Can I try—

PEDRO
A kiss for an enchilada?

GUARD
Goddammit, Pedro!

PEDRO
I ain't no giver upper.

(Beat)

You really not gay?

GUARD
I am ninety percent sure.

PEDRO
That ain't a hundred! I got a ten percent chance.

GUARD
You got no chance.

PEDRO
Ever had a boyfriend?

(GUARD shakes his head in disbelief. He drops his head with a sigh.)

GUARD
It wasn't a legit relationship.

PEDRO
So a drunk makeout sesh?

GUARD
It was nothing.

PEDRO

(hysterically laughs and reaches through the bars to playfully hit GUARD'S shoulder.)

You crack me up, Guard. I see the way you check out my ass.

GUARD

(scoffs, but not very convincingly)

I've never done that.

PEDRO

Step out of that closet and let the light shine on you.
I promise you won't burst into flames, or go to hell, or
whatever. Swear, I used to go to church every Sunday with
my abuela.

GUARD

I am not—

PEDRO

Baby, that closet is made of glass!

GUARD

Can we drop this?

PEDRO

Not a fat chance. Not until you man up and give me a fat
kiss on my fat dick.

GUARD

(hits baton on the cell bars again)

You don't have to be so vulgar!

PEDRO

So you admit it? You might be a little gay?

GUARD

If I say yes, will you tell me why you're in here?

PEDRO

(leans seductively across the bars)

I'll whisper it in your ear. Come a little closer, Guard. I don't
bite.

(PEDRO reaches through the bars and loops his

finger through GUARD's belt loop, pulling him closer. GUARD does not object.)

GUARD
Who'd you kill, Pedro?

PEDRO
Why do you assume I killed someone?

GUARD
I know you killed someone.

PEDRO
I didn't!

GUARD
I read your file.

PEDRO
Ain't that illegal or some shit?

GUARD
I work for the county jail.

PEDRO
That doesn't fill you with the authority to be looking at my
file.

GUARD
Why'd you do it?

PEDRO
Why ask, if you already know?

GUARD
I want to hear it from you.

PEDRO
What else do you want from these pretty lips?

GUARD
Pedro.

PEDRO

She banged her head! I had nothing to do with it.

GUARD

They caught you with the bloody phone in your hand.

PEDRO

He was fuckin' my ex-girlfriend!

GUARD

I thought you were gay?

PEDRO

Like you, I was in the closet. I caught her bouncing on his dick like it was some kind of pogo stick.

GUARD

A pogo stick?

PEDRO

She was bouncing on my pogo stick!

GUARD

He could have been bi?

PEDRO

He was gay!

GUARD

All the way gay?

PEDRO

Yes! I yanked her hair and cut his dick off.

GUARD

And he bled out?

PEDRO

I bashed his head in until I felt skull. Then he bled out.

GUARD

And the girl?

PEDRO
She ran.

(Beat)

You running away now?

GUARD
I've had plenty of opportunities to run.

(A buzzer sound fills the cell corridors. Lights out.)

See you tomorrow, Pedro. Save me some of those fine ass
enchiladas.

SCENE 2

The next morning. Pedro reaches under his mattress for two enchiladas wrapped in a napkin. He hands one to GUARD through the bars.

GUARD
Your grandmother's a good cook.

(PEDRO stifles a laugh.)

What?

PEDRO
I added a special ingredient. A love spell. You're all mine
now.

(Beat)

I know all kinds of brujería.

GUARD

(spits out the enchilada)

You're fucking sick!

PEDRO

*(reaches through the bars trying to touch
GUARD.)*

Come on, baby. Let me get a piece of this.

GUARD
You didn't.

*(PEDRO grabs the enchilada out of GUARD's
hand and takes a bite.)*

PEDRO
I just like fucking with you. Go on, finish it.

GUARD
I'll save it for later.

PEDRO
Fair.

(Beat)

So your boyfriend—

GUARD
He was a friend. And a man.

PEDRO
Fine, your manfriend. What happened here?

GUARD
Nothing.

PEDRO
Talk to me, baby.

GUARD
I had this thing. I hadn't met my wife yet.

PEDRO
Right. The eighteen year old.

GUARD
She's twenty one!

PEDRO
Go on.

GUARD
We met at a bar. And he came up to me—

PEDRO
And you started making out?

GUARD
Can you let me tell the story?

PEDRO
Sorry, continue.

GUARD
He came up to me, told me I was cute. I said I thought the same. And we danced.

PEDRO
Romantic.

GUARD
You want the story? Hold back on the side comments.

PEDRO
Kay, sorry.

GUARD
So we danced. We went back to his place. And you can assume what happened next.

PEDRO
You manhandled him till he couldn't take no more?

GUARD
I didn't manhandle—

PEDRO
You're a bottom? That's okay baby, I can top you all night—

GUARD

(with some hesitation, he shouts)

We fucked, okay! He fucked me!

PEDRO

(suddenly extremely serious)

You're scared.

GUARD
Excuse me?

PEDRO
Sit.

(PEDRO sits on the ground in his cell. He urges GUARD to do the same. GUARD sits on the floor outside the cell after seconds of hesitation.)

Give me your hand.

GUARD
You're not making me touch your dick, are you?

PEDRO

(grabs GUARD'S hand through the cell bars and runs his fingers across his palm.)

Do you feel that?

GUARD
It feels good, nice.

PEDRO
You feel that with your wife?

(GUARD watches PEDRO run his fingers across his palm. He shakes his head. PEDRO lets go of GUARD's hand and stands.)

You ain't no damn baby bird. You're a hawk!

GUARD
A hawk?

PEDRO
A hawk. And a hawk ain't got nothing to be afraid of.

(Beat)

So you fucked, then what?

GUARD
He told me he had a fiance. His girlfriend of three years.

PEDRO
Oh shit.

GUARD
He was inviting me to the wedding.

PEDRO
Oh shit!

GUARD
Can you believe that crap?

PEDRO
I'd never do something like that, baby.

GUARD
Pedro.

PEDRO
Sorry, it's a reflex.

(Beat)

I need to ask you something. And I need you to say yes.

GUARD
I'm not sucking your dick through the cell bars.

PEDRO
No. You need to get me out of here.

GUARD
Now you're talking crazy.

PEDRO
We're friends?

GUARD
You're a prisoner. I'm a guard.

PEDRO
But we're friends, ain't we?

GUARD
Look, I like you—

PEDRO
Then help me break loose.

GUARD
I need this job.

PEDRO
And I need to walk free.

GUARD
You've been here a month. You've never asked to bail.

PEDRO
Am I human to you?

GUARD
Course'. Flesh and blood.

PEDRO
Exactly. I ain't no bird. I don't belong in a cage.

GUARD
I know—

PEDRO

(is suddenly extremely aggressive, shaking the cell bars)

So help me!

GUARD

I'm sure your grandmother can scrape up some money—

PEDRO

Please! I was a little boy once, just like your little girl. I saw my mother destroy her body on every corner because my deadbeat father sat on his lard ass all day, calling his little boy a fairy. Goddamn it you little fairy! Be a man! Be a man! I was a little boy forced to shove his gymnastics ribbon into his dad's nose, until it pierced his brain. My mom came home, called the police and stuck the same ribbon into her neck. Tears and blood mixed together. Abuela came as soon as the police called.

GUARD

You killed your father?

PEDRO

He deserved it!

GUARD

I'm not saying he didn't.

PEDRO

You'll help me?

GUARD

I'd have to leave this job.

PEDRO

I'll make it look like I got the best of you. I'll give you a shiner, a real good one.

GUARD

How are you getting past the guards at the front?

PEDRO

I'll figure it out.

GUARD

Once you're out, then what?

PEDRO

Take care of my abuela. She ain't getting any younger.

GUARD

How do I know you won't end up in the can again?

PEDRO

(extends his pinky finger out of the cell bars)

Pinky promise?

GUARD

(smacks his finger away)

Get serious!

PEDRO

I promise on my abuela's life.

GUARD

You're a criminal.

PEDRO

With a moral compass.

GUARD

(hesitates for a moment before unlocking the cell doors)

Go to Mexico with your grandmother. Keep making those fine ass enchiladas.

(PEDRO steps out and punches GUARD. He falls to the floor. GUARD pretends to be knocked out for the cameras in the cell corridor.)

PEDRO
Invite me over for dinner before I go?

GUARD

(through clenched teeth, still pretending)

Maybe.

PEDRO
That ain't exactly a no.

GUARD
It's a maybe, with yes tendencies. Now go.

PEDRO
I like my meat well done.

(PEDRO leans down and grabs GUARD by the collar of his shirt.)

GUARD
What are you doing?

PEDRO
Getting a piece of the main course, baby.

(PEDRO leans down and kisses GUARD. GUARD sort of leans into it.)

GUARD
I ain't no baby bird. I'm a hawk.

(GUARD stands after PEDRO runs out of the cell corridors. He wears a smile on his face like a proud superhero. A moment later the voice of OTHER GUARD is heard.)

OTHER GUARD
He's got the gun!

(One shot is heard, then a scream. A final shot is heard, and a final scream. Lights out.)

Lavender Lenses | Melissa Termini



Roderick Travis Bennett and People Alike: A Tribute | Victoria Huong

Listening to the meaningless but pretty sounding music aggravated my homework-stressed mind — the noise of the looping instrumental clogged up my ears. Feeling numb and dazed, my mind suddenly recollected transient images of the gray, tufted carpet terraces of the middle school band room where I used to play the tuba. The shine of metal instruments. And then I see the figure of my middle school band teacher, Mr. Bennett, also known as Rod Bennett.

The 18th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution was proposed in 1917 and ratified in 1919 to prohibit liquor, but was later repealed in 1933 by the 21st Amendment because people could not resist the allure of liquor. I wonder if still kept in place, maybe Mr. Bennett could have been saved.

“We’re going to practice rhythms next Friday,” he said one afternoon at the end of the school day in 2016. However, this was the last band class we had together before he got hit by a drunk-driver while bicycling and died.

I recall a blurry memory of when I had a math project due and I had not finished it yet. During class, I had sat in my chair and scribbled on a piece of paper which I had placed on the wide and curved surface of my tuba that was resting sideways on my lap. Mr. Bennett noticed: “Victoria, we aren’t doing that right now.” I put it away. Being a naive 7th grade student who only talked to teachers when need be, I did not establish a meaningful connection with Mr. Bennett when he was alive. Would I have felt happier or sadder now if I had done so?

The drunk driver got sentenced to 10 years in prison,

but Mr. Bennett was still dead. My memories show me my English teacher, Mr. Lederman, a friend of Mr. Bennett, sitting at his desk during class, hard in thought. I read Mr. Bennett's obituary again, which states: "A Hart District instructor since 1999, Bennett taught 7th and 8th grade math at Arroyo Seco for 16 years, from 1999-2015, and began his dream gig teaching band at Arroyo Seco just this year."

In 2024, years past 2016, I became 21 years old – the legal drinking age. In that span of time, I had set my tuba down in its case years ago, left the band, and pursued new paths. A few weeks after my 21st birthday, I drank a canned beverage, tropical punch flavor, with an alcoholic content of 4.5%. The bitter taste of the clear liquid made my mouth cringe.

Afterwards, my sight seemed a tiny bit unclear. I quantified how drunk I was with an online blood alcohol content (BAC) calculator. A warning statement by the BAC calculator tells me that at any amount of alcohol it is not safe to drive. My BAC was 0.03%, below the legal limit of 0.08%, and it was estimated that my body would process the alcohol in 2.5 hours. Sitting around, my senses dulled, I did not see the allure of liquor. Two or so hours passed, and I felt like myself. An adult person held to the same laws and responsibilities as every other legal adult.

My numb mind knows that Mr. Bennett is gone, but I am taught more lessons by him as the years pass. In the streets of the cities, I see poles and trees with memorial decorations. Crosses, plushies, flowers, letters and notes. Daily, people die by the hands of outright intoxication and recklessness—like what happened to Mr. Bennett. Perhaps, all of the poles and trees will have these decorations eventually. Another one for someone else I know, or perhaps one for me someday. To remember death, to remember carelessness, to remember a person.

A catchphrase Mr. Bennett liked to say was "Life is a beach." Well, I have learned that life is multiple, many beaches. Initially pristine until the vandals of drunkenness crash upon them, dirtying the waters and trashing the beaches. I imagine the clinking of drink glasses almost having the same musicality of instrument notes. Here I am, a student of Mr. Bennett, still wondering about that next Friday class to practice rhythms.

For Those Left Behind | Ysabella Gonzalez

Sei

The world came to an end when Dijal burst through the door with a smile on his face. His short, black hair was point in every direction and his green skin was covered in sweat, but his eyes shone as bright as ever. Sei's heart fluttered in his chest. You'd think living together for a few months would make the butterflies go, but nope. "Sei!" Dijal nearly stumbled over in a rush to give him a hug.

Sei couldn't help the laugh bubbling up his throat as he grinned. "Does this mean you have good news?"

"Nope." Sei snorted as Dijal pulled back without letting go. For a few moments, they just stared at each other. Dijal was wearing the purple shirt he had gotten him for his birthday a year ago, though it was smudged with grass stains now. Sei couldn't thank the gods enough for Dijal, the handsomest orc to ever exist.

"Then?"

Sei watched as Dijal took a shaky breath, his smile wavering for the first time since he arrived. "I never actually made it to the council."

Sei's heart dropped, confusion and panic slowly churned in his chest. Asking the council was the only way to get permission to leave the Southern forest to fish in the ocean. They had been planning this trip for a month, wanting to spend a few days out of Akaj together. Unless ... was he changing his mind?

Dijal cleared his throat, pulling out of their hug. "Don't get me wrong, I did and still do want to fish with you ..."
His uncertainty did nothing to ease Sei's drumming heart. Dijal's gaze shot up as he looked to their wooden table, their two seats by each other. "Can we sit?"

It took everything in Sei not to freak out as he nodded

his head. His heart sunk to the floor as he watched Dijal move the seats to be across from each other. The walls in their home were filled with drawings to bring warmth, but now it felt foreboding. Sei's breathing was becoming short. What was going on? What happened? His boyfriend wasn't gone that long. Why hasn't he spoken yet? Did he do something wrong?

"Are you breaking up with me?" Sei's voice came out strained as his vision grew blurry. Dijal sucked in a breath and rapidly shook his head.

"No, no, no." In seconds, they were next to each other again. Sei watched as Dijal moved his hands to be together. Sei's heart slowed, but the anxiety stayed at the back of his head. Dijal offered a smile, but it was fragile. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to give that impression. I was just ... excited, but I'm not sure how you'll take it. I've been chosen for something. It's ... a lot."

Sei squeezed Dijal's hands, a silent comfort and assurance to continue. Even if Sei was nervous, he would always be there for Dijal. "A god talked to me."

Sei's thoughts came to a screeching halt. "A god? Like Ratheus and the others spoke to you?" Dijal nodded and pulled his hands away. "But they only choose monarch families through angels. And the Meshazco family has their blessings. Unless," Sei sucked in a deep breath. "Did the Meshazcos lose it? Are you the new monarch?" Sei took a glance around the room, but there were no angels.

"No, I'm not the new ruler." Sei's eyes drifted back to Dijal, a small traitorous part was relieved to hear Dijal hadn't been called to be a king and leave the home they had made. He didn't want to lose this peaceful life they shared, but when Sei really looked at Dijal, he was staring at the floor and wringing his hands. "But I was chosen to be a champion."

Sei's breath caught. "For what?"

Dijal raised his gaze. There was a determined look, like a fire had been lit under him. It was a look Sei would normally swoon to, but it just sent a shiver crawling up his

spine. "To save the gods." Sei felt the world tumble around him as Dijal barreled on. "While I was walking, Miras—y'know god of wisdom, reason, and what not—came to me in a vision. She showed me a threat greater than the gods or mortals could handle alone. She needs my help."

"Why?" Sei's question came out thick with anger and desperation. His eyes were burning from the tears he was trying to hold back.

Dijal looked as if he had been struck. "Our gods are in danger. Why are you so angry?"

Sei took a shaky breath. "Why are you so reckless?"

"The world needs help—"

"And I need you." Sei's voice cracked as he cut off Dijal. His voice came out quieter, "Or does that not matter in the face of glory and heroics?"

Dijal crossed his arms, "I'm not doing this for the world." "Then why?"

"I'm doing it for you!" Dijal's voice raised, taking a more desperate tone. "To keep you and our home safe. If you had only seen what I had—"

"But I didn't." Sei's heart was being squeezed, tears threatening to pour over. Could his boyfriend not see how much this hurt? Or did he not care? "Miras chose you, and you never thought about me when you agreed."

"I thought about how to keep you safe." Dijal's eyes held a mix of stone and confusion.

"Am I not safest by your side? Am I not strong enough to keep you safe too?"

Dijal's voice came out angrier. "This isn't some wild animal. This is a murderous elf who has already killed an angel—"

"Is that supposed to comfort me?" Sei couldn't stop the

tears anymore.

Dijal's gaze hardened. "It's supposed to make you understand. I am doing this to keep you safe."

"That's not what I see." His gaze steeled. Sei nearly sobbed at the sight. His chest was twisting with anger. Who was this? "I see someone who is throwing their life and our future away for some kind of adventure. I see someone who is only thinking about himself."

"I was chosen by Miras to protect our people, but I accepted to save you." For a second, Dijal was back. The love in his eyes shone through, but Sei was drowning in his own pain. How could Dijal just choose to leave?

"Then you are lying to yourself. If you wanted to keep me safe, you would stay by my side. And if you loved me, then you would spend the rest of our 50 years of life together. Not gamble some amount of it away for this death wish."

And then Dijal was gone. The cold look was back, his steel gaze sliced through Sei's heart as Dijal spoke. "Well, then maybe that's why Miras chose me and not you or anyone else. Because when the world is in danger, I am willing to put it first."

That was it. When it came down to it, Sei would never be chosen first. His voice was filled with hollow anger as he stared at the floor. "Then go. Go be the 'hero' you think you are, but if you come back, there will be no home for you here."

And without another word, Dijal pulled away and stepped out of the house, leaving Sei in the silence of his own world falling apart.

Johe

The sun was shining brightly when Johe learned that followers of Ratheus had been massacred in a temple. It was off the tongue of some gnome traveler. He looked well-off in his polished steel armor as he downed his second

cup of ale inside the tavern. Johe had just stopped by to check on the room count for the inn, but couldn't help the gasp that escaped his lips. Everyone inside the full tavern was just as shocked, a sudden silence overcoming them all. The traveler froze.

Did he not expect everyone to hear? Did the stranger not know he was in the Holy City of Jad? Ale and faith were all these people had. Johe's shaky hand moved up to his necklace, the charm was in the shape of a flame. It was warm as he squeezed it into his palm. As if the goddess Erkhest was reminding him to believe in her and his younger sister Okijek.

She had left the day before.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Johe tried not to wince from the look Okijek was shooting at him. The pair of them were in her room as she stuffed clothes and whatever else she may need into a bag on her bed. It was the same bag they had used a week prior to hand out food to weary travelers at the port. It was work that would make their father proud, if that man was ever around instead of saving lost souls.

"Are you doubting me?" She had stopped packing to look at him as he sat on the floor by her door. It gave Johe a moment to really look at his sister. She was a kid, barely 19, and dressed in a simple tunic with pants. She looked ready to help the poor, not save the world as Erkhest's champion. Even so, Okijek kept that prideful spark in her eyes. It's been there for ten years, ever since Johe got in his first fight with a city guard over the fate of a child that had stolen out of hunger.

"I'd never doubt you." Okijek gave a strong nod before turning and continuing to pack. Anyone else would've missed it, but Johe practically raised his sister. It was one of the advantages of being seven years her senior. Johe cleared his throat as he stood up. He moved slowly to the other side of the bed as Okijek continued to pack. "You know, Erkhest made a good choice."

Okijek's head shot up. She was frozen, her eyes wide with curiosity and a whirlwind of emotion. Johe nodded, allowing a smile to creep on his lips. "I mean, Erkhest is the goddess of healing, medicine, hearth, and home. You have always helped the lost, weary, and poor in this Holy City. It makes sense that you have been called for something greater, if anyone can bring a sense of peace and safety to the world, it is you."

Johe smiled wide. Okijek's eyes were beginning to water before she smiled and wiped at her tears before they could fall, "Thank you."

"Of course." Johe glanced down to see that his sister just had to pack one last pair of shoes. "Besides," He flipped his head as dramatically as he could, "if Erkhest chose me, she'd have to drag the threat off me. My good looks would be too enticing."

Okijek's laughter rang out as she rolled her eyes, threw her shoes inside her bag, and closed it. "Yeah, whatever. Erkhest didn't choose you because you're insufferable."

Johe let out a mock gasp. "I'll have you know, Erkhest didn't pick me because I'm already too powerful."

"Loser." Johe snickered at Okijek's nickname for him. With her pack done, she moved to Johe and wrapped him in a tight hug. "May Erkhest shelter you."

Johe hugged her just as tight, determined to savor the moment before she would leave. "May Erkhest guide you."

"A temple of Ratheus?"

"They were all left to die?"

"In Plojin? That's three days travel from here."

Johe slowly returned to the world around him, leaving the memory that left a knot in his chest.

"No one knows who did it."

"Is it someone the gods fear?"

People in the tavern were beginning to turn to him.

"What hope do we have?"

"Could Erkhest really shelter us?"

A silence overcame the group at the last question. All were looking to Johe for answers. It didn't matter that he was the youngest, as a human with one of the shortest life spans and in age, there was a responsibility in being a temple official's son in Jad. But what answer could he possibly give? The necklace in his palm heated up momentarily, that would be his response. Johe let go of the charm and removed the necklace, he raised it above his head for the whole tavern to see. He did his best to project his voice as he spun in a slow circle.

"Be at peace, Erkhest is watching over us." Some of the folks rolled their eyes, but most were nodding and calming. They wanted to believe Erkhest would protect them, or at least, believe in his words. "She is the goddess of home, and the temple in this city is her symbol of devotion and faith. Jad will not fall."

For a moment, it almost felt like his charm was shining. As if Erkhest were by his side for a moment to reassure the people through him. And as the light dimmed, Johe sent one last thought to be carried away.

Keep my sister safe, Erkhest.

Ahshui

It was only on the seventh night of lying awake in bed that Ahshui began to wonder if he had done wrong by his son. Even if he was only a boy, barely 24 years, Ebaki had become a fine young tiefling who could find his way through the forest and survive. But that didn't mean he was ready to leave home. Ahshui himself didn't leave until 60, and that was nearly worth being disowned if he hadn't

found himself a wife. Yet, Ebakl thought he could just leave home for some call to adventure.

Ahshui huffed and swung his legs out of bed. His heart was already drumming with anger; there would be no sleeping now. After a few minutes, he was able to sit at the table with some tea, his tail hanging limply. The forest outside his window was silent as the moon hung in the sky. It was on a night like this that Ebakl stormed out. Ahshui tightened his grip on the cup.

The boy had barely listened to any of the advice and points Ahshui had made. He just insisted that the goddess Arinba chose him for something greater, to save the gods and the world. Ahshui snorted, a bitterness twisted over his heart. What did Ebakl even know of the world?

They were mapmakers, not travelers. They stayed in the forest around their home, their village. They didn't explore the greater area, much less the continent. They were meant to protect their home and the people who took care of them, not run off on an adventure for a world that ignored their village's existence.

And yet, when he pointed this out to the boy, all Ebakl said was Arinba would take care of him. That maybe saving their world was the step needed to bring awareness to their village. That maybe, just maybe, if a Tiefling—those that inherently looked like demons—saved everyone, they would finally be treated as equals.

But this was the naivety of youth and people's hearts are not so easily swayed.

Now Ahshui believed in the gods like everyone else, he could point you to the nearest temple if needed, but he is not one to tempt the whims of immortals like the boy. Arinba specialized in hunting, archery, protection, and animals; a known fact to every tiefling around the village. But she knew nothing of fighting great evils that the boy had grown excited to face.

After a lifetime of faith, Arinba had repaid Ahshui by corrupting his son's mind with fantasies of being more than he is. If that was all the goddess had to offer then Ahshui

was done with fai—

A knock at the door cut off his thought. Ahshui blinked. The forest outside was bustling with life as the birds sang and flew. The sun was beginning to climb, but hadn't yet reached its peak. The tea in his hand had long since gone cold. How much time had he lost? The knock was harder this time. Ahshui let out a sigh as he stood. His joints were creaking from being stiff for so long. His jaw began to loosen as he finally unclenched it. Thinking about Ebakl never led to anything good.

It was only a few footsteps before he swung the door open. Ahshui's brain screeched to a halt seeing Zahar, the baker's daughter, standing there out of breath. Her face was flushed as if she had run across the village to talk to him. Ahshui opened his mouth to speak, but she just raised a finger. Her tail was swaying slowly but her horns stood tall. Whatever she had to say must've been important to drag her away from her work.

"There is news of Ebakl." The words streamlined out of her once she caught her breath. "He and a few others had a run in with the person who massacred the followers of Ratheus. Ebakl and the others lost, but don't worry, he is safe."

A tiny part was relieved at the news, but a larger part of Ahshui felt a cold wave wash over him. His eyes narrowed, his tail bristled, and his mouth twisted into a sneer. "I don't want any more news of that boy."

Zahar flinched as if she had been struck. Who was she to judge? She wasn't there when Ahshui raised his son alone after his wife had passed. She wasn't there when Ahshui had to figure out how to be a father. She wasn't there when Ahshui sacrificed everything for his son. And all that boy did was throw it all away. So what did it matter?

Ahshui slammed the door shut with one final word. "Ebakl is no son of mine."

Koi

"Is it true your sister left to save the world?" The man in

the fruit stand held out the apple for Koi to take, as if her answer would be payment enough. He had an earnestness in his eyes, searching for misplaced hope or a good story to tell.

Koi scoffed and took the fruit. "Sure, off to be a hero."

The elf's face dropped into a frown, but the gleam never left his eyes. Even if she was just the younger sister, a lot of people treated her differently after word got out of a band of 'heroes' looking to take down the angel-killer. Even in a big port town like this one, they somehow all knew how to find her. So much for the days where she and Ojwe were ignored like street rats.

"You say 'hero' like it's a bad thing."

"Is it a good thing?" Koi glanced around the market. Most people talked in hushed tones after the monarch family had been massacred by the rampaging elf. A month ago, this street would've been alive with shouting, laughter, and stories. There would be days where Koi and her sister would sit on the roof of a nearby building and just listen to the noise, pretending they were a part of it all. Now, there was a soft murmur as if sound would bring death.

Koi glared at her apple. "In every story, the hero gets praise for going on some long journey and defeating the great evil. But no one ever wonders about the people they leave behind or the ones they couldn't save."

Her words hung in the air for a moment before she blinked and cleared her throat. "Sorry. No one really listens anymore—"

"It's alright." The man gave her a soft smile. "In a port town, everyone is itching to tell stories, but no one ever takes the time to listen to one."

"Then why are you?" Koi's eyes narrowed.

"Because everyone needs to feel heard. From ancient elves to tiny dwarves like you, we all have something to

share."

Koi shook her head. "Yeah, well, go learn another story."

"Wait." She had already pivoted when the elf called after her. She shouldn't have spoken to him, he was becoming tedious. "Can I at least offer you another apple? You look like you could use the food."

"Fine." Koi took a deep breath and held out her spare hand.

The man smiled and handed it over. She rolled her eyes. "Ojwe would be happy to know you ate."

Koi snorted. "Yeah, well she is my older sis—" Koi's heart dropped. Every alarm was going off in her mind as her breath caught. The elf had a darker gleam in his eyes as he watched her.

She never told him her sister's name.

Her body was itching to run, but everything in her mind screamed to stay still. As if this tension was the only thing keeping her alive. The elf's face spread into a wide grin. "Oh come on now, we were having a moment." He slowly moved around the fruit stall and for the first time, Koi really looked at him.

His clothes and boots were filthy, but they were covered by his deep purple, long coat. It's a fabric to symbolize wealth, but it hung loose on him. It's not his. His golden eyes were a strange counter to his dark brown hair. Everything about him said commoner, but Koi knew this had to be him. The angel-killer.

Koi's mouth went dry as she began to shake. The elf began to glow, his entire being screamed death. Every customer and stall owner screamed and fled. Koi wanted to go with them, to shout for someone to grab her, but she was frozen and ignored.

The entire street was deserted in two minutes.

He glared down at her. His eyes were shining with glee. "Aren't you going to eat the apples?"

How am I supposed to tell Ojwe and her little friends that you ate if you aren't taking a bite?"

Koi couldn't breathe. Her heart was hammering her chest. Years of living on streets hadn't prepared her for feeling this kind of powerlessness.

The elf took a step closer, he was towering over her. "Do you think it would be better to kill you with a magic you don't understand? Or to strangle the life out of you?"

Koi didn't give a response. Like coming up for air, she burst into a flurry of life and pivoted. Only sparing a glance to chuck both apples at that man's face. She barely made it a few steps before she got slammed to the ground. The elf used his weight to pin her down. She could hear him laughing as she struggled to kick him off or punch him or wiggle out.

He held her arms down and shoved Koi's face into the floor. "Not so fast. You were hard to find, I'm not letting you go so easily." His breath was right by her ear. "Did you know there are a lot of dwarves in this city? Killed a few before I realized that the only way to know who Ojwe's sister was would be talking to them."

"Fuck off!" Koi shouted. Her voice was strained as the elf crushed her.

He just laughed again, there was a cruel joy in his tone. "You know, I think you were right to run and put us here. There's nothing more satisfying than hearing your screams and watching the life leave your eyes."

Koi gave another kick in response. He grunted and lost his grip as she scrambled to her feet and made another run for it. She made it further down the street only to get tackled again. This time he waved his hand and she was forced to the ground. He had a crazed look in his eyes, as if he couldn't decide between being angry or happy. "That wasn't nice." He pulled out a knife.

Oh gods, where was her sister? If the angel-killer was here, then she had to be too, right? She would come save her in time ... right?

The elf took a deep breath. "Are you scared? Have you prayed to the gods yet? Have you felt their silence? Because they aren't coming for you, like they didn't come for me."

"Fuck you!" Koi's voice cracked. "Ojwe will come! She chose to be a hero and she will save me!" The elf smiled and knelt down with the blade at her neck. The steel was cold as it pressed against Koi's skin. "She ... she has to be here."

"I'll let her know

Anelle

Anelle thought she knew busy. Being raised in the blessed city of Virce, they got a lot of travelers coming into the northeastern forest in the hopes of being closer to the gods. Anelle herself had never even met one until Ratheus appeared before her and her girl, Ibani, a few weeks ago. Now, the city was thriving with life ... but for all the wrong reasons.

"The port city Drocx was attacked two days ago." Anelle froze as she eavesdropped on the conversation shared by two orcs. The best place to get news was ironically the temple. It's where people felt the safest to gossip, as if any of the gods were sitting there listening to them. "I heard the angel-killer was there to murder someone important to a champion."

Anelle's heart dropped as the orc's companion gasped and spoke. "Did they succeed?"

The orc nodded. "And after, the entire city was set on fire. Anyone who escaped is homeless. I couldn't imagine losing everything."

Both women shook their heads as ice moved through Anelle's veins. That's what Ibani had left to face? She

grabbed the ring hanging on her necklace. Ibani had promised to come home to her, but could she really face that kind of a monster? She had always imagined a full life with her, all 640 more years left. But could that really be at risk?

"Are we really safe here?" The women continued to whisper. Only to send a glare in Anelle's direction. "Maybe as long as they are around." The orc's voice was dripping with venom. "Why do the gods favor aasimars? Why not protect and bless us all?"

"They protect those with faith. Where is yours?" Both women looked aghast at being confronted. Was she supposed to just take that and go? Anelle took a deep breath and shook her head as she left the temple.

Before this mess, aasimars were treated with respect or at least indifference, but lately, there has been nothing but contempt. Not that it was fair, the aasimars had to fight for everything they have just like the others. But no one bothered to listen. Anelle swung open the temple doors and marched away from the city.

It felt like a lifetime ago when she and Ibani would spend days helping tourists to the temple of Ratheus before spending their evenings up in some tree. They'd giggle about the children's rhyme as they kissed in a tree themselves. Before Ibani was chosen to be champion, Anelle had proposed and gotten a yes. It was the happiest day of her life, and now she didn't even know if she'd get a ceremony.

Anelle took a deep breath as her heart began to beat faster. She wouldn't panic. Ratheus was the most powerful of all the gods, he was the ruler of the skies, surely he could protect Ibani. And if she was correct, each of the champions chosen were represented by some kind of god. Each had to be powerful in some kind of way.

Her body gave a shudder as she thought about what the orcs said before. She couldn't imagine her or Ibani's life being cut short. In some distant part of her mind, it felt like they would live forever. Anelle shook her head. Despite how sheltered everyone thinks aasimars are, Anelle knew

Ibani was strong and persuasive. She would make it home.

She had to.

Anelle took a glance around the area, noticing she had walked over to their favorite tree to sit in. Being closer to the stars always helped. Anelle made it up the tree and leaned against its trunk as she sat on a sturdy branch. If she shut her eyes, she could almost pretend it was a stiffer Ibani.

In her mind's eye, Ibani had a soft smile as she wrapped her arms around Anelle. They would enjoy the breeze and draw images in the stars until Anelle fell asleep. Anelle's eyelids began to droop, feeling heavier and heavier as her heart slowed. It had been so long since she felt Ibani's arms. Maybe, just maybe, it would be okay to take a small nap here—

An explosion of thunder echoed as a giant lightning strike hit the forest and blinded Anelle. A huge wave of air blasted the trees a second later. Anelle barely kept her grip on the trunk as the tree she was on swayed. As the trees came to a standstill and Anelle's vision returned, she noticed a huge smoke cloud rising from the forest where the lightning struck.

That blast wasn't natural. Thunder never sounded that suddenly and lightning never struck that hard. A tiny voice at the back of Anelle's mind whispered that it was Ibani. If Ratheus chose her, wouldn't that give her some kind of power? The explosion was probably only half a day's walk. If she ran, she could see Ibani again.

But why would she need such a big strike? Anelle's heart stuttered. The only reason they would need something that big was to face the angel-killer. But was it enough?

Was this the silence of victory or death?

Weeping Over Words | India Thompson

Poetry is a dying.

The poor guy is mangled,
beaten, and abused.
Words twisted, bleeding
black ink in a cold, dark place.

He is screaming for someone
and although several hear it,
that's not what Poetry wants.

Poetry doesn't just want people to
hear him scream.
He wants to reach those
who will bother to listen
and sympathize with his agony
even if it's too late
to save him.

Too bad those few
are all but gone.

Poetry wants a revolution.
Poetry wants to be born again.
Poetry wants a voice.
Poetry screams for the fallen.
Poetry begs for the broken hearted.
Poetry longs for those pained beyond
belief.

How curious it is,
that writers still exist
in a world where
no one reads.

Why would anyone bother
to be great at something
that no one
cares about?

Why would they pour their hearts out,
 weeping over words they themselves
 scribbled over paper,
 typed into documents,
 painted onto walls,
 only
 for them to be glanced at
 by others and
 dismissed;
 disregarded as some
 unimportant detail?

A writer is like a pianist,
 practicing and practicing,
 fingers dancing over black and white.

This pianist produces
 brilliant scales
 and cadences
 and arpeggios.

He works to be faster and faster,
 studying piece after piece,
 only
 to convey all of his hard work
 to an empty concert hall.

Why does the pianist still practice?
 Why does the writer still write?
 And why does Poetry keep screaming?

Poetry died screaming
 in the alley:
 bloodied,
 tired,
 ragged,
 suffering,
 but thankful for the few
 who bothered
 to listen.

The writers
read
and reread
their work:
erase,
revise,
re-word,
repeat.
Then they write
themselves
to tears again.

The pianist
plays
to the empty
hall
only
to retire
and sit
at his own
piano
and practice
some more
until his fingers
cramp
and ache,
and he knows
every note
by heart.

Poetry's scream still echoes
in the ally
to the poets,
to the musicians,
to the artists,
to the fallen,
to the broken hearted,
to those pained beyond
belief;
to the dreamers
who won't stop dreaming.

I hope they all listen.
I hope they all mourn.

I hope they all see
this new world
without Poetry,

and I hope they scream too.



Tear Stains | India Thompson

I had tear stains on my glasses
but didn't bother to wipe them off.

It didn't matter,
because why wipe the stains
from my glasses when no one
could see them but me?

Well,
I guess they could see them
if they looked.
I mean *really* looked.
But who bothers to look these days?

So,
I plaster a smile
on my face and pretend
there's a real heart within
my ribs
and mechanically walk
through work
and school
and down the street
and around the corner

until have a chance to
add more tear stains
to my glasses because
God knows I could never
afford rose lenses;

and I ponder
whether I'm actually
alive

or if anyone is actually
alive

because I truly don't know
how hell is meant for the dead
when there's so much
hell for the living.

A Poet By Any Other Name | India Thompson

May I compare thee to a summer's day:
Hot, wretched, and terribly unpleasant.

I was lost only
to be found,
Turned around,
And lost again.

A shame, I'd say, to know that

If a person is lost in a forest
Without guidance from
the Sun, Moon, or Stars
They are bound to walk
themselves in circles
Until death.—

If I were cast into darkness
For the rest of my days,
Would I spend every waking minute
Struggling to find my way?
Would I squint in the pitch black
Searching for the path back;
Alone in the night
Waiting for the sun
To shine some light
On the shadowy unknown?

I don't know.

I
Don't
Know.

I fought it.
 Like a trained boxer, I fought it.
 Like the sun on a clouded day, I fought it.
 Like a poor soul being pulled into the
 ocean, I fought it.
 Like a determined optimist, I fought it.
 Like a lost cause, I fought it.

I am fighting
 And I can't afford to lose.

This
 Lost soul
 Can't
 Afford To lose.

But it never mattered
 what I couldn't afford to do.
 I've lost anyway.—

I wish to sleep, perchance, to dream
 Of a better place
 Of a better life
 Of a better me.
 And to stay
 in that beautiful lie
 And never leave.

To stay
 In
 This
 Beautiful
 Lie
 Forever.

It'd be like Wonderland
 Only I'm no Alice,
 I'd be an imposter
 Living in a child's fantasy.
 But oh, how I long for the peace
 Of an innocent fantasy.

I'm lost and losing
A battle with sense;
Mad and dizzy with my

Dense
Sporadic
Emphatic
Thoughts.

When given the choice
To jump off of this cliff
Or merely lean over and fall,
I decided on neither.
For even though,
This cliff has been eroded
And become drastically unstable,

I am unstable too.

Therefore, it'd be far
more reasonable to
Wait for when we will
Both meet our violent ends
As Time sees fit
And enjoy the view while it lasts,
For it truly is beautiful.

It is
Truly
Beautiful.

May I compare thee to a summer's night:
Warm, mysterious, and full of life.

Waiting for the right passerby
Who's up to the challenge
To notice the beautiful starry sky
And pursue the adventure that awaits.

Is that passerby me?

To be honest, I don't know.

I
Don't
Know.

But I sure hope the answer is yes.

The Hounds of Hell | Brianna Darlene

Words that cut like a knife,
are the ones I look back on, during sleepless nights.
When my thirst for blood awakens—in the absence of light.

Bathe in my suffering;
clutch it close like a lover.
Lovely, dark, and deep;
the crimson waves pull me under

Plagued by visions of killing every false witness,
as they beg on their knees for forgiveness
But there is no absolution—for the unrepentantly wicked.

The hounds are coming—
to drag us all to hell.
I hear them scratching at my door.
Locked in a maze of pain, it's just as well;
my soul lies in shreds upon the floor.

Rapid | Durena Burns

It's not the alarm clock that awakens Carter. It's the screams. She can't tell whether they're from a man, woman, or child. The screams are intermittent, happening often enough that Carter is on high alert even while she sleeps. The screams are so habitual that they break through her subconscious like a drill chipping its way through concrete.

The clock on the rickety stand near the bed reads 6:01. The sunlight passes through the blinds, illuminating the room. Carter likes to be ready when it's light out. It's not safe to travel in the dark. Who knows who or *what* may be creeping in the shadows? It's dangerous anytime, but especially at night.

She sits up in bed, grabbing a pocket-sized picture from the stand. It's a photograph of her son and granddaughter. Carter keeps it as both a reminder and a good luck charm. She wishes she could be reunited with her family, to ensure that all she has experienced is a bad dream. She places the picture in her wallet.

Carter grabs her clock, shoving it inside her backpack. Wariness is visible in her hazel eyes as she heads to the washroom to clean and dress herself. She views, through the broken mirror, the long scar on her cheek. She combs her brunette bangs and ponytail with her fingers. She eats her last ration and clasps a watch on her left wrist. Carter hoists her rangbow on one shoulder and her backpack on the other. A "rangbow" is a cross between a boomerang and a crossbow. She grunts as she takes their weight. She's 5'11 and is muscled up to 187 pounds.

Another scream—this one closer—causes her to hurry. Carter exits the house and cautiously walks on the gravel pathway, away from the gurgles.

The small, red sun is slightly above the horizon; the

temperature is warm. Carter is glad she doesn't have to take out a jacket yet. If she were to stop now, there's a chance that she'd be attacked. It's happened before. Carter needs to make it to the exchange marketplace before the first sundown.

Entering a wasteland, Carter sees the remains of a once-functioning town. Plant life is scattered on lawns of dilapidated buildings with their leaves blackened like they're charred. Carcasses of animals are stacked together. These "animals" can adapt to all climates. One of the most recognizable species looks like rodents; they're the size of ponies and only eat other "animals." Fires are spread throughout small sections, their flames dancing in the air. Garbage is tossed in piles across pathways. When it's hot outside, the smell is overpowering. It reminds Carter of a woman named Mrs. Barber and her daughter. Mrs. Barber had lost her husband but survived for a while with her little girl. The toddler had this odor, a mixture of feces and cheese, when Mrs. Barber hadn't changed her in weeks.

The exchange marketplace is where survivors trade goods. The goods can be synthesized foods and drinks, clothes, weapons, luggage, or essentials. The "luxury" items include walkietalkies, clocks, jewelry, Vaseline, paper, pain meds, candy, and communicators. Communicators are the successors of cell phones, only the devices are as small as fingernails. The tops of them have one button that pulls up a start menu and pop apps in holographic forms.

Carter waits for familiar patrons. A crowd bustles past her and she sees her chance until a couple of the people are pulverized by a visible shockwave. Carter's face is sprayed with blood and visceral tissue. Panic ensues as people try to evade the series of strikes. Carter hunches down, making herself as small as possible. She hears the breaking of objects and a horde of folks either running into stands or each other.

The attack ceases as quickly as it starts. Seven-foot, robotic hazmat suits appear and order the remaining survivors in a straight line. The Hazmats aren't one of *them*. They normally don't use the Hazmats' advanced

technology, but some can camouflage within their environment. *They've* also evolved to mimic near-human appearances and mannerisms. Carter goes lower, moving in a crab-like crawl. She tries to hold up her heavy belongings so that they won't scrape against the ground. Carter almost makes it behind a warehouse before her rangbow knocks on the ground.

Part of the building is hit with a strike, causing pieces of metal to be obliterated. Some of these pieces fall on Carter's back, causing her to lose her rangbow. Another strike rings out and she's nearly killed, the shockwave inches from her head. The static of it has her hair sticking up. She takes advantage of the momentum and skids to the other side of the warehouse using the specks on the ground. She hits her head on one of the awnings as she stands up, listening for the Hazmats.

Her sigh of relief wanes as the tip of a sword is pointed at her throat. A teen girl with a small afro holds the weapon. Carter puts her hands up, cursing herself for dropping her rangbow. She isn't sure how this girl got the drop on her. Carter hadn't heard nor sensed her.

"Hey," Carter gulps. "I mean no harm. I was trying to get away from the Hazmats." She must look like quite the sight—with blood and grain caked on her, her hair sticking up, and what she's sure is a huge knot on her forehead.

"How do I know that?" the girl jeers with an unfamiliar accent, her sepia eyes narrowing. Carter takes note of the other's appearance. The girl's a hue lighter than her eyes and she has on a blue romper. "You could be one of *them*."

"I promise you I'm not. I'm human," assures Carter. "I'm unarmed."

"You're one of the Hazmats."

"The Hazmats are rarely out of their suits in public. Whoa—hey!" Carter exclaims as the teen grabs her backpack and dumps the contents. "I said I was

unarmed!"

"Trusting strangers is a death sentence." The girl ransacks through the supplies, tossing one of the bottles away.

"You see that I don't have a weapon on me. If I were dangerous, I would've tried to kill you by now." If possible, the other's eyes narrow even more. "How old are you anyway?"

"None of your business."

The aches on Carter's forehead and back are becoming worse. "You look like a kid."

"I'm *not* a kid."

A raindrop falls on Carter's nose and then slides down to her chin. She looks at her watch again. It's an hour and 14 minutes now. The sun is getting lower and it's getting colder.

"I'm Carter. What's your name?" The girl looks at her suspiciously. As much pain as Carter's in, this makes her smile. "I guess I can call you 'kid' then."

"I'm not a kid," the girl grumbles before she sighs. "It's Zawn." She lowers the sword.

Carter sticks out her hand for a shake. She slowly drops it when Zawn gives her hand a cold stare.

Drops are falling. Carter looks at Zawn in concern. "You don't have a jacket?"

Zawn peers at her uncovered arms. "The wetness doesn't bother me," she says gruffly.

"It's chilly out," says Carter, taking off her jacket and putting it over Zawn's shoulders.

Zawn's eyes widen, looking back and forth between the older woman and the jacket. "Why'd you do that?"

"Because you shouldn't be without one," says Carter. She peers at the clouds. "Are you with anybody? If not, you can come with me. Someone your age shouldn't be alone."

"I can take care of myself," Zawn scoffs, sheathing her weapon before handing the jacket back to Carter.

"Keep it." Zawn eyes her briefly and then starts walking the other way, looking back every so often. Once the girl's out of sight, Carter bends down to pick up her supplies. She clicks her tongue when she sees that her alarm clock is broken. She's still on the defense as she listens for danger. She should've kept the girl with her. *Besides, she owes me a new clock.*

After picking up her empty bottle, Carter finds her rangbow. She lets out a hiss, hauling the weapon over her shoulder. Carter treads to the front door of the warehouse. The stench hits her hard, causing her to gag. She decides not to explore the inside of the building. 30 minutes.

Carter thinks about the first time she saw one of *them*. They weren't as humanoid as *they* are now. She had split up from her group by then. She'd hidden behind a wall and had witnessed one of *them* hobble towards injured people. *Their* skin was so translucent and hung off their bones like liquefying gum. *They* had huge skulls, purple eyes, slender builds, and were taller than humans. *They* had no distinct smell from what Carter remembers and wore no clothes at the time.

As she continues walking, she takes out another blanket and an empty bottle. She puts the blanket over her head and uses the bottle to capture the rain. She needs to find shelter, fast. Not only because of the potential dangers but also because she's hurt and cold.

20 minutes. The sun will set soon.

Carter hears a bang that causes her to turn around. She's swift as she pulls her rangbow off her shoulder and aims, her half-full bottle now strapped to her leg. She keeps her mouth shut to prevent her teeth from chattering. It's difficult for Carter to make out anything as the haze from the rain is obstructing her view. 10 minutes.

Another banging sound from her right prompts Carter to spin back around and aim. Her stance loosens as she catches the outline of a construction site. In one of the areas, four corners of drywall are placed in a square. Carter scouts the perimeter and is satisfied that neither *they* nor people are nearby. After she finds where the portable restrooms are, she huddles inside the small structure. Her watch reads 9:05.

At 11:47, Carter is lying on the muddy ground in pain. Her blanket is still too damp to be comfortable. She's on her side with her knees against her chest in the corner, away from the heavy rain. She's shivering from the elements, tired and not feeling well. Carter is at her most vulnerable and if an enemy were to find her, she has little strength to defend herself. Sunrise isn't due for another 14 minutes.

The oceans are a deep purple, almost black like the water is ashamed of itself and is keeping its secrets hidden. She tends to avoid them, unsure whether they're lethal.

She leaves the construction site at 12:13 after a quick wash-up. What Carter wants to do is find a better place to sleep and retrieve food. The red sun is out and the rain is dwindling, but the temperature is still cold. Carter makes her way to an alley.

Near its end, Carter thinks she sees a heap of clothes. It takes her seconds to realize that it's a small child. Carter

doesn't say a word until she's right behind the child, peering at the back of some shaggy hair and a long, white shirt.

"Hey," says Carter quietly to not startle the child or bring attention to herself. "Are you okay, little one?"

She gasps and jumps back after the child turns toward her. From what Carter can tell, the child's a boy. His head is a normal size for a toddler, but his skin is fair and loose. His eyes are amethyst. The boy isn't frightened of Carter, but he does start to camouflage into the brick wall behind him. The only reason Carter knows he still there is because his eyes flash. Carter has never seen one of *them* so close nor so young before. She wonders if the boy hasn't yet evolved or if he is one of the regressed ones.

Once she's sure that the child isn't going to attack or eat her, Carter asks, "Can you understand me?" The boy becomes visible and tilts his head. He begins speaking in another tongue, the sounds musical and with multiple ticks. The words are impossible for a human to replicate.

The boy comes closer, puckering his lips and trying to touch Carter's bottle. The sounds he makes seem to switch to more of a whine. His four fingers wrap around Carter's leg with an urgent tug. At first, Carter stands still, thinking that the child is about to eat her. His fingers tug again and that's when Carter catches on. "You thirsty?" she asks, aware that the boy may not know what she's saying. Carter finds herself uncapping the bottle. "You're lucky I was able to get fresh water."

The boy releases a happy sound and snatches the bottle from her hands. Carter is put out by the child's behavior but tells herself that human toddlers can act the same way. He drinks with enthusiasm, sucking into the bottle even after the water's gone. Carter is ready to protest but then thinks against it. The child didn't attack her, so she could be courteous enough to not complain.

The boy hands back the bottle. As he does, he uses his palm to rub Carter's leg. She wonders if the gesture means "thank you." Carter has an awful thought of using

her rangbow on the boy, but just as suddenly thinks against this. Despite the child being one of *them*, she would've been cruel to harm him. She thinks of the innocence of her son and grandchild when they were babies, how their warmth and unconditional love had stolen her heart. And that's what the boy is: innocent. Carter watches as the child camouflages. She hopes he remains undetected by the Hazmats.

Glancing at her watch—12:43—Carter walks out of the alleyway. She rolls up her sleeves as the temperature becomes warmer. After a few more strides, dizziness overwhelms her and she stumbles. Black spots appear in Carter's eyes and she feels herself falling. She doesn't know when she hits the ground, but she does know when a shadow blocks the sun from her vision.

Her son gives her a physical picture of him and his daughter before they separate, as holographic images tend to be more of a distraction.

When she comes to, Carter feels a cushion underneath her and realizes she's on a mattress. She also realizes that she's in a room filled with swords and axes on the walls. Sitting on the floor beside her with crossed legs is Zawn. The girl has her fists below her chin and is staring at Carter. Startled, Carter lifts herself and thinks it's strange that she's feeling much better. She touches her forehead and is amazed that her bump is gone.

"Where am I?" asks Carter.

Zawn is quiet for a long time. Eventually, she answers, "You're in a bunker."

"How'd I get here?" the older woman asks, looking around the room. "How could you move me? I'm like double your weight." And it's true. Zawn is skinny, like how Carter would imagine a living stick would be. "You must

have gotten help." The girl shrugs in response.

"Sure," Zawn says nonchalantly.

Carter is uncertain about how truthful Zawn is being with her, but she pushes the doubt aside for now. "Well, in any case, thank you."

Zawn shrugs again and tosses a small bottle at Carter. "For your hurts," she clarifies.

"I'm good for now," says Carter. "The people that helped you, are they trustworthy?"

"You can't trust anyone."

Carter is so taken aback by the venom in Zawn's voice that she leans away from the girl. Zawn abruptly stands up and walks over to where a door is located. Before she leaves, the girl says, "Check the container. There's nourishment inside."

On the other side of the mattress, there is indeed a container with rations. Carter eats them faster than necessary and has a moment of sickness. The feeling passes and she slows down. She looks at her watch again and it reads 12:52. She had to have been out for at least 24 hours, if not longer. Carter asks Zawn after she returns how long she had been unconscious.

Zawn seems bewildered by the question until her eyes light up in recognition. "Oh, about seventy-two hours."

"That long?"

"It took a while for your body to regulate." *Regulate?* Carter repeats in her mind. Zawn makes it a routine to leave the room every few hours from then on. Carter in the meantime begins to do pushups and sit-ups to keep her muscles firm. She has no idea where her backpack or rangbow is. When she asks the girl, the other says that she'll give them back once Carter is "formidable" again. One of the times Zawn enters the room, she has a pouch of

communicators with her.

"Where'd you get these?" Carter inquires, grabbing a handful of them. "I stole 'em," Zawn says. The girl is wearing an orange romper. "Most are broken."

"Did your posse help you?"

Zawn tilts her head. "What's a 'posse'?"

"Well, it's an informal way of saying a group of people working together."

"Fine, yes," Zawn says with a dismissive wave of her hand.

After being cooped up in the room for what feels like forever, Carter starts to question why she can't leave. The door has been locked each time she tried to open it. She's also curious about why Zawn is the only person Carter ever sees. When Carter mentions this, she isn't sure whether to be surprised by Zawn's attitude.

"You want to leave so that you can tell t—the Hazmats where we are!" Zawn hisses.

"I wouldn't tell anybody," Carter objects. "I feel like a prisoner here." The girl grits her teeth before turning away from Carter. Zawn's shoulders begin to move up and down. The older of the two realizes that Zawn is breathing hard.

The teen turns back around. "I'll go with you then."

"Okay, good."

Carter doesn't try to argue. If anything, she's glad that she can keep a close watch on the girl. Zawn leaves the room to retrieve Carter's backpack and rangbow. Zawn grabs a bag and two swords to carry herself.

"You need help with those?" asks Carter, motioning towards Zawn's weapons.

"I'm stronger than I look," the younger says. There is a smugness to her voice.

Carter puts her hand over her eyes as she and Zawn depart from the bunker.

As they begin walking, Carter says, "Y'know, I have no reason to trust you either." Zawn tilts her head again. She doesn't reply, but she does nod.

A scream ahead puts the two on guard. They both accelerate their movements and the girl's eyes narrow. The temperature is warm and rising. Zawn's nose wrinkles in disgust as a wave of death hits them.

"You have what you need at the bunker," says Zawn after they had been traveling for an hour. "We should go back."

"I need a new clock."

"Clock?" Zawn reiterates in mild confusion.

"Yeah, you broke mine." They come across a shelter, a decent-sized lodge with a stucco exterior and barred shutters. The foliage on the lawn is onyx and there's a pile of rotting food on the side.

"We should go separate ways and scout," Zawn whispers. Carter wipes sweat from her forehead. "Shouldn't we stick together?" she whispers back.

"No," says Zawn before heading towards the back of the lodge. Carter doesn't even get a chance to respond. *She's gonna get herself killed.*

As Carter maneuvers on her hands and knees, she sees a grubby-looking man sitting on a sofa through the cracks in the foundation. His eyes find hers instantly. The man grabs a ranged weapon on the table next to him. He aims and pulls an arrow straight at Carter. Carter shouts as the arrow embeds in her hand and she begins to bleed. The man summons others from inside the lodge, at least four

other people. Carter runs to the other side, her rangbow at the ready as she peeks around the corner. Screams, rips of skin, and breaking of bones seem to echo from inside. Carter feels beads of sweat, more from her nerves than the heat. *They're inside!*

Carter is scared, but she can't abandon Zawn now. She bends down near the cracks, trying to see if Zawn's inside. The same man is on the floor, whimpering and holding his mutilated arm. A scream of his is cut short as Carter witnesses a sword striking him.

Carter waits a long time to even make another move. She whispers after a prolonged silence "Zawn?" She can feel her heart thumping when there's no reply.

The rustling of bushes has her spinning around with her rangbow aimed. Zawn appears from the other corner with a black-haired young man. The girl has him captive, holding the edge of her sword against his neck. He has his hands up in surrender.

Zawn's the only one covered in blood and dirt. "The blood's not mine," the girl says, seeming to answer the unasked question.

"Did you see *them*?"

"I didn't see the Hazmats—"

"No, I meant *them*."

Something streaks in Zawn's eyes and she frowns. "I found *him*." She tightens her hold on the guy, her sword nicking his skin. Carter pushes her rangbow aside and checks the young man's clothes and bag. She finds four daggers and places them inside her backpack. The guy starts to protest but Zawn's hissing shuts him up.

"Let him go," Carter says. "He's no threat to us."

Zawn glares at the older woman. "You're stupid. It's incredible how you've survived."

"You're rude," Carter retorts, not taking real offense.
 "And I can say the same about you."

Zawn lowers her weapon, pushing the guy from her. She says to him, "Leave or you die." The guy doesn't have to be told twice, scurrying away. Zawn and Carter watch him until they can't see him anymore. Zawn then motions to the older woman's hand. "You're hurt."

The girl steers Carter inside the lodge, not acknowledging what Carter had said before. Instead, Zawn crushes the pain meds she had taken out of her bag. She makes a paste and covers Carter's wound with it.

There are seven exoplanets colonized by humans...

Zawn presses for them to move on again, not wanting to stay in the same place. Zawn doesn't seem to acknowledge Carter unless the girl is being authoritative or hostile.

At a particular time in the sunlight, the duo walks toward the marketplace, about a mile off. It's so hot that the pungency outside is affecting them. Zawn's purple romper is cut at the knees and Carter has her sleeves and pants rolled up.

"Why are we traveling when it's *this* hot?" Carter complains. "It's not a good idea to be out in this climate. Let's stop for a bit and cool down, okay kid?"

"Then you stop," Zawn says. "I'll keep going."

"We shouldn't separate," Carter disagrees. "We're better together."

Zawn ignores her and starts to walk ahead. She abruptly stops and shouts at Carter, but the warning comes too late. The two are now surrounded by *them* as *they* had

been camouflaged. Carter falls to the ground as one of *them* leaps over her hunched form. Carter attempts to grab her *rainbow*, but she feels a jerk on her backpack. She realizes that another one of *them* is tearing into her backpack. Carter shouts as she's hauled up by *their* strength. *These* are more advanced than some others, with multitudes of skin color, and are about the same height as humans. Just as one is preparing to jump on Carter and rip her to pieces, Zawn covers the older woman's body, taking the brunt of the attack. Carter feels horrible pain and realizes that the girl is impaled with *their* sharp teeth and is bleeding violet fluids. *Their* teeth are also sharp enough to puncture Carter's stomach. Carter thinks she might be dying, especially when peace settles over her. She sees Zawn's eyes flash purple before darkness embraces her.

Carter, her son, and her granddaughter are known as the second multi-generations to arrive in the habitable zone of the Andromeda Galaxy. Carter was raised on one of the *Markers*, ark spaceships used to colonize exoplanets. Carter had to witness her great-grandparents, her grandparents, and even her parents die without ever seeing their new destination. The first of the multi-generations to arrive was way before Carter's time. The voyages initially began as scavenger expeditions.

The civilians on the *Markers* are divided into groups of five. Carter and her family are separated. Her son gives her a physical picture of him and his daughter before they part, as holographic images tend to be more of a distraction. There are seven exoplanets colonized by humans—Carter is selected to live on the one closest to a red star. Unlike the exoplanet where Carter resides, her family must have dwellings underground for half a year modeled by the original Earth's time. Her family's new home still has more of a likeness to Earth than Carter's. Where Carter lives, the weather's sporadic, and instead of a 24-hour day, it's a six-hour day. There are so-called "oceans," but they're scarce and the plants aren't the same colors as Carter remembers them on the ship. The oceans are a deep purple, almost black like the water is ashamed of itself and is keeping its secrets hidden. She

tends to avoid them, unsure whether they're lethal.

The Hazmats are specialized people who are equipped with technology to study, identify, and experiment on *them*. These people also keep civilians in line, by any means necessary. For the longest time, Carter and others referred to *them* as aliens until it became apparent that the humans were the aliens. Carter has theorized that the reason she and so many other folks were divided into groups is because of their value. It seems like she's expendable for characteristics unknown to her. The Superiors of the ark had to have known the dangers of coming to these exoplanets. This is the main thought Carter has as she opens her eyes and sees that she's lying down in a familiar bunker. Instead of Zawn beside her though, it's the little boy from before. He looks like he has aged three years, his skin tighter and having more of a tint to it.

"Hey there, little guy," Carter says carefully.

"H'llo," he says without the ticks. He almost sounds human.

"Learned English, huh?"

"A little," the boy says. "Zawn teach."

"Speaking of Zawn," Carter mutters, her voice hoarse. "Where is she?"

The boy stands and then hobbles to the corner of the room where Zawn's bag is. He rummages in it before taking out a communicator. Carter can tell that he's sending a message to someone, noticing that the boy has evolved to have five fingers on each hand.

Carter is relieved as she sees Zawn enter the room, perfectly fine. She is adorned in a yellow romper this time. Zawn's right hand is clasped with a communicator and her left hand has a clock—Carter's alarm clock. It's fixed.

"You're one of *them*," the older woman blurts out. Zawn's eyes widen before she glares. "You saved me,"

Carter says in a flat tone. *Why?*

Zawn answers as though she read the other's mind. She says, "I followed you."

"You followed me?"

Zawn has the communicator on top of the clock, placing both on the floor. "Yes," she speaks to herself in her native tongue before continuing. "After you gave me your jacket."

"That changed your mind about humans?"

"No. I changed my mind about *you* after you helped one of our young."

With as few words as possible, Zawn explains that Carter giving the boy water and letting him live was an act the girl would've never expected from a human. She camouflaged herself and trailed after Carter. When the older woman had fainted, Zawn found her and carried her back to the bunker.

"I thought about eating you several times," admits Zawn unabashedly, but all Carter does is laugh. It's not like she wasn't as guilty in her thoughts about the boy. She winces when an ache comes to her torso. She wonders about the extent of Zawn's abilities. Will her torso look like it has a horrific wound?

"But you didn't," Carter points out. "How'd you heal me?"

"I'm able to heal myself without scars, but you were already dead. I almost couldn't bring you back. It takes a lot out of me." *I had died?* Carter shuts her eyes, sorrow emerging. She feels tears behind her eyelids, mixed emotions battling inside her.

"What do your...friends think about you helping me?" asks Carter.

"They don't know," says Zawn. "I got away and hid until they were gone."

Carter looks at Zawn briefly before looking at the boy. "What's your name?"

"Jay."

Carter half smiles. "Thanks for watching over me, Jay." The boy just nods, focused more on fiddling with the communicators.

Zawn walks over to Carter and bends down. The girl then hands the picture of Carter's family to her.

Carter's eyes water again as she caresses the photo with her index finger. It's intact. The older woman then looks at Zawn. There are so many things she wants to say, so many things left unsaid. Carter wants to apologize to the girl for humans taking her planet, wants to learn more about Zawn's species and how *they've* adapted to humans and human languages, wants to know how *they* can evolve so fast, wants to understand *their* abilities, wants to make it up to Zawn...

"Thanks, kid," Carter whispers. The usual hardness in Zawn's eyes softens just a little.

The Doll That Didn't Die | Nilgoon Askari

In memory of Mona Heydari, Romina Ashrafi and all innocent women who are the victims of honor killings and child marriages in the world.

Logline

A 13-year-old Leila refuses forced marriage to confront a patriarchal community where powerless women are victims of honor killing and child marriages.

FADE IN:

EXT. ADOBE VILLAGE - AFTERNOON

A dead tree looms in the shadows of the desert. Many dolls hang from twisted branches. WIND HOWLS. Black dust blows in an ominous formation in the air.

MAMA ANGIE (V.O.)

The Black wedding day has been in our tradition for generations. An evil wind that has plagued our girls causing sorrow, misery and death.

EXT. ADOBE, YARD - AFTERNOON

A black cloud of dust hovers near the window. LEILA (13) petite doll-like figure stands by the glass. Brown skin. Brunette hair. Sad chestnut eyes gaze at the black dust.

On the ground is the ceremonial spread for a reception. White cloths. Rows of chairs. Circular tables. An oval display of eggs. A Pomegranates pyramid. Circle of Apples. Planters of wheatgrass. A fully cooked lamb on a silver platter.

INT. LEILA'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Leila opens the book. She stares at the photo of her PARENTS' marriage ceremony. JAMAL (40s) stands next to SOFIA (20s).

They are emotionless. Jamal has a mustache. Sun-burnt face.

Sofia has innocent baby face with sad eyes. Long black hair.

EXT. ADOBE, YARD - AFTERNOON

WOMAN MAKEUP ARTIST (30s) approaches with a pink wooden box in hand walks to the house.

INT. LEILA'S ROOM- AFTERNOON

FOOTSTEPS. CHATTER. LAUGHTER. SEVERAL WOMEN enter. Leila gets scared. She closes the book. Slides it between books on a shelf. She squeezes her doll.

MAMA ANGIE (60s) weathered old woman sits in the corner.

AUNT SARA (30s) average build. She carries a bridal dress.

Leila's little sister JASMINE (11) enters.

DRUMMER WOMAN (20s) average build. Plays a drum. She walks around the room.

WOMEN 1 (30s) is skinny. Mousy features.

Jasmine brings Leila to the middle of the room. The women circle around her. THEY SHOUT. CHEER. Dance. Leila holds her doll. She is immobile. Detached.

Woman 1 undresses Leila down to her undergarments. She's embarrassed. Covers her chest with one arm. Covers her lower half with

her hand. Sara puts the bridal dress on Leila. She fixes her veil. Makeup Artist pulls out a kit from the box.

MAKEUP ARTIST

Sit down, sweetie, we'll make you a bride that shines tonight.

Jasmine sits Leila down on a chair. Makeup Artist holds Leila's chin. She narrows her eyes. Twists her face. She gives Leila a mirror. Drummer Woman exits.

MAKEUP ARTIST(CONT'D)

To happiness and joy. Congratulations sweetheart. May my blessings bring goodness for you.

She attempts to apply eyeliner on the bride's eyes.

MAKEUP ARTIST(CONT'D)

Close your eyes, my dear!

Leila stares at the mirror. Tears wallow in her terrified eyes. Teardrop falls on the mirror. Blood splashes. LITTLE GIRLS CRY. SCREAMS IN TERROR.

JAMAL (O.C.)

You piece of shit! I am not stupid, bitch! I know that you are having an affair.

SOFIA (O.S.)

Swear to God, I'm not! I'm faithful to you!

(moans)

I'm innocent.

Leila trembles. Leila blinks. Tears flow. The Makeup Artist wipes Leila's tears with her fingertips.

MAKEUP ARTIST

I can't do your makeup like this, girl! Are you scared?

Leila's hands fall on her dress. The mirror slips from her hand on the carpet. The women surround Leila. Jasmine rubs her back. Woman 1 gives her a towel. Mama Angie stares at Leila with a pipe in her hand.

MAMA ANGIE

I know you hate this situation, but every girl in this village will end up like this.

She smokes the pipe.

MAMA ANGIE(CONT'D)

Look at me, and you will see the past and future.

AUNT SARA

What else is there besides being a good wife and mother to your man?

Leila is angry.

WOMEN 1

(whispers to Leila)

After the vow, you will love him and he will conquer your heart.

LEILA

(trembles)

My mother said that these promises are all lies. I don't want him. I don't want this marriage. I will be killed like my mother.

The Makeup Artist ignores Leila. CROWD VOICES APPROACH from outside. MUSIC RISES. Jasmine looks out the window.

JASMINE

The groom is here!

Sara approaches the window. Leila turns with a worried look.

EXT. YARD - AFTERNOON

THE GROOM (40s) enters the yard. Grey-black hair. Grim facial expression. A grey gown. Loose pants. Black vest aligned with rubies. Head scarf. Pointed black sandals. He carries a tray with a brown wooden box.

Jamal greets the groom. Shakes his hand. The groom kisses Jamal's shoulder. Takes a box from the tray. He opens to reveal the gold coins. Jamal smiles.

INT. LEILA'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Leila is distressed.

LEILA

(shrill voice)

This man is as old as my father! I could be his daughter. I don't want to marry him.

MAMA ANGIE

You can't deny our traditions.

AUNT SARA

Don't be like your mother!

MAMA ANGIE

A rebellious woman will never survive here.

JASMIN

So what if she says no?

MAKEUP ARTIST

Shut up! Let me finish my work.

LEILA

(angry)

I don't want to be like you all.

WOMAN 1

Did you really think you could fight this?

LEILA

I want to see the white wind that my mother always told me about it.

JASMIN

One day, a white wind will blow and purify the darkness of this oppressive force that stains this beautiful world with bloodshed.

Women stare at Leila with fear. Their faces contort. SHIVERS.

EXT. YARD - SUNSET

Leila stands by the window. Guests enter the yard with a

MASTER OF CEREMONIES (70s). He goes to the altar. MUSIC PLAYS. The guests congratulate Jamal. Some shake hands with the groom. Both men go to the altar to wait for the bride.

GROOM

Why doesn't she come?

MASTER OF CEREMONIES

(to Jamal)

Tell the bride to come so we can start the ceremony.

Jamal looks at the window. Leila stares at Jamal. Shakes head. Runs from the window. GUEST CHATTER. Jamal moves towards the

house angry.

INT. LEILA'S ROOM - SUNSET

Leila sees the red-black wind dust on the horizon. Clusters circulate towards the village. Leila smiles.

INT. HALLWAY - SUNSET

Jamal KNOCKS on the door. Sara comes out.

JAMAL

I don't want to hear anything. Just get her to come out.

Mama Angie comes to the front door.

MAMA ANGIE

You go! I'll bring her.

EXT. YARD - SUNSET

Leila enters with her doll in hand. The women walk behind her. The guests HOOT. PLAY INSTRUMENTS.

Leila looks at the crowd. She pauses. Jamal stands next to the Groom.

Leila pulls the veil from her head. Flings it to the ground. CROWD GASPS.

BLACK-RED DUST WINDS CONJURE. The guests are bewildered. They cover their eyes. Stand crouched over.

Mama Angie smiles. Sara grins. Close their eyes. CHATTER.

Leila drops her doll. A split down the doll's chest. A WHITE DUST GUSHES OUT. BLACK-RED WINDS MORPH INTO WHITE DUST.

The men at the altar are angry. All women circle around Leila. THE WOMEN STOMP.

WOMEN

(chant)

Woman, Life, Freedom...Woman, Life, Freedom...Woman,
life, freedom....

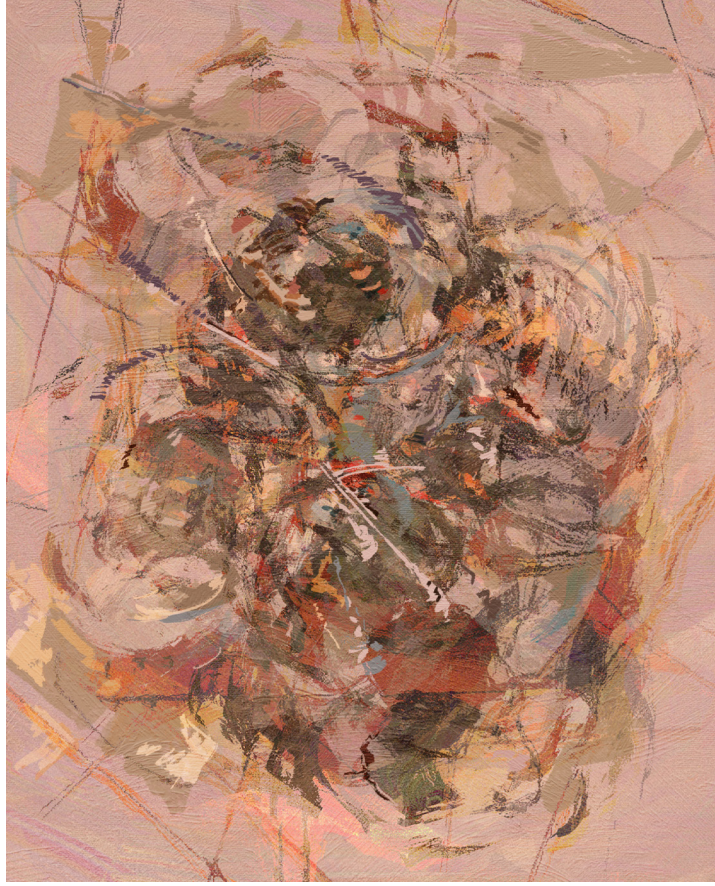
EXT. OUTSIDE OF A VILLAGE - SUNSET

A distant view of a village. A live tree. The dolls drop from the branches. WHITE WIND HOWLS. Leila's doll stands upright.

FADE TO BLACK:

CAPTION: Honor killings and child marriages occur in many parts of the world but are only widely reported in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America. Historically, honor killings were common in Southern Europe, Canada, and the United States. In 2020, an estimated 47,000 women and girls worldwide were killed by their intimate partners or other family members. This film is dedicated to the victims of honor killings and child marriages to broadcast the universal message of discrimination, abuse, and mistreatment of women that has been covered up with silence.

Tennis Shoes | Jennifer Yung



The Saints of Juicy Fruit | Sean Ahern

We used to know
the gray road owns
the fearless monsoon sky
heavy with unbroken lies.

We used to know the white metal van
with fiberglass seats overheats
as the boys in the back dodge bottles of urine
while they played Nintendo.

We used to know the frozen dance of cacti
that hope for rain, we shot them
while chewing the fuck out of Juicy Fruit,
our little lead seeds loved to sow the soil.

We used to know the smell of gasoline-soaked shorts
and the name of every roadside jerky,
we licked our fingers for the taste of money
painted like the canyons by atomic testing.

We used to know the mirages of ancient cities
seen through the roll-up windows,
where you can ask for anything
as long as you don't pray to Gods too hard.

We used to know the radio sage
spitting phrases from his glass knife,
we sing-along about sipping on black haze sugar,
pocket change and faith.

We used to know the cowboy summer
sweat as we lifted cinder blocks
until the cans were empty and we were fisheyed,
we traded it for dog tags, health plans, 401ks.

We know the open road
promises to never end,
we'll burn till the tank is empty
and sworn shut like an old rusty heart.

Artsakh: Be Strong, Be Brave, We Will Return! | George Gevorg Kalajyan

Artsakh: My History

Oh Artsakh, my beautiful land, my culture

How can I be happy, when you are not with us?

How can I live my life when others have suffered?

I saw your sign, 12 meters away, I wanted to frolick to you,

Like deers in the grass; walking in the grass, and taking it all in

Artsakh, be strong, be brave, we will return.

The treacherous nightmares you have encountered

The buildings in Stepanakert, being bombarded with rockets landing faster than the speed of light, men, women, children, elderly screaming at the top of their lungs Screaming like the victims of a shark attack!

Churches, schools, villages are soon dismantled into the ground; faster than an earthquake, destructive like a tsunami, there is pretty much nothing left; there is nobody left;

and it's a matter of time
until EVERYTHING is gone.

Artsakh, be strong, be brave, we will return.

The treacherous nightmare continues 3 years later.

The border is closed. Food, medicine, support are unable to arrive

We are struggling to provide support; like a huge boulder has blocked us

The enemy is blocking us, there is no way out

Like somebody has placed you in a room, and locked the door; no exit
Electricity has been wiped out, buildings are now darker than the caves where the
bats sleep

Our animals have escaped; home is not home anymore to them

There's no heat to warm the cold, nobody can sleep from the scream of children

Children leaving their toys, their schools, their homes and wondered why?

The homesickness is still evident, regardless of where they landed

It is still not the same; it won't be the same; until they're HOME.

Artsakh, be strong, be brave, we will return.

A 9 year old boy drives his family to Armenia for 9 hours

His family is starving, sister is begging for food, mother is in pain

Father is ill, no food to fuel him, no water, nothing! He has to drive to
survive!

Everyone is leaving, cars are lining up

The place where children would laugh, and play

Covered in snow

is now covered in ashes
With no human life

The streets are empty, garbage on the streets, animals abandoned, like a zombie
apocalypse.

No one is there. NOBODY!!!!

Artsakh, be strong, be brave, we will return.

We are gone now. Well 99% of us, because you kept attacking

Now, you started destroying our signs; Shushi; has turned to Susa

Colonized our land; settled in your people,

Even if you sank our buildings to the ground and diminished them like quicksand,

We will prevail, we will fix the damages -

And I don't care what Google or Wikipedia says. Shushi is Shushi, Artsakh, not

Susa, Azerbaijan.

Just because you put a dress on a mannequin; doesn't mean they're human.

Artsakh, be strong, be brave, we will return.

New signs have been placed, new people have arrived

But it is not their homes; not their history, not their culture.

Mocking us like the circus clowns at a festival with its animal balloons.

However, this is just cruel; it's only funny for those who colonized

Artsakh, be strong, be brave, we will return

The 3,000 years of history; of people living in these eastern villages,

The dances, where we gather together with our hands, strangers becoming family

Holding together as our souls rejoice, creating a flag with our tears and blood,

We make our dolma (grape leaves), make our coffee (very strong) we sing our songs

Our mountains, tall and strong, receive these songs, we declare our love, it goes in the air

Our mountains are lonely now, strangers are there, nobody is singing, no sounds, Our mountains are calling us. We are trying to respond but we are sent to voicemail by the current provide

Artsakh, be strong, be brave, we will return

We will rebuild our damaged buildings

We will be the carpenters of Artsakh

Like the phoenix rising from the ashes

We will retain our strength and make the comeback Now, it's just a matter of time Until our return.

Artsakh, be strong, be brave, we will return.

The Bulldog Cafe | Tristan Eisenberg

At the end of a very long day which had been filled with both work and school, neither of which moved me closer to the past, I found myself sitting at a bar which had just reopened after a twenty year long closure. In the many years since it first opened in the 1930s, it had been: a bar, a Mexican restaurant, an Italian restaurant, and a strip club. Not unlike the career of a character actor, buildings in Los Angeles tend to play a variety of different parts. Despite the versatility that most of these buildings embrace, few maintain the character of this particular establishment. It was not shaped like a cube or even a sphere, but an enormous barrel. It was a barrel.

I sat on a stool that looked out an enormous window, staring into the crowd that had flooded in. While sipping on a cocktail with an overcomplicated name, I caught the glimpse of something hiding behind the crowd. A doorway was tucked behind the collection of hip, theater types. When I first heard about the reopening from a friend, all he mentioned was the barrel, but hiding in that backyard was a familiar building from my past. I pushed through a set of french doors and made my way to the mysterious structure. After moving through a crowd that presumably just escaped a black box theater down the road, I stood in front of the doors of this extraneous building. My eyes shifted from the painting of an ice cream and tamale on its glass doors, and up to the top of the building, which was in the shape of a bulldog's head. A pipe stuck out firmly from between its lips, and a puff of smoke emerged from the bowl.

The Bulldog Cafe previously sat at the end of a manufactured Los Angeles street in the basement of the Petersen Automotive Museum, the very same smoke billowing from its massive wooden pipe for twenty years. The Petersen was a home away from home when I was a toddler. Every weekend my father would fling me into his sidecar, and we would race off to some strange place that he discovered on one of Huell Howser's various Public Broadcast television shows on California landmarks. Howser

spoke in a loud Southern accent, often howling at his cameraman Louis to move the camera closer in on some oddity in a museum. I don't know what Howser talked about in that episode, but I imagine that he was hollering at Louis quite a bit. The museum was divided into three stories, and the deeper one went, the deeper it became less a museum and more a simulacrum of a Los Angeles long since gone. Unfortunately, this dreamy iteration of the museum was sent to the landfill in the twenty-tens. If one were to stumble into the Petersen today, they would be inundated by white walls and cars without context. It wasn't always like this. In the nineties, the museum was a time machine into a smattering of Los Angeleses that no longer exist. On one Sunday, I experienced what it was like to crash a car with Laurel and Hardy in the twenties, to get your kite stuck out in front of your house in the fifties, and grocery shop in the forties. The Petersen was devoted to the history of the automobile, but used Los Angeles as the vessel to visually contextualize this past in massive, full scale dioramas. Before we began our visits to the Petersen, our Sunday adventure was often at the Museum of Jurassic Technology, which still houses an exhibition on miniature trailers of the twentieth century. I was always fascinated by these tiny automobile-adjacent displays, and so upon first stepping foot in the Petersen, my fascination grew into obsession. While I was charmed by the peculiar room of miniature trailers, the displays at the Petersen overwhelmed me, and scared me. Standing face to face with lifelike statues of long dead Angelenos broken down on a perfect recreation of an early Los Angeles road, surrounded by weeds and nothing but the vastness of a motion picture matte painting behind them. The sky of these dioramas reached on forever. The Bulldog Cafe that sat at the end of the Petersen's basement was the focal point of the display. I walked closer to it, admiring the paintings of an ice cream cone and a tamale on its glass doors for the first time. The dog towered over me. At the time, it seemed like it was the size of City Hall. Now, I know it was no more than twenty feet tall. The windows into the cafe were covered from the inside with brown paper, hiding the countertop and stools that I imagined were collecting dust inside. On this first visit, I stepped onto one of the bulldog's large, scuffed paws that had sunk into the floor and pressed my face against the glass, hoping to catch a glimpse of what was inside.

The paper was thick, and no light was inside, so I closed my eyes and began building inside the bulldog. It was not just a countertop and some stools, but a massive portrait of thirties Los Angeles. Much like the rest of the automotive museum, I pictured a scene made up of wax Angelenos in period attire. I did not know where the original Bulldog Cafe was located, but I guess it that it was somewhere downtown, not far from Bunker Hill. Artists and oddballs that filled those Victorian mansions would wander down the street to have a coffee inside the canine building.

Upon first opening the doors, the first guest to occupy my imagined version of the cafe was a painter. My father would often tell me stories about John Fante's life in Bunker Hill, of which I had little understanding of, but the alternative Angelenos of the earlier twentieth century who littered these stories lingered in my mind. The wax painter was sitting at the bar with a tamale on a plate, and a little sketchbook shoved under his arm. Every figure in the rest of the museum was detailed in the same manner, with pens sticking out of pockets and gloves hanging from back pockets. An older lady sat in a booth, wearing a sweater and a puffy dress. Her arm was outstretched towards a taxidermied tabby cat standing on the table. She held an ice cream cone in her hand, and it looked as though the cat was about to take a lick. A single phone booth sits in the back of the cafe. A young man with oil splashes all over his pants and work jacket stands inside. He is wearing coveralls, with a cigarette tucked behind an ear. His right hand is on the telephone as he yells into the receiver. In the left hand is a cup of coffee, about to spill onto a teenage girl standing outside the booth. She is holding a lollipop in her hand. It's all so loud Louder than anything else in the museum. After opening my eyes, I was once again faced with the papered over glass. Still, as I wandered away from the cafe, my tiny shoes bouncing off the faux gravel below me, I could not get the image of those Bulldog customers out of my mind. While standing in the recreation of a majestic car dealership, with floor to ceiling windows, my gaze drifted from the stunning early automobiles that surrounded me, as my eye caught another puff of smoke rising from the bulldog's pipe.

The bulldog and the imagined scene that filled its

hollow insides, remained on my mind for the years that followed. On occasion, we would return to the museum, and I always rushed from the first few floors of the museum to the basement. The escalator descended into the Los Angeles of my dreams, to the people dancing inside of the bulldog, dreaming of nothing but ice cream and tamales.

Years later, I found myself reading a superhero comic book that was stuffed into one of my father's bedside drawers. The covers featured a masked man with a rocket strapped to his back, and a Bettie Page lookalike in his arms. Below them, and the flurry of his explosive rocket pack, was a familiar bulldog. The Bulldog Cafe, complete with smoking pipe. All that wondering about what went on inside that cafe, and now, as far as I knew, I held a first-hand account in my hands. My fingers quickly flipped through the pages of the book, my eyes glazed over much of the action and romance in favor of the mundane moments inside of the cafe. The hero sat inside with a coffee in front of him, and tossed a nickel to the owner. An ice cream for my girl, he requested. A kindly old mechanic took a call from the pay phone that I knew was hiding behind that brown paper in the museum. He even spilled a coffee all over the hero's girlfriend, not unlike the painter and the little girl. It was confirmation that everything I imagined for that bulldog was true. It was history.

As I stared at the bulldog, a decade after my last visit to the museum, all I could think about was what was inside. The payphone, the counter, the tamales, every little detail ran back through my head. A film from the thirties that was never made, but I was sure would start playing the minute I pushed the doors open. I ran over to a bartender and asked to look inside. She was happy to unlock the doors, and mentioned that it was available for rent, if I was interested in hosting my next birthday party inside. The glass doors clicked open and she fumbled for a light switch. The lights finally came on. It was empty.

The pay phone had never existed. The counter was never there. It was empty when it was at the museum, she told me. Just a frame, with nothing inside but the machine that pumped smoke from the pipe. I moved my hands along the wood paneling that now ran across the walls.

As I reached the back, I noticed a picture. It was the real Bulldog Cafe. It was Washington Boulevard in 1934, and in the back of the photo, through the glass door, was a man sitting at the counter licking an ice cream cone.



In the Not-So-Distant Future — a microreview | Nicholas Godoy

...Will we finally be free from political and social upheaval, or will we let it consume the country as a whole until all that is left are the straggling remnants of human civilization?

Octavia Butler presents to the world a strikingly prophetic vision answering just that question: When the world has succumbed to the ravages of climactic disasters, economic decline, and societal breakdown, who will be left standing among the rubble and decay of the old world? The answer may not be as surprising as you might think, yet it is the response to that answer that Butler elucidates the cure-all for a collapsed society.

Published in 1993, the novel's speculative and dystopian depiction of America may feel uncomfortably relevant in today's climate. This feeling can be further exacerbated by the alarming fact that the story's futuristic dystopia begins in the year 2024, a year once thought to be just beyond the reach of our scientific imagination, yet the reality feels much closer to home than most people would like to realize. Taking place in a decaying California, *Parable of the Sower* explores a society that has collapsed under the weight of extreme wealth inequality, environmental destruction, and societal upheaval, forcing individuals to resort to drastic measures for survival. At its essence, the narrative reflects Butler's sharp social critique and deep insight into human responses to crises, serving as a serious warning about the repercussions of disregarding social, economic, and ecological justice.

Butler envisions a fragmented America: One that has allowed the fortunate few to rise to an otherworldly elite status, while the majority of America must dwell within shambled, walled communities on the fringe of society and civilization. With essential resources like water and food becoming highly scarce and valuable, coupled with the uncertainty of safety that comes with living in such communities, Butler creates a stark dichotomy between the few elite and the common man, those protected by private security which has been dictated a luxury, and those who must come together to overcome the harshness

outside the walls. Law has become privatized, becoming a commodity instead of a basic human right. Climate change has led to severe droughts and raging fires, leaving the land a scorched wasteland, unfit for agriculture, and corporations and private interests have taken over the responsibilities of government institutions. Through these pivotal notions and glaring critiques, one is left to wonder where the line between speculative fiction ends and reality begins. After all, this is just science fiction, isn't it?

The writing of Octavia Butler is most easily recognized for its distinctive and clear narrative style. This method is further complemented by a thoughtful tone that strongly emphasizes the book's themes of survival, adaptability, and transformation within a deteriorating society. The book's structure resembles that of journal entries, utilizing straightforward and easy-to-understand language in order to create a more personal and engaging reading experience, allowing readers to connect with the main character, Lauren Olamina, as she strives to grasp her role and purpose in a war-torn setting. One of Butler's most impactful techniques is her use of Lauren's first-person narration. Presented as a diary, Lauren's entries are both personal and prophetic, which creates a sense of intimacy with the reader. This format lends an immediacy to the events Lauren describes, as though the reader is experiencing her journey and insights in real time. By removing an omniscient narrator and giving Lauren complete control over the story's perspective, Butler emphasizes the importance of individual experience in navigating societal collapse—a theme central to *Earthseed*, which encourages self-determination and adaptability.

Though the events and characterizations are greatly exaggerated for the novel's effect, Octavia Butler did not simply pull these centralized themes from thin air. Rather, she engaged with the pressing societal issues at hand during her time writing this piece, which continues to remain as relevant today, in the year the story actually takes place, as when it was written in 1993 when these issues were but just symptoms of a much larger issue at hand. The 1990s is a decade most notably marked by its significant political and societal movements that are still resonating within the country 31 years later. Anti-globalization protests have begun in response to the advocacy for a more "interconnected" society; those

protesting argued that a globalized society would only lead to further exploitation of workers, a loss of culture, and further damage to an already weakened environment. Climate awareness skyrocketed with the news of a depleting ozone layer, leading to a surge in activism that steadily saw its return decades later, and the anti-apartheid movement continued to act as a model for global human rights activism. All of these instances of globalized protests and activism served as the basis for *Parable of the Sower*, which Butler wished to utilize as a warning to having these pivotal movements disregarded in favor of commercialization.

If one were to compare this story to something a little more contemporary in terms of its style of writing and societal themes present, then English majors may be able to draw its comparisons to Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* and Cristina River Garcia's *Liliana's Invincible Summer*, as all three narratives utilize a first-person narration in order to portray a more personal, more reflective and intimate perspective to the lives of each individual. In regards to the style of writing, all three novels make use of a journal and diary entry format so as to add a layer of intimacy, readers become entranced by the immediate and personal narration, which serves to fuel their understanding of the matters at hand. Each narrative addresses some form of societal issue, whether it be environmental, as is the case with *Parable of the Sower*, concerning immigration policy, such as with *Lost Children Archives*, or gender violence and inequality, as portrayed within *Liliana's Invincible Summer*, these themes help to provide a level of social commentary that can continue to resonate with ongoing discussions about the importance of social and environmental justice.

Butler presents us with a grim reminder of the consequences of our collective actions. Through very real instances of globalization and corporate greed, Butler envisions a world that has lost itself to the private wishes of the upper elite class. Taking into account the influences and context of the decade it was written, this story serves more as a foreboding warning, the inevitable that has yet to come, more than just a piece of speculative science fiction. In response to societal disorder, Butler emphasizes the importance of individuality, of adapting to change as it comes, and of letting go of the past to build a future ahead. She presents to the readers a crumbling and dying

world on the edge of total collapse. Butler thrusts readers into her world; where we are forced to reflect on the very real-world implications of unchecked inequality and a neglected environment in lieu of corporate gain, making this novel a timeless and important piece of speculative science fiction that continues to remain as relevant today as when it was written in 1993.

Plagiarized Corpus | M.M. Valencia

Books are rarely signed, nor does the concept of plagiarism exist: It has been decided that all books are the work of a single author who is timeless and anonymous.

—Jorge Luis Borges,
"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

Three students stopped by her Office Hours today.
Not bad for her.

She halts the flourish of her typing fingers, and the many burnished rings stand still.

But...why does she do it? Yet again, compelled.

She wheels her chair over the vinyl tiles, peddling herself to the door whose fiberboard nudity is censored by the poster of a poet (the fact that this poster hasn't been torn down and burned is a sign that our composition teacher is only an adjunct instructor here). She cracks open the door under the pretense of letting fresh air from the air-conditioned hallway into her windowless cubicle, when she catches a glimpse of one of Professor Maya's students across the way, reclining, almost too casually, inside the frame of her doorway. Dr. Lo, squeaking in her chair, wrestles for the best vantage in that narrow vertical slit she is peeping through, as if she's a birder who has stumbled through their binoculars on a secret vista spying into a nest and onto the promise of a hatchling's flight.

Or their fall. Must be a slow day, usually they flock these halls in halted migrations, the students swarming to consult *their* Professor Maya (at least those who cannot dead-reckon but who must rely on the draw of magnetic north for their grades), occupying her whole hour, even extending into after-Office Hours, before the long meditations in their squeaking shoes down hallways alone and into the sleepless, daydreaming nights beyond them. *I very much would not like to live rent-free in anyone's head, thank you very much! Nor as little magnetite crystals attracting the squawking of birds.*

"Hey Dr. Lo," the student waves perfunctorily. What a juxtaposition and a contrast, to turn from your favorite professor and see this other one who made you write an Annotated Bibliography last semester, just peeking out through her partially opened doorway. Not weird. Dr. Lo gives a rictus of a smile, endeavoring to act natural by opening her door wider (as if this was the plan all along). After following the student with the eyes in her motionless head, watching as they clear the frame of her doorway, Dr. Lo glances across the hall again, her gaze drifting one door to the left: over to Professor Maya's office. Her door is open, as usual, from which a greater light shines than anywhere else in that white corridor, because she has a window in there.

Meanwhile the student has already forgotten about Dr. Lo's lurking and is currently forcing themselves not to look back, don't look over your shoulder, just keep walking down this cold hallway, don't look back, she's not even thinking about you anymore, don't run back to Professor Maya's office... don't confess.

"Darkling I listen..."
—John Keats,
"Ode to a Nightingale"

Still staring in a diagonal trajectory across the hall, she suddenly hears sweet music begin to play from Professor Maya's room, a song sounding very contained and private due to the rest of the doors besides them being closed, as if she's playing it for the two of them and it will vanish a few feet away like a scented candle's odor.

Probably the result of the pot of coffee she drank before her 1:00o'clock class, her sensory faculties are all-astir. She can't work, clearly. The smell of her teriyaki chicken blends with the strong perfume whiffing from Professor Maya's open doorway. Dr. Lo suspects it might not actually be an expensive number or a potent blend but that the aroma is being amplified, electrified, from having recently mingled with her clothing and having touched her body.

Dr. Lo feels her always-manicured nails as they dig into her desktop, an electrocuted tetany of her muscles unlike on other, lighter days when she would scrawl into its wood and inscribe there forever using the almond-shaped tip of her fingernail, two big initials separated by the symbol of addition, the two letters offering the solution to this cryptic algebraic expression: $L + M$. Now sitting and gripping her desk she is seized by a self-conscious pang stemming from the contamination of cooked poultry in her cubicle. She puts the styrofoam container at the bottom of a drawer, burying its scattered innards of gristle and thigh bones like she's hiding a mutilated corpse—which is a dumb move, like whenever you try to cover-up a crime, she reflects, so she grabs it and decides to throw it away outside. However, since this is a public university, the nearest wastebasket to dispose the evidence in is down two flights of stairs and to the right. This path will inevitably force her to walk right past Professor Maya's office, the scopophobic consideration of which causes her to become aware her heart is beating—and since picking up on your own autonomic reverberations is never a good sign, like a hospital patient with renewed vigor stirring to rise from their bed, this pulsating signal in turn makes her second-guess her whole resolution. Oh my god, what is she a schoolgirl again?

"But as with Maxwell's Demon, so now. Either she could not communicate, or he did not exist."

—Thomas Pynchon,
The Crying of Lot 49

The "schoolgirl" metaphor narrated as ambiguous indirect discourse at the end of the paragraph above, might be less of an interpolation by Dr. Lo's into the patriarchal conventions and turns-of-phrases reducing a women's emotions to the precarious tremulousness of having a really big crush, and more to do with the self-reflexive awareness that she has spent most of her life at school. Although she did marry a statistician as an undergraduate, so in this sense, being a "schoolgirl" was a stereotypically "giddy" time for her. They finalized their divorce two years ago. Out of the four friends she's had who are also compositionists: one of them married a history professor (when they were both students),

one of them married an anthropology professor (shortly after one of them was a student), one of them married another history professor at some point, and one married a man who gave up at law. Secretly she has fantasized about meeting someone who doesn't put such unnatural emphasis on macro-analysis (although she acknowledges its importance), maybe someone with a similar interest in writing, maybe someone who doesn't just read words as supplements to numbers, as thin qualitative discourses spreading throughout aggregations, but who enjoys conferences, maybe someone who is in this same department. But for the past two years Dr. Lo has been married to her work. And she's never been so productive.

She has to admit the increase in her output has a lot to do with her being taken on the faculty at the university. There is a great sense of solidarity fostered in the department among all of the diverse English studies—an “all for one and one for all” type of vibe pervades among novelists, compositionists, poets, distant readers, digital humanists, queer theorists, qualitative methods analysts, and fan fiction and pop cultural and the fringe “pure” Humanities scholars alike. So it was unusual for any member of the department to be out of the loop about immanent interdisciplinary developments, especially if it related to generative AI, LLMs, the pedagogical value of these tools, or anything about Foucault.

The collectivist view on knowledge in the department also influences the faculty's local ecology by instituting a more inclusive layout for the delegation of offices, which, among English departments in the SU system, is considered to be progressive for its integration of adjuncts into the upper levels of its buildings, in an altered habitat, if you will, among tenure-tracks. This spatial orientation was accepted by the voting members of the department with total unanimity and seems to work out pretty well for everybody, including Professor Maya. Accompanying their egalitarian spirits, the permanent occupants of these halls tend to be curious about *how the other half lives* (meaning, how the adjuncts and Teaching Associates are getting along).

Moreover, if you haven't realized, it's not merely the spirit of the faculty *de dicto* that has been inspiring Dr. Lo as of late, it's also the faculty *de re*: as in *her*, the direct

referent of the discussion, Professor Maya. As an educator in this ideologically tight-knit department the pretty professor has also adopted a healthy interest in the new horizons opened by generative AI. So this can definitely be an icebreaker for them.

Dr. Lo and Professor Maya are the only residents on the floor who seem to regularly have their office doors open—most of the faculty opens them when expecting students to drop in, thereby saving the students from the awkward vacillation of considering whether they should knock or not knock...that is, since the doctor and the professor keep their doors open all the time, it causes one of them to develop the fantasy that maybe the other one is leaving their door open *just for* the one or other one of them. This is, the one daydreaming knows, only wishful thinking, and that more practically she's really just hoping one day the apparently and incredibly amiable and effusive and beloved and eagerly wait-listed Professor Maya, will just say hi to her.

"Hello darling," Professor Maya's inflection is in a mock Transatlantic accent, making it infinitely endearing. Dr. Lo, sitting at her desk with a box full of half-eaten chicken in her bottom drawer, listens to the mellifluous voice as it intermingles with the tenor of a man's, his rehearsed chest-projecting resonance bouncing off the walls, infiltrating her small office through the ajar door as hot fast-moving particles darting around her head like the hooves of Maxwell's Demon have galloped in the room, disrupting her thermal equilibrium ("or am I having a hot flash? No no, too soon. Way too soon," she reassures herself). Maybe it's the heat of putting out too much energy in an effort to control the ineluctable drive toward entropy that is keeping her from doing useful work...but she is suddenly annoyed, as if this hallway—their hallway—has been intruded upon by an outsider. One of these men who bloviates like a modified car muffler, fatuously farting reckless noise. Although, really, it's not so dissonant listening to these literati speak to one another: her silvery tones harmonizing with the velvety notes sung in his low register. She recalls something from her Masters studies in Communications: the halls back then at her private college echoing with voices like TVs broadcasting the ready-for-network dialects of a diverse student population, all bottom-lip screeching the same Jabberwocky of

prestige.

She spent most of her Bachelor's studying Literature on a scholarship, back when she wrote on Punk Rock's DIY ethos and its aesthetic influence on Zine composition. This was where she first discovered a glimmer of interest in the study of rhetoric. Since, as she now says to pretty much every upper division class the department lets her teach: "there is no rhetoric without poësis." But she first got sidetracked (so she now thinks) studying Communications-styled rhetoric for her Masters—focusing on applying Counterpublics to a Public Speaking (specifically, a scholastic debate) pedagogy. This was when she was under the youthful impression she would still be on some stage somewhere. Maybe no longer as a *riot grrrl* but maybe giving a *Ted Talk* with enough tact to be able to drop an F-bomb two; or she in the wings as director, with her ragtag team of crafty debaters under the spotlight as her representatives.

Now she watches informational *Youtube* like everyone else, saving to a playlist the videos she might later show her undergraduates. Dr. Lo sits in her office untainted by the imperceptible smell of fowl. As musical as those songbirds in the hallway might sound—with Professor Maya's mezzo-soprano erumpent and rising like a thing plumed from an unseen garden, and his honeyed slow tones warbling beside the low shores of a mountain brook, the whole orchestration painting the scene of a tropical bird as it alights on the ledge of a gaudy hotel fountain—it is a veritable vocal copulation that makes her want to burst out of her office and shout: "in the name of decency!" She smiles to herself, the outraged old ninny. At least she has self-awareness of her occasional prudishness. This doesn't stop her from getting up and closing the door.

[Quote missing]

The truth—something that might account for our doctor's severe reaction to this pedestrian interlude outside her office—is that over the weekend she created a burner account on *LinkedIn* so she could view and critique Professor Maya's résumé. This was initially meant to satisfy

her professional jealousies by allowing her to compare their CVs, subtract a few years and some white—excuse me, with skin like that—porcelain privilege, and then she was meant to come out the other side of the computer screen feeling consoled over this constant contest raging in her head and heart. Although why this task ended up taking her so many days and subsequent visits to the website—and why, had Professor Maya at any recent point checked her *Linkedin*, would she have noticed a continual uptick on her page as it was visited by one particular account titled MyahFavoriteDoorway—and why exactly Dr. Lo used this password below—

all of this is the more difficult conclusion to come by. However, rather than attenuating her professional jealousies, the project just sank her into a bad depression.

And now she's back for the school week in her office with the lights off and the door closed. The computer screen sheds an underwater light on one side of the cramped enclosure, leaving the other side completely in the dark, creating an effect like the room is really a submarine or a Yin & Yang symbol squished into a cubical, like one of those tortured watermelons sold in Japanese supermarkets. She should be working, but working once again is like working against entropy, to do useful work is too much energy, to maintain this state of control too much work in itself...

And like clockwork, here come the blues and here comes the body issues. She does compare herself to her physically too, not just merely as a professional academic. Her 20/20 devil-blue eyes versus her own glasses worn for a lifetime, frames and lenses progressively getting thicker and then bifocaled and trifocaled until she's staring through a grid superimposed over the world and she's not even forty. Meanwhile, I present the evidence, your honor, of the diminishing returns to my self-esteem: exhibit two in our little forensic reconstruction here is of Professor Maya's tenured skin as it peeks into the sunlight from the ankle, but will it ever tan? While Dr. Lo...well, she's always had pretty hands. To her credit she's always known how to display them, while holding pencils and pens to conjure grades or misdirect the precocious questions of Honors student's with the sleight of her fingers and the wave of a wrist. Throughout her life she's accentuated them with

bracelets and rings, even a little tattoo half-hidden, look, a permanent rebellion against the status quo.

So yes, she's compared herself a lot to her. Can you blame her? Wouldn't you? Don't you? She's even compared their *Rate Your Professor* scores. This was a fatal mistake, and she knew it would be too. Sometimes it's almost as if we want to hurt ourselves. Sufficed to say, this convergence of psychic factors paves the way for our heroine's downfall into plagiarism.

The rich intellectual atmosphere of the department somehow justifies it too. The new, exciting dance between AI and human invention they're always going on about. "It's all a part of the recursive process," she reasons to herself aloud. More than that, inter- and meta-textually it's all one big discourse: all the words and ideas we share together—even with Professor Maya. She sure reasoned pretty well about all this recursion stuff to the English Chair last semester, when identifying the "needs and objectives" for funding her **ENG 900: Process Composition** course proposal. She found out a few weeks ago the course proposal has been accepted. But, as always, she soon lost access to the sunny vista of that academic success behind a gathering cloud of doubt.

Thus, face drowned by the computer light, the roaring of their voices outside in the hallway like a forbidding waterfall, there she is sealed inside her small office, an adjunct of darkness, committing to a deliberate, nearly thoughtful submersion into the grotto. The one justification she makes before slipping into the deep end is, "well, it's only ad copy."

"Speech becomes indeed mere talk, simply one more means toward the end..."

—Hannah Arendt,
The Human Condition

The first question she asks the chatbot is: "Give me a detailed explanation of what a successful portfolio for an ad copywriter looks like?"

Within a few weeks she has amassed two successful ad campaigns: one for an upstart social media company and another for an international flower shipping service. The former collection of digital ads the preliminary statistics project are maintaining the average span of a "scroller's" attention for nearly an entire extra half of a second (.47). She has also captured the attention of historically uninterested demographics. She had a peculiar knack for persuasion predating her collaborations with a computer, and this was no doubt a skill she possessed before acquiring her PhD in Rhetoric and Composition. Nonetheless, the combination of these two powerful factors (persuasion and artificial intelligence) have enabled her to become outrageously successful during her moonlighting as a copywriter.

Two of her digital ads remain completely uncensored in Saudi Arabia. And what is obviously even more noteworthy than this, is how she was able to work around certain cultural sensitivities about certain "women's issues" that prevented the product from being publicly advertised at all and in the first place. As for her print campaign for the international flower shipping service, we don't really have the space or the expertise to write about what many commentators call it less of a "success" in terms of sales, more of a "progress" in terms of the zeitgeist. No one expected the clever tongue-in-cheek profundity of her "Coming Out" flower ad campaign to further receive some acclaim domestically among the major Southwest Asian nation that commissioned it. (Although as cultural critics will surely point out once the ontological shock wears off that I think we're all experiencing at this point: in order to achieve such levels of persuasive control Dr. Lo used much of her framework from the unpublished research she did on "90s Gay Jokes: The Antagonism of Shock and the Agonism of 'Play' in the Neoliberal Acceptance of Queer Discourses". It does make her feel a little icky to resort to such sub rosa rhetorical techniques for her ad campaign, for she truly despises the notion of rhetoric as "dazzling yet mere talk" [sic] especially considering some of the particular enthymemes she deploys in her flowers ads are originally conceived in stand-up comedy routines that functionally do what some might make the accusation is "punching-down" against a marginalized group. The thought of the ensuing controversy kept her from finishing her paper; so, despite the general feeling of intellectual

knaveishness, she's also unmistakably happy her work is getting a second life.

Anyway, it would be a little premature to say that Dr. Lo shifted the sociopolitical paradigm in the middle east, but there are some rumblings (how satirical they are—how much they might issue from a sense of academic resentment, as well as how many uneasy feelings in the ad industry have been stirred by a sense of encroachment by an outsider—who knows? but), there are some who, ironically or not, refer to her recent work as “the Arab Spring” of advertisement campaigns.

In fact, this week she received two emails. The first one was sent from a Dr. Mudrov, a Continental Philosopher on her campus who she's never met of course. But the email was eager and promised a lunch, so when she met the professor/philosopher at the bar-grill on campus, it becomes apparent that Dr. Mudrov is interested in collaborating on a paper with her. She (the philosopher) wants to analyze the intersection between, as she (the philosopher again) refers to them, the “hyper-rhetorics” of feminist ad campaigns as a mode for the composition of identity and the dialectics of female liberation. Dr. Lo vocalizes some reservations about rhetoric being appropriated by any form of dialectics, since, as she sees it, “it is somewhat dubious what role dialectics plays in the persuasion of an audience. I actually have a couple of papers where I argue against it”; however, Dr. Lo does like the lady's energy. Despite secretly having to concede ignorance and nod with a smile when Dr. Mudrov begins talking about rhizomatic writing as a collaborative process for group authorship, she does offer a few comments about a theoretical framework for a possible agonistic inquiry into the (“interstitial,” Dr. Mudrov insists) spaces contested in feminist ad campaigns.

Dr. Lo feels good and that feeling of self-consciousness is resolved when her new colleague begins to listen intently and even take some notes. There is after all a bit of an intimidating mystique surrounding the Philosophy Department, but as is the case when you're on a really good date and after a few minutes the whole experience quickly begins to demystify itself, so suddenly that feeling of inarticulate smallness dissipated before “a real philosopher”. Although it's not like she's been on a date in

a really, really long time to be able to confirm this analogy.

Oh yes! The second email is from a government agency. It is worded with a very promising subject title. They are very interested in her copywriting techniques, particularly in the metrics she published on her *LinkedIn* demonstrating what are, by the standards of the ad industry, considered to be “enraptured” levels of attention-grabbing. When she gets to the time she’ll respond to this email too. But she little expects her reply to win her a new friend like she has met with Dr Mudrov.

Maybe she will collaborate on that paper.

“This is only the beginning.”
 —Possibly *Genesis* 11:6,
 Winston Churchill, or popular
 misquote of
 “Death is only the beginning”
 —by Anonymous

It was, of course, a particularly hard temptation to resist, one luring Dr. Lo at least partly into copywriting, the hope of finding a platform to mass-advertise her infatuation. What she didn’t take into consideration (what subsequent promptings of the AI help her to understand) is how, despite the English department teaching Technical Writing and Creative Writing (two useful skills when copywriting) — successful “(M)ad Women” don’t usually engage in exploits that grace the face of the English department’s Gray Lit section.

Two staff meetings have gone by since her unprecedented success and no one has congratulated her on it. So, since she cannot rest on her laurels, and despite at this point really preferring to avoid any discussion of AIs and LLMs, these topics are still her major avenue into a conversation with Professor Maya.

At the very least her newly obtained international fame (outside of the department) gives her the confidence she needs to pull out the styrofoam container from her bottom drawer and the courage required to throw it out

downstairs. Fortunately, Professor Maya's open doorway is by the stairwell, so she can walk by the first time, casually, maybe making casual eye-contact with her at her desk as she walks by—maybe not, it doesn't matter, 'cause it's casual, she's just going to throw something away. But on her way back to her office, when she's walking up the hallway, then suddenly she remembers something she wanted to tell Professor Maya. Oh, excuse me, I was just... just what?

She can't even think of anything to say. Something about AI...? When did she become so inarticulate? Has she been entirely subsumed by text-based expression? What happened to her voice? What happened to that Communications debater who once won a debate arguing for the continued production and circulation of pennies in the Fiat Currency System? Now she can't even say—

"Hello," announces that voice from the lounge car hitched to the dining car chugging along the Transatlantic railroad, booming in the hallway but ringing faraway in her mind, somewhere in the indistinct haze of their past lives it comes, from when they were traveling companions during a Gilded Age. (It can't be? Have we been transported? Have I died only to dream one last time?)

[Some time elapses; we can tell due to the transition from Professor Maya's upright position framed within Dr. Lo's doorway to her current counterpoised posture as she leans against the frame]

"Wow, that's so interesting you're also into this stuff too," Dr. Lo says like a robot, an appropriate way to refer to generative AI.

"Oh, you know, trying to stay relevant," Professor Maya tries to sound humble.

Then Dr. Lo blurts out: "I want all of our students to have the relevant knowledge," and then more subtly: "Eh, my focus is more on AI literacy right now."

"Well, they're not that good yet, are they? You think they read?"

"The students?" Dr. Lo elicits a laugh from Professor Maya, who responds:

"Well, I think we know the answer to that..."

"I know what you mean. Yeah, I think the LLMs are like a regular reader's digest."

"Is that reading though? Are we aware of the digestion process as we assimilate our food?"

"No no, not yet then. I guess they don't read," she says, quickly trying to agree with her.

But it does make her think about how an AI models language and if maybe it's like teaching a model of reading to a human. People who learn how to read in a second language, let alone in a new language later in life, need sometimes very sophisticated models. A bricolage of college words swirls in her head needing to be written down, but instead she begins obliquely referencing a paper she just read: "maybe you'll appreciate it, eh, because of your literary background—the interplay of meaning and meaninglessness prompted from the AI through iterative feedback. Kind of like what we find in poetry, I think. That is—what would Frege say?—a kind of sense with no reference."

Professor Maya smiles and looks away (maybe gets a little red? No that's her own face). "I see what you're saying. But I think it ends up becoming poetry because of some 'deeper' meaning it has." She makes two air quotes, and with each one the doctor has to fight the puppeteer slacking her head-strings and jerking her back-strings contrapposto, as the professor's pale fingers seek to fold her like a cabaret marionette forced to take a bow. Apropos of nothing, Dr. Lo thinks to herself: "my instrument while I dance is the reedy accordion."

The doctor manages to muster: "Yes, I've always thought of poetry as the closest form of expression we have to thought itself."

"Doesn't get any deeper than thought itself," Professor Maya quips with perfect kairos, causing Dr. Lo to

simultaneously become self-conscious and almost melt into a puddle right in front of her.

"Yes yes" (recovering) "also I'm sure you can find a lot of scholastic utility" (she's babbling now) "by for example investigating comparing and contrasting different prominent literary styles or even based on some of the literature I've read what's eh a common activity being performed nowadays is having students prompt the AI to produce multiple essays in different styles. Yeah. You know if we can just get them to write and reflect discursively on any perceived nuances of difference in styles, you know, that's er always a good thing."

"That's a good idea for one of my Intro to Lit classes," Professor Maya supports her clear enthusiasm on this topic. Sometimes Dr. Lo, as a remnant from her undergraduate years, is afraid that she won't be understood at all, but instead will be gawked at like a bleating goat. Hence, the rhetorically imposed concessions, the self-interrogating clauses, "you know what I mean?" and "if that makes sense?" tacked onto the end of more than serviceable sentences.

Professor Maya jokes: "Don't ask the computer to write a story about Borges though. It'll write a story about a mystic detective who gets lost in a maze of hedges chasing the truth."

"I'd read that story, even though it kinda just sounds like an actual Borges story," the doctor banters in return, trying to search her eyes, maybe they can have this moment.

She responds: "What is actual and what is seeming these days, right?" The professor laughs that laugh she does (you know the one).

Secretly, despite the joy, Dr. Lo does think that maybe Professor Maya is too swayed by the typical humanist whim to always first see the problematic in every situation—nonetheless at its core, Dr. Lo thinks it is incredibly noble the way the professor has such a deep concern about this or that medium losing its soul to "Enframing by technology" (Professor Maya quotes Heidegger here).

Most importantly, really all that matters, is the professor is standing in Dr. Lo's doorway right now, the way that so many have lingered in her own, unwilling to leave, as if just maybe at this one moment she too feels that anchor in the gut, that kindling smile in the eyes, that which defies you to end this conversation. So, they stand there talking about generative AI's function within, or its disruption of, the whole writing world.

Tides of Time | Max Laska-Sandleman

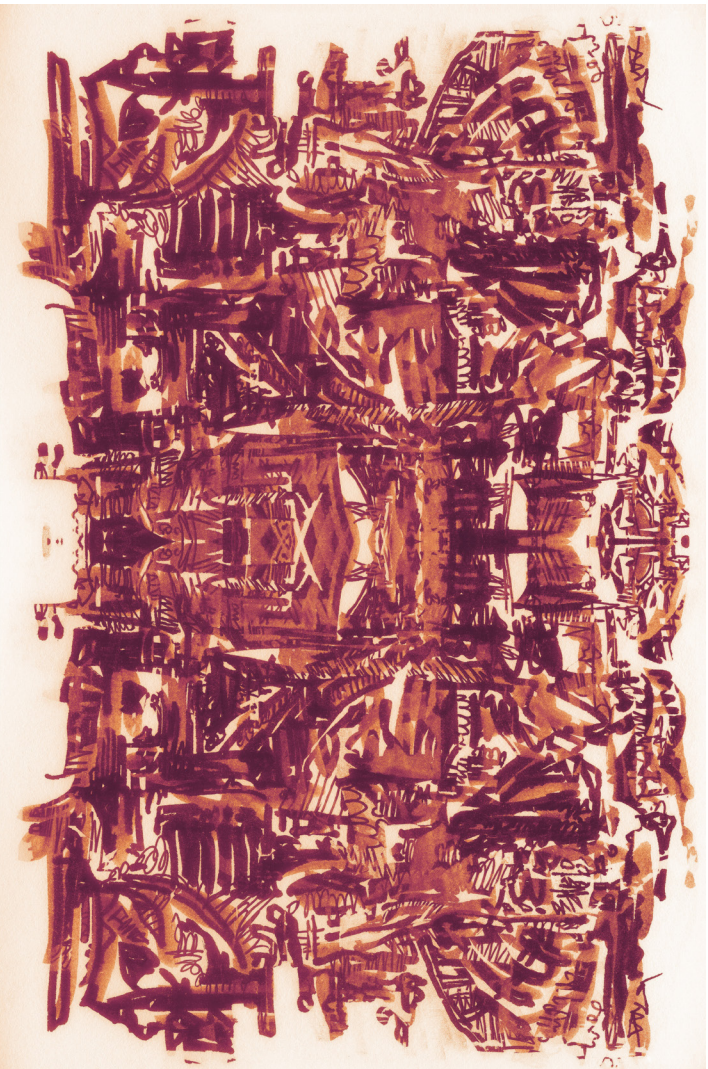
A beautifully somber town
that sits on the coast,
Where the fresh, salty smell
Of the crystal blue ocean embodies the air,
Harsh waves that end softly kissing the shore,
Whispers of the sea, crisp and clean.
The ocean breeze fights the harsh summer heat,
Its cool embrace like a gentle hug,
Carrying the stories of distant lands.

A town where time moves still,
Where people come to rest, to retire,
And the days stretch like the ebbing tide,
Slow and unhurried, as if they too are waiting.
The mile-long pier reaching out,
Over the ocean
A quiet path over violent, crashing waves,
Its planks worn smooth by years of footsteps,
Each one leaving behind a memory.

Here, you can stand and gaze,
Watch the horizon blur into the sky,
And let the rhythm of the waves
Speak to your soul,
The crash of the ocean,
The soft murmur of time passing.

This may be the place,
The place to talk about the past,
The present,
And the future
A whisper on the wind,
A promise not yet made.
Here, we hold dear what we can,
The fleeting moments, the quiet conversations,
The love that lingers like salt in the air.
But we must remember:
What we hold dear may not last forever,
For even the waves must eventually recede,
And the pier, like all things, will one day fade.

Ma | Jennifer Yung



The drip finally stops | Sophia Centurion

and leaves behind a curious stillness, now what?

Dressed in guilt like emperors' clothes,
 I will revisit the body that used to be mine;
 like strangers lining church pews after the earth flexes its calamity.
 Growing up is collecting real regrets,
 and trying not to look in that still water.

I chugged iocane to escape, convinced myself I'm smart
 enough to survive what would kill someone else.
 An insistence that kept this stubborn body from throwing
 in the towel. Drip by drip, I became stronger:
 more poison than person.
 It seeped out with every breath, into people I loved,
 directly into their mouths. It spread
 to the trust in their brains, their burning hearts. The damage
 done long before it killed me,
 and stayed long after

the apology. I avoided confronting myself for so long,
that I didn't know where to start. I broke
the surface in the wrong direction.
There is a method to keeping your head above:
it is realizing the illusion of freedom
in the slow fall to the seabed.

Escape isn't a jump in an empty pool,
it's having something to change.
It's hearing when the drip stops, learning
that there is a home

to tread back to.



If It's True | Drew denDulk

Characters

STEPH: *the one who is real.*

CAL: *the one who is not.*

ANNA: *the one who is soft.*

JAMIE: *the one who brought the drinks.*

SCENE

The wind whistles softly. The beach is empty, the weather a little too cold and water a little too mean for a normal person's enjoyment. STEPH sits alone, dressed in short and a large hoodie, a hoodie that clearly is too big to be hers originally. A small urn sits next to her in the sand.

STEPH
Guess this is it.

A beat. STEPH looks out over the water, lost for a moment.

STEPH
I did promise I'd drop you in the ocean, but maybe I should wait until summer, when the weather's a bit nicer. You always liked it better when it was warmer.

Another moment of silence. Suddenly, there's another person there, walking up to STEPH and sitting down on the other side of the urn. CAL is not dressed for the cold, in shorts and a tank top. He looks windswept despite only just arriving at the beach.

CAL
I'm sure it'll be fine.

STEPH

He'd hate it. To be dropped in the water when it's like this, he'd have hated it.

CAL

I'm sure he would understand.

STEPH

I don't know.

A beat. Suddenly STEPH stands, looking like she might do something drastic—like she might leave.

STEPH

Today isn't right. I should wait, I should wait until the weather's better, until the water's calmer. He wouldn't like it this way, he wouldn't—

CAL reaches towards her to pull her back down, but doesn't touch her. His hand hovers a few inches away from hers.

CAL

It'll be ok.

STEPH looks at him for a long moment before sitting back down.

CAL

Tell me about him.

STEPH

Why? You already know everything.

CAL

Humor me. I want to hear what he was like from you.

STEPH

I don't think I can put it into words.

CAL

Try.

Beat.

STEPH

He was... everything. He was like the sun, if the sun didn't hurt to look at. Everything he did, he did for a reason. Everything he said, he thought through two times before saying it. He was just so... him.

CAL

And now?

STEPH

What do you mean?

CAL

What's he like now?

STEPH

He's... everything he used to be but bigger. Brighter. He's everywhere. I can see him everywhere. He loved the beach. He loved the ocean, he would always drag me down here when we both had the day off from classes.

CAL

I remember.

STEPH

Every year he surprised me for my birthday with breakfast and coffee. He hated sugary coffee, but he would always make it especially sugary when I asked. He bought me my first drink on my 21st, only a week after his 21st.

CAL

I remember that too. You chugged it, decided you needed more, then downed six shots. Then you spent the rest of the night in the bathroom throwing up. I thought you were gonna swear off alcohol forever, but we went right back the next week.

STEPH

So it's *his* fault I have a problem now.

CAL

Yeah, but not for that.

A beat. They look out over the water. There's something more to what was just said that they both seem to understand, but neither is willing to say it out loud. Then, before either can say another word, ANNA and JAMIE appear. They are dressed similarly to STEPH. ANNA's in a dress, and JAMIE's in jeans and a t-shirt. They sit down next to STEPH, away from CAL and the urn. JAMIE hands STEPH a can.

JAMIE

Cheers, guys! To the best friend we could've asked for.

JAMIE leans over STEPH to clink his own can against the urn. CAL snorts, but both STEPH and ANNA give him matching looks of disapproval.

ANNA

I'm sure he'd love that you showed up to the party already tipsy, Jay.

JAMIE

What do you mean? Of course he would! He'd probably have gone pregaming with me.

CAL

That's true.

JAMIE and ANNA don't seem to acknowledge CAL as he speaks, but STEPH sends him a disapproving look. He just grins back at her.

JAMIE

(raising his can into the sky)

To the worst brother I could've asked for!

ANNA

(raising her own can)

To the only person who would let me copy off his exam paper!

They clink cans together before taking a drink. STEPH watches them, her can still unopened in her hands. CAL watches STEPH.

CAL
Are you going to drink that?

STEPH
What's the point? It won't help anything.

CAL
Well it could—

JAMIE
It'll help us not cry when we toss that metal box into the ocean.

ANNA
We're throwing the whole thing? I thought we were pouring it out.

JAMIE
No, we gotta throw it all so it sinks to the bottom. If we spill it, it'll just blow back onto the sand, and then little kids are gonna be making sandcastles out of a dead person.

CAL laughs at this. STEPH does not.

STEPH
Don't make jokes like that.

JAMIE
Why not? At least I'm coping, even if it's not through the best mechanisms.

ANNA
You could come to church with me on Sunday.

JAMIE
Hell to the no! Sorry Annie, I love you, but you will never get me into that weird old building. With my luck, it'll probably fall on me.

ANNA

There is a bible story about that.

ANNA and JAMIE continue to drink and bicker, but STEPH ignores them. CAL scoots a little closer to her, still remaining opposite of the urn and her.

CAL
They mean well.

STEPH
I know.

CAL
It's not their fault.

STEPH
I know.

CAL
It's not your fault either.

STEPH
I...

CAL
It's not.

STEPH
Maybe I could convince myself if—if it had been an accident, if he hadn't meant to do it, or—or if it had happened in a different way, maybe I could believe I didn't cause it.

CAL
You didn't. This is no one's fault but his.

STEPH
How can you say that?

CAL
Because I was there.

JAMIE

Steph, settle a debate for us. Everything he said, he thought through two times before saying it. Did Cal ever actually sleep with that TA our freshmen year or was he just bluffing?

STEPH

How the hell is that at all relevant right now?

ANNA

It's all in good fun, Stephie.

JAMIE

It's just a joke, Steph! We're reminiscing. Isn't that what you're supposed to do in these situations?

STEPH

I don't—

CAL

I didn't sleep with that TA, actually.

STEPH

He didn't.

ANNA cheers while JAMIE groans—clearly ANNA just won the debate. CAL smiles at them. STEPH can hardly bear to look at them right now.

JAMIE

Alright, whatever. Are we doing this thing or what?

ANNA

Now's as good a time as any.

They both turn to STEPH expectantly. She takes a deep breath, standing and picking up the urn. At the same time, ANNA and JAMIE stand, coming to either side of her and putting their palms on her shoulders. CAL stands as well, a little to the side of the group. STEPH watches him for a moment, gripping the urn tightly.

STEPH

If I ask a question, will you answer it honestly?

CAL

Of course.

STEPH

Is it true what they say about... well, you know? Whatever comes next?

A beat. CAL smiles sadly.

CAL

I don't know yet.

STEPH

How can you not know?

CAL

I can't go there until you let me go, Steph. I need you to let me go.

ANNA

It's time to let him go, Steph.

JAMIE

We're here with you Stephie, but it's time to say goodbye.

CAL

It's time for me to go now, Steph.

A long beat. STEPH pulls her hands back like she's getting ready to throw the urn. Instead, she holds it out and offers it to CAL. CAL takes it carefully, giving her a grateful nod. ANNA and JAMIE react like she threw it, following the urn through the sky until it crashes into the water.

CAL

I'll see you later, Stephie.

CAL starts to walk away.

STEPH
Wait!

CAL pauses.

STEPH
Do—Do you really have to go? Why can't we get more time?

CAL
I'm so sorry, Steph. We don't have any more time. It's my fault that we don't, and for whatever it's worth, I'm sorry.

STEPH
I don't forgive you. Not yet. But I will one day.

CAL nods.

CAL
I'll be waiting.

CAL leaves. STEPH watches him go. After a moment, ANNA and JAMIE leave as well, leaning into each other for comfort. STEPH remains behind, staring out at the ocean.

STEPH
We should've waited for the summer. He would've wanted it to be warmer.

STEPH watches the ocean for a long while before standing. She steadies herself, finding her courage, and walks into the waves, after her friend

Diamond Bars 2 by David A. Romero: Book Review | Caroline Urbina

It's just like one bubble popping
In an infinite foam

David A. Romero

Having never visited Diamond Bar, California, reading David A. Romero's rendition of his life in his new book, *Diamond Bars 2*, gives the reader a glimpse into Romero's views on social justice, growing up in California, lyricism, and his struggles with alcohol. Starting off the book with "The 286", sets the scene of the typical California public transportation while giving perspective of Romero's Mexican American upbringing. When he states:

Of casual dining and the promise of Disneyland
Not too far in the distance
And where should this bus take me to
But a seemingly dead-end job in the same city.

David A. Romero

It hits a certain place in my heart as a Mexican American myself, he reflects on this image of the American dream for those who immigrate here to achieve this idea. Then the harsh reality that living here in America comes with its own hardships of needing to work these minuscule jobs— that don't typically lead to careers—in hopes of achieving this dream of visiting Disneyland. This poem is a segway into the brilliant unraveling story that takes place, in between, on and pouring from the pages of Romero's book.

The narrative that Romero is reflecting reminds me of Los Bros Hernandez, the fascinating storylines of people in his life that make it hard to want to put the book down. "The Redemption of Roxy Salgado" is the first poem in the string of narratives that prepares us for the heart-breaking stories that are to follow with "Bucky", "Sean" and "Jeremiah". Romero's ability to captivate his audience with

his story telling of the people he possibly has crossed paths within Diamond Bar, CA provides the city an animated soul. Comparatively, Los Bros Hernandez uses story lines that are somewhat fictional, but have some inspirational truth behind them. Romero gives us as the reader a similar suspenseful tone when reading these narratives. I would say specifically from the two brothers Gilbert Hernandez, with his Palomar stories, and Romero exhibits the same familiarity with imagery when telling the stories of his characters. He has been able to build up these narratives in such a way that makes it difficult to avert your attention away from the text.

In that same vein, I can appreciate that Romero is standing up for women's rights, because while reading "Batman Rides Shotgun with Barbie"—I will admit—it left me in awe to his commitment to social justice advocacy. The title alone made me laugh while not realizing it—when envisioning the image, it sparked a sense of joy to witness this kind of representation in poetry. It's such an evocative poem, that it should be distributed further with a younger audience especially now with the current U.S. political circumstances. A quick applause for this special moment in the poem,

To stop being such a chauvinist
It's time we stopped looking in the rearview
But instead
Towards the road ahead
I never liked Ken
He can ride in the backseat

David A. Romero

As much as I loved the Barbie Movie, Ken was indeed a problem, he ultimately did switch his attitude as soon as he learned he could have power as well by demeaning Barbie. This idea that Romero uses in this poem, brings up these ideas of social normative perspectives that women/girls face and the issues that need to change in this perception need to change. Coming back to Los Bros Hernandez, there is always discourse with Jaime Hernandez's character Maggie, because he is a man writing and drawing about a woman's life, but Jaime doesn't force her into fitting into the normative. Romero

is not trying to write about a woman's life in this book but instead advocating for women to become more empowered and to not settle for the passenger seat.

Romero's lyrical enthusiasm in "Say a Prayer for Me" ending the book makes this an amazing send off, leaving the exploration in the hands of the reader wondering *what world was I just in?* I know that's how I felt when I put the book down. The care and attention he placed into each poem made the reading experience so much sweeter and haunting.

I can relate to Romero when it comes to his struggles of being a poet in his poem "I Am the One Who Knocks" and being a Mexican American advocating for social justice. The twist of insanity that constantly attempting to push open opportunities for yourself and hopefully for others in the same situation, would make someone break like how Romero displays at the end of the poem. He uses these stunning images throughout the entire book that can make someone think *what he could possibly talk about next with a title like this?* The one poem that caught my attention to this was "Basketball with Edgar Allen Poe" where he uses himself playing basketball with Edgar Allen Poe as a metaphor for how even long after Poe's demise, he still manages to have such an impact on poets in the modern age.

Romero's book hits a special place in the heart for California natives and poets alike. This is a book to recommend to any reader who is interested in reading poetry that explores fascinating narratives, social justice, alluring images, and lyrical poems. He has sparked an interest in this poet, and I am curious to explore his work further in the future.

The DeadLine | Emma Sterling

“Hello. You’ve reached the DeadLine telephone service for postmortem communication.

With whom may I connect you today?”

Once she finished rattling off the scripted greeting, the operator covered the mouthpiece of the telephone and yawned. She could deduce how many hours remained in her shift even without the clock above her desk. The light outside the window verged on vermillion, as it always did at sunset, and her thoughts had wandered long ago from tedious company policies to daydreams of hunky men driving hot rods. She examined her manicure as she coiled the telephone cord around her finger. Even the anemic mauve polish outshone every other color in the room; by contrast, the office appeared as bleak as the voices that dribbled like tears from the phone speaker. One such voice sobbed into the operator’s ear now.

“Please... I would like to speak to my husband.”

The operator leaned back in her seat and stifled an exasperated sigh. “Ma’am, I’m going to need more information. Full government name and dates of birth and death, please.”

“His name was Cecil.” The caller stopped to catch her breath. “He passed away on December 13, 1953.”

Yesterday, the operator noted with a grimace. Customers inquiring about recent deaths always tested her patience the most—inconsolable parents, siblings, and widows weren’t known for their coherence. She pinched the phone between her ear and her shoulder, freeing her hands to slide out the file drawer labeled ‘December 1953’.

“Alright, ma’am. I still need a full name and date of birth,” she pressed.

The caller hesitated. Only the faint crackle issuing from

the other end of the line indicated that the call was still active, until the woman cleared her throat.

"I'm afraid I don't know."

The operator ground her teeth. "Ma'am, I cannot connect you without the proper information. You mean to tell me you don't know your husband's birthday?"

"Well, you see, I can't remember. It's all been a blur. One moment we were enjoying our coffee and one last smoke together, and the next... Gosh, let me see..."

The speaker picked up nothing but rustling. When the caller continued, her voice sounded strangely mechanical, and her sniffing had subsided.

"Cecil Moore. Born April 25, 1908. Do you need more, or shall we continue?"

The operator raised an eyebrow, but proceeded with the usual spiel as she found the corresponding file and began sorting through the tangled switchboard wires on her desk. "You will be connected with the requested individual shortly. Please hold while I transfer your call."

She placed the telephone receiver on the desk and flipped open the manila envelope she'd retrieved. Inside sat a complete catalogue of Cecil Moore's life—oldest of three, ex-military, loved dogs, and other trivial details—but the operator skimmed until she reached the diagram at the back. It showed the specific combination of wires and plugs to reach the person in question; in turn, the operator needed to configure the switchboard and merge it with the caller's line.

She only managed to attach ten wires before she noticed the light above her desk flashing red, indicating another incoming call. She accepted it and picked up the receiver, but before she could recite the usual greeting, a stern voice beat her to it.

"Hello. This is Detective James Burnett, calling on behalf of the Sunset County Police Department. We request clearance for contact due to a pending homicide

investigation." The operator perked up. "Approved. Please specify who you wish to reach." "Cecil Moore. Born April 25, 1908, died December 13, 1953."

Incredulity sent her heart racing. "Of course, sir. I actually just spoke to his wife, so this should be a quick connection. Please hold while I transfer your call."

She placed the receiver on the table again. The red light above the switchboard blinked a steadfast staccato pattern, showing that the first caller was waiting on the line. Even so, the second call took precedence—DeadLine required its employees to handle all legal matters above personal ones. Fingers trembling, she hastily plugged the rest of the wires into their slots and pressed the button to merge the lines, then raised the telephone back to her face.

"Alright, sir. Please dial any number after the tone, and you will be transferred shortly."

The anti-eavesdropping policy in her employee handbook echoed through her mind, but temptation compelled her to lean forward and clutch the phone to her ear, twisting the speaker away from her lips.

"I think I've earned some entertainment," she murmured once she was sure the detective wouldn't overhear. Only the beep that indicated a call transfer answered her.

"Hello," she heard Burnett start, "this is—"

"Please help me," a garbled voice whispered into the phone, sending a chill prickling up the operator's spine. "I think there was something in the coffee."

"Not to worry, Mr. Moore. My name is Detective James Burnett. I'm calling because a homicide investigation case has been opened following your death. I'd like to hear—"

"Investigation?" The voice paused. "I didn't think anybody would bother."

The operator frowned, her eyes darting to the bulb

above the switchboard. It continued flashing in angry opposition to the darkening office.

"Well," said the detective, "we hope we can help. Do you remember anything notable from the day of your passing—anything at all? You mentioned some suspicious coffee."

"Yes. I ate at Joe's Diner on First Street, and this waitress brought me a coffee I hadn't ordered—said it was on the house. I'd never seen her before, even being a regular at that joint for years. I remember thinking it tasted funny. Well, then I got to feeling so dizzy that I couldn't finish my meal. The last thing I recall is having a smoke in my armchair once I got home."

"Alright. Can you think of any reason that someone might want to harm you?"

"No, sir, I can't. I usually kept to myself—not the type to make friends or enemies. To be frank, I didn't think many people would care that I was gone."

"Well, Mr. Moore, I reckon a few folks did. Your boss called in a tip—said it was unlike you to miss work without notice. Besides, what about your missus? A DeadLine operator told me that she's on hold right now, waiting to speak to you."

A long beat of silence punctuated the detective's voice. Anticipation crawled under the operator's skin like a colony of ants. She ran her nail along the edge of the telephone speaker, feverishly twisting the cord around her hand to channel the nervous energy buzzing in her stomach. The entire office flashed red in time with her rapid pulse.

"Detective," said Moore, "I'm not sure who that caller is, but it couldn't possibly be my wife. She died seven years ago."

A heavy pang of panic struck the operator.

The detective hesitated. "Then how do you suppose this person got your information?"

"Well... I did have an ID badge in my pocket. Was it still there when the police...?" He

trailed off, his voice fraught with misery.

"No, I don't believe any such thing was recovered."

The operator jammed the button to switch back to the first caller. The call could be traced with a device that plugged into the switchboard. She remembered learning about it during her training, though she had long since forgotten the details. Silently cursing her poor memory, she dug into the mass of wires in front of her. Even if she found the right plugin, it would only function if the caller stayed on the line for long enough—a prospect that dwindled with every second the operator spent rummaging through the jumble of telephone parts on her desk.

"I apologize for the delay," she blurted into the receiver, her voice stilted as she tried to scrounge together an excuse. "Due to an influx of traffic to our line, your request may take longer than usual. May I have your name to ensure that your call transfers correctly?"

The telephone speaker crackled as the caller scoffed. "I don't believe that's necessary."

"I assure you, it's all part of the process. You see—"she spotted the plugin and scrambled to trace its wiring back to the switchboard, "—we must verify that each customer is correctly paired with the person they requested to contact, so the names of both parties are required."

"I see. I'm afraid I must go, then. Would you kindly pass on a message to Mr. Moore?"

The operator's hands turned listless. Dread buzzed through her body like an electric current, compounded by the pulsing scarlet light around her. She pictured the nameless woman slipping a drop of arsenic into Moore's mug, slinking up behind him as he smoked his last cigarette, parroting the birthday printed on a stolen ID badge, hanging up the call and fading back into the world...

"Yes, I suppose so," she heard herself mumble.

"Splendid. Please tell him that it wasn't personal in the slightest. In fact, I may have done him a favor. Now he can reunite with his dearly departed wife."

"Why did you do it?" the operator whispered desperately.

"Well, if I may be so bold as to use your words: I think I've earned some entertainment," the caller lilted, her shrewd smile audible in her voice.

"But how did you hear—"

"Why, I suspect that in your own haste, you forgot to put my line on hold before switching to the other. Do be more attentive next time. It's rather unprofessional to let a customer overhear conversations in which legal matters are concerned. Goodbye, darling."

The operator flinched at the sharp click of the phone being hung up, and darkness enrobed the office as the red signal finally switched off. The drone of the dial tone might as well have been a death rattle.

The Breaking of China Plates | Morgan Darian

Grackle *noun*

: a large blackbird of the American family.

: known for: bravery and resourcefulness.

: sighting: things are not as they seem.

Use in a sentence: *The grackle soared high and low,*

finding no friends on the telephone wire.

I am ashamed of my grandmothers.

Proud of

grandfathers who broke the law, pirates of time and industry, willing to work towards death – their pictures make it to the mantle, while grandmothers fade forgotten, judged too shrill, too selfish, rude, mental health pushed to the back behind socks and journals worrying about husbands not coming home.

I should be ashamed of my grandfathers, and maybe proud of grandmothers

surviving, alone

raising handfuls of kids on 30 dollars a week,
kept safe in husbands' pockets.

*I am ashamed of my grandfathers, proud of grandmothers
breaking white porcelain*

against farmhouse sinks,

*single mothers married to ghosts, married to men lost in
secretaries and forests,*

*young mothers fighting venomous snakes in the long
grasses of Iowa,*

walking five kids to church down Chicago pavement.

Pirates of education and self-reliance,

*a baby on one hip, a shotgun on the other when strangers
roll down dirt roads.*

*Gravediggers, buriers of wishes, laying hopes in coffins
along with The American Dream and what love was
supposed to be.*

So manly, this breaking of hearts.

So unladylike, this breaking of china.

They Tried To Bury Us | Angelina Leaños

The girl I want to marry tells me she's not enough
 To protect me from a world that merely
 Tolerates before tossing us aside
 Like a tongue born and buried in the same day

The world says there's no room for bodies like us
 I will not let my legacy be buried before
 My story has been written
 I'm a river of words unafraid to cross fences

My lover and I will be the gardeners of this
 Earth that washes away our voices like stains
 We will plant sonnets in the soil, scatter elegies
 In the sea and bloom bodies where there are tombs

At least I of all people know Power by her figure
 Even when she is absent.

Combat Water Survival, Third Class (CWS3)

"Enter water from height of 5 feet using the modified abandon ship technique, into deep water with full gear and weapon, travel 10 meters, remove pack, and travel 15 meters with pack and weapon."

I was entering the water from a little higher than 5 feet. I was not abandoning a ship either. Instead, I was abandoning the Bridge of The 14th of July above the Tigris River. I handed the PRC-119 radio to another Marine. I jumped with full knowledge that the swim ahead was further than what I had been required to swim back in San Diego. What I couldn't have prepared for was the stark contrast with the heated pool back at home. The pain almost rendered me unconscious. The rescue swim was almost over before it began.

I swam back to the surface of this polar bear plunge in the middle of the desert. The temperature tricked my body into forgetting the need to breathe. In my state of crisis, as my body yearned for air, as my oxygen levels dropped, I pictured my mother and remembered her stories of these rivers...

"Biblical lands!" she had exclaimed.

"I'll make sure and send a postcard, Madre," I snorted at her while I packed my gear.

In Genesis these rivers are from the mythological Garden of Eden. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the third and fourth rivers respectively. In its current state, it much more resembled the rivers as depicted in Revelations. The end of times was near. Here I was on the banks of the river like Daniel having visions.

I gasped and finally caught my breath; I was back in the river. I kicked and pulled frantically through the water. The fire illuminated the overturned vehicle, and I could see

the back wheels of the seven ton still rolling on. As I made my way down to where the truck had come to a stop, I began to bump into gear. First a pack, and then food we had been rationing. My stomach, already a mess, lurched as I struggled to focus over the sound of my teeth chattering. The screams of a Marine nearby snapped some clarity back into my life.

"Castro!!" He got out before going under. He popped up again and again as he labored. "My leg is fucked," he cried out.

Combat Water Survival, Second Class (CWS2)

"Wearing full combat gear, perform 25-meter collar-tow on passive "victim" similarly dressed, simultaneously towing two packs and two weapons."

I grabbed the back of his flak jacket and pulled as I side-stroked using the current to help me carry his ass back to shore. Once he was on land the pain really set in, and he was not doing much yelling. The corpsman was already applying the tourniquet to his left leg. The morphine that followed sent Mercado off with the sandman. The other swimmers were not as lucky as I had been. I could hear them counting out compressions as they wrestled with the unconscious bodies. I knew Mercado had been with the unconscious bodies. I knew Mercado had been with the first platoon, so my worst fears were confirmed; Valencia must have gone in the water when the truck hit that IED. This fighting force had proven to be as problematic as our unorthodox fighting had once been for the British.

Jumping back in the water was not necessary if you had already made it back to shore with at least one Marine. Most of the other swimmers were now securing the perimeter. After all, it wasn't just the strong current and fire that threatened us. Surely, whoever set that IED would be coming to take pleasure in seeing their work. There would be no better time for their target practice. Thank God they're not all marksmen like the men in our ranks.

I still could not find Valencia and he was one of those rare marines that could hardly swim. He'd barely qualified with an unofficial combat water survival 4. He was certain we would not be doing much swimming in the desert,

never mind the classroom training before our deployment and the literal meaning of "Mesopotamia". The cradle of civilization was located between these two rivers. The flooding that once gave life had also made it the reason for so much death.

Combat Water Survival, First Class (CWS1)

"Tread water or survival float in deep water with utilities and boots for 30 minutes without artificial floatation. Boots will be removed after 5 min. and retained. Five min. prior to completion of the 30 min float, and without exiting from the water, replace the boots and swim 500 meters using one or a combination of survival strokes."

I kept telling myself that I owed him one more lap. Not much of a swimmer but the gold standard when it came to troop morale and the esprit de corps that fueled the brotherhood. I walked upriver on the shore before getting back in the water. I moved packs and called out to him. I swam as close to the truck as I could. That is when Captain O'Brian called out that just two Marines were unaccounted for. I knew one of them had to be Valencia.

The marine I handed the radio to had made his way down to the river. He called for me to come back in. He had heard the call go out, with the company engaged to the north, we needed to call the quick reaction force. I dove below the surface one more time. Visibility was close to zero, but I felt my way around. That is when I realized the front of the truck had taken a direct hit and no one in the cabin could have survived. If the blast did not kill them, they died fighting for their last breath.

I swam back to the surface. I could sense the emotions taking over. I could also hear the machine guns now fully engaged. The full rate of fire told the story of the size of the force coming. The sky was now bright with tracers. I could tell by the bright crimson streaks that they were ours. The green tracers the Iraqis use were outnumbered. By sheer number, we were winning that exchange. I decided to keep swimming, in hopes of getting him out regardless of his status. Killed in Action provides a closure that Missing in Action just can't.

Soon after, my own head started spinning. I knew I had been at this for too long and if I did not get out now, I, too, would lose my life so far away from home. I kicked and kicked and although I questioned if I'd lost consciousness, I was now on the shore. I cried for my best friend. I cried for his family. I cried for my family.

Marine Corps Instructor of Water Survival (MCIWS)

"Among the most physically demanding courses in the Corps. This course creates instructors who can train Marines to react and survive life-threatening situations in the water. The course mixes heavy loads of aquatic conditioning, endurance swims, rescues, and training for aquatic emergencies. Half of you will fail!"

After coming home, and with every intention of leaving the Marine Corps, I decided to become a Combat Water Survival Instructor. Before my deployment, I completed the subjectively tougher Water Survival Advanced, a qualification with attrition rates between 75-85%. I would now honor his memory by drown-proofing other Marines under my charge. Not only did I lose Valencia that night to the blast, but several Marines drowned because of lack of training in the name of expediting the show of force overseas.

It was 5 years before I could visit his family. It was his daughter's fifteenth birthday, her quinceñera, and I could not say no to his mom when she requested I be there to tell his daughter a little about her father and the time we shared together before his tragic death. I spoke to her about how much he had told me about her every night before we fell asleep at bootcamp. She, in turn, told me how she still remembers me visiting. As she shared memory after memory, she began to reminisce about much fun she would have swimming with her dad. I thought this odd because of how poorly he had done when we went through training. It turns out, like everything else in his life Valencia ever struggled with, he had made it a point to work harder than anyone else around him and eventually master it.

He knew about the possibility of the MCIWS course having an opening. He had, in fact, completed the screening for the course that once terrified him. It was actually his spot that I filled when I got back home from Iraq.

Every pilot I had trained. Every sailor I prepared for their time at BUD/S. Every person I dragged out of the pool because of a shallow water blackout. They were all indebted to him. I am now convinced he pulled me out from under that overturned truck in Iraq.

Touches of Winter | Amy Barnes

The first touch of Winter's chill descends upon my bones,
tightening 'round my mandible and steadling feeling from my toes.
It's an inking of what's yet to come, though no snow obscures the ground,
Telltale signs of shriveled leaves are swept together in fragile mounds.

The second touch my eyes behold, as night consumes the day,
Dusk and dawn have now allied to trade hues of pink for gray.
A damp and melancholic gloom dims and darkens sight;
Hot months and long shadows vanish, swallowed up by night.

The third touch comes closer still and taps softly on my heart,
It's not yet the sting of bitter cold, but it pulls my seams apart.
Time now paints with chilling strokes; sorrows our attention seek.
Soul and body flock to firelight, craving warmth amidst the bleak.

The fourth touch my spirit feels, and this is the one most dear to me.
It long outlasts the winter months and deepens a longing for eternity.
I wonder that Creator, Ancient of Days, beyond the curtain obscured,
Deigned to put on flesh like ours so that men could see the Word.

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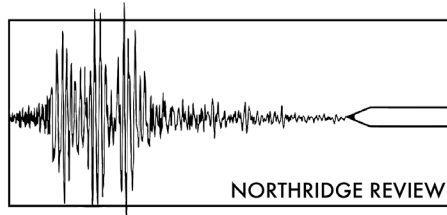
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