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S2026

**Northridge  
Review**



**Spring  
2026**



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# Masthead

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### *Special Thanks to the Fall 2025 Editorial Team*

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# Editors' Note

*Vox Veritas Vita. Speak the truth as a way of life.*

Writing and creating are so important for expressing one's unspoken thoughts or feelings. It is intimate, particular, and expressive. This book holds the voices of many different people; no piece of writing or art is the same in this collection. In publishing these perspectives, it was important that our team created a book that recognized these expressions it held inside, and gave these pieces a new life to be shared with others.

Creating a book that amplifies the individual voices of each contributor is demanding, yet rewarding. Each creator deserves to be represented uniquely. After several brainstorming sessions—and plenty of unused covers—we decided on a cyanotype collage created by the members of the class. Cyanotypes are sun-printed pictures, made from the shadows of objects that are brought into the light. Just like cyanotypes, our goal as editors is to bring these creative voices into the light. We believe that speaking truth as a way of life does not limit oneself to spoken words. Expression can be sought out through writing and art, and cyanotypes. Our team each individually sun-printed an object from home that was inspiring to them. These images were then collaged together to create the cover. It is a collection of allegorical words, introducing this book and the pieces inside to life.

*Northridge Review* is a large part of CSUN's literary history, dating back to 1962. The history of CSUN will live forever within this book. We thought it would be important to showcase this history through the representation of the CSU system's motto, "Vox Veritas Vita"—Latin for "speak truth as a way of life". Writing has always spoken truth as a way of life. It shows liberty and personal expression, something that is very important to creators.

We would like to thank the entire team this semester, and the editors from last semester, as well as Sean for all of his wisdom and supervision. Thank you to all of the people who dedicated their time to physically create this book. And most importantly, thank you to the contributors. This book would not be here without your creativity.

Never stop creating and speaking your truth as a way of life.

With gratitude,  
Saige Boddy and Grace Muller



# Iceman

*Sean Ahern*

Iceman I heard your truck diesel down the dirt  
into the strawberry lands  
Brother was perched on a pallet  
yelling at the top of his little lungs  
Grandfather far ahead  
his fingers wed which berries were next,  
another week more  
*The big ones sell better*  
Sister agrees  
*Not ripe yet, she can tell by the smell*  
of stems and leaves  
Mother loads another box full  
and watched your wake cut through the field  
Father thought he was fast  
in his white rusted pickup with gypsy wheels  
loaded red and spilling out  
crashed in a ditch  
Iceman you picked them  
the very best ones  
piled high on your plate.



# **More Maui Hotties**

***Veronica Gutierrez***

Acrylic paint on Canvas sized 16" x 40"

# Two Coffees

*Bee Phipps-Lincke*

I'm doomed in the June gloom that's taken over Southern California. It didn't even wait until after high school graduation. Maybe it senses my mood and tries to accommodate me—but nah! Who am I kidding? I can't control the weather, or the fact that I'm stuck helping my uncle at his office supply store the summer before college. My only bright spot is my morning coffee and chocolate éclair at the local donut shop. For one divine moment, I get to close my eyes, taste the chocolate, and daydream of Paris—sitting at a café, notebook in hand, writing my next big piece.

Paris is a real city of stories, not my boring town where nothing ever happens. The donut shop's black-and-white tiles haven't changed since it opened at the end of World War II. The bell over the door chimes as I enter, cutting through Creedence on the radio: "*ain't no fortunate one.*"

A man sits at a Formica table silhouetted against the gray Southern California sky in the donut shop window. His windbreaker is green, his gray hair grows over his ears, and his face is light pink and lined. He sips his coffee, nods to the coffee opposite him, and mumbles something.

He feels my look and glances up at me. His blue eyes light up as if the sun shines behind them. He stares for a moment, then his gaze goes blank. He looks down at his coffee, then at the cup opposite. He resumes his soft-toned conversation. I catch a word now and then—something about "the black shadow blades of Huey cast against a child running into the jungle." The man pauses to listen, nodding. I hear no answer. No one sits in the opposite seat. He tilts his head and mumbles toward the other coffee cup. He's talking to the air.

I narrow my eyes over the rim of my Styrofoam cup, watching to ensure the beverage opposite him doesn't change levels. It remains full. I'm almost disappointed.

Every morning of my summer job, before I reluctantly take my place at the cash register behind the rows of stationery and pens, I visit the donut shop for a chocolate éclair. The man is always there with his two cups of coffee.

Until the day he isn't.

The woman behind the counter, with the sparkly hairnet, notices my surprise.

“Jeremiah isn’t here today. Heart attack yesterday afternoon, and the ambulance took him to Presbyterian.”

“I’m so sorry to hear—”

“I went to school with Jeremiah and his twin brother, Michael.”

She pours my coffee and grabs a tissue and my éclair. With neat precision, she places my breakfast before me on the counter.

“No charge, today, honey.” Her voice breaks a little, and her eyes seem watery behind her thick mascara.

“I’m so sorry about—Jeremiah. Will he be okay?”

“I don’t know.” She grabs a napkin from the shiny metal dispenser. She dabs her eyes, blotting her mascara.

“Why the two cups of coffee?”

My question hangs in the air as she blots her eyes until the napkin is full of little black streaks. She takes a deep breath when she crumples the napkin. “Jeremiah and Michael got drafted for Vietnam in ‘69 right before high school graduation. Michael didn’t make it back. Jeremiah always orders a coffee for Michael.” She bursts into tears.

“I’m so sorry,” I repeat.

All day long in my refuge behind the stacks of paper and pens, I think about the soldier twins, Jeremiah and Michael, the one who came back, and the one who didn’t.

Eventually, I grab a pen and paper and write down my thoughts. I end up with a few lame paragraphs. I crumple up the paper like the woman in the donut shop crumpled her mascara-streaked napkin.

I don’t go to the donut shop after that. Not for weeks. When I finally get up the courage to return, the summer heatwave is in full swing.

Jeremiah and his two coffees are not there. There is, however, a week-old newspaper clipping taped to the side of the cash register—an obituary with a picture of two young men in uniform. The young men look identical, and I don’t recognize them, but I know one is Jeremiah and the other is Michael, both fresh out of high school.

The woman with the sparkly hairnet isn’t there either, but the cute guy behind the counter tells me he’s filling in for his mom, who’s taken a few weeks off.

“Three cups of coffee. One iced, and one chocolate éclair, please.”

The woman’s son puts the coffee in a carry container. “Cream, sugar?”

“Oh, no carrier, thanks—it’s for here.”

He gives me a weird look, but his eyes soften when I place the two hot coffees opposite each other at Jeremiah’s table.

I take a bite of my éclair but find it difficult to swallow. I blink real hard.

He hands me a couple of napkins from the shiny metal container.

I wipe my eyes and try not to honk when I blow my nose.

“I’m Ben,” the woman’s son says, “I think you’re a grade above me at Longfellow?”

I take a sip of coffee. It feels cold going down my throat.

“I’m Stella, class of ’94, so yeah, I graduated this year.”

“You work at the office supply, right?”

“I quit yesterday. I’m going to start college in an exchange program with France soon.”

“Wow. I always wanted to go to Europe. But for college—that’s amazing. What are you gonna study?”

“French Lit... And maybe law school after for international peace and conflict resolution.”

I realize the fact of that new part, the part after the “And”—about law school—when I say it out loud.

“Damn,” Ben says. “Good luck with that. I got one more year of high school, and then I’m all Army.”

A sudden chilling gloom descends over me. I shiver. I open my mouth to plead with Ben to ditch the military, but I can’t find the right words.

“Um...thanks for the napkins.” I nod.

Ben nods back.

I take one last look at Jeremiah’s table. Steam rises from the two coffees.

The radio loop plays that Creedence song, and the bell chimes cut through the words: “*I ain’t no millionaire’s son*” as I walk out of the air-conditioning and into the summer heat.

# Mice Dreams

*Joseph & Casillas*

Last night I dreamt of a mouse or  
maybe two.  
They were dancing around my room and  
stopped at the foot of my bed.  
When I asked why they returned, they  
looked and said,  
“There’s a party beneath your feet, but  
you are not to attend.”  
As I nodded off, I  
wept and said,  
“Have a good time, then.”  
And sighed at not having  
been invited.

# Well Wishes

## *Emma Sterling*

Entwined in the garden there lingers the well  
Among where the orchids and hyacinths dwell  
Don't breathe in its vapor or yield to its spell  
This awful oasis, this heavenly hell

If you lean in closer, there chants from the deep  
A chorus of voices now rousing from sleep  
Do not toss a coin in, no matter how cheap  
The thrill will be fleeting, the consequence steep

One frivolous flick of your eye and alas  
One moment on foot, now flung down the crevasse  
Nails rasping in vain at each stone that you pass  
You splash down and plummet to your new impasse

The murmurs, empowered, now echo and chime  
Judge, jury, and butcher for only the crime  
Of building on sinkholes and squandering time  
And chipping away at a pale paradigm

Mouth reeking of wishes, your tender skin stings  
You glance all around as the tribunal sings  
Surveying the lattice of lush ivy strings  
And lichen-lined rubble upon which it clings

Its leaves once lay parted to show the way back  
But now merely thrash like a demoniac  
Eclipsing the halo with fingers so black  
Their panic has passed to make way for attack

As soon as the chasm has you in its thrall  
The longer you linger, the lower you'll fall  
You'll stomp in its basin and scratch at its wall  
But fleeing means flying and you only crawl

You'll wait for cold terror to dullen its fangs  
Ignoring the tremors and vertigo pangs  
And when you taste hope and its very first tangs  
The thought of escape in its infancy hangs

In spite of your nausea, you'll heave up to stand  
And struggle to grasp at a foliage strand  
You'll start climbing slowly, just hand-over-hand  
Like Alice emerging a foul Wonderland

Your skin will glow slowly beneath golden skies  
Light piercing your muscles and searing your eyes  
You'll tune out the whispers as they criticize  
Ignoring the wishing well's final reprise

You'll finally scale to the top of the pit  
With lungs barely breathing and teeth tightly grit  
And sprawl in the meadow, too worn to admit  
The triumph endures where the pain will remit

In time, it's no more than a fable to tell  
A long-ago portrait in faded pastel  
The scar will heal over, the wound will dispel  
But deep in the garden still lingers the well

# Boxed In

*Lyn Eisen*

#BREAK#

F B F

R O R

O E

X ME

#THEIR#

# <poetry>

*Damián Jaime Galván*

Fringe literature  
and deadbeat  
poetry, all  
gave a name  
for excuses and  
proudness,  
boldness to  
a couple  
of chumps.  
Now we are  
stuck with  
their words  
built on  
neverlasting  
promises of  
an American  
<freedom>  
If I may be so  
bold, where  
do I get to sign  
my name?



# **Dream Classroom**

***Melissa Termini***

Watercolor on Sketchbook paper, 10 x 7 inches, 2025

# Ode to My Hair

*Emma Sterling*

Like me, you weren't born lazy  
You whirled and twirled and curled  
In naïve ringlets from my head  
You flounced from bright scrunchies  
You bounced from shiny barrettes  
Golden sunlight threaded through you  
When did you change, old friend?

Unlike me, you smoothed yourself out  
Though you now hang limp as a corpse  
You never yielded my temper  
I spy your indecision in the mirror  
Too stick-straight to let you be  
Too stubborn for contortions  
I sweat over you until I feel faint  
I will make you a masterpiece if it kills me

I burn you flat and spray you down  
I bend you into curls you'll never keep  
I spirit you into the clutches of clips  
I shear you off in silky chunks  
I pluck you from my skin and my sweaters  
I dredge you up in slimy ropes from the drain

No torture tames you  
I hate it and love you

Bob above the waves, you mystic pixie  
Braid your layered soul with mine  
And tumble untethered down my back  
One day frost will bleach you  
And I will smile on your silvering surface

Until then, your darkness lasts forever  
But when the sun strikes you sideways  
The light still skims through you  
Golden as a promise

# Heavy Traffic

*Joseph & Casillas*

I drive with the windows down  
to let my thoughts  
feel the breeze.

Flying past cars,  
I feel free.

But then traffic picks up,  
and I pass St. Leon  
Cathedral.  
I can't help but  
think,  
I lived a life  
there.

It went by a different name  
back then.  
The building in front of our old place.

Had I asked  
and had they said yes  
and they said yes  
and they said --

*It's okay.*

Because I don't look over  
anymore  
when I pass it.

Even when I'm stuck in  
heavy traffic.

The place that marks where  
I once loved.

I was just a child, then.  
Both sides undone.

Now I speed past cars  
so as not to give  
myself a chance  
to look.

All of that  
just to be  
strangers  
again.

# The Muse

*R. William Vincent*

It took the Writer most of the day to work up the strength to kill her. He didn't eat, didn't work, didn't even shave. He spent the day sitting in front of the door to his basement where she lay, staring at the knife in his hands. Eventually, as the shadows grew long and night drew in, he finally found the strength to open the door and kill his muse.

When most people call someone their muse, they are saying they inspire them, that their very presence in their life motivates them to create beautiful works of art. They are talking about a muse in a figurative sense. When the Writer talks about his Muse, he means it in a very literal sense. She came to him in a storm, almost a decade ago to this day. He remembers vividly the night she fell to earth in his backyard.

That night, he was staring at his computer screen, watching the flickering cursor on a blank page. It was an empty comfort to him on those nights when he couldn't write anything. Those nights seemed to become more and more common. When he was younger, he was a prolific writer. He was never that talented, but he didn't care. For as long as he could remember, he had wanted to be a writer, and that's what he was. It was more than a title to him; it was his identity, so who cared if it made him money? But now, as the vigor and immortality that comes from one's teens and early twenties retreats into the rearview, his ability to write seemed to have gone with it.

It was then that he heard it, a thud as something heavy fell into the wet grass of his backyard. More confused than scared, he went outside to investigate. It was then that he saw her. She was so beautiful. She had clearly fallen from a great height, for she had dug a deep groove into his backyard. Despite that, her skin and robes remained perfectly clean and blemish-free. Her whole body had a faint glow to it, as if some divine fire burned within her. Indeed, she looked like a creature plucked straight from the scriptures, some biblical ideal of femininity. There she was, someone who could only exist in dreams, lying unconscious in a pit in his backyard.

The Writer brought her in from the storm. Despite having to drag her through the mud and rain she remained spotless, though his clothes were

drenched and matted. He laid her on his couch and began the long process of trying to revive her. For days and days, he tried. He tried giving her food and water, but she would not stir. He tried smelling salts, various rubs and ointments, everything he could think of, but nothing worked. She remained in a deep slumber, and he began to lose hope that she would ever wake.

He spent his days sitting by her side, reading her his stories. What a pair they made, the Writer who couldn't find readers, and the woman who wouldn't stir. And so they might have remained if it weren't for one fateful day.

The Writer was in the kitchen prepping his dinner. He was slicing a tomato when he accidentally cut himself. As he raised his finger to his mouth, he suddenly felt her beside him. Despite not hearing her move, there she was, just behind his shoulder. He turned around to face her in shock, and as she saw the blood on his finger, she smiled. It was a wicked smile, the smile of sadists, and psychopaths, and all the harbingers and avatars of evil. She ran her tongue over her lips before she began to speak.

While he heard her clearly, her mouth didn't move. Instead, he felt her words in his head, dancing along his synapses and worming their way in. "Blood," she said, her voice raspy and hoarse from disuse, "I need your blood."

"What are you going to do with it?" The Writer asked.

"Drink deep and grow strong," was her reply.

Before the Writer could tell her no, she said something that gave him pause. "For your...devotion... For your...sacrifice...I will reward you."

"What will you give me?" The Writer hesitantly replied.

"I will tell you a story," she said, her smile returning, "I know many stories. Ancient stories, potent stories. Stories of the magic that dances between the tree branches. Stories of when your kind was young and the world was powerful and strange. Beautiful stories, stories that could make statues weep...stories that could make you wealthy."

With that, she knew she had him. He held his hand out and she took his bleeding finger into her mouth and drank of his blood. With every sip the Writer felt a part of him seep out, as if she wasn't just draining his blood, but his very essence. When she had drunk her fill, when the Writer felt weak and woozy, she let his hand fall to his side. She stepped back from him, her feet slowly lifting off the ground as she hummed in contentment. She then leaned down and began to whisper in his ear.

When she was done, the Writer still in a daze—sat down at his computer and began to type. His fingers moved practically of their own accord, as if he were being puppeteered. He typed and typed till his fingers felt numb, and he collapsed at his keyboard from exhaustion. When he

awoke, he saw his manuscript. He had written the Muse's story.

The story quickly brought him the success and the wealth he had wished for his entire life. The Writer finally felt worthy of his moniker. But despite all the joy he felt, all the celebration, there was a hollowness behind it all. For the Muse was still in his house. And she had more stories to tell.

For months after his first hit, he tried his best to ignore the Muse. Tried to tell himself that it was a one-time arrangement, something to get him over the hump. To her credit, she never harassed him, never cajoled him, never called out to him with need. In time, she even moved from his living room to his basement, but she never left. She waited and waited. It was like she knew she wouldn't have to wait long, for no matter how hard he tried, no matter what he told himself, night after night, he could do nothing but stare at that blinking cursor. So eventually, when his desperation outweighed his shame, he went down to the basement.

---

For many years, their arrangement was prosperous. He would let the Muse feed on him, and once she was done, she would whisper in his ear, filling his head full of stories, guiding his hands to the keys. With each of the Muse's stories he found more wealth and fame, but it was never enough. Despite all of the money, all of the attention, he still felt hungry for more. He became even more of a recluse than he was before his success. He didn't need people in his life; he had the Muse. He had success.

All this success came at a cost.

As the years went on, the Writer felt a weariness creep into his bones. His skin began to fade, hanging loose around him like a poorly fitting suit. His eyes sank into their sockets, a perpetual tiredness hanging over them. Even his own mind, once considered his proudest possession, grew foggy when he wasn't writing. He tried to starve the Muse out, to write under his own power. While his brain was full of ideas of his own, whenever he tried to put them to the keys, to bring them to life, he found himself staring at that blinking cursor. As the Muse depended on him for sustenance, he depended on her for his stories. He was her physical lifeblood; she was his creative.

The Writer didn't know how much more of himself he could give. It would never be enough, not for her. He began to worry that if he continued on this path, he wouldn't survive. That one day, he would go down into the basement and never come back up. He decided to do the one thing he never thought he could do. It took everything he had, but eventually he found the strength to take a kitchen knife and set out to free himself.

It took him all day to gather the courage to open the door. He went down into the basement, the wood creaking under the weight of his

emotions.

Step.

By.

Step.

Until eventually he reached the basement floor. There she was, standing before him at the foot of the stairs. She saw the knife in his hands, but she didn't even look scared. She looked amused. She stood before him unafraid. She didn't even have to speak, as he could see what she was saying to him written across her face. "You. Won't."

It was at that point, the cauldron of shame, rage, and fear that had been brewing inside of him all night finally came bursting out of him. He raised the knife over his head, swung it down, and...stopped. He couldn't do it. No matter how much he wanted to, no matter how much he needed to, he couldn't do it. Her hold over him was too strong to cut. He let his arm fall impotently to his side, the knife clattering across the floor. When the Muse saw that her guess was correct, she smiled. She had won. Defeated, the Writer went back upstairs. The next day, he went back down those steps once again. Not to try again, but to make an offering of himself upon her altar once more.

It took three weeks for anyone to find his body. When they finally found him lying on the floor of his basement, having spent his last drop, they found him alone.

# Remember

*David Carr*

You know that smell  
Nighttime and jasmine  
Dusty sage and heat  
Wafting on the ocean breeze  
No matter where you are its summer.  
At the corner of Swarthmore and Sunset.  
You're in love.  
Nothing has been written  
Every thing is still

# **Kill For Peace**

## *Brianna Darlene*

Jungle haze,  
mirage heat-wave,  
bullets buzzing,  
horizontal rain.  
Two on a match,  
Lucky Strike,  
American struck,  
between the eyes—

They lied to you, GI.

Mosquitos whine,  
rice paddy graves,  
children burning,  
whooping cranes.  
Buried ammo,  
village raids,  
“Dance fucker dance!”  
(Is what the private said.)

They have ordered you to die.

Napalm burning,  
jungle rot,  
Agent Orange,  
Viet Cong.  
Draft cards,  
body bags,  
shoot the bird in the bush,  
drop the two in hand.

It is a very good idea to leave a sinking ship.

***Darlene***

Tunnel rats,  
spider hole,  
Bouncing Betty,  
there she blows!  
Saigon falls,  
spit in your face.  
Airport terminal,  
homecoming shame.

Your government has abandoned you.

Drunken veterans,  
shanty town streets,  
myth of soldiers glory,  
trod beneath feet.



# **Mutual Understanding**

***Grace Muller***

# Corn Syrup

## Dragon

*Siobhán Áine Cassandra Quille*

The wild kit fox has an average lifespan of five and a half years. Even in its relatively brief existence, the creature is no stranger to premature death, as evidenced by the skull laying here in the middle of this desert highway. Despite the short life, there is a story here, likely unknown to all but the one that is no longer with us. Seeing its skull bake in the sun, separated from the rest of its bones, it's hard to say if this kit ever stood a chance in the first place.

"I was just a kid when I first had a taste."

A car speeds down the desert highway.

"It was like, a limited time thing. A promotion for a movie or something."

A bright red hood shines in the sun.

"And it's not just a flavor of ice cream."

A license plate reading 1 SCR33M.

"There was nothing else like it. There is nothing else."

A bird of prey lets out its cry somewhere in the distance.

"I've tried to recreate it countless times. Always to no avail."

A pop sounds off, followed by screeching tires.

Marshall stands next to Agnes, a 1999 Chevy Malibu shitbox with a bright red paint job, looking out into the distance while a AAA mechanic changes one of Agnes' tires.

"But recently, I decided to take some real initiative for once. I found the address of the company's factory and mapped out a campaign. Which brings my story to here, out on the open road, in search of the recipe for that sweet, sweet frozen ambrosia."

"Uh, sounds cool, man." The mechanic stands up. "There seemed to be some bone fragments in your old tire. Probably how it popped."

A brief yet still awkward pause takes place. Marshall's smirk doesn't falter. His sunglasses hide nothing.

"I'm done here." The mechanic climbs into his truck. "Have a nice

day. And be careful.”

That last sentence is delivered with direct eye contact. Marshall thinks nothing of it.

~

Marshall and Agnes tear through the desert at a not-so-legal but still reasonable speed. The smirk found on the driver’s face an hour prior has since transformed into an excited smile. Another hour passes before they pull into a chain convenience store. The sign atop the business reads ‘Oasis’, with smaller letters below the logo spelling out ‘Everything but room & board!’.

He strides into the store, making his way to the candy aisle while dodging the mascot merchandise bursting out of the shelves and displays near the entrance. He focuses on two adjacent rows of boxes, one labeled Mike’s and the other Ike’s. His eyes dart back and forth between them until his gut growls, which prompts him to walk toward the restaurant section of the expansive rest stop establishment.

He looks up at the menu hanging above the counter and zeroes in on the chicken tenders and fries combo without reading anything else. He orders his food with the vacant-eyed cashier and reaches for a small plastic stand with a number printed on it. The cashier stops him.

“You don’t need that.”

“Oh. I thought we were just supposed to do it anyway, y’know?”

“Yeah, but you’re, like, the only one here.”

Marshall turns his head to look at the empty eatery.

“Oh.”

His order is called as soon as he settles into a seat. He grabs it from the counter, sits back down, pauses to judge the food’s visual quality, and proceeds to eat away. During his meal he glances out the window and notices a strange vehicle in the parking lot.

What kind of car is that? Why’s the back so big? Is it some sort of limo?

He pauses eating to stare at the hearse, expecting something to happen. Nothing does.

No plates and jet black all over. Whatever it is, it’s giving me the heebie-jeebies.

Marshall finishes his food and unconfidently waves goodbye to the cashier—who does not see him—as he exits the building. The hearse is now in a different parking spot, slightly closer to Agnes than before. He walks toward his inanimate steed with uneasiness on his face. He makes a sudden turn to look behind his back but finds no one. He gets in his car and drives away.

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The duo drive down the desert highway into the sunset and Marshall realizes he's been anxiously checking the rearview mirror over and over. He turns on the radio in hopes of finding distraction.

"And you're back with Triple-D DDDixon. I'm cracked out—whacked out—an all-around menace to society, and I'm playing the greatest hits of you and your grandma's yesteryears. Here's a good one from a band that deserved a bit more than they got."

An unforgettable drum intro starts to help Marshall calm down. He turns the volume dial up. Though he quickly finds that even with his favorite one-hit wonder from his childhood playing extra loud, he cannot stop thinking about that weird car. He turns the radio off and starts mumbling to himself.

"That song's overrated anyways. They had better options for the sing..le..."

The hearse is in the rearview.

The dark driver stays at a safe distance from Team Ice Cream, matching their speed. Marshall forces his eyes to focus on the road in front of them.

Is it following me? What if it stops the next time I do? What should I do? What will its driver do?

He looks back at the rearview and sees the hearse is now slightly closer. He turns the radio back on and the volume up higher than before.

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At the grey area between late night and early morning, Marshall drives while taking prolonged blinks. He becomes aware of this and perks up, immediately scanning for the hearse. Agnes appears to be the only automobile out tonight. Eventually they reach a town and cruise through until locating a motel.

He pulls into the parking lot, gets out of the car, and walks into the motel's equivalent of a lobby through an ajar door. Little is found in the small room aside from a reception desk placed opposite the entrance and a lone antique chair seated next to the entrance. Yellow lighting accompanied by a smell that mixes carpet cleaner and his grandparent's house hangs in the air.

There's no one at the desk, so he approaches it and presses the call bell. No voice nor footstep is heard. He presses again. Still nothing. The sound of his third ring is spoken over by a small woman who is now suddenly sat behind the desk. She speaks without looking at Marshall.

"Once is enough, you know."

"Jeez Louise! When'd you get here?"

The woman takes a name tag saying 'LOUISE' off of her shirt. She

continues talking with her eyes trained on the outdated desktop computer set up in front of her and to the right of Marshall.

“What do you need?”

“A room. Just for tonight. I actually have to get going bright and early tomorrow. You see, I’m on this quest—”

“Cash or card?”

“Card. Debit.”

The motel manager swiftly types at the computer. Then follows a moment of silence as she stares at the screen that is just long enough for him to become uncomfortable.

“Can I see some form of I.D.?”

“Yeah, sure. Here.”

He fumbles to retrieve his wallet with just a touch of visible anxiety. He hands over his driver’s license. The manager holds it up and Marshall is making the exact same large smile at her right now as he is in the photo. She once again types with furious speed. Another uncomfortable moment of silence. She opens a drawer and rummages through it before pulling out a key.

“You’re in Room 2, two doors down from here.” She makes a hand gesture in the direction of the door as if Marshall weren’t right in front of her. “9AM check out time okay?”

“Y-Yes. Thank you.”

He begins to walk out of the office. As he makes the door even more ajar to complete his exit, he turns back around.

“Have a nice nigh—”

The motel manager is glaring right at him with intense eye contact. He hurries out the door.

Marshall walks over to Agnes and starts to trace his fingers along the space below the car’s hood as he gazes into the night sky. He looks back down to Earth and sees a parent and child strolling through the parking lot. Both are holding ice cream. Marshall’s fist tightens, then loosens up before he places his hand on the car’s hood and gently pats it.

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Marshall sits at a diner booth in front of a half-eaten plate of hash browns and scrambled eggs with a generous drizzle of ketchup on top while sipping orange juice and scrolling on his cellphone. He happens to look out the window just in time to see the hearse slowly cruising down the street. Fear takes over his face. A tall waitress walks up and places a bill on the edge of his table, then speaks with a smile.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

He keeps his frightened eyes fixed out the window on the hearse,

which is just about to pass through visibility.

“Are you good, dude?”

He snaps out of his trance and looks over at the uniformed woman towering above him. He puts his phone in the front pocket of his jeans.

“Oh! Yeah. I’m fine. Thank you.” He shovels the remainder of his breakfast in his mouth while examining the bill.

“Of course. Well, whenever you’re ready.” The waitress turns away from the table as Marshall is sifting through his Velcro-secured wallet.

“Say, do you get cars like that around here often?” He says before briefly gesturing in the vague direction of the hearse’s last-known location.

“You mean that bright red one right out front? Sure, but not in that color. Man, talk about garish.”

He jams his hand into his other pocket. “No, no. The shiny all-black one that just passed by.” He drinks the last of the orange juice in one gulp.

“Didn’t see it. Sorry dude.”

He exhales and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand in an exaggerated motion. “Ah, damn.”

He shoots up from his seat and slams cash down on the table. As he rushes towards the exit, he speaks in bursts.

“That’s too bad!—Thank you anyways!—Have a nice day...!”

The waitress watches Marshall through the windows as he runs into the parking lot. She picks up his money and counts it.

“Huh. Exact change.”

Marshall runs past Agnes and a small handful of other members of her species and onto the sidewalk. The hearse is nowhere to be seen. He puts his hands on his knees and slumps his torso toward the ground, breathing heavily.

“You alright, stranger?”

He raises his head at the sound of the unfamiliar voice behind him. He stands upright and turns to face a disheveled older man with long, unkempt facial hair sitting on a bus stop bench.

“What? Oh. No, yeah. I’m fine. Doing pretty great, actually.”

The older man looks him up and down with skepticism. Marshall’s breaths are still just labored enough to be concerning.

“Uh, alright. Just asking, ‘cause you looked pretty distressed a moment ago.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean—Nah, I was fine. I just thought I saw something...strange. In the distance. In the sky. Whatever, that’s in the past now. Practically ancient history by this point.”

Marshall attempts to casually lean against a nearby signpost, but it is slightly too far from where he stands, so he awkwardly extends his body

to reach it. Marshall adjusts his footing and fakes a smile.

“HA! You sound like a forward-thinking guy.”

The man then mimics Marshall’s pose from where he sits on the bus bench. The two stare at each other for a moment before the older man starts cackling. Marshall looks on in confusion while the laughter fizzles out.

“Name’s Joseph.”

“I’m Marshall.”

Marshall shambles over to sit next to Joseph. He plops his body down and hunches over, elbows on his knees and palms cradling his jaw. Joseph maintains an upright but relaxed position while looking out onto the street in front of them. He leans toward Marshall slightly as he speaks to him.

“I liked what you said.”

“I’m Marshall’?”

“Wow, you really do live in the present. No, the ‘ancient history’ thing. Tells me you’re the kind of guy who’s always moving forward. Like a shark.”

“I guess so.”

“Yup, no time to dwell on the past for guys like you. Admire it, really. Very different lifestyle from mine.” Joseph’s line of sight trails off into the distance as he finishes his statement.

“Really?”

“Yeah...Was a bit of a past-dweller. Still am, I’d say.” Joseph looks down wistfully.

“How so? You seem to be here right now.” Marshall looks at Joseph more attentively.

“Used to collect things. Would drive to different states just to buy stuff I found online.”

“What kind of things did you collect?”

“Figures and such of stuff I liked as a kid. Lunchboxes and glasses with characters and logos on them. Memorabilia. Though I guess they weren’t made to be memorabilia...”

“You said you used to do it. What made you stop?”

Joseph looks at Marshall with a serious face. “It got to a point where most of my time and money went into finding these things. I had to stand back and look at myself.”

“What did you see?”

Joseph looks out again. “A guy so tunnel-visioned he didn’t notice everyone had left him until it was too late.”

Marshall’s eyes look away and around until he fixes his vision downward. Then follows a quiet that he ends up breaking while forcing himself to look back at Joseph.

“What’d you do with the memorabilia?”

“Sold it. Took a while because I wanted to make sure I made my investment back. Had to be done, though, since it all carried new memories of a different investment I would never get back.”

“And now you’re homeless.” Marshall gazes out into the distance as something supposedly profound settles in his mind.

Joseph turns to look at him with a mix of confusion and offense.

“What? I’m not homeless. What made you think that?”

Marshall suddenly sits upright, now more animated and looking at Joseph but dodging eye contact entirely. “Well, I mean, I guess nothing really, I just assumed ‘cause, uh...I’m from a city with a large unhoused population, so it didn’t strike me as unrealisti—”

“Calm down, Shark. What are you doing here anyways? Said you aren’t from here.”

“I’m on a quest.” Marshall calms down and hunches back over.

“A what?”

Marshall sighs. “I’m on a road trip.”

“Any destination, or just looking to see whatever’s along the way back home?”

“I’m heading to the factory of an ice cream company.”

“They do tours or something?”

“No. I’m trying to find the recipe for a discontinued flavor of ice cream I loved as a kid.”

The two sit for another pause, this time accompanied by a different kind of quiet.

“The people at the factory know you’re coming? You have an appointment or something?”

“Um, well, no. I did call the company a while ago to try to get the recipe, but that didn’t work.”

“So...what, then. You going to drive to this factory and break in?”

“If I have to.”

A bus pulls over to the curb. Joseph gets up.

“Make sure there aren’t any more ice cream recipes after this one.”

Joseph steps onto the bus. “Goodbye, Marshall.”

He watches the bus drive down the street in the direction opposite to the one the hearse had gone.

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Marshall and Agnes continue their campaign, racing through the flat terrain on an even flatter road under a cloudless sky. The sun beams down on, well, everything as Marshall thinks to himself so as not to upset Agnes.

‘Any more ice cream recipes’? What was he on about? There are no

more recipes. Nothing else even compares to this one.

The irritation on his face fades into something more sad.

If I don't find it there, it's not like there'll be any substitute.

His brow arches down and he presses a little harder on the gas.

It'll be there. It has to be.

The pair come upon a set of off/on ramps when Marshall notices a person holding out their thumb on the side of the road in between the ramps. The mild dejection on his face turns into mild excitement. He pulls over, rolls down the window, and lifts his sunglasses up to talk.

"You uh, you going this way?"

"I would be on the other side of the road if I wasn't," the hitchhiker responds while shielding their eyes from the sun.

His smile is replaced by a look of slight confusion, yet the smile still peeks through.

"I'm just giving you a hard time. Are you offering a ride?"

"Planning on it. But I can only take you as far as Dale Valley."

"I only need to go to Santa Angustia."

"That is certainly doable. Let's get rolling."

Marshall flicks down his sunglasses and points a finger gun forward. Then he remembers he must unlock the passenger side door and does so as his friendly smile reforms into something more apologetic. The hitchhiker gets in Agnes and the trio take off.

"Your car is...red. Really red."

"Yeah, got it done custom. They didn't make this model in this color."

"I wonder why."

"That's what I said! Man, it's cool to meet someone with similar tastes."

The hitchhiker nods insincerely and looks out the passenger seat window.

"Her name is Agnes, by the way." He pats the dashboard with his right hand.

"Who? The car?" They look back at him.

"Yeah!"

"I've never actually met anyone who named their car. I thought people only did that in movies."

"I like movies too."

Quiet resumes for a bit. Marshall stays smiling until he makes a face as if he remembered something.

"Oh! My name is Marshall. What's yours?"

"I...haven't decided yet." They look away from the driver.

"Ooh. Cool and mysterious! What takes you to Santa Angustia?"

“Oh, change of pace, change of scenery. And I didn’t feel particularly wanted back home. If I can even call it that anymore...”

“Sounds heavy.”

“Cause it is.”

Marshall’s smile falters. “So...why Angustia? Is it that much better than not-home?”

The hitchhiker shifts in their seat but keeps their gaze fixed out the window. “Not by a whole lot. But I have friends out there, so it’s better than other options. Like Dale Valley.”

“Heh, yeah. What a weird name too. Dale Valley.”

“Doesn’t dale already mean valley? Or some type of valley?”

“I think so, yeah. It’s basically just Valley Valley.” The smile on his face changes from one of intentional friendliness to one of natural joy.

The hitchhiker giggles. “That’s like naming a place ‘Valley Glen’ or ‘Glendale’.”

“HA! Yeah...”

The travelers chuckle together at the absurd world they’ve crafted.

“What has you out here anyways?”

“I’m on a quest.”

“That’s an interesting word to use so seriously. What is this quest, pray tell?”

“You see, years ago, this ice cream company had a limited-time flavor, and it was the best thing ever, but eventually they stopped making it.” He switches his view back and forth between the road and his companion as he talks.

“So you’re hunting down the last pint of it?”

“No.” He turns his head to look at the hitchhiker with a grin full of misguided confidence while holding up one thumb. “I’m hunting down the recipe.” He looks back to the road.

“Where’re you going then?”

“The company’s factory. Or maybe it’s the packaging plant...anyway, I suspect they’ll have the answer I’m looking for.”

“What’s your plan? You’re gonna get a tour and sneak off into the restricted areas? Infiltration, stealth mission?”

“No, no, they don’t do tours.”

“You have someone on the inside? A mole?”

“No...no.”

“So...B ‘n’ E?”

“B and E.” Marshal nods. He then leans his upper body towards his new friend while keeping his eyes on the road. “If it comes to that.”

“You’re a little weird, Marshall.”

“That’s funny, my mom says the same thing.”

“It’s not an unreasonable reaction for someone learning about your ‘quest’.”

“Oh, no, she said that before I got the idea for this.”

“In what context did she say it then?”

“She just said it in, like, general. She’s said it a couple times before.”

Agnes zooms past a sign that reads ‘Santa Angustia – 2 MILES’.

Soon, the group reach the small city and cruise through.

“Where should I drop you off? Are your friends expecting you anywhere specific?”

“No, they said to let them know where I was when I got here.” They are slumped in their seat when they glance out the windshield. “Man, I could use a coffee. Could you just drop me off at that place on the corner?”

Marshall pulls into the chain coffee shop’s tiny, overpopulated parking lot. The hitchhiker gets out of the car and stands holding open the door, bent over to look in at Marshall.

“This is goodbye then.”

“That it does seem.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, No Name.”

No Name smiles warmly. “Likewise, Marshall.” They stand up straight. “And you too, Agnes.” They shut the car door and pat the roof.

Marshall drives away through Santa Angustia. As he is departing the city and getting on the highway, his look of contentedness adjusts suddenly.

“AGH! I should’ve asked for their email!!”

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Marshall stares into the night sky as he fills his car’s tank and realizes he never knew there were this many stars visible from Earth. Before his thoughts can take their next steps into an existential confrontation with our humble planet’s insignificance in the grand scheme of infinity, he notices something familiar in his peripherals—the hearse, parked just out of the light supplied by Gas Station, Nowhere. He furrows his brow, marches over to the imposing vehicle, and knocks on the driver’s side window. Impatiently, he extends his arm to knock again but is stopped by the window rolling down ever-so-slightly. A slip of paper slowly slides out of the opening and a deep, quiet voice speaks from within.

“You’re gonna want the corporate offices, not the factory.”

Marshall grabs the slip of paper and reads it. It’s an address. He looks up with wonder. He looks back down at the hearse and opens his mouth to speak but is interrupted.

“Go.”

Marshall’s face is filled with determination as he clutches the paper.

He runs to Agnes, then abruptly turns in the direction of the gas station convenience store. He sprints through the automatic doors and screeches to a halt at the cash register. He addresses the cashier slumped over the counter with unprecedented assertiveness.

“One large coffee, please!”

“It—It’s, like, a self-serve machine.”

“Right!”

He briskly walks to the coffee machine, fixes up a large cup, and briskly walks back to the register. He slams his coffee down on the counter and stares through the cashier. The cashier slowly blinks.

“That’s, uhm, four-fifty.”

He tosses three singles and a two-dollar bill on the counter and swiftly exits.

“Keep the change...!”

After jumping into Agnes, he sets his beverage down in the cupholder, puts on his seatbelt, turns the key in the ignition, gingerly picks up the coffee to take a careful sip, and speeds off into the night.

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The ice cream company’s corporate office building sits in a remarkably flat area near a highway and a small number of other grey rectangular buildings with a low but still multiple count of stories. Few souls stir here in this early, early morning, as the drained souls of the offices’ employees don’t clock in for another couple hours. The desert’s natural tranquility overpowers the negative energy that emanates from corporate headquarters like these, and all remains calm. That is, until Marshall and Agnes tear into the parking lot.

He takes a swig of his coffee before hopping out. The digital clock on the dash displays a time well after 3AM. He pops open the trunk, pulls out a backpack, slings it over his shoulder, and shuts the trunk. He then scurries over to the building’s front entrance in a crouching pose. He takes off the backpack and retrieves a magician’s lockpicking kit, which he successfully uses to open the doors.

Somewhere within the building, a tall security guard sits at a desk twiddling his thumbs. Repeated beeps from the computer in front of him catch his attention. He picks up a walkie-talkie to contact his coworker while ignoring the many screens, one showing a camera feed of a strangely determined young man on the first floor.

Marshall sneaks past the reception desk and finds a map of the building on a wall next to two elevators. He traces his finger over the image until he locates the records room, then heads for the stairs.

“Bravo, come in.”

“I keep telling you, there’s only two of us. We don’t need codenames.” responds Bravo from another part of the building.

“I think you set the silent alarm off by mistake. Over.”

Marshall, in half of a crouching pose, sidles down a hallway an inch or two away from the wall until he reaches the records room. He tries the handle, but it’s locked. The magician’s kit gets another point towards justifying its purchase.

“I don’t think I did.”

“Well there’s nothing unusual on the cameras, and you’re the one who isn’t sitting in this room. Over.”

“I’m patrolling, but I’m not opening any doors.”

“The silent alarm says otherwise. Over.”

The records room is filled with numerous rows of shoulder-high filing cabinets. A printed guide to the categories of files is pinned to the wall next to the door. Marshall examines this guide before proceeding with purpose into the filing cabinet forest.

“You want me to do a sweep? Will that satisfy you?”

“...maybe. Over.” He glances at the camera feeds as he finishes his statement and sees the young man sifting through files.

“Okay. Fine. I’ll do a sweep tonight. Another one.”

“Hey-hey! We got an unknown individual in the building!”

“What? You sure that isn’t me?”

“I’m sure. Meet me outside the records room.”

The tall guard holsters his walkie-talkie and begins to leave his chair but stops and grabs the radio once more.

“Over.”

Bravo puts his own walkie-talkie away and pauses the video playing on his cellphone that he’s holding up sideways in front of his raised knees. He gets up off the floor and walks around the corner to the records room.

The tall guard hurries out of the camera room and through a door that leads to the space behind the reception desk. He makes the motions of a running start to hop over the desk but stops after a single step and walks around it.

Marshall flips through a group of files organized under ‘D’ for ‘Decommissioned’ within the recipe cabinet.

“Why aren’t they alphabetized within the section? If I wasn’t trying to get out of here quickly, I’d reorganize some of these—”

He sees it. What he’s been searching for, what’s been kept from him for so many years. The doorknob turns. The stars in his eyes disappear as he looks up like a deer in headlights. He grabs the file and slides it into his backpack while taking out two concealed items.

Tall and Bravo enter the room. Marshall is already standing. He and the guards stare each other down, Marshall and Tall looking serious while Bravo confused. Bravo leans towards his coworker.

“What do we do here?”

Tall turns to Bravo, astonished.

“What do you mean ‘What do we do’?! We apprehend him, of course! He’s breaking and entering in the place it’s our job to watch!”

“Right.”

The pair start to look toward the invader again.

“Then let’s do our jo—”

The crook flicks a lighter and brings the flame up to a cheap smoke bomb from a firework shop. There’s some struggle to get it lit, but when he does, he throws it at the ground and pushes past the guards. A frankly inoffensive amount of smoke emits from the bomb, barely filling the guards’ noses, who are standing still and bewildered. His frantic footsteps become increasingly distant as he escapes down the hall. The two look at each other.

Marshall jumps into Agnes’ driver’s seat and tosses his backpack on the passenger’s side in the same motion. They peel off into the early morning light. Marshall sips his coffee with a big, satisfied grin and thinks he can’t remember the last time he felt this excited. He’s so excited, in fact, that he doesn’t notice the hearse in the rearview mirror.



## **New Orleans Nights**

***Veronica Gutierrez***

*New Orleans Nights* is originally an acrylic painting on canvas sized 12" x 16".

# **Violent Love and Loving Violence in I. S. Jones’ Bloodmercy**

***Emma Sterling***

How do relationships—whether they exist between loved ones or among aspects of an individual person—emerge from complex webs of violence, grace, and intimacy? As its title suggests, CSUN alumna I. S. Jones’s poetry collection *Bloodmercy* evokes both blood and mercy to explore relationships as multifaceted fusions of cruelty and love. *Bloodmercy* draws from the biblical story of humanity’s first murder, which occurred when Adam and Eve’s firstborn son, Cain, killed his brother Abel. In visceral free verse poetry, Jones re mythologizes Cain and Abel as two Black sisters struggling towards adulthood and learning to navigate relationships with each other, a hostile and self-centered father, and a mother who defies traditional expectations of femininity. Each of the sisters comes to understand their ties to womanhood through their own experiences as well as the connection they share with one another. *Bloodmercy* contains two poems that share a title, “Bloodmercy,” with the collection itself. The first, situated a third of the way through the book, inhabits Cain’s perspective, while the other closes out the collection in Abel’s voice. Deeper study of Cain’s version of “Bloodmercy” reveals this speaker-persona’s changing outlook on her relationships with her sister and herself, illustrating the interconnection between violence and mercy.

Cain’s “Bloodmercy” begins with a description of a late summer day that embodies Cain and Abel’s shifting perceptions of each other and themselves. While much of the collection focuses on the relationships within and between people, Jones often calls on natural imagery to deepen the symbolic representations of these ties. In particular, “Bloodmercy” takes

place just as “summer begins its descent,” positioning the sisters in a seasonal parallel to the transition between childhood and adulthood (Jones 20). This motif recurs halfway through the poem, when the changing of the seasons marks a new distance between Cain and Abel as they “stop knowing each other” (Jones 20). The poem’s long and somewhat prose-like lines of free verse resemble the vast outdoor space Cain and Abel find themselves in. While nature in “Bloodmercy” appears less perfect than the biblical Garden of Eden their parents were cast out of, it provides a space for Cain and Abel to enjoy their childhoods and experiment with adulthood—a stimulating environment that differs from the paradise their mother Eve calls “boring” in “Contempt for Eden” (Jones 19). Natural similes and metaphors enrich the sisters’ connection with the earth, comparing their clarity and understanding to light, and the growing distance between them to a wind guiding them apart. Their relationship with nature hints at their original roles in the Bible, in which Cain worked as a farmer and Abel as a shepherd. It also grounds “Bloodmercy” in the lineage of ecopoetry, which emphasizes nature as a common theme. As Camille T. Dungy writes in her introduction to *Black Nature*, ecopoetry holds particular significance to many Black writers, whose work often includes “elements of the environment [that] simultaneously function as imaginative, literal, and figurative realities” (xxiii). To this end, the yard in “Bloodmercy” acts as a physical environment while transcending reality to become a mythic signifier of Cain and Abel’s development as individuals and as sisters. Jones’s diction reiterates this growth, showing Cain’s “mastery” in styling Abel’s hair, her new acknowledgement of “wisdom” and “understanding”, and the eventual “clarity” of her connection with her sister (20).

However, the setting points towards another theme—violence. While Cain and Abel view nature as a place of freedom and growth, it also inflicts cruelty on them. Most notably, a piece of tree bark scratches Abel’s hand deeply enough to draw blood. Jones additionally uses double meanings to deepen the presence of violence in the text. While “each green blade” corresponds with the grass that the sisters traverse, the focus on “blade” underscores the looming threat that culminates in Abel’s blood being spilled (Jones 20). Moreover, the red drips of melting popsicle that stain Cain and Abel’s “good dresses” evoke the image of blood, especially menstrual blood (Jones 20). This tie between menstruation and violence pervades the entire collection. In “Daddy’s Girl,” for example, Cain laments how “the first blood” ostracized her from her father and her male friends (Jones 15). Abel echoes this sentiment in “Fawn”, stating that “my father stopped hugging me / when the first blood came” (Jones 42). *Bloodmercy* treats menstruation as a punishment for sin—a form of physical and social violence towards

people born female who dare to transgress ideals of womanhood. In “Bloodmercy” specifically, menstruation represents one of many steps into adulthood, which eventually drives the sisters away from each other.

Violence and various reactions to it also hold implications for how relationships manifest. When Abel’s hand bleeds, Cain shows empathy by cutting her own skin and mixing her blood with Abel’s. This mixture—“cainabel”—physicalizes shared pain, as well as a relationship’s creation from the sum of its parts (Jones 20). Cain cares for her sister, as shown when she rinses Abel’s blood with the hose. “Bloodmercy” thus portrays mercy emerging from blood as a reaction of solidarity, or of action to lessen further pain. Despite empathizing with Abel, however, Cain also acts as a perpetrator of violence. Jones directly verbalizes Cain’s intentions in lines aimed at Abel: “I wanted to deliver you / from cruelty & gave you my own instead” (20). The tension between Cain and Abel hearkens back to their biblical origins as the first murderer and murder victim, respectively. The Cain of “Bloodmercy” desires both closeness and separation from her sister, resulting in seemingly contradictory behavior that includes both betrayal and mercy.

Reading Cain and Abel as two parts of a whole rather than two individuals brings further insight into the dynamics present in “Bloodmercy.” In an interview with Darius Phelps, Jones stated that during her writing process for *Bloodmercy*, she “realized Cain and Abel represent my childhood selves, while Eve embodies my adult womanhood” (Phelps and Troy). Writing the collection through multiple speakers enabled her to confront different aspects of herself, including her queerness through Abel’s exploration of sexuality, her experience of adulthood through Eve, and her distant relationship with her own sister through Cain’s relationship with Abel. Cain’s mourning for a time when she and Abel “were of one mind and two bodies” suggests the shape this collection’s speaker might occupy with all these fragmented perspectives taken into account—a complex individual with many dissimilar and even contradicting pieces that make up their identity (Jones 20). Thus, the connection between Cain and Abel becomes fully realized as a person’s maturing viewpoint towards themselves, as well as their internal and external relationships. As displayed in I. S. Jones’s “Bloodmercy,” blood and mercy each drive how people harm and help themselves in close tandem with the rest of the world.

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# Caravana Roja (Red Caravan)

*Damián Jaime Galván*

Hay suficiente  
espacio para  
pensar en ti  
aquí en California,  
cuando la camioneta  
viaja sobre  
campos de cultivos,  
colinas y desiertos  
habitados.

Tu presencia  
camina a lo largo  
de árboles  
frutales; estás  
atrapada en la  
explosión de  
una ola de calor!  
En un espejismo,  
te pierdo por  
un truco, y  
desapareces  
en la maleza  
de una zanja  
seca cerca de  
la carretera.

There is enough  
space to think  
about you  
here in California,  
when the van  
travels across  
crop fields,  
foothills and  
inhabited deserts.  
Your presence  
walks along the  
fruit trees;  
you are trapped  
in the explosion  
of a heatwave!  
In a mirage,  
I loose you  
to a trick,  
and you disappear  
in the undergrowth  
from a dry  
ditch near  
the road.

# You Are Not My Eater

*Daniella Donis*

He kept himself well groomed. Gym 5 days a week. Strict diet. No alcohol, no drugs. He kept himself strong, but lean. He needed to be able to run faster than most. He kept his smile white and his hair clean. The ones he chose, they always loved his shiny hair and his sweet cologne. His mother always told him that a good man was a beautiful one.

Nights were spent in the city searching for his perfect choice. Alone, petite, thin, and easy to carry. Long, loose, easy to pull locks. What he really looked for was her eyes. They needed to be hopeful and optimistic; he had no fun with the depressed ones. They would urge him to finish as they usually anticipated the end. He needed one that he could break, one that would beg and beg him to stop. One that truly believed he would.

It started with what he could get; usually just homeless too sleep deprived to put up a real fight. He would lure them into his home with the promise of an eightball or a meal. He enjoyed it. It was good practice for him to learn what he could do. To sharpen his knife. But now, he wanted a challenge. He wanted to test his strength, and often he'd even surprise himself with what he could do.

The way her head bobbed as she walked, the way she smiled at strangers, the way she sang along to a song only she could hear, the lust for life in her eye. Happy, blissfully ignorant with her eyes glued to her phone. These girls were his favorite. It was easy enough to catch one. They loved his charm and his mystery. So, he crept along behind her.

He smiled to himself and let pride swell in his chest. He always picked the right ones. It would be easy enough to yank her along by that yellow ponytail and that pencil neck he could snap with one hand. He imagined how he'd paint her golden hair red as he sat onto the subway car.

The breaking of their spirit, and the blood. They've always been his favorite parts.

"What're you smiling about?" The light wind-chime of a voice ripped him from his daydream. Deep brown eyes behind thick blonde lashes

surveyed him. Her lips in a smug, flattered smile.

He had been noticed.

He melted into the seat and stretched his arms across the backs of the chairs next to him. He flashed her his perfect, rehearsed *I know something you don't* smile. She returned one.

“Just imagining how our night’s about to go.”

The blonde scoffed and rolled her eyes. *They always react the same way*, he thought.

“What’s your name?” He leaned onto his knees as if hanging onto her every word.

“It’s Tess,” she held his gaze. Her cheeks went pink and drool welled in his mouth.

“What’re you up to tonight, Tess?”

---

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Darkness filled her sight. The stone floor sent a chill that cut through her naked skin, down to her bones. Her long hair, noticeably brushed, provided little warmth down her back and around her face. Wet and moldy stink filled her nose and throat. Rope tied her limbs together but were surprisingly gentle.

Heavy boots stomped toward her, and her sight was back. He was naked, too.

“Do not scream,” he said gently.

She didn’t. The room was filthy and coated in dark stains she couldn’t stare at for too long. The smell of bleach hung in the air, but a funk that couldn’t be washed out lingered in the back of her throat.

He looked offended at her silence.

His breathing got heavy and his eyes crept over her.

“What are you...” she barely got the words out. She didn’t really want an answer.

A sick, giddy smile split his face. His eyes bore into her. Dark and empty pools of black. She could see the predator in him. The malice. The hunger.

Tess fought the urge to cower.

---

His breathing trembled with excitement. The blood rushed through his body, and he felt his erection growing. He loved this part. Deciding what

to do first.

Gently, he pet her golden hair and raised it to his nose. Breathing in deeply; strawberry scented. His hand trailed down her head to the soft skin covering the supple flesh on her bones.

A woman's skin is his favorite part of her. Even the hairy ones. They never felt as coarse and wiry as men. He actually enjoyed the prickly feeling of their unshaven legs or arms. Fortunately, she was prickly.

His hands travelled the expanse of her legs. She was surprisingly muscular. He didn't pay much attention to anything else of hers, but he noticed her watching him carefully. Curiously. To his surprise, and dismay, she didn't look scared.

He ripped his arms away and stomped across the room. A long blade flashed in the dim light.

"I'll let you pick what we do first. Would you like to be eaten, or drank?" His voice thick and low. She wiggled her wrists around, the rope starting to chafe. She didn't speak.

"ANSWER ME, BITCH! WHICH ONE?!" He lunged at her grabbing the nape of her neck, raising her gaze to his. She slipped a whimper out.

"Will you untie me?"

Tess kept her eyes locked on his and he hated it.

His usual girls would be crying, cowering, and begging.

"I want to taste you," he said plainly, "I want to taste you, inside and out."

Red welled from where he pressed the blade just below her collarbone. An arm on her side kept her in place. He trailed the cut across her chest and around her shoulder, blood slowly trickling down her skin. She stayed quiet, but pain burned through her. He ran his hand along the fresh red and brought his wet fingers to his mouth. A moan poured from him.

He shifted his grip and brought her to his lips. His hot mouth set fire to her skin. His tongue weaseled its way inside the open wound. Tears filled her eyes, and vomit fought its way up her throat. Fatigue consuming her, she slumped into him as he lapped up her lifesource.

The thought of his next move scared her more than her own. Tess lowered her eyes to his eager erection, and she wrapped her hands around the meaty member. He moaned into her shoulder sending another ripple of pain up her body. Against her will she trembled furiously.

"Kiss me..." she barely uttered.

He met her gaze with hungry eyes and smiled with blood stained teeth. He wrapped his arms around her to support her weight and leaned into her.

Without indulging in a second thought, Tess lunged for his throat

and wrapped her teeth around his trachea. Simultaneously she squeezed her hands as tight as she could, crushing his penis and balls between her fingers. Tess slammed her jaw closed, flesh and blood filling her mouth. His neck crunched and squelched between her lips, and hot iron coated her tongue.

Tess shoved his body with her bound limbs, and he crumpled to the floor, disfigured and twisted. A piece of him lingered in her mouth as he gargled and whimpered with rage in his eyes. Blood poured from his gaping neck as he stumbled to stand, his skin losing more and more color. He slipped around on his knees in his sticky secretion until he finally fell forward. The blood slowed to a serene trickle, the puddle slowly inching closer to her. His eyes stayed on her until the rage slowly melted away to emptiness.

Tess spit the chunk of flesh out, and vomit quickly followed. This taste will stain my mouth forever, she thought. Finally, she slipped her arms from the ropes and wiped her face with unclean hands. The predator laid in front of her with empty eyes and pale skin. To her horror, an airy laugh filled the room. She knelt over clutching her stomach, and laughed until she cried.

# Grad Students Don't Get Chick- Fil-A

*Joseph & Casillas*

Because I don't get off until 10 p.m.

and society is tailored to the young.  
They didn't even put a vending machine in my building.

My classes start right after work, around 12 p.m.  
By the time I'm out, most everything is closed.

So, as I get my stale baked potato from Wendy's  
and the clock strikes 10:05,

I look over at the jolly Chick-Fil-A workers  
sweeping up after a long shift.

There is some part of me that couldn't let this place go.  
"Why there?" I'd get asked.

It wasn't the bright fast-food lined streets leading to campus.  
Because grad students arrive just as the sun goes down.

When the light blindingly shoots down the horizon.  
And you can barely see the white lines on the road.

When you get to campus, it's like arriving to paradise.  
The palm trees, taller than I remembered, mark sanctuary.

I pull into Maple Hall just as the undergrads head home.  
None of which have seen the parking lot past 3.

That's when the old people show up.  
The 9 to 5ers.

The moms. The dads.  
The grown-ups, still in uniform.

The adults that run this place.  
They represent the working class of campus.

So, during my 2nd ten-minute break of the ten-hour day  
as I break into the closest building to look for food

I remember that

***Casillas***

# Following the Coyote

*Mario Vanegas*

I'm lucky to have been born here, there, nowhere. I never had to leave my family. The smell of shrapnel everywhere, tainting the city with the stench of iron. The city walls splattered with maroon like a blooming hibiscus. The shriek of death is the sound of metal scraping skin clean off the bone. The windows become smaller, they bleed the tears of our ancestors. Your home begins to birth the beast. Scrubbing the windows and walls, the dried residue of its venom creeping in every crevice. The residue seeps under the nail bed and infects the body with fear. The beast lives in the home, everyone bloodthirsty. Death is at every corner and counter. It seeks to take all that has seen the maroon city. The journey away from the maroon city leads to a river so pristine from a distance. The water is a morpho butterfly waving its wings in the mountains. The soft murmurs of the water. The thirst that overcomes is unbearable, the dry cottonmouth tastes like eating half burnt cigs. The river widens. I see the reflection of the dead living in the water. Drowning for eternity. The water is dirty and murky infused with rust, it smells like the stomach acid that's regurgitated after a week-long bender. The water slowly sinks its clinch around your neck. Nearly dead, the voice of freedom in the distance. The river decides who makes it to the other side. The first gasp of air is so intense that obsidian pierces the lungs. Running is my last hope. Hiding is the only option. I'm lucky to be alive. Everything has been taken from us. The blood of our ancestors is on your hands. You hate me, I hate you. But I love you too. Your beautiful mountains and valleys lush green full of liberty. The voice of equality is the sweet voice of mermaids serenading sailors. It's a mirage, a mansion with no light. A car with no engine. All flash, no function.



## **The Allen's Hummingbird: The Unexpected Star of the CSUN Campus**

***Em Richter***

It is a mixed medium piece made with marker, colored pencil, and some digital elements (no generative ai). The original size was only 3x3”.

# All That Glitters Is Just Water

*Kimberly Barba*

GIL: A goldfish who believes he's human.

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE": The omnipresent, almost mocking narrator or conscience who speaks through the bubbles or fishbowl filter.

MILO: Gil's friend who talks with an occasional lisp.

SUSHI CHEF: Quiet, barely speaks. Blabs randomly to himself, carries a rusty knife, and wears a greasy "Kiss The Chef" apron.

## Scene 1: "Clock In, Give Up"

Setting: A clear fish bowl that looks like a miniature city, streets made of coral, tiny plastic buildings, a desk with a computer made of shells, and a fake tree to the side.

(GIL swims lazily to his office and to his "desk". He swipes at a small computer screen made of coral and clocks in.)

GIL

Another day in paradise. I mean, you'd think this whole "glorious existence" thing would get more glamorous the longer I'm stuck in this bowl. But no, just the same food pellets, same filter hum, and no one to talk to except...

(GIL stops.)

...you.

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE" (sarcastically.)

Ah, yes. Me. The omnipresent voice in your head. Your one true friend, trapped in a glass cage. But hey, look on the bright side, Gil. At least you're not a shrimp. You could've been a shrimp. Just think of the existential crisis you'd be having.

GIL

(Rolls his eyes.)

Yeah, nothing says "life goals" like being a shrimp. No thanks. At least I've got my human job.

(Mimics typing.)

"Dear Mr. Shrimp, I have finished the report."

GIL (sighs.)

Okay, actually, I do wish I were a shrimp. I bet they don't have to feel this much pain.

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE"

You don't feel pain, Gil. You're a fish. Your brain is the size of a pea. You think too much for a guy who can't remember what he had for breakfast five minutes ago.

GIL

Yeah, well, I'm a deep fish. Ever hear of Nietzsche? Guy got it. Everything is meaningless and we're all just swimming in circles, trying to find a reason to breathe.

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE"

Are you quoting Nietzsche now? In a fishbowl? Do you even know what "eternal recurrence" means? You can barely remember how many bubbles you've blown today.

GIL (sarcastically.)

Oh, look at you, you think you're hot shit just 'cause you know a couple facts. Yes, I'm aware I can't remember yesterday, but hey, that's a blessing in disguise. If I could remember every miserable day I've spent in this tank, I think I'd swallow a rock.

(GIL swims past a tiny plastic tree, kicking it over, as if it's symbolic.)

GIL

(Sad and softly.)

This is my life. This tiny glass prison, with plastic trees, a fake “career,” and a computer screen that does absolutely nothing. But you know what? At least I get to feel something, right? So maybe that’s it. The point of it all. To just feel like you matter, even if it’s just for one moment in the glow of an LED screen.

SHELLSEA “THE VOICE”

You’re doing that thing again. Getting all melodramatic. You’re a goldfish, Gil. You have a memory span of three seconds. You can’t existentialize your way out of this one.

GIL (sighs.)

I wish I could forget. I wish I could be like every other goldfish in here... mindlessly swimming, blissfully unaware. But no... instead I’m here, ranting to myself and pretending this fishbowl is a metaphor for something. Like there’s a “big picture” I’m missing. Maybe I’m just... tired...

(takes a deep breath.)

...tired of pretending this place is a world. It’s just a... a fishbowl. I’m not special. I’m just... swimming.

(GIL stares at his reflection in the glass.)

SHELLSEA “THE VOICE”

Yup. That’s it. You’re swimming. Might as well make it look good while you’re at it, right?

GIL (sighs.)

Yeah. I’ll put that on my LinkedIn profile “Living the dream... until I don’t.” I’m not sure if I’m looking for answers or just a distraction at this point. But hey, I’ll keep swimming. Because, well... What else is there to do?

SHELLSEA “THE VOICE”

Exactly. You’ll swim. And maybe, just maybe, you’ll catch a glimpse of the truth. Or a bug. Same thing, right?

(Gil stops swimming, stares out at the tiny “world” beyond the bowl. He lets out a slow, heavy sigh as the bubbles rise.)

GIL

Day 350 completed... time to clock out.

(GIL then “clocks out” and swims away.)

Scene 2: “SuShi”

Setting: A tiny, dimly lit sushi bar tucked between a laundromat and a taxidermy shop. A Neon sign flickers “SuShi Happy Hour”.

(GIL pushes the door open, a little bell jingles.  
MILO is already inside, slouched at the counter.)

SUSHI CHEF  
(Trailing off.)

Irasshaimase.

GIL (muttering.)

Yeah. Real red carpet treatment.

(MILO waves him over, almost knocking over a  
fake candle)

MILO  
(Excited, lisping.)

Gilly! Over here! I got uth a booth!

GIL  
(Joins him, slumping onto a tiny rock seat.)

Wow. A booth. Living the high life.

SHELLSEA “THE VOICE”

Psst, You hear that? Booth seating. That’s how you know you’ve peaked.

GIL (whispering.)

Shut up, not now.

(The Chef slides over a damp coral menu.)

GIL  
(Reads out loud.)

“Tonight’s Special: Goldfish Tempura. No substitutions. No refunds. No

hope.”

SHELLSEA “THE VOICE”

Spoiler, you’re the entree and the side dish.

MILO (chuckling.)

That’th what they call a “fthignature dithh.”

SHELLSEA “THE VOICE” (whispering.)

Signature dish? Yeah, it’s your signature on your own death certificate.

SUSHI CHEF

WASABI IS JUST SPICY SOAP!

(Sniffs and rubs nose.)

MILO

(In a teaseful playful tone.)

Tho, you’re theeing any lucky ladie-thees?

(He winks.)

GIL

(Annoyed and embarrassed.)

Milo, stop it! you know I’m saving myself for marriage until I find my lucky lady.

SHELLSEA “THE VOICE”

The only “Lucky Lady” is going to be the ones you look up on Fish Hub or Fishes Near Me at 2am.

MILO (sassy.)

Pfft. Lookth aren’t everything, Gil.

(Pauses.)

But if they were, I’d thtill be killin’ it.

MILO

But hey buddy, What’s wrong? You look like a guppy who just found out college ith a thcam.

GIL

Long day. Boss made me alphabetize algae samples. Again.

MILO

(Cackles, slapping the bar)

Algae alphabettthin'?!  
 (Laughs harder.)

MILO (Cont.)

That'th it, I'm callin' the union.

SUSHI CHEF (muttering.)

Miso soup is a government trick... never trust a clam that talks back.

GIL

Anyways...

(To the chef)

Do you have anything that's... I dunno... less horrifying?

SUSHI CHEF

(Stares, muttering to himself. He whispers.)

The water knows your sins...

(Awkward silence. MILO grins like it's normal.)

MILO

You ever think we're the lucky ones, Gilly? Like... like maybe we're meant to be here?

GIL

Yeah. Meant to be born, meant to suffer, meant to eat ourselves one sad little roll at a time. Real fairytale stuff.

(The Chef places two tiny plates in front of them, each has "sushi" made of multicolored pebbles and algae paste.)

SUSHI CHEF

(Quiet, to himself.)

Everything decays... even the dreams...

(He wipes the counter with a dirty piece of kelp and stares off into the middle distance.)

GIL

(Staring at the plate.)

Do you ever order dinner and feel like you're just staring into your own obituary?

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE"

No, Gil. Just you. Most fish just eat and shut up about it.

MILO (cheerfully.)

Thith is delictthiouth! It tasteth like... if hope had a flavor!(pause)Like... if hope were really thalty.

GIL (dry.)

Yeah, Milo. That's the salt of the crushed dreams. Freshly harvested this morning.

(Gil reluctantly picks up a fake piece of pebble sushi, chewing thoughtfully. He speaks to himself.)

Maybe the real secret of life is pretending it's not as dumb as it actually is.

MILO

(Sipping gross sake out of a tiny cracked cup.)

Y'know, buddy...

(Slurring slightly.)

Maybe it don't matter if ith real. Maybe it only matterth if you feel it.

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE" (mockingly.)

Aw, that's cute. Next he'll be selling you inspirational kelp posters."Hang in there!"

MILO

(Swiping at his face.)

Y'know what, Gil? We may be small. We may be... pointlethh.

(Holds up a soggy sushi roll like a trophy.)

But we are here.

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE"

Technically, you're "here" because the universe forgot to flush.

GIL (smirking.)

Nice. Motivational quotes from a guy who once got stuck in a six-pack ring for two days.

(Laughs.)

MILO

To another day of the good life!

(They clink their cups. One cup immediately cracks)

and leaks everywhere.)

GIL  
(Small, tired smile.)

To whatever this is.

(The scene fades and only the sound of bubbles and the faint buzz of the neon “SuShi” sign is heard.)

### Scene 3: “Flakes of Freedom”

Setting: Late Night, eerie lighting, The SuShi bar is closed. Everything looks warped and wrong, like a dream glitching. Gil swims alone through the empty, flickering world. The neon “SuShi” sign is now missing letters, buzzing weakly.

GIL (whispering.)  
There’s gotta be a way out.  
(Looking up.)  
There’s always... a crack. A door. Something.

SHELLSEA “THE VOICE”  
Oh sure. Just swim through the sadness hole and land right in Disneyland. Great plan.

GIL  
No. No more sarcasm. No more cheap shots.  
(Looking around.)  
You don’t get it. I can feel it. I’m close.

SHELLSEA “THE VOICE” (amused.)  
Close to what, genius? Drowning in slightly more depressing water?

(Gil spots something, a shimmering, faint line in the “sky” like a crack in glass.)

GIL (whispering.)  
There it is.  
(To himself.)  
Freedom.

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE" (laughing.)

Freedom? Gil, buddy, you're a goldfish in a novelty bowl. "Freedom" is a brand of fish flakes they sell at discount pet stores.

GIL

(Ignoring the voice.)

I just have to get through... just once... just push harder...

(Gil starts swimming hard toward the crack, faster than ever before. Water around him ripples violently.)

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE" (nervously.)

Whoa, whoa, hold up, Flipper. Let's think about this. Maybe just... chill?

GIL

(Gritting teeth.)

NO. You don't want me to get out.

(Realizing.)

You're scared. Because if I leave... you die.

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE"

(Scoffing, but shaky.)

Pfft. Please. You need me. Who's gonna narrate your failures if not me?

(Gil swims faster, smashing into the crack. It starts to spiderweb open, glowing light pours in.)

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE"

(Urgent, almost begging.)

Gil. Seriously. Without me... who are you?

(Beat.)

You're nothing but a dumb little fish flopping around pretending to matter.

GIL

THEN MAYBE I'D RATHER BE NOTHING!

(Gil slams into the crack one last time, it shatters, brilliant white light floods the whole bowl. Silence.)

Gil floats there, stunned. The tank looks the same.  
Nothing changed.)  
GIL (quietly.)

I made it?

(No response.)

GIL (softly.)

Hey...

(Looking around.)

Where's Shellsea?

(Dead silence. The Voice is gone.)

GIL

It was you or me.

(Gil's alarm suddenly goes off and Gil jolts awake.  
screaming.)

SHELLSEA "THE VOICE"

Morning, sunshine! Did you miss me? Ready to fail all over again?  
(Laughs.)

# Keep Counting

*Aren Pariyani*

Three long nights spent cruising on the outer edge of Córdoba should have filled Dario with some sense of pleasure. Popular media personality Jocian Elveric once said that “A couple days ‘n nights out ‘flourishin in the sun-sparkled ‘enviros surrounding Córdoba oughtta do any of you worn-down city folk good. Because our fair and plenty city ain’t the only sight on our beauty of a planet.” In truth, spending any time out of the city just felt worse. Too close to the rot and decay of modern urban life, but just far away enough to embolden the dream of something better.

No, the true prize was up above. “Into the stars, away from the shit,” as another, more grounded media magnate once said. Besides the worn-down spirit, the three-night bender out of town left Dario with the worst sleep he had had in months. Maybe his decision to sleep in the crusty room at his brother Marcel’s apartment wasn’t the best choice he could have made. The decrepit room was filled to the brim with stacks of boxes—their uncle’s one-time study reduced to the second greatest fire hazard in Weilen. Dario had already gone through his waking motions: clothes, a shave, the regulars. The only thing he was missing now was his datapad. Finding it meant work, and work meant spending less time in squalor.

*Allure Information Co.* was to some, the beating heart of Córdoba. To others, it was a shadow conglomerate comprising the worst of the city. Eleven years working for *Allure* and Dario still relied on his brother’s small apartment for any permanent dwelling—a hand-me-down from their late uncle where they grew up. Marcel was sitting across from him on an old office chair. The years hadn’t been kind to his brother. Thirty-seven, and the wrinkles had already consumed his countenance. Yet, Marcel would proudly regard himself as the happiest man in Córdoba.

The fact that his brother was present meant only one thing to Dario and, not long after he began his search, he was proven correct.

As he slowly spun in the rickety chair, Marcel began, “You know what your problem is, Dario? You’re always runnin’ full speed at life! You move past everything so fast you never see enough of it!” Dario ignored his brother’s lecture, instead wandering about the room searching for the

datapad. “Remember that girl you met a couple years ago? What was her name, Maria? Know she’s a doctor now? Yeah, ‘workin out of one of those colony ships. Permanent assignment, too. Real shame you ended things with her.”

Dario, hoping to end his tirade, replied, “What are you playing at, Marcel? You damn well know she left me.”

“Really? ‘Cause from what I remember it was your sorry ass who scared her off trying to get her to board that junker going off-world. Thing probably ended up in the scrap heap rather than anywhere else.”

“Why are we even talking about this? Besides, where’d you hear about this? How do you know?”

“Grapevine’s awfully long around here, Dario—especially when it’s coming off a colony ship.” Marcel swirled a finger up, “A Weilen kid blasts off this shit heap? Talk of the whole ‘fuckin town.”

As insular as Marcel’s life was, he was right, at least partially. Most of Córdoba was too preoccupied with not catching a stray bullet or being the unfortunate bystander of gang disputes. But those living in Weilen, Córdoba’s poorest district, had the wildest aspirations of all. To go from the lowest of lows to a bright future in the stars was almost like a rite of passage.

Marcel kicked one of the boxes in front of him, sending the stacks of yellowed paper fluttering onto the floor.

“Man, I just know my lot. Far as I’m concerned, sky’s an illusion. When you learn to think like that, the whole damn thing becomes clear. Like shit, man, at least put your mind to one thing. Want out of here? Do something about it, but just stop jumping from one thing to the next.” Dario gestured to Marcel’s right arm, “Mind rollin’ up your sleeve? Then try telling me all that again.”

Marcel leaned forward in the chair, the faint squeal of the old thing filled the dead air, “You know that ain’t the same, Dario. All that shit, know what I did? I left it behind.”

“Mhm. Ever think of what your ‘lot’ is? You know damn well you’re sitting on the bodies they buried when it all went down. That’s why you sit your ass in here all day,” Dario pointed out the window, “Streets still remember what that ink stood for.”

Marcel stood up from the old chair, hand on his back, and inched toward Dario, “And I remember what it cost us. So I left it all.”

“And you left everything else too,” Dario grabbed the datapad, slipped on his jacket, and started for the door. “Gotta go now. Get up off that chair a few more times, yeah? Wander around a bit, it might get your brain working some, get some original ideas floating around in there.”

He was to meet his occasional partner, Kosta, in an alleyway near the old Cranham Electric Plant. Possibly the only spot in the city that you could guarantee would be free of prying eyes. The plant had been shut down years ago, due to the toxic chemicals leaking from the sublevels. The city never took any proper actions to end the leak; it was easier to ignore it and let it seep into the rest of the city, so as to make it just another part of life in Córdoba. Most other alleyways in the city had long since become their own self-sustained, self-contained shanty towns.

At first, decades ago, the corporations fought back when the poorest residents of Córdoba took advantage of the free real estate offered by the wider roads cutting in between the high rises. But, where high rises took billions in investments and backroom deals, a shanty only needed scrap, which the city had plenty to provide. In those days, the wealthy ignored the shanties. Some even believed they found it amusing to look at the cityscape and admire the contrast.

The fastest way to the meet was through the public railway line. The windows of the old railcars were completely covered with graffiti and other scrawlings long since rendered illegible. No one ever cared to clean them. Most Córdobaans would rather look at anything but the burning skyline of their city. Be it on the morning commute or sundown return, staring at the drab metal shell or even the sullen faces that reminded them of themselves was better than the view outside. There had been a time when Dario looked at the skyline as if it were inviting him into a world where all he had to do was grab hold, but now, he was glad for the obstruction. It was easy to discount the culprits of the art display as mere vandals but, eventually, the glass and steel facade of Córdoba's oldest still operating rail line just wasn't a big enough target.

Whatever the sentiments expressed on the scratch-and-spray canvas were, they were always true, always things these people believed in. They didn't pile on after decades of living in the city like this, all of it's there from the moment you're born or unlucky enough to find yourself landing at any of the city's thirty-seven orbital landing pads. To Dario, the truth had become that nowhere else was any better for the majority.

Dario scanned his index finger over the vandalized glass, feeling the microscopic indentations in the sections scratched through with crude implements. Most of the scrawlings were typical of the graffiti seen around town: inflammatory remarks toward corporations, poorly drawn gang insignias, colorful drawings by children, and even some small, scratched-over words defending corporations.

But most common of all was the foremost sentiment in Córdoba:  
*Fuck you.*

Dario considered adding his own two-letter revolt. But what would it be about? Be it scorn for an ex-lover, the corporation that threw you out onto the streets, the streets themselves, or any other target, every day spent in Córdoba brought a new moment to spark even the smallest rebellions and, sometimes, the basic sentiments tell all. Somewhere out in the infinite reaches of the cosmos, on a pale dot, sat Córdoba's sibling. A century and a half ago, somebody gave the name a second chance; who knew if the reincarnation would last anywhere as long as its first model did?

Kosta was waiting at their arranged spot; as expected, not another soul was in sight. Kosta was dressed in his signature style, complete with ankle holsters and an assortment of pouches, traditional holsters, and other accessories strapped outside and under his heavy green jacket. His manner of dress often confused Dario.

The appeal of *Allure* was that there were no strict rules or standards to adhere to, yet Kosta was dressed and prepared for an occasion that rarely came. The high-flying mercenaries offering their services at exclusive dives around town had long since left behind small-fry work for stable, often off-world contracts, many of which necessitated preparation for violence. Factory workers at Sangura or Ollerich plants were too busy grinding out the gears of heavy machinery and their own bodies to worry about how their uniforms looked. But Kosta? His look had more in common with street gangs and other rackets based out of Weilen and other crime-ridden districts. Not exactly the look you want when jobs put you near rival factions. One wrong turn, one wrong look, and you are nothing but an extra digit on the daily crime statistics. Dario preferred to dress more conspicuously. A dark, faded synthetic-leather jacket with plenty of room and breathability was the cornerstone of his ensemble—courtesy of an old, tattered mercenary handbook he found in his youth amongst his uncle's hoard, and regarding style, it served him well. But Kosta had fourteen years on the job to Dario's eleven, perhaps blending in with the most openly vicious of Córdoba's underbelly had its benefits.

"Took you long enough. Got your 'biz here," Kosta sent the contract to Dario's datapad. Working as a pair meant one had to be the designated contract holder. Either party could amend the partnership agreement at any time, but Dario liked working with Kosta. Plus, a partner meant the occasional access to more lucrative two-person jobs.

The sing-song beep emanated from the pad, and the holo display slowly scrolled the text:

**MARKED AND EXECUTE.**

"What's wrong, D-man? Told you this day would come!" Kosta

pushed a hulking metal case out from under him toward Dario and knelt to open it, "Got your gun here."

Dario grabbed the pistol from the case. It was a Tempora 55c with a built-in biometric scanner pre-configured to only recognize Dario's fingerprint. Working for *Allure* guaranteed anonymous contracts without any overhead, except for selling out just a tiny bit of your soul. Whoever relayed the gigs for *Allure* had next to no contact with those who'd complete them; the corporation served as a middleman for those without the means to seek out their own contracts. The terms ensured that the biometric data was strictly for the protection of the contractor. As far as *Allure* was concerned, the assurances were all they needed; every would-be employee willingly gave them the authority to harvest any biometric data they wanted. Who knew where and how they actually used the data?

Dario ran his thumb over the sensor, the texture completely matched his thumb's—a firearm of unusual design rarely seen in the hands of anyone not working for *Allure*.

"Who's the mark?" Dario asked.

Kosta knelt down and sat beside the open case, "Some exec or somethin' out in Ibreus Tower."

"Really? Got me after one of them? They send mercs armed to the fuckin' teeth into those towers all the time, you sure *Allure* would send those pickings our way? "

"Well, don't think you would stick a ganger five hundred meters up and tell him 'to stay put.'"

"Fuckin-A," Dario peered to his left, and just over the crumbling remains of the Cranham plant's side buildings were the spires of the downtown metropolis' megatowers. One of those spires corresponded with Ibreus Tower, an older tower but one of the city's most exclusive, where handshakes and a round of off-world cocktails were all it took to trigger war or just the latest in a series of cost-cutting measures that would inevitably affect only the lowest of the low.

Dario knelt and grabbed the holster from the weapon's case; even the holster was custom fit to his waist. He slipped it under his jacket and let it sag to the left, just as the handbook described. "You couldn't take the job?"

"Nuh-uh. Came direct for you—someone on the inside likes you."

"Or they just really want to send me into the Viper's den."

Kosta laughed, "Shit, you ever seen a Viper? Street trash like you and me would get booted from one of those urban gardens they got up downtown."

"You know what I mean."

“Nah, man, I’m tellin’ you, got a fan. They’re even rolling out the VIP treatment,” Kosta tossed his datapad to Dario, “Check it.”

Dario flicked through the pages of the contract’s file. Brief, just like every other contract. Most of the pages were filled with the terms and conditions that every beginner erroneously agreed to. On the final page was a small, grainy image of the mark. His name was *Giraud Landry*. He was an old, balding man wearing round glasses. The only other detail he could make out was the copious amounts of cybernetic implants lining his face. The function of the implants, if there were any, was impossible to discern from the low-resolution image. The only text on the page was what Kosta had meant, to the right of the image, in large, block text:

*You are expected.*

He’d never dropped a contract once in those eleven years—four hundred and thirty-seven contracts complete—and nothing had ever held him back before. Sure, most had been simple jobs like disposals and deliveries—short, uneventful, safe work. But in the absence of any direct overseer to pat him on the back with a bonus or promotion, Dario needed something to pride himself in, and punctuality was good enough for him. The apprehension couldn’t be blamed on a lack of experience either; like any good Weilen kid, he learned to fight young. The possibility of violence was inevitable for anyone working for Allure long enough, let alone living in the city. If he’d considered it a week before, he’d have ditched the contract and let someone else have a go at it, but something about the particulars of this job poached him to the side of accepting. *Allure*, he thought, *Damn fitting name.*

“Where are you off to?” Dario asked as they left the alley.

“Delivering these burnt-out batteries to the Piranha Electric plant out on Baker Street, why?”

“Mind giving me a lift?”

“Uhh, fuck it, sure. Front passenger seat, slip those batteries into the back.” Where others would have put their earnings toward a home in a less violence-stricken neighborhood, Kosta saw the value in a set of wheels.

“Sheesh, these things reek,” Dario said as he moved the batteries to the back seats and placed the gun onto the narrow central armrest.

“Like I said, burnt-out,” Kosta gestured toward the alley, “Better the killer you smell than the killer you can’t, eh?”

As Kosta’s ride cruised out of the cramped alleyway and into the open expanse of Weilen’s lower streets, the smell of the malfunctioning batteries faded. In its place came the derelict sights of blackened skeletons of old automobiles, shuttered storefronts, and half-deserted streets—a boon for Kosta’s urge to speed through Weilen. Once they’d left the district

and the sights changed, Córdoba's more colorful buildings began to whizz by. Uniform, but with vestiges of individuality, the buildings lining a given street rarely adhered to a consistent color scheme, but even at high speeds, the blurs of the shanty towns in between them broke through the sun-soaked oranges and yellows.

At an intersection just before the bridge leading to the upper district, Kosta grabbed the gun issued to Dario. He chuckled as he studied its form, "Ever tell you about the gig I took out in San Serena? Had me one of these pieces of junk; older model though."

Dario snatched the Tempora from Kosta's hand, then pointed at the intersection. "That's the one where you waterlogged the phony imports?"

"Nah, this was a year, maybe two, before we met up. Shit, I don't know why I never told you about this one. So, a contract comes rolling in, and it's some blowhard amateur named J.T. Murphy. Word around the streets was that he and his kid bro, T.J., shot up some other amateurs. J.T. caught lead and landed in a coma, and some hustler wanted to sunset him."

Dario laughed, "Yeah, why haven't you told me this one before?" The vehicle hurled forward onto the bridge. What would have been a thirty-minute ride had transformed into a series of starts and stops.

"So," Kosta resumed, "I think this is an easy hit, intel says the back alley clinic he's at is low security, and most of his boys are picking fights elsewhere—Shit," Kosta raised his upper lip and grabbed the scar running across the side of his cheek, "Scar was so fresh then that I probably coulda waltzed in and just flashed it at anyone inside, make 'em think I was one of them."

"What happened next?"

"I took the inconspicuous route. Snuck right around and through one of the half-broken windows. It wasn't long until I was right there facing our comatose friend. Except, intel forgot to consider that T.J. may want to be by his brother's side. So here I am, face to face with the wrong Murphy, so I end up putting them both down. But if T.J. catches the bullet engraved with J.T. on it? No sweat. Maybe some sadist who gets off on that poetic shit feels a little deflated. Who cares? Look, my point is, if they're sending you into that tower with a plus one, then you better make your one shot and make it square."

"Think this is some game for them?"

"Definitely is for someone, and I don't want to know who."

By the time they reached downtown, the glass of the megatowers was bathed in the glare of the fading sun. Kosta dropped Dario off several blocks from Ibreus Tower. Walking toward the imposing structure, Dario hid

the Tempora in his jacket pocket and pulled the holster up underneath. In a display of deterrence, sadistic challenge, or both, the city's upper district inhabitants found pleasure in openly flaunting their combat capabilities. Anything from tech-enhanced bodyguards and drones to mechanized limbs to the latest in-fashion personal weaponry. But the sight of a Tempora only painted one picture: that of a baleful visit by one of the bottom dwellers come to stamp the life out of one of their own. In the lobby, the receptionist at the front desk—the only person inside—gave Dario a friendly smile.

“Do enjoy your time at Ibreus Tower,” she said.

He'd never set foot in a corporate tower, at least not past any of the dank, less-than-polished parking structures below the corporate buildings. On his way up to the forty-second level, there wasn't another soul in sight.

The door to the mark's room, 429, opened right as he reached it, as if someone were waiting for his arrival. The loft looked like any of the city's upper-class dwellings would look: sterile. Except this one looked like it had a biohazard squad comb through every nook and cranny to shatter any hint of personality that remained. Only trace hints of what was once the home of an executive suite remained. The outline of what was once a lavish kitchen and two white sofas were all that was left.

He looked over to the mark, who was standing a few meters past the door.

*Giraud Landry.*

The name didn't ring any bells, nor did the face. You didn't have to spend much time in the corporate world to understand that the danger wasn't from the faces and names plastered on high rises or holo-ads. A man like Giraud Landry, *unknown*, was where the actual threat lay. This wasn't some entry-level techie who barked up the wrong supply chain; the average worker who mucked things up this badly would have gotten a quick bullet to the brain. It was merely a statistical anomaly for the pencil pushers who would have to draft up an official termination and not even a twinkle in the eye of those who ordered their death. Just another piece of human salvage to add to the trash heap lining the city's outskirts. But this? This was different.

Uneasy with their distance, Dario moved to get a closer look at his target. The man in the grainy picture he saw just two hours ago already bore the resemblance of a corpse, and now, the man standing in front of him seemed to be somewhere beyond death. He wore a white button-down shirt with the sleeves pulled up, revealing veiny forearms with traces of purple and blue, as if his veins were expanding. Underneath the expensive slacks and the typical corporate wear was a gaunt figure that seemed to be more suspended than sustained by his faculties.

Dario slowly inserted his right arm into his pocket and pulled the Tempora out far enough to see the scanner. The light was still red. The geolocation within the firearm should have activated the sensor once he'd entered the tower, unless someone was tampering with the activation. *What were they waiting on?* Dario thought as he looked at Landry.

Compared to the bright, fluorescent lighting in the hallway, the room was growing darker with the setting sun. The shutter at the edge of the west-facing window began to close, darkening the room even more.

"Ah, I see you're giving the windows a good look-over," Landry walked over to the window as the screen opened, "Really squanders the splendor of being so high up, doesn't it?"

Far in the distance, miles away, were several of the orbital landing pads. A massive colony ship was taking off as the shutter began moving.

Landry began to follow the shutter as it closed, "Funny, isn't it? To buy into a trip to the stars only to see none at all. The holo-projection displays on all the sub-decks show nothing but advertisements and sanitized filtered views. It's for the esteemed to see the miracles of our work." Landry followed the shutter as it opened again, craning his neck upwards as the ship began to break the atmosphere, "Really, the best view is from down here, or really, up here. I'm curious, what's your take?"

Dario moved away from the window and sat on one of the sofas, "I've never been," he answered. Landry stepped away from the window and, methodically, walked toward Dario and sat on the chair across from him. Upon seeing him closely, Dario noticed the scar tissue where he'd seen cybernetics before. "Took your implants, huh?" Dario said.

Landry sighed as he scanned three fingers across his face, "Not the smallest price to pay, but you learn to feel the lack of it rather than to care for its absence. Though I will admit, the hormone regulation was a treat in a pinch."

Dario pulled out the Tempora and rested it on his lap.

Upon seeing the gun, Landry laughed, "And here I thought they would leave me with some dignity. Forty-five years I gave them," he said as he stared at the gun, "How many do you think you'll get through?"

Dario moved the gun to his side, "Doesn't it give you some comfort? Knowing what's ahead?"

Landry leaned back into the chair, taking on the appearance of a business magnate about to offer a deal to Dario. "There's an old Earth writer who wrote of soldiers gored by cannon fire, of men stabbed and bleeding out in dark, lonely forests. And they all believed until the very last moment that they'd survive by some divine or contrived miracle. That they'd be rescued. In such desperate circumstances, a man thinks whatever it

takes to keep the soul intact. But you tell a man in no uncertain terms that his life is forfeit, that on some preordained time, he'd die, then you destroy something deep, something profoundly human inside of him," Landry removed his glasses; streaks of red and white swirls obfuscated his brown irises.

*Took his ocular implants, too, Dario thought.*

"Know what I think? We've just gotten so damn good at it all that we can kickstart those dreams, those illusions, and crush them all in a single day," Landry gestured toward the door with his right arm, with the left toward the gun. His eyes remained fixed on Dario, "Do your *job*. Or do your *job*."

Underneath Landry's raised arms, Dario noticed the outline of wires running up his arm. Implants reserved for the top military brass and the wealthiest of the wealthy could sustain life in even the most dire circumstances. With a kitchen as bare and lifeless as the one in front of him and eyes so sullen that he looked like a dead man walking, Dario concluded that Giraud Landry was the lucky recipient of state-of-the-art cyberware giving him sustenance. He was probably the only person in Córdoba, maybe anywhere, *unlucky* enough to be strapped up with cyberware like that. Attempting to remain motionless, Dario eyed the sensor; the darkened room made it easy to tell: Green.

Dario raised the pistol in slow, calculated movements and pressed his thumb to the sensor. Landry remained in the same position as before, his right arm raised, head pointed directly at his specter, as if rigor mortis had set in hours too early. His eyes followed the barrel of the gun, the swirls growing as his pupils dilated. The motor underneath the fingerprint scanner vibrated, unlocking the trigger mechanism. Dario squeezed the trigger.

For a fleeting moment, the muzzle flash lit the room in an orange hue. The shutters opened, but the sun had long since disappeared below the horizon. In the dark, lifeless room, the only color left was the blood spatter staining the sterile chair on which Landry had died, a small gift of life. But Dario couldn't be sure—it was only in his mind's eye.

On the way out, the lobby receptionist once again shot Dario a friendly smile. "We hope you enjoyed your stay at Ibreus Tower, Mr. Mackenzie. Have a pleasant evening."

After exiting the building, he felt a vibration in his coat pocket. Kosta's datapad. He must have forgotten to hand it back. A second vibration, this time from his other coat pocket—his datapad. He pulled it out and read the text scrolling across the display:

**MARKED AND EXECUTE.**

Eleven years on the job, and not once did he receive the same

contract twice. He pulled Kosta's datapad out and scrolled through the terms, agreeing with each and every one.

He headed for the nearest rail station, boarded it, and sat in an empty cabin. The railcars of corporate centers and cities' upper-class districts bore no resemblance to those of Weilen.

Through the pristine windows in front of him, Dario watched as a massive colony ship descended toward the city, bringing thousands of new arrivals and replacements for the departed of cities most cutthroat. Maybe Giraud Landry's replacement, too.

The railcar whirled into motion, descending up the vine back toward the hell that was Weilen. Dario let the inert firearm sag into the holster and pulled out his datapad. The pillars of fire and smoke around the colony ship dissipated and the floodlights powered on; the glow reached all the way into the railcar.

As he agreed to the terms on his end, the dead man's words rang in his head. The first shot had counted, the second was waiting in the barrel. He swiped across the final term and tossed the datapad aside. Perhaps his life was already forfeit.

# Faith

*Sean Ahern*

I know a scar  
misspelled on the wrist  
the wrong direction  
laughing till the road is spit across the back of the stars  
jutting loose like words afraid to taste themselves as they  
evaporate into dreams,  
sweet and frail and never meant to exist.  
I know a man with his fist deep  
into the atomic remains of God's chest  
reaching to hold the idea of a heart  
but won't ever know the shape.  
Only that his fingers have tried to find it.

# **Nubes de Mermalda (Clouds of Marmalade)**

*Damián Jaime Galván*

Espero mi juicio  
entre la multitud  
de nubes  
empujadas por el sol.  
Siento una  
suave brisa de  
esta oscuridad  
lavanda,  
uno que me  
advierte de esta  
radiante sonrisa  
de esperanza.  
Un tempo  
construido  
sobre una  
presión índigo;  
sonidos de una  
tierra azul  
entrando por  
mi ventana.  
Eres parte de todo  
lo que está por  
venir bajo esta  
tarde de mermelada.

I await my judgement  
amongst the multitude  
of clouds  
pushed by the sun.  
I feel  
a soft breeze from  
this lavender  
darkness,  
one that warns me  
of this radiant  
smile of hope.  
A rhythm  
constructed  
over an  
indigo pressure;  
sounds of a  
blue earth  
entering through  
my window.  
You are a part  
of everything that  
is to come  
underneath this  
marmalade afternoon.

# MA SŒUR DES TOURESOLS: Le Jardin de Monet À Vétheuil, Claude Monet, 1881

*Emma Sterling*

A child skips straight through the sun  
And sips June days like lemonade  
Beneath the yellow nodding heads  
That sprawl their dappled shadows wide  
The leaves fan out in earnest  
Always growing, ever curious  
And burst and blossom in the light  
Much like their newfound human friend  
Far gone are cottage comforts  
Traded for the garden's transience  
I'm there if you know where to look  
I haunt the stairs a world away  
When I say "don't forget me,"  
What I really mean is "don't grow up  
And roam so far that I misplace  
Your bobbing head among the blooms  
Don't let the summer pale me  
Into somber sun-bleached memory  
And usher in the winter wind  
To whisper icy cold farewells  
How strange to find my outlook  
Now obstructed by these slanting stems  
Their browning heads encroaching  
As they wilt their colors clean away  
How strange to dally on the path  
While you go frolicking ahead

How strange to be my sister's keeper  
Separated garden-wide  
How strange to see this woman  
Sprouting from the seedling I once knew  
The you I loved when you were still  
No bigger than a gleaming pearl."

# **bundled and bound by limbs and hope**

*Lauren Baljian*

A breath,  
your lips move slow;  
warmth lands on my cheek,  
your hand on my head, fingers in hair.

I melt,  
body melding into yours.  
I don't mind being consumed by you  
bundled and bound by limbs and hope.

Keep still,  
my beating heart withers in your open palms;  
it pulsates in sync with your  
fingers plucking its strings.

It hums are low,  
like the booming voice of God.  
It's enough to shatter existence  
just as you have mine.

A breath,  
a kiss, a slow refrain,  
keep still and  
keep me close.

*Balijian*

# Worlds Between Worlds

*J. Max Levin*

The wet sound of rubber soles slapping against concrete echoed through the old, rancid tunnel. Abigail's clothes were soaked right through to the bone from thrashing about the shallow waterway. Dark sneakers, plain jeans made of Future Forward PseuDenim™, a torn white T-shirt, and a thin jacket made of worn polyester armored her against the dank, stale air. Cold sweat and fear poured down her face, framing her brown eyes and welding her short brown hair to her face and nape. The acrid scent of raw sewage mixed together with the stench of the black mold and rot that dotted the tunnel's walls, forming a colorful cocktail of nauseating filth. Ancient, leaky pipes and wires stripped bare of insulation ran down the hole in either direction along the cracked concrete coated by the dim, dolorous, incandescent lighting. She'd been running so hard for so long, she felt as though her legs were about to give out underneath her. Her lungs were on fire and her head pounded with tension, but some primitive need to survive drove her forward. Abigail shut her eyes tight and tried to swallow her panic, but the tears leaked through her eyelids like a sieve. The sound of her pursuers followed close behind. *Splash, splash.* The jackboots plowed through the aged water duct, at least three separate pairs. *Splash, splash. Splash, splash.* Abigail's eyes flew open, bloodshot and wet from sobbing. She wanted to pause to catch her breath. She was so tired. Instinct whispered in her mind.

Don't stop. Run.

Her inner animal was right. If she stopped moving, if she failed to ignore it all—the pain, the terror, the cramping in her legs, the burning in her abdomen, her heart beating like a drum—she would die. Up ahead, Abigail spotted a four-way intersection. The tunnel continued forward with a pathway leading off to her left and an alcove on the other side. The alcove was a few meters deep and hosted a collection of unidentifiable electrical equipment, most of it caked in flaking scabs of corrosion. Carefully, Abigail pulled off a shoe and set it on the ground at the front of the crossways, then nestled her small, skinny body into the space between one of the

electrical transformers and the wall, trying her best to crouch behind it and stay out of sight. The sound ceased momentarily as the jackboots stopped at the intersection. One spoke in a muffled voice, barely audible to her through their helmet.

“Lost visual on target.”

Abigail’s throat tightened; her heartbeat pounded in her ears so loudly she thought it might give her away. The air felt thick, like she was breathing through water. She heard a short crackle—like someone stepping on a day-old potato chip—softly shudder against the trooper’s ear. Every sound was sharp and jagged, cutting through her thoughts like broken glass.

“Affirmative.”

The troopers continued forward in the direction indicated by the shoe, and Abigail caught a glimpse of one of her pursuers from behind. She couldn’t tell whether the trooper was a man or a woman, old or young, because they were covered head to toe in a suit of black polyaramid armor with hard ceramic plates over their torso, thighs, calves, shoulders and forearms. A gas mask was built into the helmet, the beady goggles radiating a soft, infernal red glow through the built-in light amplifiers. The back of the armor was emblazoned with three white capital letters: *MRD*. *MRD*; Mutant Retrieval Division. *Retrieval*. She’d never actually heard of anyone being “retrieved.” The Federation government had a zero-tolerance policy toward mutant fugitives and usually marked them for disposal regardless of the circumstances.

Abigail cowered as she watched them leave. Once the coast was clear, she stepped out from behind the transformer, reached up and rubbed the nub that remained of the horn that stuck out of the right side of her head. It was wrapped in bloody gauze and tape, excruciating to the touch. It looked like an antelope’s horn, once stuck out from her head at a slight curve by over a foot. What remained was roughly the length of someone’s finger. Lingering voices echoed in the back of her mind: unpleasant memories angry that she’d ignored them.

“Abbie! Abby the abbie!”

“Genefucked freak!”

There was no going back now, and Abigail wasn’t sure she wanted to either. At first, she thought she’d be able to get away. Maybe they wouldn’t know who did it, maybe they wouldn’t believe she did it, maybe she could just slip into one of the world’s many bulging throngs of humanity and disappear. She was wrong. That much had become clear as soon as she saw her face on the news. She was a fugitive now. The only way to safety was down, inward, further into the lawless, dilapidated guts of the shell world that had long been forgotten by polite society.

The squelching sound of soaked footsteps trailed off into the distance, the echoes fading away. Finally, she could breathe a little. Abigail grabbed her shoe and shoved it onto her foot, then headed down the path across from the alcove, away from the MRD troopers. She moved slower now, walking to keep the noise down. There was no map of these old ancillary sublevels. How was she supposed to know where to go? The closer to the world's surface she was, the more danger she was in. A place where no one would find her—that's what she was looking for. The further down the waterway she went, the wider the tunnel became until it eventually opened outwards completely into an enormous reservoir. It was so big she could barely see across to the other side. The sewage trickled down a ramp with a grated staircase next to it and emptied into the artificial basin. Abigail walked down the steps and onto the catwalk that crisscrossed the room. Up above the reservoir the horrid stink lightened up a bit, and she could tell from the color of the water below that it was treated. *Thank God.* When she made it to the far end of the treatment chamber, she found another ramp leading downward. There were open sluice gates made of corrugated metal in front of each ramp that looked like they hadn't been operated in years, which gave her hope that the area was less monitored than the sewer sublevel above it. Abigail followed the catwalk, went down the steps on the other side and kept going. Down, she went, past spillways and adjunct tunnels, maintenance rooms and more arcane machinery. How long was it now? It was impossible to be sure—she lacked a clock after ditching her pocket computer. She did know something though; everything hurt, and she was getting tired and hungry. Her pace slowed as exhaustion began overtaking her, and after a while, she slumped against the nearest wall, curled up and passed out, too tired now for more tears.

Abigail woke up to the sound of someone talking. She immediately felt the throbbing pain in her once-horn return, the pangs of hunger in her gut. Who was talking? As her consciousness returned, the sound became clearer, and she realized that there were two voices talking in turn.

“Man, ain't nobody gon' buy a mutie. It's too much of a pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, but I bet they'd buy a mutie's goop. Tell 'em it'll make 'em psychics and they'll pay top cred, I'm sure.”

“Good point!”

Abigail's eyes opened slowly to the terrifying vision of a pair of mutilated cyborgs. One of them grinned toothily, the other glowered with his arms crossed. Their bodies were covered in mismatched prosthetics, many of which had clearly belonged to someone else once. They were covered in surgical scars, mostly self-inflicted, and what unmarred flesh they did have looked a sickly yellow-green from countless past contusions, infections

and mistreatment. One of them was larger than the other, with a huge red eyepiece that curled around his bald head from the side. The other was scrawny, with wild, stringy hair, but the numerous spikes protruding from his body made him just as imposing. They were both dressed in patchwork leather jackets and jeans that were in dire need of mending.

Abigail used to hear about people like this on the news, and they were popular villains on holovision. Scumps, they were called, people who specialized in trading all sorts of organs, whether internal or external, made of flesh or made of steel and polymer. She had no idea where the word came from, but it stuck well enough. The grotesque sound of it aptly conveyed the revulsion she felt at the sight of them. Never in her wildest dreams did she think she'd ever meet a real one. Goosebumps spread across her body as Abigail realized the depth of the shit she was in.

"She's awake!" The smaller one yelled in excitement.

"Keep it the fuck down, moron. It's a tunnel. It echoes. You want him to find us?" The larger of the two Scumps snapped at his companion. Abigail wanted to scream, but it stopped itself in her throat, escaping as a quiet, terrified yelp.

"Please... Just leave me alone. I'll go away. I'll hide. You'll never see me again!" Abigail begged and pleaded in fear as tears began to well up in her eyes.

"Afraid that's not gonna happen, sweetie. Now get the hell up. You're coming with us and you best keep any more whining inside before I shove it down your gullet, fucking mutie." He reached down and wrapped his hand around the grip of a pistol stuck out from his waistband, drawing it with an emphatic flourish. It was a conventional handgun, that much Abigail could guess—it was easy and legal to obtain reproduction firearms on most of the shell layers. Military-grade weapons were so tightly controlled, even the police didn't have access to them; too many instances of theft and loss. It didn't matter, a solid slug of lead nearly half an inch across was more than enough to put her out of her misery. It didn't feel fair. So, she had a horn—so what? These assholes were far more grotesque than she was, so why did everyone see her as beneath even them?

Abigail stood up and complied in resignation. What else was there for her to do? Whatever it was that she'd done to those people before, it wasn't something she knew how to do again. It was an accident, something that just happened. Things would have been much easier for her otherwise. She walked in between them, constantly on edge, constantly aware of the gun looming behind her. The Scumps laughed and chatted with each other as they led her away.

"Lucky us, huh? Payday's gonna buy me a new hand!" The scrawnier

Scump held up his metal hands and flexed them. One of them, Abigail noticed, had been damaged by oxidation and was starting to fall apart, while the other appeared a size too big for his arm. The other Scump hissed angrily.

“Didn’t I tell you to shut the fuck up? Keep your voice down, dumbass.”

“Yeah, whatever, dad. Gonna tell me to brush my teeth, too?”

The bigger Scump rolled his one organic eye and growled.

“Are you trying to lead that bastard straight to us? Quit your yammering or I’ll fucking kill you.”

The scrawny one quieted down after that. Abigail wondered if some of those bruises they wore had been left by each other. Through the tunnels and across the causeways, Abigail followed her captors. The narrow passages were laid out like a maze. They reached the edge of one of the cyclopean supporting structures that held up the planetary layers above. Crossing over from the sewers into a neighboring adjunct, Abigail found herself somewhere unrecognizable. The new tunnel was much wider, at least 30 meters across. It was a perfect cylinder, dry on the inside, and smelled slightly of ozone. The lights inside were brighter than those in the sewers, but many of them were flickering, dimming or plain broken.

As the door opened, a rush of air blasted through the doorway and nearly knocked Abigail off her feet. Inside, a powerful, constant gust of wind came from one side of the tunnel. It chilled her to the bone and was so loud she couldn’t hear herself think. The larger Scump grabbed her by the arm and pulled her along in the same direction the air was flowing. Then they walked in silence, unable to hear each other speak over the howl of the air. They walked for so long that Abigail noticed once more the pain in her shattered horn and muscles, her hunger, her thirst, and her slowly dying adrenaline. Keeping herself distracted by staying in her head was all she could do, thinking about happier times, like when Mom was still around. Keeping ahold of thoughts of pleasant memories was impossible, and no matter how many times she tried to turn her mind away, she was always pulled back to the day her mother disappeared. One of Mom’s friends—Kieva something-or-other, Abigail couldn’t remember her surname—had dropped Abigail off at a private orphanage called “Edenbridge Youth Sanctuary” around a month before she was to enter secondary school without any warning. Abigail cried for her mom, but nobody could tell her anything except that what happened was what her mother wanted. It always seemed impossible to her.

The orphanage itself had been ordinary enough: mostly mundane, with the occasional moments of neglect or discrimination over her

mutation. Usually, it was the other kids that did it, not the staffers. Abigail realized that none of the thoughts she was having were helping. She sniffled and held back tears at the thought that she'd never see her mother again. Her heart crawled up and caught itself in her throat. Mom was the only one who ever cared for her, ever treated her like the child she was, ever saw her for who she was instead of what she was. She was the only person who had ever loved her, and now she was gone. Forever.

As the three of them walked, the sound of the gust grew fainter and fainter, until it eventually died down to a whisper, and then—nothing. Abigail spent the entire walk looking for opportunities to make a run for it, but there was nowhere to run to. The entire path was one long, straight tunnel with no turns or corners. All the openings along the sides were closed up tight when the supporting structure was not lined up with the tunnels around it, and even when they were open, she was too afraid to try. What if she failed? What if they got angry?

At last, Abigail saw an exit on the horizon. It was an opening into an enormous wide-open chamber. The closer they got, the clearer it became, until they reached its border. The perimeter of the room was dark and drearily lit, with only a few sparse fixtures along the walls. It stretched vertically so far that Abigail could see neither the top or the bottom. There was a pillar in the center that looked like an axle, and she saw enormous fans the size of houses when she looked along the shaft. There was a catwalk with a grated floor surrounding the pillar, with bridges leading off in all four cardinal directions. Both above and below, there were identical catwalks for story after story. It became clear that they were trekking through one of the shell world's mammoth-sized ventilation systems, but the shaft they'd come to was old and decrepit, the axle broken and still. The Scumps began to lead Abigail across, and the larger one addressed his companion.

"Think it's close enough?"

"Yeah! Fuck it, man. Freezer's ten minutes away, let's just do it here. No way that guy's still tailing us."

"Good, 'cause I'm getting sick of this bullshit. I ain't no fucking nanny," the big guy said.

Abigail felt a sharp tug as the Scump pulled her toward the center of the catwalk, then shoved her against the axle in the center.

"Ow! Stop! That hurts!"

Abigail protested loudly, but the Scumps acted as though they couldn't hear her. His hands found their way to her shoulders and shoved her down towards the floor onto her knees. There was a sharp smack as one of them kicked her in the head, and she fell sideways, rolling in pain.

She heard the sound of a pistol's slide being racked; a bullet loaded into the chamber. Turning to face her assailants, Abigail was greeted by its barrel. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly – squeezed out the fear. It trailed down her cheeks. This was it—the end. Time to die.

BOOM!

The sound was so deafening it made Abigail's ears burn. A shrill, high pitched ringing overwhelmed her senses and reverberated through her head as though it were echoing in the hollows of her ears. Something warm and wet splashed across her face and chest. She instinctively reached her hands up to her head, clutching her ears.

BOOM!

Another gunshot echoed through the chamber, and Abigail felt the catwalk shake as something tumbled over and thumped onto the floor. Trembling with dread and uncertainty, she reached up to wipe whatever it was off of her face so she could open her eyes. A shrill scream flew out of her mouth when she saw the aftermath. The smaller of the two Scumps—who had held the gun to her head—was lying in a heap with most of his head gone. Bits of shattered bone and brain-matter littered the floor around the corpse, coating the grating a deep, shiny, curb-side red. The piecemeal remains of some metal neural implant in his head had been scattered everywhere, some caught on sticky splotches of dark blood that pooled all over his shirt. The larger one was several feet away with a hole in his torso the size of a melon. Shards of metal and circuitry were strewn across the catwalk behind him and what little remained of his viscera had spilled out to the side of his body, some of the smaller chunks sliding through the holes in the floor.

Still deafened, Abigail jumped to her feet in confusion. *Did it happen again? But a pistol can't do this, can it?* Her question answered itself a few moments later as a man strode into view from behind her. He was tall and slender with an ochre complexion, disheveled black hair and a poorly-groomed beard. His thick, green jacket and tattered chinos looked secondhand, and he was covered in grease and grime. An enormous handgun with a barrel like a brick swung on a holster at his hip. It was a C-Charger, a type of advanced firearm made entirely of high-tech poly-fiber capable of withstanding incredible pressure, and rarely seen within the shell world. They fired an explosive charge internally that blasted through a copper cap, which ejected from the barrel at such speed, it was reduced to a spear of molten metal that bored through solid material like a paper hole-puncher. Upon impact with something squishy and wet, like a human body, the lance exploded from sudden, high-pressure vaporization. The man walked straight past Abigail and approached the body of the smaller Scump. Though it was hard to hear, Abigail could make out his

words by looking at his lips as he reached down and took the fresher of the cadaver's two mechanical hands in his own flesh-and-blood grip.

"This ain't yours, asshole."

# Apple Gospel

*Megan DeFrancesca*

## **Draw An Apple!**

Not like that  
you've drawn it  
Wrong  
Let me show you  
how

## **First**

Find an apple  
pick it up  
Turn it over and see  
the way the light hits it  
Hold it  
in your eye the way  
Eve did and  
release it

## **Now**

Forget the apple

## **Next**

Draw a circle  
not like that  
Rounder  
you're doing it  
Wrong

make it red  
Because  
apples are

**Then**

Draw a leaf  
there is a  
Leaf  
have you not  
Seen the leaf?  
have you not  
Been looking?  
there is always a  
Leaf

**Keep Going**

you've done it  
Wrong

**Try Again**

with less  
Bruises

**Are You Done?**

Everyone  
is done  
They understand  
but not  
You

**Finally**

It's ready for the

*Desirancesca*

orchard  
Hang it among  
the rest  
You've drawn  
an apple

**Now**  
Forget the  
taste



**\$crap\$ II**  
***Veronica Gutierrez***

*Scrap\$ II* is originally an acrylic painting on canvas sized 18" x 24".



Heaven-Sent Charter Corporation  
Zepher-Highliner-Aircraft-081104  
Tele-My-Graph HSCC-081104-BR



**TO:** Our Beloved and respected workers  
**FROM:** The Department of Biological Resources

**DATE:** 13-40-25789  
**SUBJECT:** Procedural Memo

A Reminder: Do Not Play Action Hero - No Matter How Loud the Screams Sound

The Heaven-sent Charter Corporation is commemorating its centennial with a once-in-a-century celebration. As always the on-hand staff is expected to cooperate in the company's goal of ensuring guests the luxurious dream vacation amongst the clouds of Paxon-Orion.

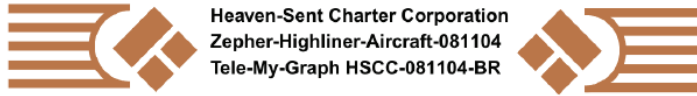
The Zeph Highliner Airship is a veritable mountain of engineering. As such some performance concerns have been reported to upper management. So a few guidelines have been posted.

#### **Revised Hard-Air Pistol Regulations**

The Standard Maxie-action Steam Revolver included in waitstaff uniforms are intended for the use of protecting company assets. Not for the use of personal matters or concerns. The Steam Revolvers are especially not intended for the use of extermination. Experts agree the Ravenous Splinter-Wing infestation currently poses no threat to guest safety or experience quality.

#### **Policy rules and Guidelines**

1. *Do Not Attempt Rescue of Missing Waitstaff.* The Zeph Highliners' lower halls have been known to hold an echo *that* can travel for up to several minutes and through several Corridors. If you hear any concerning sounds chances are it is already too late to change anything. *Instead, head to the nearest designated leader and ask for a reassignment to a different part of the ship.*
2. *Do Not Engage with Splinter-Wings.* If a Splinter-Wing is Identified It is advised to do anything possible to escape the situation. Staff are discouraged from using any means at their disposal which could harm the creatures as their corrosive blood could cause devastating damage to company architecture.



#### Questions and Answers

##### What Will Happen to Employees Who Disobey These Guidelines?

Depending on the severity of the violation staff could face punishments such as reduced compensation, diminished priority at the cafeteria, repurposing of personal goods, and temporary suspension of license to operate Tinker-matronic limbs or limb substitutes.

##### Who Decides What Corrective Incentives Are Deployed Against Rule Violators

That is up to the current on-duty line supervisor's discretion. We trust that the unique almost family-like bond held between low tier workers and their immediate bosses will give the line supervisor the necessary insight to know how much corrective incentive is necessary to correct unproductive performance.

##### Reminders:

- Once-in-a-lifetime memories are irreplaceable but limbs can be replaced!
- Chell Quo our valued worker was found dead yesterday of natural causes the autopsy will be held tomorrow, more details to come.
- Dolly Prioxi- is holding a memorial service during Lunch period 3. Dolly wrote "I hope you fly high and far away"
- The Heaven-sent Charter Corporation, Heaven-sent Staff Housing, and Retail Division, and the Tinker-matronic Assembly Group would all like to thank you for your continued hard work and perseverance!

# **Memo for Stratonauts**

## ***Gerica Cuevas***

# A Bloody Kiss

*Camryn Smart*

Love is a living, breathing thing.  
It hurts more than anything else.  
It cuts open your chest and flays your ribs like a cadaver in a lab—cold to the touch.  
But that's not even the part that hurts.  
What hurts is when it picks up your heart and leaves a soft, bloody kiss.  
It's still beating, but barely.  
It beats only for love now. Only on its word. On its command. On the touch of its lips.  
It places your ribs back in their rightful place and stitches up your chest. Carefully. So so so carefully.  
But it's empty beneath the freshly sewn skin and the blood and the cracked ribs.  
It still has your heart in its warm hands and that's when you realize.  
You'll never have control over your beating heart again. The blood in your veins turns thick and solid. Your lungs turn black and harden.  
You stare down at your empty chest and you look love right in the face, and you know the pain has only just begun.

# Rain Dance

*Damián Jaime Galván*

Speak up!  
So that the scribe  
may feel your  
breath upon  
their frozen marker.  
In here, every sway  
covers the floor,  
where our feet  
squeak with  
each lyrical lie,  
thinking that we  
have to  
belong here.  
Where else can  
we go before someone  
thinks of  
keeping  
the lights on?  
Each spear dies  
without hearing  
a woman's plea  
and bargain.  
Spill it out!  
and we will  
slip across the  
floor with its  
mess underneath  
our soles.

# All Humans Bleed the Same Blood; Why Don't You?

## *Nebula*

(Trigger Warnings: Death of an animal, gore, blood and anxiety attack)

According to a website aptly named [Lobsteranywhere.com](http://Lobsteranywhere.com): “When exposed to oxygen, either through injury or during cooking, lobster blood undergoes a dramatic transformation. The hemocyanin reacts with the oxygen, turning the blood a light blue color.” The most important part of this reference is that lobster blood. . . is *blue*.

He'd had a fear of blood for a long time now. Hematophobia. He first realized it when his brother Cooper scraped his knee while they were playing. They had gotten too rough, a game taken too far maybe. Playing on asphalt instead of carpet wasn't a wise decision, but they were children. Cooper tripped and fell after a particularly hard parry with the sticks they were using as swords. Cooper didn't even cry as he fell to the floor and scraped up his little knee. And what did he do? He froze. Like a coward. Not because he was afraid he would get in trouble, but because the reddened knee stood in contrast to the honey brown of his complexion. One pearl of blood was enough to make him feel like he would faint. His vision blurred, his senses dulled and suddenly it was his younger brother crying out for his parents to treat *him*—the kid who was fine, instead of the child with the scraped knee. Cooper didn't understand. He didn't either, but fear was something to be controlled. You can't be a chef without it. Control.

It's what he was doing as he stared at the lobster in front of him. Gaining control. He'd been doing this for years now, cutting up different pieces of meat to prepare them in various ways. It was commonplace. His hematophobia only bothered him when he was dealing with an extremely juicy piece of meat, the juices oozed out so similarly to blood as he would

cut. Reminding him at one point that the meat he was cutting into—pork, chicken, beef, lamb, fish—was at one point alive. Breathing. Full of blood.

He would hold his knife in those moments, count his breathing until his heart rate finally stopped plummeting to the floor. He got exceptionally good at not thinking about the meat he was cutting. Ironic, given how he was praised for his knife cutting skills.

He shouldn't have been thinking about that though. He should have been focusing on the lobster in front of him—the live lobster with its pincers bound shut by a rubber band—the antenna on its face still wriggling. He needed to kill it. Should have killed it ages ago.

This was his last order for this shift. All he had to do was kill the lobster. Something he had done a million times, but his blade was dull and he was exhausted, so he broke his rule of not looking at the piece of meat in front of him.

He made the mistake of looking the crustacean in the eyes.

He needed to kill it.

So he did.

It was sloppy. The cut was bad and his hand was shaking, even as he switched out the dull knife for a proper one. Something was wrong with him today. It was the only thing that made sense. By some miracle, he was looking at blood and he didn't feel like fainting. He was looking at blood and wasn't intimately aware of his own heart beat in his chest. The lobster head, cut off but not yet pushed to the side, was leaking blue blood everywhere. **Blue**. Someone was yelling at him to hurry up. Everyone wanted to go home and he should have finished this ages ago, but there was more blood than there maybe should have been, except he was a grown man who didn't know how much blood should spill out of a lobster and ooze onto the cutting board when he killed it because he'd never looked before. So, there was that.

His finger stung too, which was bothersome and annoying, but that was a thought that could be put aside. Like the way he was marveling at the blue blood. Because blood was red. Wasn't it? Normal blood? He dragged a finger through the blue blood, morbidly curious. He turned the severed head of the lobster back towards him—even knowing the creature was dead—he needed something else to see. The blood was blue and he wasn't close to fainting. He shook himself out of his stupor as the yelling got louder in volume, going about the rest of the mindless process and preparing the lobster to be served. It truly was such a bloody mess. He would need a mop with how much this lobster was bleeding. Did lobsters even have that much blood in their bodies?

When the dish was served, the waitress gave pause. He could tell

she was also looking at the mess of the kitchen. So much blood. So much blood, but the kitchen was closed now, so he could deal with it. As well as his hand—the hand that was hurting. The hand that was hurting like he maybe did something foolish that also went against his code. Like **cut** it. Whole body shaking. Breath stilted. He moved quickly through the kitchen space towards the pantry. He squeezed his left wrist in a vain attempt to stop the flow. If he didn't look at it, there was no way it was real. No way it was bleeding onto the floor. No way for a few drips to make him faint like a loser with a condition. Like when he nearly fainted in front of Cooper, when his parents should have been paying attention to his brother instead of him. His breathing wasn't calming. He was hyperventilating. He was dizzy, he was shaking. Was he breathing? Was his wretched blood-filled heart beating? There was so much blood. Why did he have to bleed?

He fell into the pantry wall, rattling the contents on the shelves. Hitting the wall with his left hand only made the wound hurt more. They were about to have a safety hazard on their hands. Him and his issues. Him and the blood. The fucking blood. So red.

He swallowed down everything, clutched his hand and left the pantry to run it under the water like a grown man. **Blue**. His erratic heart beat calmed. Blue? The lobster had blue blood. The lobster was bleeding everywhere. The lobster.

He poked at the wound. Squeezed it and watched it drip blue. **Blue**. He pulled at the loose skin, only wincing slightly as it pulsed and hurt. He watched the pad of his finger go past the knuckle of his thumb, becoming even more loose skin. He should've been disgusted—if not because of his hematophobia then because of his own sense of self-preservation—but as he pulled back the skin and as his heart began to race out of curiosity instead of fear, the pain numbed. Blue. Blue. **Blue**. The clear water kept turning the blue lighter and lighter, but with an endless stream to keep it blue it never ran truly clear. He grabbed a knife from the skink, ignoring the hygiene issues and used it to hack away at the flesh. The dull knife from before. Blue, blue, blue, blue, **blue!** Human blood was red. He had hematophobia. He should be fainting right now. There was so much blood. He hacked away with the knife on his arm. Curious. So curious. More blood. More blue. It would be a horror movie were it not for the coloring being wrong.

Something was clogging the sink. It was overflowing, the bluish water was spilling onto the ground. He was getting yelled at again—alarm and fear in the tone. What a ghastly scene he had probably made. Or was it? Humans had red blood, but lobsters had blue. Blue. Blue. Blue Blue Blue blue blue blue blue blue blue. He wasn't fainting.

The cuts were stinging, his heart was slowing, people were screaming.

Red. Something was red. He fainted, his head hitting the floor as he saw blue.

# The Fountain of Youth

*Diego Molina*

*(A boy and his mother watch the late-night news.)*

NEWS ANCHOR

This just in. A brand-new type of liquid has just been discovered on the moon. Scientist say it carries all the same benefits of water, but with the added benefit of living forever. This miracle water is being call Water 2 by many.

BOY

Mommy? Are we going to live forever?

MOTHER

Oh baby. I don't think they're going to release Water 2 to the public.

BOY

Does that mean we are going to die?

MOTHER

Baby... you don't have to worry about that just now. You have your whole life ahead of you.

BOY

Okaaay.

MOTHER

Now go brush your teeth and get ready for bed.

BOY

Okay mommy.

NEWS ANCHOR

Jeff Bezos has claimed the rights to sell Water 2 on Amazon at the low low price of \$10 a bottle.

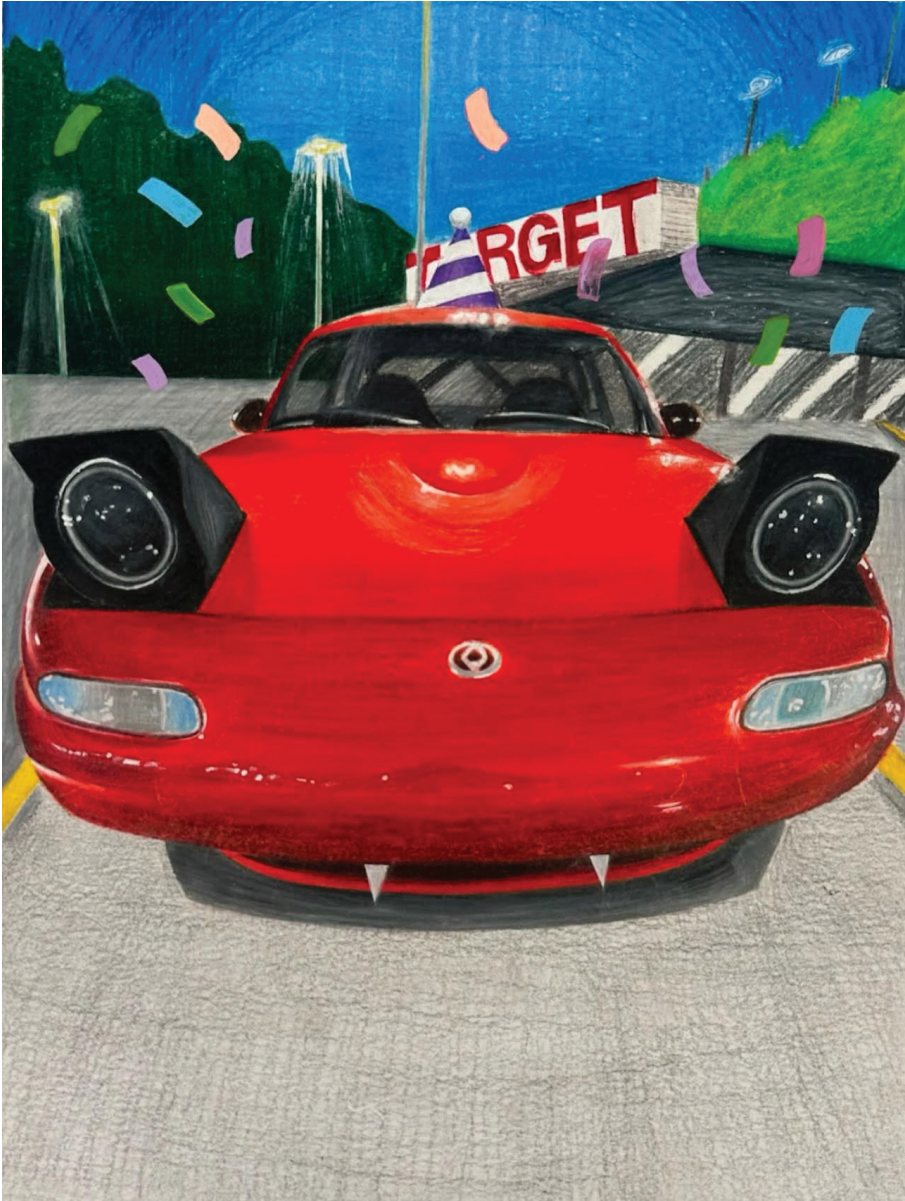
(110,030 years later. The same boy and mother watch the galactic late-night news)

NEWS ANCHOR

This just in. A brand-new type of liquid has just been discovered on Glorb E-728. Scientists say it carries all the same benefits of water but with the added benefit of death. This miracle water is being called Water 3 by many.

MOTHER & SON (together.)

Oh, fuckin' finally!



**Red Car**  
*Stacy Cruz*



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# About the Design

This edition of the *Northridge Review* utilizes three font families: Ohno Blazeface, Ohno Fatface, and Inclusive Sans.

Ohno Fatface and Ohno Blazeface—type families created by James Edmondson for OH no Type Company—were used for the headers, titles, and author names. The titles and headers are all in Ohno Fatface 12 Pt, while the title page is in Ohno Fatface 60 Pt. All author and artist attributions are in Ohno Blazeface 12 Pt Italic.

Inclusive Sans—a type family with 10 faces designed by Olivia King for Google Fonts—was used for the body of the text in Regular and Italic, and for the page numbers throughout the volume in Medium.

This book layout was designed by the editorial team and compiled and formatted by Saige Boddy and Grace Muller.

# About the Cover

The cover concept of this issue was designed by the Spring '26 Executive Team of *Northridge Review*. The original cyanotypes were created by the Spring '26 Editorial Team.

The cover was compiled and collaged by Grace Muller.





**SPRING**  
**NR 26**