

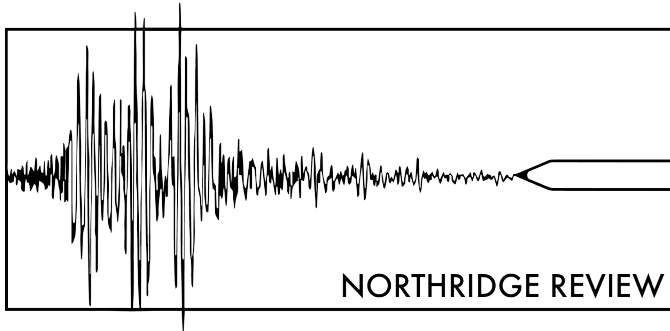
Northridge Review

Fall 2023



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Many thanks to the creative writing community at CSUN and to all the teachers who encourage us to work hard and dare to dream.

THIS IS A HANDMADE BOOK BY THE FALL 2023 LIT MAG CLASS.

Jacket illustration featuring photography by Rene Zardoorian.

www.csun.edu/humanities/english/northridge-review-masthead

Summary: In these pages you'll find heartbreak and hopes, silliness and anger, wondering and wandering and much more by the students of CSUN.

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Citrus

by Sean Ahern

Couldn't help but taste
shades of citrus
deep in haste,
fingers in mouths,
waiting to paint us
with heavy breaths.

Couch

by Satik Hambardzumyan

My father would sit on the couch and complain that I always found the shortest, sluttiest skirts to wear to spite him. Little girls dress to spite their fathers, he would say. He would roll a cigar and watch the same Soviet-Era cartoon that depicted Western people as idiots. The animated propaganda would play on a DVR loop as he followed along, mumbling the sermon around his cigar. He said he hated Americans and their “dreams,” but I think he was bitter since he never dreamed. He would lecture me on how he came to America so his child would have the opportunities he never did, but life cursed him with a daughter. Daughters don’t have opportunities, even in the land of dreams. He would lecture me about times when fathers were respected, and Western propaganda didn’t brainwash children into hating their parents. I didn’t feel brainwashed. His cigar smoke would cloud the air and paint the walls as he continued talking, blowing nonsense into philosophical ideology. I was never permitted to speak; daughters weren’t scholars. Soon the cigar would end, the room would go dark, and he would fall asleep on the couch until we would repeat our cycle the next morning.

He died on that couch of a stroke and I burned it in the backyard so I never have to see it again.

You Weren't in El Paso

by Rachel Stratemeier

On this side, we're always on the road. Buildings, like peaches, pass the Ford Mustang, one in a trillion. I am looking for the river Styx, the delineation of my world and theirs. I see a line of cars in the distance, a flow in and out, an undulation of fossil fueled humans. Then I see it and I am peering into the pink, blue, bright stucco castles, let into the secret alleyways twinkling with rainfall, the black SUVs splashing it up their windows as they slide down the hill on the other side. Do they notice the chain-link fence they're about to run into? They don't: The green river bleeds to block their way, the color of my curious irises, staring out of a window, transfixed by the world on the other side of a black fence.

You weren't in El Paso
but Juarez is you, like black eyes
in the alley, sparkling.

My Moms Mom and Hers Too

by Amber Alas

If I could give my great grandmother a gift,
it would be the gift of understanding
to stop our generational curse from coming

If I could give my grandmother a gift,
it would be the ability to live in the moment
to stop and smell the roses

And if I could give my mother a gift,
it would be the gift of walking away from
things that no longer serve her

Then maybe,
I would walk away from spaces
I was never meant to enter

Ichor

by Erik Huerta

On weekends with my father we would head to a diner where he would order me French toast while he drank black coffee, smoked cigarettes, and played Scratchers. Having never drank coffee I asked him, “What does it taste like?”

I assumed he’d say it was good but I was too young to try it or terrible but he needed it anyway. All adults said that, and I was just trying to make conversation. Instead, he looked at me directly in my nine year old eyes and said, “It tastes like ichor.”

I’d never heard this word before, but the seriousness and near reverence with which he said the word made it sound important. So I asked further, in almost a whisper, “What’s ichor?”

Matter of fact, and again with unbreaking eye contact, he said, “It’s God’s blood.” Then he stood and left to pay the bill at the counter or use the restroom. I can never remember.

All I remember is the image that popped in my head afterwards. My father walking down the aisle at Sunday congregation, with a full mass in attendance singing hymns or homilies, then going up to the massive statue of Christ on the cross. He cupped his hands. In my imagination, Christ was still bleeding. My father filled his hands with holy blood and drank deep and long. Then he turned to face the congregation but looked at me specifically and, with a smile stained red, said, “It tastes like coffee.”

Scorpio

by Diana Serrano

My mother once told me that her older brother, my uncle Francisco—may he rest in peace—used to burn the tails off of scorpions with a lighter and let them walk down his arm. I imagine how the siblings would gather around to watch, in fear and in awe, as the small creature crawled down his arm, from the shoulder to the hand. The scorpion does not have the power to hurt anyone when its tail has been burned off. I was born on November 11, therefore the stars have determined that I am a scorpion. There's venom in me, but I cannot bring myself to hurt anyone. I have no tail to sting with—I spent the last few years of my life burning it off with lighters and matches until it was so singed it fell off. But as I got older and I started living and working and getting screamed at by the customers who demand their discounted groceries and getting blamed for things out of my control by the boss, I realized I should have never burnt my tail off. I no longer have the power to hurt anyone. I cry when my father raises his voice ever so slightly at me. I cry sometimes because my German Shepherd doesn't know that I love her the way my mother loves me. I cry for sacrificial lambs who did nothing to deserve their fate. I am the lamb on the altar when I should be the cult member speaking in tongues. I'm the man laying on the ground being beheaded with a boxcutter, when I should be the one sawing away at his neck. The stars have determined that I am a scorpion. I cannot bring myself to hurt anyone, when I should be able to ruin lives and not feel a thing.

Buffalo Dragon

by Sean Ahern

You call
at 1:57 a.m.
words broken,
I'll be right there.
The door is open
I smell the wine
your bent over,
his ghost is still
on you in you.
Puking to the gods of tomorrow.
I'll hold back slick hair
to clean your face
take the time
to wash away.
I'll be waiting
to tuck you in
and as I leave
say, ***Never again.***

A Mother's Love

by Chira Watson

The first time I met my mother I was eight.

Sweating in traffic under a freeway overpass. My father pointed to a homeless lady I'd only ever heard of. How did he know it was her? She leaned into the car and asked my father if she could see him later. He spoke to her with a love I'll never understand, and I never knew myself. Cars started to move.

She was raped and murdered years later. Stabbed in a K-Mart parking lot. Curiosity sent me down a Facebook hole. Messages of love for the "sweeper lady." She's praised for keeping her lot sparkling clean. She wasn't some environmentalist though. Just some lady with a broom. "RIP. I know you're sweeping the golden streets of heaven!" She's homeless in heaven too, I hear.

The last time I saw my mother I was seventeen.

Easily the ugliest thing I'd ever seen up close. Toothless, swollen, calloused. I covered my nose as she told me I was beautiful. She got dirt on the carpet as she told me I was beautiful. Saying it over and over must've made her aware of her own vanity like waking from a dream. Could she borrow some makeup?

Para Tus Huesos
“For Your Bones”
by Damián J. Galván

Noticia y color,
detrás de cada letra
está su mano.

Obsesionada con
la obra enjuiciado;
luz opalescente
dominándola.

Nocturna, y el neón
remata lo sabio.

Amor sonrojado
a través de
los huesos,
por la pintura
y por el huérfano.

- Para mi hermana.

News and color,
behind every letter
is her hand.

Obsessed with
prosecuted artwork;
opalescent light
dominating her.

Nocturnal, and the neon
finishes off the wise.

A love flushed
through the bones,
for the paint
and for the orphan.

- For my sister.

Hard Lemonade

by Amanda Mitchell

Some people are lemon trees; when life gives you lemons, you know they didn't fall far from those nearby branches. Did you know lemon trees are filled with thorns? Both prickly and sour; so unpleasant in so many ways. I made enough lemonade in my life to drown in. Equal parts water, sugar, and juice with three times as much of my tears to dilute. Every day we waded through the house, dragging our feet through flooded lemonade. Some mornings we woke up already submerged, forced to swim and splutter for air above the surface. My skin always felt sticky when I left the house. I wondered if people could smell it on me: the perfume of citrus. Did they see the scratches on my skin, which throbbed shamefully from being soaked in acid?

I remember when I waded through the tension in the living room: Lemonade waist deep, ripples moving over the surface of the syrupy sweetness as I moved in a wide circle around him. I was careful to remain outside the reach of his arms as I went to open the window. Lemonade splashed out over the windowsill and poured acidic juice onto the parched plants growing in the shade provided by the side of the house. The rest of the property which absorbed direct sunlight was scorched barren by the unsurvivable climate. I was so careful even though he never hurt me with his hands; he finished a long day at work with a long evening of drink. Sometimes he said things, leaving stinging puncture wounds nearly invisible to the eye. I finally told him I was scared he would hurt me and he cried and promised he never would. He told me his dad used to hit him with a belt. He would never do that.

Now I watch from inside my neighbor's house, my hands and my legs sticky as the lemonade drips from my oversized t-shirt and pajama shorts. I'm looking at my house from this stranger's perspective, surprised by how much hides behind closed blinds. Despite the flood I know churns beneath that roof, the property looks dry from the outside, and I guess that's why it was easy to hide the truth

for as long as we did. He and I, complicit in the cover-up until a good friend of mine intervened. I watch my house as two police cars and a fire truck pull up to my street, the flashing lights touching me through the blinds. Red and blue, the lights alternate as police walk up to the front door, my feelings flashing back and forth between resentment and relief. I didn't want this, but my choices withered away one by one. He answers the door, the shock on his face worth all the more to me because I know I'll never see that expression again. Eyes too big and mouth wide open, lemonade pouring past his ankles in a stream and frothing in the dirt. Shame spills from the open doorway into the night, as if he's pissed his pants in fear. I turn my back before they arrest him, I look at the supportive people gathered behind me who wanted better for me when I didn't want better for myself. They don't want to leave me alone, but I insist the next part I have to do by myself.

My hands are shaking when I let myself back into my house after he is gone. I stand on soaked carpet squelching under my socked feet and wince at the world's worst sensory feeling. Wet socks, akin to my regret. I wish I had time to clean up and wash every surface. I could hire professional help, get the carpeting deep cleaned. If I ripped his roots out from the foundation, would the house still be stable? I won't know because I can't stay. I'm lucky enough to have survived this long, but the dangerous part starts now that I'm trying to leave. Women like me have to try an average of nine times to get away. I think I did try before, but I am not certain when I think back. Was I really trying to leave him, or just trying to seek his attention? This is an opportunity, I have to keep the momentum going. When I can finally move from the threshold, I seek the stowed bag I had already packed. My getaway bag, always ready in case I had to run. It is a suitcase stored in the closet, only sought out for traveling, so not sought out at all since he lost his second job. In my bedroom, on the floor, is a nasty reminder laying coiled like a snake between me and my belongings. His belt, buckle winking at me when I turn on the light. I sit on the edge of the bed, unwilling to deal with this obstacle. Dealing with this alone was a mistake. My phone is in my hand, his name is first on my speed dial. I think briefly how hilarious it would be to call him, while he is likely

still in the back of a police car. Not funny at all, I remind myself. I get up without the crutch of relying on others to prop me up. I jam my feet into a forgotten pair of boots beside my nightstand so I can kick the belt under the bed and out of my sight without feeling it. I take my suitcase; it is light because I only packed essentials. I open the zippers so I can fill it up, there is still room for more of my clothes and a sliver of pride I salvaged for myself.

I won't make lemonade in the future. Eventually I'll make artwork and I'll write stories. With clean fingers, I'll turn the pages of my favorite books without them sticking together. I'll learn why I fell in love with sharp thorns and fruit so sour my eyes would water. Maybe my family tree had a few lemons. I won't make this mistake a second time. I want to try peaches and savor my first taste of kiwi. I look forward to a life of cherry picking in the summer and homemade apricot preserves. The halo of soft light around the harsh sun will remind me of the color of lemonade but I will stop and smell the flowers and enjoy my new experiences. I survived, and soon I will be blooming, I promise myself. I stuff my suitcase until I can't fit anymore and leave the rest behind.

I have to shut my phone off when he wastes his one call on me. My neighbor is kind enough to take the burden of my baggage from my hands and load it into my friend's car. This is a different friend, because the one who called the police is someone I can't bear talking to yet. I am bundled into the passenger seat; people wish me well and blow air kisses. I want to scream some nameless emotion back at them. Instead, I roll down the window to wave goodbye and let out the smell of the lemon-scented air freshener.

The Chancla

by Jennifer Alarcon

In my youth
I didn't realize the
benefits
of a good beating
by
...
Can you guess it?

THE CHANCLA

Brought out on special occasions –
*but, not limited to *
the CHANCLA was the pinnacle of my mother's
rare ass whoopings
paired with a piercing pinch on
my forearm
a warning of what was to come
from the hand that had just fed me

Tears poured down my face
And thoughts would flood my brain
“HOW COULD YOU HIT YOUR CHILD”
What a barbarian way to discipline your daughter

“The kids down the street don’t get hit”

I would screech

But with age I’d regret because

their parents didn’t carry the weight

of a hundred Guatemalan

parents,

grandparents,

great grandparents,

and you get the point-

The CHANCLA

our mutual factor for

hundreds of years of discipline

and

I think my mom

turned out okay,

well to be honest turned out

pretty great

I will respect the history of the CHANCLA,

but my kids will probably

only get a slap on the wrist

with a tale of

how my mother would hit.

No Different

By Kalan Cordell

Marcus knelt in front of the dead carcass of a calf, its ribs protruding through ripped skin, blowing in the wind like a sheet. He gripped the inside of the wound. Viscous blood oozed on the pads of his fingers. Grimacing he pulled the gash wider, it sounded like paper being split down the middle. Above him a flock of vultures flew in circles, watching. The calf's organs were a dull gray color and its flesh had a spoiled scent. Still, Marcus was hungry. When a person is hungry, God knows they'll eat anything, even each other.

Marcus shoved his hand deeper into the chest, noticing the colony of maggots that had made the white calf's mouth their meal. "We're not so different." He thought, pulling out the long rope intestine, tossing it behind him. Marcus ran his tongue around his lips as he grabbed the heart. That was what he wanted. It was a craving that sat on his taste buds. Why? He wasn't sure. He could've eaten any other part of the calf; he was starving after all. But it's heart. That's what his mouth and stomach demanded. A united answer. He stripped the heart from the cords that kept it bound to the calf, and pulled it out from the corpse. A string of saliva oozed from his lip, eyes widened. Behind him the vultures were fighting over the intestine, their black feathers swirling in the air like a vortex.

Marcus took a bite out of the heart, its taste coppery, sour, and rotten. Blood and yellow puss ran between his fingers. Again he ate. And ate. His body wiggling, legs pressed against each other. It tasted so delicious. A Thanksgiving meal. The muscles in his body and bones felt like jelly, lethargy entered his system. Marcus was deep inside the the meat of the heart, tiny pincers chewing bits of spoiled flesh. A maggot eating the dead.

Nothing in Mind

by Sam Card

My mind's ocean tide's stirred by a hurricane of self-doubt.

I coalesce and crash upon myself to no end.

A sea of perplexity, a sea that lacks life.

Yet despite the rain and the snow's descent

I lack the lifewater to walk within or without.

"Oh, the crescent moon! How art inspires me!"

What pretension! I would never feign roused glee!

Candlelight's glimmer might glitter the sea,

But sparkles, rainbows, starshines, and moonlights

In the eyes of a Mind Sailor is just debris.

Something I find so pretty is when I can see lines—

Without color.

I want an ocean with no water.

I don't want a blue or starry-night sky.

I want a clear conscience.

I want to be conscious

With nothing in mind.

The Man Who Killed Elvis

by Lucy Conrad

My granddaddy hit switches and ripped heaters,
he hollered like hell on the highway to a hit job,
put a gun in my hand when I was 8,
said shoot the sons of bitches 'fore you ever git robbed.

and

The man who killed elvis was dressed in all red
With a Hawaiian undershirt
And rhinestones on his lead

now

Seven sects of snake charmin' church men sang "All hail East Tennessee"
Where three six mafia records and rifles are free
And fuck off 'bama cuz the tide did shit for me
When my brother said with tears in his eyes
"the man I looked up to wasn't a man at all"

meanwhile

The man who killed elvis strolled into Graceland
With his piece on his hip and a lighter in his hand
Said let's play house and kicked up his feet
Had a disguise on and a devil to meet

The Mormon quarterback kissed me in the bathroom

and called me a fag for his friends

He spat dip in the drain and I smoked a cig in the corner stall towards the end,
but fuck him!

I still wore school colors to the game every Friday night

Screamed “Seven Nation Army” and prayed for a fight

When I moved to California I said I wanted to be buried in a red dress

So I walked up the stairs whistlin’ hound dog in the hall

Said that’s all right to Priscilla and Paul

Found the king in the bathroom after he took a fall

Pulled the trigger

And waited in the jungle room for the cops to get called

To tell ‘em the man who killed elvis wasn’t a man at all

Lipstick

by Emily Story

I wear a berry brown color in the mornings because that's what Mom wears. She applies it carefully with a brush. It goes on softer that way, not too much, she doesn't like to wear too much. It's easier than it seems, having too much, even if it's an accident. We eat oranges at the seaside and read books slim enough to fit in our purses, while Grandma watches. Her lips are powdered with pink.

I shake my head at everything Mom picks out for me at the department store. When I go with Grandma, I'm showered in sequins. And bright skinny jeans, and big furry jackets I have no business wearing, and lipgloss that smells like bubblegum. I don't even like bubblegum; the scent is too sickly for me, right under my nose, but it's the hot flavor at the moment and Grandma knows this. I put the lipgloss in my pencil box and apply it after lunch. Mom swipes on a honeycomb chapstick when it gets cold out.

I like a peachy shade in the afternoons, because a magazine told me it looked youthful, and I want to be innocent and dainty like Audrey Hepburn. Mom starts gravitating towards the plum colors. She applies it quickly and straight from the bullet. She still takes me to the bookstore when I have no one else to go with, even though the stairs are hard for her. She buys me a cookie at the cafe and asks me if I had a good time. I'm selfish enough to believe that my happiness is enough for her.

Suddenly, I desperately want to be a red lipstick girl. I want crimson and cranberry and black cherry. All the best characters in the books I read garnish their lips with blood. Grandma suggests opting for pink instead because red

makes my acne look worse. And it's less noticeable when I inevitably get it all over my teeth. I tell Mom that I want to be a vampire for Halloween and beg her not to make me go to her friend's party because I hate those people. I wouldn't dare

wear the lipstick to school, and Mom now can't get out of bed. Mom in long dresses, sneakers, girl scout grin, excited and goofy and baby faced. She whispers when she asks me if I'm mad at her.

Mom's in the hospital and they serve her green jello and a chicken pot pie. She gazes down at the tray and picks at the edges with her fingertips. She smiles at me with her teeth. They match her lips. She won't tell me anything because she doesn't want to stress me out. I have to go to work. Dad stays. I call her after my shift and ask if she wants me to bring her lipstick. She laughs, and says yes, please; she just wants to feel like a person again after all that bloodwork. She meekly requests the berry brown color and her brush

Shrike's Nest

by Chloe Johnson

It was in my mother's kitchen, where I learned to eat rotten fruit
Because it's all we had, because I wanted something sweet, because I asked for it
Like Eve— took an apple, sunk my claws in deep

Not a vulture, *remember*, not a vulture

It was in my mother's kitchen, where we would write the grocery list
Bills pushed aside on Monday mornings as we talked about what we wanted
It was then that I knew
This, right here, is what it's like to be wanted

It was Saturday nights I sat at the table before she got back
peeled the skin off of brown bananas
told myself it was a treat
I was compacted into something so small and trivial
Convinced myself over spoiled peaches that I was still loved
Even though Monday seemed so far it felt like it would never come
and I'd be left alone, alone to rely on the sticky and undeserving to remind me

Not a vulture,
remember,
not a vulture
you are more victim than predator

It was in my mother's bathroom mirror where I learned to never let the anger show
Do you want to be something angry,
do you want to let the decay define you?
(don't let the *pain* define you)
Just eat the rot
 take it
 let it run through you

Eat,

like a shrike.

Eat the dead creatures that couldn't survive the summer's heat

Eat like a scavenger,

Eat like the ravenous beast you are

Eat as you learned in the fruit basket

Eat like you had to in the nest, in the womb of your mother

—eat like you would do anything to be loved

Because you know you would,

since the first time you saw flesh under your claws
and mistaked it for

love

Not a vulture, remember? Not a vulture,

really?

But you learned how to hold on to everything so tightly it bled

even if it wasn't fresh,

even if it wasn't much at all

think, *I am lucky to have been given this, I'm lucky
to have been wanted*

It was in the nest of the shrike I learned to swallow everything that was given to me,

but it was in the nest of the vulture I learned to

devour

to lick my lips until they shined

You held on because you never knew when you were going to be loved next
(you didn't think you deserved it)

Because how do you teach a starved child not to sink their teeth in deep?

Tell an empty heart not to be a vulture

ODE TO THE 10,000-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

by Brigitte Salazar

She was twenty-something when she got swallowed
by Los Angeles, before Los Angeles was about the bustling.

The La Brea Woman, they call the female bones
unearthed from a warm ice age. It was only around 60 degrees then.

She's got a piece missing from her skull. From a blow
to the head, probably, because violence doesn't have a clear beginning.

In 1970, they transported her body from one display case to the next.
Somewhere along the way, some freak took her femur.

Millions and millions of bones have been recovered
from LA's everbubbling asphalt. Only hers got a digital rendering
of what she must have looked like if she fell off of a mudflap.

What must it be like to be forced to wait for gunk to cover you
like a sticky shroud and then be subjected to relive it
10,000 years later by people you don't understand?

Did you know that the tar pits are just a few inches deep?
And that death comes in the form of hungry predators and your own
starvation. The dark never does the killing.

About 5 minutes from the tar pits is a liquor store
where you can buy as many bottles as it takes to forget
the heaviness of this woman, who despite her best efforts, died once
& then some.

The Dumbest Man on Fogo Island

by Alex Philpott

It must not be an easy life being The Dumbest Man on Fogo Island. For you see, life is a lot different there. There's no electricity or running water. It's just a small speck of land off the Northern coast of Newfoundland, Canada near the top of the globe. It's an island off an island. To even get there you have to take two planes, a train, and of course, the ferry. It's a frigid little remote seaside village hidden away from the rest of the world. In many ways, Fogo Island is from a different time entirely.

The shores are lined with jagged cliffs and clinging to those rocks are many scattered bright-colored clapboard houses. Houses that have sat on those rocks for hundreds of years. You see, the descendants of this frozen isle came here from Ireland many generations ago and never left. They came here for one reason and one reason only, fish. More particularly, cod fish. You see, Fogo Island is and always will be a fishing community—a community where the population is just above 1,000. So, everyone knew very well who The Dumbest Man on Fogo Island was.

After all, he didn't give himself this title. But that's how everyone knew him. In fact, most people on the island didn't even know his real name. They just simply referred to him as Mr. Balbh (bal-luff), which is the Old Irish word for “dumb”. And dumb he was. For you see, Mr. Balbh hasn't spoken in over fifty years. Not a single word to anyone and not a single person knew why.

He was an older man well into his eighties with thinning white hair and a weathered face that was half-paralyzed and covered in purplish-black spots. He no longer had family left on the island and lived alone in what generously could be described as a shack. And though he is a recluse, he's quite popular among his fellow islanders.

A spotting of him would spark a good chat for at least a few days. He had

almost a mythical quality to him. Children would tease each other that Mr. Balbh would be waiting for them under their bed or in their closet and things of that nature. A common saying on the island when you make a silly mistake, people will joke and say, “Oh, Mr. Balbh would be so proud of you.” And to them, that’s all he was. A punchline to a joke with no setup. Just an old, odd forgotten codger occupying space.

Naturally, his fellow islanders found his commitment to silence to be quite strange. They couldn’t understand why a man would suddenly stop speaking. One of them even confronted him about it one night at the local tavern after having one too many drinks. He staggered over to Mr. Balbh and asked with his finger wavering in his face, “Why don’t you talk no more? Are you mental? Is that it? Are you too stupid to talk? Do you not know how anymore?” Of course, Mr. Balbh didn’t respond. “Well, I guess that settles it then, the man’s gone dumb!” The tavern erupted in laughter and that’s how it started. As a joke. But as time went on, the joke lost meaning and now he’s Mr. Balbh.

Of course, it didn’t always use to be this way. Long before he was Mr. Balbh, he was Douglass Cobb. A sixth-generation islander with fishing in his blood. He never learned to read but he could man his own boat and fishing line by age six. So aye, he was dumb before he became a mute, after all, there’s a bit of truth in every joke, but he became a damn fine skipper. As a young man, he would fish those icy shores all day and night to provide for himself and his mother before she passed. And in the Winters, he would take tourists, as few as there were, on expeditions to see the Northern Lights. But just as he retired from speaking, he retired from fishing and expeditions all the same. Now all he uses that boat for is to search the waters. Even in his old age, he will spend days at a time scanning the waters from here to Ireland and back again, forever searching. Some folks on Fogo joke that he’s out looking for a functioning brain.

Douglass spent the majority of his life alone. You see, he never did too well with the women. He was a good looking lad in his youth, sure, but every girl on Fogo Island knew nothing happened behind his sea blue eyes. He couldn’t discuss art, he knew nothing of politics, nothing about theater, or literature, philoso-

phy, the complexities of human emotion, nothing really. All he knew was fishing. That's why no woman had ever fallen in love with him. Douglass however, fell in love just once in his life.

Her name was Sarah. She was an American firecracker who had an energy about her that could light up any room she entered. She worked for a nature publication and had come to Fogo for the Winter season to photograph the snowy landscape. Almost instantly, she had taken a liking to Douglass, and he to her. He offered his home for her stay, which she gladly accepted. Given the size of his home, or lack thereof, the two became quite familiar with one another.

Aye, Douglass was a dumb man, but even worse than that he was a dumb man in love. He would do anything for her and she knew it, everyone did. People spend their entire lives searching for someone to look at them the way Douglass looked at Sarah. He asked her to marry him after only two weeks. He wanted her to come live with him and share a life together. She declined of course. Everyone knew a woman like her simply had too much life in her to be stuck on a rock like Fogo Island. The day he saw her off was tough for both of them. Sarah was quite ill that day. They said their goodbyes to one another and before she got on the ferry, Sarah kissed Douglass on the cheek and promised she would return one day.

Devoted and dedicated, Douglass sat by that dock in the same exact spot each and every day waiting for her. From sunrise to sundown he'd watch the ferry come and go and the people unload. Days turned to weeks and weeks to months. Seasons came and went, and like a stone, Douglass waited for her, but, she never came. Until, one day about 18 months later, she did. And waiting for her like always was Douglass. But she wasn't alone. You see, in her arms was a small beautiful baby boy. His name was Charlie. He was nine months old and had his father's blue eyes.

Douglass had never been so ecstatic in his life. When he gazed upon Charlie's face for the first time he found his purpose. He thought his waiting had paid off and now he, Sarah, and Charlie could finally live the life he always dreamed of. However, that fantasy would be short-lived. Just three days later while Douglass was still asleep, Sarah snuck away and took the first ferry out. She didn't leave a

note or give any explanation as to why. She pawned off Charlie and abandoned them. She decided her life would be better anywhere else with someone else than it would be there with him and that child. Douglass was heartbroken, but he had a child to look after.

Douglass fully dedicated himself to that boy. He started saving money to make sure that Charlie got a proper education. The last thing he wanted was for Charlie to be like him. Douglass had envisioned a great future for Charlie. He had an explorer's heart and a philosopher's mind. He knew that child could be anything he wanted to be so he did everything he could to give him that future.

Charlie had grown into a fine boy. He was only five but like his father, he'd already learned the basics of fishing. He and his father practically lived on that boat. For New Year's, Douglass wanted to take Charlie to see the Lights for the first time. They left at dusk, the water was particularly choppy that night and made the boat rock something fierce.

After about a half-hour boat ride, they found themselves under those magical dancing green waves in the starry night sky. Charlie was in complete awe, his eyes wide and mouth agape. It was a look Douglass knew well, he had seen it many times before. The beauty and wonder in which the Lights paint the sky are indescribable. It washes over you and leaves you lost for words. Only when gazing upon them with your own eyes will you ever truly understand.

Charlie tried to get a better look. He propped his body up on the railing, his torso hanging over the edge. Douglass yelled at him to get down. Charlie didn't listen, he leaned out even further. Then, in one rapid motion, a wave rocked the boat and flung Charlie over the edge. Douglass screamed and sprinted to the railing and looked over but all he could see was darkness. He quickly shed his clothes and without a second thought dived right into those icy waters. His body immediately went into a state of shock. When you jump into water that is below freezing it feels like a million flaming pins piercing your body all over.

Douglass screamed Charlie's name at the top of his lungs until his throat was throbbing. His ears were ringing and he couldn't feel a thing below his neck. His breaths began getting slower and slower. He knew hypothermia was begin-

ning to set in, he could feel himself slowly dying. Devastated and defeated, he began swimming back to the boat. His eyes felt increasingly heavier with each sluggish stroke. Douglass's entire body was completely numb, he was drowsy and disoriented and struggled to keep his head above water. By some miracle, he found the strength to pull himself back on board. He crawled as far as he could while coughing water from his lungs before he lost consciousness.

When he woke, he was in a hospital room on the mainland with no recollection of how he got there. The first thing he noticed was the black spots that covered the entirety of his body, the second was the scathing pain. He tried calling out for a nurse or doctor but all that managed to escape was a high-pitched indiscernible squeal that burned his throat on the way out. He would later learn that he suffered a stroke before going unconscious and as a result, lost all feeling in the left side of his face as well as the ability to speak. The doctor told him he was lucky to even be alive, of course, Douglass felt differently.

He didn't return to Fogo Island for quite some time. When he did, not a single person asked about Charlie. They probably assumed he went back to live with his mother in America. It wasn't long after his return that Douglass Cobb became Mr. Balbh. But in all honesty, he never minded the name. For him, it was easier to be seen as a fool than to be seen as a monster. He feared what they'd think if they knew the truth. He didn't want them to look at him the same way he looked at himself.

It's a funny thing actually, how when you don't speak for yourself, others assume they can do it for you. The truth can be whatever you want it to be as long as you're willing to believe it. But, in the same breath, an unwillingness to believe the truth doesn't make it any less true. And for Douglass, the truth was too painful, but for Mr. Balbh, the truth could be hidden in silence.

Family Symmetry

A Ten Minute Play

by Alexis Shrewsbury

Characters:

BECKY, *female, late 50s. Mother of Hugh. Takes pride in her motherly instincts.*

JACK, *male, late 50s. Father of Hugh. Aloof. Forgetful.*

HUGH, *male, mid 20s. Fiancé to Mable. Cautious.*

MABLE, *female, mid 20s. Fiancé to Hugh. Optimistic.*

Notes:

In scenes 1 and 2, Becky/ Jack's living room (stage right) and Hugh/Mable's living room (stage left) are completely (or very close) to being symmetrical to one another with only the color of the furniture being different. Becky/Jack's living room is full of drab browns, grays, and cream colors—while Hugh/Mable's is filled with vibrant colors of reds, blues, and yellows. A visual divider sits between the two rooms like a wall. The phones to the home should be located downstage center, near the very front of the center divider, but making sure not to go past the wall

Scene 1

Lights up on BECKY and JACK's living room. JACK is sitting in an armchair reading something. MABLE in the dark folding clothes on the other side. BECKY enters from stage right.

BECKY
Honey?

JACK
Yes?

BECKY
There's leftovers in the fridge.

JACK
Alright.

[Beat]
BECKY
You want me to warm them for you?

JACK
No, no. It's fine.

[Beat]
BECKY
Did you have a good day?

JACK
Sure. Just fine.

[Beat]
BECKY
Did Hugh get his promotion?

JACK
Don't know.

He didn't tell you?
He doesn't tell me anything.
He tells me things.
So then call him.
I wouldn't want to bother him.
Jack, please talk to me.
What is there to talk about?
Think.
I'm drawing a blank.
Of course you are...
Well, is it important?
Imperative.
Then say it.
I shouldn't have to.

BECKY

JACK

BECKY

JACK

(Gesturing to the phone)

BECKY

[Beat]

BECKY

JACK

BECKY

[Beat]

JACK

BECKY

JACK

BECKY

JACK

[Beat]

BECKY

BECKY turns to walk out of the room.

BECKY

Don't forget about the leftovers.

JACK

(Almost annoyed.)

Yeah, yeah.

BECKY

Did you hear me?

JACK

No, what I heard was a witch.

BECKY

Good. One more thing.

JACK

Make it quick.

BECKY

Eat the leftovers cold. You'll have something in common.

*BECKY exits stage right. HUGH
enters stage left.*

HUGH

(Scanning the room until he sees MABLE)

Mable?

MABLE

Boo!

HUGH

Guess what?

MABLE

(Gasps)

Did you get the promotion?

*HUGH nods. MABLE screams in
excitement and runs to hug him.
They hug.*

MABLE

(Pulling away from the hug)

Did you tell your parents yet?

HUGH

Not yet. I was about to call them.

MABLE

No, no! Surprise them tomorrow!

HUGH

Tomorrow? We already have a bigger surprise to tell them tomorrow.

MABLE

But think about it! Two surprises in one day!

HUGH

That might be too much on their old hearts.

MABLE

They'll be fine!

HUGH

Oh, alright.

MABLE hops onto the couch. HUGH makes his way over to stand behind her. BECKY enters from stage right holding up a shirt.

BECKY

Jack! How many times have I told you not to hang up wrinkled clothes!

JACK

I forgot.

BECKY

(Angrily pulling out an ironing board)

You always forget.

JACK

Well you won't have to deal with it much longer.

BECKY

(Sarcastic)

Thanks for reminding me.

JACK

(Sarcastic)

You're welcome.

BECKY

Idiot.

JACK

Witch.

HUGH

Love?

MABLE

Yes, darling?

HUGH

I was thinking about the future today.

MABLE

Really?

HUGH

Flying cars, all-chrome buildings, fake trees...

MABLE
(Smiling)

Forgetting anything?

HUGH
(Playfully)

I don't know, am I?

MABLE laughs. HUGH moves down stage and speaks simultaneousl with BECKY.

BECKY

HUGH

How do you think he'll react?

How do you think they'll react?

MABLE

Happy!

JACK

Confused.

MABLE

Ecstatic!

JACK

Saddened.

MABLE

Proud!

JACK

Disappointed.

BECKY and HUGH speak simultaneously.

BECKY

HUGH

(Sharply)

(Laughing)

Alright, that's enough. Alright, that's enough.

JACK and MABLE speak simultaneously.

JACK

MABLE

Are you worried?

Are you worried?

BECKY

No, why should I be.

HUGH

They're my parents.

JACK

He's our son.

MABLE

Are you confident?

HUGH

In?

MABLE

This decision?

HUGH

Of course.

JACK

Are you having—

BECKY

Second thoughts? No. You?

JACK

None.

BECKY

Good.

MABLE

Good. Because I'm confident.

In yourself or in me?
Both.
Oh!
Don't sound so surprised.
Don't sound so excited.
Was there excitement in my tone?
Perhaps.
Well at least there's something to look forward to.
For us or for our son?
Us, obviously. Hugh on the other hand—
Anyway, they may need a moment to process it.
But he'll eventually come to understand.

HUGH

MABLE

HUGH

MABLE

BECKY

JACK

BECKY

JACK

BECKY

JACK

HUGH

BECKY

Scene 2

*HUGH walks into the room wearing
a nice suit.*

HUGH

How do I look?

MABLE

Ooh, fancy.

Do I need a tie?
HUGH
MABLE nods.
BECKY
You need a tie.
HUGH exits.
JACK
But it's just a casual dinner.
BECKY
What, you want to look like a monster in front of your son?
JACK
Last I checked, you were the monster.
BECKY
Oh don't you start with me.
JACK
You initiated it.
BECKY
And you agreed upon it, remember?
JACK
Yeah, yeah.
BECKY
Glad to see you remember something.
HUGH comes in wearing a tie.
HUGH
How's this?
MABLE
Very nice. Like when we first met.
HUGH
Mable, please. I was a mess that day.
MABLE
So was I, yet you still complimented me.
BECKY
How do I look?

JACK

Like the Wicked Witch of the East.

BECKY

Really Jack?

JACK

You would look better if the house was on top of you.

BECKY

Why did I even ask you?

MABLE

Your hair looks nice.

HUGH

Thank you.

MABLE

No, it was more like “Thank you!”

HUGH

I wasn’t that enthusiastic.

MABLE

Was.

HUGH

Wasn’t.

MABLE

Was.

JACK

Wasn’t that the dress I first met you in?

BECKY

Check your eyes, Jack. That dress is long gone.

Scene 3

JACK, BECKY, HUGH, and MABLE are sitting at a table in a restaurant together, with no divider in between them.

Oh, I'm so glad we're all together.

It's been a little bit hasn't it?

That it has.

Any changes?

Now why would you ask that?

Just trying to make conversation.

Oh, then what have you two been up to?

Ah, well—

I think it's wonderful that we're all together Mrs. Carolyn.

I agree. Isn't this nice Beck?

You're avoiding my question.

Mom, relax.

There's something you're not telling me.

Mom please.

Ah ha! Your eyes moved.

BECKY

HUGH

BECKY

HUGH

BECKY
(Off guard)

HUGH

BECKY

HUGH

MABLE

JACK

BECKY
(To HUGH)

HUGH

BECKY

HUGH

BECKY

Mom—
Beck, stop pestering him.
Oh you're one to talk.
Is there something I should be aware about?
No, not yet anyway.

HUGH

JACK

BECKY

HUGH

JACK

*BECKY hits the back of her hand to
JACK's chest.*

BECKY

Idiot!

JACK

What?

BECKY

Why would you tell him that?!

JACK

I'm trying to let the kid down easy!

HUGH

I'm sorry?

BECKY

Jack!

HUGH
(To BECKY)

Mom?

BECKY

Eat your food.

HUGH

Are you hiding something too?

BECKY

There's bread on the table.

HUGH
Do not try to distract me with bread.

BECKY
It's nice that we're all together.

HUGH
(To JACK)
Dad, what's going on?

BECKY
(Sharply, to JACK)
Don't answer that.

JACK
Your mother has spoken.

HUGH
Would you two please—

MABLE
Hugh, let's tell them.

HUGH
Mable!

BECKY
So I was right!

HUGH
You want me to tell them now?!

JACK
Way to inflate her ego.

BECKY
Not now, Jack.

MABLE
Yes, now.

HUGH
First or second?

BECKY
Hugh.

MABLE
(To HUGH)

One at a time.

HUGH
(To BECKY)

Look, bread.

BECKY

What are you not telling me?

HUGH

That...

(He looks to MABLE)

That I got my promotion.

JACK

Son, that's great!

MABLE

It is, isn't it? I was so excited—

BECKY
(To HUGH)

Liar.

HUGH

What?

BECKY

I can tell you're lying.

HUGH

It's the truth!

MABLE

I can vouch for—

BECKY

No, no. Not about the promotion.

HUGH

Then what?

BECKY

About what you have to tell me.

HUGH
Oh really?

BECKY
That's not the surprise you were hiding.

JACK
It is at least good news though—

HUGH
Well maybe I can ask you the same thing.

BECKY
Oh, now I'm the bad guy?

***JACK and MABLE speak
simultaneously.***

JACK
Honey, maybe we should tell them—

MABLE
Honey, maybe we should tell them—

***BECKY and HUGH speak
simultaneously.***

BECKY
Not yet.

HUGH
Not yet.

HUGH
Is it so difficult to have a nice dinner together?

BECKY
You don't know the half of it.

HUGH
We're trying to share something special.

BECKY
And what's so much more special than family?

HUGH
Maybe this does involve family. MY family.

BECKY
We are your family!

MABLE
Hugh!

JACK
Becky!

BECKY

Why do you have to be so stubborn all the time?

HUGH

Me? I probably get it from you!

*JACK and MABLE speak
simultaneously again.*

JACK

MABLE

Just tell him!

Just tell her!

*BECKY and HUGH concede in anger
and shout simultaneously.*

BECKY

HUGH

Fine! We're getting a divorce!

Fine! We're getting married!

[Beat]

BECKY

HUGH

WHAT?!

WHAT?!

Scene 4

*HUGH paces back and forth within
his living room stage left. MABLE is
in the room with him.*

HUGH

Can you believe this?

MABLE

It happens. There's nothing you can do.

HUGH

I just don't understand.

MABLE

Were they having issues before?

HUGH

No. Maybe. I don't know.

[Beat]

HUGH

I mean, how—

*Lights up on BECKY and JACK.
BECKY finishes HUGH's sentence.
BECKY paces around their room
stage right.*

BECKY

—could this happen!

JACK

It happens. There's nothing you can do.

BECKY

I mean, so young. Our baby.

JACK

He's not a little boy anymore, Beck.

BECKY

But so soon?

JACK

Give him a break. He's in love. And Mable seems like a fine girl.

BECKY

The girl isn't the problem, Jack. The problem is how I wasn't able to tell.

JACK

You had a lot on your mind.

BECKY

No thanks to you.

JACK

This is not time to fight.

BECKY

My motherly intuition is usually always right.

JACK

Well did you have an inkling?

BECKY

Yes. No. Maybe. I don't know.

[Beat]

JACK

Beck, give him a call.

BECKY

You call him.

JACK

He wants to hear it from you.

BECKY

(Huffs)

He probably hates us right now, you know that.

JACK

I doubt it. He's probably just as concerned as you.

Reluctantly, BECKY goes to the phone downstage center. HUGH's phone is right on the other side of it.

BECKY

(picking up the phone and dialing it)

What should I say?

JACK

Just talk to him as you normally would.

BECKY places the phone to her ear. Lights up on HUGH and MABLE. The phone is ringing. Lights are still up on BECKY and JACK.

MABLE

That could be them.

HUGH

I can't answer it.

BECKY

He's not answering!

JACK

Relax.

Don't tell me to relax!

BECKY

Well, give him a moment!

JACK

Hugh, it could help. Just answer it.

MABLE

HUGH reluctantly goes over to the phone downstage center. He is right across from BECKY, but the two can not see each other due to the divider.

(Reaching out, but stopping before grabbing the phone.)
What do I say?

HUGH

Just talk to her as you normally would.

MABLE

HUGH picks up the phone.

Hello?

HUGH

He answered!

BECKY

(Whispering, to JACK)

Hugh! Darling...

(To the phone)

Mom.

HUGH

So about—

BECKY

Earlier tonight?

HUGH

Yes.

BECKY

I'm happy for you.

[Beat]

Thank you.

HUGH

[Beat]

Am I supposed to say the same?

BECKY

I suppose not.

HUGH

Could you tell me why though?

BECKY pauses. She cups her hand around the mouthpiece of the phone and turns to JACK.

BECKY

He's asking why.

JACK

Then tell him. He deserves to know.

BECKY uncovers the mouthpiece.

BECKY

To put it bluntly. We're just not getting along anymore.

JACK

Bingo.

HUGH

After twenty five years?

BECKY

It's complicated.

JACK

I'll say.

BECKY
(To JACK)

Hush!

HUGH

There's no ulterior motive to this right?

MABLE
(Gasps, offended for them)

Hugh!

HUGH
(Whispering to MABLE)

What?

BECKY
No no! Nothing like that at all. We just...need to go our separate ways.
[Beat]

You can understand that right?

[Beat]

Hugh?

[Beat]

Hugh, please say something to me.

HUGH
(Pauses. Looks at MABLE. Then looks back to the phone.)
Will this make you happy?

BECKY
What?

HUGH
Getting married is going to make Mable and I happy. So will this...divorce make you and dad happy?

BECKY
It's hard to define happy in this context.

HUGH
Well?

[Beat]
BECKY

Yes.
HUGH

Then that's all I need to know.

HUGH goes to hang up the phone.

BECKY
Hold on Hugh!

HUGH places the phone back to his ear.

I can hear it in your voice.

HUGH pauses and listens.

You're afraid aren't you.

HUGH

Mom—

BECKY

There's no need to be afraid.

[Beat]

HUGH

How so?

BECKY

Well for starters, you're not us.

HUGH

But I'm like you. VERY much like you.

BECKY

This is true.

HUGH

So what's to say—

BECKY

Don't think that way.

[Beat]

Where's Mable?

HUGH

In the room with me.

BECKY

Good, good.

HUGH

Why?

BECKY

Do you love her?

JACK perks his head up from what he's doing, focusing on BECKY now.

Yes, of course.

HUGH

Then say it.

BECKY

Right now?

HUGH

What? Are you embarrassed to say it in front of your mother?

BECKY

Fine.

HUGH

I love her.

[Beat]

MABLE perks her head up from what she's doing, focusing on HUGH now.

Louder.

BECKY

Mom!

HUGH

Please do it.

BECKY

I love her!

HUGH
(Louder)

[Beat]

BECKY

Good. Now don't forget to tell her that every once and a while, do you understand?

[Beat]

HUGH
(Taken aback)

Mom.

BECKY

Three little words can go a long way.

HUGH

I see...

BECKY

And don't forget to have her repeat to you either, okay?

[Beat]

Okay?

[Beat]

HUGH

Okay.

BECKY

Good. I'll call you tomorrow.

BECKY hangs up.

JACK

Well?

BECKY

I took care of it.

BECKY turns to exit. JACK speaks right before she walks out.

JACK

Thank you.

BECKY freezes, her back turned to him.

BECKY

Two words too late Jack...But you're welcome.

BECKY exits. HUGH hangs up.

MABLE

Well?

HUGH

We talked.

MABLE

And?

HUGH pauses.

HUGH

I love you.

hummingbirds, snakes, & emeralds
A novella in three poetic acts
by Ana Flores

Xō chipilli

Running along the path leading into a forest,
one can always be certain, that the trees, grass, and animals
all have stories to tell;
even if they do not possess human mouths
they can tell stories in their own ways.

As Spring brings in the new year, the sun rises
so does the sound of the black carriage,
carrying he who sheds tears

For he alone must soon face the task
of being the reckless hero
for the truth he shall unmask
in years so.

Yearning for her
the boy seeks his mother
who has vanished
under the earth

“As all things must.”
His father had said,
Had he cared?
Had he cried?
Had he no desire to yearn?
For her presence, at least?

He was no longer the child of a mother of nature.
he was the son of a land, that gave him no mercy
to yearn, cry, or care
of anything of the world
The World now being his land.

The future inspector not knowing the tumultuous path
that awaited him,
was only fifteen years old when he decided to explore
the lands he would have inherited.

As the open carriage rode about the vast countryside,
the boy was mesmerized by the greenery and colors
of the land; however, what laid there was a gift,
from his mother of nature.

It was a fleeting moment
Where two pair of eyes would meet
A glimpse, if you will.

Brown eyes looking at brown eyes
The future inspector was mesmerized
by the beauty,
Of the future king of thieves.

“Can a man choose from amongst the stars in the sky?”
Perhaps.
But in this glimpse of a moment,
The garden of many flowers
suddenly bloomed.
and for a fleeting moment
the son of the land felt
as if
his life held meaning again.

*My dear mother,
what is this sudden burst
of sweet surprise?
that blooms in my chest?*

When he was fifty-four, he realized that
the sudden burst was admiration and passion.
For the boy he saw that day
was the same man
he was going to die for;
At Dawn

To die for love
He now understood his mother.
His heart beat into the night.

Cuzcatlan

To be exiled from one's own home
was too much for his heart to bear
And yet,
the great judge called history
had already decided the young prince's fate.

All he'd ever known
He had to leave behind,
Because a king
Is never afraid of anything.

Right?

Summers on the coast of a small village
the sand touching his feet
the sun in his eyes

and his father holding him steady
as they walked
alongside the calm tides coming in.

Spring festivals with a parade in the city
endless flower petals falling everywhere,
aromas of spices and sweets filling the air,
even the birds joined in on the fun.

Winter trips to an abandoned hunting lodge
in the mountains of course,
and when picking apples from the orchard
he learnt to be content with peace.

The autumn season brought the rain,
nourishing the crops and fertile land
that was reigned over by his father.

His father was nowhere to be found;
The last time the boy saw his father,
was the night they both tried to flee.

“Wise kings make hard decisions.”
It was the most difficult sacrifice he had to make.

The King of Thieves
now a man of mud.

And ashes.

The only thing that remained of him
was the family crest ring.

A precious jewel sitting on the band,
like the land itself.

He was only five
And yet,
his heart ached to hug his father
his arms,
ached to hold him.

Wet thrice,
he did as he was told
while somehow trying
to live his truth
covered in a web of lies.

Scared of what this new land
had to offer to him,
all he could he do
was make sure his new partner
would be happy
and their future heir as well.
The prince had become a man,
And now comes the hour
of new life

And perhaps,
a living image of all that once was,
coming back to life.

The Other Man
becomes a shadow of his King's love.
The Other Woman
becomes a broken ring of what never was there.

And “The Presumptive Heir”
has to live under a veil
of false promises
the prince made to both of them.

The Joy of Heaven, La Alegría del Cielo, Inpapaquiliz

Many have come before you
a princess
a knight
and a god.

When I look at the paintings,
beneath the annex floor;
I am reminded
many have had my face

My sister has the same brown eyes
he who shall not be named’s smile
her mother’s chin
and oh, speak of the devil
she even has the grandfather’s hands

I’m at the same age my grandfather was
when he became king
same age
same physical type
yet very different in voice

I can’t believe it!
how or why am I, twenty-three
envious of a thirteen-year-old?

The World is your oyster
and I hate you for that

Theft is not an art to you,
It's life to you.

You are not in the glory
of cathedrals and churches,
Street concertinas and folk dances
are your opera house delights.
You were offered nothing
you are all they have.

A brilliant fire is not enough,
to quench my thirst of swapping jewels,
there is never enough warmth,
to conceal the scars of those before me
and mine as well.
I am not a god
yet I like to think I am one.

This man that is chasing me down
does not know
we share the same father
and my heart hurts just thinking about it.

This ordinary street girl
was my father's diamond in the rough
why did he cherish a girl like her?
why did he forget he has a son?

How dare he!

The old coward
allowing this spic
to exist
as the abomination that she is?!

Life is a performance
for the girl of a thousand masks.

blessed be for a girl like me
blessed be like my brown ancestors
house servants and agrarians
on coffee and indigo plantations
blessed be by the sun herself.

I will defeat my brother in life
He will not defeat me by his death.
I was meant to suffer these things
by living and existing.

There is beauty in my happiness
one for which he will never live
to see in its full glory.



Aground

by Cory Sewelson



Ursa and the Forest House

by Cory Sewelson



Isolation

by René Zadoorian



Isolation II

by René Zadoorian

Disconnected

by Jeanette Benitez



Hazeltine Cleaners

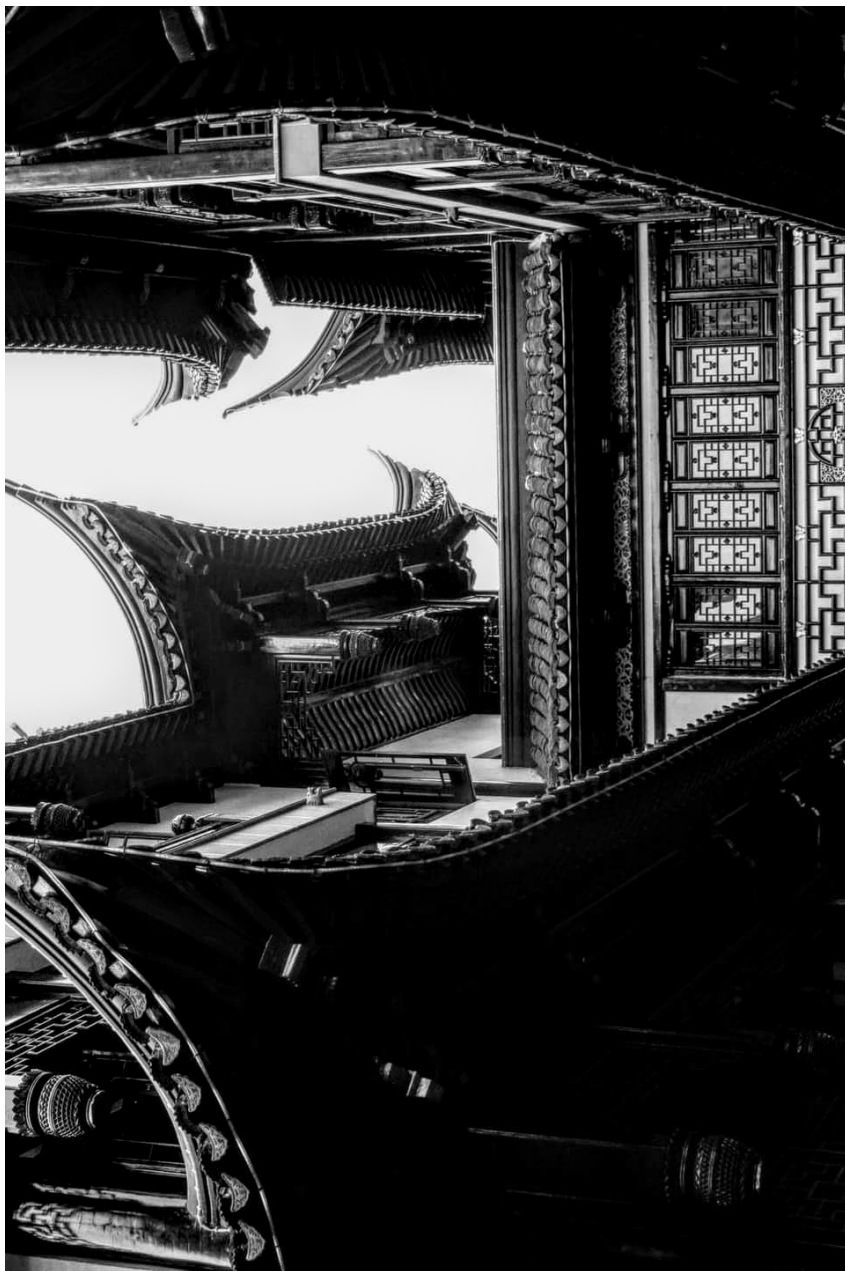
by Jeanette Benitez



How Much Does a Piece of Dust Weigh?

by Liu Renming





Our Incredible World - Shanghai

by Quinnette Free

...What time is it, again?

by Celine Sanchez-Rosas



Berries
Oil on Canvas
by Emily Story



Thirteen Virtues for a House on Fire

by Grace Nuce

I. Witness

Wail over old film reels. Finger every burn hole. Carefully caress the corroded edges with your fingernail. Melt your nail on the embers. Allow your tears to put them out. Glance back; stare at the bad things. Only feel the bad things. Drench the driveway so you can watch the white blood stains reappear. Take a picture.

II. Foundation

Falter under a cracked foundation. Gnarl sponges in between your vertebrae. Carefully paint the death of your spine on the shades of the back of your eyes. Feel the crisp strike of lightning explode down the information channel of your body. Seize in a cocked position. Stand still.

III. Crumble

Curl cautiously into a coiled critter. Fall away into flakes of flesh beneath your feather-down comforter. Cramp no more. Cease to flourish. Compulsively starve and make sure to crimp your blood vessels closed.

IV. Drought

Sands sucked dry of nutrients should pour into the entirety of your frame. Heavy clouds of Diet Coke drench the cracked floors and dry into salt plains. Your brain will shrivel into a king-sized raisin. Wax-covered cups will fill the floor of your heart. McDonald's logos light a fire in you. The sprinklers go off and you slip on the water gliding atop the salty dance floor.

V. Burn

Burn your flesh on stoves, curling irons, and cars on fire. Watch your flesh boil into pus-filled bubbles. Screech as they roll your skin up like a carpet on the floor. Pick

at the leather scabs and watch *Passion of the Christ*. Ask for forgiveness. Wonder if there was a message from the burning bush.

VI. Fail

Grit your teeth till they leave a fine powder on your gums. Flee angrily from the scene and blame circumstance. Never allow yourself to feel you've failed. Only ever get better. Grind up past versions of yourself add linseed oil and turn the pigment into paint. Find a new way to be the best. You will never be good enough, but you can try.

VII. Inherit

Inherit the fire from your momma's growing pains. Lean into her problems, fears, and desires. Stretch your soul to the outermost limits and expand into a rubber cement. Try to mend the shredded heart of her tired body. Grow no branch to fall on her home.

VIII. Consume

Consume for those squelching pores that drip grease from their craters. Your lapping tongue drags a sly hand; searching it grips around the foods who love you. Pillars belonging to your house of cope. Tubs of ice cream cool the flames of fear in your heart. Pastas embrace your inner child. Alfredo sauce lulls your wailing to sleep, and all is well in the world.

IX. Consume Pt. 2

The cave reflects the sounds of angry waves of acid. Howling sailors lost at sea claw at the mucus membrane of your inner mazes. Bring your body out of bed and feed yourself late at night. Likened to a dog who will never know when to stop.

Reach inside for an owner and only stop yourself if you find one.

X. Cocoon

The hungry caterpillar has a long journey ahead. Your mouth with bloated cheeks

and short thin whiskers brushes up against walls of flesh. Black coffee spills and condoms peeled from sticky orifices. Hungry nights and crisp July leaves. Your polka dot eyes stare into each crumb of food, every crunch of the snappy green leaf crumbles beneath the roof of your mouth. Peel away from a skin that no longer suits you, eat it, and wrap your body in silks. Caress the fleshy tunnel of your new home.

XI. Cry

Yearn for floods of tears. Do not build an ark. When they come let them beat your face. Allow the water to slash and sting you like a whip. Wait until your flesh feels like grape jelly then sink into the salty sea. Submerge in a world away from the one you've known. Give way to the sour penance of minerals deposited in your raw skin. Swim beneath the waves that wrestle above until the sharp salt no longer bothers you.

XII. Unfold

Conscious metamorphosis is a kind intention you should have for yourself. Squeeze your sticky discharge-covered limbs from your patina cocoon and snap the seams open. You are a seam ripper, and the sharp points of your limbs are necessary needles. Point them upward where the white light can wrap them in the curtains of the sun.

XIII. Inhaler

When your burning house finally releases from the former of its structure, and the ashes blow away in the wind. When the amber-colored charcoal embeds its pigment in your skin. You are free to use an inhaler when your lungs hang limp like panting dogs. Rest with care on what used to be our front lawn.

Lunch Break

by Jaine

I did not intend to have any difficulties with my supervisor.

“Good morning, doll.”

I hate him. He’s a creep and I can hear him speaking to her, my cubicle neighbor. I hate that I can hear everything that wrongfully exists in the world, and hate that I can envision the congo-line of ants making their way to the complimentary danishes in the break room, as there is a known ant issue in the office. I need just a few, but it’s still too early. It’s best to wait until an appropriate time, like lunch.

“Morning, my angel.”

My body nearly convulses at the sound of his voice being directed at me. I look up and over my cubicle wall, my hunger strangely growing. I want nothing more than to escape.

“My name is Isis.” I retaliate, and his eyebrows playfully raise at me. He’s intrigued and embarrassed, maybe. “I told you yesterday.” He chuckles at my response, walking away to breathe down the scalps and breasts of others.

He must perceive me as a “feisty-sapphire,” grouping me into his collection of other women that reside in the crevices of his ill mind. I want to remove the smug look from his face. I need to eat in the break room. Although I am able to ignore his words successfully, I am never able to get over his unpalatable appearance. The manner in which his tie hangs loose and how his button-up shirt is wrinkled irks me. And the rage that is born within burns the calories of everything I’ve inhaled the days before. I become increasingly hungry.

The sound of my blocky keys washes out the overbearing noises of water-cooler

banter and other chat from nearby cubicles. Certainly, I can wait just like each day. 12:30 pm is the appropriate time to eat, even if the light overhead is reminiscent of buzzing beetles from Zanzibar, or maybe the round-bodied rhinoceros beetle that can punch its horns into the eyes of the perverted. It is impossible to continue my report, my mouse wanders to another tab yet again.

I scratch the side of my neck between bouts of typing just to ease the hunger-itching. My eyes shift to the clock widget in the far right corner of my computer screen: 11:43 am. I scratch my thigh with my nails, my neck has become slightly sore from touching it too much. I can hear the congo-line of ants approaching the danishes. I can't have my meal ruined; cross-contaminated food is the worst thing next to my supervisor.

Pushing myself out from my desk, I stand up and begin making my way toward the breakroom. I keep my eyes on the ground to avoid any wandering pairs. At last, I make it past the threshold. The blinds are covering the glass windows, just as I like them. I can't be seen in my state of famine.

"Good, good." I quietly mumble to myself. It appears that the ants have not touched the danishes. I turn my head to look around and check if the break room is empty. It is a personal rule, or maybe, a ritual, to not eat around any of my co-workers; it would be rude.

I bend down to the counter, holding the pink-colored box of pastries. Before I can appreciate the sight, I begin digging in. My tinted lips press onto the cool surface and begin slurping aggressively. Claw clip styles keep my curly hair from spilling into meals; it is etiquette. Each black ant, one by one, erase into my cavern. I chew a mouthful of them and slurp each and every last one until they all disappear. I feel bad of course, smacking my lips like an animal. I would have wiped down the counter, but then I would have sprayed some of the ants with cleaning solution and that terribly ruins a meal.

“Is your salary not enough for you to eat breakfast at home?” My supervisor chuckles, his voice clearly coming from behind me. Familiar chills rise up and down my spine from my position: face down on the counter and eating ants. He continues, “I can see if you can get a raise, but you would have to prove it, you know?” Of course, he is too perverted to realize I had just finished eating ants.

I have no reply, and I have swallowed all of the ants whole. My shoulders twitch and convulse violently; I am still hungry. It seems that I have miscalculated the number of ants that would be in the break room, and it seems that my supervisor’s comment elicited a violent response from me. As I said, it is a rule to not eat around any of my coworkers, as it is rude.

Within seconds, I turn around and hold my supervisor by the shoulders, my nails sinking into his cheap blazer that covers his un-ironed shirt. I latch onto the side of his face and bite down viciously. I thought I could stop after one bite, but I cannot refrain. His filthy self is enough, it is exactly like a larva revealing itself from under a muddy rock. I am a rhinoceros beetle in combat, unstoppable— and oh, I gnaw his flesh off relentlessly, he cannot even release a scream.

His blood spills violently down my chin as I bite the rest of his face off. Initially starting from the jaw, I successfully ripped apart each and every muscle that held his face together. From the peeling of peach-fuzz skin to the revealing of over-ripe and rotting fruit, his face was gone. By the time I finished pushing my canines through his cheekbones, eye sockets, and other miscellaneous human facial anatomy bits, his body had fully collapsed down to my heels.

It’s a different taste from bugs, human flesh that is. I wouldn’t have it again, it’s horrible. Of course, I now understand that eating my supervisor’s face off does not make for a very trustworthy statement. One thing that I will critique about eating humans is that they are not pure, and are very messy. One can feel the wrongdoings within their blood, and I am left covered in it from my chin and down to my blouse.

“Shit, shit, shit!” My rampage and rebellion suddenly end.

I stuff his decapitated body into one of the large cabinets that hold cheap party decorations. He’s heavy, and a limp body makes things much more difficult. Running to the sink in the room, I wash myself down and unbutton my blouse before stuffing it underneath my pencil skirt. My tank top is not stained, luckily.

Eating bugs provides me plenty of protein and forces me to act on my feet, as being caught with a strange meal makes for awkward encounters. I reach for the roll of paper towels and wipe up the spills of blood while simultaneously spraying bleach. I open the cabinet where I stuffed my supervisor’s body and douse him with bleach as well, just to subdue the rich scent of iron and overall stench. I take all of the used paper towels and cleaning bottles, which I stick down into my taut pantyhose.

Surely, there are mistakes in my track. Acting on impulse left me with no choice but to eat him. I repeat this to myself as I leave the break room with my exposed chest and shoulders. For once, there are no strange comments. But my stomach is swollen, bulging with discomfort. I have eaten too much, but eating him alive had to be a good idea, for the greater good of the other women in my department. He didn’t do any work either, everyone’s work can go without micromanaging. He offered nothing but sleazy comments and discomfort— something good was done! I did something good, surely, yet my stomach continues to pain me.

My gait is strange on the walk back to my desk. I’ve never maneuvered around with a wad of bloody paper towels and a singular bleach bottle in my tights. Walking with a blood-soaked shirt stuffed up my skirt did not make the situation any better either. It was as if a cheap menstrual pad meshed with toilet paper was left on for 3 days to expand and hang from behind my ass.

A small squelch is heard as I sit back down at my desk. I’m horribly embarrassed by the turn of events today. Now, I have to leave work early. I’m quick with excus-

es, however. I email HR that I have an emergency with my mom or some other family member that lives out of state. I soon forget the lie that I typed, my stomach struggling to digest the foreign parts of my supervisor. I pack my shoulder bag with my belongings before standing up again. I make one last awkward walk to the elevator, inching and dragging my heels along the floor.

Certainly, I did not intend to eat my supervisor.

In the House of Hera

by Lucy Conrad

Sofia Monroe found herself at a party in some bombed out three bedroom house in the valley on a Saturday night. She was already tired from work, and she allegedly wasn't drinking or smoking right now, and she either didn't know or didn't like half the people here, so she was sort of wondering what the point was.

But her ex, Vesper, this stone butch from the Bay was there, and Sofia couldn't resist making sure Vesper was just as miserable as her right now, so here she was. Whatever.

Sofia was trying to give off the vibe that she didn't really care what was going on when this dude Derek showed up who like, okay, she had fucked a couple of times, which was embarrassing enough because his name was fucking Derek, but also now Derek sort of thought they were a thing and he could talk to her whenever. Sofia tried to put out cool, tough lesbian energy but it was hard when you were a barely passing trans girl and even harder when dudes named Derek came up to you talking all flirty.

Sofia was thinking about all of this and kind of staring off into space, and Derek was halfway through a sentence before she realized she was spacing out and just walked away from him. She was a little high, but she needed a drink.

Unfortunately, Vesper was by the "bar" (folding table with a bunch of loose liquor, lukewarm 2 liter sodas from the grocery store, and scattered red cups). And they were talking to this bitch Stace who was like, picture a cishet white girl and that's her. There was no way Vesper, coy-about-her-pronouns, fake-deep-to-the-point-of-accidentally-being-real-deep, listen-to-the-Mountain-Goats-and-actually-gets-it, goes-by-the-name-fucking-Vesper Vesper, would settle for that. Would they? To be fair, these were all things that Sofia thought were cool and/or hot about Vesper, but putting it like that she could see how Vesper actually might be super annoying and shitty. Their tongue was in Stace's mouth but that could mean anything, really.

It did mean she wasn't looking at Sofia at the moment, and so Sofia poured something like two and a half shots worth of vodka into a cup that already had some flat off-brand Dr. Pepper in it, and booked it to the nearest corner as

fast as she could. One benefit of being broad and tall and lanky as hell was that Sofia had elbows and knees like goddamn jackknives, and this made traversing small crowds and mosh pits very easy. And it was a pretty good turnout as far as five-dollar-per-person fundraisers for vaguely university-associated groups go.

Sofia of course, does not pay to get fucked up on weekends as a moral thing, so she snuck in through a window. Well, more accurately, she stumbled in. It's kind of hard to be stealthy when you're 6'2 and have bright red shoulder-length hair and are swimming in even brighter baggy-ass clothes from the hot topic discount rack three years ago when you worked there. I mean she. Whatever, this internal monologue's getting confusing.

Point is, that's what Sofia looks like when she's alone in a corner drinking vodka and Kroger brand "Dr. Cola" and that's what she looks like the first time she sees the Goddess Hera, she of the mound, protector of women in childbirth, goat-eater and patron of marriage, family, and cattle.

Of course at the time, Sofia didn't know she was looking at the Flower of Argos. She just saw a seven-foot woman, scrawny but doing a bad bitch runway walk, making her way through the party and no one making a note of it.

Hera was adorned red and white, not royal or angelic but like that of dried blood and ash. What Sofia later found (by smell) to be dried milk covered the old god's flesh, pale and cracked so she looked like a decaying statue of herself. She wore tattered robes and a belt of still-dripping hooves, and wielded a staff tipped by the tightly chained carcass of a cuckoo.

She looked around, aimless at first, before wandering to Sofia. Sofia noticed the difference in height. Not a lot of women were taller than her. She had dark eyes, too. The old Greeks said she looked like a cow. Sofia thought she looked kind of like a grungy Cate Blanchett, who Sofia was totally into.

Sofia took a long sip of her drink. The goddess explained herself and her predicament. Apparently gods get bummed out when nobody believes in them or even thinks about them. Not "binge-watching Seinfeld" bummed out or even "checking into the grippy socks hotel" bummed out, something like fading out of existence forever plus eternity bummed out. Like every memory of you gets tainted. Sofia understood that.

However, there was a solution: human sacrifice. Shock, awe. Screams

from the crowd. Sofia was faded at this point, so not too freaked out. Human sacrifice is intense but surprisingly prevalent in our culture. It worked for Jesus. Sofia nominated Stace.

She tried to explain how Stace was like a total homophobe because she kept describing things as “faggy” and Sofia didn’t understand why she kept using that word because she wasn’t even gay, probably. Vesper was basically a dude so they didn’t count. Plus Stace just looked homophobic.

Hera didn’t really understand what homophobia was, because they didn’t have that in ancient Greece. It was kind of a “just pick a twink and go to town” situation for the ruling class of guys, and nobody cared what the women were up to. (Any time you’re reading about ancient Greece and you hear about someone spending a lot of time with her “handmaiden,” just know they were on some Blue is the Warmest Color shit.)

Which also led to an interesting point: One of Hera’s handmaidens from back in the day was trans. Very progressive. This also meant that Sofia was qualified for the sacrifice thing. Yay.

Honestly, having her gender validated by a deity was really flattering, but even three drinks and a liberal dose of Granddaddy Purp was not enough to make Suicide by God appealing (although it would make a great name for a metal band). This wouldn’t sway Sofia from making conversation though. She wasn’t really any good at flirting, but talking to Hera was kind of like talking to a muscly brick wall, so it was good practice.

They found they had a lot in common. They loved music (Sofia was really into the Yeah Yeah Yeahs at the moment - Hera enjoyed the operas written in her name), gossip (Sofia restarted the rumor about Marilyn Manson’s rib removal - Hera once drove her husband’s bastard son to violent madness), and games (Sofia had a PS4 - Hera explained something involving two oiled-up gladiators, a pit full of spikes, a bird, and a sword). As they talked, Sofia found herself growing oddly attracted to the (much) older woman. It may have been the external validation, or the liquor, but there was something silky about her voice that made Sofia feel... comfortable. She wanted to curl up in her arms and take a nap.

Hera had a way of looking at her, too, like she mattered. She paid attention to details. The way she clicked her tongue when she was nervous. Her air of avoidance around Vesper. She brought it up. It was kind of intimidating, but

refreshingly forward.

Sofia told her the truth: that she thought she was in love, and it didn't work out. Tale as old as time. Plus she was one of like three side bitches.

Hera said she didn't deserve that treatment, which begged the question, "What kind of treatment do you think I deserve?" Hera told her the truth: she could make Sofia feel like a god.

Now that was intriguing. She asked for an explanation. Hera had a lot of details. There was a process. "Three moons of deflowering," and dancing and music and freaky orgy stuff. And then Hera would lie down with her, and she would slit her throat and drink her blood.

It was pretty metal but like, it seemed like a whole thing. Plus three weeks? I just met you! Buy a girl a drink first.

So using what may have been the single strongest moment of good judgment in her life, Sofia declined. She told Hera it was a kind offer, but she needed some time to move on. Time alone. Time she had never given herself before. Hera knelt to her. Said there was a great bravery and a great sadness to Sofia, and that she hoped she never grew out of the first. Then she walked away.

Sofia sat and thought for a moment, then went back to the bar, took a shot, and slapped Vesper across the face. It was a weird night and that felt like the right way to end it. Before Vesper recovered, Sofia was halfway out the door with Derek's hand in hers. Sure he was a guy and like, ew, but this night was a total bust otherwise. The Hera thing was nice, but she needed some good old-fashioned male validation, and that was going to come in the form of some shockingly quick sex in the back of a Toyota and a lot of annoying voicemails the next couple days. Nothing she hadn't dealt with before.

Still, Sofia would find herself in the days to come thinking about her conversation with Hera, wondering if she made the right decision. It would have been major gay street cred to be able to say she slept with a goddess but for the first time in a while, Sofia felt pretty happy to be alive.

Home Snow

by Robert A. Jones

After traveling through three states in nine hours, John was finally approaching the Wisconsin address Larry had given him. It was a chilly evening in October of 1954, and the snow had already begun to fall a month prior, earliest on record. As John got out of the car and stepped onto the snowy lawn, he caught a glimpse of Larry watching TV in his living room. He stopped for a second, took a deep breath—inhaling all the scents of the forest not masked by the snow—then headed for the front door with a soft smile and a shaky hand.

“Well if it ain’t Dogface Kane showing up late as usual,” Larry said with a smirk and a hint of alcohol on his breath. “Are you coming in or would you prefer to freeze your balls off?” John entered the security of Larry’s small home and embraced him once he closed the door. “Nice and cozy place you got, I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many trees surround a house.” The walls of the home were all empty but one—directly over the fireplace was a plaque with a few war medals neatly organized in two rows. Both of the only framed pictures to be found were of Larry with his parents, one in the kitchen on a windowsill and the other sitting beside his bed.

“Pfft, you city boys see one damn tree and think you’re in the wilderness. Tomahawk is just down the road.” Larry escorted John over to a couch near the fireplace in the living room where he’d been enjoying a cold beer in his recliner with a rerun of *I Love Lucy*.

“Well, I’m surprised I even spotted this little den with all the snow covering it up. It’s barely starting back in Cleveland.”

“The snow came a bit early this year but it ain’t so bad, I always liked the way it covers everything up.” Larry said as he grabbed an extra beer for his guest. “I never liked the snow much...” John refused the beer, placed it on the table, then looked back up at Larry.

“Well the snow we saw was something else. The march to the Yalu River wouldn’t have been so bad if we had the proper gear either.” Larry gestured to the

window, “Now this, this is **our** snow. Home snow.”

“Home snow seems like it might be the same as it was out in the field. Not really a fan of it.” John’s gaze left Larry and got lost in the view outside.

“Well if you don’t like it maybe you should move out to California; I hear there ain’t much snow out there,” replied Larry before downing his current beer and tossing it into the trash. He grabbed another before dropping back into his recliner.

John glared at Larry for a second, then let out a sigh followed by a smile. “Well how’ve you been man? It’s been a year since I’ve seen you, how does it feel to be home?”

“Good. Real good. Been working on cars with Nash Motors, which is nice, the pay is good.” Larry paused, then looked up at his medals, then back down at his new drink. “The nightmares ain’t so bad either. Being back on my turf has helped with them, I’d say. What about you? You’ve been back in Cleveland for some months now?”

“Yeah I’m doing alright. Surprisingly I enjoy the loud city life, missed it even. Who would’ve guessed I’d miss sleeping a street away from the train,” John said with a chuckle. “I went to see my pops. Had a long conversation with him, but I don’t think that’ll happen again for a while.”

“Why’s that?”

“Just, you know, uh... different opinions.” John reached over and grabbed his beverage and cracked it open while Larry watched. John almost mimicked the same way Larry had poured his icy beer straight down his throat and felt it hit his gut before his body got used to this new temperature.

The two men sat quietly for a moment, listening to the fire make small crackles in the wood as it burned. Larry took another sip of his beer then set it on the table. “Well I’m sorry to hear that but you know, shit happens. I’m sure it’ll all blow over eventually.”

John’s eyes met Larry’s while keeping his face towards the ground. “Sure, how’s your parents doing?”

“Good. I go to Sunday service with them every week. Mom makes us

breakfast then Dad drives us all in his old pickup truck. Can't believe that old thing still runs."

John's train of thought got caught between two tracks, until Larry moved from his recliner to the couch, beside John. "So nothing new at all with the folks then?" John asked, "Nothing come up at church?"

Larry's glance jumped from John to the ceiling, then found its place in the fire. He took a deep breath, releasing some tension, then spoke. "Yeah, now that you mention it there's a nice woman they introduced me to. Nine... No ten, yeah ten months ago. We've really hit it off, she even stays here sometimes. Cooks me meals and such."

John's head slowly bobbed up and down. He stared at nothing but faced the beers sitting on the little coffee table in front of him. "Good for you man. I'm sure your mom is thanking God for... what's her name?"

"Sheryl."

"She has a lovely name."

In only a few seconds, the latest beverage in Larry's possession went from nearly full, to a crushed can sitting atop his trash bin. "I'm going to propose to her."

At first John felt the hairs on his arms and legs rise, but soon he didn't really feel much of his limbs at all. All he felt was a pain in his gut and the weight of his head. "Well she's got her work cut out for her. I hope you two the best." John gathered his strength, stood up, and headed for the door. "It's pretty late, I'm gonna go find that motel I passed down the road."

Larry jumped up from the couch. "Don't bother, you can stay here, it's no big deal."

"No, it's ok. I don't wanna be a burden."

"You're not, I thought you'd be staying so I'd already gotten ready for you."

"No, really, I think it's better if I just stay at the motel tonight."

"Well you've been drinking. It's not safe." Larry grabbed John's empty beer can. "How about one more, to help you think about it?"

John broke from Larry's glance and turned towards the door. "I'm fine, I

only had one and you know I'm no light weight. Besides, if I stay and have more I'll end up with an actual accident on my hands."

"...Ok. If you insist."

"I'll be back in the morning to give you a farewell before I hit the road."

John turned and motioned his hand towards the door, but it didn't reach its destination. His eyes found Larry once more. "Maybe we can go for a trudge in the snow before I go. You can show me why you love the stuff so much."

Larry gave John a warm smile. "Yeah, sounds like a plan."

John exited the home and felt the cold air send shivers down his spine. He crossed the snow covered yard to get to his car, not letting it slow him down. Once there, John glanced back at Larry with a mournful smile, got into his car, and headed out on his search for a new place to stay.

The Boulder

by Ryan Okabayashi

Woke up. Fell out of bed. Dragged a comb across my head. Got dressed for school. Said goodbye to my mom and sister. Walked down the street. Shot a man to death. Made it to school on time. Slept through class. Teacher got mad at me.

How am I supposed to care? He won't remember by the end of the day. I get fed up with his lecture and begin to say what he is about to say to him before he says it. I even say his surprise before it occurs. He's sufficiently weirded out enough to leave me alone.

Second class of the day. Nothing of note is different. Bide my time until the first break of the day.

Bell rings. Leave class. Head to the one gate that's broken and unwatched. Leave school. Go across the street. Break into the house with someone home sleeping. Suffocate them in their sleep. Make it back to school on time for the break to end.

Make it to third period on time. The storm begins earlier than normal. Maybe he's mad about my approach? How can he be mad, this is his fault. What a hypocrite. Being lost in thought during class leads to the teacher asking if I'm paying attention. I decide to mix it up and say no. Teacher makes a comment and then proceeds, like nothing had happened.

Fourth period. News about the random deaths has hit the school. School continues despite a body being discovered across the street, as expected. Decide to change my strategy, go for some risky plays.

Lunch break. Break into chemistry lab. Mix the chemicals at random. One of these times I'll make a bomb randomly, but apparently today isn't the day. I do make a

gas that nearly knocks me out, so I hold my breath and get out of there as quickly and quietly as possible.

Fifth period begins. An explosion is heard in the distance. Apparently today is that day. Chaos ensues, and an evacuation shortly thereafter. Luckily class was far enough away that I'm allowed to leave after my class is accounted for. Will find out the death toll later, apparently the whole classroom exploded.

Make my way to the store. Buy what I need for the next part, using a fake ID for the alcohol. Then I raid the weapons cache I discovered for some bombs and assault weapons. The cache was located in an abandoned building near the outskirts of the city. The second floor had a room full of weapons. Light machine guns, sniper rifles, assault rifles and the like lined the walls, with a weird stone tablet on a pedestal in the middle for some reason. I think the cache is for a terrorist group that's planning something, but I'll make much better use of these supplies than they ever could. They don't have the time to plan what I have.

I make my way downtown and slink into the basement parking lots of several buildings. Planting the bombs is hard to get away with, but I've had practice. Once I finish setting the last bomb, I immediately go to the city hall. They don't expect someone to crash a car through the front door, especially not a car covered in bombs. I quickly dash out of the car, making it behind cover as I set the bombs to blow. The bombs blow up, and I managed to be in the one safe spot in the building, as planned.

Unfortunately, as I survey the wreckage, a lucky shot from a faraway cop takes me down.

I wake up to familiar scenery. Another audience with the one who calls itself God.

"So, how'd I do?"

“Why do you persist with this path? You know the end of it. You are here until you become good.”

“Or you give up. Which you will.”

“Why are you so confident?”

I laugh. He could never understand. Not while he still believes that someone like me could be a saint.

“You’re going to lose your little bet with the Devil, you know that? Like I could ever become a good person. Time loop or not.”

“You know you’ll end up good given enough time, so why do you resist so vehemently?”

“Because I can succeed. And so I will. I will try until you won’t.”

“You remind me of another mortal I punished. Do you know the tale of Sisyphus?”

“Of course, eternal boulder and hill, as punishment for defying death twice.” I assume he’s discussing the myth, rather than the version I like, Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

“Unlike him, you can leave. All you have to do is become a good person.”

“And that’s why you don’t understand my confidence. Because given enough time, the boulder will stay on top of the hill, right?”

“Fine. We’ll continue this conversation later.”

My consciousness fades. It seems he got tired of me.

Woke up. Fell out of bed. Dragged a comb across my head. Got dressed for

Glasses

by Miranda Lubin-Badillo

i was blind to your sun-rays
how when i kiss your cheek you make a funny noise that puts a wide grin on my face
i was blind to your green flags
which is ironic because it's one of your favorite colors
i was blind to your patience
how each time i try to push you away and leave in a huff you accept me back calmly
i was blind to your grace
how you allow me to experience whatever i need to without exerting blame
i was blind to your affection
how you often touch your lips to my forehead when i'm lying crooked on the bed
i was blind to your calmness
how i can tell you my most appalling stories and you remain curious and thoughtful

i was blind to a way i'm not used to
i expected eruption, for boiling rivers to freeze over just as quickly as they heated up
i expected criticism for shortcomings
hurtful words, cold rejections, a pointed finger
i expected hellish anger on account of me being me
i suppose relationships aren't about waiting for the next natural disaster
or anticipating exits
it can be a quiet hum of security
your light snoring on the phone
your overused catch phrases
your affinity for fantasy
your goofiness
your lit up eyes
hanging onto the moments you laugh
our terrible singing

i was blind to your goodness
and the goodness we share
but today i grabbed a pair of glasses

The City Underneath

by Sean Ahern

There's a city underneath
a false floor leads
below the jigsaw streets,

a cathedral of steel
in concert with moans

echoes from the surface.
Where the body shops
build people from ash and bone,

they meander above
to walk and smile
for neon screens.

They pray, but their hands are empty.
They pay, and their hands are empty.

The broken ones
can't find home,
so they wander

and live in cardboard boxes
that held someone else's life,
a family, a husband, a wife.

They watch as shapes stride,
sinking back into their underworld
where they once belonged.

Their fingers and feet filthy from digging
as they try to purchase the ground.

The dirt here doesn't seem real,
it knows too much;
it remembers a million stories
written by soles that walk above.

Can You Feel the Panic?

by Emily Story

Take one sip and feel your insides twist like soft serve. Mold in my mouth. Fuzzy dark green mold with textured orange spots lining the roof of my mouth, the sides, the insides of my cheeks where the spit pools. In the pools grow little fuzzy trees with trunks the width of needles setting their pointy roots in my gums and growing little fuzzy oranges laced with worms and caterpillars. Igneous rock in my throat. Slimy and solid, smooth and dense. High up enough that you can see it if you tilt your head back and open wide. Metamorphic rock in my stomach. Pendulous. Scrapes the walls with every step, every swing. Erodes my stomach lining until the blueberry acid drips out. Heartbeat in my collarbones. Teeth become sweet tarts, grind them and feel them disintegrate, leave a film on your gums, feel that sticky substance rot straight through, watch your gums turn black and bruised. Brush and cleanse and rinse and kill what's hurting you, what's choking you. Brush and cleanse and rinse and feel the mold weaving down the back of your throat, feel it spread through every airway, feel it enclose the space between the esophagus and the rock that already makes it hard to breathe, feel it clog your nose, feel it foam. Brush and cleanse and rinse and notice how dry your tongue is, coated with flour no matter how much you scrub, as the mold becomes overgrown your tongue catches the residue. Taste it, feel it stick, feel its chunky texture. Gag. White hot pressure in the tissue where your shoulder and neck meet, and where the back of your skull meets your neck, and in your brain, cooking it. Red slow pressure when you breathe, lungs and ribs won't stop screaming at each other, he did it, she did it. Bone constricting muscle when muscle expands, pinching, muscle has no choice but to try and worm its way through open pockets. Feel the pressure move around inside, be able to identify its parasitic travels, it's in your shoulders now, will it crawl up your neck and settle on your jugular, or to your forehead or your pelvis next? Allow it to wrap around your brittle sugar cane bones, allow yourself to start shaking, allow yourself to weaken, allow yourself a cup of coffee and a muffin. Feel it eat. Its favorite foods are cake with buttercream frosting and ice cream and saltwater taffy. Suffocate in sweetness. Feed it even though it aches you.

This Poem Has No Imagery

by Markie Metzlar

au·tism

Noun.

1. a neurodevelopmental condition of variable severity with lifelong effects, chiefly characterized by difficulties with social interaction and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior, and often associated with sensory processing difficulties

I sit in class and softly tap-tap-tap at the keyboard, drowning out the silence that sits too heavily on top of me, and look around the room I've seen a dozen times before. The projector shows a grassy hill. The walls are littered with posters of fault lines and the earthen plates and mineral identifications. I wonder what makes basalt different from andesite? Words, carefully indexed, fill my mind. I set them back in their folders and slide the drawer shut with a resounding *thunk!*

ban·ded i·ron for·ma·tion

Noun.

Geology

1. a sedimentary deposit that consists of alternating thin layers of iron oxides (such as magnetite or hematite) and iron-poor minerals (such as shale or chert)

—> abbreviation BIF

The professor passes around a chunk and talks about tiger's eye and oxides and something called iron-poor chert. I can't see it from my seat. So I busy myself with taking notes and forget the world around me, lost in the tapping of my keyboard. If time passes then I am blissfully unaware.

tex·ture

Noun.

1. “the feel, appearance, or consistency of a surface or substance.”

The girl next to me sets the banded iron formation on my desk. I pick it up—
surprised at the weight—
and run my fingers along the uneven ridges.
The surface is glossy and rough. Bands of
soil-black (consistent
only in its beveled finish, a plaster drizzled on gravel)
and burnt-tangerine
(grit under the pads of my touch
like sand scratching at skin and I can't snatch my
hand away fast enough)
stretch across the surface in an all-encompassing embrace.
Thin veins of gold
(smooth and simple)
glitter as primordial stars trapped in amber
illuminated by
shafts of sunlight that sneak through slanted shutters.
The cold of the Ancient etches itself into my skin.
The specimen sits heavily in my palm as I pass it

back-and-forth, forth-and-back
examining it from all sides
each one a new
surprise.

a·phan·ta·si·a

Noun.

1. “the inability to form mental images of objects that are not present.”

I pass the BIF to the student behind me.

Descriptive words - porous, igneous, jagged - fill my
mind, informed by the ghost of texture still dancing
on my hands.

I press my palms together to memorize a picture

I will never see again.

The Scent of Morning Rain

by Wendy Aguilar

I stepped outside, and I heard
the wind whisper your name,
the breeze carrying each syllable

A string.

Even in the silent winds,
your existence is made clear.
Siphoning, the way a storm picks up,
lifting up everything in its wake,

Catastrophic.

I stepped outside, and I smelled
the scent of morning rain,
the droplets trickling down simultaneously,

A flood.

I think
I miss the clear skies, despite
the truth they revealed.
Stability. a stormless season.
A walk down the dry concrete.

Safety.

Promises to the Concrete

by Sean Ahern

We made promises to the concrete,
wrote them with fingers
on walls, sidewalks, and on the back of our spines.

We drew halos on our bodies
an ink shadow canvas
to step into each other.

We pray
to the gods that sleep with us,
to the ones that hold our hands
as we cross the street,
to dip us in dreams
tirelessly, learning
we are tears to a hurricane.

We tried to catch the sky
with plastic bags
but they melted
on the pavement
into polymer butterflies.

Promises worn to protect the chest
from breathing.
Spent
as lips divorce,
bent on knowing
how to hold them better in our mouths.

the first of many heartbreaks

by Diana Serrano

my body
was the only thing you liked about me,
the only part of me that you can touch—
you don't quite like what's inside.

i find myself wanting to go back
to last November, when i was counting
the stars i could see in the blackened sky
and the little white pills in my hand

for i want to destroy the very thing
you loved the most about me.

i want to slice myself open and
clean the wounds inside my stomach,

i want to crack my ribs and sternum apart,
take out my lungs and my heart,
and leave them on your doorstep
to see if you'd still love me.

i'm nothing—my body is empty, pathetic,
uglier than ever; *filthy*, so filthy that i'd scrub away at it
in the shower, scrub so hard until i saw blood
and every layer of skin underneath.

whether i'm dead or alive
doesn't make a difference to you—
you still see me as just a body
devoid of a soul

so i want to destroy the very thing
you loved so much,
the same way you destroyed
me

Springtime
by Rachel Stratemeier
After Springtime by Pierre-August Cot

Have you ever felt more strongly that the whole world
is egging us on?

You feel my light arm around your neck.
Folds of ethereal fabric
Wrap their lacy fingers around
your feet and ankles.
The light expands onto you,
the tentacles of a supernova.

Oh, you dark
and shrouded creature.
How the sun has left his
words and lifeblood
from your small and novice body.
The shade caresses
You from your hair to the leaves at your feet.

But I am consumed in light!
You sad thing, let me enwrap
you with gentle fingers.
Cast away the darkness
and drink the wine
that drips from my fingers.
It is aliveness.

Fear Not

by Jaine

“Fear not!” A loud voice jolted Misha awake from her sleep, a mixture of beginner-level clarinets and untuned violins filled her room. The shining light blinded her violently, her arms flying to grab her pillow in order to hide from it.

“Christ!!” The woman shrieked in half-awake terror. She kept the pillow in front of her face as she pushed herself up against the headboard of her queen-sized mattress. It was four in the morning on a work day, Tuesday to be exact. “Please spare me God!” She screamed with great fear.

The unknown speaker stood at the edge of Misha’s bed, their arms extending to pull the pillow from the woman in order to reveal her face. Without much luck, the pillow was unable to be taken from her strong grip. “Fear not, I say!” They call out once more, attempting to tear the pillow away from Misha.

Misha wailed and held onto her inanimate savior, not giving in to the weak grip of the mystical being that appeared in her room. “Please, I’m not ready to go yet!” She sobbed, nearly hyperventilating in between words.

“I said fear not!” The being became disgruntled at the struggle for the pillow. Taking their staff made of glue and popsicle sticks, they smacked Misha’s hands away from her makeshift shield. The staff broke into pieces upon impact, the pillow dropping along with bits of what seemed to be used popsicle sticks and dried globs of hot glue. “Look at what you did!” they huffed and began picking up the parts, frowning at the woman.

Finally revealed, there stood a gray-colored hairless cat-type creature with patches of sparse hair on the top of their head and parts of their body. They were hunched over in stature, wrinkly in texture, and annoyed in expression. Four poorly feathered wings were attached to their back, along with two tails that Misha

thought were rather awkward and unnecessary. The appearance made her tears stop— although, she was quite weirded out.

“What are you supposed to be?” Misha stared at the creature blankly.

“I am Kyzlambnada, angel servant of the most high,” they bowed diligently, nearly losing their balance from the odd positioning of their wings. “I have been sent by the universe to claim your soul, John Edwards the 8th.”

Misha continued to stare. Her name was certainly not that of John Edwards the Eighth. She was a Black woman with a tight curl pattern and a gold nose piercing that contrasted her mahogany skin. There had to be a misunderstanding.

“My name is Misha Harrison.”

“Oh, I’ve had this trick played on me before. Yeah, no, no, you’re Edwards Johns the Eighth.” The angel reached up with their hind leg and scratched at their ear gently. Next, they reached into their back imaginary pocket, pulling out a crumpled piece of paper. “Your name is attached to this address right here. This is the penthouse I was told to stop by for collection.”

“I live in a one-bedroom, one-office condominium.” Misha kept a straight face while the angel sat at the edge of her bed. She would have asked about the angel’s thinning fur, but she decided it would be rude or maybe a little improper. “How many collections have you done before?”

Kyzlambnada hopped off of the bed and floated upwards to turn the lights on, then landed back onto the carpet with a small thud. They walked around the room and jumped onto the dresser, sniffing the potted plants. “About a few million, why?”

“Okay...well,” Misha sighed with a brief pause and watched the being walk over her personal belongings, “I’m not the guy you’re looking for, and I have work in about three hours.”

“But I was sent here!” Kyzlambnada meowed their words out, “I have another collection tonight, so if we could- pardon me.” They reached their leg upwards and began scratching at their ear again, just like before. “If we could get this show on the road, that would be amazing.”

Misha pushed her head down into her hands, growing annoyed at the realization that her sleep had been disrupted by a strange animal with wings and patches of hair. “Can I just show you my ID or something? Please?”

Kyzlambnada shrugged at Misha with a blank facial expression. Without another exchange, Misha slid herself out of the covers and towards her desk. The lanky woman pulled out her wallet from the laptop bag sitting in her computer chair. After struggling with puffy eyes and no glasses, she managed to pull out her driver’s license. “Here, just look. There’s been a mix-up.”

The being flapped their wings and floated to face Misha fully, taking a look at the card, back at her, and back at the card once more. As promised, Misha was not John Edwards the Eighth. “I guess there has been a misunderstanding. I really thought you were him, my bad.” Kyzlambnada apologized with a dry laugh. “I’ll get going now, have a good night.”

With their bidding, the creature sent by the most high flapped towards the window that had been left open. Kyzlambnada perched on the sill before jumping out, an echoing splat being heard from below along with a car alarm. In disbelief, Misha rushed over to stick her head out of the window, the headlights from the vehicle flashing at her. There lay a cat-sized dent in the car, with no cat. As soon as they had arrived, Kyzlambnada was never to be seen again; at least, at Misha’s home.

Double Teaming by Gabrielle Higgs

Too much of this, not enough of that
I stand as a middle-woman front and center
Forever stuck, lacking what I am not
And never will be

Brown girls in braids chuckle and hoot,
Small smiles straining when our brown eyes meet.

Most are *nice*,

While others seem to sneer like I somehow think myself better

Their stares mix me up:

Never knowing their intentions

Never knowing what to say to make them stop

I return their smiles and want to make conversation

But hard, questioning looks cause me to freeze up and move on

Like it never happened,

Like I was never interested anyways.

I'm okay, I assure, while my

Face drops, goes blank, because nothing ever bothers a brown girl who could've had it worse.

The other brown girls nod politely when I speak,

But eyes wander as if to say:

Why is she talking to me? Why doesn't she find her place elsewhere?

Their brown-blond hair is lightly curled or pin straight—no in-between

The foreign, yet familiar language that spills out of their mouths

Reminds me of my second home,

Where buñuelos and arroz con leche is a Christmas regular

And the warmth of the sun is sometimes too much

As they turn away, I imagine a place for me

Where my lacking is not a thought that plays on repeat

Where smiles are genuine and my too-much-of-this-and-that

Leaves me a seat to rest my feet

The Fitting Room

by Diana Serrano

after Natalie Diaz

Standing in the fitting room, I blankly
stared at the dead girl looking back at me.

Oh God, I thought, *Oh God*.

What has become of me?

I stare at the dead girl looking back at me.

Look at the ribs, the chest cavity—

what has become of me?

The shadows on the bones like pockets of night

on the ribs, the chest cavity, the beating heart;

I begin to understand why Mom is worried.

The shadows on the bones like pockets of night,
the darkness inside is on its way out.

I understand now why Mom has been worried,
obsessive counting has not been my friend.

The darkness inside is on its way out—

Oh god, I say, sobbing in the fitting room.

Night After Night

by Jackie Orchard

Drawn from the Nordic word for nightmare, the mara, a creature featured in Scandinavian folklore and Nordic legend, sits on the chest of a sleeping person and brings nightmares. -Myth : myths and legends of the world explored

In the apocalypse
I can never find my shoes
so i crunch
on a litter box of bones
scuffing my heels
on the edges
of tin cans and teeth.

Sluggish
my legs never move
fast enough
and the sky consumes
churning purple
and red
and dark blues.
Crackling.

Lightning
is the warning
before the flood
before the sky opens up

pouring.
Bodies float around me.

Wading,

I'm waiting.

Encircle

the last tree

grab my own wrists

flinching

for the tidal wave—

A breath

trying to break

the surface, trying

to breathe under the weight.

Who saves us?

(For The Brown Kids That Are Victims Of Gentrification)

by Amber Alas

brown kids
in brown homes
displaced
just in time for
the white man
to take

Yessenia sold her
donut shop because
she couldn't
afford the rent

but the bodega
across the street
has no problem
stealing her cent

liquor licenses
and brewery's
next to our
brown schools

and although the
white man acts
A fool,
none of this
Is new

We can't afford rent
We can't afford groceries

being deprived and
displaced is our
new and brown
normality

Untitled Tanka

Inspired by Crystal Oskovoitch's *Arrival*
by Max Castro

Celestial body
tilling the starless soil,
dissolving edges
of my calloused universe,
embraced by your pastel curves.

Ballad of the Hypocrites

by Daniel Buck

Listen! Listen!
But I won't listen

Listen! Listen!
But I won't listen

Danger

by Kat Rodriguez

Harry and Stella

“Harry,” Stella said, distressed. She stared out the window in Harry’s room. She had been standing by it for a while just looking at the dim sky. “What do you think this means?” she asked Harry.

“I don’t know,” Harry responded.

They could both feel their hearts beat fast. Both of their hearts had been racing for a while. For days. For weeks. Harry fidgeted with his hands whenever he thought Stella wasn’t looking. Picking at his fingernails.

“Say we’ll be okay, Harry,” Stella pleaded, turning to Harry. She needed to hear him say it. Ever since their parents died, when they were fifteen, Harry had been the one she leaned on. Though he was only a few minutes older than her, she looked up to him immensely. After all, it had been just the two of them for six years, with the exceptions of the maids and cooks that used to come every day. Their parents had been very wealthy, so when they died, neither of them had to worry about where to live or if they would have food on the table.

“We’ll be okay,” Harry told her. He looked up at her from the floor where he was sitting and tried to smile.

“Do you mean it?” Stella prompted, not buying his smile.

“You’ll be okay,” Harry promised. He stood up and closed the window, locking it, but leaving the curtains open.

“Harry,” Stella said.

“We’ll be fine, Stel,” he assured her.

They both looked out the window. Up at the sky and down at the lonely streets. Rarely did anyone walk the streets anymore. Patrol cars made sure of that. Anyone that was caught walking down the street for any reason other than work or an emergency was captured and taken to prison. That’s what the news had said. It happened with one of their neighbors. A woman decided to ignore the stay-at-home order and was spotted by a patrol car and arrested. It had been

three weeks and they hadn't seen the woman since.

"Harry, sometimes it looks like it's getting closer to us," Stella observed.

"I know, but it's not. It's just our imagination."

"It looks that way to you too?"

"Yes, but like I said, it's just our imagination."

"How are you so sure?"

"They would've said it on the news if it was," he assured her.

Stella knew that was true. Yet, she couldn't help being scared. She wanted things to go back to how they were only one month ago. Back to being able to go outside any time she wanted. Back to seeing the sun shine, without feeling its intense heat.

"What do you think is up there?" she wondered.

"I don't know," Harry said, still looking up at that looming, moon-shaped presence that seemed impossible to hide from.

"Do you think there are more people?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think there's another version of us there?" That idea scared her more than anything. Though it also gave her some hope.

"I don't know."

"Maybe like our doppelgangers?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you're just full of insight aren't you, Harry?" Stella said frustrated. She was annoyed at how uncooperative Harry was being. There wasn't much to do, he may as well humor her with a conversation.

"What do you want me to say Stella? I don't know what's up there!" Harry yelled.

"I know you don't! That's why I asked what you think is up there Harry!" Stella yelled back.

"Well, I don't know!"

"Stop yelling at me!" This happened all the time now.

"You're yelling too!"

"Yeah, but you started it!"

"I know," Harry calmed down. He went to sit on the carpet floor again.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you," he sighed.

"I know. It's alright." Stella moved to sit next to Harry.

Mrs. Mary Acker and Mrs. Janet Bentley

Mrs. Acker and Mrs. Bentley sat in Mrs. Bentley's living room, having their afternoon tea. They rocked in their rocking chairs without much to do.

"Those crazy kids are excited about this. Can you believe that, Mrs. Bentley?"

"It's ridiculous, those darn kids have no sense of self-preservation," Mrs. Bentley criticized, pouring herself another cup of tea.

Janet Bentley was known for thinking less of others, especially the younger generation. They were vile and ill-mannered. They had no respect for their elders.

"Still, you would think even the young ones had some common sense or any sense of danger," Mrs. Acker shook her head.

"You expect too much of this younger generation, Mary. Look at them," Mrs. Bentley gestured toward the window. "There are two of them outside right now. Always breaking the rules."

Jonah and Kevin

Jonah sat down beside Kevin in Kevin's front yard. He lived a few streets down but he had been walking to Kevin's house for all fifteen years of his life, and vice versa.

"I hate this," Jonah told Kevin.

"Me too," Kevin sighed. There was a moment of silence before Kevin spoke again. "The next patrol car will be driving by in two hours."

"I know, I set an alarm on my phone."

"Do your parents know you're here?"

"Of course not, I said I was going to shower and then do homework. It should be fine as long as I'm home before dinner."

"You think they bought that?" Kevin asked doubtfully.

"Honestly? I don't know. I'm pretty sure they did."

"Pretty sure?"

"Well, they're just as scared as Mrs. Acker and Mrs. Bentley – and anyone else too old to know the difference between the unknown and danger – so if they knew, I'm positive they'd have thrown some kind of fit and put bars on my windows like in Harry Potter," Jonah looked up at the sky. "Anyway, I left the shower on a 25-minute timer so they don't have any reason to doubt."

"Jonah, we're in a drought."

"I think that's the least of our problems."

"I highly disagree."

"Whatever," Jonah laid back in the grass.

Harry and Stella

Harry stood up from the carpeted floor and offered Stella his hand. "Let's go downstairs," he suggested.

Stella took his hand and stood up. She glanced at the window one more time and followed him out the door. They walked down the stairs and sat down in the living room. Stella went to open the curtain to let the sunlight in. Other houses usually left their curtains open now, due to no one walking outside anymore. Harry preferred to have the curtains closed, but despite doing it a lot lately, he didn't like to argue with Stella.

He went to sit on their bright green couch. "Turn on the news," Harry instructed, as Stella reached for the remote.

"That's what I'm doing," she told him.

"Scientists now speculate that the other Earth we see, is another version of our planet and of all of us. They believe that there is another version of everyone there, on that other Earth. More at six," the newscaster stated.

Stella turned off the television. She wasn't in the mood to watch anything. Harry wasn't either. They didn't really like watching television anymore, it would only distract them for a moment, before reminding them how much things had

changed.

Ever since the other Earth appeared, it had been declared that people were to stay inside. They did not know enough about this other Earth to declare it safe. They were afraid that the people on that Earth would come and attack.

Stella thought of something then. "Harry," she said.

"What is it?"

"If there's another version of us there..." she paused. She stood and walked to the window. She looked up, longingly up at that other Earth. "Do you think mom and dad are there? Alive?"

Harry had been thinking the same. "I don't know. Maybe. Or maybe those versions of us die when we do," he speculated.

"Or we die when they do," Stella added.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

Mrs. Mary Acker and Mrs. Janet Bentley

"Well, that's that," Mrs. Bentley said as she sighed and turned off the television. "I reasoned the news would answer my questions, instead all it did was bring about more."

"I agree. I was thinking, do you believe they have the same personality as us?"

"Oh, Mary, how should I know?" Mrs. Bentley stood. Right as she did, there was a ding coming from the refrigerator. She opened it and took out some cookies she had made to go along with their tea. "I made cookies. Would you like some?"

"Yes, I see that, Mrs. Bentley, and I would love some." Mrs. Bentley brought over the cookies on a silver platter and placed them on the small table between their rocking chairs. "No one makes better cookies than you, I must admit," Mrs. Acker said, as she took a bite.

"You think the other me makes cookies as delicious as I do? I doubt it."

"Oh, I doubt it too Mrs. Bentley." Mrs. Acker knew that was what Mrs. Bentley wanted to hear. Though she did mean it, so she didn't mind compliment-

ing her.

They ate in silence for a while before Mrs. Acker spoke again. “Do you reason they make the same choices we do?”

“I wonder that too. If they do, do you think their lives are the same?”

“I think so. Our choices lead us to where we are, don’t you think?” Mrs. Acker asked.

“Maybe,” Mrs. Bentley agreed. “I just can’t imagine another version of myself not living in a house like this. Not having the wealth and etiquette and elegance that I do. It’s just unthinkable.”

“It sure is,” Mrs. Acker chuckled.

“Oh, how I long to go outside, Mary.”

They both turned to the window again to see the empty streets. To see the sunshine that was so bright in the daytime.

Jonah and Kevin

“You have leaves in your hair,” Kevin pointed out to Jonah.

“Dammit,” Jonah responded, sitting up and reaching toward the top of his head. “They’re from ducking under so many trees and walking through so many bushes to get here without being seen.”

“You just have to be more careful.”

“Whatever, and I just washed my hair too. Help me get them out.”

“What?” Kevin asked as he reached toward Jonah’s hair to get the green, purple, blue, and orange leaves out. “I thought you said – ”

“I took a fifteen-minute shower and then left it on another 25-minute timer,” Jonah explained.

“That’s even worse Jonah! That’s half an hour worth of water wasted! And are your parents really going to believe that you’re taking a 30-minute shower?”

“I’ve done it before.”

“You– ”

“Relax Kevin! I don’t do it every day. Ow!” he yelled in pain.

“Oops. Sorry, this leaf was really stuck, I guess I accidentally pulled your hair.”

“Dick,” Jonah muttered.

Kevin laughed. “Your hair still smells like shampoo at least.”

“Man, I want to go up there. See if it really is like our Earth,” Jonah said, after a small moment of silence.

Kevin’s phone lit up. He took a look and said, “Hey Jonah, look.”

Breaking News Hourly E-Newspaper

WHAT’S NEW ABOUT THIS OTHER EARTH?

The drone sent to that Earth has recently come back with some new information. What we learned just now is that, according to scientists, there are other versions of us on that planet. They seem to be a little different, but they are other versions. This is all the information that has been recovered so far.

PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT

As you can see, we are no longer waiting to update every hour. We will be updating as soon as more information is released.

Jonah and Kevin

“Woah!” Jonah exclaimed as he read Kevin’s phone. “That’s so cool!”

“You think?” Kevin said hesitantly.

“Well, yeah! Oh, come on, don’t tell me you’re scared now!”

“Of course not! It’s just a little creepy, that’s all.”

Jonah took Kevin’s hand. “It’s okay,” he looked up at that other Earth. “It’s not like I’m going to let anything happen to you.”

“What if they are smart enough to come here and attack? Maybe we should stay inside after all...”

“Do you want to go inside?”

“No. I’m sick of being inside.”

“So then think about it this way, if they’re smart enough to come here, I’m pretty sure they’re smart enough to open a door. And if they come, it doesn’t necessarily mean they’ll attack. Maybe they’re friendly. Everyone’s being overly cautious.”

“I guess you’re right. It happens once in a while, and I’m glad this is one of those times.”

“Yeah,” Jonah chuckled. “Wait!” he yelled as he realized he had just been insulted.

Kevin laughed.

Harry and Stella

Harry and Stella sat in silence. Harry read a book without really paying attention to the words on the page. Stella stared at the blank television screen without really seeing it.

“Harry, what if they do come, like we fear?”

“What if they do?” Harry asked.

“You think the other version of us will try to kill us?”

“Why would they do that Stella?”

“I don’t know. They say that doppelgangers want to kill the other version of themselves,” she told him.

“Well, they’re not doppelgangers, they’re just people from another planet,” Harry stated.

“I guess,” Stella sighed.

“And besides, we still don’t know if there’s really another version of us. The news said scientists speculate,” Harry pointed out. This seemed to calm Stella down.

“I want to see mom and dad again,” Stella said. She tried looking at the bright side. If the speculation was right, there was a chance their parents might still be alive.

“Yeah, so do I,” Harry looked up at Stella then.

“You think they have the same names we do?” Stella still looked at the

television.

"Who knows? They may not even speak the same language," Harry pointed out.

"That's true. You think they speak some weird alien language?"

"Maybe. I mean it is another Earth, just like ours it seems. Even from here on the ground, it looks just like ours. With oceans, and greenery. But that doesn't mean the people are all like us, even if they look similar," Harry said.

"That's true," Stella agreed. She finally looked away from the television at Harry for a moment. She went to stand by the window again, she had been doing it a lot lately. "It's terrifying, isn't it?"

"What?" Harry turned to look at her.

"Seeing it so close to our Earth. It looks even closer than the moon. Sometimes it looks like it will fall on us at any second."

"Yet it won't."

"I wonder if they look exactly like us."

"Well, if they're another version of us, doesn't that mean they have to?"

Mrs. Mary Acker and Mrs. Janet Bentley

"How do you figure?" Mrs. Acker asked Mrs. Bentley.

"Well, they wouldn't be another version of us if they looked different, would they? They'd just be another person. Or whatever they are..." Mrs. Bentley said.

"That's a good point. Though, maybe they look similar but not like an exact copy," Mrs. Acker suggested.

"Maybe."

"Do you think they dress the way we do here? Do you think their skin is purple, like ours? Do you think they speak with their minds?" Mrs. Acker asked.

"Well, how else would they speak Mary? There's no other way."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Mrs. Acker agreed.

Jonah and Kevin

"I want them to come. I want to see what they look like."

"I do too. I guess another version of you is worth them coming," Kevin smiled, laying his head on Jonah's shoulder.

"You really think so?" Jonah smiled.

"I do." Kevin lifted his head and looked at Jonah.

"I want to go there. I want to see what it's like. I want to see another you, too," Jonah told Kevin. They both blushed and looked away.

"Hey look," Kevin motioned toward the giant house across the street.

"Stella's at her window. She's so pretty."

They stared at her in admiration. Stella was considered beautiful by most that saw her. Her long white hair always drew attention. She refused to cut it like other girls. The way two of her eyes were a different color from the other two, and how those colors looked perfectly together. Two were purple and two were pink. Her skin was a prettier shade of purple than most too.

Harry and Stella

"Harry, mind turning on the heater? The sun's going down, so it's getting cold, and I don't want to start sweating," Stella asked of Harry.

"Sure." Harry stood up. "I'll make dinner now. Anything specific you want?"

"I haven't been feeling particularly picky lately."

"Come on Stella. Everything will be fine. Take advantage of me offering right now," Harry told her as he went to the kitchen.

"Alright then, how about some blue rose soup with paper hearts and a glass of liquid nitrogen?" Stella went to sit at the dining table.

"How rich do you think we are Stel? Blue rose soup is a delicacy that even we can't afford!"

"I know, I was just joking," Stella laughed. "How about some pink rose colored soup with paper hearts and liquid nitrogen?"

"Coming right up," Harry smiled.

"Harry, is it just me or does the sun seem closer than usual lately?"

“It’s not just you,” Harry sighed.

“It’s so strange.”

“Well, everything is strange, as of one month ago.”

“Can’t argue with that.” Stella stood up and walked to the living room to turn the television back on.

“It seems that there really are other versions of us on this ‘other Earth.’ They look slightly different, but they are other versions of us. Unfortunately, travel to that ‘other Earth’ is now prohibited, as it seems that that Earth is in terrible conditions,” the first newscaster said.

The second newscaster continued, “Yes, and not only that, but it seems that the versions of us on that planet are not peaceful. They are divided and fight amongst each other. It has been deemed too dangerous of a place to visit.”

“Fortunately for us, they do not seem advanced enough in their traveling methods to visit us,” the first newscaster spoke again. “It has been stated that we are all now free to go outside. More at nine.”

Breaking News Hourly E-Newspaper

WHAT’S NEW ABOUT THIS OTHER EARTH?

More information has been gathered from the drone sent to that other Earth. The inhabitants there call themselves “humans.” They have different skin colors, and only two eyes. They claim to be united, but from the footage brought back, it looks like that claim is false. Nation fights nation. Brother kills brother. Parent abuses child. Continued on page 11.

Mrs. Mary Acker and Mrs. Janet Bentley

“Well, that’s that,” Mrs. Bentley said again, turning off the television.

“It is,” Mrs. Acker agreed. She had another sip of her blue tea and another bite of the translucent slime cookies.

“Would you like to take a stroll now?” Mrs. Bentley offered.

“Absolutely.”

Mrs. Acker and Mrs. Bentley jumped gently down from their floating rocking chairs and went for a walk outside.

Latest Opinions Gossip Magazine

WHAT DO WE THINK ABOUT THIS OTHER EARTH?

They call themselves humans, but really where is their humanity? What kind of people kill animals for fun? They call it “hunting.” Now, we understand the killing of animals for food and survival, but for sport? These creatures actually have fun killing. To make it worse, some of them kill other people for fun! They kill in their own race. From what has been found, it seems that these “humans” are the only creatures there, and here, that kill for sport.

“That place sounds like a nightmare. Worse than the horror show I starred in last year!” said our beloved actor, Ian.

Our sweetheart, Hellen said, “They are divided by skin color. I just don’t understand that.”

In the statement recently released by the Vatican, they say, “We suppose they’ve never heard the phrase, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”

Jonah and Kevin

“I’m so disappointed. They’re not even releasing whatever footage they retrieved,” Jonah said annoyed.

“Hey at least you’re not going to have a leaf problem every time you come here,” Kevin tried to cheer him up.

“I guess, and I don’t have to sneak out anymore.”

“Exactly.”

They both looked up at that other Earth again. Wondering what more they’ll never know about it. Kevin then turned to look at Jonah.

“You want to go inside?” he smiled.

“Definitely,” Jonah smiled back.

Breaking News Hourly E-Newspaper

WHAT’S NEW ABOUT THIS OTHER EARTH?

This other Earth seems to be warming at a dangerously rapid pace. Their forests are also being cut down. Many of the other “non-human” species on this other Earth, both land and aquatic, are dying out. It also seems that there is an over-population of these “humans.” We put “humans” in quotes because their humanity is currently in question.

From what we gather, there are places on that Earth where people are starving. Other places where people are killing each other for no reason. People letting parents abuse their children and contributing to that abuse. They have “human trafficking rings” and “sex traffic rings.” These “rings” as they call them, are networks where people capture other people, usually women, and trade them for currency.

Scientists say there is still more to be discovered, but from what has been found so far, they doubt they will find anything good. For now, we are safe. The stay-at-home order has been lifted.

Harry and Stella

“Well, I guess we’ll never know if mom and dad are up there,” Harry said.

“It’s heartbreaking. If they are there, I hope they’re ok.”

“It’s alright Stella, I’m sure there’s at least one peaceful place there. I’m sure at least some people live with no worries,” Harry assured.

“I hope so,” Stella said.

“Come on, dinner’s ready. Let’s eat it before it dries up.”

Stella smiled and hugged Harry. “Yes, thank you. After this let’s go for a walk outside, ok?”

“You got it.”

On Self-Destruction

by Austin Lack

1. A Premature Spring

A human is a walking mirror in search of their own reflection. It takes nothing more than a stray rock to shatter one into a thousand fragments and distort the endless and eternal experience bouncing between us. Purpose, belief, and the history of existence are bound in this illusion of wholeness forged and sealed by ideas about self and others, god and nature. I sit down to write, to enter the path of deflections, hoping to catch just one of them like you would a moment: by focusing on its connection to place, and time, and being.

As I write this, the weather in Los Angeles is composed of a thick marine layer that rests over the cityscape like a lampshade, filtering the light and reducing the skyline to nothing more than a vague silhouette. The Premature Spring of Los Angeles is what we call Fall: a two-faced day that turns in the afternoon. It is unpopular to love this turn of weather in Los Angeles, The City of Angels, which is typically cast in its own eternal light. But like all heavens, I find its endlessness is a form of torture, a type of indulgence that attracts people like a light attracts a bug, expanding until it zaps them stupid. In contrast to our ever-expanding summer, the fog is an balm for a healing city, split and blistered by a growing sun.

The concrete catches the heart of this season with a certain ease. You may have a bleeding sunset in the summer, spring, or winter, but LA's fall sunshine lays over the ground like a mist. It is a weak light, tame and florescent, a near translucent light - that is what makes it premature. The air dilutes the orange sun and illuminates the sidewalk like a blank film rinsing over the screen at a theater. Though many would look to the sky for the weather, I look to the land beneath my feet, to the concrete. Los Angeles is a post-modern product made from the modernist tool chest. One only needs to observe the freeway on ramps, their heavy forms frozen at dusk, sloping through the ombre sky, to see that the city is one of angels whose god is concrete. It has become a symbol of the city's

method of sacrifice, to dip life into concrete and memorialize it forever, to at once destroy a thing by immortalizing it, to erase the past in the name of the future. But this permanence, like all permanence, is only an illusion, for even water changes concrete, if only its smell. Like all passage of time in Los Angeles, it is only the subtle differences that mark the change of seasons: only a shade, or a haze, or a moodiness that sheds like skin to reveal a place altogether new, with people altogether different.

I listen to the sidewalk in the evenings when I hear the rain, for the trickling of water down Isabel and Figueroa St. I look to the waves that rise from the ground in the heat, to the dust in the crevices, to the plants growing up from the gutters and the gates swinging in the shadow of hedges and trees. I look at the ant trails that line the concrete walls and splinter across them like a pulmonary system. They pound and pulse soundless, relentless, always in a unified cadence. The trees in the Arroyo Seco area of Northeast LA house green and red parakeets that were introduced to this land many years ago and have never left. Like myself, they are an invasive species brought here by Europeans. These invaders drop fruit that is citrus mostly, while others drop seeds that are long pods filled with tiny seedlings moving inside, shaking to the rhythm of another world. The Spaniards came here as invaders, but the locals on my street today speak Spanish and they translate the land.

My neighbor, Imelda, is retired and lives across the street from Madi and I. She does not know the dances of the Tongva people that were the caretakers of this place before it was invaded, but she shakes a pod of seeds out from her windshield and sucks back on her Marlboro cigarette. She flicks it to the earth as the car leans down the hill and rests against the parking brake. She pets her old and limping pit-bull, Mick, who is tied to a rusting fence. We speak to each other in such bad versions of the others language that we have created a new language that we call trying our best. Every now and then she asks me for forty dollars when she is drunk, and every now and then I say no and buy her a pack of cigarettes. We wave to each other almost every day from across the street, and sometimes more than that. She tells me that my dog is fat and that she hates our

nosy neighbor, I tell her that my dog is trying her best. We exchange cookies on Christmas, laughter in the afternoons. She is a local. I am her neighbor.

The land brings us into conversation.

Tropical trees mix branches with evergreens and below them are the spiny red hibiscus flowers that stick to my clothes as they reach out through the wrought iron fences. A flurry of cacti wrestles beneath the fluttering leaves of the eucalyptus, and it is only a pre-conditioned illusion of order that disrupts the harmony of their intertwining. Fall is a time of transition without an end. The city moves toward a dark winter and then turns back around, as it refuses to conform to any pre-determined path. It hides the sun in the morning and refuses to change its leaves, and the only orange one can find are the bunches of marigolds at the street side ofrenda's, the carved pumpkins lining the porches and apartment staircases, the dumpster fires blazing against a trickling highway. As the trees hold on for winter, the grasses and bushes are carefully poised, hiding a secret beneath them, a glimmer under the leaves, a fragment among them in the muck of the gutter. I pick up the fragment, bring it up to the light, stare into its glimmering angles to see myself as a young, scared boy in a dark church office. How many times? the pastor asks, and I am confronted by those lonely nights, a sheltered kid scrolling helplessly through pornography on his phone, escaping the pain of fighting parents and the hole that was punched through my bedroom door. It was their way of coping, to hit things instead of each other. How many times had I escaped my pain that week? How many times would I do it again? The question whirls up through the leaves and echoes on the sidewalk as I inhale the smell of the ground.

I am a collector when I write. A collector of moments and sunsets, of cigarettes and Spanish phrases, of memories and stories that are buried behind us and discoverable through writing, there to be stumbled upon in a pile of leaves. The tree roots press against the topsoil and break the sidewalk into pieces, preparing a space to bury the seeds, for flowers to grow, revealing hidden land under this concrete façade. I wave to Imelda as I mount the curb and fill the slanted, quiet street with the sound of the collected fragments tumbling in my pocket.

Beneath the surface that holds us, the city dances on a tightrope, performing its illusion of permanence as the fault line waits for its big break.

2. What We Call Winter

As I write this, I am sitting on hold with the insurance company, waiting for help to replace my stolen catalytic converter. The sun is beaming through the window of my apartment as I watch a crow flying, black against the pale blue and white sky. The powerlines outside of my house look tighter than they did a month ago, as if the marginally colder weather is coiling the tension and pulling the wooden utility pole upright as it is intended to be. The utility poles around my house are splintered and withered like wooden crosses, and sometimes I wonder if they have grown roots and dug themselves deep into the earth. Even in the heart of a different season, nothing has truly changed in Los Angeles. The wait time for the insurance is still long, stealing a catalytic converter is still profitable, and a good thief can still cut one from the bottom of your car in about two minutes with a battery powered reciprocating saw.

My nosy neighbor had seen the thieves in the act, had run up to my apartment banging frantic on the door. Grab your gun! she said yelled as I swung it open and she gingerly descended the stairs. The thieves were already gone by that time, along with the expensive emission regulator. Where's your gun? she asked, looking up the stairs with an angry expression. She's an old woman working as a social worker in Lincoln Heights, a social worker who's seen it all and can't be bothered for politics, or smiles, or niceties. I didn't have time to grab it, I said, but this was a lie and she knew it, eyed me up and down suspiciously. You need to get a piece, she said, and be ready to use it, damn!

I text my friend Simon who also recently had his catalytic converter stolen in downtown Los Angeles. He had come out to leave and found a pair of legs dangling under his car, so he yanked on them, pulled up a man like a kid pulls a fish from the water. We'll kill you, bitch! he heard from behind, as a group of them came out from their van with their battery powered reciprocating saws. He watched as they slid the part out from under his car and threw it into their van

with the others. I guess it's close to Christmas, he tells me, even thieves need money for presents.

I met Simon last winter at his tiki bar pop-up, Santa's Hideout. The goal of the bar was to enjoy the escapism of tiki while avoiding the line of cultural appropriation. The three, of course, are integral to Los Angeles: escapism, tiki bars, and cultural appropriation. When my friends and I arrived at the bar, they introduced me to Simon. You should meet my friend, he told me, he's a writer too. Simon was well-connected, infectious, a cigarette in his mouth and a bottle of rum and somehow, he could pull off a Santa hat. The thought of someone like that thinking of me as a writer, of introducing me that way, and to other writers no less, writers with CV's and publications, can make a person wonder, make him sip rum all that faster. The palm leaves swayed overhead, the police helicopter swung over the patio like a shooting star, as its brilliant light passed through me and brought me up into a familiar world.

How many times? I heard again, the pastor demanding his number, fixed and enflamed, a dirty number in a dark room. Nothing was so personal, so intimate, then to admit to an adult about masturbation, of the mysteries that sheltered boys were destined only to discover beneath a blanket of shame and regret. We wondered what on earth they were asking the girls in their separate group, but we dared not wonder about girls anymore. We dared not wonder at all.

They never asked about the arguing or the splintered doors, did not know about the confusion I had fumbling in the dark, that I did not know I was doing at all. They did not care for why or what, only for a set of tally marks. I thought about my brother laying in the gaze of the moon as he faced the opposite wall of our room, his body white and porcelain, like a statue from a history book. I wondered how men of god could stand so confidently without shame or embarrassment when they posed for their statues. I held back tears and wondered, captive by guilt, by a world of escape that I would later replace with one ever more mysterious and frightening: a page and pen. No, I do not write for self-pleasure – writing is not a world of simulation, but of substance; a place to hit something instead of someone.

I took a sip of rum, as the palms sparkled in their twinkling Christmas attire, inflatable reindeer, fake snow, and snowflakes painted gaily on the windows. The streetlights blinked green and red like ornaments, as their light was baptized beneath the thick-running blood of holiday cheer. We sat in our short sleeve shirts, our drinks topped with ice and nutmeg and fire, kindly mixed, our Thai food from the restaurant next door, barely steaming, rose up into the evening. I could see Charlie's breath against the glow of the night, Terra's skin looked paler than usual, as if it were recoiling from what we call winter in Los Angeles. Charlie sipped his drink and twirled his fork into chicken pad thai, and each revolution let more and more heat out into the darkness. Christmas songs rung between us as we drift away like ice on a river. I placed my beanie on the table and ran my hands through my hair, felt the grease roll between my fingers. The rest of the world was freezing over, and were dying of thirst, but that night we were victors. That night, the sun hugged some other place, and us cold-blooded creatures clung to the residual heat of our concrete oasis.

3. Summer

As I write this, Madi is laying on the bed with her shoes on the comforter, falling into one of the idiosyncratic things I have come to love about her: her hatred for feet. She is wearing the same black leather shoes which she stuck out the window on our road trip in Central California. She played her guitar as we drove, music blaring through the speakers – plucked along to Jeff Buckley's Grace and belted into the hot air as it streamed through the car. The window was all the way down, opened up to the gaping world which seemed to expand and stretch like a reaching hand. The wind caught hold of the objects inside and spun them around, receipts tumbled, straw wrappers twirled like twisting hair. We drove through the wine country and drank in the collective blur of the vineyards as they collided with red and yellow leaves, and the rows of vines and trees and bushes swiped past our eyes cinematically, turning the valley into a flipbook animation. Farm after farm passed through the viewfinder, as the sound of the world rattled through the window.

We were caught between the deserts of the south and the fog of the north. In the valleys where the Spanish missionaries brought wine, and that wine made itself at home. Though the religious pilgrimages were through, the vestiges of their sacraments remained entangled in the vines, stretched beneath the Sierra and Coastal mountains, gazing into starless skies, and waiting, it seemed, for the golden light to be blanketed in the shadow of the state's notorious wildfires. We admitted together how the sun painted shadows on the valley from behind the mountains, and the distant peaks, once freckled in white, were naked and bare, penning the horizon with their purple frames as they melted in the heat.

We passed like a blood vessel through the heart of the state, hovering above its tall grasses, listening to our music, laughing at the cows as they mounted one another and made love in the mud. We saw more cows stacked three to a stall in their staging warehouses, one cow on top of the other, waited to be slaughtered. Madi brought her shoes in the car as the shadows from the mountain reached in through the window. The road grew darker, the sun quietly fell, and the rows of crops were gone, replacing its rattling noise with a dense and silent field of mud. I turned the headlights on as the car engulfed the white lines beneath us, the music faded as Madi turned the volume down instinctively, almost reverently. For a moment, all the cows were unnaturally loud, then suddenly quiet, until all that we heard was the noise of the tires peeling and re-peeling the asphalt beneath us. I heard the window motor engage and the black felt rub against the glass as it whined to a close. Madi said nothing, but placed her guitar in the seats behind us. In the inevitable highs and lows that accompany a long drive through any territory, the landscape had lost its illustrious glow. The various wrappers, no longer dancing, piled into a corner and became trash once again. The sunset was over – death fell over the valley.

Like the vineyards and the apple trees wait for the wildfire, the cows awaited the blade. The killing saws were sharpened and spinning like the straw paper pieces that fell to the ground, as we rolled up the window to shut out the violence, and with it, the world. Madi asked me what the difference was between our love for cats and dogs and our treatment of cows and pigs, what makes them

so easy to slaughter out here in the valley? She told me that cows have eyes that stare into hers like a puppy, that their faces were adorable. We talked about going vegan as we drove through this utilitarian middle. We talked about a lot of things when we were in the car together. Madi wrapped her hand around my arm over the center console of the car, the center of our world. A tiny bucket with a hairbrush and cords and whatever CDs we had; old concert tickets, parking tickets, the letters written between us. This Ford was our room, it was even called an escape. We talked in our room, kissed in our room, and kept our secrets locked and hidden away in its doors as we discussed our goals, ambitions, and fears.

We used to park at the top of the airport in Santa Ana, where hundreds of people were there, suspended, tilting and hobbling, their eyes shut, or wide, or someplace else. They left their lives behind them as we watched and waited for our chance to do the same. The planes passed our world through the windows, filtering planes from one to the next as they sank and fell out of color. In our world, we could talk and watch in awe as the great metal birds fluttered in, the pink sky cascading, blowing onto the clouds as though they were a collection of candles, breaking each one apart like dandelion heads and scattering them out over the pale. In our world, we could talk about our ties to our religion open and freely.

Madi and I had met in a non-denominational church before we had ever been anywhere else. There were many nuanced views at our church, which is less of a tradition and more of an American hybrid of conservative values, biblical dogma, and misguided attempts at spiritual guidance, often with harmful consequences. I learned that she was never asked about her intimate habits but was assumed to have none, to be the object of intimacy and therefore a problematic object as she passed through the world. The church's view was that women needed to avoid tempting men, that a woman's role in this life was to married, to occupy the supporting position of wife for a husband, leaving Madi, until that time, a decontextualized object, a wife in waiting. But we were firstborns trying to please our parents through an informal system of rules and rewards: the proximate gods of the leaders around us and their standards of stainlessness driven by guilt, and

shame, and regret.

Having just returned from university, I told her that there were plenty of people who believed that women and men were equal in every respect. I asked her what she thought, not to test her, but because in our church questioning women's equality was a type of gateway drug: as the pothead is bound toward heroine, or the democrat to communism, the questioning Christian is bound toward agnosticism, or atheism, or worse, premarital sex.

We were told all our lives that she would need to submit to me. That she would give up the guitar when she needed to. I was told that this was the natural order, that to be together, she shouldn't work, because I should do that sort of thing. They told her that she could play in that band on Sundays if she missed it enough. That this wasn't about what either of us wanted, but about something bigger than either of us. They told me that my job was to stop the world from corrupting her, but they didn't know about our world – that I had let the world in the car, rolled the windows up tight, and we were both being corrupted. It was then that I realized that to get to anything of substance I had to get out of the way. And so we did the only thing we knew how to at this time of our lives – we put everything we knew, hung it on a cross, and killed it together. I knew it, she said, I always knew it, and having been able to say it out loud I remember that she cried, and cried, and cried.

4. A Season of Rain

As I write this, there's no claim to be made about the weather, as California seems to shift from record drought to record snowfall, one season in Los Angeles is no more 'real' than another. Its seasons are simulations, its days shapeshifters. The city is a writer spinning fictions with every sunrise, writing fall into spring or winter into summer. On any day it might, for its own reasons, birth life in a season of death or burn the hillsides after an outpouring rain and paint the streets in ash. Each day is a new interpretation, a reminder that the seasons are not something to preserve, but to enjoy as they appear, whenever and however they choose. This is the same for writing, for love, for art – not one of which

preserves itself, but which expands and grows and iterates. Like love, writing is an act of endurance. Enduring not the mundane repetition and cyclical energy of a routine, but enduring with the eternally changing person who you thought you knew; of relearning the skill you thought you had. This is what makes Los Angeles a writer: its only repeated cycle is that of relearning itself. It is the city with a short memory, a hint for the romantic covered by its love for the dramatic, a love for destroying itself and rebuilding again. When you walk around the city, there are no old buildings. When you scan across the sky, there are no clouds. Did you know that Los Angeles used to have the country's largest transit system? Did you know that the skyscrapers sitting in Downtown were once Victorian homes? Did you know that Dodger Stadium was built on top of a school, and a market, and a million stories?

These are the questions I ask when I think on the rainy season of my childhood. When the streets ran like rivers, refusing to flow into the drains, as they were overrun with dirt and leaves and whatever other objects had dried and died and clogged them to the brim. There was a rumor of an old pitbull being pulled up from the bottom of the ocean by a surfer after a torrential rainstorm brought in by the Santa Ana winds. The dog was still attached to the leash at the neck. But there I was, hearing this story in a hospital with my childhood friend Evan, whose father was dying, spending his final days rushing down a makeshift river, floating away on morphine, drying, dying, and stuck to this world by a collar around his neck – his kids on the other side holding him down. Like all dogs, he wanted to be led by the leash, but did not want to stay. This world was ready to flush him, but he held on like a leaf to the metal grate. But that is the funny thing about resistance, like the rain in Los Angeles, it is noticeable because it is rare. I remember when the old pitbull Mick died and Imelda cried enough tears to send him down the river toward the pacific. It has not rained harder since that day. Because despite itself, Los Angeles holds on to life without its clouds or buildings, it's street cars or its people. Today, rain falls from the shower.

A lot of my writing is done in the shower, a place where my mind is free to wander, to run on in sentences, to exhaust whatever expression is fumbling

around in the dark matter of my subconscious. I place one word after the other in my head, sometimes even out loud so that my wife hears me from the other room and thinks I am singing. These are not ideas I can write down for later. Once the thought is finished, I cannot write it down, I have to catch it before it ends, otherwise, it has already been written down, transcribed in some inaccessible dimension, like words thumbtacked onto the fogged shower glass that fade when the door opens. No, I hop out of the shower and put a towel on and sit with my wet body on the couch, I double up the towel so that the laptop does not get wet.

This is it. I am doing it now. Sitting in a towel, dripping on the couch. Gus, my dog, is laying as close to me as possible as I continue the thought from the shower and fight desperately to keep it going instead of trying to return to what I was thinking about inside the shower. The moment I try to remember I am doomed, not to forget, but to ruin the entire thought – I am writing now not to transcribe a thought but to see where it is going, not to remember an idea that strikes like a match and fades just as fast, but to chase it. The thought is like me, a dumb wet animal. The thought is like a designer dog, like a poodle that is much smaller in size and sad in the face when it is wet and its hair is flat. This is why I don't return to the idea but write incessantly to try and discover where it is headed. I don't want the wet dog. I want to dry the idea off and see what it looks like. I call what happens in the shower writing because it fills my head with nothing I thought possible, with sentences running to places, to thoughts, to conclusions I did not hold at all before, and cannot keep ahold of without writing them down.

I write to find my wandering self, to bring back to the present moment all that I had forgotten and all that is left to discover. This is the danger of escape: that to discover yourself you must first destroy your self, for every escape is a return, and every act of creation a cry of confession. A confession, not of guilt, but of ignorance, an admission to the truth that I don't know, and so I must get out of the way. I write for people. For my friends, for my family, for Madi, for the evil people and all the rest of them. I write to discover who god is, who they are, and who I am. To get out of the way so that they might become lost in this same

land through the “I” that I see through. That is why I wrote the opening story of the need and danger of escape through pornography. That is why I am telling you here, now, wrapped in a towel, that this is a project of self-destruction, not of writing, but of myself, and of all the things I thought I was. I stop looking for my reflection and start to see the people that are there. I become enjoined to the millions of pieces. Writing is not the mirror or the grandiose realization of the other. Writing is the force that shatters everything – writing is the rock.

This is the ultimate destruction of the self: when I am fully on the page. I am gone. I am in the writing, here I am, right here, lost in this other place, transcribing what I see and who I am for myself and for whoever else will read it. It is a moment of transcendence, of confession, of abolishing the ideas I hold so tightly to. When I take the collection out from my pocket and put them together, I discover a window, a mirror, some pieces of glass – a god so small that it fits in my hand.

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Thank You

Keep writing.
Keep building our creative community.
It matters.
You matter.
Keep submitting.

-NR Editors

In these pages you'll find heartbreak and hopes, silliness and anger, wondering
and wandering and much more by the students of CSUN.

“Keep writing.
Keep submitting.”

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