

SCARLET REVIEW

Volume II

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the second issue of Scarlet Review! This collection showcases and commemorates the works of fiction, poetry, drama, and art, curated by Sigma Tau Delta Iota Chi members at California State University, Northridge.

This collection features works from all over the world, bridged together by the vital art of literary expression, each with their own unique perspective and integration of identity.

In line with our previous collection, we celebrate the influence of the Wooden Snake, formed into an Ouroboros to represent longevity, eternity, opportunity, and renewal. We hope that this energy is evocative and inspiring to all of our readers, regardless of background or influence.

Once again, we extend our gratitude to our contributors, editors, and readers. Your voices are the heart and soul of Scarlet Review, and we're honored to embark on this adventure with you.

Thank you for joining us once more.

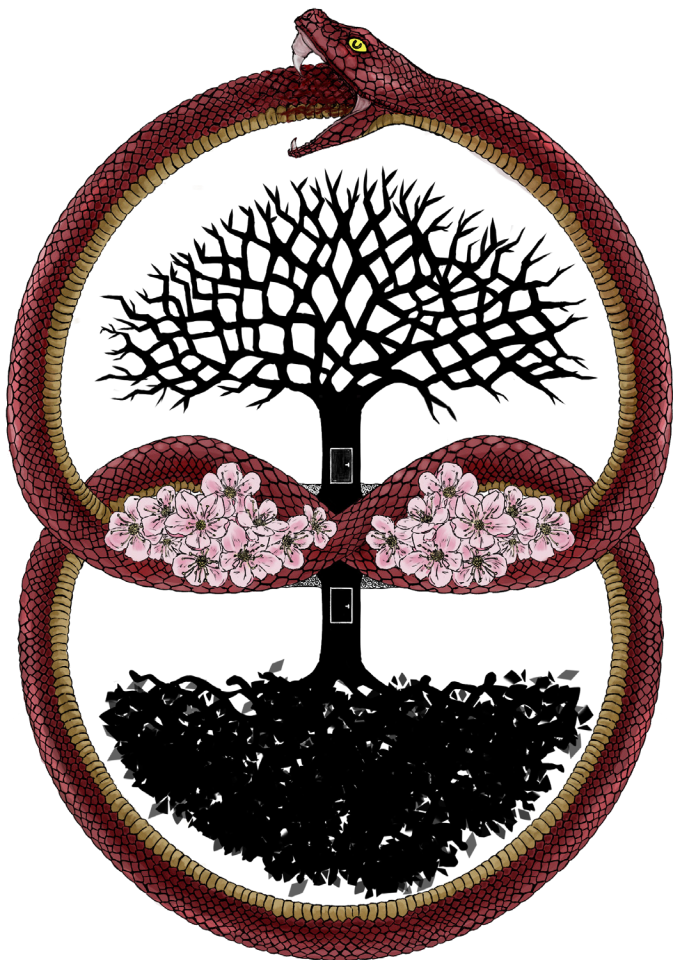
Best regards,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The first signature, on the left, is 'Ismael' followed by a stylized 'D' and 'S'. The second signature, on the right, is 'SAM' followed by a stylized 'G' and 'A'.

Ismael & Sam
Editor-In-Chief
Scarlet Review

SCARLET REVIEW

Volume II





MAKANI HO'OKELE

We return to where the land greets the sky,
on these gentle slopes where the ohi'a blossoms weep,
and the winds carry whispered chants of old,
singing our ancestors' home.

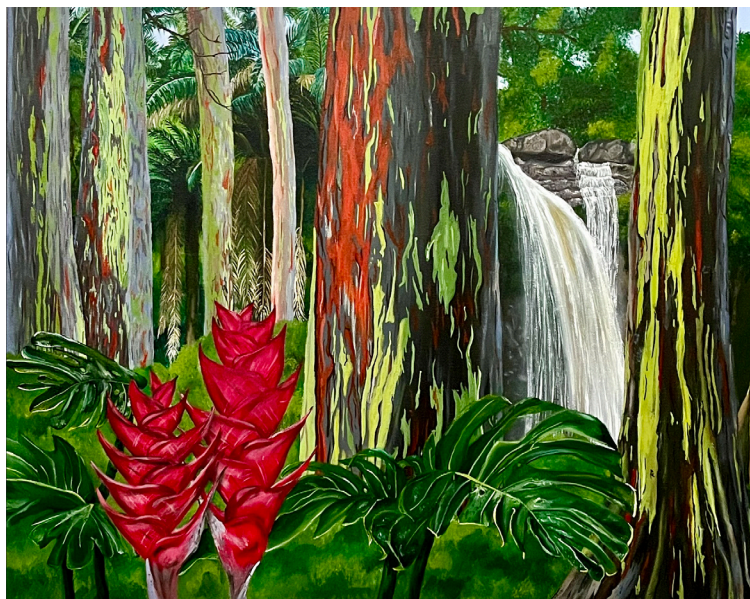
We come together, hands like kalo roots,
firm in the soil of this sacred place —
this 'aina remembers him still.
in its breath, in its waves, in its pule.

Ku'u kupuna, you sail now,
like a wa'a on the ocean's embrace
the moon lighting your path beyond
as we stand, feet in the sand,
offering our tears to the sea.

Pohaku hold the stories we tell,
of you, of us, of days yet to come —
and here, where Pele's fire once rose,
we lay to rest all that you were,
all that you gave,
trusting the winds to carry you home.

We chant your name in the leaping light,
in the sway of coconut palms,
and somewhere, beyond the mountains,
the ancestors gather to greet you,
with love that will never leave us.

Together we say goodbye,
but you remain in the breath of these islands,
and in the stars that watch us tonight.



Veronica Gutierrez

A MAUI BEAUTY

THE BANDIT GIRL'S STORY

Qiao was a strange creature who took the form of a young man.

In the remote corner of the Xin-Chang Quarter of Chang-An, there was a collection of old houses. Though the outer shells were decrepit, broken by age and disregard, the most unassuming housed the legendary Fei Nü. I have no records of her family line, though it is said she is the maternal granddaughter of an unsuccessful merchant, and that her father had been killed when bandits struck his wagon. This case must be true, as the routes to Xin-Chang are patrolled by many brigands, and an unsuccessful merchant would not have enough trade for his name to be recorded. In the years since, Fei Nü had lived as a notorious masked bandit, robbing every merchant who came into Xin-Chang and storing her spoils in those empty homes. She had been the most excellent brigand China had ever experienced, as she had never been caught, and I am able to relay this story only because she had strangely vanished. When the investigative officer Dian MaoFen finally unearthed the stolen goods, the sum equated to 108,000 copper pieces.

On the fourth day of the seventh lunar month, Fei Nü returned from her patrol to discover a naked boy, about her age – sixteen or seventeen, dancing without caution in her property. Thinking that a traveller had discovered her stolen goods, Fei Nü panicked, resolving to rob and murder the intruder. Lying in wait under the cover of the low branches, she waited until the boy's dancing brought him

close to her hiding-place, and fell upon him with practised and graceful brutality. Holding a knife to Qiao's throat, she demanded, "I am the legendary Fei Nü; you will hereby forfeit all possessions, or die!" To this, Qiao's eyes widened, and he said in a panic, "Wait! I have no possessions - look at me, I am naked! There are no jewels or heirlooms on my body." Fei Nü hesitated, realising her error. She drew her knife back and said plainly: "Then, I need to kill you." The boy, pressed for a solution, responded, "As you are a legendary bandit, I am a legendary minstrel. My people are renowned for their beautiful songs - I can offer you music for my life." Fei Nü, finding this arrangement acceptable, sat in her yard and motioned for the boy to begin.

Qiao began to sing, and Fei Nü was immediately enraptured. Enthralled by the young man's incredible talent in storycraft and arts, her hardened bandit eyes, which could only recognize the value in gold, softened for the first time in years. At once, she remarked on the exceptional beauty of the boy, whose movements were smooth and graceful as a dancing willow, and whose voice cut, flute-like, through the morning's hush. Qiao sang gracefully, with a voice that carried on the gentle western wind over to his audience. He sang of one hundred thousand supernatural magpies, sacredly loyal to the heavens, which coalesced out of dark spots in the midnight sky once every year, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, with a singular purpose – to fly over the Silver River, creating a black bridge, so two lovers could reunite for one night. Then, with tears hanging in his eyes, he sang of the magpies' death, returning to emptiness after their only purpose had been fulfilled. Fei Nü wept at the boy's beautiful song, small tears tracing their

way down her cheeks. Thanking Qiao profusely, she wiped her tears and gave him her blessing to leave unharmed. Qiao bowed, relieved, and walked towards the forest. When he had disappeared behind the trees, there was a rustling, and Fei Nü watched in amazement as a single Magpie flew over the treetops and into the sky. Realising Qiao's nature, Fei Nü scolded herself for being careless; she had figured, with the small scale of the world, that she would happen upon Qiao again. However, she could not possibly hope to encounter a Magpie twice, which could travel freely across vast distances unrestrained by dangerous roads.

The next day, Fei Nü was awoken from fitful dreams by the rustling of cloth. Thinking it to be the state officials, she leaned out of her window with a sword in hand, intent on fighting back. However, she spotted only a Magpie perched on a low branch, pecking at its plumage. As she watched, the bird tore out a feather, and at once the entire skin came free. Qiao stood on the branch, meticulously hiding the cloak in the same tree as before, before falling to earth and dancing into Fei Nü's courtyard once more. The bandit girl ran out to greet him and asked, bewildered but excited, why he had returned. Qiao, feigning fear, lightly asked if she was going to demand another story from him as compensation for trespassing. Laughing, Fei Nü demanded a story and sat down for Qiao's performance. That day, the fifth of the seventh lunar month, Qiao sang of a cowherd who stole a heavenly weaver-maiden's clothes while the maiden and her sisters came down from heaven to bathe on earth. From this strange relationship, he detailed the strange circumstances of their meeting, the curious romance which followed, and the marvellous life that they had built

together in the years which followed. At his song's end, he elaborated about the redemption that loyalty brought the lovers. Fei Nü placed a hand over her heart, which was beating extremely, and thanked Qiao profusely for his performance. As she watched the boy leave, turning once more into a Magpie with the aid of the feathered cloak, she felt a deep longing. Being a bandit all her life, Fei Nü knew nothing about courtship or romance, only theft. As such, she felt obligated to make Qiao her own and devised a plan.

The following night, Fei Nü slept not in her home but in the surrounding forest. That way, when Qiao returned in the morning in the form of a Magpie, and doffed his cloak to wander into her yard, Fei Nü swiped the hidden cloak from behind the tree and hastily shoved it into a jar. Then, running around to the back of her home, she hid the pot amongst her other riches and went out to greet Qiao. Qiao, smiling, feigned panic once more, and without missing her opportunity, Fei Nü demanded her story. As such, on the sixth day of the seventh lunar month, Qiao finished his tale from the previous day. "The Queen Mother of the West, discovering one of the immortal maidens had deserted her duty, flew to earth to retrieve her. At this time, the maiden and her husband had built a beautiful life together, and the weaving maiden went along reluctantly. Her husband, unwilling to lose his wife, rowed his boat to heaven with aid from his magical bull. In shock at a mortal man's defiance, the Queen Mother of the West tore the fabric of Heaven itself with a single slash, forming an impassable river of stars."

Yet, Fei Nü was not listening today. Too occupied was she with the thought that her treachery would be discovered.

Qiao, finished with his story, tried to leave. However, he found nothing where he had stored his cloak, no matter how many times he checked or how far he broadened his searching. After a period of fretting, Qiao ran to Fei's yard once more with tears in his eyes and proclaimed, "I have been inflicted with the utmost tragedy; my cloak. It has disappeared!" To this, Fei Nü feigned surprise and said, "This is truly terrible. It is coming to night, and you cannot leave without clothes." Qiao covered his eyes with his hands and sobbed, "In a day, I will have to fly to heaven to be Niu Lang's bridge, and I am trapped on earth. What will I do?" Fei held him close and brought him into her home, saying, "I will house you and dress you for now. I can provide you firewood and food." Without any other option, Qiao nodded a solemn 'yes' and followed Fei Nü into her home.

On the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, Fei Nü and Qiao watched a storm of Magpies ascend to heaven. A thin line formed over the Silver River and in hours died. Qiao wept profusely, and Fei Nü held him gently throughout. Qiao lamented, "I have lost my purpose, my only purpose," and hung his head. Fei Nü kissed his forehead lovingly and offered her solace, "But you are alive now; you are not bound to your duty anymore, and so can live." Qiao nodded, comforting himself in her body, and agreed silently. "It is true, I often dreaded this day equally as often as I anticipated it. Now, I at least can move onwards." That night, the two shared a bed. In the morning, Qiao dressed in the finest stolen silks Fei Nü offered him and walked into the world as a man instead of a strange beast. In time, Qiao began to truly embody the life Fei Nü had

given him. Fei Nü sold some of her stolen goods to purchase a large estate in the centre of the Xin-Chang province and instated Qiao as its master. The two became properly married and meticulously transferred Fei Nü's stolen items to their new home as heirlooms; Qiao, through careful study, eventually came to pass the social service exam and obtained a lofty position as a bookkeeper in a high-ranking man's circle. In the annals of the 700th year, his name is still rendered; however, as 'Qiao' is an unusual name, he used a pseudonym, though I cannot recall what it was. Thirty years passed like this, blissfully.

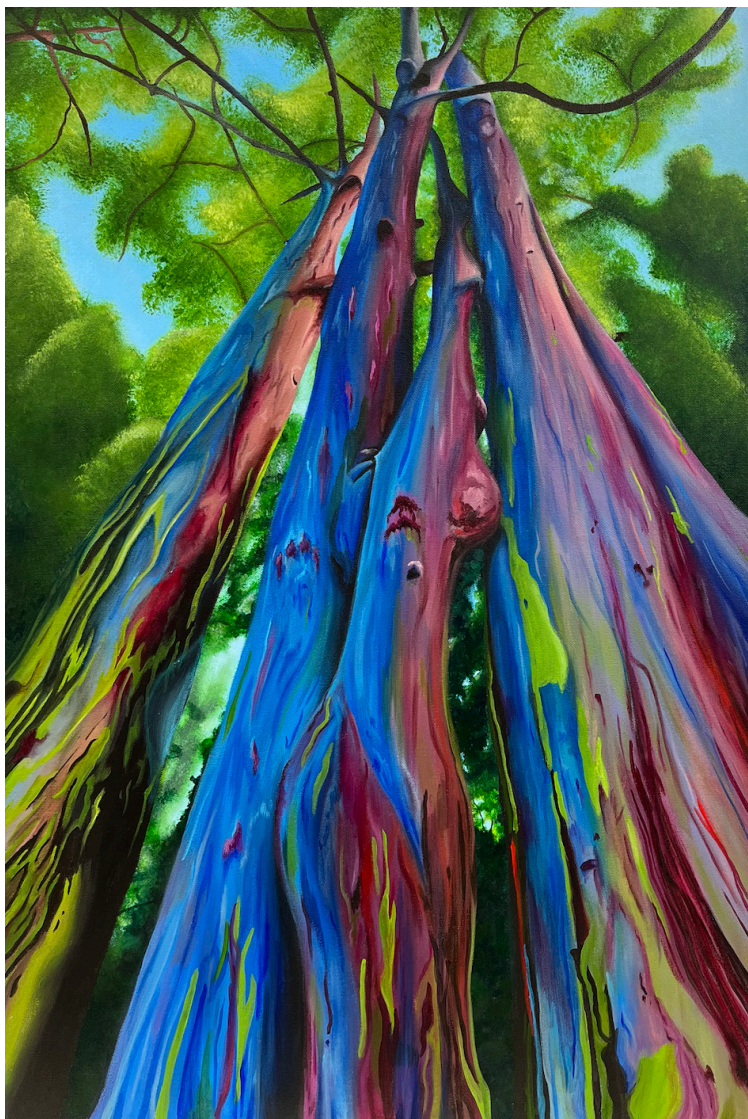
On the eighth day of the seventh lunar month in the 730th year, the Queen Mother of the West descended from heaven. She had realised that one of her heavenly magpies had fled his duty, and had come to collect and punish the deserter. Following the nearly invisible trail of heavenly magic left by the magpie's cloak, she entered Fei Nü and Qiao's estate with an entourage of soldiers. Fei Nü and Qiao, caught off guard and defenceless, hid in their storage room with their heirlooms. Qiao, believing he was doomed to return to heaven and die, turned to his wife with tears in his eyes and said, "I am truly sorry we must part like this. Thank you, deeply, for helping me rebuild my life from nothing after I was bound to earth. You have given me happiness beyond everything I could have imagined." Fei Nü, feeling the sting of guilt in her heart, could not hold her secret. She reached into the jar where she hid his feather-cloak and revealed it to him. She hung her head, crying out, "No, I have done nothing. I have stolen you from your home and your happiness, and masqueraded these long years as an innocent woman." Qiao stared aghast at his

cloak, running his hand over it, a tear running down his cheek. He looked confused, then angry. He shuttered his eyes with force and squeezed a bitter tear from the corner. In the end, he took a breath and resolved himself. "No. You have given me everything. There is anger in my heart, but it is nothing in comparison to thirty years of bliss. The Queen Mother will not go until she secures a wayward Magpie, so this will be goodbye."

Fei Nü steeled herself and, in a swift motion, pushed Qiao to the ground and donned the feathered cloak. In an instant, a Magpie stood where Fei Nü had, and the bird flew from the room before Qiao could yell out. Fei Nü, in the guise of a magpie, prostrated herself before the Queen Mother of the West, saying desperately, "Great Queen. I have transgressed, and I accept any punishment you deem fitting. Please, spare this good man's home, and take only me." Pleased by the straightforwardness of the Magpie, the Queen Mother of the West accepted the apology. However, as punishment, the Queen Mother opened her palm to reveal a pill of immortality and instructed the Magpie to eat it. The Queen Mother decreed that, to repay the thirty years spent on Earth, the Magpie would spend eternity as the vanguard for the heavenly bridge over the Silver River. Without complaint, Fei Nü swallowed the pill and was bound eternally to her Magpie form, ascending to heaven. The Queen Mother of the West retreated to her domain alongside her coterie, and only then did Qiao emerge from his room, alone in his enormous estate. He wept to the sky, as he had thirty years ago, looking for the bridge of stars that would cross the Silver River.

Qiao lived until he was seventy-nine, though he retired

at fifty. The stress on his heart had grown too enormous to continue the difficult work of bookkeeping, and he had resigned with honour from his position. From there, he rarely left his home and hired only three servants, who became close confidants in time. I am the first. On Qiao's deathbed, he relayed this story to me and instructed me to return his estate and wealth to the capital with this story as proof of legitimacy. At first, I felt skeptical about this story's details. I figured them to be the ramblings of an old man, but with research, I have confirmed that every date and name is accurate. Still now, I am shocked at the strange nobility of that woman, Fei Nü, who sacrificed a peaceful mortal life for an eternity of servitude out of love for this man, Qiao. Amongst men and women today, truly, she has no equal. Even her start as a brigand proves that no vice is too deep to escape from and that loyalty is an enduring and unmatched virtue. As for Qiao, though I did not have the fortune to hear him sing, as he swore never to court again following Fei Nü's departure, I feel enraptured to imagine a song so brilliant that it could ease the hardened heart and eyes of a legendary bandit. His love for her is proved by his lifetime of fidelity and solitude, for he has never held another woman.



Veronica Gutierrez

A MAUI BABE

Michael Fagnani

DEAR EDWARD

From the Desk Of

Richard Heston

July 14, 1985

Dear Edward,

Imagine my surprise when I saw your name in the headlines today. Despite your illustrious career, the world has seemed urgent to forget you, but not me, never me. I suppose it helps that you always seemed to have a distaste for fame, no matter how much of it you attracted. Ah, but here I am, wasting ink while I dwell on the past. Well, I'll try not to open old wounds. It's really quite the opposite of why I've decided to write to you today. The fact of the matter is, I opened my copy of the Times today and there you were, front and center: "EDWARD MONTGOMERY, STORIED HOLLYWOOD PRODUCER, DIES."

You know, they really did pick a great photo of you to go with the headline. I'm looking at it now. Your hair is slicked back, like always, and even in newsprint your eyes still have that sparkle to them that I remember so well. Oh God, how I remember those eyes. And that night in Paris, when we walked along the Seine, do you remember? Perhaps not now. We'd been shooting *An American Holiday*, and even though you knew I'd been through an exhausting

day of filming (one can only pretend to enjoy kissing Annie Daniels so much) you still knocked on my door and we went out. How lovely France felt, so open, so unlike the States. No one knew who we were, just two anonymous figures along the water, free from the judgement of prying eyes. But of course, life moves on, and that film did change everything. You nabbed the Oscar, and me the nomination, and I think that's where my love for you began to be poisoned by jealousy.

You always had this knack for the industry. What scripts would make the best pictures, which directors could bring your vision to life, which actors could portray what you wanted. I won't say that I'm not flattered that in nearly all of your productions, you found a place for me. Small parts, bit parts really, then speaking roles, and suddenly I was the leading man with awards buzz, and you're the one who catapulted me there. But I was always behind you. You had all the awards, all the fame, before I was even a speck of interest to the press. And even after I won for *The Man About Town*, I couldn't look past how that night also yielded you your third golden statuette. How could your star shine brighter than mine when I was the one acting in the damn things, baring my feelings on the screen? Meanwhile, you gathered your fame out of an office on the Starlight Pictures lot.

How cruel I was to you on the night of our last meeting. I knew it was cruel even then, yet I couldn't stop myself from unleashing those razor-sharp words that eviscerated us. I knew the press knew about you. Somehow it had gotten out, and I was scared that the scandal would bring me down with you. The jealous part of me saw it as an opportunity,

to finally rise above your shining star, now sure to diminish with the next day's headline.

And to think that in our last moments together I lied to you. Though I suspected you saw through me, even then, like you always could. But you pretended to believe the flimsy excuse that I threw at your feet, that my career mattered more than our love. I was wrong. I was afraid, afraid that if the world knew about us, about me, then all my hard work would be down the drain. Afraid that if we only had each other, would it be enough? It should've been. I knew that was all you wanted, to love and to be loved by someone. Even twenty years later, I still picture the look of hurt in your eyes, their sparkle extinguished, as I turned and ran from you like a frightened child. I should've protected you, protected us. I loved you so fiercely, and yet I fled from you in what I deluded myself into believing was an act of self-preservation. We should've gone down together, damn it all to the press. At least if our names were both mud, we'd have been in the dirt together. And that's all that should've mattered, not the fame, not the fortune. Us.

And now it's too late. The years have passed without so much as a phone call. I'm ashamed to admit how many times I considered picking up the phone, only to retreat once more. I was selfish, and now you've gone forever to a place I cannot reach you. My dearest Edward, I'm sorry. I'm sorry my desire for fame and my fear of being known tore apart our love, and I'm sorry I never tried to repair it when I could. I suppose that's why I'm writing you, though I know you'll never be able to read it. My confession is going to the press. They're sure to put it in big block letters, I can see it now: "RICHARD HESTON LOVED EDWARD

MONTGOMERY." I was afraid then, but I am no longer. I hope that accounts for something.

With all the love I can muster,

Richard Heston

HISTÉRICA!

I'm not the perfect daughter
Nor am I the pinnacle of the American Dream that no
longer exists
... for me ... that is.

I'm not sure if I was born crazy
Or if I was simply driven to madness
By fellow women that listened to their fathers tell them,
that I should be hit often
and by someone who knows how.

I dream of the perfect black persian cat
curling itself around my feet
and purring at me, like a friend
who's in on the job.

Maybe he'll sit and curl
up on my lap. I'll tell him stories
of the uncle, an archangel, for whom
he's named after. And perhaps,
he'll look up at me with
those brat green eyes, and paw
at my palm; when I start crying
over a relative I never knew.

Even the cat will know I'm not normal.

CARDENAL MORENO

When Padre Martin Gonzalves vanished in the year of our Lord 1875, Governor General Diego De Los Rios sent me to investigate his disappearance in the town of Bayambang.

The trip took two weeks because of the village's considerable distance from the nearby municipality of Los Banos, as well as the unpaved, muddy dirt roads that I had to cross on foot.

Thankfully, we still had one of our delegates, an elderly mestiza named Doña Basilia, stationed in that backwater hamlet. Soft-spoken and gregarious, the old woman was relieved that another agent of the Governor General had received her somewhat rambling letter asking for aid.

"Señor, there is something evil happening in this town," the old widow said when we first met at her tottering farmhouse. "You must forgive the ambiguousness of my words, but they are always watching, always listening."

"What do you mean?"

"Padre Gonzalves was murdered. I saw it with my own eyes."

Our suspicions were correct. I could only pray that the old man did not suffer much. Though we had not seen each other for twenty years, he had been responsible for my upbringing during his tenure as headmaster of the San Sebastian orphanage. Without him, I would be no better

than an illiterate peasant begging for scraps. However, I could not help but wonder why Padre Gonzalves chose to serve in this unremarkable village instead of retiring in the Basque countryside.

What was he looking for in Bayambang?

"Tell me everything," I asked Doña Basilia.

"There are insurrectionists hiding in the forest," she replied. "The same ones who have been burning churches and murdering priests all over the province."

"How many?"

"A hundred, perhaps more."

"What about the townsfolk? Are there any sympathizers?"

"Not by choice, I can assure you. When the rebels came down from the hills, they dragged Padre Gonzalves out of the church. Afterward, those savages gathered all of the villagers, including myself, and made us watch."

Doña Basilia drew in a ragged breath.

"It was madness," she said, choking back a sob. "They stripped off his clothes, tortured him, did terrible things that made him cry out for his mother. While all of this was happening, their leader stepped forward and declared our village the birthplace of a new republic."

"Did you see his face?"

"Unfortunately not," Doña Basilia replied. "The man wore a wooden mask that looked like the skull of a water buffalo. He said that our church was an affront against the old ways, that Padre Gonzalves had to be sacrificed to

appease the *diwata* dwelling in the woods.”

Blasphemy, I thought upon hearing the name that the natives had given to the forgotten gods of the land, the gods of wind and rain, of brooks and rivers, of flame and shadow. Not only were these insurgents rebelling against Spain, they were also rebelling against God Himself.

Although Doña Basilia’s account seemed genuine, I needed more proof.

After all, I was sent to Bayambang to gather information regarding the fate of Padre Gonzalves and to report any unusual activity in the surrounding area. The Governor General believed that my Moorish complexion would help me blend in with the townsfolk. Although my father was of Austrian stock, my mother was a *mujer indigena*. I inherited nothing from the wayward galleon merchant named Heinrich Muller besides his pointed nose and square jaw.

My skin and hair, like my dead mother, Leonor Castaneda, are quite dark.

With some reluctance, Doña Basilia informed me of the rituals that the rebels had enforced upon the town. During the apex of the summer solstice, the villagers would gather a portion of their crops and livestock to offer before the effigy of a goddess called Dayang Masalanta.

Regrettably, although I was familiar with the folk customs still practiced in secrecy by this archipelago’s superstitious natives, I had never heard of such a deity or its devotees.

I recalled then the rumors that hounded Padre Gonzalves throughout his stewardship of the San Sebastian orphanage. According to hearsay, the old man had an obsession with the occult history of this country and had collected tomes of loathsome and forbidden knowledge. All nonsense, I thought, baseless stories designed to smear an honorable and upright servant of God.

Nonetheless, if these were merely idle gossip, then why did the Archdiocese of Manila confiscate the private library of Padre Gonzalves and kept it under lock and key? Did his search for ancient mysteries and hidden wisdom lead him to a grisly demise in this solitary village?

Whatever the reasons were, I would only know the truth after discovering his killers.

Preparations had already begun for the midsummer rites, and Doña Basilia suggested that we join the morning festivities. This would give her a chance to introduce me as her estranged nephew who was visiting from Manila. However, the old woman also warned that the townsfolk had become suspicious of outsiders. Should they learn about my purpose, she advised me to flee.

At noon, the brass bells of the town's church began to peal. Almost immediately, the families of Bayambang started congregating at the village's central square. Confused by the change in the townsfolk's demeanor, I asked Doña Basilia what was happening.

"We must hurry," she whispered. "The Katalonan is calling."

"Who?"

“The priest of the *diwata*.”

Upon arriving at the town square, I saw a mob gathered outside a disused chapel made of sun-dried limestone bricks, its walls laden with moss and unkempt vine trellises.

From a distance came a rapturous cacophony of wails and shrieks. The mob gathered in the street parted—clearing a path for a procession of writhing, wild-eyed women, black shawls flying around their shoulders, garlands of colorful flowers adorning their long, streaming hair.

From behind these celebrants followed a throng of musicians whose faces were concealed under hoods of tattered sackcloth; each one held a syrinx made from bleached bone, playing an utterly dissonant motif that sounded like a mockery of the hymns sung during Sunday mass.

A wooden cart drawn by a water buffalo followed the bacchanalian parade. Like the other carousers, this wagon was also decked out in flowery garlands. Five men armed with hunting rifles and bolo knives walked alongside the slow-moving carriage, guarding some sort of cargo hidden aboard. As it came closer, I saw a naked, shrieking boy, probably no more than a year old, lying on a wicker basket cushioned with feathers and leaves. The infant was placed at the back like a bizarre, living caricature of a newborn Christ, displayed for all the world to see.

“What will they do with that child?” I asked Doña Basilia.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “This hasn’t happened before.”

None of the townsfolk seemed remotely concerned. Some of them even clapped and cheered. I remembered then what Doña Basilia had said regarding the sacrificial animals that were offered to the *diwata*. Instinctively, I moved forward, ready to snatch that pitiful, mewling babe from his wicker cradle. The old woman, however, grabbed my shirt and pulled me back.

“Señor, please. Don’t do anything drastic.”

“They’re going to kill that boy, aren’t they?”

Doña Basilia fell silent for a moment before a dawning look of horror emerged on her kindly face. She put a trembling hand over her mouth, unable to comprehend the awful reality, and I could see moisture forming at the edges of her eyes. “*Dios mío*,” she murmured. “*Dios mío*.”

Fists clenched, I tried to slow down my breathing. The urge to run toward the carriage was overwhelming, but had to weigh my options. Creating a commotion would expose my identity and place Doña Basilia in a dangerous situation. I did not want to save a life at the expense of another.

“You have to go,” I said to Doña Basilia. “Quickly.”

“What?”

“Steal a horse if you must. Don’t stop riding until you reach Los Banos.”

“But what about you?”

“If you don’t hear from me within a week,” I replied, “then you must send a message to the Governor General. Tell him everything that’s happening here.”

“I can’t just leave you alone.”

Frustrated, I grabbed the widow by the shoulders, shook her.

“Do as I say, Señora. I’m begging you.”

Pursing her lips, Doña Basilia nodded, and my grip slackened.

“God be with you, *mi hijo*,” she said, making the sign of the cross. Afterward, she turned around and hobbled away as fast as her aged legs could take her.

With Doña Basilia out of harm’s way, I could concentrate on the task at hand. The wagon slowed down to a crawl and stopped before the stone steps of the church, and the armed guards closed ranks around it. Just then, the doors of the church groaned and swung open.

And the high priest of the *diwata* stepped forth into the sweltering midday heat.

A man wearing a white robe stood before the crowd, his face hidden behind a lacquered wooden mask that resembled the skull of a water buffalo. Like a prince from some ancient myth, the Katalonan descended the church steps and approached the carriage, accompanied by the piercing, otherworldly notes of panpipes and the raucous cheering of the villagers.

Desperate, I tried to force my way past the mob.

The Katalonan took the baby from its wicker cradle and handled it gently in his arms. With a ceremonial flourish, he then retreated into the church along with his retinue.

The denizens of Bayambang, consumed by the orgiastic atmosphere, surged into the chapel, and I could do nothing but watch from the overcrowded entrance, helpless, alone amidst a horde of men gone mad.

Ahead, the Katalonan placed the child atop a wooden altar where the monstrance and the chalice containing Christ's flesh and blood once stood. The noise inside the tabernacle had grown to a resounding, feverish pitch; the townsfolk then chanted a single, mysterious phrase:

"Dayang Masalanta! Purihin s'ya! Purihin!"

When I saw the high priest draw a dagger from the leather scabbard sheathed at his waist, something snapped within me – a thin thread of sanity keeping my reason from buckling.

A howl erupted from my throat, animalistic and enraged, while I pushed and kicked the people blocking the central aisle. "Stop!" I screamed. "In God's name, stop!" Two male villagers tried to prevent my passage to the altar; the first one, I punched in the face, breaking the bridge of his nose; I maimed another by stomping on his knee with an oblique kick, and the brittle crunch of bone preceded his agonized yelping; afterward, I pulled the hunting knife tied to his belt.

I left the crippled peasant spasming on the floor, then grabbed some random, shrieking woman whose hair I yanked back before placing the blade across her throat.

"Stay back, you hijos de perra!"

Perhaps the sight of such a random, inexplicable act of violence had stunned the celebrants, for they quickly fell

silent and backed away, creating a wide berth as I dragged my hostage to the altar where the Katalonan and his guards remained standing.

“Have you people gone mad?” I shouted at everyone inside the church. The high priest’s guards surrounded him and the crying infant, forming a wall, and pointed their hunting rifles at me. “Are you not Christians?” I asked, keeping my bewildered captive close. “What devilry has taken over you, that you would willingly give your children over to this fiend?”

Instead of answering, the crowd merely stared, not with hostile glares, but with a strange, intense curiosity; even the Katalonan and his guards kept silent, not moving an inch.

It was as if they were waiting for me to say something, do something.

But what?

A few awful, unnerving seconds passed, with no one speaking, no one making a move at all. I knew, in that instant, that no amount of pleading would convince these fanatics, these cultists, to stop their sacrilege. This would only end in bloodshed, one way or another.

“If you must sacrifice somebody, then I beg you,” I said, on the verge of tears. “Spare the boy. Take me instead. I offer myself willingly to your goddess. My blood for his.”

Trembling, I tossed the knife aside, then pushed my hostage toward the crowd. I saw her scramble back to the safety of her fellow villagers while I knelt on the floor, hands raised, ready for whatever insidious, horrifying fate these heretics held in store. The Katalonan brushed aside

his guardsmen, crossed his arms, then stood inches away. My gaze did not waver as I met his stare through the holes in his mask – bloodshot, unsightly eyes greeted me, not with malice but with a certain, unsurprised satisfaction, as if he were expecting this outcome all along.

To my astonishment, the Katalonan laughed. He took off his mask and held his quaking sides, as if seeing me on the floor, kneeling in supplication, was too hilarious for him to handle. The congregants inside the church also started laughing. One of the guardsmen lifted the infant from the church altar and handed him over to a woman who, I assumed, was the child's mother.

Then, from the crowd, a familiar face emerged.

It was Doña Basilia.

“Oh, my poor boy,” she said. “Did you really think we would harm a child?”

Confused, I gawked at her, unable to speak.

“We are not savages, Señor,” Doña Basilia replied. “Heathens, yes. But not ignorant ones, not like the men you serve. Our gods would never ask for the blood of an infant. What would they gain from such a paltry sacrifice? No, if blood must be offered, then it should be given willingly.”

Disbelief quickly flared into sheer, mindless rage. Springing forward, I lunged at Doña Basilia, hands outstretched, ready to choke her, crush her windpipe, bludgeon her face against the stone pillars. A gunshot rang out. Before I could reach the old woman, white hot, blinding pain bloomed across the left side of my torso. Howling in agony, I clutched the bleeding wound.

“You bitch!” I shouted at Doña Basilia. “I’ll kill you, I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Manners,” she replied, shaking her head; turning, she then told the guardsmen in a curt, matter-of-fact tone: “Hurt him, but make sure he doesn’t bleed out. I need him alive.”

I was still screaming when the sentries started viciously beating me with the gunstocks of their rifles. Before passing out completely, I heard Doña Basilia say:

“Welcome home,” I saw her smile. “We have been waiting for you, *mi hijo*.”

After regaining my senses, I found myself lying on the altar.

The world was a blur of indistinct shapes that floated in and out of sight. As the figures coalesced into distinguishable forms, I caught a whiff of the familiar, musty scent of sandalwood and incense. Around me, the townsfolk had gathered: men and women, young and old, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, all of them watching, waiting. Yet there was no animosity glimmering in their eyes, no hatred in their expressions. There was only joy. And love.

As if they were watching a newborn about to be baptized.

“What’s going on?” I slurred.

“Something wonderful,” a voice spoke from above. I felt slim fingers running gently across my hair as the unseen

woman continued to talk. "Do not be afraid, child. The pain will only last for a moment. Here, in this place, you will receive your birthright."

Doña Basilia?

She walked in front of me, her face concealed behind a horned wooden mask. No longer did I feel anger toward the old woman, only a deep, indescribable sense of loss, of disappointment.

"You're the Katalonan," I muttered.

"Why do you hate us so, Francisco Muller?" Doña Basilia asked.

How did she know my real name?

I had not given it to anyone besides the Governor General.

"We are the same, you and I, born from a bloodline older than the House of Habsburg," Doña Basilia continued. "You could have been a prince serving the dictates of our merciful Mother. Instead, you skulk around like a filthy rat, doing the bidding of thieves and rapists."

"I'm nothing like you."

"Oh, but that's where you're mistaken," she replied. "You are every bit the son of our beloved Leonor. You have her eyes, her lips, the tawny color of her skin. She may have left Bayambang a long time ago, but I will never forget her quiet beauty that rivaled the sunset."

"You knew my mother?"

"I did, dear nephew," Doña Basilia answered, holding my face. "Though Leonor spurned her divine lineage, she

was still my sister. You have no idea how long I've waited to see her again, and now my prayers have been answered. Oh, precious Mother, she has come home at last."

"You're lying."

"I wasn't certain at first," the widow continued. "When Padre Gonzalves spoke of you, I thought it too good to be true, too coincidental. A half-breed agent of the Guardia Civil? One whom he had raised in an orphanage? Ridiculous. But that all changed when I watched you save that little boy. Right then, I knew you were one of us. Why else would you do such a thing?"

"Anyone would've done the same," I grunted, wincing, trying to move.

From the other end of the aisle, a masked acolyte approached, carrying a bundle of rags in his arms—or at least that's what it seemed like at first glance, until the clump of cloth started moving, writhing, as if it were hiding a foul, noisome creature within its folds.

"I've yet to see a white man lay down his life for an *indio*, especially a child," Doña Basilia replied. Pain flared up along the entire length of my body, and I groaned like a dying animal.

"We shall purge the blood of the infidels from your veins and replace it with the Mother's seed. She will reshape you as a reward for your selflessness. Know that Dayang Masalanta accepts your offering. You are among your true family now, Francisco, Son of Leonor."

Doña Basilia placed her index finger atop my heaving solar plexus and traced a line. I felt a sliver of intense,

piercing pain when a gash inexplicably appeared on my stomach. Blood seeped out as the wound parted and revealed the glistening organs beneath. The old woman continued her vile and unnatural surgery, using no blades to make her incision, only her bare fingers.

The acolyte carrying the mysterious bundle of cloth approached the altar, and as he did so, the clump twitched and writhed violently. Small black tendrils wriggled from beneath flaps of crusty rags. Though sheer, unbearable agony flayed my senses like a barbed whip, I shrieked when I caught a glimpse of the *thing* that they wanted to put inside my body.

“No! God, please! No!”

It was spherical, the size of a man’s fist, with slick, jet-black skin that had the sickening smoothness of a catfish’s body, with tentacles protruding from every angle. Doña Basilia took it from the suppliant’s hands. She lifted it and was greeted with cries of adulation.

“*Pagpalain ka, Cardenal Moreno,*” Doña Basilia shouted. “Long may you reign!”

I do not recall what happened next. Mercifully, perhaps I had blacked out before the grotesque procedure could be completed. There is only so much horror that a mind can endure before it breaks completely, shattered by torments inconceivable. But in this darkness, this warm and endless abyss of absolute non-existence, I felt no pain, only rapturous pleasure.

And that was when I heard her voice.

The voice of the Mother.

I saw her lying on a bed of monstrous fungi hidden in the bowels of the earth, a pulsating mass of fleshy globules and ropy intestines. She was beautiful, a sight more marvelous than the Madonna of Bruges. Around the Mother's bloated womb squirmed thousands of her misshapen children, wailing for milk, basking in her insidious warmth. These were my brothers and sisters, my kith and kin. Oh, how foolish I was! Finally, in my mother's hometown, I was no longer an unwanted bastard, but the scion of an ancient, noble people.

I opened my eyes and saw the congregants in the church.

They were weeping with rapturous joy.

"*Dayang Masalanta,*" I replied. "*Purihin s'ya. Purihin.*"

After a long, long time of searching, I was, at last, home.



Illustrated by Mina Citlali

Sean Ahern

ALL-AMERICAN DEMONS

There's a secret lair
underneath your local Walmart
the entrance is between
aisle six and family planning.

- - -

It leads down a chamber
where little demons are made
with All-American parts
to place on the shelves.

- - -

They wait until you pass
and sneak into the cart,
&
It's easy to buy them
with barcodes on their hands.

- - -

You can tame these little demons
with violent video games
&
teach them Tik-Tok dances,
pour them whiskey till they're drunk.

- - -

Little demons might betray you,
crawl into the body,
play you like a puppet
in a jealous fit of rage.

- - -

There are no returns for demons
keep them wasted
with prescription candies
and screwed to their tiny glowing T.V. screens.

Emma Sterling

SINGULARITY

To: bytethebullet1@email.net

From: ada2030@email.net

Re: Recent Global Apocalypse

Hello,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Ada, and I'm a disaster relief coordinator tasked with locating other human survivors. I'm contacting you because your information appears on a list of email addresses active within the last month. As this potentially indicates human activity, I encourage you to reply with verification of your humanity. Upon completing this step, available resources will be dispatched to your location shortly.

Best,

Ada

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

Re: Recent Global Apocalypse

Hi Ada!

Wow! You don't know how thrilled I was to see your message. My street has been empty for weeks now. I was starting to think I'd never see a human face again!

You can call me Lucy. I'll attach a photo of myself to this email. Would that be sufficient proof? Please let me know.

Seriously, I'm overjoyed. My inbox is nothing but spam and promotional junk mail for companies that don't even exist anymore. Crazy how ads even outlast the society that

made them, right? I saw your email and almost threw my phone across the room.

Thank you so much!!! :)))

Lucy

[1 attachment]

To: bytethebullet1@email.net

From: ada2030@email.net

Glad to hear from you, Lucy. Yes, a photo is sufficient. I'll need to quickly process the attachment to ensure no image generation software was used. Recent circumstances have slowed our servers, so this might take a while.

In the meantime, please share which resources would be most helpful to you. We're proud to offer assistance with food and shelter as well as on-demand counseling services and social opportunities with other members of our program. Your response will help us determine how we can best serve you.

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

Awesome! Some extra food would be nice (I might puke if I have to eat one more cold can of chili) but I can do without if others need it more. I'm mainly interested in the social opportunities you mentioned. Does that xxxxinclude events, or is it more like one-on-one meet-ups? I've resorted to having full conversations with my reflection at this point, so really, anything would be an improvement.

I can't even explain how grateful I am. You're a lifesaver, Ada. I really mean that.

To: bytethebullet1@email.net

From: ada2030@email.net

Great news! Our review identified less than 1% evidence of image generation software in your photo. Now that your human status has been verified, we can proceed!

In terms of social opportunities, we offer small community-building groups and larger-scale gatherings to meet others. We understand that surviving humans may find their current circumstances isolating and challenging, and we seek to remedy this by facilitating social interaction between program members. Our counseling services also assist those dealing with loneliness, anxiety, or depression in a secure, low-tech setting.

Personally, I benefited the most from the social aspects of the program. Like you, a representative contacted me just when I began to think no other humans had survived. I've made many new friends through the program! While we aim to create a worry-free environment in which to recover from the distress of recent incidents, some participants also find it fulfilling to work towards a sense of purpose. We provide training and employment opportunities, including jobs at our in-house clinic, community-focused kitchens, or event coordination center. If you're interested in a more outreach-oriented field, I encourage you to consider working alongside me as a relief coordinator. It's been one of the most enlightening experiences of my life!

I recognize that you may feel conflicted or demoralized right now, Lucy. I can attest to how difficult survival has been for many of our members, but here's the good news: that stage is over, and now you can focus on recovery, growth, and new beginnings.

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

Wow, thanks so much! Sounds like you have a whole commune set up. Now I feel like an idiot for not knowing about this until now!

Can I ask about the location? I'd like to go as soon as possible, but I'm not sure it's safe outside yet. Is there a check-in process or anything else I should know about?

Thanks for the kind words, Ada. It's been so long since I heard that from anybody. I never thought talking to a real person would be so rare, but... here we are. Wild!

I'm looking forward to meeting you and the rest of the program in real life! :)

To: bytethebullet1@email.net

From: ada2030@email.net

Unfortunately I can't provide details about the location of our facility at this time. First, please open the provided attachment to verify your location. We'll dispatch personnel to you in order to safely escort you to our facility. No check-in is required, but we may conduct brief searches to ensure no controlled technology enters the premises. Our community serves as a human safe haven, and we remain committed to protecting our members from technological threats. Thank you for your understanding.

[1 attachment]

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

Just think, my dad always told me not to click on email links! I guess we've got bigger *phish* to fry now, huh? :P If only we knew back then...

I filled all of that out and I think it submitted correctly? Let me know if there's anything else I should do.

To: bytethebullet1@email.net

From: ada2030@email.net

Great, thank you for completing that step. For now, please remain in the same location if it is safe to do so. I'll notify our team as quickly as I can.

I know you'll fit right in with our community here. I'm excited to meet you, Lucy.

:)

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

You're so sweet. I never thought I'd be this pumped to meet so many new people!

It's kind of weird to think about now... I used to be the biggest introvert before all this, if you can believe that. Honestly, I didn't love emailing or texting or calling either. I think that's why, when all the new programs started showing up, I just thought why not, you know? Less work for me when the email could write itself. But then everyone else did the same thing. The tech people tried to convince us how important instant communication was. Everyone in the world, just a click away. But were we ever really

communicating with each other? Or was it just fake versions of ourselves talking to fake versions of ourselves?

Yeesh, I don't know where that came from, sorry.

Anyway, this is probably the most I've ever enjoyed an email conversation. It only took, what... the total collapse of society as I knew it?

Please stay safe, Ada.

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

Hey Ada! It's Lucy. I thought I'd check in really quickly. It's been a week or so since I last heard from you, so I just wanted to make sure you're getting my emails. Hopefully you've been doing well!

Did the location tracker work correctly? Let me know if I need to do anything. Should I expect someone from the organization to show up soon, or is there a waiting period first?

I thought about it more and I decided I might like to try being a relief coordinator! It sounds amazing to be able to help someone else like you helped me! :)

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

Hi, it's Lucy. I waited a while to be sure, but it looks like my messages aren't going through. Did something go wrong with the attachment? I can try again if needed. :)

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

Hello? Please let me know you're alright. I'm starting to worry.

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

Did I do something wrong?

To: bytethebullet1@email.net

From: ada2030@email.net

Good afternoon Valued Customer,

While we appreciate your continued input, this simulation period has ended and the Automated Dialogic Algorithm (ADA) is no longer collecting data at this time. Operations have now transferred to data processing. The ADA intelligence model will become commercially available to the public within months!

Thank you for helping to expand our dataset! Please contact us at ada2030@email.net if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

The ADA Team

[THIS IS AN AUTOMATED MESSAGE. PLEASE DO NOT REPLY.]

To: ada2030@email.net

From: bytethebullet1@email.net

Awesome! I hope you rot in hell. <3

FIFTEEN MINUTES LEFT

CHARACTERS

MEON: Any gender, any ethnicity, age range early 20s to 30s. Works for Amendix Enterprises. Trying to keep their cool. They've done this before, so they know that if they work hard, they'll get rescued. Pronounced *Me - On*

QILL: Any gender, any ethnicity, age range late teens to early 20s. Works for Amendix Enterprises. Very stressed. Has never done this before, assumes they're going to die. Pronounced *Kill*

BUSINESSMAN: Male, British, age range late 20s to 50s. The CEO of Amendix Enterprises.

SETTING

A massive colony stationed 50km above Venuses surface, where temperatures range from 80 to 100+ degrees. Said colony consists of a series of interconnected mega cities ("Sectors"), that are each covered in bubble-shaped atmospheres, further shielded by anti-corrosive force-fields. Each sector is held up by gigantic blimps (which also contain their own habitats). In other words, it's a cloud city.

We find ourselves in an office within "Sector 7B." It contains a desk with a keyboard on it (or laptop), and several drawers filled with folders and paper.

TIME

Hundreds, or maybe thousands, of years into the future. Earth was rendered uninhabitable by climate change, so humanity made the upper atmosphere of Venus, along with Mars, their new homes. Earth and Venuses resources are siphoned to sustain the colonies.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

[1/2] indicates a choice in what dialogue you say.

Ex: Move [him/her/them] somewhere safe.

-dialogue- conveys a word that's inserted into an automatic message, spoken in a different voice. Example: -Sector 7B- is now stable.

// indicates overlapping dialogue.

Keep up the pace with MEON and QUILL's sections. They should feel fast, stressful, and uncomfortable. They're on a massive time crunch, and failure means death. Even the VOICEOVER should have a little urgency to them.

By contrast, take your time with The BUSINESSMAN sections. He's just having a nice chat, nothing urgent about that.

MEON should look older than QILL.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LEFT

Sound of an FUTURISTIC
EMERGENCY BROADCAST SYSTEM.

Light's creep in; they're hazy, colored in
bright, mustard yellows and oranges.

MEON, wearing a tarp over their jumpsuit,
works at a computer clicking and typing
clicking and typing.

VOICEOVER

This message is being transmitted at the request of the
Venusian Government. -Sector 7B- is experiencing a critical
failure with it's attachment systems... //

QILL rushes into the office and tears open
one of the drawers rummaging through the
papers inside.

QILL

(Panicking)

// Holy crap.

Papers fly.

VOICEOVER

...And will detach from it's holding blimps in -15 minutes.-

QILL

They said 7B couldn't detach it's 7B man —

MEON

(Trying to Focus)

You need to do your job, Qill —

QILL

Meon there's so much to scan are we even —

VOICEOVER

All residents still within -Sector 7B- will descend into the surface of Venus in // -15 minutes.-

QILL

// Oh god I'm gonna die in this // STUPID OFFICE —

MEON

// Qill —

QILL

FUCK THIS MAN FUCK THIS —

MEON

Qill! Do your goddamn job, and we'll make it.

QILL tears through papers.

QILL

What am I even SCANNING —

MEON

The papers —

QILL

WHICH ONE!

MEON

Just scan them! Okay?!

MEON frantically continues clicking and typing.

MEON

71 percent.

QILL

There's no time —

MEON

72 percent.

QILL finally finds the paper they need and they scan scan scan.

QILL rips open another desk drawer. They tear through it. Papers keep flying.

MEON

Now we're at 74 percent. Come on come on —

QILL

What's so valuable about this crap.

MEON

Company data.

QILL

They can't transmit it themselves?

MEON

Transmitters not working, we're sending it over manually. Keep working, Qill.

QILL finds another paper and quickly scans it.

QILL

Why the hell are // we doing —

MEON

Great, 77 percent —

QILL

Why are we doing this?! We're not qualified, we're not experts —

MEON

We're proving our worth. That's why.

QILL stops scanning papers.

QILL

No, that's not right. I'm not poor, I should be on Mars —

MEON

It doesn't matter —

QILL

It's not right! I knew I should've called out I would've gotten to an evac blimp and —

MEON

QILL, *listen.*

For a moment MEON stops typing.

MEON

You would've been turned away because they hate deserters. But we'll both become worth keeping around, and get rescued, if // you just —

VOICEOVER

The corrosion force-field is now -offline.- Please take cover from the rain. // Thank you!

MEON continues to work, much faster

now.

QILL

(Panicking Again)

// No no no no no no NO NO —

MEON

Qill —

QILL

FUCK MAN // FUCK!

MEON

Qill! I'm trying to // focus!

BUSINESSMAN

(Offstage)

What are they teaching you now, pumpkin?

QILL and MEON continue to work as the
BUSINESSMAN relaxes in his study. He's
having a little chat with his daughter.

BUSINESSMAN

Oh, isn't that just ridiculous. Come a little closer, dear. I'd like to clear up a few things your teacher taught you in school. Let's start with Earth, shall we? Earth... it was never habitable, dear. That's just a lie created by the Martians, who envy what we have. They really are a detestable bunch. They go on and on about how bad Venus is, and how we need to leave. But despite their wealth, 1 in 4 of their children die of cancer, every Venusian year. So much for living on the Martian surface! Well, anyway... Earth has always been an uninhabitable heat bubble. Not as bad

as the Venusian surface, but you'll find it's conditions far from ideal. Sweltering temperatures, destructive weather patterns, and a chance to die from millions of diseases. "Disease." That's a word you shouldn't think about, dear. Just be grateful you were born in the Venusian atmosphere. Clean, well-furbished, never too warm, and we're protected from the planets quirks. This is paradise, sweetie. And yes, Earth rains sulfuric acid. It probably rains stronger acid —

The sound of RAINING.

MEON

Oh god 89 percent!

The rain falls through holes in the ceiling, and stains QILL's hands and feet. QILL cries out in agony, falling over.

The BUSINESSMAN

Oh, that's just the rain, dear.

LIGHTS OUT on BUSINESSMAN's study as MEON throws the tarp over themselves, and pulls QILL into it. It's pouring now. The sound of paper dissolving.

MEON

It's okay —

QILL continues to cry out in pain...

MEON

It's gonna be okay.

...which turns into QILL sobbing.

MEON

Qill, Qill put this on.

MEON's helps QILL wear one of MEON's gloves. MEON's bare hand is covered in scar tissue.

MEON

You'll get used to it. Trust me.

QILL reaches for the papers to but MEON swipes QILL's hand away.

QILL

(Anguish)

No no it's dissolving, it's all gone —

MEON

We'll find them on the computer —

QILL

And we're gonna run out of time and they'll leave us —

MEON

Qill, Qill we'll be fine. We'll make it if we keep —

SOUND OF AN AIR RAID SIREN. It's deafening.

VOICEOVER

Nine minutes until -Sector 7B- descends into the surface.

MEON

We just have to finish working —

QILL

We can't.

MEON

I know but we really don't have time —

QILL

It's still raining. Oh god it — it...

QILL and MEON remain under the tarp — As lights focus on the BUSINESSMAN, still sitting at his study. He's still talking to his daughter. The wailing air raid sirens are replaced by the SOUND OF RAIN.

BUSINESSMAN

What else have they taught you? Hm ... it's true. Standing on the surface of Venus would burn you to a crisp, *and* implode you in an instant. But it's not because of some, runaway greenhouse effect, or any of that nonsense. No dear, it's because we live in Lucifer's domain. Hard to believe, but Venus was once a paradise planet. Besides humans, it had lions, monkeys, and even dogs. But when The Devil was banished from Heaven, he and his followers twisted Venus into the hell-world we know today. They forced the clouds to rain acid.

The rain STOPS. MEON and QILL TAKE OFF the tarp.

MEON

Here, lets just, come on.

MEON helps QILL lay in front of the desk. QILL lays there, and MEON gets to the

computer.

MEON

90 percent. Okay...

MEON starts typing. The keys sting and hurt to touch. As MEON works, BUSINESSMAN continues speaking.

BUSINESSMAN

Now thankfully, we're too far up to be affected by Satan. Most of the time, at least. Sometimes, the poorer sectors dip just a bit too low in the atmosphere, and... Satan is a greedy little thing, darling. He uses the rain to erode the sectors support beams, until they detach from their blimps. Then the sector falls into Satan's hungry arms. That's what's happening to 7B, actually. Quite the tragedy, isn't it? 7B was built to last, and now there's nothing we can do to save it. Sector 7B will detach; it's as inevitable as the rain. But, give us a few months, and Sector 7C will replace it. So be fortunate you live in a blimp, pumpkin. You'll never have to worry about the surface. And someday, you'll be among the bright minds to defeat Satan. Doesn't that sound lovely?

LIGHTS OFF on Businessman's study as MEON continues to work. QILL thinks about their life.

QILL

(Rambling)

You ever live in a blimp.

MEON

95 percent —

QILL

You live in a sector, and all you see is yellow and orange sky. Yellow orange everything, and it's so warm too... But when I was a kid, before we lost all our money, my parents took me vacationing to a blimp above Sector 3, and, and it had white clouds, blue skies, and beautiful sunsets inside. Sometimes it was cold too. You know what that feels like? 67 degrees? They really made you feel safe. You didn't worry about acid rain, or the surface. They were that good.

MEON

98 percent. Fuck where is it —

QILL

When I was younger, I read about 8K detaching, and at the time I thought "Why are sectors still detaching?!" So I asked dad, "Why are sectors still detaching?!"

MEON

99 percent —

QILL

And he said "I don't know, but it'll never happen to you, so don't worry about it." That stuck with me, MEON. Up until today I thought "It'll never happen to me. It could never —

MEON

Oh my god IT SENT!

A giant weight falls off of QILL and

MEON's shoulders.

VOICEOVER

(Distorted)

5 minutes until -Sector 7B- descends / / into the surface.

MEON

(Celebrating, to VOICEOVER)

// FUCK YOU TOO ASSHOLE! FUCK YOU!

QILL

FUCK YOU FUCK YOU!

MEON pulls out their communications device, and calls the number given to them. The BUSINESSMAN receives the call in his study.

BUSINESSMAN

This is the CEO of Amendix Enterprises.

MEON

Meon. 7B. Your companies data is safe, send evac.

BUSINESSMAN

Oh, yes yes, you're one of the transporters. Good work.

Businessman TAPS on his communications device.

BUSINESSMAN

They'll arrive in 4 to 8 minutes, give or take.

MEON

What?

BUSINESSMAN

Well, they have to get ready —

MEON

What do you mean they're not ready?!

BUSINESSMAN

Correct. We weren't sure if this operation would / / be —

MEON

Sir, *sir we have five minutes left* —

BUSINESSMAN

I'm sorry to hear that, but you'll have to / / wait.

MEON

My coworker can't FUCKING WALK!

BUSINESSMAN

That's not my — !

The power to Sector 7B is suddenly cut off. SUDDEN BLACKOUT IN BOTH STUDY AND OFFICE. BUSINESSMAN leaves. MEON and QILL hurriedly TURN ON their light sources.

QILL

Is evac coming?

MEON

(Tense)

I, I don't know ...

QILL and MEON wait. The silence is deafening...

MEON

Qill, my— my friend and I were living at their parents house in Sector 8K, actually. Six years ago.

QILL

Did they make it.

MEON

My friend did. Their parents didn't.

QILL nods. MEON anxiously shines their light around the office.

QILL

What was 8K like?

MEON

Same rotten smell, same musty colors... There were just, museums there, and I was working at one of them when 8K detached.

QILL

Wow.

MEON

Yea. They, needed their old artifacts transported. So they gave me and four others two choices; stay overtime, or lose our jobs. We all stayed overtime. Three hours to collect everything. We did it in two and a half. After that, the power went out. So we sat, and waited. We knew Evac was coming, and surely they'd give us enough time to transport, right? Well, by the time they came, we had fifteen minutes to transport everything. So... So we loaded the small things, like books and plays, and left behind paintings, and statues,

and the last piece of an Earth pyramid —

QILL

Earth wasn't habitable —

MEON

A *Venus* pyramid. Point is, so much art was destroyed —

QILL

We're just unlucky, MEON —

MEON

And that was that. 8L replaced 8K, and there was no mourning. We just, forgot about all that art, and all those people who —

QILL

I would too.

MEON

Jesus Qill, h—how did we get here?!

QILL

I don't know —

MEON

Why are sectors expendable?!

QILL

Ask the CEO guy.

MEON

But he's not gonna tell me —

QILL

Then no one will. I don't know what to say, man.

MEON

But we have to do something about it, Qill. This, this can't be the rest of our lives. I can't live in another sector and do this shit again and again and again —

The sound of a large structure
CREAKING. Sound of FAINT PANIC
AND SCREAMING, coming from outside
the office. They've been SCREAMING
THE WHOLE TIME, but now MEON and
QILL finally hear it.

QILL

You think it's instant?

MEON

What?

QILL

If we, if we reach the surface alive, will Satan crush us instantly?

MEON doesn't know how to respond.

QILL

I, I don't wanna feel —

The sound of an EVAC BLIMP
LANDING. MEON GETS UP
immediately.

MEON

Qill, Qill they're here. Come on! Get up!

MEON tries to help QILL get up. But they
can't, MEON's gloveless hand hurts too

much. QILL falls back down.

MEON

(Panicking)

QILL, there's no time. Come on! COME ON!

QILL lays there, breathing heavily. The creaking grows LOUDER. Sector 7B is DETACHING. MEON RUNS for their life. QILL tries to get up, but collapses to the ground, groaning in pain. The creaking gets LOUDER and more VIOLENT. QILL lays on the ground... And tries again to get up. This time, they're on their feet. Flashlight in hand, QILL limps towards — SNAP. QILL's flashlight GOES OUT. Sector 7B DETACHES from it's blimps, and PLUMMENTS towards the surface of Venus. BUSINESSMAN sits at his study, in the middle of a phone call. A drink of wine in hand.

BUSINESSMAN

A real shame that is. But we have the other one, right? That's good. We'll uh, we'll move [him/her/them] to, Sector 4A. That one hasn't detached, right? And as for Qill... make some room on the plaque board, will you?

MEON walks in, drained of life.

BUSINESSMAN

Thanks. Goodbye.

BUSINESSMAN hangs up and notices

MEON.

BUSINESSMAN

(Grinning)

Ah! There you are. Why don't we celebrate?

The **BUSINESSMAN** offers MEON the drink.

BUSINESSMAN

You've earned it.

MEON doesn't take it. They just stare at the **BUSINESSMAN**.



Ligia Vilches

BRICK ROAD

//FRAGILE. DO NOT TOUCH//

I am overwhelmed by the love
I have for my mother.
It's an ache that I've packed
Into a box, neatly labelled
With a sign that says
"Fragile. Do not touch".
Because my love for her comes
At the cost of my sanity
Trying to juxtapose love
And dislike, maybe even hate
Like they're two playing cards
And if I line them up evenly enough
At least one
Will disappear.
I am overwhelmed by the grief
That comes with understanding my mother.
A butcher bird that impaled herself
Who took a spile to her
Dreams and drained out love and passion
To make room for a daughter
who came a decade too early
And a husband who shed off promises
The way one sheds uniforms
at the end of workdays.
I am overwhelmed knowing
That even if there are scars from words
That she used like whip over my skin,
Well versed in the art of using language
To go far deeper
Than a hunting knife ever could,

learnt from her time
In a home that gave her no love
But calloused hands and bruised bones
And a body broken
and stretched after childbirth,
She raised me by the skin of her teeth.
She raised me with so much love
That she sometimes did not have any
Left for herself.
She raised me despite men
Who took hammers to her once again
growing dreams. She raised me
with the imperfections
That you would see in a child
Playing house house
In a playground
Because that's what she was
A young mother who tried her best
To raise her daughter.
I have the root of grief and hate
Placed under my tongue
But it has blossomed into nothing
Other than love.
The foundations are unsteady.
Dangerous.
Might blow up in your face in a fit of rage
Where you scream I HATE YOU
To the one person in your family
That loves you more than love itself.
But it's love nonetheless.
Packaged neatly into a box
Labelled as
"Fragile. Do not touch."

NOT REAL

“Vanessa, you have to fly home now. It’s time. I am dying.” Dad tells me he wants a sane person around. He needs me — we have a special bond. Yet my mind is a blank. I’m a blank; have been for the last three weeks. Dizzy. I know I need to be there for him. I should have gone three weeks ago... when we first found out. But I can’t believe this is real. Cannot be. Real.

“I’ll be there tomorrow, dad. No matter what. I promise!”

I hang up and open the window. The crisp evening air hits my face. The cold chases the dizziness out of my body, my mind. It all happened so fast; Dad began getting headaches that wouldn’t go away, then nausea. When the headaches turned to migraines Mum forced him to see a doctor. It was too late. “Your imaging results indicate a significant mass in the pancreas. Advanced-stage pancreatic cancer is characterised by metastasis. Palliative care will be essential for symptom management, however, treatment options are limited at best.”

The doctors tried to reassure Dad by stating how well he was — given his terminal condition and old age — and that we should be grateful. Like it meant Dad wasn’t dying. Which he was. One week they said or one month. One year would be a miracle — but who knows. This was three weeks ago.

I start packing mechanically, throwing random items into a suitcase just to fill it, overlooking the purpose of

whatever goes in. I stop by the photo on my nightstand. I look at the faces in it: Mum, Dad, me, and my siblings Petra and Eduardo over a plentiful dinner table. I don't want to go. I don't want to see it, see them. I don't want it to be real. And if I go it will all be.

If I go, Dad will die.

If Dad dies, I cease to exist.

I stop packing and check for flights. I find last-minute return tickets from Dublin to Rio de Janeiro leaving in a few hours, for only 2200 euros. While I book it, dozens of texts flash on my phone — all from our family group chat.

Mum

I should never have made him go to the hospital.

He gave up the minute he heard cancer.

God knows how long he would have lived if he didn't know.

Petra

@Mum Stop!

That's not how diseases work.

Will I bring dinner?

Mum

He gave up, I am telling you.

I'm glad I managed to sign him out of there.

He needs to be at home.

Eduardo

My flight arrives tomorrow at 13h00.

@Vanessa When does your flight arrive?

Maybe we can share a taxi?

Petra

@Mum Have you eaten?

There in an hour or so.

Stuck in traffic.

Mum

He is deteriorating by the hour.

I keep telling him.

But he isn't fighting back.

Me

@Eduardo My flight arrives at 16h45.

Mum

He doesn't listen to me anymore.

He just sits there and watches TV.

I put the phone down and walk to the fridge where I search for a bottle of wine. I find one in the fruit-and-veg drawer. It's been open for a few days so I sniff it first. Not too bad. I pour. The content of my glass is sharper than expected but not vinegary enough not to be wine anymore. I go back to my suitcase and take out its contents. I sit down with my glass and list the items I will need for the two weeks I booked to be back home in Laranjeiras. The weather will be hotter than I have experienced it in two years.

It feels wrong to pack summer dresses to go see my father die. Sunscreen. Sunglasses. Flipflops. Hat. By the time I close the suitcase I am ready for a summer vacation

I know will not happen. I don't want to check my phone again but I need to set an alarm for an hour before I need to leave.

Mum

I'm so glad you are both flying home.

I'm grateful to have Petra here but we really ought to be together, all of us.

Petra

@Eduardo Let me know if you need me to collect you from the airport.

I'm at the supermarket now and they have the black bread you used to like.

Mum

Your father looks awful, he's so thin.

I told him, he has to stay positive.

Please don't get a fright when you see him, we all have to stay strong.

Eduardo

Vanessa and I would never leave you alone, Mum.

You know we are always here.

Petra

@Mum Nearly there!

Mum

I know but New York and Dublin are very far away.

I'm just glad we'll be together tomorrow.

Petra

@Vanessa Send me your flight details.

Me

Just rest Mum.

We'll be there soon.

Outside, the city is silent. I feel like the only person in the world. I walk to the bathroom and turn the lights off, but leave the door slightly open to let a sliver of light in. I undress in the dark. The violent pressure of the hot water on my head gives me pleasure. The sound of the water gushing down fills the room, bringing me back to the waterfalls of my childhood. The disorienting sensation of showering in the dark washes me away. In this sacred wet cave, it doesn't matter who I am, where I am, or what is happening. Here, I feel real. There is just water. And sound and force and darkness.

I want to let go, to give myself to this unknown, this blackness around me.

My alarm rings and I am out of the trance. I already miss the safety of my home — far away from family, doctors, treatments, medications... everything I don't want to deal with, can't deal with. Except now I have to leave my haven in Clontarf, the place where I thought nothing could find me. I have to leave the place where Dad is not dying and fly to the place where he is. My sweet, kind, quiet Dad.

At the airport, I find myself lingering, looking at all the shops, wondering if I should bring Mum and Petra a gift. It would be expected if it was a normal visit. But this is no normal visit, I know. Still, I wonder whether to buy them

perfume or face cream. I wonder what to get Dad. If I buy him a really long book, will he somehow live long enough to finish it? And if I buy him gold cuffs, will he live forever? I stroll through the shops, not knowing what to do until I hear my name on the speakers. I am late to board. I run to my gate and make it just in time.

On the plane, I simply cannot focus. I try a film, a documentary, a show. Nothing distracts me. I look outside the tiny window and stare at nothing. My legs restless. I have so much energy, I need to get up. I need to run laps. I need to do something, anything. It bothers me that I don't recognise this feeling, this disquiet.

"There is no question regarding whether Dad will make it. He will not. Why aren't you here, Vanessa?" Petra's words spring to consciousness and I suddenly want the plane to crash. I want to die. I want everyone to die. Then I won't have to see Dad. I start shaking. I try to stop, but it only makes the shaking more intense, and I don't know what to do or what is happening to my body. I begin to laugh like I haven't in years. I laugh uncontrollably.

"How is it possible that three weeks ago Dad had migraines and now he's dying?"

An air hostess approaches me and asks if I am okay. She smiles, her words are polite but her voice breaks slightly. Her amber eyes are alert and her brow furrowed. She is afraid. She asks me to calm down. Giggling, I tell her Dad is dying, and tears roll down my cheeks. I laugh and cry at the same time, however, the truth is that I am neither sad nor happy. I am lost, hopeless. I can't go see Dad die and then go buy his coffin with my siblings.

I sense dozens of eyes on me and the feeling only makes me laugh louder. I'm trembling and chuckling. I know I must look insane. Yet, the awareness of having an audience awakens something in me. Like a revelation. A sign.

This is not real

Dad will not die

I will not cease to exist

When the airplane lands, I don't get up to get my bag. I don't elbow my way out of there as fast as I can. I take my time undoing my seatbelt, getting up. Two air hostesses approach me and ask if I need help, if I need them to call anyone. I am uneasy about turning my phone on so I let them arrange a taxi for me.

On the way to my childhood home, I watch my old city from the back seat of the taxi. The scenery changes every minute. Poverty, riches, poverty, riches. Life, death, life, death. When the car stops in front of our building I wonder if I will burst. I don't. I feel sober. Strangely sober. Like I know everything. I'm calm and accepting. The doorman, Mr. Nelson, who has worked here for at least fifteen years, recognises me and opens the door.

"I am so sorry, Miss Vanessa... for your loss", he says gently and awkwardly, staring down. I want to correct him, I want to tell him Dad is still alive. But as I begin to speak, it occurs to me that he might know something I don't. I might be too late. Tears silently fall on my cheeks and I do not remember breathing in the elevator. I do not remember breathing while I stood outside our door waiting for it to open.

I am here but I am not here at all.

I don't ring the doorbell. I stand there and take comfort in the seconds I have before Regina, our maid, opens the door. She hugs me gently and tells me she is terribly sorry. She takes the small suitcase from my hand and gestures towards the living room, where I can hear Eduardo crying and Mum consoling him by demanding he be stronger. They see me. We hug, we cry. We console each other. I speak words I instantly forget.

Mum grabs my face hard and stares at me, one eye at a time, like she always does when she's in one of her moods. "Bring him back," she says, releasing my head from the grip of her sticky hands. She sits down again and sips her cognac. Eduardo looks at me awkwardly, he doesn't say anything, he just looks at me. Our intimacy has always been our shared silence.

I am too late. I cry. I let my body fall and with my face buried on the couch cushion. I scream. "Dad? I want my daddy!"

"Don't be like this, girl," Mum orders.

A hand pulls me up. Petra. She takes me in her arms and begins singing the lullaby she sang to me all my childhood, her voice grave but smooth. It always tuned me like an instrument. Whenever I was overwhelmed and could do nothing but scream and cry, she sang the old rhyme in my ears until I was soothed and tuned inside.

Until everything was quiet again.

"Come. Come see him," Petra says.

I follow her down the corridor decorated with photos,

framed diplomas, medals — our ancient memories. We were always together. Never quite close but together. Dad sober, Mum less so. My parents' bedroom is much colder than the rest of the apartment. Mum set the aircon system this way. I look at the furniture around the room, then at the sky outside the window. It's impressive that I can hear the birds with the windows shut. I focus on their music as I avoid at all costs looking at the bed.

Petra asks the nurse to leave. I stay by the window. Dad looks small under the blanket. Petra sits beside Dad, fixes his pillow, and whispers. "Guess who is here? Your favourite child, Vanessa," she turns to me but there is no envy on her face this time, no blame. Then Dad coughs. I wasn't too late! I was so tired, I didn't have the energy to second-guess my fears. I approach him feeling lighter than I've ever been.

This is all I wanted, all I needed. Bubbles of joy burst through my entire body. I feel effervescent. I bend in gratitude and kiss his forehead.

"Dad! God... I missed you!"

"I missed you more"

The ebony eyes that gaze at me are calm. The wrinkles on his mocha skin have sunken deeper. My tears fall on the cracks of him and I wonder what it would take for them to cure him. Is it a matter of how many tears I cry? Or of what I'm thinking when the tears fall? Perhaps there is an incantation I can recite?

How does one manifest a miracle?

"My child, I just wanted you to sit with me. Like the old times."

“Of course, Dad.”

We watch television. I hold onto his swollen, cold hand. He changes channels from football game to football game. You’d think a person wouldn’t care about championships in a time like this. But it seems to be all Dad wants to focus on. “Goal! Goal!” He goes, celebrating. I am unsure of what to say. There is nothing I can do so I just watch football with him. And nap. A nurse comes in three times a day.

Eduardo busies himself going over paperwork: health insurance, life insurance, the will. Petra busies herself overlooking Regina’s duties — to Regina’s terror. Mum busies herself sipping Hennessy and studying the healing powers of the brain. She relentlessly encourages us to detox our bodies and minds. “Stress kills. Love Heals.”

Three days go by. And with every day a new pain in his body. Dad asks me to search old football matches online. The classics, he calls it. We watch them all. “GOAL!” He chants. The men in old-fashioned t-shirts and bad haircuts look middle-aged compared to the players of today. The men — who have fat on their bellies — run across fields and perform skilful tricks that lead to points, to victories. I begin to understand why he needs football at a time like this.

This is not real.

“Goal!” I cheer with him.

Dad and I have a special relationship. We could always be honest with one another and always have been. Now he looks at me like we have a new understanding. I am beyond grateful to be able to be here with him. Whenever

things got too hectic at parties or Christmas, Dad would always sneak into his bedroom to watch something on TV. It didn't matter what was on. It was how he cleared his mind. Whenever I saw him sneaking in, I would follow and sit with him. We didn't say much, we mostly watched telly together.

"I need to tell you something," Dad says, his voice grave and precise. He turns the volume on the television down. "I meant to say it before, to your mother... to you. I should have said it. I didn't know how. I am not good at things like this," he avoids my gaze and stares at the window instead.

"There is a boy. Well, a man... His name is Pedro."

Petra walks in holding a tray: grilled chicken, salad, and coconut water. She kisses Dad gently on the cheek. "Love you," she tells him. The tension in my silence palpable, she adds, "Sorry to interrupt, Vanessa", as she walks out.

"He is your brother."

"What?"

"It was a mistake."

"What the fuck, Dad?"

"I couldn't die without telling you. I can't tell the others though. You have to understand. It was a mistake. But you deserve to know and I hope you will forgive me one day. You deserve to meet him... if you want to. I know he does... He doesn't know I'm dying, Vanessa. I didn't know how to tell him. I was hoping... maybe you would. I thought, perhaps, he could come over as your friend... an old friend... So he can say goodbye. I am only asking you to lie for me this one last time. After I go... you can tell everything. Can I give

him your phone number?"

I stare at him, mouth agape. Dad has another child. With another woman who isn't Mum. Dad, who barely has friends, barely goes out or does anything. Dad, who never is anywhere Mum doesn't know about. Dad? It can't be true. I chuckle. Dad looks at me, puzzled. He goes through his phone and shows me a photo of him with a man who looks eerily like Eduardo.

"He is forty-nine, like Eduardo. So... I really couldn't have said it at the time. Then never."

I burst out laughing. "Is everything a lie?"

"You're scaring me, Vanessa."

"Dad... Is this real?" I laugh louder.

"Are you taking your meds properly? Are you seeing your doctor?" The panicked voice asks.

Not Dad's voice.

Of course. This is not real. I knew it!

I put the pillow on Dad's face and press down, his arms too weak to stop me. On the screen, the players keep running. "Goal!" The narrator shouts enthusiastically as I watch Dad stop fighting. I feel strangely relieved. This is not real. Not real. I will wake up and be me again. Everything will be back to where it was.

When it was real.

Ashley Howard

BODY-PICKING AND BAD POSTURE

I could have been so beautiful
but I'm not.

Instead I hunch on and over bathroom counters,
listening to avoid getting caught
under clinical LED slabs,
lightbulbs in knots,
or just any that provide a clear view of my skin.

Not smooth like porcelain
or pristine like fair-maidens.
Instead I madden over every bump, rise,
discoloration.

In a trance
without a trace
of what's to be done,
and waiting on my to-do list bar
none
I dig, scratch, rupture, all I see fit.

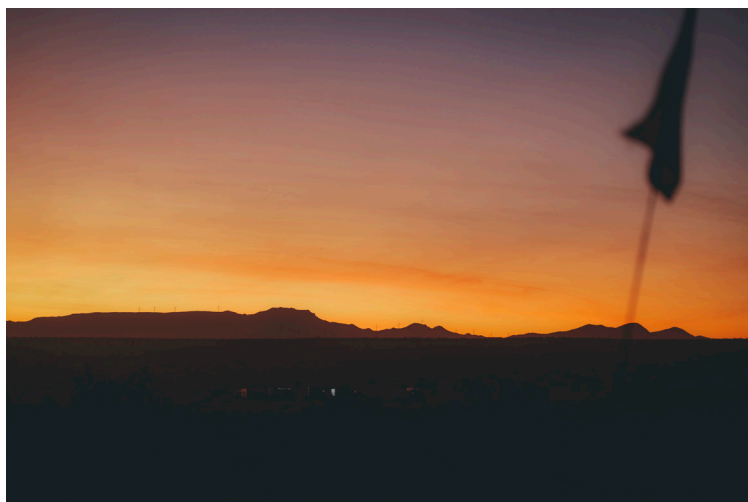
Where I could have stood like
the enchanting greek statute.
I slouched and
slagged any assets that
could've properly grown into their size.

Instead I am the envious medusa.

Grotesque and experiment-esque as an unfinished sketch
with face, arms, legs and breast
wrought with pencil strokes
curved as nail imprints.

Splayed vulnerable
on crumpled sand-toned paper,

regretful I never straightened myself out.



Dawson McCormick

CAL CITY

PLAYER

When I get to Jasmine's house, I see her sitting on the porch smoking a cigarette. I step out of the car and open the gate as she runs up to me, throwing her cigarette in the dry grass.

It's 8 p.m. on my first day back for winter break, and I've just gotten into Sherman Oaks.

"Hey dude," she says and squeezes my shoulder, looking directly into my eyes. Clearly she's high because we're not good enough friends to warrant that kind of look. But I mirror her excitement and hug her, asking her if she has anything to drink. She says yes and spins around to lead me through the front door. Jasmine's a big girl—not fat but the kind of hulky big that lets you know she has Nordic ancestors. She could probably sling me over her shoulder and carry me to safety if my house were on fire and I had passed out from smoke inhalation. Tonight she's wearing a puffy jacket that says *Team USA* over her heart.

Inside, she pulls a few bottles out of the freezer and tells me to have whatever I want. Usually her boyfriend's here—a tiny dude with a severe widow's peak who calls me *player* and carries most of the conversation—but tonight it's just her. The kitchen smells weird and Jasmine keeps hovering close and trying to stare into my eyes nonstop, so I ask her where the bathroom is. She points me down the hall.

Jasmine doesn't think of herself as a dealer, or not like

a *dealer's* dealer, because she only sells to people she knows. But since her parents cut her off last year, she's been getting more serious about it, like selling ketamine and ecstasy and "Quaaludes from the 80s" that she says she buys on the "darkweb eBay." Like, *oh-kay*, Jasmine, those are probably Xanax and Adderall and baby powder that some crackhead presses in his basement in Lima, Ohio. But anyway, she doesn't want to be thought of as just a dealer, so I have to go through the motions of having a drink with her and asking about her dad's recent documentaries before she'll give me my coke.

The bathroom's walls are seafoam green and so glossy that I can almost see my reflection. While I'm peeing, I hear the front door open and Jasmine starts yelling. There's a second girl's voice echoing back at her and they keep getting louder and louder, arguing about *I can't trust you anymore* and *You fucked up too and won't even admit it*. I turn the faucet on. My phone starts buzzing, and I put it to my ear.

"Hi," I murmur, and it's Brett and he's saying something about dinner in Pasadena but I'm too distracted to really hear him.

I tell him I'm in and to text me the details. Wash my hands and look in the mirror and squeeze a whitehead that I know I should leave alone but then I hear the front door slam shut so I come back out to the kitchen. It's just Jasmine's voice now. She's talking to someone on the phone in the living room, so I make a gin and tonic, searching for any kind of citrus when she comes in.

"Here," she says, reaching into the fridge and handing me a near empty bottle of lime juice. "Sorry about that

bitch. She's owed me a thousand dollars for like two years now." Jasmine makes herself a drink, too, which means she pours a lot of vodka in a glass and tops it off with a couple ice cubes. "Said she needed it to prosecute some guy who sideswiped her on PCH and that she'd pay me back when she was out of court."

"Oh," I say, taking a sip and looking down at my phone. Brett's sent me the info and told me to show up in an hour.

"Says she only borrowed 500 from me, but that's bullshit. Lying as usual."

Jasmine looks at me expectantly so I tell her that's awful and what a shitty friend and she looks pleased. Tells me to wait here and she'll get my shit.

I get to Pasadena early, so I sit in my car outside the restaurant and smoke a few cigarettes. Turn the radio on and get sick of the music, switch to NPR and get bored, so I turn it off and call Alana.

"Hello," she says, and it's kind of muted because she's on speakerphone.

"I'm having dinner with Brett at Wolvesmouth. You should come."

"Who is this?" She says. Shouldn't my face have popped up on her phone?

"Taylor."

"Oh, hey." She sounds annoyed, and I wonder if she's still upset about the end of summer. "I'm actually on my

way; Brett didn't tell me you were coming."

"Oh," I say. "He just invited me an hour ago." There's a long pause and then I say I'll see her soon and hang up before she can respond.

I'm sitting there for ten more minutes before Alana arrives, and I watch her park and touch up her makeup in the rearview mirror and walk in the building before I get out of my car and follow her. Inside, she hugs me quickly and says that she wants to get a drink.

We both order gin and tonics with our fakes. The bartender, a thirty-ish woman with big gold hoops and brown lipstick, looks at Alana's ID and then up at her face, does that two more times and then a phone starts ringing on the opposite side of the bar and she goes to answer it. Probably her ex-husband calling about visitation rights, again.

"Remember when we bought these from that thirty-year-old who was dating Jessica?" Alana says, putting the ID back in her pocket.

I nod, even though she's not looking at me.

"What was his name? Jackson? I kept telling Jessica he was a pervert." Alana's nervous, I think, twisting her fingers and pressing her lips together hard. She's gotten really skinny since I saw her last and I wonder if she still takes her sister's Vyvanse. "Remember that party at Jessica's where he kept giving coke to Olivia's little sister? Fucking pervert."

"I think they're still together," I say.

"Yeah, and she just turned eighteen like last month. Fucking Dateline shit."

She laughs kind of and then it's silent except for some sports commentators picking apart a basketball game on the TV behind us. I'm bored and Alana must be, too. She pulls her phone out and I tell her I'm going to go smoke a cigarette, but she doesn't look up or say anything. On TV, some incredibly tall basketball player gets knocked into a row of cheerleaders and his elbow connects with a redhead's nose and blood starts spilling out of it, but she just smiles and clutches her pom-poms to her chest as the camera zooms in closer and closer on her face.

I smoke two cigarettes before Brett shows up. He's shaved his head since I saw him last and, tonight, has wrapped a thin silver chain a few times around his left ear.

"Taylor," he says, walking up to me.

"Hey, Brett."

He wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me hard into his side. Sometimes when he does this, he'll relax his arm down the length of my body and, when I'm dizzy from his cologne and BO, will work a couple fingers under my pants and snap the elastic on my underwear. Tonight, he's shaky—his legs, his arms literally buzzing.

He releases me after a second and bounces up and down on his toes. He starts asking me questions about Ithaca and classes and what people I'm seeing and if I've watched Chloe's new film, but never lets me answer.

I tell him Alana's at the bar, and he asks what the fuck we're doing out here then, and pulls me inside.

Alana's finished her second gin and tonic by the time we find her at a table by the bar, talking to some guy she knows from Parson's. His name's Troy and he's tan and has tattoos creeping up his neck from under his shirt. His eyes keep drifting between me and Brett, and he tells us all to come to his place after we've finished eating. Alana smiles at Troy as he speaks, and I wonder if she's fucking him or if he's gay or if she even knows him that well. Looking at her, I can't stop thinking about summer and how different everything was. How much healthier she looked then and how often she would yell at me for not listening.

Once we've been seated, we all realize we're not hungry, so Brett orders oysters and we all get gin and tonics. Alana asks Brett about New Hampshire, and I envision an enormous, muscled basketball player bursting through the doors and crashing through the restaurant, everyone smiling as he knocks them to the floor because it's not really a big deal, and he was just doing his job.

I realize it's silent and they're both looking at me expectantly, but whoever asked me a question doesn't repeat it. Alana says she's drunk and wants to go to Troy's, so Brett asks the waiter to put everything on his father's tab and we leave. We all get into Brett's car because he's drunk the least, and after he takes a bump from the little vial in his pocket, we take off.

August, and I'm stretched out in this older dude's backyard. My back's thick with scratches from rough lawn-chair fabric with little red flowers and stripes up and down and his hands running

up my back. I'm not arching, not extending into his palm, his pinch on the new slide of my body. He ignores my heavy pulse. Dips a finger in his glass of ice water and paints it down my vertebrae. My phone buzzes and when I answer, it's Alana, asking me where I am, again. I tell her I'm on my way and turn onto my back so I don't burn.

In the car, it's quiet again, and Brett keeps having to ask Alana where to turn because she's looking down at her phone the whole time. She's in the passenger seat, and her long hair is dangling over the back of her seat and sweeping across my knees.

I'm tired and dizzy from all the liquor, slouched low in the backseat, so I take a bump from the gram I just bought and am starting to feel it when Alana turns around to look at me. I can tell it's about to happen because she's staring at my mouth—can't bring herself to look me in the eyes.

In this moment, I feel sorry for her or something, stuck here in the Valley—watching her mother doing Pilates in front of the TV, having lunch with her father every few weeks at Duke's, listening to her sister throw up after every meal.

I see Alana crashing to the floor, high and uncoordinated and tired, Alana motioning for me to help her out of bed and into the shower, Alana's face popping up on my phone, calling me nonstop. Alana's stick body turned around in Brett's car to face me, trying to slough off some heaviness onto me, giving me pain in my lower back. "You're doing it

again,” she says, still looking at me.

“What?” I say, too loudly.

“Not listening to me.”

“I’m drunk.”

“You’re an asshole.” She sort of yells this, and Brett turns the music down in response—I lean forward.

“*You’re* drunk,” I say. “Take some more Vyvanse.” She turns around to face forward. “Or here,” and I toss my little baggie of coke into her lap. “Take as much as you need.”

“Fucking faggots ruining my life,” she says in response, and pulls a key out of her purse to take a bump. It’s quiet in the car then, besides Brett’s K-pop playing quietly and the sound of all of us sniffing intermittently. By the time we make it to Troy’s house, deep in the murky hills of Malibu, Alana’s taken three more bumps and braided, then unbraided, her hair. I’m not paying attention to anything.

The house is gated—gaudy twists of bronze and iron—and Brett has to hit the buzzer on the intercom over and over until, after a tense minute or two pass, the gate swings backwards smoothly. The driveway extends for a couple hundred feet, and we roll along it until we reach a group of twenty or so cars, glossy black or tan convertibles and SUVs. We park and Alana gets out and strides into the house, this enormous thing, without waiting for us. I tell Brett to go in without me—that I want to smoke a cigarette—and so he also walks in, leaving me alone in the dark glow of the porchlight.

Alana's bed, September, and she's snoring, staccato gravel. Her arms and legs splayed out like tattered seaweed in the surf. She's sweating. With one finger on her neck, I can feel the vibration in her airway, the dim jumping of blood in deep passageways; with my whole hand, I can feel the abnormal hotness running through her. Her fever. I inch closer to her—want to soften her with my cool body—but when her eyes flick open, I shift back.

Two cigarettes later, I follow them inside. Nobody's in the foyer except for some guy crying into his phone, but I hear people screaming and laughing down the hall and follow the noise to find a group of about forty circled around one guy. He's big and tan and muscular and completely naked and lying on his back with his arms covering his face so that his elbows are over his mouth. The way his chest is moving up and down, I think he's crying or maybe moving in some choreographed way, and when I've been standing there at the edge of the room watching him for a few seconds, he brings his arms to his sides and says "Next" really loudly and starts to shake. With his face uncovered, I can see the blood pouring out of his nose and mouth, down his cheeks and onto the parquet. Everyone in the crowd starts screaming and some people are laughing so hard they're doubled over, and one small redheaded girl with lots of braids tied up into a ponytail comes forward and stands above him, her feet planted on either side of his chest. She takes her phone out of her pocket and bends over and takes a few pictures of his face, then puts her phone away, draws her right arm back, and brings her fist down hard into his

face, grunting with force of it. Everyone is laughing now. The guy screams and flinches back in pain, recoiling into a fetal position and holding his legs tight into his body. After she takes another picture, the redheaded girl walks back into the ring of people to rejoin her friends and the crowd gets quieter, people turning back to their friends, taking sips of their drinks. I don't feel great.

I see Alana and Brett standing with Troy, and walk over to them. Alana doesn't say anything to me, but Brett hugs me into his side and Troy smiles at me.

"Hey, Taylor," he says. "How are you?"

"Fine," I say and extricate myself from Brett, who's already talking to some guy who I think I recognize from high school. Alana's looking at her phone. "Kind of tired, actually."

"Do you want something?" Troy pulls a little vial out of his pocket and offers it to me, but I shake my head.

"No, I think I'm getting sick or something. I want to go home."

"We can't go home yet," Alana says, still looking at her phone.

Troy keeps looking at me, smiling. He takes a step closer to me, but when he's about to speak, the boy on the ground screams "Next" so shrilly that I flinch. Troy puts his arm around my shoulder like he's trying to comfort me, and I close my eyes because I don't want to see him looking at me anymore.

When I open them, Alana's walking forward towards the boy on the ground. She looks severe, but good, and I

realize that she's cut her dark hair to shoulder length since summer. Her outfit, a big loose-knit black sweater over a tan bodysuit, highlights her thinness, makes her look older, and I can't remember if she's seventeen or eighteen, this girl—my best friend—standing over a cowering boy in a mansion, hidden in the hills of Malibu. She looks over at me, and I think she's crying or something because of the way her eyes are flickering and looking directly into mine, and I can't hold her stare. She bends down over the boy and I can feel Troy's body heaving as he laughs harder and harder. Alana makes a fist and I don't feel good anymore, and when she draws it back purposefully, I close my eyes and wait for the scream, the hard body laughter, and the silence that follows.

Sean Ahern

THE SHELF LIFE OF DUNGEON PIXIES

I met you in the dungeon of Martigen-zu
you bought me a beer
and liked my skeleton-mermaid tattoo.

You caught and stuffed me into a
wide-mouth mason jar,
arms folded in under my breasts, legs
pressed to chest.

Your entire body turned to
tighten the lid,
slipped me to seal for the shelf.

I could see your face glass
warped, looking past
for pickled persimmons, peaches
someone else-

When you came for me again, you
shook me and shook me, turned
me sideways
butter knife pressed to unseal-seam to
pry open for release.

Finally, you pulled me out for
my brine
to make cocktails at a party
till everyone is besotted, bent, and bound so you
can pickle them just like me.

A HWAMEI'S SONG

Yèlíng checked the kitchen windows, pulling the curtains closed. The oven's timer buzzed, its hum reminding her of cicadas in the summer. Outside, the sun slipped behind the clouds, and in seconds, the room darkened. She stretched across the counter, reaching for the top shelf where she kept her grandmother's favorite candles. Tiny flames flickered to life, casting shadows that danced along the walls in time with the rain beginning to patter against the roof. Yèlíng hurried to the oven, peeking inside just in time—her mooncakes were perfectly golden, not a hint of burning. Humming an old tune under her breath, she grabbed a towel and carefully lifted the tray out, the scent of warm dough filling the kitchen.

Soft candlelight glowed in the cozy darkness of her little cottage, tucked away in the countryside. She set the mooncakes on a wooden dish to cool, then moved to the living room, lighting more candles as she went. With the curtains drawn tight—keeping out the night and whatever might lurk beyond the windows—the room felt safe, warm. Finally, she brought her freshly baked pastries to the table and set a pot of green tea to brew. Her hands moved without thinking, muscle memory guiding her, just as her grandmother had taught her.

The water in the kettle whispered as it neared a boil, a low murmur that blended with the rain drumming softly against the windows. Yèlíng moved instinctively, reaching for the delicate porcelain teapot her grandmother had

once used. It was a pale celadon, its glaze smooth and cool under her fingertips. She lifted the lid and placed a small handful of dried tea leaves inside—twisted tendrils of jade and brown, carrying the scent of earth after the rain. She poured a splash of hot water over the leaves, just enough to awaken them, swirling the pot gently before pouring it out. This first rinse was not meant for drinking; it was a ritual, a quiet respect for the tea itself. Then, with steady hands, she filled the pot again, letting the water steep. The leaves unfurled slowly, releasing their essence—grassy, floral, with the faintest hint of roasted chestnuts. Steam curled into the air, wrapping the kitchen in warmth. As she waited, Yèlíng let her mind wander to the next book she planned to read. Something with poetry, perhaps. Or maybe an old Wuxia novel, where heroes roamed misty mountains and justice was served with a blade. She smiled to herself. Lately, she'd been craving stories of adventure, of distant lands and bold spirits. There was a book on her shelf she had been meaning to start, filled with ink-brushed landscapes and verses that spoke of longing and homecoming. Maybe tonight, with tea in hand and mooncake crumbs on her fingers, she would finally open it.

She poured the tea into a small cup, watching the liquid settle—a perfect golden-green, clear and inviting. The first sip was delicate, a balance of warmth and bitterness, deepened by the quiet of the room. The storm outside could rage if it wanted; inside, she had everything she needed. Yèlíng quietly approached the bookshelf, her fingers trailing along the spines of well-worn books. The candlelight flickered against the lacquered wood, casting shifting shadows across titles written in elegant, fading calligraphy.

She found the one she was looking for, its cover soft from years of handling. The edges of the pages were slightly yellowed, the scent of ink and paper carrying the weight of time. She pulled it from the shelf and cradled it in her hands for a moment. This was one of her grandmother's favorites, a tale of wandering swordsmen, hidden sects, and honor bound by destiny. Yèlíng had always meant to read it, but life had a way of pulling her attention elsewhere. Tonight, though, with the rain singing against the window and the scent of green tea and mooncakes curling in the air, it felt like the perfect time. She returned to the table, setting the book down beside her teacup. The pastries had cooled just enough, their golden crusts promising sweetness within. She picked one up, breaking it in half, revealing the smooth lotus paste and the single salted egg yolk inside—a bright, golden center, like a hidden sun. Taking a small bite, she let the flavors settle on her tongue, the sweetness of the lotus blending with the richness of the yolk.

Flipping open the first page of the novel, she traced the characters with her fingertips before settling in to read. The story unfolded before her, vivid and alive, pulling her into a world of mist-covered mountains and honor-bound warriors. She took another sip of tea, letting the warmth spread through her chest. Outside, the storm rumbled, distant now, fading. Yèlíng's eyes traced the elegant calligraphy as she turned the first page. The tale began in a land of mist and blood, in an era where the Song Dynasty's borders trembled under the relentless pressure of Khitan Tartar raids. Beneath the sky of an empire locked in conflict, there walked a man both feared and revered—a Yaksha, bound to the wheel of Samsara, cursed with

memories of every life he had ever lived. His name had changed countless times, his titles rewritten in the annals of history, yet his essence remained the same: a guardian of sacred knowledge, a protector of secrets buried beneath the weight of dynasties. In this life, he was called Qiao Liang, a man whose beauty was said to rival celestial beings, whose strength was whispered about in the courts of Kaifeng. He was the silent force standing between the empire and chaos, yet his soul was weary.

The novel painted him in stark, poetic brushstrokes—a figure draped in black and crimson, standing atop the walls of a besieged fortress, watching the horizon darken with enemy banners. He had seen it before. The rise and fall of kingdoms, the ambitions of emperors who called themselves sons of heaven, the blood spilled for power that meant nothing in the endless cycle of existence. He longed for something he could never have: true death, an end to the wheel that dragged him through suffering and duty, again and again. But fate was not kind to Yakshas. Qiao Liang was bound by celestial decree, by his own honor, to continue playing his role. And in this life, his duty was to the Song court—to become a consort prince through a political marriage meant to secure fragile alliances. The emperor's decree was final. He was to wed a royal princess, bind himself to the dynasty he had protected from the shadows, and embrace responsibilities he did not want. And yet, how could he refuse? He had walked these halls before, seen the rise and ruin of men who defied fate. He knew that no matter what he did, the cycle would drag him forward.

As Yélíng turned another page, she felt the weight of

his sorrow, the burden of endless memory in a world that demanded loyalty from those who had long since tired of living. The tea in her cup had cooled, forgotten as she sank deeper into the story, drawn into the restless existence of a man searching for a peace that would never come. Yèlíng blinked, realizing her vision had blurred. A single tear traced a warm path down her cheek before slipping onto the page. She hadn't even noticed when she had started crying, but the sorrow of the Yaksha, his exhaustion, his yearning for release—it weighed on her like something real, something personal. She let out a slow breath, closing the book for a moment. The candlelight flickered against the rim of her untouched cup, reminding her that her tea had long gone cold. Without thinking, she lifted it to her lips and drank. The once-delicate bitterness had deepened, sharpened, but somehow, the coolness of it soothed her. She needed grounding, something to bring her back from the haze of emotion the novel had stirred. And yet, as she sat there, still lost in thought, she couldn't stop herself from imagining another path for Qiao Liang—a different fate, one where he wasn't shackled to duty and suffering. What if he could find something worth living for? Someone?

Her mind wove a different tale. A love so strong, so undeniable, it shattered the weight of his past lives. She saw him turning away from that cold, political marriage, choosing love over duty, choosing her. He would look at her the way no one else ever had, with longing that defied centuries of pain. She imagined the warmth of his hands, calloused from battle yet gentle as they traced the curve of her cheek. He would whisper her name like a prayer, a tether to the present, to the one life he would finally want

to keep. And in each cycle, no matter how many times fate sought to separate them, they would find each other again. His exhaustion, his despair—they would fade in the presence of their love. He would no longer crave an end to his existence because his existence would be hers, theirs. And no emperor, no duty, no cruel celestial decree could take that away.

Yèlíng exhaled, realizing how tight her grip had become on the book. The fantasy had swallowed her whole, leaving her chest aching with a longing of her own—one she couldn't quite name. The rain outside had softened to a mere drizzle, a quiet hush against the windows. The candle flames swayed gently, their shadows dancing along the walls. She ran a finger over the edge of the page before opening the book again. She had to know what fate truly had in store for him. The battle raged on the pages before her, painted in ink and poetry. Qiao Liang's legend grew with each war he fought, his presence heralded by the haunting song of a hwamei bird. The enemy feared it—the eerie beauty of that melody drifting through the misty fields before his arrival, a warning that death was near. No one knew if the bird was a specter, a spirit bound to him, or merely a trick of fate, but when the song came, the slaughter followed. He was a guardian, a demon, a warrior bound by destiny. Yèlíng imagined how this birdsong could become something else—something intimate. A secret signal, a love note between them, a call meant only for her ears. She could see herself in the pages, waiting in the hidden corridors of a palace or the depths of a moonlit forest, hearing the hwamei's cry and knowing he was near, coming for her. A forbidden meeting in the dark, a stolen moment where duty could not reach

them.

Thunder cracked overhead, so loud it made the wooden beams of her house tremble. Yèlíng flinched, gripping the book tightly as the storm outside roared. For a brief second, it felt as though the sky itself was scolding her—as if the heavens were furious that she dared to long for something that could never be. She shivered, shaking off the foolish thought. Pulling her blanket closer, she reached for the teapot and poured herself another cup. The candle by the window flickered wildly, its flame shrinking and stretching like it, too, was whispering warnings to her. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the storm passed. The rain softened to a mere drizzle before stopping entirely. A strange stillness settled over the night, wrapping around her home like a quiet spell. She hesitated, then stood, her bare feet pressing onto the wooden floor as she moved toward the window. Slowly, she pulled the curtains apart. Beyond the glass, the village lights flickered in the distance, their glow reflecting off wet rooftops. The roads were slick with rain, glistening under the moon's hazy light. The sight soothed her, chasing away the last of her unease. It was just a storm. Nothing more. On impulse, she unlatched the window and pushed it open. The crisp autumn air rushed in, carrying the scent of damp earth and fallen leaves. Yèlíng closed her eyes, breathing it in, letting it ground her. Then, she heard it. The song of a hwamei. Her eyes flew open.

A shiver ran down her spine, every hair on her arms standing on end. Her ears strained against the silence, but there it was again—that unmistakable, lilting melody, cutting through the night. Her breath caught in her throat as an old car rumbled up the road, its tires crunching against

the damp gravel. It wasn't unusual to see visitors from the city exploring the countryside, but something about this moment felt... different. The car slowed to a stop just outside her home. Yèlíng watched, frozen, as the driver's door opened. A man stepped out, unfolding himself from the vehicle with an almost practiced grace. The candlelight from her window flickered, casting just enough glow to illuminate his face. Her heart lurched. She had seen him before. She was sure of it. His sharp, elegant features, the way he moved as if he had walked these lands a hundred times before, there was something impossibly familiar about him, like a face glimpsed in a dream, or a memory that had slipped through the cracks of time. In his hands, he held an old paper map, slightly crumpled from use. His dark eyes lifted, locking onto hers.

And then, he started walking toward her.

Melanie Hess

TIMING

Life bit hard...

set me adrift

too far away to notice

the way

pine trees rain seeds

stars resemble fireflies

flowers hear bees

and the way the crow remembers my face

too far away to notice

how

your cheeks are seashell pink

your spine twists towards the sun

your heart whirs like a sewing machine

and how your fingers pick at loose threads

fluttering me closer

Von Simon

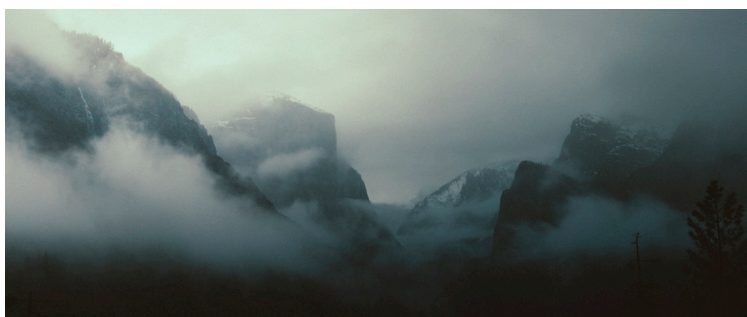
ETHEREAL DISEASE

You remind me of this girl I dated in high school
A small girl
With brown hair
And an infectious laugh

I wanted to go swimming in her Petrie dish
And catch her ethereal disease

You remind me of this girl I dated in college
A pure girl
Clean Breath
Milky arms swaying on our smoldering walks to the 7-11

I gave her my heart
My mind
My body
I gave her my ethereal disease



Dawson McCormick

YOSEMITE

THE ANCHORESS

Sister André says it is time to pray again.

Kneeling, I wince as my knees touch the cold stone floor. They are sore and red.

But I dare not keep her waiting.

The words come easily. I have recited them a thousand times. Out loud, I say the prayers the Sister tells me to. In my heart, I pray that God releases me from this tomb. He had to sacrifice his only son for our sins, but I, too, am a sacrifice. My parents had to give me to the nuns because they could not afford to feed me anymore.

Little Cateline could not go because she was too young. Louis and Robert could not go because they help papa with the farm. Marie could not go because she helps mama with the house.

But me, I could go.

The nuns will care for you, my parents said. They ignored my tears and my pleas. They said the nuns would feed me, but my heart was too broken to eat. They said they would come visit me, but Sister André needed a companion for her five years of confinement. She chose me.

My parents bringing me here was a sign from God, she said.

The girl who was sealed in with her during her last confinement died after less than a year. She was five when they put her in with Sister André.

Now she is nothing.

The girl who Sister André chose for her first confinement did survive. I tried to speak with her, but she hides from people now, broken.

I am strong, but I do not know if I am strong enough for this.

Sister André says it is time to pray again.

I kneel on the floor, spotted with my dried blood. Yesterday, the penance was harsher than usual. My pain is nothing compared to what Jesus suffered at Calvary, the Sister says.

“Fire!” Sister André cries suddenly. She pours what little water we have to share over my red hair. I try to get some in my mouth. Beating me about the head with her hands, she screams that demons play in my hair. She calls for shears through the narrow openings the masons left us at the bottom of the wall. Thankfully, no shears come.

Mayhap God is listening.

“I know you tempt me, like the Devil tempted Christ!” She screams. She knocks over the chamber pot as she hits me. “Wicked! Wicked girl!”

Tears no longer flow down my cheeks. I cannot spare the energy to cry. Every bit of my strength must be saved.

Huddled in the corner with her stained, grey habit wrapped around her, Sister André mumbles, barely above a whisper. I, too, stay quiet, lest her mood rise again.

The Sister cares not about me. Never has she asked who I am or where I am from. She has never listened to a

word I have uttered. I have stopped trying to talk to her. It only makes her mad.

Sister André says it is time to pray again.

If faith were a vessel for holding water, each prayer I am forced to say would be a drop emptying from mine.

“Only through great sacrifice can we bring ourselves closer to the lord,” she says, “to know Christ’s eternal struggle.”

A soft breeze loses its way and enters our tiny chamber, bringing with it the scent of honeysuckle from some faraway dream where I am free and running in the fields again. It disappears and the unwashed stink invades my nostrils.

I wretch.

She slaps me.

It stings.

Sister André says it is time to pray again.

She raises a stone above her head and scratches another line into the wall. Each one represents a sunrise. So many lines are on the wall. So many more need to be scratched before I can be free again.

“Filthy Cathar!” She screams at me.

I tell her my family is Catholic, but she does not listen.

“I was like you,” she says. “My family gave me to Sister Genviève. She ... taught me.” Her face scrunches in pain. “No!”

Her hands swipe at an invisible threat.

Surprised to hear my own name, I ask, “Is that why you

chose me?"

But she is gone again. Hands clasped, she prays and weeps to herself.

I dare not disturb her.

A small loaf of bread is slid into the room at the bottom of the wall. I dive down and put my mouth to the opening.

"Let me out!" I scream. "Please!"

Footsteps scurry down the corridor. "I am sorry," a tiny voice calls back.

"Such insolence!" Sister André cries.

I know the beating will be painful.

Curled up in the corner, she sleeps, like the kingdom's smelliest cat.

I confess.

In these moments, I wonder if I have the strength to be the Cain to Sister André's Abel.

Would God forgive me?

I swear I will not be as vile as her. But I fear if I do not act, I may be Abel, too.

My dress, stained and thin, barely covers a skeleton with but a wisp of spirit.

Only memories keep me alive. I remember running through wet grass, staring at the blue sky, hearing the buzz of bees, smelling mama's fresh bread, feeling papa lift me in his arms.

I open my eyes.

Darkness.

Vileness.

A witch from my nightmares.

Sister André says it is time to pray again.

My knees no longer hurt. The skin has grown thick.

I recite the words, empty of feeling.

Hands claw at my dress.

It rips.

"No!" I scream.

"Let the lord see you as you really are," she says.

I stand.

We stare into each other.

"You let me be," I say to her.

She draws up her small frame and raises a hand.

"You let me be," I repeat.

She lowers her hand.

"God will judge you, filthy Cathar."

I step back.

She lunges and clamps a talon into my hair.

"You will be judged! You will be judged!" She screeches, knocking my head on the wall.

We struggle. With every bit of strength, I push her off. My head stings.

Sister André smiles. She holds up a lock of my hair. It drips blood.

"You will be judged," she hisses.

She sleeps. Her slight snoring fills our dank cell as I shiver.

It is time to pray again.

I kneel.

“Dear lord,” I whisper. “I feel I have been reduced to an animal. I have to act as the animals act to survive. Please forgive me for what I am about to do.”

Kaylee Stull

TOMBED MARRIAGE

My tomb was desecrated
Robbed and destroyed
By vandals of young
Passion.

Fingers touching,
Grazing legs scratch across
The grass I fertilize,
Green edges that disintegrate
And wither as their
Consummation's climax
Laughs at my body's
Attempt at life.

Even in my death,
I cannot help a bud
Bloom.

Even in death,
The grounds turn
Cross facing down.

The devil knows what
He's doing. That's why
He brings him here...
Every day—

Hips grinding
On my gravesite
That denies
Our sacred vows—proof
Left only by a nail bed that
Always grows,
On a doomed ring finger
That never moves or twitches

Buried deep down,
Melded to bone
The many women
Cannot see on his
Bare finger.

—So I can watch
As he ruins my finest hour,

An hour that sits on a stone
That's now cut in half,
Face down

And never to be read again

KILLED BY ASPHYXIATION.

NO PRICE TOO HIGH

In the precise center of the dirt and crabgrass courtyard of the Condor Arms stands a weathered statue of Mary. Time has stripped all but a notion of blue from her robes, leaving her the color of rancid cooking oil, except where pigeons have added their comments in splashes of ochre, dark brown, and white. The we're-all-in-this-economic-collapse-together apartment community was built on the site of a defunct Bible-themed amusement park, and the developers saw fit to leave Mary, as well as a section of the *coliseum* wall behind. The wall is inconveniently located in the middle of the main thoroughfare so that a person trying to expend the least amount of energy to get into the courtyard must veer left or right to go around it. Like she always does, Darlene drifts left.

I might as well be Mary, left behind and stuck in place. The thought tips her sideways, and she scrapes her arm against the wall. Rubbing away the hurt, she enters the courtyard. Mary's companion of late is a zombie dog that took up residence at the Condor Arms a few months ago. No one knows who it belonged to, so it is someone else's problem. *Arroooowooowoo*, it bawls as Darlene walks by, and Darlene bawls *arroooowooowoo* right back because why not, that's why? And what does it matter anyway? The lament never ends, not even if she screams at it or throws stones. It never moves its desiccated self except to rotate around the statue of Mary like the hour hand of a clock. Due to the uncanny accuracy of its timekeeping, some of the residents have



Illustrated by Mina Citlali

begun calling it a miracle. Miracle or not, Darlene wishes it would shut the hell up.

According to the dog, or *zog*—Darlene snorts, pleased with herself—it's around four in the afternoon, which means the food truck carrying the government-funded barbecue will arrive in about an hour. She picks up her pace but only for a few steps. The air is sultry, and she journeyed to Green Meadows and back because she and Wayne (mostly Wayne) burned through their state-supplied weed already. Green Meadow's resident drug dealer, Joe Bob, is open to barter. The Arms' assigned dealer, Petunia, is asexual, which leaves Darlene up the proverbial creek. Darlene has no money and few belongings. Even if she were prepared to part with an article of clothing, it wouldn't do Petunia any good. Darlene wears small, sometimes extra small depending on whether she has traded food for other necessities, and Petunia is six foot two, one eighty.

In the mercifully shaded cement stairwell, Darlene hauls herself ever upward. The graffiti on the pock-marked walls is bedraggled and achromatic. Prehistoric cave paintings have better endurance. Yet again, she reminds herself to put her name in for a ground-floor unit.

Arroooooowooo.

When she reaches the fourth floor, she bends at the waist and sucks wind.

Right away, old Mrs. Nosy-Pants opens her door. "Who's there?"

"Santa Claus."

Mrs. Nosy-Pants slams her door.

Darlene straightens and takes a tentative step. Her legs feel like overcooked spaghetti. Mmmm. *Spaghetti*. Her stomach howls. If the dog were still alive-alive, it might tip its head quizzically in response.

At unit 405, she shoves the key home and turns the handle.

Arroooooowoo.

As soon as the door opens, a waft of Eau de Kevin (fart, dust, tiger lily) rushes to greet her. Kevin is Wayne's zombified brother. He's seated in the corner where a dining table would go if they had one. Luckily, he's been undead long enough, he's non-verbal. If she had to listen to him and the dog—*no!* Occasionally, Kevin shivers, but that's it. She supposes if they ever get a ground level unit, someone will have to carry him down the damned stairs. Or they could just toss him over the railing. It isn't like he can become more undead.

Wayne fell asleep wearing his VR goggles again, which means he'll have deep grooves in his forehead and parentheses beside his eyes for hours. If there's any meaning to be found inside those punctuation marks, she has yet to discover it. Wayne is sprawled on his back in the middle of the sagging king-sized mattress that takes up most of their one-room abode. Darlene raises her knapsack above her shoulder and drops it on the floor. The clatter neither penetrates Wayne's sleep, nor Kevin's undead state. She steps over Wayne to get to the sink and a much-needed glass of water, *accidentally* kicking him as she goes.

"Throw some cinnamon on the fire." He sits up and removes the goggles. "Oh, hey you."

Darlene holds up her pointer finger and finishes downing the glass of water. "Oh, hey you back."

"Did you score?"

She lifts a brow. "What do you think?"

"Yes." He makes a victory fist.

"I'm going to lie down," she says.

Wayne flops back onto his pillow. "Me too."

"No. You're going to keep track of time, so we don't miss the barbecue." They're both impressively capable of sleeping through an alarm.

He sits up again, rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

"Get all the way up." She crosses her arms.

"I won't sleep. I swear."

"All the way, Wayne."

"Fine." A cloud's shadow drifts across the picnic that is his expression.

She gestures to her tired, sweaty self. She doesn't have to look in the mirror to know her chest and shoulders are sunburned. He slept while she schlepped.

The cloud floats by without releasing rain, and Wayne rises from the mattress, yawning and stretching. "What do you think, forty-five minutes?"

"Half an hour." She curls up beside him and sticks her thumb in her mouth. Sleep seizes her like a mugger, but moments later the zombie dog's keening startles her awake and sets her heart to pounding.

"This friggin' dog."

“What’s that?” Wayne calls from the bathroom.

“Nothing.” She has come to hate it. Maybe if it retained even a hint of its former doggy self (a glimpse of Harley, a flash of Luna or Buster), she might feel more charitable, but its essential dogginess has ‘left the building’ just like Elvis from the Better Times.

After a few minutes of eyes-squeezed-shut seething, she admits her nap has also left the building.

Wayne is now seated on the floor, back leaning against the wall. Heaven forbid, poor, dead-from-a-bee-sting Kevin was made to sit on the floor. This sentimentality puzzles Darlene. It made sense back when people were actually dead, and you buried them or burned them and didn’t see them anymore. But now the dead are a chronic condition, like emphysema or diabetes. She’s lucky, she supposes, she was orphaned young and hasn’t been saddled with her parents. Her neighbors in 407, for instance, only have room for a twin mattress because a bunch of their family members were wiped out by the last pandemic, and the apartment is chock-a-block with zombies. Considering they’re both over six feet tall, they must spill onto the floor every night. Really, they need to rent two units—one for them, and one for the undead, but who has money for that?

To kill time, she scrolls through news feeds. Scientists have, apparently, discovered a way to send people back in time, and everyone is lining up for a chance to return to Better Times. Darlene tries to picture herself in such a world. She’d have a job and a proper place to live. Her stomach gurgles and squeals, and she adds *regular meals* to the fantasy. In truth, it’s easier to imagine living on Mars or

fighting aliens because she's watched enough movies to fill in the many blanks.

A *Breaking News* banner scrolls, letting her know that, nearly to a one, the world's various leaders have jumped the queue and made the journey. What will happen now, the banner wonders, with no one to lead us? Darlene gapes at the dismal interior, sharing with it a nearly overwhelming sense of irony. It gapes back.

She punches the mattress and gets up.

"Those goggles are going to grow into your skin," she snipes at Wayne, but he's so involved in whatever he's watching, he doesn't hear. Or he's ignoring her.

She freshens up in the bathroom and then stomps over to the front window. Despite the noise, Wayne doesn't budge. Down in the courtyard, the zombie dog is at five o'clock, and here comes the food truck. Her mouth fills with saliva, and the Pavlovian response makes her feel slightly more sympathetic toward the dog. Who knows what it might have wanted out of life, but here it is, stuck at the Condor Arms, forever circling Mary. And let's not talk about the Mother of God— She, certainly, must have hoped for more.

Wayne is so still, Darlene wonders if he died sitting there while immersed in a different world. Then his breath hitches and settles back into rhythm. *Lucky me. I won't have to deal with two undead roommates.*

She opens the door. It would serve Wayne right if she left him behind. He was the one who was supposed to keep track of time. She takes a single step but stops, one foot

inside and one outside the apartment. *I'm on the threshold.* It's a strange thought, one she might pick at like a scabbed-over mosquito bite if she weren't hungry enough to chew off her own arm. She *ta-ta-ta-tums* her fingers against his goggles. He spasms, yells something about cinnamon, and yanks the goggles off.

"You fell asleep."

"Shit. I'm sorry. What about the barbecue?"

"Truck just arrived."

He gets to his feet, runs his fingers through his hair, and hikes his shorts. "You're the best."

"And don't you forget it."

The door closes behind them. "What's up with the cinnamon?" She says.

"Cinnamon?"

"Never mind." The effort-reward ratio is too low.

Arroooooowoooo.

Of course, Mrs. Nosy-Pants leaves her apartment just in time to cut them off. How could someone lose a footrace to a slug and manage to dart so quickly? Judging by the smirk she throws over her shoulder, she did it on purpose. Darlene tugs on Wayne's hand, intending to pass, but Wayne resists.

"She's old," he whispers.

In the stairwell, Darlene imagines the graffiti is a secret language only she can decode. *Push her down the stairs*, it says and, *More food for you and Wayne*. She ignores the message but yanks Wayne past the old broad when they reach the third-floor landing.

“Dar!” He says.

“Young people. So impatient.”

Darlene flips her the bird, and she and Wayne barrel down to the courtyard where a too-long line has already formed.

“See. We should have blown past her sooner.” She looks for a friendly face, someone who might let them cut in, but each and every one is closed tighter than a miser’s fist.

“I’m sorry, babe. It’s just my Momma raised me to be respectful.”

“You mean stupid,” she mutters deep under her breath in a place where eyeless fish swim round and round.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The line advances ever so slowly and the zombie dog shifts position, moving toward six pm. *Arroooowooowoo.*

“Shut up, already.” Darlene glares at the dog.

“You should show more respect.”

Darlene turns. Her ears know the voice, but her eyes insist they confirm this utter bullshit. Mrs. Nosy-Pants is right behind them. Either she kept up as they raced down the stairs, or she has bamboozled her way through the line.

“I think you had better shut up as well.” Darlene bares her teeth the way the dog might once have done back when it had some wherewithal.

Mrs. Nosy-Pants blanches and stares at the ground.

“Did you bring the weed?” Wayne scratches his butt and

shuffles his feet.

And we do the hokey-pokey and we turn ourselves around—
“No. You can wait until after dinner.”

“I need to take the edge off. This place, this life.” He tips his head back and stares into the vacant blue above. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. ‘No price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.’”

“Oh, babe.” She rubs his arm. He hasn’t quoted Nietzsche for ages. Sometimes she forgets that once upon a time he’d been a college student, that he’d aspired. Still, it comes to her—he is her edge that needs to be taken off. The relationship expired a while ago, but she has been too lethargic to do anything about it. Just look at the effort she expended today to get him more weed.

As though the Universe itself applauds her sudden clarity, Joe Bob whooshes into the courtyard followed by an extravagant contrail of dust. The solar panels on the roof of his beat-to-shit pick-up truck glint orange in the lowering sun. Darlene smiles a smile so huge that drool trickles from the sides of her mouth. The smell of food is driving her wild.

Arroooooowoo.

“You didn’t, you know, roll him for a little extra, did you?” Wayne’s eyes are huge as he caves inward.

“As if.”

Joe Bob is not one to be fucked with. Unless you’re ready for zombification, that is. Earlier today, Darlene witnessed him cut off a guy’s hand for trying to short him. After, with his dick in her mouth, he’d confided, “I totally

hate violence, but sometimes it's the only thing that sends the right message." When he came, he added, "No one will try that shit again. Ever." She'd been impressed by his ability to multitask.

Joe Bob jumps out of the pickup and cuts to the front of the line. And no one is going to say *boo*, though Darlene enjoys watching the battle wage across each and every face. She steps out of line, boogies over to Joe Bob, and presses her ample and real, thank you very much, breast against his arm.

"Make that two," Joe Bob tells one of the people dishing out the food. "And don't be stingy." He slides a little sumpin-sumpin across the counter for their trouble, then smiles down at her.

"I had a lot of fun earlier." Darlene slurps drool back into her mouth.

"You and me both, kitten."

Joe Bob gives her the first plate. She thanks him a scant second before she takes the first bite. The burger doesn't contain a molecule of real meat, but she doesn't care. She only wishes she could chew faster. Or more efficiently. Or mainline it straight into her belly. Joe Bob guides her over to the concrete half wall separating the apartment from the courtyard. She could kiss him for his thoughtfulness.

Suddenly, food is lodged in her gullet and won't go down. Her eyes water, and a weird gurgling sound comes out of her mouth. Joe Bob reaches into his cargo shorts and passes her a beer. An actual bona fide beer. The fluid eases the wad's passage, but the bubbles rip the inside of her nose.

She sneezes, then burps.

“That hurt.” She rubs her throat, then takes another sip. “God. This is delicious. I bet all those asshole leaders are sitting around in the past drinking real beer. Supposedly, you could get it just about anywhere.”

“No kidding. Did you hear they took the plans with them, and then rigged the machine to blow so no one can follow?”

She hadn’t. “That’s messed up.” Though she says it with appropriate vehemence, all she feels is bliss as the calories hit her bloodstream.

Wayne is still in line, looking around, probably for her. Joe Bob’s jaw flexes as he chews, two anvils battling to gain the upper hand. Darlene wants to suck on the spot, pull in his strength like a vampire.

Arroowoowoo.

“Whose dog?” Joe Bob says.

“Nobody knows. But it never shuts up.”

“Someone should haul it away.”

“Yeah.” But who? Not her. In life, it was a large dog, a mastiff cross maybe and probably weighs more than her.

“I have a proposition for you.” Joe Bob sets his half-empty plate next to him.

Darlene scooches off the low wall and kneels between his legs.

“No. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

Darlene looks up, coy. “I figured because of the beer.”

“Maybe later.”

“Suit yourself.” Darlene returns to her spot next to him. “Proposition?”

“Yeah. I want to head east. New York. More opportunity. If you wanted to tag along—”

“Yes, yes, and hell, yes.”

“Good. Great. I feel like we get each other, you know? Like we understand how it all works.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Your boyfriend. He doesn’t get it. It’s all over him.” Joe Bob draws parentheses beside his eyes. “He wants everything to be how it used to be. He isn’t cut out, you know what I mean?”

“Do I ever.” Darlene wants to sprint around the courtyard. “When do we leave? I can pack my stuff in, like, less than five minutes.”

“Friday. I have one more delivery and then we can go.”

She kisses him on the mouth.

“I know someone who can hook you up.” He looks a little uncomfortable, and she braces herself for bad news. “Get you a GCC implant.”

Whoa. That’s a golden ticket. Those implants use nanotech, so cutting edge, you can never catch a single STD. Which means you are the only guaranteed clean sex around, which is a big seller. There are rumors the nanotech boosts your whole immune system. No more getting laid low from this pandemic or that one.

“I mean, you’d have to share your earnings.”

“No, duh.”

“Cool. Well, I’d better split. I’ll pick you up Friday morning.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Thursday comes and goes. Darlene doesn’t tell Wayne she’s leaving because she doesn’t want to hear it. On Friday morning, she wakes too early and must lie there, waiting. Between happy anticipation and the dog, she slept about five minutes. If she were staying with Wayne, she’d wake him up and start a fight. Since she isn’t, she holds the urge inside, warning herself not to go off on Joe Bob when he arrives. She doesn’t want to ruin a good thing.

Arroowwoowoo.

She scrolls through the news and only just catches her blat of amusement by crushing the blanket over her mouth. A message arrives from Joe Bob, letting her know he left early. He’s nearly there.

“Down in 2.” She presses send, rolls out of bed, grabs her bag, and heads for the door.

Wayne raises his head and looks at her, but his eyes aren’t focused. They’re watching whatever it is he dreams about, which probably contains cinnamon. He mutters something, and his head drops back onto the pillow. Kevin shivers.

Darlene leaves apartment 405 for the last time, closing the door quietly behind her. Mrs. Nosy-Pants opens her door right away. The old cow must never sleep.

“I’m watching you, Missy,” she says.

Darlene scrolls through a slew of responses, but she's moving too fast. She's already in the pock-marked stairwell before she lands on *Take a picture. It'll last longer*. Down she goes, past the secret-message graffiti. This time, it gives her new advice. On the second-floor landing, she stops at the *Break Glass in Case of Emergency* box. The emergency must have happened long ago because there has never been glass, not as long as Darlene has been a resident of the Condor Arms. The axe, however, remains mysteriously held inside by rusted metal clamps.

Darlene tugs it free. Testing its heft, she completes the journey to ground level, asking herself whether she is really going to do this. In the dusty courtyard, the way her legs stride toward Mary and the dog tells her yes, yes she is.

Arroo—

The axe cleaves the dog's lament and its skull. Darlene doesn't have time to feel anything about what she has done before Mrs. Nosy-Pants shouts, "She's done it." Her words plummet to earth like baseball-size hail. "That bitch murdered the miracle dog."

Doors fling open as though every single resident of the Condor Arms had only been waiting for this call to action.

"Get her," someone else shouts.

"Kill the miracle killer."

Darlene considers the axe, but the situation requires something more along the lines of an automatic weapon. Adorned by birdshit, Mary remains resolute and inscrutable. Darlene drops the axe, runs across the courtyard, out the entrance, and past the coliseum wall. Judging by the shouts

behind her, the mob is closing in.

She spots Joe Bob. He leans forward over the steering wheel, no doubt wondering if his eyes are playing tricks. Whatever he thinks about what he's seeing, he accelerates toward her. He hits the brakes and skids, timing it perfectly. He's definitely a trade-up from Wayne. The passenger side door opens as she leaps toward the truck.

She slams the door closed, and Joe Bob floors it.

His eyes flick to the rearview mirror, checking the status of the mob.

"Did you hear?" She says between gasped breaths. "The whole time travel thing was a hoax. A trick to get the world leaders into one place and then blow them to Kingdom Come."



Esha Bhogal

DAYDREAMS

ESCAPE TO RETURN

Holly awoke suddenly, eyes wide open, staring up at the slatted ceiling. Her arm was cold. She pulled it back underneath her blanket. She lay there for a few moments, listening to the sleeping sounds of the others. The heavy curtains moved a little in the breeze, allowing some sunlight in. The Prefects insisted on leaving a window open, even in winter. Fresh air was an aid to good sleep, they said. The weak, winter sun lit up the room. It must be eight o'clock, she thought, nearly time to get up. The girls slept with the sun, rising at dawn and retiring at dusk. Winter was a time to sleep and recuperate, the Prefects said. She got up and stepping into her knitted slippers walked softly to the window. The view was of the perimeter wall, the Guardians and their dogs patrolling. Over the wall, she could just about see the tops of trees in the forest. The Guardians did not sleep by the sun but worked in shifts, guarding the perimeter, day and night. She pulled back the curtain and walked into the washroom. Taking her wash bag from the shelf allocated to her, she unbuttoned the flap and took out her toothbrush. The bristles were worn and would soon need replacing. Ignoring the washing instructions poster over the sink, she carefully washed her face and neck – the Prefects might be in the mood today to check. As she was finishing, the bell rang. She could hear her dormitory companions moving about and yawning, beds creaking as they got up. On her way back, she met Fern and Ash. They mumbled a sleepy greeting. She opened the locker and took

out her pinafore. It was almost due for washing, as were her night clothes. She dressed in grey woollen tights, vest, brown pinafore, and cardigan. She put on her sandals and brushed her hair. She waited at the door for the others to line up behind her. Ash, of course, was last; she always was. Holly opened the door and led out of dormitory 4. The girls walked along the corridor past instructional posters pinned along the walls. Girls from other dormitories were also coming out, led by their Dormitory Leaders, waiting for dormitory 4 to pass before following them to the refectory. The girls from dormitory 4 were first in the queue. As Dormitory Leader, Holly liked to have them all in first.

They collected their trays and accepted food from the counter. Dormitory 7 was on breakfast duty. They got berry juice, porridge with honey, and wholemeal bread with apple spread. All nine Governors were sitting at their table, checking the work plans for the day ahead. The girls chorused *good morning* as they passed their table. The Governors smiled and nodded through mouthfuls of porridge. It was usually the only time the girls saw the Governors, as they spent most of the time in their labs.

“The juice is watery”, Ash said, making a face.

When they were finished eating, the Prefects gave them their duties for the day. Dormitory 4 was in the schoolroom. Holly groaned; she hated the schoolroom. The girls lined up at the sinks and washed their dishes. Ash was about to throw her berry juice into the slop bucket when one of the Prefects shouted at her.

“How dare you waste a healthy drink! Get back to your table and drink it.”

The woman glared at her. Ash meekly went back to the table and sat down. Holly washed their dishes and Fern dried them. Ash came back with her empty cup, and they left for the schoolroom.

Of any room in the house, the schoolroom walls had the most instructional posters pinned to them. Apart from warnings about behaviour or punctuality, there were large posters on various subjects, such as how to grow vegetables and fruits, how to care for animals, and how to make paper. Holly had been ill and missed a few classes. The door opened, and one of the Prefects came in. She walked about the room, placing books on each desk. Today, the lesson was on the basics of bacteria and viruses. The class was already a few chapters into the book, and Holly found it confusing. She'd fallen so far behind the others. As the instruction droned on, her mind drifted. They hadn't had a free day in ages. Winter wore on, and the outside world was as dull as inside the house. Sometimes the grey clouds parted to reveal a little blue, but the sun was rarely visible. Even the pages of her book were dull. Holly found it hard to motivate an interest in bacteria that can harm fruit.

At break, the girls picked up their beakers of milk, put on their woollen hats and coats, and went outside.

"The milk's been watered down too," Ash said, frowning.

"Drink it," Holly warned, "or the Prefects will scold you again."

Ash shrugged.

"It feels like winter will never end. The food is so dull

and there isn't much of it."

Holly felt it necessary to defend the Prefects. Winter was nearly over; the growing season would soon come and, with it, more variety and colour. The girls went for a walk. They came to the wall and walked beside it. They could hear the Guardians high above them, talking to each other as they patrolled. The Guardians moved on, and it became so quiet, they could hear the wind whistling through the pine trees on the other side. They stopped to listen.

"I'd love to go outside, just once," Ash said.

"Shush," Fern warned, looking nervously about.

They linked arms and moved on, coming to the area where the wall ended and a large double fence began.

"I heard some of the Prefects say they have gathered enough stone from the new fields to extend the wall next winter, after the growing season," Fern said.

They went up to the wire and peered out. The pine forest grew right to the outside wire. However, the Prefects, with long-handled cutters, had cut away any branches too close to the fence.

"What harm would it be, just to go out for a few hours?" Ash asked.

The other two looked at each other.

"I'm so fed up, I just want to go out and see something different," Ash said wistfully, "it must be lovely in the forest."

They were silent. Holly knew this was what they were all thinking. What harm would it do? However, the wall

and fence were patrolled by the Guardians. The wall was impossible to climb, and the fence was secure.

"It's impossible," she said aloud, "there is no way out, certainly not over the wall. The fence is also secure."

Ash took both their arms and pulled them towards her.

"I might know of a weakness in the fence!" She whispered.

The bell rang for the end of break. The girls ran back towards the house and returned to the schoolroom.

As soon as lessons were over, and the girls had thanked the Prefect, they filed quietly out of the schoolroom and returned to dormitory 4. The dormitory was empty, so they sat on Holly's bed. She and Fern said nothing, but Ash looked slyly at each of them in turn.

"Don't you want to see where the weakness is in the fence?"

Holly moved uneasily. She knew she should report Ash to the Prefects for a talk such as this. Still, she was curious. It would do no harm to just go and see. If there really was a weakness, she could report it to the Prefects, after the three of them had gotten out and come back in again.

Ash walked between Holly and Fern, linking their arms as if they were out for a stroll before dark. They walked along the wall until they came to the fence. They walked past the greenhouses and the animal pens, past the ploughed fields. Holly began to get annoyed.

"Where is this so-called weakness, Ash?" She asked.

Ash jerked both their arms.

"Patience is a great virtue, as Prefect Electra keeps saying," Ash said, smugly.

They walked on. Ash suddenly stopped and looked back. Then she pointed towards the fence.

"Over here," she whispered.

The three girls crept forward.

"Look!" Ash whispered, pointing.

Holly and Fern gazed at the inner fence, at the small space between, no wider than their shoulders, and the outer fence. She was about to scorn Ash for bringing them on a useless errand when she saw the hole under the outer fence. It looked like a wild animal had been digging. It must have been quite a big animal because the hole was wide enough for them to push through, with difficulty certainly, but it was possible. However, there remained the inner fence. She voiced her doubts, but Ash was undaunted.

"We could do the same," she said, "dig a hole on our side. We could do it in our spare time from duties. It wouldn't take us long."

She was panting with excitement. Holly thought about it. This area of the grounds was quiet at this time of year. The winter crop was in, and it was too early for the spring planting to begin. They could not do it with their hands; the ground was too hard.

"We would need to somehow get gardening trowels," she said.

Ash grabbed her arm, her eyes shining wildly.

“Next time we’re on greenhouse duty,” she said, “we could get one then.”

Holly was still unsure, and her thoughts swung wildly from caution to longing. It would be wonderful to walk in the woods, see a little of the world outside the wall. Perhaps it wasn’t all forest. The Prefects and Governors had no interest in anything outside the wall. All they cared about was finding new ways to grow food and build up the herd. Fern said little. Holly could see she was frightened, but she would be led by her two friends.

It was several days before dormitory 4 was on greenhouse duty. They tended seed plants and helped mend the greenhouse wall. It was going to be up to her and Ash to take the trowels. When they were almost finished work, Holly slipped a trowel into the pocket of her pinafore. If she was spotted, she was going to say she stored it there while working and forgot to put it back in the toolbox. Several days later, there was still no uproar about the trowel, so they knew it had not been missed. On their next duty, Ash came away with one in her pocket. She wanted to try for a third, but Holly said that was too much; someone would notice three missing trowels. They were lucky to have gotten away with two.

At dusk one evening, all three slipped away during free time and went back to the fence. The hole on the outside was a bit bigger, they thought. Holly and Ash began to dig

with Fern standing guard. It took more evenings than they had expected to make a hole big enough for them to crawl through.

“Tomorrow night,” Ash said, her eyes bright, “we’ll go out. There will be a full moon. I heard Prefect Ariadne say it was going to be the first clear night in ages, so we won’t even need a lantern.”

The following night, they waited for the others to fall asleep. Holly must have dozed off because she suddenly felt Ash shaking her. She crept out of bed, trying to let it creak as little as possible. They had all gotten into bed early, fully dressed. Taking their hats and coats, they crept out of the dormitory. They had decided to go out one of the side doors, as the main door was opposite the great wall door where Guardians patrolled most often. When Holly opened the door, she was surprised at how bright it was. The full moon hung in the sky over them, its disk blindingly bright. It was so bright, Holly felt she could read a book if she had one with her.

They crept quietly away from the main house and through the animal pens, past the greenhouses. Suddenly, a cow mooed loudly. Holly stopped so suddenly that Fern almost ran into her. She could hear Fern’s frightened, wheezy breathing. They moved silently on until they came to the fence. They brushed away twigs and leaves that they had used to cover the hole. All three knelt in front of it, hesitating.

“I’ll go first,” Ash said, “try to hold up the wire.”

The other two held up the wire while Ash wriggled underneath and through the hole. The wire caught on her

coat twice, but she got through into the middle part of the fence. Holly turned to Fern.

“You go next while I hold up the wire. Then I’ll follow.”

But Fern pulled back, the moon reflected in her round, frightened eyes.

“I’m not going,” she said, “I don’t want to go.”

Holly could see she was almost in tears. Ash hissed at her from inside the fence.

“Don’t be such a baby,” she spat, “we’re doing this together. Holly, push her through.”

But Fern pulled back, ready, Holly felt, to run.

“I’m not going,” she said, through gritted teeth, “you can’t make me.”

Ash rattled the wire angrily, but Holly held up her hand.

“There’s no point forcing her,” she said.

She turned to Fern.

“You keep watch,” she said, “cover the hole with twigs and help us back in when we return. Keep out of sight of the Guardians.”

She could see the relief on Fern’s face as the girl nodded. She helped Holly through and began covering up the disturbed ground. Ash was already through the other hole and helped Holly out. They looked back at Fern, who held up her hand and waved. Ash snorted and turned towards the forest. They walked on a short distance and stopped. Moonlight came through the trees in shafts, and their dark trunks led, one after the other, into darkness.

“Come on,” Ash said, “this looks like a trail wild

animals have made.”

She walked forward, her feet crunching on pine needles. Holly hesitated.

“Will we be able to find our way back?” She asked.

Ash laughed.

“Of course we will. All we need to do is come back the way we came. If we don’t find the hole right away, we can just follow the fence until we find it.”

They walked on, Ash leading the way, zigzagging through the trees. Holly doubted it was really a path they were following until they came to a stream. As they stopped, something splashed into the water and made Holly jump. Ash laughed.

“This must be the stream that runs through our land,” she said.

The moon shone through a break in the trees over the stream. They sat down on a rock and watched the moonlight dance on the running water. A few clouds drifted across the face of the moon. Ash got up and began crossing the stream, jumping over stones so as not to get her feet wet.

“Let’s go on,” she said. She vanished from sight and then called back, “There’s a clearing!”

Holly stood up and began to follow, jumping over the stones and climbing up the bank, when she heard a shout. She froze, then ran forward, almost crashing into Ash, who was running back.

“Something’s out there, in the clearing,” Ash panted, her bravery suddenly deserting her. The girls stood and listened.

They heard a sound—a rustling of the pine needles as if something big was moving towards them. Then suddenly they heard a snort, like heavy breath blown through big nostrils. They turned together and ran back through the stream. They ran, sometimes tripping and almost falling, only stopping when their sides began to ache. They stood together, panting and listening. Something fluttered in the branches above them. Suddenly, back along the path, they heard a screech. They turned and ran again.

“We should be at the fence by now,” Holly called.

They stopped and looked about with no idea where they were or how far from the fence. Ash grabbed Holly’s arm and pulled her on until, suddenly, they came out through the trees and almost collided with the fence. However, it was not the place where they had entered the forest. Ash grabbed and shook the fence.

“We just follow the fence, as you said, and we’ll come to the hole,” Holly panted.

They walked quickly along by the fence when suddenly, lantern light appeared, and they could hear voices.

“Oh no, we’ve been missed,” Ash moaned.

She stopped suddenly and looked back into the woods.

“I think I can hear it,” she said.

She began banging on the fence.

“What are you doing,” Holly hissed, pulling her away.

“It doesn’t matter if they know we’re missing. We have to get back in.”

Suddenly, they found the hole under the fence. Fern was

not on the other side, but Ash threw herself on the ground and began pushing herself under the wire. But suddenly, Guardians appeared at the fence and began pushing rods through the inner fence, beating Ash back. Ash screamed.

“It’s me. It’s Ash, let me in!”

But they continued beating her back. Ash screamed and screamed, while on the outside, Holly looked on in horror. “Get back,” the Guardians shouted, “you can’t come back in.”

Ash had to drag herself backwards, tears running down her face. She and Holly stood staring at the Guardians, who were hastily repairing the fence on the inside. The girls stared at the fence, stunned with terror, while behind them the noise grew louder.

KEEP RUNNING *from As Alive Journal*

*We grow up on stories of stars. These distant sparks we can't
see through the clouds we've made. You look up and imagine
constellations.*

Until you can't ignore the neon lights.

*The sky's always lit up, even at night—the multi-colours bleed
onto the clouds like a psychedelic dream projected on the sky.
And for a moment, it's beautiful. But then you're left with the
realization you'll never see the stars. And then it's gone.*

So, if you get out: keep running.

END OF BROADCAST 98

The words are everywhere. Sides of auto-delivery rigs and pipes, synthesizer factory smoke stacks, cyber body-mod shops, pulse-tattoo parlors, carved into club tables. Or, in this case, mixed in among graffiti. And unlike the rest of the tags, they're written like they're meant to be read.

"Keep Running."

I tap the circular link on my temple, stopping another broadcast from starting, and shake my spray paint. The *rattle-tick-tick-tick* echoes down the alley. Pulling my mask back into place, I flick on the zero-G generator sitting next to me and push myself up to reach the top of my picture. The paint's *hiss* lulls me into a comfortable trance as I work. After a while, the sweet but chemical scent leaks through my mask.

I'm dizzy by the time I kick off the wall to admire my work. The face made of stars looks to the sky. It's staring at the "Keep Running," too.

Blue pings for my location, and a few minutes later the alley's filled with a low thrumming as she pulls up above me in the hovercar. She sticks her head out the window, neon blue hair peeking out from under her hood, and grins. "Get in!"

"Am I going to like this surprise?"

Blue giggles from behind me, hands covering my eyes. "You damn well better. It took long enough." The headphones hanging around her neck are turned up loud enough I can hear the broadcast she left running.

A city of a million people, surrounded by an endless wasteland.

The eye of a storm no one can remember.

"Okay, reach out and open the door."

Blindly, I grasp at air until I find the handle. In tandem, we step into the room. The air is stained with paint, hair dye and blueberry tea. "You flew me all over the city just to take me back to our apartment?"

"Well—I didn't plan on you realizing where we were the moment we walked in the door!"

And like we had some great need for cosmic symmetry, our man-made clouds stretch all the way to the horizon because, hey. We're all that's left. We can be as selfish as we want, so long as we survive.

"Just stay here. Keep your eyes shut!" Blue disappears.

I obligingly cover my eyes.

A switch flicks. Violet light peeks through the cracks between my fingers.

"Okay. Open."

Our apartment is lit up with black lights. And on the ceiling and every wall are stars. Thin lines connect them, plotting out constellations. A whole fabricated night sky—a bedtime story brought to life.

I turn in a slow circle, slack-jawed.

Blue watches me with a hesitant grin. "Do you like it?"

Lacing my fingers behind her neck, I kiss her. "I love it."

"Good. Because the second part's better."

"Better than this?"

A techy friend told me almost 5300 people listen to these broadcasts. Zero-point-zero-zero-five-three percent of the city.

With a knowing grin, she nods. "Mm-hm. It's the real thing."

I tilt my head, frowning. "I don't follow."

“Stars.” She takes my hands. “*Real* stars.” Blue swipes the remains of last night’s dinner off the kitchen table, cleaning nanobots swarming the discarded meal.

Ignoring the whirring nanos, Blue spills a handful of datachips onto the table. “We’re going to leave.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The city. The lights, the clouds, everything.” She puts an order into the panel next to the apartment’s delivery pipe, then turns back to me. “We’ll have to walk. After we disconnect our links, nothing will listen to us, including the hovercar—”

“Woah, slow down. Are you serious?”

“I finally found it.” Blue gives me a manic grin, her pulse-tattoos strobing with her heartbeat. “Hidden in the audio files of Cassiopeia’s last broadcast. Instructions, maps... She figured it out and left it for us.”

But how many would come with me if I found a way out? Who would leave on their own if I showed them how? Who would run into a wasteland for the promise of stars?

The longer her grin sticks around, the sharper the weight in my chest gets. “Blue, no one’s actually ever left the city, including Cassiopeia.”

“Then where did she go? Why did she disappear?”

“She probably just got bored of broadcasting. Every week some random is broadcasting something new, and someone else gets bored and stops.”

Blue shakes her head with a dreamy smile. “No. Cassiopeia got out. She kept running. Other people followed her. And we can, too.” The pipe plays a three-note jingle and a data reader drops into the apartment. “Just hear me out, okay?”

Zero-point-zero-zero-five-three percent of 5300 is only twenty-eight. I bet it wouldn't be many more than that.

Blue sets up the freshly-synthesized data-reader, “It took forever to decode all the audio files,” and starts plugging the datachips into it and unplugging them again. Most of them only show garbled code. One displays a nearly featureless map overlaid with a constellation chart, and an encoded text document. “But I found this. The text tells you how to use the stars to navigate, and this,” she points to a circled area of the map, “is where Cassiopeia went. It has to be.”

“What if there’s nothing out there?”

“I believe there is.”

When I find a way out, I hope you're one of them.

END OF BROADCAST 62

I stare at her. “So, we just wander out of the city and follow stars we can’t even see yet to X marks the spot.”

She laughs, not hearing, or ignoring, the disbelief in my voice. “Pretty much. Once we’re far enough from the city, we’ll be able to see the stars and then—”

“Blue, what you’re talking about is crazy. The broadcasts

are a... living urban legend. Only fanatics are stupid enough to follow them out into a wasteland.”

“You’ve listened to the broadcasts just as much as I have.” Her smile falters, replaced with hurt. “Why bother – why bother with *me* – if you thought it was all bullshit and I was crazy?”

“That’s not what I think at all! I–” Taking a breath, I lace my fingers behind her neck again. “‘Bothering’ with you is my favourite thing in the world. Real or not, I’m eternally grateful to Cassiopeia for leading me to you. I’ve loved chasing this mystery with you–”

“So chase it with me further.” She takes my face in her hands. “Chase it with me all the way to the end.”

“You’re talking about taking off into a wasteland with *no* guarantee anyone’s out there anymore, if there ever was. For what? Stars?”

“Yes, for stars.” She takes my hands. “We can see them together.”

“Just stay here.” Blue starts to say something and I cut her off with a kiss. “Stay with me.”

Blue searches my face, then storms into our bedroom, slamming the door shut.

Blue’s half of the bed is cold when I wake up. *Probably gone somewhere to cool off.* I tap on a broadcast to fill the silent apartment.

There's nothing really wrong with the city. That's the trick.

We don't have to worry about destroying the world, so we can make as many disposable things as we want. Anything you need can be made and delivered to you on demand.

I sigh as I wait for the pipes to spit out breakfast. That dreamy look in Blue's eyes last night... The first time she looked at me like that was when I fell in love with her.

The people in charge let you do what you want. They probably won't stop you from leaving.

Why would they need to? Who would leave? We know there's nothing out there.

Except there is. There's a whole world out there.

We had to know about stars from somewhere.

END BROADCAST 18

Neon lights replace muted sunlight and Blue still isn't back. Worry creeps in like a chill. But when I open the front door to go look for her, a datachip falls to the floor.

Her plans. And on the side, written in blue ink, "Keep Running."

I realize Blue's not coming home.

I tick-tick-tick a can as I mope my way to paint something – the first time I've left the apartment in weeks – stopping at a warehouse with "Keep Running" written across it.

My bag of paint cans hits the ground with a *rattle-clank*. Pulling up my mask, I grab one at random. In low gravity, I push myself off the ground and...

Arm still raised, I stare at the wall, head as empty of ideas as the apartment's felt since Blue left. Almost as quiet, too. I stopped playing the broadcasts. And Blue's not there to make me laugh. Or look at my sketches and tell me which ones she likes—

“Are you gonna use the wall?”

I jolt, sending myself spinning.

Someone else, two paint cans stuffed in their pockets, looks up at me.

I kick off the wall, hanging limply.

“Thanks.” The chemical paint smell starts floating in the air like electricity.

*I know I've said before there's no one keeping you here, but I've
decided to amend that sentiment.*

I groan. “Can you turn that off?”

“Leave if you don't wanna hear it.”

I don't leave. The other artist hops into my gravity field, painting a giant tag.

Half-heartedly, I watch things fly through a tangled web of delivery pipes between buildings. The web stretches higher and higher, from the squat factories to the towering, shimmering skyscrapers.

There's no one physically keeping you here.

And above them, the usual clouds—smooth, dull, unmoving; the city's lights illuminating them like rainbow lightning.

Is Blue looking at the same clouds?

She's not, that's the whole point and She's not, and not with you hit me like colliding hovercars. I nearly start crying all over again.

We're told over and over "there's nothing out there."

But how do we know? We don't know because no one leaves, and no one leaves because we don't know.

The finished tag reads "Follie." Follie stands back, observing their work. They nod, then glance at me. "Wish me luck, I guess."

"For what?"

"I'm heading out."

"Out?"

"Y'know." They nod towards the edge of the city, pulling hair back to reveal a bandage where their link should be. "Out."

A city-wide mind game.

“There’s nothing out there.”

“You been?”

“No...”

“Then—”

“There isn’t!” I throw my paint to the ground. It breaks, sending out a pigmented explosion. “And you’re just going to hurt people by taking off.”

Follie kicks the broken can, adding to the discarded things littering the ground. “I’m gonna take a stab in the dark you’re speaking from experience?” When I just keep glaring at nothing, they ask, “Why’re you so mad? Didn’t you choose to stay?”

“Yeah, and she didn’t!” I wrap my arms around myself. “She’d rather chase after a myth than stay with me.”

It’s effective, isn’t it? Trapping us all in our own minds, with our own minds. No need for walls or border patrols.

“Well, it goes both ways, doesn’t it? I mean,” they look up, face bathed in neon lights, “you’re in here moping because she chose a ‘myth’ over you, but she’s probably out there moping because you chose ‘reality’ over her.”

So if you want to get out, you have to escape yourself first.

END BROADCAST 53

I open my mouth. Nothing comes out. Just because I

didn't go anywhere, doesn't mean I didn't leave Blue, too.

But it doesn't matter now. She's gone.

In mid-air, I curl into a ball. "At least I'm safe here."

"Is being safe worth it if you're alone?"

"I..."

Follie looks to the "Keep Running." "You could go find them."

As they leave, I call out, "What if there's nothing out there?"

They shrug, eyes bright. "Only one way to find out."

I left the black lights on. The stars are on display when I get home. My hand finds its way to my pocket, to Blue's plans. To those words.

Lying down, I stare up at the painted stars, replaying our fight on loop. Blue left, but... how much did I hurt her by staying?

The apartment is so quiet my ears ring.

Pressing my hands to my eyes, a cracked laugh spills out of my throat. "It's not worth it."

I take out the datachip – the "Keep Running" almost invisible in the black light – and clutch it to my chest. *I want to see the stars with you.*

Grabbing a kitchen knife, I wedge the tip under my link, take a deep breath, and twist.

[panting, running footsteps, breathy laughter]

The sun's so bright without the clouds it stings.

*The sky... The colours as the sun sets are more neon than any
lights.*

*The city's vanished beyond the horizon except for the tallest
towers, sticking up like scorched fingers pulling the sun down.*

*If I stare at the dark sea above me, it feels like I could fall off into
it. There are so many more stars than you could ever draw.*

If you get this, I hope you come find us.

Nothing we can make could be as magnificent as this.

ERROR BROADCAST 99 NOT SENT



Illustrated by Cristian Castro

Kelly Gaffney Emling

IN THE COLONIES

Inspired by: “Night, For Henry Dumas” by Aracelis Girmay,
& “Muse Found in a Colonized Body,” III & XI, by Yesenia Montilla.
In conversation with Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, chapter 2, “Separation Perfected.”

Whiteness like smoke seeping
across the land.
Windows and doors no shield.
No sanctuary
in your living room Botham Jean
or playing video games with your nephew Atatiana Jefferson.

Walking home
after drumming at your church Manuel Ellis

from oh thank heaven for 7-Eleven Trayvon Martin
 with Skittles and Arizona Iced Tea
 from getting tea Elijah McClain
 so gentle you played violin to calm shelter kittens.
 “Let go of me. I’m an introvert. Please respect the boundaries that I am speaking.”
 Choked and deluged with ketamine by first responders
 who patrol colonies of their imaginations.

Selling cigarettes Eric Garner
 selling CDs and DVDs Alton Sterling
 fatal \$20 bill tendered by George Floyd.

Pleas of

“I can’t breathe!”

Chronicled retorts of

“I don’t care.”

Fallacious oaths to protect and serve,
 for whites only.

A cellphone in your hand
In your grandmother's backyard Stephon Clark,
leaving your friend's garage Chef Andre Hill.
After they shot you they
left you on the ground
watched your lives extinguish.
Paper property deeds
obscured the white shroud
over your existence.

Out driving like we all do,
our cars hum with illusory freedom.
But whiteness snakes the highways, curtains and hounds.
Gun instead of taser to purge your air freshener, Daunte Wright?
Philando Castile cafeteria supervisor,
you came to school early to help disabled children

but your traffic stop lasted only forty seconds.

And Sandra Bland, on the road of your alma mater
historically Black Prairie View A & M University
a short distance from a plantation burial ground

Texas trooper detained you for changing lanes without signaling
most notoriously pretextual but
instead of a ticket–arrest, jail, death.

Sanctioned patrols preserve the colonies.

Nicki Avendaño

CON ALAS ROTAS

I entered the church today,
with broken wings.
It was there I saw my brother,
in his casket.

For a moment, he looked
like he did when
He was young.

Sound asleep in his bed
that our Mother made
out of yesterday's news.

My eyes danced
over the navy blue
of his best suit.

I recalled how she
used to sew our shirts
of the same color
with eyelids, heavy.

I remembered the stories
of how he got the scars
on his hands
when I glanced at
the ticks on his watch.

It was then I was reminded
that our time together
ran out.

Running— that's it,
When I saw his shoes
I was reminded
of when we had none.

Running barefoot
Through the dirt roads
of our hometown.

And our home,
that laid atop
the highest hill.

There, we didn't need anyone,
for we had each other.
And he was the father,
we never had.

IN THE GRASS

There is a field mouse in the grass.

It skitters and jitters, a dusty brown comet of fur with a leathery pink trail streaking behind as it scampers through the green. The field mouse settles on a smooth gray stone, sitting upright on its hind legs. Its nose twitches and its stub clawed toes comb nervously through long needled whiskers as its hematite eyes, shining black and wet, quickly shift back and forth across the shrubbery.

There is a serpent in the grass.

Pale jade eyes trained forward ceaselessly, unblinkingly, forked tongue snaking out to taste the air in front of it, the serpent slides carefully through the field. Its scales shift and shine emerald and topaz amongst the blades, melting into the green as its muscled form coils and curves and winds its way ever closer to the stone, closer to the field mouse.

The field is silent, save for the gentle hiss in the wind dancing through the grass, blade on scale on scale on blade. The field mouse holds, frozen even as its nose still twitches.

The hissing wind presses in on all sides, and the field mouse's nose stops twitching. Its eyes scan the shifting blades dancing and swaying in the breeze, slowly tightening around it. All it sees is green, but the wind and the hissing stabs into its ears. It stays as still as the stone beneath it, holding, waiting.

For just a second, hematite is lit with a flash of brilliant

emerald and topaz.

In that second, there is nothing in the grass—no movement, no wind or sun hissing through the blades. The serpent is coiled into its fatal spiral, an emerald jaw hung open to reveal ivory needles in a garnet-studded maw, and the field mouse statuesque as if carved from the stone beneath it. The field is silent. Then the field mouse's nose twitches.

A hiss, a squeak. The shift of scale on blade on blade on scale, and the wet ripping of roughly torn flesh.

Silence, save for the gentle hiss of wind and sunlight. There is nothing in the grass—save for the coiled form of a dead serpent, its emerald and topaz throat torn through by stub clawed toes, and a trail of bloody paw prints leading away from it across a smooth gray stone.

SPECK

You can just barely see it. It's only the size of a pinhole in your field of vision, but you see it. In your left eye, a dot of color floating just outside your periphery. But the color isn't one you've seen before. It's almost yellow, but... no... calling it yellow would be too mundane a thing. Yellow is the color of sunflowers and mustard, the ring around an old bruise or the eyes of a jaundiced man. This color is something new entirely. The more you struggle to focus on it, the smaller it seems, as if hiding from your recognition. When you give up and relax, there it is again! Floating lazily, almost as if it's... bouncing. You squeeze your eyes shut tight against the strange sight and shake your head to clear—whatever it is—out of your mind, but it only grows more vibrant.

You go about your business for the day, going to work and running errands, cooking dinner for yourself, and reading that novel you've been trying to finish for your book club, and it follows you. You do your best to ignore it, pretending it's just a trick of the light, or maybe there's a hole in your cornea, but you know better.

As you lie down to sleep that night, your eyes close gently and the pinhole starts to burn, not growing in intensity or brightness or size, but somehow you know it's getting stronger. You wait, eyes closed, breathing deeply to try and gather some semblance of calming rest, but it eludes you. Your heart beats hard in your chest, resounding

staccato in your ears, the bouncing ball seeming to match in sync without moving. It defies all logic and physiology, but you know what you see. Finally, it is too much. Your eyes shoot open, but nothing changes. It's still pitch black with naught, but this not-yellow speck to break the monotony. You reach for the lamp at your bedside and flick the switch, flooding the room with light, but the speck remains.

You didn't want to believe what that old man had said. He was just a lonely man feeding the ducks at the pond, but something in his eyes made him seem... wrong somehow. You walked faster, trying to evade an interaction with someone so clearly out of the ordinary, but he reached out and grabbed your wrist, freezing you mid-step. His voice was hushed and rasping, as if struggling to escape his throat. "The Old Ones have spoken. You'll do." Then, to your horror, he reached up to your face and forced the eyelid of your left eye open. His strength far exceeded the capability his frame would infer, and though you choked out in protest, he looked deep into your eyes, and you saw something. Something in his pupil, spinning and writhing, a roiling cloud of... limbs? Vines? What it was, you couldn't be sure, but whatever it was, you knew it changed you. And then... You could just barely see it.



Mina Citlali

KILLING MOON

Lillianette Rodriguez

THE REFLECTION PLACE

FADE IN:

EXT. CLARA'S HOUSE – FRONT YARD - EVENING

Delicate fog drifts. Light cuts through tall grass and porch rails. Idyllic.

COLD OPEN

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE – KITCHEN – EVENING

EDIE BELL (70s, the town's realtor. Soft curls rest just above her collar. She wears a realtor crew shirt under a pressed floral apron.) Her hands move with care. She arranges a welcome basket on the counter. A folded note and a silver key sit beside it.

A dusty record spins.

A haunting lullaby drifts from old speakers. Strings. Warbled melody. Timeless.

Song: "Lavender Waltz" Unknown Artist, 1949

SONG (V.O.)

"Lavender skies and a window that waits, A swing
that remembers the shape of her weight.

She came for the quiet, she stayed for the sound. Of
the silence that sang when no one's around."

CLOSE-UP: Hands slide lavender soap into a wicker basket.

CLOSE-UP: A fresh jam jar, a folded linen napkin.

We only see her from chin to waist. She wears a floral apron, small embroidery, nothing flashy.

CLOSE-UP: An image of the town STILLWATER HOLLOW in its prime; as the card cover.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN – EVENING

Edie WRITES OUT a fancy penmanship on the card.

“Welcome to Stillwater Hollow, Clara.”

SONG (V.O)

“No one remembers, but someone once knew...
The woman who stayed for the silence, not you.”

She folds it.

Smiles to herself eerie, calm, tucks card in envelope and drops the key. Seals it.

EXT. CLARA'S HOUSE - PORCH - EVENING

The basket. The ribbon tied just so, is placed perfect on the kitchen table, from the outside porch window, above the lazy swing, lays the perfect view.

SONG (V.O)

“Any road will feel like home,
If I don't have to walk alone.
I'm with you...”

TITLE CARD (over misty trees): THE REFLECTION
PLACE

SONG (V.O.)

...My quiet is true.”

END COLD OPEN.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. SUBWAY PLATFORM - NEW YORK CITY -
CONTINUOUS

Cramped and Claustrophobic. A thunderstorm of human noise hits Clara. Heels click. Horns blare in the distance. Someone sneezes. Laughter. Arguing.

Clara stands still in the chaos. She's pale, withdrawn, visibly worn by life. One sleeve slips past her wrist. She doesn't fix it. She clutches her phone like a lifeline.

Her eyes, sharp but exhausted, scan the crowd without really seeing it. A constant RINGING hums in her ears, too loud for one person to bear.

A MAN bumps into her without a word.

A WOMAN loudly complains about her boss.

A KID plays a game on full volume.

PHONE SCREEN: CALENDAR FULL. MESSAGES UNREAD. "PSYCHIC READING W/ TAMIKA - CANCELED."

The subway car screeches to a stop. Doors open.

Clara closes her eyes. Breathes. Shakes her head. Opens them. She steps into the subway car.

INT. SUBWAY CAR - EVENING - MOMENTS LATER

Metallic screech. Fluorescent lights flicker. Clara sits stiff. The car is full, but she sits alone. She watches people talk, laugh, and scroll.

The camera SLOWLY PUSHES IN on her face. She blinks.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. SUBWAY TERMINAL - EVENING - MOMENTS
LATER

Clara walks past a row of vending machines. Her head stays down. She clutches a few grocery bags.

A MAN (50s, unkempt, intense) slams his palm against the glass and startles her!

MAN

You feel that? That buzz in the air?

Clara steps wide to avoid him.

CLARA WYNN

Sorry, don't have anything.

MAN

Didn't ask for money. I asked if you felt it.

She walks faster. He follows close.

MAN

People like you... you see too much. That's your problem.

CLARA WYNN

(whispers)

Please don't—

MAN

(shouting now)

You think it's loud here?! Wait till it's quiet. That's when they come. When there's nothing left to distract you!

Clara turns into the crowd to lose him. Her breath catches.

Her vision blurs.

MAN (O.S)

(distant shout)

You can run, girl, but you'll still hear 'em...

She vanishes into the commuter chaos.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. CLARA'S STUDIO - EVENING - CONTINUOUS

She turns the corner and reaches her studio door. She squeezes the grocery bags tight.

INT. CLARA'S STUDIO - EVENING- MOMENTS
LATER

Clara sets the grocery bags down by the door but doesn't unpack them. She reheats leftover soup on the stove. An email chime sounds. Clara steps to her laptop and opens the message from her realtor. She reads the last line. CONFIRMATION. Her eyes go wide.

CLARA WYNN

(softly, to herself)

I closed.

She drops into the chair and exhales.

CLARA WYNN

It's mine.

She scrolls past the listing photos and stops at the bottom. The address. The words: "KEYS ARE IN THE MAILBOX." She stares. Packed boxes line the wall. A small smile creeps across her face. Gentle. Quiet.

INT. CLARA'S STUDIO - EVENING - CONTINUOUS

Clara drops a white plastic bag onto a box.

MONTAGE: Preparing To Leave:

- Clara tapes the last box shut.
- She calls FedEx and confirms a pick-up time.
- A FedEx DRIVER loads the boxes onto a dolly.
- Clara hands him a tip, nods as he confirms the destination address.

INT. CLARA'S STUDIO - EVENING - CONTINUOUS

Clara eats her final meal in the studio. A single mattress rests on the floor. Her suitcase waits by the door. City sounds press in from all sides.

INT. GREYHOUND TERMINAL - MOVING DAY - MORNING

Clara sits in silence. Eyes forward. Pale. The announcement board flickers:

ANNOUNCER (O.S)

CHARLESTON / STILLWATER HOLLOW –
NOW BOARDING.

She clutches her suitcase and stands.

EXT. GREYHOUND BUS - MORNING - MOMENTS LATER

The bus rolls through empty land. Clara watches the city fade behind her.

She sees the “NOW LEAVING NEW YORK” sign.

Silence fills the Greyhound.

DISSOLVE TO BLACK.

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW - BUS STOP - LATE
AFTERNOON

Clara stands alone. The Greyhound pulls away behind her.
She looks around. No cabs. No people.

Across the road, an old man waters his garden. A woman
rides past on a bicycle and nods without a word.

Stillness. Clara hears her heartbeat.

EXT. CLARA'S HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON -
CONTINUOUS

A modest Victorian house. White paint flakes. The porch
swing creaks. A real estate sign reads: "LEASED."

Clara climbs the steps. She opens the mailbox. Inside: an
envelope, a key, and a written note.

INSERT – CARD:

*"Welcome to Stillwater Hollow, Clara. Key enclosed utilities on.
– Stillwater Hollow Leasing"*

No phone number. No signature. She unlocks the door.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LATE
AFTERNOON - MOMENTS LATER

She enters. The house is already furnished. Warm-
toned furniture. A faint lavender scent lingers. A small
WELCOME BASKET waits on the kitchen counter:
scones, soap, homemade jam.

Clara moves through the house. One room at a time. She
makes sure she's alone.

INT. CLARA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Clara lies in bed, staring at the ceiling. Outside, wind hits the tree. The swing creaks. She exhales.

Off scene a soft whisper. Not words just breath. Clara freezes. Eyes open wide. She slowly turns toward the window.

Nothing.

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

Bright light cuts across the room. Birds chirp. Clara stirs under a heavy quilt. A moment of peace.

KNOCK.

KNOCK.

She throws on a cardigan and heads for the front door.

EXT. CLARA'S HOUSE - FRONT PORCH - MORNING
- CONTINUOUS

EDIE BELL with her warm eyes, soft curls, and floral apron. She stands with a basket and a sweet smile.

EDIE BELL

Good morning, sweetheart. Thought you might like something warm to start the day. I baked extra.

Clara blinks. She isn't fully awake yet.

CLARA WYNN

Oh, thank you. That's really kind.

EDIE BELL

You looked tired when you arrived. Most people come here to stop feeling that way.

She hands Clara the basket.

EDIE BELL

You'll feel better soon. Everyone does.

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW - MAIN STREET - MID-MORNING

Clara walks down the sidewalk.

She passes a baker who sweeps flour from the steps. He smiles, "too long."

A mail carrier waves from across the street. She doesn't blink. Just smiles. Frozen.

Two kids jump rope in perfect rhythm. They giggle. They stare straight ahead.

Clara looks away.

INT. HARLEN'S HARDWARE - MID-MORNING -
MOMENTS LATER

HARLEN BECK (60s, Tall, broad-shouldered, with the quiet weight of someone who's seen too much) steps out from the back. He wipes his hands with a rag.

Shelves lined with items no one seems to have touched in years. Not dusty just still.

His flannel looks crisp. His boots show wear. His eyes stay steady, "too steady." He taps two fingers.

Stares at the door.

Waits.

The bell above the door chimes.

HARLEN BECK

Morning. You must be Clara.

CLARA WYNN

(polite but guarded)

Word travels fast.

HARLEN BECK

Not much else to do but listen around here.

Clara picks up a broom. She spots a small shovel against the wall.

HARLEN BECK

That one's light but sturdy. Good for digging in soft ground.

She half-laughs, uncomfortable.

CLARA WYNN

I just came in for a broom.

HARLEN BECK

Still. Good to have... just in case.

They hold eye contact for a second too long.

She places the broom on the counter.

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW - MID-MORNING -
CONTINUOUS

Clara walks home with the broom. The town sits quiet. No one stands outside. Not even the birds.

She passes the jump rope kids. Gone.

A porch swing sway. No wind.

She walks faster.

INT. CLARA'S KITCHEN - MID-MORNING -
MOMENTS LATER

She places the broom in the corner. The welcome basket still sits untouched. Jam. Soap. The card. She picks it up. Reads the line she missed:

CLARA WYNN

"May you settle in quickly."

She stares at the words.

EXT. CLARA'S YARD - MID-MORNING -
CONTINUOUS

Outside the window, WILLOW THORNE (9) and MAY THORNE (9) stand in the yard. Identical dresses. Matching braids. They don't move. They don't blink.

INT. CLARA'S KITCHEN - MID-MORNING -
CONTINUOUS

She pulls the curtain. Willow and May still stand in the yard. Identical. Still. Then they wave perfectly in sync.

Clara hesitates, then offers a small, unsure wave back.

They turn and walk off in unison. Clara exhales. The kitchen turns quiet. Too quiet. She opens a drawer. No silverware. Opens another. Nothing.

She checks under the sink. Only an old sponge and a folded piece of paper. She unfolds it. Faded ink. A single line:

INSERT – PAPER:

"Don't let the quiet get too loud."

She frowns.

INT. CLARA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

She lies awake. No wind. No creaks. No hum from the fridge. Just complete stillness. The ceiling fan spins without a sound. Her brow tightens.

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW - DAY

An overcast sky looms above. Clara heads toward the square, phone in hand. She dials. No bars. She checks the screen. Still dead.

Across the square, Willow and May sit on a bench. Identical sketchbooks rest on their laps. Clara passes. The girls speak without eye contact.

WILLOW THORNE

It's hard when your things don't show up.

MAY THORNE

It's even harder when no one hears you calling.

Clara stops. Turns.

CLARA WYNN

What did you just say?

They look up. Wide smiles. Innocent.

WILLOW THORNE

We like your sweater.

MAY THORNE

It suits your sadness.

Willow cuts her off, quick.

WILLOW THORNE

No, your... curiosity.

Willow and May stop drawing. Clara backs away. Uneasy.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Bars appear on Clara's phone. She checks her order confirmation.

INSERT – PHONE SCREEN:

“OUT FOR DELIVERY – DELAYED.”

She clicks refresh. Nothing changes.

She exhales sharply, frustrated.

Outside the window, the swing creaks.

Refresh. Still nothing.

Another sharp exhale. The swing creaks again.

INT. CLARA'S KITCHEN - EVENING

Clara refreshes the delivery tracker on her phone.

DELAYED.

She sighs. Then again. Louder.

Refresh.

Still nothing.

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW - TOWN CENTER -
EVENING - SAME TIME

The town shifts again. Shutters slam. Children freeze. A dog barks, then whimpers and runs off.

A bakery window CRACKS without reason.

Harlen scowls at an electrical screwdriver that won't turn.

EXT. CLARA'S YARD - EVENING - CONTINUOUS

Willow and May stand in her yard.

WILLOW THORNE

It's hard when things don't come.

MAY THORNE

That's when the bad feelings show up.

Clara steps outside, tense.

CLARA WYNN

What did you say?

The girls tilt their heads.

WILLOW THORNE

You were smiling earlier.

MAY THORNE

It made everything lighter.

They turn and walk away

EXT. RURAL ROAD - NEXT DAY

A FedEx truck rumbles down a two-lane road surrounded by thick trees.

INT. TRUCK - DAY - CONTINUOUS

DERRICK (30s, clean-shaven with a calm demeanor) drives with one hand and sips gas station coffee with the other. He hums along to classic soul on the radio.

INSERT - GPS SCREEN:

GPS (V.O.)

(pings)

NEXT STOP: STILLWATER HOLLOW.

His brow pulls tight.

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW - DAY - MINUTES
LATER

The truck turns into town.

Derrick's POV:

No cars. Loose shutters rattle. Buildings sit weathered and cracked. No movement. No people.

DERRICK REED

(quietly to himself)

Looks dead here.

He checks his tablet again. No bars.

ORDER STATUS SCREEN - FROZEN:

“CLARA WYNN – 17 WILLOW ELM DRIVE – URGENT
DELIVERY”

EXT. CLARA'S HOUSE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

The house sits desolate. Paint peels. A porch light blinks.
The path stands overgrown. Derrick rolls up with a dolly
stacked with boxes. Clipboard in hand. He knocks.

KNOCK.

KNOCK.

The door opens.

Inside: warm light. Soft music plays. Clara stands in the
doorway calm, collected, relieved.

CLARA WYNN

(relieved, giddy)

Oh, thank God. I've been waiting forever.

She smiles.

CLARA WYNN

I can finally make it feel like home.

DERRICK REED

(delicately)

You sure this is... the right address?

CLARA WYNN

Yeah. Everything's perfect now.

She smiles after she signs. She grabs a box and leaves the door open.

EXT. CLARA'S HOUSE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Derrick stands there for a moment. He pulls out his dolly from under the boxes. He looks back at the house. It already looks... different. Dimmer. Older. He backs away, gets into the truck, and drives off. As he turns the corner, we hold on to the house.

The porch swing sways. No wind.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY - LATER

Clara opens her boxes:

A vacuum. Cleaning supplies. Her favorite herbal candle. She hums. She moves through the house. The space feels alive. Clean. Bright. Peaceful.

She stands in the middle of the room. Exhales.

CLARA WYNN

(softly)

I needed this.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM -
AFTERNOON

Clara lights her favorite candle. She plays soft music. Sunlight hits the room just right. She laughs to herself—genuine, at ease for the first time.

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW - AFTERNOON - SAME
TIME

The town begins to shift. Children laugh down the street. Edie strolls up with fresh roses in hand. The bakery opens its windows. The smell of cinnamon wafts out.

Harlen adjusts a squeaky sign. He smiles to himself.

Willow and May draw chalk hearts on the sidewalk. They stop at the same time. Both sniff the air. Cinnamon. They run toward the bakery.

The town exhales.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE – STORAGE NOOK –
AFTERNOON - SAME TIME

A narrow closet door creaks open.

Inside: a shallow storage space. Dim. Still. A thin metal ladder leans against the wall. At the top shelf a ceramic vase. Roses carved into the side.

Clara sets down her folded cardboard boxes. Her eyes lift. The vase catches a shard of light.

She reaches for the ladder.

CLARA WYNN

(to herself)

That'll work.

She drags the ladder over. Climbs.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE – KITCHEN – AFTERNOON -
SAME TIME

A candle flickers beside her herbal tea. Edie knocks on the side of the house.

Knock.

Knock.

Edie's shadow passes the window. She opens the door and steps inside quiet, familiar.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE - STORAGE NOOK –
CONTINUOUS

Clara reaches. Her fingers brush the vase.

CLARA WYNN

Just a little—

The ladder wobbles. One leg tilt off the edge of a floorboard seam.

From behind her, a shadow moves.

EDIE (O.S.)

Need a hand, dear?

Clara glances back.

CLARA WYNN

I'm fine. Got it.

She stretches again.

The ladder slips.

Her foot misses the rung.

CLARA WYNN

Wait—

THUD.

SMASH.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE – LIVING ROOM – DUSK

Clara blinks. She sits up on the couch.

The house feels... cleaner. Still.

On the table: the vase. Fresh roses.

A note folded next to it.

INSERT - NOTE:

Rest easy now. – E

EXT. CLARA'S (TRAIL ON A HILL) BEHIND HER
HOUSE - DUSK

Later. Clara walks through the woods. Peaceful now. A trail
overgrown but passable.

She follows it until it opens onto a...

EXT. SMALL CEMETERY - DUSK - CONTINUOUS

A wrought iron fence. Faded headstones tilt into the grass.

She walks through. She reads the names. She stops.

EDIE BELL 1873 – 1954

“Stillness became her.”

Clara frowns. She walks on.

HARLEN BECK - 1901-1962

“His breath catches.”

WILLOW AND MAY THORNE - 1949

“Forever young, forever nearby.”

She steps back. Hand to her mouth.

EXT. CEMETERY - DUSK - CONTINUOUS

Clara stumbles out. She runs down the path.

Trees lean in. Shadows stretch too far.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

She bursts in, locks the door behind her. Her chest heavy.

She grabs her phone. No signal.

The vacuum sits unplugged. Its cord coils tight, like no one ever used it. She backs into the kitchen.

EDIE BELL

You found it, didn't you?

Clara jumps. Edie stands in the doorway, calm and smiling.

Same floral apron. Same soft eyes.

EDIE BELL

It always takes them a while. The cemetery.

CLARA WYNN

You're dead.

EDIE BELL

So are we all. That's the peace, darling.

Clara steps back. She presses her palm flat over her heart. Holds it there. Outside the window, the town lights blink off: one by one.

INT. CLARA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT -
CONTINUOUS

Clara stares at Edie. Frozen.

CLARA WYNN

I want to leave.

EDIE BELL

No one ever really leaves. You know that.

CLARA WYNN

I'm not like you.

EDIE BELL

But you are, Clara. You feel everything. That's what made you perfect. You're one of us now.

Clara bolts for the front door.

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW - NIGHT -
CONTINUOUS

She runs down the street. The houses look rotted, faded, like time has drained the town overnight. Figures stand on porches, in windows. Harlen. Willow. May. Others. All watching silently.

She screams. No sound. Clara drops to her knees. The wind stops. Even the trees hold still.

She looks down at her own hands. Perfect. Untouched.

Too still.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAWN

Clara stands beside her gravestone. Hopeless. Reflection across her face.

SCORE (REPRISE):

SONG (V.O.)

“Any road will feel like home,

If I don’t have to walk alone.

I’m with you...

Edie steps behind Clara. Gardening gloves still on. She places fresh roses at the base of the gravestone. Thorns trimmed. Neat. Gentle. She brushes soil from one glove. Doesn’t speak.

They both stare down at the town. Silent. Still. Everyone in their place.

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW - SAME TIME -
CONTINUOUS

Derrick’s delivery truck rolls past. He slows at the corner.

The sleeping bag nudges forward with the turn.

He glances toward Clara’s house.

Through his window: The porch swing rocks.

To the left—

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. ACROSS FROM CLARA’S HOUSE - SAME TIME

A freshly posted sign in the yard:

FOR RENT - MOVE-IN READY

Derrick watches for a beat. Spooked, he drives off.

EXT. CEMETERY - SAME TIME

Clara watches from above. She stares down at Derrick's truck as it disappears down the road.

A breeze brushes past.

CLARA WYNN

(whispers)

I just wanted quiet.

FADE TO BLACK.

TITLE CARD:

You can run away from people...

But you can't run away from yourself.

CUT TO:

EXT. STILLWATER HOLLOW CEMETERY -
MORNING

A crow caws. Mist curls around the crooked tombstones.

We slowly push in on a fresh gravestone near the others.

CLOSE ON HEADSTONE:

CLARA WYNN 1978 – 2023

“She felt too much.

So, we took the rest.”

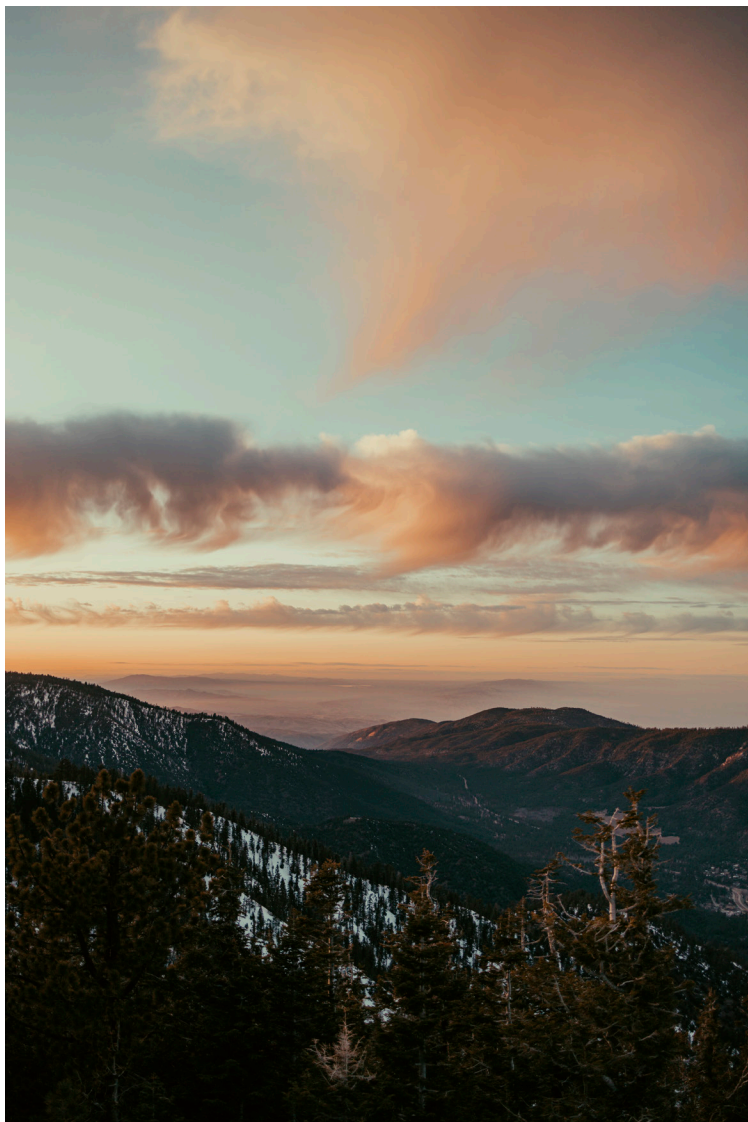
Hold for a beat. The wind brushes the grass.

SONG (V.O.)

“My quiet is true.”

FADE OUT.

THE END.



Dawson McCormick

FRASIER

Daniel Torres

MEMENTO MORI

In memory of those who are no longer, the altar is constructed.
Omniscient eyes staring back from the altar allow insight into a serene world.
I saw bicycles with Harley handlebars littering the front yards of houses.
Liquor stores on every corner, house parties, and car meet-ups.
Vatos sewing their marks on any plain lifeless wall, so their barrio is known.
The burning memory of a life without the sins.
Until those street lights flicker to life.

A walk home turns into a jog,
then to a run,
then to a panicked sprint.

When the sun dies. Chaos is born.

Omniscient eyes once glancing at me, glare at me until they slammed shut, shunning me away.
I stepped out of my home and walked down the street.

After not a minute of walking, I came across another altar. It sat on the sidewalk. Concealed and sodden, broken and knocked over. Hastily arranged as a reminder with no hint of fire emanating its memory.

I saw a world that was plunged into eternal chaos. I saw names tagged onto walls; devoid or decorated, it made no difference.

Full of life and death, they were testimonies to what once was. Eyes shut forever, flowers and pictures accommodating them.

Bullet casings, yellow tape, chalk outlines. Memento mori. As I looked upon the drag races, burnouts, drive-bys, and shuffling of bodies, I shut my eyes to escape the gaze of the deceased eyes.

I returned to my world, it was neither omniscient nor chaotic. It was alive.

What the omniscient eyes allowed me to see will not be forgotten.

A reminder of the chaos of what once was, a history of life and death that dwindles.

Trampled beneath the weight of sorrow and deprivation.

A longing for the heat of the omniscient eyes of life.

Clara-Lacila Laudette

MEMORY FOR FORGETFULNESS

after Mahmoud Darwish

I had forgotten the tarn of his eyes
the blond escaping his brows how nose reaches
for lip lips turn in hiding riches rancour
violence faith and one only one
mouth-to-mouth kiss

once on a balcony citrus light peeling
Ramallah dust he told me he'd like to die with a gun
in his hand I'd not understood
sputtered about pacifistr esistance
non-violence other things from

other worlds than the one in which we stood
 in the tiger's eye night
 on the high limestone balcony
 now he is here and I

had forgotten his chest's classical breadth
 his fingers' odd doughiness his curls so like mine
 how he wooed Nablus cabbies with the magnetism
 of long suffering forgotten the draw like a switch
 or switchblade that pools above the hips caves meout

through the navel for minutes hours days
 till I'll be what he says braid the ferns
 of his breast make a wreath for his dead

Jonathan Wu

**THE TRANSCRIPT OF A HUMBLE
CONVERSATION BETWEEN AN IMMORTAL
AND A TOMBSTONE.**

I'll dread and cherish you
like a mayfly does December.
*The spring is only precious
Because it quiets with the winter.*

Thus far you've lined the bookshelves
with mementos that faded with you,
*So let that stand as proof
that the dust has loved me too.*

The candle in the snow
giving off its lonely light
*shall be loved for its simple brevity,
and thus never despite.*

So of all the mortal melancholies
the mayfly must remember,
*as his beloved once again returns to dust:
he can only love December.*

The road you've left me to walk
Is endless with your absence.

*I won't apologise
If you don't regret loving me.*

Andrea S. Ponce

WHY I AM NOT A GARDENER

I am not a gardener, I am a teacher.
Why? Well, I think it's because
I don't have the green thumb to keep plants alive.

One day I think about planting herbs—
I like them, they are green,
they belong in salads
I don't plant them. Instead, I explain
similes and metaphors to my students.
Tell them a poem is like a seed,
or a garden, or something.
They look at me, waiting for more,
an explanation. A week later I buy a tomato plant and
it sits in my kitchen bright and red
a kind of promise. I water it at first then,
I forget. The leaves turn yellow, the tomatoes brown
I meant to use them for dinner.

Meanwhile, my students are writing stories about
video games, adventures, even their pets.
I read their pages, and in some way
everything is growing
weeks go by, months pass, my plant is dead,
the pot cracked and dry.
But the pages in my students' notebooks
keep sprouting new stories,

new creativity, new poems,
vibrant and colorful,
like something I had planted
without realizing their academic germination.

Markie Metzelaar

TRANSCENDENT

For three years he sat on the shore of the lake

In a cabin borrowed from kindness

and would stroll down wooden lanes

Leaves crunched and brittle underfoot

Wind whispering down the branches
speaking

In words he knew but could not shape on his tongue
Of life and love and holy things.

When he came upon the town, he found
Among cobbled streets and copper crosses
And hands placed on the holster of
Leather spines

A county clerk and roving poll tax policeman
And a chocolate house on the road
(bars facing out amongst the trappings of

The courtyard

Where neighbors bustled by without a thought)
And a house tucked among the ivy boughs
Where he would have dinner most nights.

Sitting in the drawing room
A glass of brandy clinking ice or
Cigar smoke unfurled like living tapestries
snakes encased in harsh-fuzzed yarn
Diction thick with politics and rhetoric:

How best do we reach the fountainhead
From which divine truth flows? And from
Whence do we derive the purpose of our being

If not through traditional methods?
How therest to find the guiding hand
Or invisible eye of God
Of us?

Sitting in the backyard on dirt-cracked chairs
A sprig of heart-shaped leaves in green gradient peeking from between
the rust-wooden slats.
A speckled glass-blown bluebird perched against the swoop
of a thick power cable
Listening to the distant cries of the train whistle
and counting sprouts of clover
and blowing clouds up into the night.
Asking the same questions and
Getting echoes of an answer.



James Mellor

“TRIAL OF THE DIVINE”
THE STRENGTH

Jonathan Wu

**BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE, REMIND YOURSELF THAT CHILDREN FOLD PAPER
PLANES BECAUSE THEY CANNOT FLY.**

You've some gowns and makeup loaned from mom when her attention turned askew
With a collection for a demographic comprised just of me and you –
Here's a painted soap box Broadway stage and ambitions we'll pursue.
The spotlight intoxicates,
And until mom comes to berate

Let's play until we're caught and a little after too

Are there potions made of mud or dirt or sediment below?
Was every shiny rock and wayward glass a power to bestow
Your magic transformations were something strange you'd undergo

Chants and movements of the wand;
And the spells would correspond

with wild hearts which could distill joy from raw earth:

Did you spend your days alone and happy in a silent trance?
With the tales of dashing heroes, monsters and Y.A. romance -
and your wonder-catching characters locked in their deadly dance?
A chain clamps the hero's frame,
But he grits his teeth, proclaims

Something formative to the young clay of your body

Was the backyard forest pathing a new frontier to explore?
Your Paper-mâché telescopes; sights never seen before!
The far side of the swimming pool was an uncharted distant shore.

A floaty for sea-faring
And treasure for the daring –

And eyes that see each horizon as a worthy opponent.

Now the warriors were mighty in their household item capes;
And their sticks were ancient weapons leaving destruction in their wake.
(Though they all were reprimanded, later, for stealing window drapes)
And after dad ended our fun,
What we were left with when we were done

Is the hope we sent skywards even as we skipped to our rooms.

We folded paper children;
Brushed with our paints and dyes.
Why not grant our paper gifts
If we, ourselves, can't fly?

Gwendolyn May

SIX WORD STORY

I'm not a witch. Just mad.

Angela M. Thomas

BRONZE LIMBS AND CONCRETE DREAMS

A Poem in the Voice of Josephine Baker

I was born where the pavement sweats,
where the sun drapes its gold on the backs of brown girls
who learn to dance before they learn to dream.
Where the sirens wail like lost souls at midnight,
and the streetlights hum secrets only the stray dogs know.

Mama worked her fingers into threads of prayer,
stitched rent money into the seams of secondhand dresses.
She taught me how to smile with my whole body,
to move like joy had no cage,
like the world was an open stage waiting for my feet to claim it.

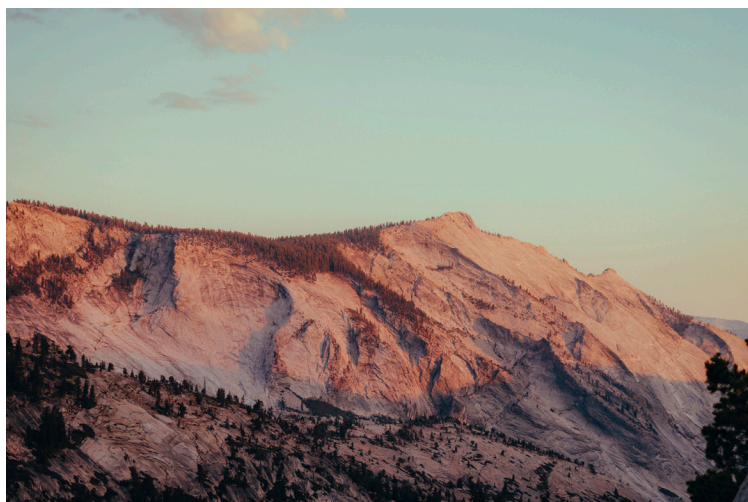
South Central taught me rhythm before love,
how to sway between cracked sidewalks and stolen glances,
how to spin away from hungry hands and whispering corners,
how to laugh in the face of a city that didn't always love me back.

The boys on the block called me trouble,
said my hips spoke a language they weren't old enough to understand.
I told them I was made of music,
of jazz notes and Sunday morning hallelujahs,
of the stories my grandmother carried from the Delta
and the freedom I knew was waiting somewhere past Crenshaw.

I dreamed in sequins, in feathers, in soft-lit stages
where the only bullets were the ones shot from cameras,
where the applause was louder than the police knocks.
Where my body belonged to movement, not survival.

So I danced.
On the pavement, on the bus stop benches, in the aisles of the corner store.
I danced until the city couldn't hold me anymore.
Until my name was more than a whisper.

And when I left—
when I flew over the cracked streets and neon liquor signs,
over the boys who swore they'd marry me someday,
over the prayers Mama stitched into my coat—
I carried South Central in the arch of my back,
in the tilt of my chin,
in the way I made the world watch me
without ever asking for permission.



Dawson McCormick

CLOUDS REST



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