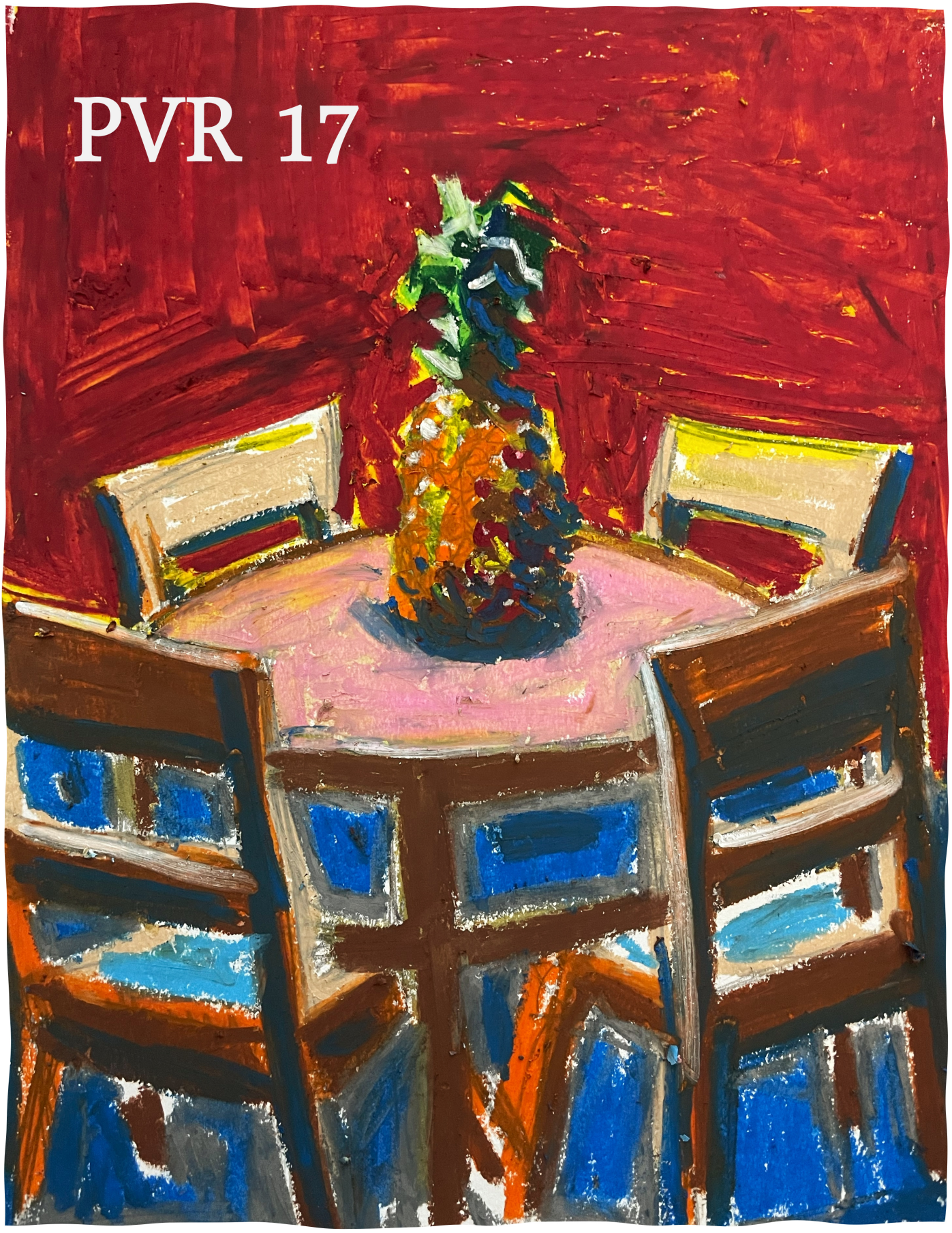
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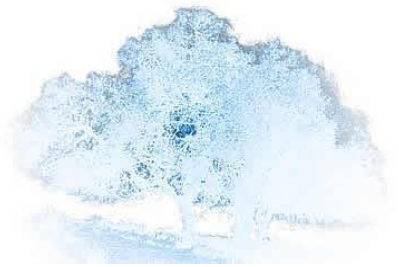

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY | FICTION | NON-FICTION | ARTWORK

7 The Dreamhole
T. J. Masluk

8 Again
Christopher West

9 Untitled, Room Tones Series
Jaya Darriet

10 My Uncle Marty
Stephen Tejas

12 I Think I Hear My Train Coming
Jordan Montejano

14 Family Reunion, Birdie, Georgia
R. Longfield

24 Sobering
T. J. Masluk

25 Enough to be Seen
Edward Lee

26 Getting to Yes at all Costs
Scott Outlar

29 Winter Dreams
Ann Christine Tabaka

30 An Apartment Takeover
Francisco Uribe

39 Speech Conflicted
Edward Lee

40 Padre
Ari Sicarios

42 Chinches
Julian Zaragoza

46 I Have a Tendency to do the Things I Love Until I Break
Hana Saad

47 Paul Newman & a Ride Home
Chance Castro

48 Tongue/Tied Thoughts after "Living English Work"
Helen Chen

49 See it for what it is (The Myth)
Hana Saad

51 The Declaration's Memorial
Malia Miguel

52 Fisherman and His Dog
Nia Mahmud

53 Please Don't Feed the Coyotes
Carolyn Siegal

61 Memories in Oil Pastels
Jonathan Ceniceros

62 I Go to Aisle 7 at Gonzalez Northgate Market
Aruni Wijesinghe

63 Trespassing
Frank Modica

64 Slowly, Surely
Annette Petrusso

65 Relapse
Tom Barlow

66 Blackout
Stephan Tejas

67 Bike Ride
Jonathan Ceniceros

68 Where The Brown Buffalo Roamed: Searching for Oscar Acosta's Ghost in East Los Angeles
Hector Carillo

Digital Portrait Study
75 *Jonathan Ceniceros*

Aftermath as Pygmalion's Statue
76 *Carson Wolfe*

Blackout
78 *Zach Murphy*

Aeolian
80 *T. J. Masluk*

Sister City: A Play in 3 Acts
81 *Ken Post*

Dance of Time
88 *Edward Supranowicz*

89 The Perfect Figure
Sarah Edmonds
101 Consumption
Stacy Fowler
102 Dead Wishes
Isabella Nuqui
103 Glitter and Gleam
Eva Nemirovsky
115 Portrait
Sanjeev Sethi
116 The Haunted House
Randall Whitener
119 Carcass Dreams
Michelle H
121 Flower Womans
Monae Sims
122 Mother
Ari Sicarios
123 Nary a Gasp
Gissel Ruiz
124 How Fragile
Randall Whitener
125 Dye
Layal Dahi
126 Night Swimming
Karly White
129 Wet Lips
Chance Castro
130 96 Hours
Alexandra Wright
132 When is When
Terry Trowbridge
133 I was Reading Your Obituary &
Chance Castro
134 Past Ingredients
Maria Ermoshin
135 All the Pretty Peonies
Francisco Amaro
136 I will Build You the Heaven I Deny Myself; Approaching the Ice Berg
Terri Niccum
138 The Mango Tree
Michelle H
140 Lavender Fields
Jonathan Ceniceros
141 A Hot Afternoon in Soybean Country
Frank Modica
142 January 23rd, 2023
Jaya Darriet
143 Nova
Levon Shahnur
146 Noir
Carter Nicklaus
147 Night, In Flux
Helen Chen
148 I Could Have Loved You
Amanda Dawson
149 Canopy
Madeleine French
150 Peacocks
Saul Villegas
151 My Heart and Your Ocean
Natalie Olmos
152 On Pain & Promise; The Physical & Mental
Layal Dahi
155 I Write
Aruni Wijesinghe
156 Untitled Digital Study
Jonathan Ceniceros
157 World Records
Tom Barlow
159 My Sister's Best Friend
Ash Mojica
173 Infinity
Ash Mojica
174 The Last Songbird
Ann Christine Tabaka
175 From the Editors
183 Biographies

Dear Readers

As of 2023, the fight for human rights not limited to the inhumane treatment of migrants at the southern border, Black and brown lives, the undercutting of reproductive rights, the severing of critical infrastructure that encouraged questions into systemic inequalities, attacks toward LGBTQIA+ communities, and more, presses onward.

In line with *PVR 16*'s emphasis on how creative mediums help us create, nurture, and deconstruct connections to such issues, *PVR 17* exists as an extension of those acts.

PVR 17 begins with T.J. Masluk's poem, "The Dreamhole," that may inspire the process of how something familiar becomes lost not to time, but the morphing perceptions we have attached to the past. Thus, Issue 17 begins by emphasizing how defamiliarization becomes the very basis upon which we as individuals re-evaluate and grow. Simultaneously, we also want to emphasize that some of the content that deals with defamiliarization may be graphic and triggering for readers.

To complement the act of pushing on, Ann Christine Tabaka's poem "The Lost Songbird" closes out *PVR 17*. In its own words, "I limped into a future // where hope did not exist," but "Pain could not // stop me from my quest." Tabaka's poetry relays what we hope readers will take away from their experience of engaging with the issue.

PVR 17 seeks to offer a space in which writers and artists can contribute their voices to conversations they want to have. The voice of our contributors shapes each issue and reflects the topics important to them.

It is thanks to ongoing protests and the work done at and through community building that contributes to the loudening of voices necessary to reshape systems that have been detrimental to equity and quality of life for many. *PVR 17* is just one branch of protest, pushback, revaluation, and community voicing through the arts that can't be reduced to the realms of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and art alone.

With this, please enjoy *PVR 17.*
The Editors
PVR

THE DREAMHOLE

On the road to Lafarge

I crossed a stone bridge by motorcar,
saw through magic glass
eddies of feathery-pink.
Below were carved chasms
of jagged cliff and craggy outcroppings,
dangerously steep;
beyond, holiest of man-made canyons
caressing a waveless sea!
Noble kilns
towering above!

Far beneath the surface-safe
were rooms shiny and luminescent,
streams with odd-looking fish
the color tangerine,
ceilings blue-green with pearl-like strings
of shimmering light.

A network of passages:
chamber leading unto chamber,
dark corridors between,
lost in a grand hotel
time had forgotten.

Eerie sounds punctured the morgue-mute
like earthen tongues,
excavated scenes playing
upon an inner screen,
and many *more* things in heaven and earth…

for eyes
that see.

~T. J. Masluk

AGAIN

And where do we go
When our dreams turn inside out
Upside down and we'll live in a rainbow
This time it’s all we’ll know
Sleep has held us in a linear cell-
Yet tomorrow we wake to absurdity
And look into the kaleidoscope
With a mirrored glow on each side
Walk up to the edge, take my hand
Millions of mirrors adorn the wall
Embrace the absence of each color you’ve ever known
Feel a billion hues as you dive
Through each one of them and you'll find
A second sleep
A peaceful time

~ Christopher Nelson West

"Untitled, room tone series, photograph scanned from 35mm. 2023"

~ Jaya Darriet

MY UNCLE MARTY

I didn't really know him during the last years,
But I grew up around him as a boy.
He showed me strength in a smile.
Now,
Only a nice photo of him remains
Alongside a shrine built of red and white flowers,
A cardboard box at the center,
Carefully folded,
Containing his ashes.

He was a roughneck, earning his way with
Busted knuckles, arthritic knees,
and a back beaten to the tune of the foreman's whistle,
Laboring all day under the sun,
Building houses and destroying homes.
Now,
Before the pouring of the ashes,
Words and butterflies are let go
To chase his *ghost*.

He drank and drugged,
Battling demons in dark corners,
With whispers and shouts,
"Finally," they say he is at peace,
With a last wish of being poured into the creek
That he played in as a child.

His ashes float out and down they swirl with the stream,

While kicking children laugh and shout.

The pieces of him disintegrate

In the cold clean water

As he goes off to be with

His mother

And little girl.

~ Stephen Tejas

I THINK I HEAR MY TRAIN COMING

The town was old, but charming. Lively, yet quaint. The train tracks ran straight through it and the train station was small, but full of character. Not to say that the town itself didn't have its share of interesting characters. Some of the townsfolk filled the local saloon, laughing, eating, singing, and enjoying their time. A few members were at the local church praying on their knees before the cross. A few people saw the doctor, but no one knew why. Arthur anxiously rubbed his thumb and index finger across the brim of his favorite hat wearing down the leather.

"I don't think my train's coming for a while," Arthur said as he slid his hand down to rub a sore spot on the back of his neck.

"Everyone's train comes eventually. Best not to miss it," an older man said as he adjusted how he was sitting and rubbed his head with his cane.

"Well then what about them?" Arthur asked pointedly as he looked out to the town.

"I don't care how they are doing. We are the ones who are here. I'm more interested in catching my train as should you. Not that I should be lecturing you anyhow seeing as I am waiting for my own train," the man said.

"Why not? Yes, we are both here waiting for our train, but you have more…wisdom than I do."

"Wisdom is well put. I gained all my 'wisdom' from making the wrong decisions and paying for them." He lifted his train ticket from his pocket, and it had more holes drilled out of it than a block of Swiss cheese from a Charlie Chaplin film.

"How did you manage to get your ticket punched so many times without taking the train?" Arthur pleaded. His entire disposition changed. He was now on his knees reaching out to try and feel the ticket in his fingertips.

"So quick to find a way out, are we?" The man pulled his ticket back and struck Arthur sharply on the forehead with his cane. "My ticket is not what it once was. It's been worn, torn, soaked, burnt, and broken. I'll be lucky if they let me on the train at all."

Arthur pulled back and rubbed his forehead. "I never thought of it that way."

The old man extended his right hand, "Give me your ticket. Don't look so sheepish. I'll give it right back to you. I don't have long to wait!"

Arthur handed over his ticket and the old man held up his own worn ticket, so the sunshine caught it and cast shadows onto Arthur's ticket. It was beautiful and eerie in a way.

"You have but two holes punched in your ticket. Both felt quite life altering didn't they. The odd thing is, the more holes that get punched, the less you feel. Before you ever realize, you end up with more holes than ticket."

The sound of the upcoming train rattled the station as it reverberated along the tracks.

"That's my train coming," the old man said.

He stood up, stretched, and dropped his staff. He took a few slow steps forward, and by the time he got to where he needed to be, the train stopped, and the doors opened. He walked up the short stairway into the train car and turned around to face Arthur.

"Safe travels. Don't run," the man said to Arthur as the door to the train car began to close.

After a few moments or a few years, time didn't matter much anymore, a burst of cool air rolled through and kicked up dust around the station obscuring Arthur's view.

"I think I hear my train coming," Arthur said, struggling to see through the dust cloud. His hat was carried off by the zephyr. He instinctively caught it in flight, but ultimately let it go.

"I hear my train coming."

~ Jordan Montejano

FAMILY REUNION, BIRDIE, GEORGIA

Birdie, Georgia, 1917–
four generations gaze at me,
their lost plantations seeded
in memory

embedded in DNA--
four generations
await the rapture--
for sweet, vengeful
Jesus to make things right

or teach them how to fly away–
how they loved that old, old song.

Fifteen years before his birth
my bright-feathered father stands
between two women–one hand
On each shoulder–I've seen

this pose before,
in a photo from 1954--
on leave from the Navy,
his confidence untested
by life, or death in war.

He does not yet know
how loss and death maim the soul–
not the way his people knew–
these long-dead ancestors

knew all too well the prices
paid for love, hope, and land lost–
look at them now, living in
ramshackle mill cabins on old

Stump Hill, like migrant workers

in an unending harvest.

But here, for this reunion
all of them wear their Sunday
best. The dapperly dressed
somber men, the women
with their hooded eyes
and care-worn faces--

even the children
look resolute and resigned.

Grandfather Wesley blankly
stares ahead--his white hair stands
straight up, electrified. He
will die in 1923–

a life defined by loss--
from cotton gin to cotton mill
from war, to reconstruction
to reduced circumstances--

Grandma Mary
sits beside him, blind
and frail, hands clasped, eyes
closed, Aunt Beulah's hand

on her shoulder—long, thin
fingers, disembodied hand,
just a hand–wordless love.
I think of how she will live

until 1941–a life
spanned by wars. I look at my
grandmother at eight years old–
and see my daughter's

eyes. I cannot take my eyes

off her. I cannot stop
thinking about the way love
transmutes through veins,

through DNA--
how these people
still exist within me--
how
I cannot stop thinking
of them. Mostly, I cannot

stop thinking of my daughter–
how soon it will be before
all she can say to me will
be communicated by

touch, like Aunt Beaulah's
wordless love–
her delicate fingers
on her mother's shoulder-- love,
simultaneous love and mercy

her dark eyes gazing skyward.

Family Reunion–Birdie Georgia

Birdie, 1917
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love; her delicate fingers
on her mother's shoulder-- love
simultaneous love and mercy

her dark eyes gazing skyward.

~ R. Longfield

SOBERING

for Mom –
amíg újra találkozunk

She had to grow up fast, minus the luxury
of an "extended adolescence." Hardship ruled the day,
death an all-too-familiar presence. Consider, for instance,
the trauma of losing her brother Frankie at just ten,
killed in a car wreck on a frigidly cold day in January,
when Hitler was consolidating power and Soviet forces
had just struck Finland. War clouds were gathering,
thoughts of her other brothers risking their lives weighing
heavily upon her. Charlie died in infancy, the one
she'd never known. Fate spared her. She'd lose her father
by the time she'd reached twenty-five, her mother by age 30.
Her father, she would sadly discover, had passed
while she'd walked up town to the pharmacy to purchase
his medicines. She would go on to witness births, weddings, additional wars, and the deaths
of *all* six remaining brothers
and sisters. So many bones to mourn! Faces to miss!
Such sobering realities explained her pensivity,
especially around holidays.

~ T. J. Masluk

“Enough To Be Seen” ~ Edward Lee

GETTING TO YES AT ALL COSTS

My vices lead to balance
and paradise –
without them I would be
holier than thou
on a mountain peak
caught up with myself in silent Zen.

My vices are a grounding rod
here on earth –
each sip of red wine
is a perfect reminder
of the blood
that flows through my living veins.

My virtues could be
the death of me –
trying to appease them
leaves me hollow and empty;
I cannot give
more than I have,
lest I shrivel
and shrink away
into the lonely abyss
of sainthood gone awry.

My virtues are a forced smile
on cracked desert sand –
with each blistered laugh
I lose
a little part
of what makes me human.
The dry dirt
in my mouth
dehydrates asphyxiation
down my throat.

I must have my vices
to quell the thirst –
drinking deep
and long
of this world,
I become attuned

to the vibrations of mortal flesh
where I am saved
in the pure anarchy of reason.

My virtues drive me
further away
from humanity –
into solitude and depression,
into an overload of empathy,
into compassion beyond the pale.
I cannot survive
with an open heart
that bleeds, bleeds, bleeds,
hurts, hurts, hurts
all day, all night, forever.

My vices keep me calm
and steady –
always focused on success, tapped in
to the goal, on the ready
for whatever circumstances may arise.

My vices are the Tao River –
I ride them in peace;
I flow, I flux, I catch the tide,
I surf the wave
to the shoreline
and sleep there in sublime surrender,
understanding in dreams
the dichotic nature
of my animal/angel dualism.

My virtues are the false hope
of heaven
and the ancient fear
of hell –
wrapped up in illusions
and whispered falsehoods
of mythological delusion.

My vices are the Godhead
of present moment awareness –
the absolution of Now,
the evolution of time's theory,

the progression of expansive space,
the constant high that never ceases.

My virtues are a lie,
a fakery,
a mask…the cowardice
of a yawning grave.

My vices are the dust
and ash –
the truth in all its horror,
the existential madness,
the awesomeness, the joyousness,
the suffering, the sorrow, the final acceptance,
the Great Yes to it All.

~ Scott Thomas Outlar

WINTER DREAMS

Winter tires waiting for spring, as I tire of life.
A sky of slate overshadows the day.

I am tar once blistered by searing heat,
now cracked and scarred by the cold.

Ancient stars burn out
while singing lullabies to nebulae.
Time fades from existence in a single breath.

Hoping, dreaming, yearning, we saunter past dawn.
Some things never change. Why do we go in circles?

Darkness calls us into the storm.
The struggle becomes the path.

Spring is forever gone.
I have lived too long to remember the warmth.
Winter is here to stay.

~ Ann Christine Tabaka

AN APARTMENT TAKEN OVER

March 1, 1983

I started out liking my new apartment despite it being small, dark, having shoddy electricity and paper-thin walls. The spiderwebs that filled the apartment's corners didn't bother me at all, maybe because rarely did I see any spiders crawling around. Their delicate, sticky traps would reappear as if by magic the next day after I tore them down. I was nineteen, living off the little money my aunt left me after passing away. And even though I shared the apartment with no one else, I barely had enough room to move around. My twin-size bed was pushed up against the wall. A round dining table with four yellow-padded chairs stood next to the stove and fridge, and I had nothing comfortable to sit on. There was one window. But if I kept it closed, the air would become so stale that I feared I'd suffocate from how unbreathable the air felt going into my lungs. But having the window open only added to the unnerving sounds that already came from everywhere inside the building—from neighbors, bad plumbing, and the many strange creaks. It didn't take too long after I'd moved in for those sounds to become more oppressive than the surrounding air.

The gray-brick apartment building was three floors tall and stood on a sloping hill on the corner of Third and Pacific Avenue. On the other side of the street, homely-looking people sat on a bench scratched with curse words and graffiti. Those people were waiting for big gray-colored buses to come and take them away. Behind them, cars squealed as they pulled into a liquor store. A sheet of plywood had been used to replace one of the store's glass panels. Next to the liquor store, white smoke blew out of the vent of a flimsy-looking burger stand. On cold nights, the air was heavy with the smell of diesel oil, unleaded gasoline, grease, French fries, and burned hot dogs. Men who leaned on cinder block walls lingered long after finishing their greasy meals. They drank, spat, and told stories about how it had been somewhere and sometime.

I lived on the second floor. Despite the scandalous daytime talk shows, the rising popularity of music videos, and the countless sitcoms that would later become beloved classics, I didn't keep a television anywhere inside my room. I didn't need one. Close by, in one of the other apartments, there would always be an electrical apparatus turned on and tuned in. At nights, I'd listen, trying to create images out of the noises that I heard. But as time went by, my mind and ears wandered away from the television sets and radios. Instead, more and more, I found myself anxiously

listening to scrapes, murmurs, flicks, taps, scratches, a faint word, or a string of faint words put together.

It was through those sounds that I was able to observe my neighbors without them ever knowing. Much of my leisure hours were spent creating vivid images out of the things I heard. They were simple pictures of what my neighbors wore, how they walked, the facial gestures they made when they spoke, how their hair was combed, or even how their room was furnished. For example, my next-door neighbor had been up since dawn, and he was listening to KMET—The Mighty Met station, which played bands like The Doors, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, ELO, and Creedence Clearwater Revival. Up to that point, I had never laid my eyes upon my neighbor, but I could nevertheless see him as clear as daylight. He was a burly man with a messy beard. His chubby fingers were calloused, his fingernails filled with grime. Bits of greasy food dirtied the corners of his mouth. And his hairy stomach bulged out through his pajama top, which he'd forgotten to button all the way down. The whole picture was quite unpleasant.

Sounds coming from a television set below me made their way up to my room. A husky voice asked someone with an Irish accent, "The problem is, how did the bottle get from here . . . to here, and why?" The old Russian man who lived with his Russian wife on the first floor was loudly watching an episode of Colombo, and I knew by the Russian's groans that he was impatient with how slowly the crude and unkempt detective solved the mystery of who murdered a traitorous arms dealer.

The Russians' apartment was the first one anyone would see when entering the building through the front gate. Any time one of them shut a door or a window, the entire building shook. One day, the apartment shook so much that I wondered, "What kind of people go around closing and opening doors, opening and closing windows?"

To answer that question, I aimed my attention at them and went on to imagine the old Russian man sitting on a recliner with his bare feet propped up on an unvarnished coffee table. His thick, cracked, yellowing toenails pointed skyward toward where I was resting on my bed. Several hairline fractures ran down on the wall behind him. To hide those fractures, pictures of grandchildren who never visited their Russian grandparents were nailed all over the walls.

The old man ate sunflower seeds while watching the last thirty minutes of Colombo. But instead of collecting the seed shells to throw them away into a trashcan, he'd toss them out into the street. For a whole hour and thirty minutes, his window would sharply slide up, seed shells would fly out and land on a small

growing mountain of empty sunflower seeds next to a flower patch. Then the window would slam down to stop the cold weather from entering their apartment.

To confirm my suspicions, I easily could've gone outside and inspected the ground right by his window to see if there were any empty seed shells lying about. But I never went outside fearing the old Russian would catch me snooping. But the one thing I did know for sure was that his wife was cooking something awful.

Whiffs of what I imagined were oregano, thyme, crushed bay leaves, onion, garlic, and fish heads could be smelled throughout the apartment. The Russian's wife was making Borstroyanka, which was a name I made up to describe the faint sourness that I'd smell from time to time. From those particular scents, the Russian woman made herself visible to me. She was a stout old lady with thick fingers, piercing blue eyes, and a cloud of white hair. Steam from her pot warmed her face. Sweat dribbled out of her deep Russian pores and stuck to her forehead like bread crumbs. She slowly and smoothly stirred the pot, then tasted the stew. She'd say something that I'm pretty sure sounded like, "Bo-sheh, yeh-moo, nu-shnow, bol-sheh, ches-no-ka." And out of her kitchen cabinet, she grabbed a head of garlic. The cabinet's door smacked the wood when it came to a hard close. The garlic was then separated into ten cloves. Chop, chop, chop. The leftover garlic went back into the cabinet. And again, the cabinet door smacked the wood.

I couldn't help scrunching up my face, which was where I felt most of the tightness that I was feeling. The persistent window slamming and smacking of kitchen cabinets annoyed me to no end. "Can't they ever stop?" I found myself saying aloud. And immediately, both of the Russians went quiet.

The window slamming stopped, and no more smacking of kitchen cabinets. Even their television went on mute.

I slowed my breathing and squinted my eyes as if that was going to sharpen my hearing, but there was only the muffled sound of my heartbeat. Their silence had unsettled me. The tightness in my face spread to the rest of my body. I couldn't move or didn't want to move because I was sure that they'd heard what I'd said and were listening in on me.

After that, the pictures I'd go on to create in my head would begin to shift and slide.

At ten in the morning, my neighbor next door turned off the radio so that he could start watching game shows. The *$25,000 Pyramid Show,* followed by *Card Sharks*. By the time *The Price is Right* started, he'd fallen back asleep. His mattress squeaked each time he readjusted his lying position. His snores were hoarse and harsh with grunts, gasps, snorts, and wheezes. I imagined his head sharply raised on

many pillows, constricting some passageway of airflow. His mouth slightly ajar, struggling for the surrounding air. The sheets under his head darkened by sweat and the drool that dribbled down the sides of his cheeks. Suddenly, his purrs became roars. I then realized my neighbor was painfully turning into a tiger. And once the tiger was fully formed, it began to follow me.

There was no escaping the predatory feline. After all, where could I hide? My room was so small that all I could do was learn to live with the threat of being eaten alive or mauled to death at any moment. So I went about my business as if nothing was wrong and poured hot water into a ceramic mug. The water turned black as soon as I tossed in the instant coffee crystals.

With the tiger stalking my every move and the Russians listening in on me, I'd have to be careful about the noises I made. So I tiptoed to the dining table, carefully pulled out a chair, and quietly sat down. My only defense against all of them was my silence.

A pitter-patter of shuffling feet made my ceiling creak. There she went again. Unlike many of the other tenants, I had actually seen the single mother who lived above me. She often left and entered the building, and now she was moving from one end of her apartment to the other. Perhaps she was looking for her earrings in a corner and for her purse in the opposite corner. More than any other neighbor, she, along with her daughter, had taken over my apartment. Every movement they made would cause me to stop and listen. I began to feel trapped by their web of sounds. The daughter's tiny, quick patters as she ran across the floor, the cadenced scuffs of the mother's sweeping, it was as if those things were happening right in front of me.

The coffee on the dining table was burning hot, so I tossed in a few ice cubes to cool it down. The ice cracked and melted. I took a gulp and held the coffee in my mouth. Tilting my head back, I stared at the ceiling and speculated more about what the single mother was doing. Maybe she'd found her earrings or purse or whatever she was looking for since all I heard now were tiny screeches from what I was certain was a stool. I figured she was fidgeting in her seat, applying her makeup, getting ready to go out. As I continued looking up, I imagined the ceiling made of glass. Like I mentioned, I'd seen the single mother before. She was young and very pretty.

I slowly opened the window. A slender tree with ghostly, smooth bark was tall and close enough for me to reach out and fan my hands among its yellowish-green leaves. The tree obstructed my view of the sun, which appeared to be at eye level and sinking fast. The theme for *Family Ties* arrived loud and clear from the room next to mine, "Sha-la la-la." And above me, the single mother's footsteps clacked. She had to be wearing high heels. Red, I hoped. My ears followed

her going out the door, locking it, going down the hallway, down the stairs, past my floor, and down another flight of stairs.

I grabbed an RC Cola and the last four slices of ham out of the refrigerator, then rolled the ham into a tube. The breeze rushing through the tree's brittle leaves reverberated like an ocean. There were chirping birds hidden in the tree. Loud cars with small block engines drove by. Neighbors argued. Kids played hopscotch. A jumbo jet flew over the apartment. And from amplified electronics, static-filled voices and music merged to become one messy sound.

When the single mother finally came out of the building, her hair bounced with each step she took in her stiletto heels, which were glossy blue, not red. Her dress stopped at mid-thigh, and my eyes traced the back seams of her stockings. Her little daughter, walking right beside her, held her mother's hand as they crossed the street. I took a swig from the RC Cola and chewed the ham. Almost all of the mental pictures that I'd created of my neighbors were rotten, infected by my state of mind. So seeing the single mother with my eyes was sweeter than anything I could ever envision in my head.

I crept over to my bed and lifted my blanket off the white sheets, which I noticed were covered with spots that look like specks of pepper or black grains of rice. Nowhere in the apartment building was there a washer or dryer, and it was too much of a slog to take my dirty sheets and clothes down to the laundromat, three blocks away. So I hadn't done my laundry since I moved in.

The next night, I awoke from my siesta with a jolt. I vigorously scratched my leg, then touched and rubbed the misshapen bump that was quickly forming close to my ankle.

Oddly enough, none of my neighbors were making any noise. All I could hear was the hurtling rhythm of cars rumbling by. Their white, yellow, and red lights illuminated my walls and created hard shadows across my ceiling, and before fading away, the lights and shadows stretched out in slanted angles.

The limbs of the tree outside swayed like tiny ballet dancers. And in the middle of my room, a spider used its eight legs to pull itself up an invisible thread. It would go up about two inches. There'd be a misstep. The spider would drop about an inch, and then it'd go up about another two inches. The spider went on like this, going up and down, up and down, until it made it all the way to the ceiling where it crawled next to the light fixture and stopped moving. The spider didn't recoil when a loud hum vibrated through my ceiling. The single mother had begun vacuuming, and she pushed the vacuum cleaner all around her apartment. Then she turned it off and made her way to her window and closed it shut. She entered the bathroom. A light,

steady stream poured into a toilet. There was no flush. Metal rings from a shower curtain slid along an iron bar, and a squeaky knob turned. Water began spurting from a showerhead. The water gurgled as it traveled down the drain and through the rusty pipes. I stepped into my bathtub, fully clothed, and stood there on my toes. I closed my eyes to better see the images I had in my head. Soapy water sliding down soft breasts. Down long, smooth legs. Her long-damp hair clinging to her glistening body.

The spurting of the water continued, but the gurgling stopped. Her drain must've gotten clogged. A common occurrence in these apartments. And as she stepped out of the shower, her hot, wet feet slapped the floor. "Toenails painted pink?" I asked myself. "No." I decided they had to be baby blue, bordering on white.

Forty minutes later, the wood underneath her feet squealed longer and deeper. She had to be carrying her little daughter, putting a greater strain on the floor. When she walked out of her place, I didn't hear the deadbolt to her door turn and hit the metal plate like I normally heard. She'd forgotten to lock her door. I was certain, and through my window, I saw her and the little girl going out of the building. Knowing that the door to her apartment was open turned my mind inside out. There were so many nights that I thought, "What if I was up there, how nice that would be."

Next door, my neighbor fell asleep. His mattress squeaked with each labored breath he took, and his stomach made loud, grisly noises. It would be only a matter of seconds before his beastly transformation into the tiger was complete. I had no choice but to escape. Luckily, no one caught me in the hallway as I scurried up the steps. And it was my good fortune that the staircase didn't creak, which would have alerted the tiger to my whereabouts and revealed my intentions to the Russians, who were always spying on me.

The door to her place opened noiselessly. Everything around seemed familiar, yet strange. Each piece of her furniture had made a particular squeak, clink, or scrape, which I'd heard often enough to have accurately guessed their positions beforehand. The bed was a foot-and-a-half away from the vanity desk with the stool tucked in underneath. The kitchen table pushed right up against the window. The coffee table in front of the sofa. In the corner, a shelf holding a Sanyo stereo and cassettes. What I was wrong about were the colors and the interior style. For whatever reason, I had imagined pearl-colored Victorian furniture. Instead, honey-oak tables, dressers, and headboards made up much of the decor, along with pastel-colored fabrics and floral patterns. Pink ceramic vases held dried pampas grass.

Seeing the messiness of the room surprised me, even though it shouldn't have. I should've kept in mind the great demands that are placed upon a single mother as well as a child's destructive tendencies. Thrown about were coloring books with the pages torn off. Crayon colorings scribbled outside the lines. Only one page did I assume was colored in by the single mother. The markings were neat and uniformed, kept inside the outline of a cowgirl. The single mother had taken her time with the drawing, making sure the tones were as realistic as the eight Crayola colors allowed for. The cowgirl's skin was orange, but the crayon had barely brushed the page so that the skin looked more peach than orange. The cowgirl's hair and boots were black. Her jeans, blue. Her eyes, green. And her shirt, red with black stripes. But the single mother forgot to color the horse, so I grabbed a brown crayon, leaned forward, and filled it in myself.

I got up and walked around and saw her unmade bed. A small yellow blanket smelled like sweet milk. Clothes lay on the floor. Trash spilled over the wastebasket. And in the kitchen, charred flakes of eggs were stuck to a pan left on the stove. I scraped the bits of flakes off and swallowed the salty bits.

An insect's egg sac had hatched by the windowsill. It looked like a small piece of cotton pulled apart. I opened the window and brushed it out. Looking at her cassette and record collection, I read the names of musicians I never heard of. Emmanuel, Amanda Miguel, Camilo Sesto. Wanting to commit one of the names to memory, I said, "Camilo Sesto" three times.

In the bathroom, I found a silverfish taking a walk in the washbasin. It disappeared down the pipe. Pushing the shower curtains to the side, I saw the murky water still in the tub. An oval ring of black grime ran along its outer edges. I dipped my hand into the water as if it was holy because the water had touched every part of her naked body. I took off my clothes and stepped in. There was only an inch of water, and it was cold, but I grew very excited. The bottom of the porcelain enameled bathtub was even colder, and my entire body became covered with goose skin, so I opened the faucet and waited for the water to warm up as it rose to my stomach.

Someone next door had their television at its maximum volume. Tonight, Johnny Carson interviewed a comedian. "You know Johnny," began the comedian with his jittery, blustering voice, "my wife, she's a screamer in bed."

"Oh yeah, a screamer you say?" asked Carson.

"Yeah. Every time I walk in on her, she screams, 'get out!' I'm telling you, Johnny, I get no respect."

There was laughter, and I could just picture how Carson must've leaned forward in his burgundy sports jacket, showing his full head of white hair to the

camera, trying to hide his boyish grin from the crowd. When the audience finally calmed down, I unclogged the drain by pulling out the long strands of hair along with thick, brown and gray gunk.

I was afraid the tiger or the Russians would hear the dirty water whirlpooling down the drain and realize what I'd done. But there were no tigers or Russians anywhere near the single mother's apartment. I'd finally found an escape from all of them, at least for the time being. Here, I could breathe without fear.

When I left the single mother's place, no one was around.

Back in my bed, I felt a tingling sensation, like a tiny bug wiggling under my skin. I couldn't quite pinpoint where the feeling was coming from. So I stayed up all night scratching my arms, chest, neck, and legs, even my earlobes.

Five in the morning, and the single mother hadn't returned. Where could she be? What could she be doing? Who could she be with? These thoughts kept running through my mind. Finally, a series of hastened clacks went past my floor, up the flight of stairs, and into the single mother's apartment. The clacks continued until they reached her bed. Muffled thuds replaced the clacking. She'd taken off her blue high heels, and now her bare feet made their way to the window, which I forgot I left open. A shiver went down my spine.

"Did she know I had been in there?" I asked myself. "Did I leave anything behind?"

After she closed her window, she began moving cautiously from one spot to another. Slithers, hisses, and rasps were the only noises I heard from her. Those guarded noises were like a searchlight shining down on me, exposing to the entire building the violation I'd committed. I had the urge to run out of the apartment, but all I could do was lay still and look up.

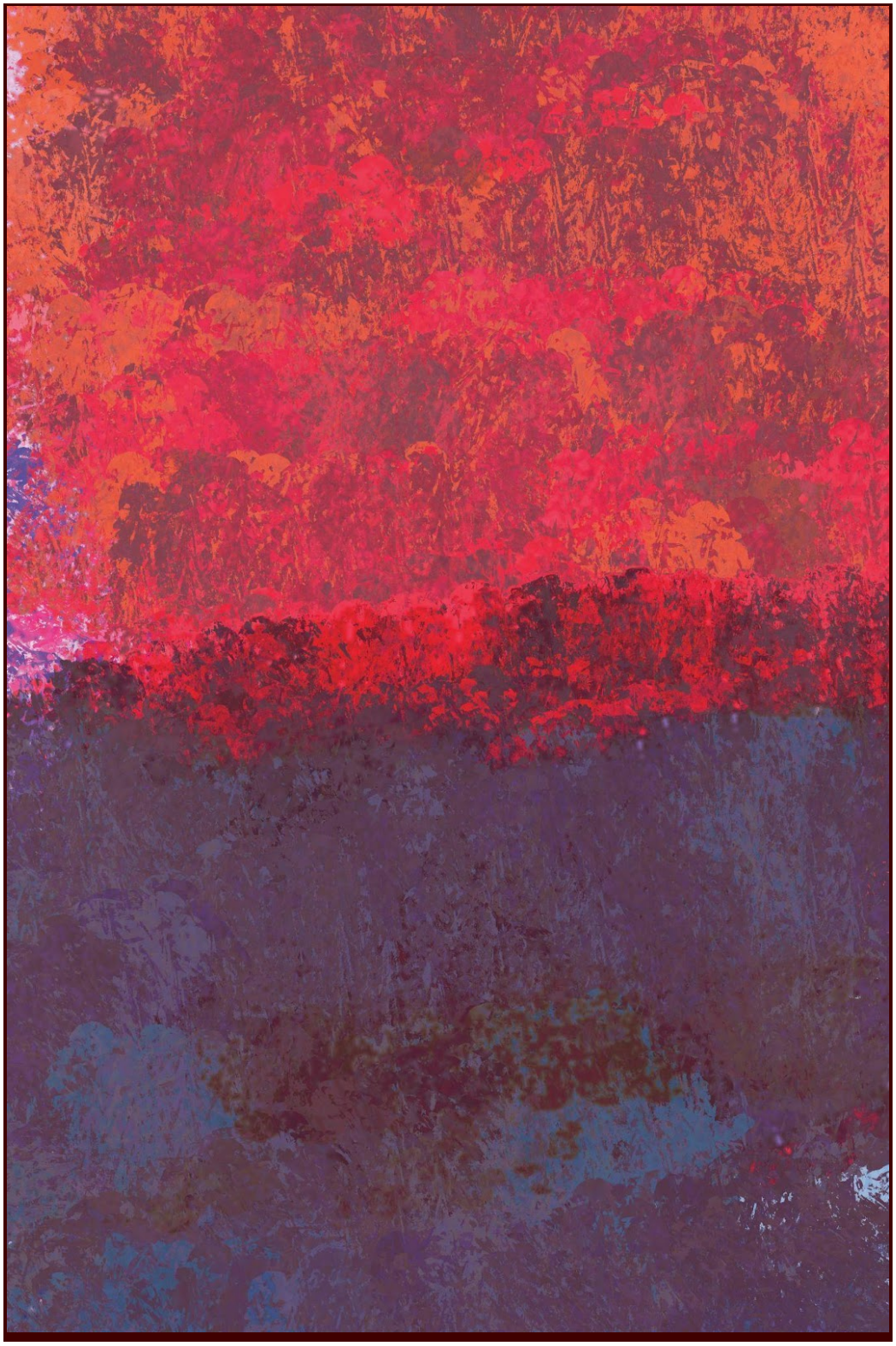
Stuck on the ceiling, next to the light fixture, was the spider. It hadn't moved since climbing up on its invisible thread hours ago. I wanted it to flinch, give a little twitch, but it didn't move. Because it was dark, I started thinking that maybe what I was looking at was nothing more than a smudge of dirt. But no. There was just enough light for me to count one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Eight long and stiff, string-like legs.

The single mother started retracing my steps. I was almost certain of it. As she walked from the kitchen to her bathroom, my eyes didn't stray away from the spider. I mouthed off the words, "move, move." Move, I implored the spider because I saw it as an obstruction, an extra layer that separated her from me. But the spider remained motionless. So I stared and stared. I stared so long and hard that the room turned upside down, and I lost sight of the spider and instead saw myself.

Peering downward, I watched a young man lying on a bed. Our eyes met. Neither of us blinked. He was thin. Prickly hairs had only recently begun to cover his chin and upper lip. The rest of his face was smooth, except for the scars left over from acne, which had only cleared not too long ago. His arms, neck, and chest were red from scratching. I could see him, but with my many eyes, I also saw the entirety of the room. There was no tiger lurking in the shadows, no Russians with their ears pressed against his door. It was clear the young man right below me was caught in a deep fear. He was afraid of having been seen by his neighbors, of having them know about his existence. So he lay as stiff as a dead body, straining his ears trying to clarify and understand the sounds around him. The roars from his neighbors had always just been snores. And the single mother walked slowly and silently only because she had placed her sleeping daughter down on the bed and did not want to startle her.

But the young man did not move for a long time. He was ready to dart off at a moment's notice. A few feet away from him, hundreds of ants entered his apartment through a small crack in the window's frame. They ran along the wall in a straight line, then the trail made a sharp turn towards the floor, and in a frenzy, they crawled all over a rag that smelled like sugary-mildew, like a cherry starting to rot.

~ Francisco Uribe



"Speech Conflicted" ~ Edward Lee

PADRE

Please hold me
Please love me
What is so retched about me that you can't stand to look at me
Father
Please
i'm begging
On my knees
Please please
Though you don't want me,
Can we just pretend?
All I ask is for you to love me
Oh
Love me, love me, love me

Though your love stings like acid
i crave It
As It's poured through my mouth
Sliding down my throat
It burns
And It leaves trails behind It
Raw and red
Needles scratching their way through my body
But i want more
And It begins to eat away at me
and i want more

This is what paternal love is
Agony and stinging and distance
i tell myself though you don't talk to me anymore
Though you throw heavy blankets on me,
Suffocating and itchy,
You love me.
Do you?
Your baby.
Your chula.

Please
All i can do is plead while you freeze and block me out
i hate you more than you know
With my womanly body that you can't zip up anymore
Your touch on my back is fidgety and awkward
Why?

Maybe if i'm gone, you won't see my body anymore
You'll see me and you'll see your reflection staring back at you
Staring and burning
Pa, please just make it stop

~ Ari Sicairos

CHINCHES

In most of the world but especially in Latino households, with their eternal mistrust of European nonsense like psychotherapy, the DSM, and not beating the mental illness out of your children, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of what bipolar disorder is. For most people, misconceptions of bipolar disorder range anywhere from mood swings to split personalities to the crucifix scene in The Exorcist, but the truth of it is far simpler. If there is a part of the brain responsible for synthesizing and interpreting reality, bipolar disorder is simply its overexertion. It is an imperative to decipher an incomprehensible barrage of signifiers; to create an orderliness from the chaos of existence. It is an impossible mission to which one is called upon by chemical imbalances in the brain. A mission into the heart of one's own madness, a madness that has seemingly been codified into the world, down to the most innocuous and insignificant detail, and to an overwhelming degree. In the moments preceding a manic episode, one feels as though they are teetering on the edge between sanity and madness, and it takes the smallest of anxieties to push you over. For Javi Hernandez, it was the three red welts between his right thumb and index fingers which his mother had jokingly warned him about that pushed him over the edge on the day of his death.

"Parecen mordidas de chinche."

Javi sat at his parents' dinner table gazing blankly at the bowl of menudo under his nose, his mother's words still ringing in his head. On a normal day he would be contemplating the violence before him, musing to himself about the morbidity of the dish, with its various assortment of disemboweled stomachs and chopped hooves, all simmered for hours in a sanguine broth. He would try distracting himself by deconstructing everything around him, picking apart every dish, every comment, every cultural practice to take his mind off of the misery of his daily existence.

As a college dropout, Javi had grown increasingly self-conscious about his lack of prospects. A once-promising student who ,no matter how many "you're wasting your potential" and "play nice with your white teachers" lectures he was given in high school, couldn't seem to outwork a brain that insisted he stay locked inside of his room and his own head. Like many a formerly-gifted student, he was unable to deal with the pressure and sheer volume of work required to prove his humanity in the uncaring institutions that promised him a better life, a life that validated the two decades of an American Dream that consisted of little more than his parents being overworked, underpaid, and occasionally starved. Instead he was circling the drain in his fourth year of community college, turning to alcohol and whatever pills he could skim from the family's medicine cabinet to numb the shame

of his failure. He had few friends and dating was out of the question, save for the occasional porchfront 40 oz or pity hook-up at a local kickback. His friends had grown tired of his maudlin disposition, and the brooding tortured soul act that once charmed suburban girls was growing increasingly pathetic the closer he inched toward 25. Unable and unwilling to pull himself out of the freefall of his failure, he resigned himself to a life of isolation. He had long since given up on maneuvering through the latticework of tightropes that were human relationships. Lost amongst the incomprehensible system of signs spoken and unspoken that untangled all the feelings friends and lovers could have for him, be it joy or contempt, love or resignation, Javi retreated inwardly. On any other day he would find himself lost in this crushing isolation, blacking the world out until he was brought back to reality by a stinging pain from the cheek he instinctively bit down on to stop himself from crying at the table. But not today.

A chill ran across his arm. Was it a chill? A spasm? Or did it feel alive? Did it go across his leg? Why did it move to his back when he touched his leg? He looked. He touched. He scratched. Nothing appeared save for red streaks across freshly irritated skin but it did little to assuage his paranoia. Every sensation became another sign to interpret, a message to be decoded, a thread to untangle. Within every thread of fabric that rubbed against his skin, every twitching nerve, every chill that ran across his body was proof of a corporeal swarm. The sensory and mental overloads fed into each other in a vicious cycle of infestation that buzzed in his head so intensely that Javi could not hear his parents' mortified screams as he ran out of the house removing his shirt and picking at the bedbugs he felt skittering across his abdomen.

His legs carried him all the way to the bus stop where the Sunday morning señoras stood patiently waiting for the bus to take them to church, their eyes instinctively averting the shirtless mess, spastic and heaving, that tripped on its shoelaces in front of them. Years of sharing public transit with a rotating gallery of drug addicts, from shermheads to crackheads to tweakers (and the ever-present tecato), these women were well-trained in the art of judgment from the corner of an eye. Javi empathized, he knew firsthand the conditions that bred this talent for peripheral surveillance. The ability to take in the world, to decipher the threats that lay hidden within it, was often the deciding factor between a warning and a jail cell, getting home or getting deported, living or dying. As a child, Javi was forced to develop an intuitive ability to maneuver the web of California's highways long before he could even see above a steering wheel. When his father would have to work, he was promoted from passenger to the role of co-pilot in his mother's car. Reading directions from a sheet of paper that always smelled faintly of the library they were printed in, Javi was in charge of making sure they made it to and from their

destination without attracting the attention of the police or getting too close to the border. If his directions came too late, she would drive erratically, drawing the attention of the police. If he missed the exit, they would be too close to the San Clemente Border Patrol checkpoint, or worse, the actual border in San Ysidro.One missed exit, one wrong turn, and they could be headed straight across a border his mother was years away from being able to cross freely. He remembered her face whenever they'd have to go to a family gathering in San Diego without his father, the beads of sweat forming at the very top of her forehead, the knuckles that became whiter as her grip on the steering wheel became tighter and tighter when a police officer drove behind her, the sound of her whispered prayers between heavy breaths still buzzing around his head to this day. Sometimes he would imagine her gripping the steering wheel so hard that it would snap under the pressure, sending them skidding across the freeway until they fell over an embankment and crashed, freeing them from the endless eyes peering into their cars, poring over every inch of their lives in hopes of sending them back to Mexico.

On a normal day Javi would be patiently waiting with the women, scanning the streets and the skies for any sign of danger. As they boarded the 252, Javi directed his watchful gaze internally, cataloging any movement he felt on his body, suppressing the visceral disgust elicited by the fabric of his shirt the bus driver forced him to put back on. The ghetto birds that normally swarmed the skies now lived inside of him, a pestilence burrowing its endless eyes into his sanity like the swarm of bed bugs making their way across every inch of his skin, burrowing themselves underneath through his pores, nesting and hatching new life in his body, in his brain. Today his attention was squarely on the insects that bore through him like the freeways that bisected his neighborhood, rhizomes that left him dirty and split and segmented into an endless collection of bits, torn apart by roads that led only to hostile worlds far from his own, worlds which he did not belong to.

The bugs made his clothing feel unbearable, as if his body was blanketed by a tapestry of insects crawling and biting and consuming his flesh and his sanity. As Javi tried getting them off, ripping every article of clothing and burying his fingernails deep into his skin, picking and digging and tearing, the bus driver pulled over and walked toward the naked and bleeding maniac to throw him off until he stumbled again and rolled out of the rear exit onto Soto Street, taking off in a full sprint down Cesar Chavez toward a small crowd forming around a fruit cart. Fully naked and bleeding from the divots on his torso made raw by his futile attempts to rid himself of the contamination that completely occupied what was once his body, now little more than a empty vessel for the hive's endless cycle of death and rebirth, Javi locked eyes with the frutero slicing and seasoning fruits.

"Don, ayúdeme con las chinches!"

In a panic, the old man raised the cleaver high above his head to scare the bleeding, sobbing mass running toward him. When Javi continued, the old man closed his eyes and swung toward him in an attempt at a more threatening gesture, only he did not anticipate Javi tripping and lunging toward him, landing in the cleaver's downward path and severing his neck open from the carotid artery to the esophagus. Feeling the blunt force of the impact, the old man opened his eyes and let out a scream to accompany those of his customers as Javi slumped forward bleeding to death.

In the final moments of a manic episode, there is at times a curious inversion of interpretive drive. In its denouement, the afflicted person's internal fixation turns inside out and rather than interpreting the world as a series of narratives which they sit in the center of, they become overwhelmingly attuned to the existence of others, taking on an unbearable empathy for all living things past, present, and future. They feel one with the world, and no longer lost in the incomprehensibility of their own grand narrative, are crushed by the weight of everyone else's. On a normal day, Javi would have spent his final moments alive looking at the hazy wall of sobbing faces and bloody hands working to stop the bleeding, feeling connected to them through their mutual suffering. He would have felt grateful for their efforts in spite of their futility. He would have felt guilty for burdening them with his madness, and now with his death. He would have felt that he was no longer alone, that he was around people who cared about him, people who expected nothing for their compassion, people who loved him for no reason other than he was a person just like they were. The day of Javi Hernandez's death, however, was not a normal day. In his final seconds of life Javi looked up at the bed bugs spurting out of his neck and onto the sidewalk, shining fat and ruby-like in the sun, breathing one last sigh of relief at the spectacle before him that proved that he was not crazy.

~ Julian Zaragoza

I HAVE A TENDENCY TO DO THE THINGS I LOVE UNTIL I BREAK

I circle around
what I love,
endlessly
only stopping for weary rest
in the water like a shark,
frantic that this is my last
swim; that I will see a fishless
sea:

> When the guitar sings you a melody,
> you take it. When your best friend
> asks you to dance, you do, until
> your ankle snaps. You instill
> words into your veins until they ache
> for blood — you build a dream
> and you pay the price.

Will my death be marked by the
sound of jagged teeth ripping into flesh
fins flailing into
open an fishnet, black diamonds
glistening with saltwater in the
air, hurled onto wet wood and left there,
maw snapping around the prize
catch?

~ Hana Saad

PAUL NEWMAN & A RIDE HOME

Holy Mary, pray for me.
How can boyhood be
anything other than breaking
in your Hi-Tops—split soda pop,
drizzling lemon squeezes over
Chili Cheese Fritos,
watching the draglines shovel
away your favorite hillside,
where you sat like crabgrass
in your Sunday best after the funeral?

St. Joseph, pray for me.
There is still
ceremony in your eyes.
I laugh with you and
it sounds like crying.
Your dehydrated legs
cross the dirt like sticky
knotted worms.
A boy is still
a child even after
a tumor. The chalk-stained
cracks now tinted in rosy
drips from your nose.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,
assist me in my last agony.
We are posturing
over the problem
like pigeons
with seeds in our beak,
and you step out
into bright sunlight
from some dark
movie house
and flutter away.

~ Chance Castro

TONGUE/TIED THOUGHTS AFTER “LIVING ENGLISH WORK”

if it does not fit fine-tipped, i wish
to saw the remains for the lips
to turn fine gold piercing
every crevice dollar-for-dollar
chapped coins molded over sweating hair
the happy release of dead skin
now open mouth sucking earth

the tongue takes a vulgar u-turn
against the teeth jutted out
denting L & Rs into slur
tumbles through concrete

tearing apart soft plump flesh
surgical knives stampeding
under the tongue
blood-busting maps of anatomy

fingers crawling over balled up
cheeks, forking
out saliva so cold
death curled back

pooling of blood
on blade only it dried and wash to repeat
my frenulum is forever cut from the house
of mouth ghoulish red drop
dug a scar permanent over pulsing veins

kissing your palate
before the molars are rotten
clothes hanger melting into water

if the tongue does not swirl nimbly
without curse round rich and anglo-saxon
hammer into the mouth straight

~ Helen Chen

SEE IT FOR WHAT IT IS (THE MYTH)

Some of us have
bought into
the Myth,
strung it between
our teeth and hung
ourselves from the parapets,
glistening,

listening for the sound of
water against mint metal,
a slender taste
spreading across our tongues
a snake coiled around our
wrists, relentless.

The Myth glimmers like
sunlight on the waves
where the boats come to shore,
golden threads burrowing in our throats
twining through red muscle, a voice
trapped in a seashell locket.

The Myth is beautiful; the Myth
keeps us singing, breathing, we unspool
the golden thread from the cusp of our
necks, let it shine in our palms, pull
our sons and daughters to us,
release them to the water; the Myth

promises to protect, the undeniable weight of it:
iron heavy in our palms, burning holes in
our hands. We clutch it even as our
flesh burns, even as our bodies
contort to fit the Myth, so

we let it tumble from our hands; we
see it for what it is; we clutch our
bleeding throats, burning chests, gnashing
our jaws, blood sluicing down our backs.

We let the Myth stand,
watch it from the sea,

let it burn in the sand.

~ Hana Saad

"The Declaration's Memorial" ~ Malia Miguel

FISHERMAN AND HIS DOG

When I scribble notes on scrap paper, it's in English. Birthday cards
in Spanish. Anger scalds my palms when I find its hiding place,
sometimes it'll burst from my chest before I get a chance
to shove it under my bed. Despair finds me in English if it finds me at all.
What meaning does sadness have for a girl who doesn't recognize
her mother tongue? *La tristeza es para* someone who understands
its depth. When I am in my childhood bedroom, I make lists

of everything that will stay the same when I am gone.
Walls I repainted at fourteen, a practical purple-gray.
The book of Puerto Rican myths tucked away between study guides.
Those are written in Spanish. My favorite was one about
the dog who turns to stone, who waits every day for his fisherman
to return home. I still think that's the greatest tragedy

I ever read. A dog; waiting day and night for his fisherman. His best friend,
his family. The salt air turned that poor dog to stone and God it still
makes me weep. The dog compels me to dig under my bed to free my anger,
introduces me to despair. If the fisherman had returned
it would be to a room where everything is the same. Everything is frozen because
of him and his need to leave. This island might call me a stranger
but her stories crush my bones. Turn me to stone.

I am heavy with this guilt. I have to tell you *que me da pena*.
Leaving is written in Spanish so all my ancestors can understand
what I've done with their sacrifice.

~ Nia Mahmud

PLEASE DON'T FEED THE COYOTES

The sharp crags of the San Gabriel Mountains rose behind the rooftops like a scenic postcard, a vast wild horizon. Sandy hopped down the front steps of her new house, blonde ponytail bouncing under a white Dodger's baseball cap. She could be anyone—a spicy redhead or a chic brunette—but she stuck to Revlon 85B, strawberry blonde, the color of her twenties. The sun cast long, ominous shadows across the sidewalk. She hesitated, unsure of which way to go. The movers drove away yesterday afternoon, leaving her alone with rooms of furniture and stacks of boxes.

A teenager zipped by on a skateboard, long, black hair flying. The girl came to an abrupt halt using one foot as a brake, turned around, and stared. Sandy glanced away. Her chest tightened, her heart beating hard. The girl waved and stepped closer. "Mrs. Bohraz? Is that you? Remember me? Brooke. Brooke Sanchez. I was in your class, like, a million years ago."

Sandy peered at the girl, noticing the nose stud and thick black eyeliner that swooped into little wings. Her large brown eyes and lush eyelashes were familiar. Hundreds of children passed through Sandy's third-grade classroom; keeping track of them all was hard. Mostly she remembered the kids that kept in touch with high school graduation announcements and holiday cards.

Brooke looked down, with a shy, embarrassed look, scuffing the toe of her sneaker against the curb. Sandy smiled, relieved. Now, she remembered Brooke standing in front of her desk. It was the day before winter break, and Brooke held a misshapen plastic container that looked like it had been microwaved many times over. Brooke's eyes widened at the fancy-wrapped gifts on the desk and welled with tears. Sandy swooped in and grabbed the container from Brooke's hands, opened the lid, and exclaimed loud enough for the class to hear, "Tamales my favorite."

Back then, Brooke was a sweet, timid girl. Now, the girl in front of her was almost a woman. An inch or so taller than Sandy, wearing black baggy pants, midriff bare, and the beginnings of a bustline barely covered by a tube top. Sandy gestured to the house behind her, a pristine English-style cottage, with white and blue trim, feigning pride, hoping necessity sounded like an intentional choice. Renting this house was the best she could do after the divorce. "I just moved in."

Brooke nodded. "I live next door. Saw the movers. You have a lot of stuff."

Sandy laughed. "Too much. Hey, I'm going for a walk. Which direction is best?"

"Anyway is good. But hurry. The coyotes run at night." Brooke waved, riding down the street in a long wide loop and out of view.

Sandy shivered at the thought of feral animals roaming the streets and turned

the corner with a determined military-like stride. A light perfume from early blooming roses and star jasmine floated in the air as she passed neglected front yards with colorful Black Lives Matter banners, three-year-old fading Bernie signs sunk in the ground like garden ornaments, chain link fences with guard dog warning signs, and cars parked pretty much anywhere except the driveway. Raucous laughter carried from a backyard, reminding her of parties years ago, tumbling into bed half-drunk after putting five-year-old Tess to sleep.

The enticing aroma of barbecue smoke made her stomach grumble. All she'd eaten today was a banana and a handful of raw almonds. Sandy eyed a fruit-laden tree in a front yard and as if she'd conjured it, there was a cardboard box at the edge of the lawn with oranges, and lemons, ***'free'*** written in black sharpie across the front. She picked out an orange, and two lemons, stuffing the lemons in the waistband of her leggings, and biting into the orange, peel, and all. Juice dripped down her chin as she tossed the peel under a bush telling herself it was biodegradable, not like the plastic bottles she'd passed in the street.

Two streets north there were well-maintained homes, mowed and trimmed lawns, and large aloes in symmetrical rows. Halfway down the block, there was a small wood structure, like a box on a fence post. It had a framed glass door and a brass plaque engraved, 'Little Free Library'. She opened the library and flipped through the books, bestsellers from years ago, *The Shipping News*, wedged between *Dianetics* and *The Paleo Diet Cookbook for Beginners*. She imagined the owner as a woman searching for self-improvement. Sandy nodded and thought, good for her. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and snapped a photo of the website's name.

The sun was setting when she reached the corner of her block. She stopped, frowned, and stared at a ranch house with cracked green stucco, chunks missing as if someone attacked it with a hammer. The roof was covered with a blue plastic tarp held in place with bricks. She pictured an elderly couple, huddled on a living room sofa, shivering under a blanket, watching raindrops plop in a saucepan. How did things get to this state? It will never happen to her.

A week later, Sandy sat in bed wearing flannel pajamas, drinking coffee, iPad on her lap, swiping pages of the New York Times with one finger. Her favorite things were on display in the bedroom. The I LOVE MY TEACHER mug filled with red pencils, sharpened side up like a pointy bouquet on her desk. The lopsided ceramic candlesticks Tess made in Girl Scouts on the bookshelf and next to the bookshelf hung the family photos she took with her, frames and all, leaving behind a checkerboard of unfaded paint rectangles on the walls.

It was almost ten o'clock, and light streamed past the edges of cotton curtains

that weren't quite wide enough to cover the windows. Her head was groggy, and she took a big swig of coffee. The prior evening, high-pitched animal howls interrupted her forkful of Chinese take-out eaten straight from the container. Through the window, she saw three coyotes, with shining eyes, staring back at her. She slammed the window hard with the heel of her hand. The animals slinked off, in no rush at all. Glowing eyes haunted her sleep.

Sandy stretched her arms over her head, yawned, and changed into a T-shirt, shorts, and sturdy walking shoes. She selected books off the shelf, with a quick assessment. *The Lacuna* (not as good as Poisonwood Bible), *American Wife* (who cares about the Bush family now?), and *Life of Pi* (everyone's seen the movie). From the coat closet, she pulled out a brand-new grabber stick with a bright orange claw. She wedged the books under her arm and turned the brass door knob. A warm spring breeze carried the scent of fresh-cut grass. Across the street, a neighbor wearing a green jumpsuit like the one the school custodian wore, pushed a gas-powered mower across a rectangular lawn. The grinding sound drowned out her half-hearted hello as she opened the tiny glass door of her just-built Little Free Library and slid the books in. He was the first neighbor she'd met, other than Brooke. Mark Williams rescued her as she struggled with digging a two-foot deep and one-foot-wide hole per the enclosed instructions, sweat running off her neck.

Mark did the job in two minutes with a thing that looked like Pac-Man on a pole. Sandy read the writing on the truck parked in his driveway, *Williams Landscaping*, and pulled a twenty out of her pocket. She wanted to be respectful of his time. Mark shook his head with an emphatic no and waved her hand away. "Just being a good neighbor," he said.

She'd said thanks and wondered if she'd insulted him but didn't understand why. In her old neighborhood, paying a gardener for an extra job was considered de rigueur. But then, she realized, her cheeks growing hot with embarrassment, Mark was her neighbor, not her gardener. She made a nervous exit, arms flapping with some made-up excuse about a casserole in the oven.

Sandy waved at Mark, her hand sweeping the sky, but got no response, and looked away, in embarrassment. Had he already cast her, as a middle-aged aged tone-deaf white lady? She wasn't like those women in the news, kicking people out of public parks, and calling the cops on birdwatchers. She taught third grade for over two decades just two miles away.

An empty soda bottle nestled against the curb, and she imagined it being flung from a car by a driver who considered the street a personal trash can. She pinched the sides and held it up like lost treasure and dropped it in the bag. Next, she snatched a rusted nail and a McDonald's cup. Her mood lifted as the plastic bag

filled. She hoped her efforts would be appreciated.

The plastic bag was heavy with glass bottles and wet newspapers, by the time she returned to her block. An elderly woman, not more than five feet tall with wrinkled skin the color of a hazelnut shell and rounded shoulders, stood still as a statue on the scraggly, weed-filled lawn of the run-down green stucco house. It was the only house on the block with bars on the windows and a wrought iron security door, a vestige of another time, a time when Sandy drove through this area with her doors locked and windows closed on her way to and from work.

The woman had short gray hair and a deep crease on each side of her face that hinted at a lifetime of frowning. A few lazy clouds drifted in the sky, movement imperceptible as if time stopped. The woman's body was swallowed up by a red cable knit sweater, big enough to fit a pro football player. She threw something and it dropped to the ground. A hunk of bread. Sandy was not used to seeing people throwing food on their lawns.

The woman lifted the hem of her sweater and pulled another piece of bread out of a pants pocket flinging it in the air. It didn't fly far; bread was not aerodynamic. Sandy cleared her throat. "Feeding the squirrels?" she said, sounding nervous.

The woman stared at Sandy as if feeding squirrels was the most ridiculous idea ever, more ridiculous than throwing bread on the half-dead lawn like it was a duck pond. "Squirrels got plenty to eat. I'm feeding that." She pointed to a dark shape near the side gate. A coyote, gaunt with matted grey fur hulked in the shadow of the hedge.

Sandy flinched. Could it be part of the same pack she shooed away last night? "Don't you hear them howling at night? The sound gives me the creeps. No wonder they're hanging around here."

"I didn't hear anything except my own heartbeat. He won't hurt you. He's a sweetheart." Come here honey, come get some breakfast." Her syllables slurred together. She made kissing sounds and tossed another piece of bread.

Sandy leaned closer to hear the woman, but not too close, aware of the animal in the corner, heart pounding. "Get out of here!" Sandy said in her loud teacher's recess voice. The coyote was more obedient than her third graders, trotting down the block.

"What'd you do that for?" The woman put her hands on her hips.

"I'm *trying* to keep us safe." She gripped the bag of trash, the plastic slipping in her moist hand. This certainly wasn't Ridgecrest, with its wide, clean streets, perfect green lawns, sprinklers working overtime, even during the drought, and front doors painted in tasteful shades of white, beige, and grey approved by the

homeowner's association.

"Says you. Whoever you are." The woman spat dry air.

"I'm your new neighbor. Four houses over. Sandy Bohraz." Sandy looked down the block towards her house. Mark was weeding his flower bed. He paused and raised a hand clutching weeds. She lifted her hand, fingers extended, happy for the acknowledgment.

"Well, everybody knows me. I've been here sixty years. Lillian Mae. I'm not going anywhere. If you want we should be friendly, mind your own business." She turned and with slow, unsteady steps went back inside the house.

"Are the new neighbors friendly?" Tess asked the following Saturday morning during their weekly mother-daughter phone chat.

Sandy sat on the sofa in the tiny living room, crossed and uncrossed her legs. She thought about Lillian Mae, stubborn as the roots of the deodar tree in her front yard. "Some more than others. A neighbor across the street helped me set up my lending library. That reminds me. I'd like to put some books in there for a former student who lives next door. What do you think a thirteen-year-old girl would like? Harry Potter?"

Tess laughed, one of Sandy's favorite sounds. "I'm twenty-two. How would I know? I was a teenager ages ago. You could look through my stuff, maybe there's something kids are still into."

"Oh, good idea." Sandy had packed up Tess's room, everything except the bedroom set. Tess was too busy at work to fly home for the big clean-out. The boxes were still stacked in the garage.

"But Mom, maybe it's time you stop worrying about other people. Do what makes you happy for a change."

"And the daughter becomes the parent. Sage advice. But this does make me happy."

After she finished talking with Tess, Sandy went into the kitchen and tied an apron over her pajamas. Baking was therapeutic, and brownies could be just what she needed, a peace offering. She measured out the ingredients, unsweetened chocolate squares, flour, vanilla, baking powder, and walnuts, lining everything up on the kitchen counter. After all the ingredients were mixed, she tasted the smooth brown batter, licking her finger with the delight of a five-year-old. Thick ribbons of batter folded over into a square baking pan, a well-used wedding shower gift. She was twenty-three when she got married, living with her parents after college, and just a year older than Tess, full of naive, almost storybook ideas. Not anymore.

While the brownies baked, she dug through a plastic bin in the garage for

gingham ribbon and paper plates. When the timer on her phone vibrated. Sandy opened the oven. The scent of dark chocolate escaped. She inhaled deeply. There were no calories in breathing.

The morning was half-gone. She cradled cellophane-wrapped paper plates of brownies in her arms, each with an attached note card on which she'd written, *From Your Neighbor!* with her email and phone number. After giving a plate to Mrs. Santos, Sandy knocked softly on Mark's front door under the ***No Soliciting Sign***. He looked wary when he opened the door.

"For your help with the library." She thrust a plate of brownies toward him.

He took the plate, nodded, and said thank you. She shifted the other bundle to one arm. "I planted a rosebush yesterday."

Wow. How stupid did that sound? There was no way he could know what a big deal it was for her. If she explained that in Ridgecrest, planting was the gardener's job it would make it worse. Even if it was true.

"Good for you. Nice to see someone taking care of that house. And I've seen you walking around picking up trash. I keep my curb clean, but not all folks care." Mark had one hand on the door, as if ready to close it in a hurry.

Sandy smiled. She cared. And he saw it. Mark looked at the other plates. "Where're you headed next?"

"Lillian Mae. The house on the corner." She turned her head and looked at Lillian Mae's house.

"Known her my whole life. Always been ornery. Hasn't changed a bit." Mark closed his eyes and shook his head as if in disbelief. "Why do you want to talk to her?"

Sandy sighed. "I'm hoping to convince her to stop feeding the coyotes."

Mark said, "Good luck." He sounded dubious.

There was no response when Sandy rang Lillian Mae's doorbell. She rang again. Maybe the bell didn't work? She rattled the security door, and tried the bell a third time, pressing her shaking index finger hard on the round button. There was a click of the deadbolt, and the inner wooden door opened.

Lillian Mae's face was framed by the metal bars of the locked security door. She was thin and frail, wearing a terry cloth robe, her head wrapped in a scarf. There were stacks of magazines on the living room floor and a gold velvet couch wrapped in heavy-duty, clear plastic. "I figured you were the Jehovah's Witness folk. But even they give up and go away. What do you want?"

Sandy wondered if the brownie mission was a mistake. "I made you some brownies."

Lillian Mae looked confused; her forehead furrowed.

"Sandy. From down the block." Sandy was going to say we met when you were tossing bread to a coyote but stopped herself. That conversation hadn't ended so well.

"Yeah, yeah. I remember. The new neighbor." She eyed the plate of brownies. "I've got diabetes. But I do love sweets." She turned the bolt on the security door and opened it about six inches wide, enough for her scrawny arm to slip through the opening and take the plate.

Sandy noticed the frayed cuffs of Lillian Mae's robe. "I have a favor to ask."

"What?''

"Please, don't feed the coyotes."

"I'm not feeding any damn coyotes." Lillian Mae glared at her.

Sandy's pulse raced. She gestured behind her, arm stretching across the yard. But there was nothing to see, the evidence eaten or dried to dust.

Lillian Mae said a curt thank-you and goodbye and closed the front door. Sandy stood there for a minute, dazed. Lillian Mae might be lonely, hungry for company, but she didn't act like it.

Living alone was tougher for Sandy than she expected. The divorce was a tough decision. But she had to do it. Bob gambled everything away, and worse, hid it from her. The money disappeared like water through his fingers at the low-rent casino in Hawaiian Gardens. But their marriage was companionship, the sound of the television in another room, a stilted conversation over orange juice in the morning. Now the only sounds in the house were the ones she made, the clang of the oven door, the swoosh of the shower, and the slapping of her slippers on the hardwood floors. She wanted more.

Three months later, on her front stoop, Sandy inhaled, arms raised in a triangle like a yoga pose. Her eyes traced the up-and-down line of the mountaintop through the sky. With a sure step, she headed east, her favorite three-mile route. She'd worked hard to build a fresh life. There was book club this afternoon, movie night next Friday, and a lecture on composting at the local library tomorrow afternoon. Her rose bushes were heavy with pink flowers.

Sandy checked on the little library and was pleased to see it was replenished, and not by her. The ebb and flow of books was a sign of acceptance, of belonging. Brooke was on her front porch, reading a Judy Blume book. Sandy recognized the cover. A Tess discard from the little library.

As Sandy turned the corner a young couple pushing a baby stroller walked past, and she smiled at the sleeping baby. There were porta-potties in front of

houses, roofers, and painters at work. The neighborhood had improved, almost in lockstep with her hopes. As she walked, she hummed a tune from school, *If You're Happy and You Know It*, pausing to stomp her feet at the end of the refrain. Not even a pair of wet underwear hanging on a towering hedge spoiled her mood. She picked it up with the grabber and dumped it in her bag. How did it get there? A late-night tryst in the bushes, a load of laundry falling off a truck? She was no longer surprised by the objects discarded through the neighborhood, old sofas, mattresses, and even dirty diapers.

On the last block before home, a coyote with fluffy brown fur, trotted, graceful like a four-legged ballerina. There were still regular coyote sightings, and the howls at night were disturbing, and creepy. A few weeks ago it was bad, the screams of what she was sure was a dog mixed in with the din. The next day, Mark knocked on her door and asked if she'd seen his little yappy, terrier dog, Suki. She didn't have the heart to tell him what she heard. Suki never did come home.

The coyote trotted around the corner. Lillian Mae's front yard was covered in slices of white sandwich bread, like a Christo art installation. The coyote sniffed and weaved through the bread. Sandy laughed out loud. The last time she talked to Lillian Mae was more than a month ago. She'd abandoned the idea of convincing Lillian Mae of anything, but she always said hello if Lillian Mae was outside as she walked past. Sometimes Lillian Mae even said hello back.

The coyote growled; bared teeth biting a piece of bread. It was close, less than ten feet away. She shook the grabber and yelled, "Hey!" Loud noises usually scared them away. This coyote didn't budge, its body tensed. Yellow eyes watched her. Sandy hurled the grabber with all her strength. It spun through the air, twisting twice, and landed with a thwap at the coyote's feet. A curtain slid across a living room window, and Lillian Mae peered out. Sandy stood there, blinking, stuck, trying but not succeeding at moving.

Before she could change her mind, Sandy pulled an amber beer bottle from the plastic bag and heaved it at the coyote. The bottle glanced off the coyote's back and rolled across the lawn. The animal pulled back with a startled look and ran away. Lillian Mae in a tatty robe and house slippers stomped towards Sandy, yelling get lost, her words sharp and clear. Lillian Mae said, "Pick up your trash and get out of here." She kicked the bottle, and it almost hit Sandy in the foot.

Sandy imagined telling Tess about today, the blue sky, the wet underwear hanging from the bush, the bread, and the coyote showdown. Tess would laugh. They would laugh together. It was her favorite sound in the world.

~ Carolyn Siegal

"Memories in Oil Pastels" ~ Jonathan Ceniceros

I GO TO AISLE 7 AT GONZALEZ NORTHGATE MARKET

I go to Aisle 7 at Gonzalez Northgate Market

to pray. Glass jars of salsa picante gleam
like so many rows of scarlet votive candles
flickering under the buzzing fluorescent lights.

The flags on the Pan-American aisle hang limp,
colors draped against rows of culturas enlatadas.
I pick up a bag of chicha morada en polvo, remember
how we toasted your birthday with violet.
The powder shifts like hourglass sand, time
I cannot reverse to call you back from the dead.
One more ofrenda I take into my hands,
then put back on a dusty altar.

I fish a carton from the bottom shelf:
jugo de maracuyá, marca Gloria.
Sweetness shipped across continents
is sold on the corner of Cherry Avenue
and San Antonio Drive. Rows of passion
the color of an elusive Lima sun.

Back home I decant gold from the carton,
press the glass to my lips. Gloria spills
down my throat, this strange communion,
and I celebrate your death mass. I carry
the empty tumbler to the sink, count
my penitent steps across the cold kitchen floor.

~ Aruni Wijesinghe

TRESPASSING

Old age muscles its way
into every conversation
uninvited, like a street corner
evangelist asking
if I've been born-again,
opens corrupted files
on the compromised hardware
of my 70-year-old body,
fills store window reflections
with the gritty, gray dust of wrinkles,
broadcasts the murmurs of arteries
trying to keep their own secrets,
closes all the doors and windows
of my dwelling place.

~ Frank Modica

SLOWLY, SURLEY

Slapdash chaos
of the paint job
on my narrow staircase
to the attic belies
the beauty of climbing,
with tiny steps,
this wooden field
the color of Agapanthus
like a slug sliming a trail
after a torrent of flower
and leaf consumption.

Any allusion to the garden
pest should not loom
because this isn't a grim
structure but a westing,
a way to rise
into a new future,
bloomed and
without rustles,
tensions, or tumbles.

~ Annette Petrusso

RELAPSE

Remember those wooden hand paddles
with rubber balls attached to them by
foot-long rubber bands? Sometimes
late at night when I can't shake

the jitters I sneak one from the boy's
toy stash and smack that ball as hard
as I can, but all it does is fly right
back at me, over and over and over.

We're driving through Chillicothe
at three in the morning, the downtown
spooky as an abandoned mall, as though
a neutron bomb, the one that would kill

all the people but leave their properties
intact, has exploded here. I'm off
the oxy again and I remind my husband
about my gall stones and my angina and

the hammer toe and the hot flashes and how
my spine is bent from the weight
of my breasts and how my knees are
bone on bone and of course the PTSD

and a bad wisdom tooth and how
I have to soak my hands in hot water
before I can open the fucking jar of coffee
and with every word I can hear the slap

of that ball hitting that paddle again
but he says nothing, as usual, keeps peeking
up at the sky as though watching
for that bomb and I'm afraid he's thinking
the same thing I am:
bring it on.

~ Tom Barlow

BLACKOUT

Just one more beer

One more scotch

One more bump in the bathroom

I woke up soundly in my bed

Having been fucked

Or saying fuck one too many times

I remember a vision in the blackout

3 am at the bottom of a ditch

Head cracked on asphalt

Bandages clinging to open wounds.

In the morning

I wanted to smoke a pack of

Cigarettes

With a fresh brewed coffee

But I lost my wallet

And keys too

So I had to substitute it

With a broken spliff

And two day old coffee

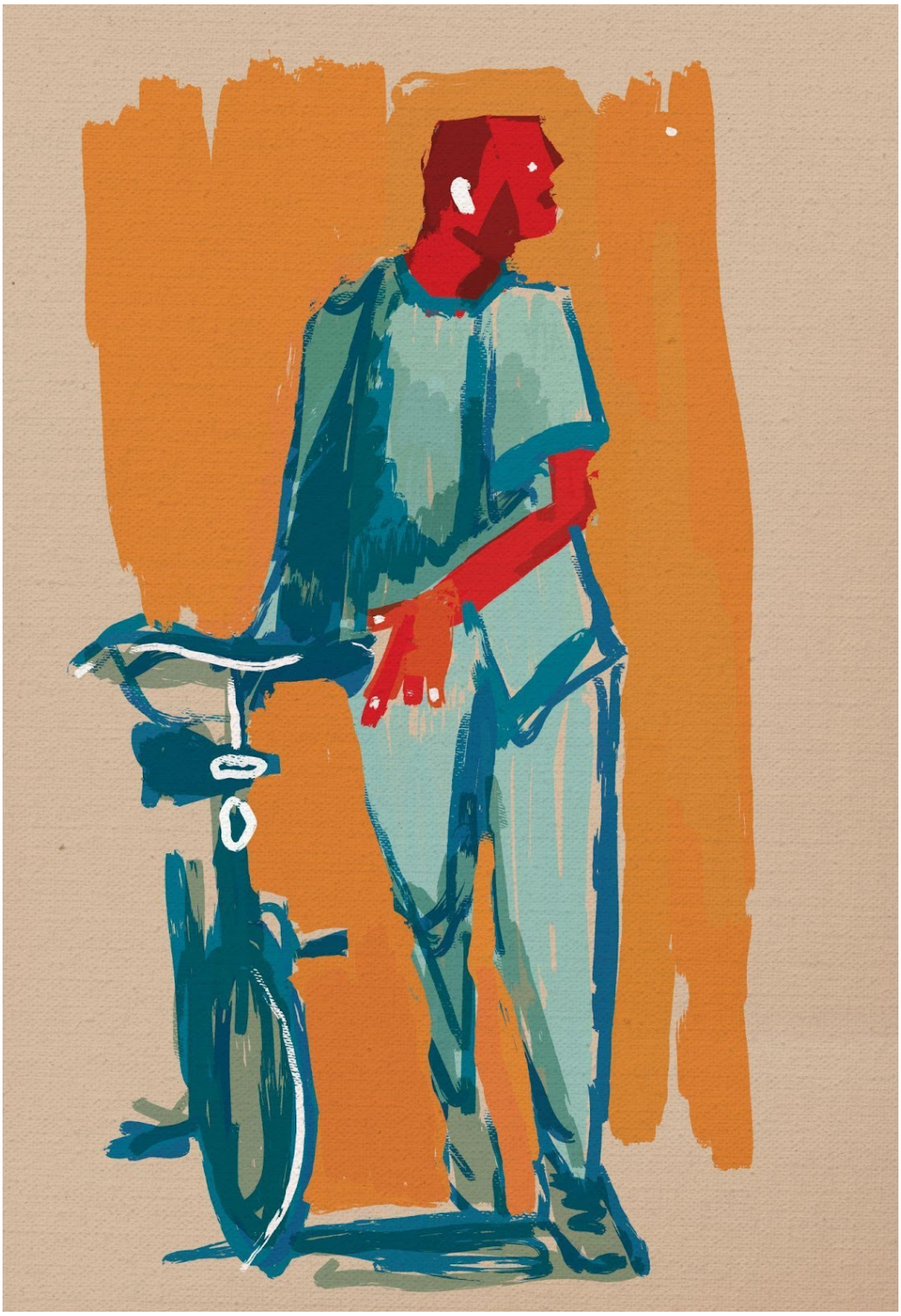
Spiked with the next shot of doom

Perhaps I can find my keys and wallet in

That ditch

Along with my head.

~ Stephen Tejas



"Bike Ride" ~ Jonathan Ceniceros

WHERE THE BROWN BUFFALO ROAMED: SEARCHING FOR OSCAR ACOSTA'S GHOST IN EAST LOS ANGELES

No doubt about it: America loves heroes. Historically, our national consciousness has been characterized by the ingenuity and personal determination of ordinary people who achieve extraordinary goals.

But what about those individuals who fall short of the goal? Is there any glory in flaming out before reaching the finish line? Is there a consolation prize for those individuals who, in the process of achieving greatness, are marginalized by society as unworthy of being heroes?

These pressing questions stir me awake early this morning. Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I feel a sharp pain in my shoulders and neck. Lately, I've been feeling physically shot, although I'm doing my best to cope. Common sense compels me to see a doctor, but I am sure that the doctor will only find several other ailments upon examination. A cold streak of cynicism plagues me now, but maybe that's what happens when you wake up to find that you are suddenly 35, currently unemployed, and sleeping on your mom's living room couch.

Recently, I lost my latest job at a logistics company because - as management clarified in their typical, sterile corporate language - I was "no longer a good fit." Since then, I have been searching for a better fit, but I haven't yet found a worthwhile opportunity.

I check my phone for notifications for any job updates and see that I have two new emails. The first is one of those automated rejection emails that are sent to prospective candidates to inform them that they didn't get the job: "Thank you for applying…other qualified candidates…you were not selected…wish you the best in your future endeavors." Whatever.

Shaking off the initial sting of rejection, I open the second email, which is a reminder from UC Santa Barbara that I have an appointment today at 1pm to see the Oscar Zeta Acosta archives at the university library. I am grateful for the reminder, which now jolts me out of bed. I have been looking forward to this day for quite some time.

I ready myself for the trip up north, careful not to wake up anyone in my household. I would prefer to avoid questions as to where I am headed, since driving more than a hundred miles up to Santa Barbara to examine old letters and manuscripts might elicit eyerolls from annoyed family members, especially when finding a job should be my priority. I hurriedly brush my teeth, then begin to boil

water for coffee in the kitchen. After scraping the last grounds from the jar of Folgers, I gulp down a cup of coffee that has both the taste and consistency of mud. Not the best, but I need fuel for the trip.

I proceed to a nearby car rental service, because I want to save wear and tear on my own car today. The rental office is filled with eager drivers hoping to secure a car to get out of town for the weekend, maybe longer. If they're anything like Oscar Acosta, however, they'll never be seen or heard from again.

A man standing near me loudly exclaims that he needs to get to Phoenix by tonight, so can someone please fucking help him already?!? He is promptly assisted. The rest of the eager travelers, including myself, must wait. Patience.

Once I am called to the front desk, I am helped by a particularly chatty staff member who asks me what my plans are, where I'm headed, and why. I figure the guy is either genuinely interested in exchanging pleasantries, or perhaps his standard company training requires him to speak to all customers. I don't want to be a jerk by assuming the latter, so I make small talk.

"I'm headed up to Santa Barbara", is my terse reply.

"Why are you going up there?" Damn, not another probing question. I choose to avoid an in-depth explanation.

"Actually, I'm going to see about getting admitted to grad school." Not true, since I already graduated from a master's program earlier this year at Cal Poly Pomona. First in my family to do it, earned a 3.7 GPA, even scored a high pass on my comprehensive exams. The whole deal.

"Man," the guy says with a rueful shrug of his shoulders, "I really should have stayed in school, but…you know."

Yeah, I know. You go to school while working yourself to death in a soul-sucking job to pay tuition, sacrifice your family, friends, and mental health to earn a master's in English, only to end up unemployed and with no direction in life. Trust me, I know.

The drive from my home in Fontana to UC Santa Barbara is marked by a whirlwind of worrisome thoughts about my search for employment. I have worked nonstop since I was 17 years old, and now, nearly half my lifespan later, I find myself swimming in the shark-infested waters of the current job market. Considering that it's almost summer, more eager college grads will soon be on the hunt for jobs, so it will only become more challenging.

As I head further north toward my destination, I can't help but wonder if a master's degree even has any cache in the job market anymore. The social prestige and economic promise of my higher education will not be so readily profitable, at

least not yet. Patience.

Steering my thoughts in a more positive direction, I focus on the author whose life I am traveling 280 miles round-trip to study: Oscar Zeta Acosta. The Brown Buffalo. The biggest and baddest motherfucker east of the Los Angeles River, whose mythological status as a folk anti-hero still casts a large, misshapen shadow on Chicano culture.

I first discovered the work of Oscar Acosta when I was an undergrad at Loyola Marymount University. Being the lone Chicano student in most of my literature classes drove me to seek other voices that spoke to my own cultural heritage as a Mexican-American, so I scoured second-hand bookstores to find new authors. When I found the works of Denise Chavez, Rudolfo Anaya, and Ana Castillo, I had the sudden realization that I was no longer stranded on an island of my own personal inadequacy at being Mexican-American in a predominantly white school. Now I had heroes of my own.

But among the many Chicano and Latin American writers that I discovered during that time, Oscar Acosta's books were unique, because they seemed to fall in line with the more radical and experimental literary works of contemporary authors like Alejandro Morales or Margarita Cota-Cardenas: writers who pushed Chicano narratives further away from the rural desert landscapes of New Mexico and Texas, and into the grimy and crime-infested setting of inner-city life.

Acosta's two novels, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, take place in Oakland and East Los Angeles, respectively, and document his life as a doomed figure and mammoth-sized caricature with a penchant for firebombing supermarkets and inciting political dissent. Fueled by a mind-bending cocktail of psychedelic drugs, sexual exploits, and radical politics, Acosta was, as his friend and fellow writer Hunter S. Thompson famously described, "Too weird to live, and too rare to die." In reading Acosta's work, the reader easily anticipates a tragic outcome from which it is difficult to look away without a profound sense of fascination at the debauchery and destruction that defines the author's journey.

Sometime in 1974, Oscar Acosta boarded a boat in Mexico with the intention of smuggling a large shipment of cocaine to the United States and was never seen or heard from again. The mysterious circumstances of his disappearance have always intrigued me, and partially feed my interest in studying his archived writings and personal belongings, in order to perhaps surmise his fate.

Beyond that, however, I intend to retrace the author's footsteps. One of the main reasons why I am visiting Santa Barbara today, is to find the home address of the small apartment that Acosta describes in his novel, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, as the meeting site for his carnivalesque group of friends that included

intellectuals, acid-heads, political militants, wayward street freaks, *vatos locos*, and teeny-boppers. I am curiously fascinated with the thought of making the pilgrimage to the former home of my literary hero. I guess you could consider it a form of tribute.

I arrive at UC Santa Barbara early and take in the picturesque seaside scenery. Although various people in my professional and academic circles have attended UCSB, this is my first time visiting the campus. As I navigate the labyrinthine grounds searching for the library, I wonder about the decision to house Acosta's personal archives at UC Santa Barbara, especially because his work is being housed so far from the place that Acosta's legacy is closely identified: East Los Angeles.

East Los Angeles looms large in the Chicano imagination. It is designated as part of the urban sprawl of Greater Los Angeles, but culturally it could be its own country. East Los Angeles is not only a place on the map but also a state of mind, and it is recognized as a preeminent stronghold of Chicano history, art, and culture. It was there, in 1968, that Acosta essentially reinvented himself from a failed, disenchanted lawyer, into a leader of the Chicano Movement of the 1960's and 70's.

Santa Barbara, by comparison, feels like it's a world away from East Los Angeles. The air seems clearer, it's less crowded, and the streets look cleaner, but it's a bit too puerile for my liking. I don't think Acosta could have written his novels in a place like Santa Barbara.

Once inside the university library, a student worker ushers me into the large Special Collections reading room, which has glass walls that provide a panoramic view of the campus greenery. I sit at a large table under a bright lamp, where I am given clear instructions: no backpacks, food, or drinks are allowed inside. Materials are to be handled with the utmost care, and only pencils and paper are allowed to write anything down. I am informed that I have four hours to study the materials. Sounds good.

The worker leaves momentarily and informs me that the materials are not in their intended space, so she must now look for them. That's fine, I tell her. I'll wait. Patience.

The only other person in the room is an older gentleman who is sitting behind me and perusing through what appears to be a stack of vintage black-and-white photographs of steam-powered trains. His bespectacled eyes appear even larger behind a large magnifying glass that he holds with a shaking hand. When he suddenly notices me staring at him, he quickly draws his arm around his photographs, as if he is hoarding precious information to which I am not privy.

After about half an hour of waiting and nearly being lulled to sleep by the soft hum of the air conditioning in the room, a single box is dropped on the desk with a loud THUMP. And here it is: the treasure trove of the master, a holy grail of dingy manila folders filled with the correspondence and personal belongings of the author.

I immediately begin rummaging through the boxes, carefully fanning out multiple pages of handwritten letters and typed manuscripts across the table. Some of the documents are brittle and feathered from being passed through so many hands, but they are clearly legible. I am searching for a specific address of a house that, according to Acosta's published work, is located on 6th Street in East Los Angeles.

I figure that the address must be on an envelope or letterhead, so I focus on the correspondence. Acosta wrote many letters to his wife, most of which detail a relationship in decline. It seems that the author's ambition to become a writer and leader of the Chicano movement took precedence over his own marriage.

Letters dated near the end of Acosta's life indicate a struggle to stay genuine to his craft, while still being able to earn a living wage. The author asks friends for money yet refuses to give up on his goal of being a full-time writer. I suppose it's a problem that plagues all great writers at some point in their lives. No wonder the guy had to resort to smuggling drugs to make ends meet.

After about an hour of searching for the address, I am beginning to lose hope. More than anything, I am fighting a nagging feeling that making this trip was maybe not the best idea at this time. Like Acosta, I am also in need of money to pay my bills, while still managing to fulfill my ambitions as a writer.

After battling with myself over the point of this mission, I finally locate a letter that has the 6th Street address on the letterhead. Success! I quickly scribble the address on a piece of unlined paper, which I then stuff into my pocket for safekeeping.

As I get up to leave, I notice that the man who was sitting behind me earlier is still examining his vintage photographs of trains. He looks at me and shakes his head in disapproval because I apparently broke his concentration. Sorry. Anyway, it's time for me to go back home.

Rather than driving directly from Santa Barbara to Fontana as had I originally planned, I am going to detour to East Los Angeles to see the Acosta house on 6th Street. It's a compulsive and ill-timed decision at this time of the day, but it's part of the journey.

About 2 hours after leaving the UC Santa Barbara campus, I arrive in East Los Angeles at dusk, right as the sun is setting over the city. The streetlights begin

humming to life as soon as I park on Whittier Blvd - the central vein of this tight-knit community.

Walking down Whittier Blvd. is an assault on the senses: all at once, I am bombarded by a wide array of sights, sounds, and smells. Even as daylight begins to fade, the thumping beat of cumbia music is being blasted from speakers set up along the sidewalks: shopkeepers are apparently vying for business by perforating the eardrums of anyone who walks by their store.

Taco trucks are everywhere, and the mouthwatering aroma of carne asada wafts across the street, with scores of people lining up to order a meal. The pungent smell of candies and fresh fruits which have been cut and drowned in candy glaze, is also evident this evening.

I am tempted to buy a cup of mango slices sprinkled with lime and chili powder, but I don't want to waste the last few precious minutes of daylight. Hurrying eastward on the boulevard, I cut through dense crowds of people, mostly families with children who are playing dangerously close to the edge of the curb. Using Google maps to lead me to the address that I jotted down earlier, I cross the intersection at Arizona, and head a few streets down toward La Verne Avenue, where I turn left onto an inconspicuous street lined with placid stucco houses that line either side of the block.

I am sweating now, trying to reach the house in time before it's too dark to see. As I get closer to the corner of 6th and La Verne, I assume that it must be trash day tomorrow, because several plastic dumpsters are blocking the sidewalk. The smell of rotting garbage, some of which has spilled onto people's driveways and into the street, burns my nostrils.

I come around 6th, and finally…I've finally found it: 4949 E. 6th Street. The site is a small, bright pink duplex that is partially hidden behind a young magnolia tree, which covers half the house. From a safe and respectful distance across the street, I can hear mariachi music softly emanating from behind the front door. Standing there, I suddenly feel a sense of satisfaction in knowing that I made the pilgrimage to see Acosta's house. I take in the moment, knowing that in its relative insignificance, this moment means everything to me. But it's getting dark, and I need to go home now.

As I begin walking back to where I parked on Whittier Boulevard, I think about what it means to be free in this country. It is easy to forget that there was a time when these streets were filled not with shoppers and taco vendors, but with revolutionaries.

Although much has been made of the turbulent atmosphere of the 1960's in America, the heady flower-power ideals of that time were eventually proven to be a

drug-induced hallucination that was poisoned by the hippies' own self-indulgent optimism. Acosta, for his part, portrayed his time in East Los Angeles as a period of fear, paranoia, and above all else, defined by the struggle to be free. Acosta must have walked these same streets when he lived in this town, but now he's gone forever, and his absence leaves me with a vacuous feeling of loss.

It's strange, but at 35 years I feel younger than ever, and willing to accept every challenge that life presents - including finding not only a job, but a purpose in life. If there is one central lesson that I have value in Acosta's work, it's that the road to self-awareness is not always readily found, but instead often requires us to cut a clear path through the dense jungle of our own fears and personal limitations in order to attain clarity. I often remind myself that self-awareness is more valuable than any occupation, college degree, or political movement.

And that is why I love Acosta. The guy was irreverent, lovable even when he was immoral, and he would certainly bruise plenty of egos in the current era of gratuitous political correctness and cancel culture. But in his mythical role as a folkloric Chicano trickster and scoundrel, Acosta sacrificed his body, psyche, and ultimately his life to find himself in the struggle of a geographically displaced chimeric culture that claims both American birthrights and Mexican heritage.

The Brown Buffalo helped me find my identity, and thus my dignity. And if that isn't a hero, then I don't know what is.

~ Hector Carrillo

"digital portrait study" ~ Jonathan Ceniceros

SIGNS YOUR TOILET SEAT MAY BE KILLING YOU

In traditional Feng Shui, an open toilet seat
will drain your lifeforce, siphon the home
of positive energy, swirly your self-respect.

If this isn't enough to disturb you, flushing
with the lid open allows teardrops of shit
to spew into the air, onto your toothbrush,

poisoning you in doses so small, eventually
you open your mouth to speak, and decay
of who you once were is all that echoes out.

You may fault your friend's advice, distance
from your mother, who is always to blame,
somehow. You may look to everyone

except the man who says he loves you,
the man pointing his finger like a loaded gun
at everyone who loves you,

the man who is always leaving the seat up.

//

It was a surprise to learn how he flushed
to muffle his snorting on Sunday afternoons,
how he was so fluent in white lines

he still asked for salt on the roast I'd cooked.
His appetite, unfazed. I wonder if new tenants
are haunted when they pee at night by all the lies

that made me feel as stupid as a housewife
who never suspected the bodies in the basement.
I wonder if they'll be poisoned by all the shit

in the air that no amount of ammonia can lift.
What happened there can never be cleansed,
it seeped into walls and grew like black mould

into an image of me. Her fingernails scratch
at pipes, her whimpers rationalised as mice.
I wonder if she wanders the hallway searching

for the patch of carpet she was dragged to.
I wonder if she locks herself in the bathroom
with razorblades.

I wonder if she puts the seat down.

~ Carson Wolfe

BLACKOUT

My roommate took off right before I lost my job at the pizza place. The only thing he left behind was a note that read, "Moved back home." If only the unpaid rent were attached to it.

I sit at the wobbly kitchen table, gazing at the floating dust particles that you can only see when the sunlight shines in at the perfect angle. Sometimes, you have to convince yourself that they aren't old skin.

The air conditioner moans, as if it's irritated that it has to work so hard. I haven't left the apartment in four days, for fear that the hellish temperature might melt away my spirit even more. Is a heat wave a heat wave if it doesn't end? I gulp down the remainder of my orange juice. The pulp sticks to the side of the glass. It always bothers me when that happens.

As I stand up to go put my head into the freezer, the air conditioner suddenly goes on a strike of silence and the refrigerator releases a final gasp. I walk across the room and flip the light switch. Nothing.

There's a knock at the door. I peer through the peephole. It's the lady with the beehive hair from across the hall. I crack the door open.

"Is your power out?" she asks.

"Yes," I answer.

"It must be the whole building," she says.

"Maybe the whole city," I say.

"The food in your fridge will go bad after four hours," she says.

I'd take that information to heart if I had any food in the refrigerator.

"Thanks," I say as I close the door.

When the power goes out, it's amazing how all of your habits remind you that you're nothing without it. The TV isn't going to turn on and your phone isn't going to charge.

There's another knock at the door. It's the guy from downstairs who exclusively wears jorts. "Do you want a new roommate?" he asks.

"What?"

He nods his head to the left. I glance down the hallway and see a scraggly, black cat with a patch of white fur on its chest.

"It was out lying in the sun," the guy says. "Looked a bit overheated, so I let it inside."

Before I can say anything, the cat walks through the doorway and rubs against my leg.

"Catch you later," the guy says.

I fill up a bowl with some cold water and set it on the floor. The cat dashes over and drinks furiously.

At least water is free, I think to myself. Kind of.

I head into my dingy bedroom and grab the coin jar off of my dresser. "This should be enough to get you some food," I say.

I step out the apartment door and look back at the cat.
"I think I'll call you Blackout."

~ Zach Murphy

AEOLIAN

for Dy

More than anything,
she wants to be free of flaming despair
and words ever heard,
“You’re not good enough!
You don’t *fit in.*”

She is Joan of Arc
storming the ramparts,
an astronaut-in-training
circumnavigating a crescent moon.

Her imagination
is sublime.
Pain does that.

Widowed,
she spends her days
clearing cobwebs from chandeliers,
nights
wandering lonely as a cloud,

hearing a voice
in the wind,

self-affirming,

its numinosity
a quiet joy.

~ T. J. Masluk

The place is so packed with people Cindi feels like she is struggling in heavy surf. An illuminated skyline of Manhattan glistens through an entire wall of windows. A towering Sub-Zero fridge stands guard at one end of the kitchen while a massive Viking cook stove weighing as much as an armored car flanks the other entrance. Empty bottles and glasses line the counter next to an overflowing trash can.

"Where r u?" Gina texts.

"Near the kitchen," Cindi replies. Cindi and Gina, her roommate and best friend from Mrs. Kinkaid's first grade, were invited to the party by Gina's coworker, then the coworker bailed at the last minute. They decided to go anyway, to check out the scene, even though they didn't know anyone. Isn't that why they'd come to New York City anyway? Experience new things. Meet new people. Get away from staid and stagnant Comstock, Ohio. It was an escape from being town pariahs.

Gina has disappeared pursuing a server with an appetizer tray brimming with shrimp.

Cindi overhears a couple nattering on about work. She's already been an Applebee's waitress, nanny, Gap sales girl, college grad, and currently, business manager at a software start-up. No clue what the next step is. Find a job overseas?

She'd like to travel—Paris in the spring would be wonderful—but she doesn't have much vacation time, and even less money saved. Right now, she could make it as far as Poughkeepsie for the weekend.

A moment later, her ass vibrates from the cell phone in her back pocket.

"OMG, I think your boss is here." Gina had stopped by the office a few times and never forgets a face.

"WTF????" Ten thousand parties in NYC and she has to go to the same one with her boss, Heidi, who could stare down Darth Vader. Short, squat, and teetering on high heels, Heidi has a chain mail personality. When Heidi needs something, she flashes a charm offensive only to throw a hissy fit a half-hour later about a PowerPoint font. The Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde act has worn thin. The job seemed like a good stepping stone and she wanted permanency after working short-term gigs. Now, it's a white-collar sweatshop. The only reason Cindi's hung on so long is to expand her resume. Cindi's contemplated asking for a raise for weeks; without her, the office would implode. All she has to do is find the courage to convince Heidi. On more than one occasion, Cindi's determination has ebbed and flowed like the tide at Coney Island. She's headed to Heidi's office more than once, only to lose momentum and plop back into her fraying office chair.

Her phone buzzes again. "Check out guy in blu jacket—he's hot!" Gina says. Cindi stands on the tip-toes of her flats to look. Gina is the impulsive one who, by force of gravity, always pulls Cindi along. "Twin sisters of different mothers," they used to joke. The crowd thins around Gina for a second and Cindi sees her far across the room.

"How come ur not talking to him?" Cindi texts.

"Waiting for the right moment and positive thinking," Gina says. "Remember our Girl Scout motto."

Cindi is stumped. Maybe it's the alcohol. Maybe it's because of her hellish week at work. She survived a last-minute investor audit Heidi foisted on her, followed by a computer crash, almost lopped the tip of her finger off in a paper cutter, and drew the short straw for cleaning the office fridge. The smell of rotting kimchee take-out is entombed in her brain and the kink in her neck won't let up.

"Always be Prepared," Gina texts.

Cindi's worst fears bubble up. Mr. Blue Jacket could be a psychopath, an axe murderer, or most horrible of all—a Trump supporter. A chill runs down her spine, tingling all the way to her flats. Gina may have a few screws loose at times, but they are a team and together earned their Girl Scout Silver Award at the Comstock Pet Hospital.

Cindi feels woozy, overwhelmed by a potential social encounter with Heidi coupled with the sardine can atmosphere, an apartment as hot as a pizza oven, and the three glasses of wine she consumed. She closes her eyes for a minute, inhales deeply several times, trying to steady herself.

Cindi needs to contact Gina, somewhere in the living room to let her know she, Gina's wingman, is checking out for the night. "Not feeling good. Going home," Cindy types. Home—a dingy third-floor walkup so tiny they both can barely be in the kitchen together. Feeling motherly, she adds, "Don't let anyone slip u any stuff."

"Hope u feel better." Gina's teary emoji follows. Then: "I'll be careful!"

Cindi maneuvers towards the door through a crush of people. She's been on subway platforms at rush hour that were less crowded. She tells herself to be nonchalant but forceful as she shoulders her way.

The air in the hallway is as bracing as an alpine gust compared with the anoxic apartment. It is also littered with broken shards of party-goers. A man comforts a crying woman, another couple speaks in harsh but hushed tones. Cindi's head clears.

Farther down the hallway, two women are lip-locked, while ten feet away a bearded guy is texting furiously. The dull glow of tasteful wall sconce lights casts shadows, and Cindi follows the lights as if they are airport runway beacons leading her

somewhere, anywhere.

When she first came to the city, it was packed with opportunity and interesting people. It was like salivating in Katz's Deli on Houston Street for the first time, so many delicious choices. She'll take one of everything! Only now, it's more like shopping without money. A quiet dread fills her as she contemplates returning to an empty apartment.

Cindi steps from the Uber, stumbles over a few tilting slabs of sidewalk, and enters her building where a dim, naked bulb illuminates the tunnel of hallway leading to the stairwell.

Act II: Revelation

In the morning, Cindi wakes up as if she's embedded in her mattress. She rests a forearm on her head for a minute before gathering enough strength to get up wearing just a tee shirt, and walks to the bathroom.

After splashing water on her face, she slips on sweatpants and heads to what passes in their apartment for a living room: sofa bed, coffee table, and bookshelf.

Someone knocks at the door and Cindi opens it to find Gina looking a lot like Cindi did when she stared into the bathroom mirror a minute ago. "Why are you knocking?" Cindi asks.

"Your doofus roommate forgot her key," Gina says as she slaps her palm to her forehead.

"Did you and Blue Jacket—?"

"Never met him," Gina says. "It was like people were lining up at a takeout window trying to get to him." Gina hangs her coat on a hook in the hall, and pees with the bathroom door cracked. "A guy named Mike chatted me up," Gina said. "He was friendly, had nice eyes, and we sort of connected." Gina returns to the kitchen opposite Cindi in front of the stove. "He's an air traffic controller at La Guardia and left for the graveyard shift."

Cindi reaches for her Bialetti coffee maker. "Want some?" The aroma of the coffee beans reorients the cells in her brain.

"Definitely—make it extra strong."

"Gonna see him again?" Cindi asks.

"Dunno," Gina says. "He said he'd call." She grabs two mugs from hooks under the cupboard. "On the other hand, I'm not sure I want him to." A trace of smile crosses Gina's face and she offers a gentle fist bump to Cindi, who taps knuckles.

Cindi admires Gina's ability to let storm clouds never gather over her; they scud by and dissipate. That's the way Gina is. Every day is a wonder and Cindi is warmed by her sunbeam identity. They stand in silence, pressed into their tiny

kitchen until the Bialetti spouts steam. The weight of a Saturday night with too much alcohol, too little sleep, and not enough tenderness presses down on Cindi. “Wait a second,” Cindi says. “If you didn’t go home with La Guardia Mike, where did you spend the night?”

“Down the hall in Joni’s apartment on a leaky air mattress.” Gina rubs her eyes. “The neighbors fought all night. I didn’t sleep a wink.”

“What?” Cindi asks.

“I got concerned when you said you weren’t feeling well.” Gina pours herself a cup of coffee. “So, I came home to check on you. That’s when I realized I didn’t have my key. It was late and I didn’t want to wake you.”

“You’re so sweet,” Cindi says. What other roommate would abandon an evening out on the town for her? “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” says Gina.

“Do you ever think about moving back to Comstock?” Cindi asks. A gnawing doubt creeps in and her insecurities flutter like clothes drying on a line outside their apartment.

Gina folds her arms over her chest and leans back on the counter. “Never. Not once. And you know why just as much as I do.”

***

Senior year in high school doesn’t seem like that long ago. Seven years? The town basketball star, a cell phone, and a naked, underage girlfriend was a bad combination. Might as well touch a match to gasoline. Fellatio pics zing across social media like a stone skimmed across a pond and reputations sink like rocks. Gina and Cindi viewed those pics and knew exactly what to do: turn him in.

“Don’t do it,” some of their friends said. “He’ll get in trouble, maybe go to jail.” Comstock flipped inside out: kids they’d known their whole lives dissed them, parents accosted them in the Kroger vegetable section, they got trashed on Facebook, and the media camped on their lawns. In Comstock they were caught in the crossfire so they picked its sister city: The Big Apple.

***

Cindi is struck by Gina’s resolve. She can do better and knows Gina can too. She hugs Gina and their eyes catch. They simultaneously break into a recital of the Girl Scout Law, getting an octave higher on “responsible for what I say and do” and “respect myself and others.” They give each other the three-finger Girl Scout salute and fall into a hug.

“Who’s got dibs on the shower first?” Cindi asks.

“I think you need it more and I’ll make breakfast,” Gina says. “How’s that sound?”

"Great. I want to scrub last night right off my body," Cindi shudders.

Like a traffic cop, Gina waves a spatula in the direction of the bathroom.

The hot water sears Cindi's head and is strangely satisfying, as if it's drilling to her core and filling a liminal space. She steps from the shower into a steamy mist and wraps a towel around herself. The chipped mirror is fogged and Cindi uses her forefinger like a stylus and scribbles, the words almost shooting from her fingertip in a burst: **Do it**!"

ACT III: Free at Last

Over the weekend Cindi felt like the desiccated starfish the tide had abandoned at Coney Island this past summer. She needs an incoming tide to wash over her. It's Monday morning but the timing has to be right; the office is too buzzy with weekend catch-up and early brushfires. Let the waves break before approaching Heidi for a raise. Cindi's confidence yo-yos and she fiddles with files on her desk at work, mulling the best time to approach Heidi.

She and Gina practiced all the arguments to plead her case: how Cindi managed to cut office overhead 22 percent, developed a streamlined budget process, and how she saved them money with her contract reviews that were well outside her job description. "Be firm, fair, and above all else, stay calm," advised Gina.

Just before lunch, Cindi knocks on Heidi's open door. Heidi is hidden behind a bank of three enormous computer screens and peeks over the top.

"What's up?" Heidi's keyboard clatters.

"I was hoping we could talk," Cindi says.

"About?" An eyebrow of Heidi's elevates.

"A raise. Is this a good time? The sweat on Cindi's palms softens the manilla folder in her hand. "I was supposed to have my performance review four month ago."

Heidi pushes away from the keyboard. "Not really. Since you're here, could you shut the door?"

Still standing, Cindi articulates the key bullet points and is impressed she does not trip up. All the while, Heidi, elbows on the desk with hands tented over her mouth, bores into Cindi with Teutonic-blue eyes. A long pause follows.

"I don't think so. I don't see how I can make it work." Heidi gets up and opens the door.

That's it? Cindi stands there and Gina's words come back: *stay calm.* Stay freakin' calm!

"Sorry. Thanks for coming in," Heidi says.

Cindi bursts onto the street, walking until her lunch break is long over. She marches past dingy walk-ups, laundromats, pizza joints, and window displays with half-naked mannequins.

Heidi calls. "Where are you?"

Cindi searches for a street sign. "23rd and 2nd Ave."

"You were MIA at our 1:30 budget review. It was a disaster without you. Did you forget?"

"No, I started walking at lunch and it feels really good." To maintain composure, Cindi imagines Gina's aura of serenity she manages in the face of a storm.

"Are you done walking?" Heidi asks.

"I'm not sure."

"Is this about the raise?"

"Definitely."

"Why don't you just come back?"

Cindi's mind fills with reasons not to *just come back*: Lousy pay, crappy benefits, through-the-floor job satisfaction, and zilch-o respect.

"Cindi, don't be foolish. We can work this out."

"We couldn't this morning."

Heidi exhales through the phone loud enough to practically ruffle Cindi's hair on the other end.

"Okay, I'm turning around," Cindi says. She fails to mention her apartment is in the same direction.

"Good. Thank you," Heidi says. "See you in a bit."

Cindi pivots, absorbing the energy of the sidewalk throng and the honking taxis. A skyward glance past the bank of skyscrapers reveals a deep blue backdrop. It's almost like she's powering upstream against a current. She had left Comstock on short notice and survived; can she abruptly cut ties again?

The office looms and Cindi strides briskly as the lunch crowds thin. She has her phone, jacket, and pocketbook—containing a paper with two solid job leads from companies she recently crossed paths with. She reaches the building and looks up to the sixth floor where her spider plant struggles to survive behind the porthole-sized window near her desk.

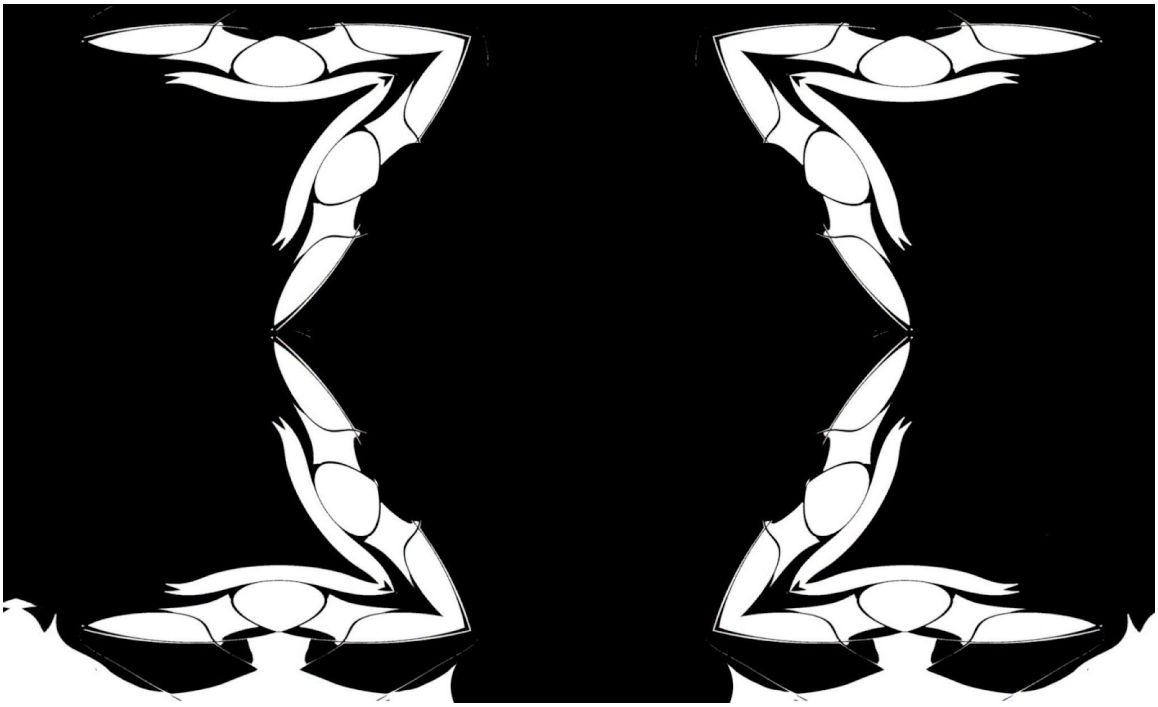
As the elevator ascends, Cindi conjures Heidi drumming her fingers on the desk, ready to dole out a few crumbs to keep her little hamster on the spinning wheel. Cindi slips into her office to grab her favorite coffee mug, a framed picture of

her and Gina in New York Ranger jerseys at Madison Square Garden, and the stuffed bear she won at Coney Island. The spider plant stays; it was never going to thrive in that environment. Nobody notices her office dash and she relaxes as the elevator *dings* to descend. Cindi heads to her apartment with something more important. She walks and calls Gina, fist-bumping Mustapha as she passes him manning the Sabrett hot dog stand.

"Hey Gina, guess what…"

End

~ Ken Post



"Dance of Time" ~ Edward Michael Supranowicz

THE PERFECT FIGURE

Melanie had known control her entire life. She knew, for instance, how to control the angle of her computer screen so that the glare from her glasses hid the dark circles under her eyes during her college's few synchronous video classes. She also knew how to control her tone, her words, and all thirteen muscles needed to hold the "self-assured but not cocky" smile her mother had coached into her since her first public performance at age eight. It had been a Halloween costume pageant in which her homemade fairy princess had taken third place.

Her mother enrolled her in sewing lessons the week after.

The only time Melanie did not feel in control was when she was on the ice. No matter how much she trained, how complete her muscle control, and no matter how much her parents donated to that week's competition sponsors, there were still variables. Whether the ice was fresh or three programs in, whether the fringe on her costume fluttered or clung to the sequins along the seams, and whether the judges were watching to see if she landed cleanly or with that twinge in her ankle—these were things Melanie could not control. These were the things she battled each time she stepped into the rink.

This time, however, when she took to the ice, she wasn't alone.

"Closed practice," Melanie called out to the girl on the other side of the ice.

The girl didn't seem to hear, spinning without form and humming along to whatever music she was listening to. The wires from her headphones whipped around her, barely reaching down to the phone tucked into the back pocket of her jeans.

"Hey." Melanie waved, trying to get the girl's attention, as she skated over towards her.

When the girl—who was actually a woman, Melanie realized, albeit a petit one—saw she was not alone, she pulled out of the spin and stopped with such grace it very nearly brought Melanie up short.

This was no free-skate amateur.

"Closed practice, sorry," Melanie repeated, a little more cordially, as she gestured vaguely over her shoulder to the exit.

The woman pulled her phone out of her pocket and smiled, bemused, at the screen. "I know, so if you don't mind…?"

11:47 glowed up at her from the screen. Melanie always reserved the rink from noon to three; it was the only time she could practice without her coach watching her every move. No one else ever—

"Oh, are you?" Melanie took a step back, trying not to let her face show her embarrassment. "Sorry."

The other skater laughed and Melanie didn't know whether to be offended or not. "You can stay and watch, if you like?"

Definitely offended.

"No, that's okay." Melanie turned her back and skated back to the exit as quickly as she could. She stumbled slightly stepping back onto solid ground. The soft laugh from behind her only made the humiliation sting more.

There were only three reasons why a competitive skater would let another person watch their practice. 1) They were skating as a pair. Seeing as Melanie had never once competed with a partner, that was certainly out. 2) They were just starting out and needed advice. Despite her initial impression, Melanie knew that woman was no beginner. The poise she had shown out on the ice, even when moving from such an unrefined twirl to perfect stillness, had been more than enough proof of her skill. 3) They believed themselves so skilled it didn't matter who watched. Only the most arrogant or talented skaters believed they were above pressure from fellow competitors. The woman was certainly skilled but, more than that, her nonchalant attitude said something more.

It meant she thought of Melanie as no competition at all.

"She just doesn't know you," Melanie spoke to herself, trying to sooth the blow to her pride. "You don't know her, she doesn't know you."

She waited in the locker room, tapping her foot along with the second hand of the clock, itching to go back into the rink and watch the woman skate. There was no way she'd give her the satisfaction.

Two minutes past noon the woman still hadn't come through the locker room. Melanie had planned on waiting but, remembering the woman's casual jeans and t-shirt, she realized waiting may have been pointless. After a few deep breaths and a mental check-list of her training plan, Melanie pushed herself up from the locker room bench and make her way back into the light.

"There you are!"

To Melanie's annoyance the other skater was still out on the ice. The woman pulled herself short of a lazy figure eight and made a beeline to the gate.

"I thought maybe I had scared you off." The woman grinned.

Melanie fought back a scowl. "It's past noon."

"Sorry, I just realized I didn't introduce myself." The woman hopped through the gate and held out her hand. "Katrina. You can call me Kat. I'm in town for the classic next weekend. Like to get acquainted with the ice first, you know?"

"Sure." Melanie had never spent more than two free days at a competition site. The day before and after. It was better to avoid being scouted by the competition. "I'm Melanie—"

"Finch." Kat shook her hand with surprising fervor. "I know. I saw you at Skate Tulsa a few years back."

So she did know who she was. "I didn't see you."

"Oh I wasn't competing. My mom needed someone to explain the judging system." Kat chuckled but her smile faltered slightly.

"Gotcha." Melanie couldn't relate. Her mother knew every facet of competition rules. She knew which judges favored classical music and which favored innovative transitions. She couldn't imagine a season without the constant quizzing and technical lectures. "It was nice to meet you."

She didn't really mean it, but Kat didn't seem to inclined move out of her way.

"You, too!" Kat finally shifted for Melanie to get by but her next question stopped Melanie in her tracks. "Mind if I hang out for a bit?"

Melanie gaped at her.

"I won't get in your way! I'll just sit over there while I wait for my Uber." She pointed at a spot in the stands. The perfect spot to watch and take notes.

"No." Melanie shook her head, backing out onto the ice. "I'd rather you didn't."

"Ah, right." Kat waved, unfazed. "Then I'll see you around!"

Melanie watched her leave, the dark waves of Kat's shoulder-length brown hair seemed to shiver, the only unsteady thing about her, as she walked out into the lobby without bothering to change out of her skates.

Melanie waited until she heard the lobby door shut before she started her warm-ups. All through her turns and jumps, even her transitions, she kept losing focus. She was used to fresh ice for warm-ups. Silence to get her head into the game. Melanie had competed in Tulsa a few times—some wins, some loses. She wondered which competition Kat had seen.

How little did Kat think of her? Kat knew who she was but didn't care that Melanie saw her practice? Did she think Melanie would just let her sit in on hers? What, did she think Melanie would jump for the chance to get her advice?

"Who the hell even practices in jeans anyway?" Melanie scowled, slamming the gate closed as she left the rink half an hour early.

* * *

Melanie took her time changing back into her street clothes knowing that, if she came home a full half hour early, her parents would never let her hear the end of it. When she left the locker room, she expected the first few middle school free skate girls to be lingering around the lobby. What she didn't expect, however, was to find Katrina sitting on the bike rack at the edge of the parking lot. Melanie kept her head down, hoping her long hair would somehow act as a "don't talk to me" screen as she walked briskly towards her car.

"Have a good practice?"

Melanie clenched her jaw, training her expression back into one of polite indifference before turning around. "Great, actually."

"I'm glad." Kat hadn't moved from her spot on the rack. She had put her blade guards on, laces tied, and hanging over her shoulder. She was wearing black ballet flats that must've been rolled up in her pocket and her earbuds were wrapped around the phone balanced on her knee. Kat must've seen her looking because she picked up her phone with a shrug. "Died before I finished ordering the Uber."

"Do you need to call someone?" As much as she didn't like the other skater, Melanie couldn't leave her stranded. The rink was in a nice area, but a young woman alone in a strange town? She wasn't that heartless.

Kat's grin turned sheepish. "I don't know anyone in this state."

Okay, maybe she was.

"Your coach didn't come with you?" Melanie asked, both surprised and hopeful for an excuse. "Your parents?"

"My coach doesn't come up this early." Kat stood and shifted her skates like a hitchhiker would their satchel. "The hotel's not too far."

Melanie scowled at Kat's departing wave. She watched Kat walk partway across the parking lot before she gave in. "Do you want a ride?"

Kat turned around as if she hadn't heard.

"Those shoes are going to kill your feet." Melanie didn't wait to see if Kat agreed or not.

Making a point to take a path Kat could see, Melanie made her way over to her car and threw her bag in the backseat. Kat followed, to her relief and dismay, and held her skates in her lap, grinning from the passenger seat.

"Thank you."

"Where to?"

Melanie drove Kat to a two-star hotel off the highway in relative silence. Up close, and without the tension of practice between them, Melanie could tell the other skater looked around her age, maybe a bit older. Her arms, which had looked twig-like out on the ice, were actually chorded with muscle and she held herself with the posture of a monarch. As a competitor, Melanie had to admit that Kat was intimidating. As a passenger? The off-key Avril Lavigne impersonation was driving her crazy.

By the time Melanie dropped Kat off at the hotel and pulled into her own driveway it was well past the time her parents would expect her home. At 23, she didn't have a curfew, but that didn't stop her mother from questioning her anytime she didn't stick to the expected schedule.

"You weren't here when I got home." It wasn't a question but Melanie knew she expected an explanation.

"It's Monday."

"Did you reserve an extra hour at the rink?" Melanie's mother wasn't a very imposing woman. Average height, thin, stern. But when she took up that tone, perched on one of the dining room chairs, Melanie knew she wouldn't let the conversation drop until she heard the truth.

"I met another skater." Her mother would know she meant another competitor. Melanie never was very good at lying. "She needed a ride to her hotel. "

"Who? Did she see your routine?" Her mother pulled out her phone, already prepared to look through competition stats.

"Of course not. Her name was Katrina…" Melanie realized Kat hadn't given her a surname. She shrugged. "Katrina. She seemed about my age? Short, dark brown hair. I didn't recognize her."

Her mother frowned, clearly disappointed with the lack of identifying information. "And she said she was competing?"

"Yeah." As soon as Melanie answered she realized she wasn't so sure. Yes, Kat had said she was there for the competition. But she never said she was competing.

After all, her coach hadn't come with her and, from what Melanie had seen, she didn't seem to have any sort of formal routine to practice, either.

Melanie's mother, however, already had her head lowered over her phone, searching through past competitions or texting her many contacts to try and weasel some names off of the competition register. Melanie knew that it wouldn't be any use trying to take back her answer. Instead, she grabbed a protein bar from the kitchen and headed up to her room, as far as she could get from her mother's frantic prying.

* * *

The knock on her bedroom door came barely two hours later. Melanie had just enough time to switch her laptop from Netflix to her training log before her mother barged into her room.

"Katrina Grajnert." Her mother shoved her phone in Melanie's face. "Was this her?"

Melanie leaned back, blinking at the overly zoomed-in image of a girl on a podium. The girl was young, maybe 15, and her hair was wrapped in a bun, but her face looked similar. She and the woman Melanie had met shared the same freckled nose, the same one-sided dimple, and the same sky-blue eyes.

"Maybe?" Melanie's mother scowled at the non-answer so she amended, "I think so."

Her mother nodded, visibly relaxing. "Good. Good. She won't be a problem, then."

"She's first there, though." Melanie didn't necessarily want to spark her mother's anxiety, but "not a problem" certainly wasn't the impression she had gotten when seeing Kat on the ice.

"Ten years ago," her mother scoffed. "Other than an exhibition skate here or there, she hasn't competed in years."

"Did she get injured?"

"No one knows." Her mother seemed completely disinterested since, in her mind, Kat was no longer a threat. "Besides, even then, her form couldn't hold a candle to yours, sweetie. You've got nothing to worry about."

With a painful pinch to the cheek, her mother left, a renewed pep in her step. Melanie followed her partway to shut the door before picking up her laptop and opening a new tab. Her fingers hovered over the keys, curiosity warring with a keen sense of apprehension that had nestled itself in her stomach the moment she had seen Kat out on the ice.

Feeling more than a little ridiculous, Melanie squared her shoulders and set on her search. The first page of articles were all editorials speculating on what happened to the "rising star of skating" who had disappeared from the limelight for no apparent reason. Some speculated about an unknown injury, others proposed that the stress was too much for Kat to handle, but nothing definitive. Melanie was surprised she hadn't heard of Kat or, at least, of the rumors surrounding her. It was only when she double-checked the date of the earliest article, that she realized that

Kat must have stopped competing two years before Melanie herself had aged into the circuit.

Scrolling past the articles, Melanie clicked on one of the few videos available of Kat's competition days. The video was filmed through a single wide shot of the rink. It was difficult to judge Kat's form from the angle of the camera but technique wasn't what caught Melanie's attention.

At first, Melanie rolled her eyes at the playful—downright childish—routine captured in the video. Kat moved from turn to jump to pose with a sort of reckless abandon that reminded Melanie of the playful spinning she had walked in on at the rink. It was obvious why her mother had been so dismissive of Kat's talent. There was nothing regimented, nothing finely tuned about the way Kat moved across the ice.

But she had still won. More than once, Kat had won medals over much more seasoned skaters in her bracket. So many that it had been considered a loss to the sport when she left.

Melanie watched as many videos of Kat's old routines as she could find. By morning, she was no closer to understanding than when she started.

* * *

The next day, after completing the course work she had allotted herself for her online bachelor's degree, Melanie headed straight to the rink.

She was supposed to meet her coach for formal training that night but she couldn't get the mystery of Kat's success out of her mind. It was a long shot that the mysterious unconventional skater would be back at the rink just a day later but, to Melanie's relief, there she was.

It was barely 10AM and this time Kat was balancing on the toe of one skate in the middle of the rink. She wore a black cropped sweater and a calf-length olive skirt which rustled every time she shifted from pose to pose. They weren't traditional poses. No, to Melanie it looked more like she was imitating some sort of martial art.

Melanie hesitated by the gate, suddenly hyper-aware of the fact that she had intentionally intruded on Kat's practice after being so defensive about her own. She was just about to head back to the lobby when Kat rotated out of a pose and saw her.

"You're back!" Kat grinned, waving, with no hint of annoyance at Melanie's interruption. "I didn't steal your ice time again, did I?"

"No, no, I…" Melanie felt her cheeks getting hot in spite of the cold. "I was hoping to take you up on that offer. To watch you practice?"

"Only if I can stay and watch yours."

Melanie stiffened. It was a reasonable request. A show of trust and mutual respect, but she still couldn't bring herself to agree.

"I'm just kidding." Kat clapped her shoulder over the gate. Something in her expression looked disappointed. "Of course you can watch! You can even join me out here, if you want."

"No." Melanie rolled her eyes before realizing that the offer may have been sincere. "Thanks."

"Mhm." Kat replied more like she was humming along to a song.

Melanie made her way over to the stands as Kat returned to her poses. The poses each looked fairly basic, still nothing Melanie had ever seen in competition, but the more she watched the more impressed she became. Kat transitioned from stance to stance with grace and strength. Never once did her balance waiver. Never once did she drift away from her center. She stayed steady and tall as if she were a feather touching down upon the ice.

From the poses she moved into jumps. Kat kept her jumps simple. Singles, doubles, nothing too strenuous. But Melanie got the impression that she was intentionally holding back. Each jump propelled her high into the air, far across the ice, effortlessly in whatever direction she desired. Melanie's brow furrowed as she watched. If Kat really was holding back, then perhaps her "kind and carefree" attitude wasn't as innocent as it seemed.

As if she had read Melanie's mind, Kat slid to a stop in front of her. There was a glint in her cold blue eyes when she called up, "Want to see something really cool?"

Melanie nodded, leaning forward in her seat. This had to be the moment. The moment when Kat showed her something that would prove her nonchalance was backed up by skill.

Kat's grin vanished. She turned and pushed off towards the open ice, gliding backwards around the perimeter of the rink, gaining speed until Melanie thought she would surely slam into the boards. Just when she lifted her back foot to initiate the jump she turned, angling her body forward towards the heart of the rink.

Pushing forward one more time, Kat swung her leg forward and threw herself high into the air. She turned mid-air, drifting over the ice as if defying gravity as she spun once, twice, three—

Melanie took off sprinting from her seat as Kat hit the ice and slid, full force, into the plastic boards of the rink.

"Are you okay?" Melanie half ran, half slid across the ice in her sneakers to get to where Kat lay on her side, shaking.

It took Melanie a second to realize she was laughing.

"Did you see that?" Kat turned so that she was laying on her back, still laughing. "I was so close!"

"What the hell were you thinking?" Melanie sat on the ice next to Kat before her knees gave out. There was hardly a week until competition. No one in their right mind would try a jump like that in practice without properly building up to it. "Triple axel? Seriously?"

Only nineteen women in the history of the sport had ever landed a triple axel in competition. What shocked Melanie most was that the woman in front of her really was "so close."

"I was going for the quad." Kat grimaced as she pushed herself into a seated position. Her hand pressed gingerly against her hip where she had hit the ice. Melanie was going to ask again if she was okay but Kat stood before she had the chance. "Do you have the rink reserved next?"

Melanie shook her head, grabbing the board to pull herself to her feet. There were still several hours until her coach had reserved the space for formal training.

"Give me a ride?" Kat started off towards the gate, her hand still at her hip. "That hotel ice machine is calling my name."

* * *

After dropping Kat off at the hotel—and making sure she hadn't hurt herself too much to manage the stairs—Melanie's day went on as planned. She went grocery shopping for her parents then back to the rink to meet her coach. He was the best coach money could buy—for the Midwest, at least—and he pushed her beyond perfection at every turn.

Usually, Melanie had little to no problem making the miniscule adjustments he demanded of her. An elbow in here, a knee straightened there. It was a matter of control. Mindfulness and willing the body into submission.

That day, though, she just kept picturing Kat. Over and over again, she saw the joy in Kat's face as she swept through basic jumps and leaned into unconventional poses. She saw the fierce determination in her eyes and the reckless but immense power with which she launched herself into a jump that only one woman had ever landed. The sound of her laughter, pure and unmarred by failure, echoed in Melanie's ears.

When Melanie's mother came in for the last half hour of the session, she tried to tighten her focus. To no avail, however, and the lecture over dinner was almost enough to dissuade her from going back to the rink to watch Kat again the next day.

Almost.

* * *

The days following continued in much of the same chaotic pattern. Melanie woke up early, completed her coursework, and went to the rink to watch Kat skate.

Kat, too, was there every morning without fail. She never again asked to stay and watch Melanie practice—because she did, of course, use practice as an excuse to hang around the rink—but she did often invite her onto the ice. Each time she refused Kat pouted and pulled some weird but impressively difficult stunt in response. She never tried the quad again and Melanie wondered if she had seriously injured herself when she fell that first time. But, aside from proudly sporting a massive bruise, Kat never complained and any pain she may have felt never showed in the way she skated.

Unless Melanie was meeting her coach at the rink, most days, she would drive Kat home.

The day before the competition was the only day Melanie didn't see Kat. Her coach and mother both insisted that, since it was a competition at their home rink, it would be better for her to stay home and rest than to exacerbate any nerves with the crowds and set up happening on site.

Melanie felt it had to be worse sitting at home. Alone, in the quiet of her room, going over the stats, notes, and videos her mother had filled her email with the days prior, Melanie had a chance to gain some perspective. She still knew next to nothing about Kat. She had watched her train for days and yet Kat had never done the same moves twice. She had no idea who Kat's coach was, what her program would be, what her costume looked like, or what her music was. She didn't know why Kat had chosen that moment and that place to return to the competition circuit or, for that matter, why she had left in the first place.

What she did know, however, was that her time with Kat had left her distracted. There was no denying her mother's accusations that her mind had been elsewhere. Melanie was kicking herself for not dedicating more time to her own program. What if that had been Kat's plan? Distract the competition, get her to let her guard down, and then pull out something impeccable? After all, Melanie had no doubt that Kat had the potential to be one of the greats.

But no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't imagine Kat as some sort of Harding-type mastermind.

Still, the day of the competition came and Melanie did her best to push all thought of Kat out of her mind. Her program was planned. Her body was trained. There was nothing left but to execute.

As per usual, Melanie wore noise-canceling headphones from the moment she got out of her car to the moment she sat in one of the backrooms with her mother and coach. She listened to their advice, their warnings, and their encouragement with the same practiced detachment she had for every competition. It didn't matter that she knew the building and knew the ice. It didn't matter that some of the competitors were jet-lagged while she was—supposed to be—well-rested. What mattered was the program and her mastery over it.

When her mother brought in the skating order, Melanie noticed that Kat was two slots after her. She was glad that she would have the chance to watch Kat's routine, even if she still had nerves about competing against her.

Sooner than she would have expected, it was time for her flight's warm-up window. Melanie went out onto the ice with the other skaters to loosen her muscles and practice away some of the pre-competition jitters. She was keenly aware of Kat's absence out on the rink. As usual, Melanie didn't watch any of the programs before her. Instead, she sat in the stands with her head down and headphones on as she chanted her program order like a mantra to sooth her nerves. When she was two competitors away, her coach came and told her to get ready.

She could hardly feel the scratchy cling of spandex and fake jewels on her skin. The short half-skirt attached to her leotard tickled her wrist when she walked, eyes on the ground to make sure she didn't step on any wires or litter left over from the competition set-up. The last thing she needed was to trip and twist her ankle walking to the ice.

Her mother and coach were standing as close to the gate as they could get, their expressions stern and unwavering.

Melanie nodded to each of them. Her jaw set, her head held high. She kept her eyes focused on the far end of the rink, forcing herself not to see the competitor before her taking her bow or the hear the comments rippling about the previous skater's program. As the other competitor exited the ice, she gave her a cordial pat on the back and stepped aside to give her a clear path.

A shout and blur of motion from the stands in front of her caught Melanie's attention. She looked up, an involuntary grin breaking through her calm façade, as she saw Kat, already in costume and makeup, bouncing up and down, waving a bouquet of flowers over her head.

"Go Mel! You got this!" Kat's screams rang out over the residual cheers for the previous skater.

Melanie chuckled at the unexpected nickname, offering Kat a small wave in return.

"Focus." Her mother snapped beside her, grabbing her wrist and jerking her to face towards the rink. "You're up."

The sudden yank caught Melanie off guard. Her mother was harsh, yes, but she had never handled her like that. Certainly not as an adult.

Still, it was enough to pull Melanie back to reality, and she tried to shake off the sudden spike of joy and anxiety as she stepped off onto the ice.

Once she took position and the crowd around the ice fell to silence, her training took over. She knew the moves by heart. Each beat of her elevated pulse seemed to thrum in time with the music—a compressed classical symphony—that rang out around her. But her training couldn't account for everything.

With each line and turn she made towards the gate her eyes searched for Kat. A voice in the back of her head wondered what Kat thought of her routine. Was she disappointed? Impressed? Was she even still watching?

Melanie's hands, as she reached up or out in the turns, were shaking. The spot where her mother had grabbed her felt bruised, though she knew it couldn't have been. She tried to ignore it, to focus solely on the sound of the music and the vibration of the ice through her blades, but the harder she tried the more difficult it became.

Melanie felt herself falling behind the beat. Three-quarters of the way through the routine and she had two jump passes left. Perfect smile cemented in place, Melanie pushed herself harder. She needed the momentum to get through her last combination.

The second her feet left the ice she knew she had made a mistake.

She landed the first luz by the skin of her teeth. The audience cheered, not aware that she had landed too far on the angle of the skate. As she swung up for the second jump, she knew she should lower the difficulty. A double salchow instead of the double loop. The program would be fine.

But what would her mother say?

What would Kat think?

Melanie pulled her elbows in and braced herself.

The side of her underrotated skate caught the ice first, twisting her leg and forcing her down on one knee upon impact.

Sharp pain radiated up from her ankle through her knee and all the way up to her teeth. Somehow, the pain made the silence from the crowd all the more noticeable. But she still had to finish.

As gracefully as she could, Melanie stood, gliding into position for her final turn. Thankfully, the speed of her spin had wicked away all the tears from her eyes by the time she struck her final pose.

Her smile almost looked convincing.

"I don't know what's gotten into you." Melanie's mother put her arm around Melanie's shoulder as soon as she stepped through the gate.

Behind her, Melanie could see Kat waiting, flowers in hand.

Melanie couldn't look the other skater in the eyes. She was almost glad to let her mother lead her away, the lecture about distractions and fraternizing with the competition drowning out the announcers' play-by-play of her latest mistake.

After sitting on the bench to receive a score she hardly heard, Melanie retreated into the locker room to breathe.

She almost didn't come back out. Even more than the likely loss of the competition or her mother's disappointment, she didn't think she could stand it if Kat's routine was as prodigious as she suspected it would be.

But she had to know. She had spent so much time with this woman who was so reckless, so controlled, so strong, yet so graceful all at the same time. Melanie had to see for herself what kind of skater Kat would be.

Luckily, her mother and her coach were too absorbed in their breakdown of her performance to see her leave the locker room. She slipped behind a group of trainers and trailed them towards the edge of the rink. Kat was already taking position on the ice.

Melanie was surprised to see she had the bouquet with her, pointed down, a handful of petals already piled on the ice.

She would be penalized for that. Melanie frowned, her own mistake already fading in the wake of her confusion and concern for her competitor.

The music started. Or, at least, Melanie thought it did. A quiet tapping came from the speakers, like the end of a record or a metronome. Kat didn't move and one of the technicians made their way towards the laptop to check the recording.

"Leave it." Kat's voice rang out from the center of the ring, her piecing blue eyes trained on the tech. The entire room went silent. Melanie's breath caught, a surprised laugh escaping her lips as Kat broke one of the unspoken rules of the sport. Kat grinned, as if she had heard the laugh, and called out to the audience, "Listen."

The digital clock on her program still ticking down in time with what was indeed a recording of a metronome, Kat finally moved. Rose petals trailed her as she slid across the ice, gliding as if not a single person had touched the ground before her.

In silence, Kat skated the most beautiful program Melanie had ever seen. The whole notes of the turns, the staccato of ice dance-inspired steps, the impacts of her simple yet flawlessly executed jumps all worked perfectly in time with the ceaseless beat of the recording. Her skating was the music.

There was very little technical difficulty to her routine, at least on paper. But every skater knew that to miss every fallen petal, to begin and land every jump with timed precision, all while smiling like someone on a Sunday stroll would take an unparalleled amount of skill.

As the seconds counted down on her program, so, too, did the tempo of the music. Kat lined herself up for her final pose but, as the music ended, she broke her stance and glided directly to where Melanie stood.

Kat reached over the board, bouquet outstretched. Melanie took the flowers, Kat holding her wrist ever so gently in the process.

"What the hell are you thinking?" Melanie asked Kat, not for the first time.

"Did you like it?" Kat's question seemed sincere. Like the only thing that mattered was whether or not Melanie liked her program.

"You're crazy, you know that?" Melanie couldn't help but laugh, increasingly aware of the fact that the audience was still silently watching their every move.

"I just want people to watch me skate," Kat replied loudly enough for the people in the closest stands to hear. She pushed off from the board and slid back into the center of the rink, shouting, "Is that so bad?"

Another beat of silence passed before Melanie's bewildered giggling broke through. She cheered, and clapped, and laughed louder than she ever had. Kat pointed at her from across the ice and took her bow.

What petals from the bouquet were left fell in a pile at Melanie's feet as she clapped. She didn't care. She hardly noticed at all.

~ Sarah Edmonds

CONSUMPTION

Oreos, Twinkies
stacked up boxes
of potato flakes
cans of jalapenos
and refried beans
Rearranging to
cram in
boxes, cans,
and bags of
flour and chips
Even more found
in pantries
and freezers
until it is
unclear what
is consuming who

~ Stacy Fowler

"Dead Wishes" ~ Isabella Leia Nuqui

GLITTER AND GLEAM

Melanie had known control her entire life. She knew, for instance, how to control the angle of her computer screen so that the glare from her glasses hid the dark circles under her eyes during her college's few synchronous video classes. She also knew how to control her tone, her words, and all thirteen muscles needed to hold the "self-assured but not cocky" smile her mother had coached into her since her first public performance at age eight. It had been a Halloween costume pageant in which her homemade fairy princess had taken third place.

Her mother enrolled her in sewing lessons the week after.

The only time Melanie did not feel in control was when she was on the ice. No matter how much she trained, how complete her muscle control, and no matter how much her parents donated to that week's competition sponsors, there were still variables. Whether the ice was fresh or three programs in, whether the fringe on her costume fluttered or clung to the sequins along the seams, and whether the judges were watching to see if she landed cleanly or with that twinge in her ankle—these were things Melanie could not control. These were the things she battled each time she stepped into the rink.

This time, however, when she took to the ice, she wasn't alone.

"Closed practice," Melanie called out to the girl on the other side of the ice.

The girl didn't seem to hear, spinning without form and humming along to whatever music she was listening to. The wires from her headphones whipped around her, barely reaching down to the phone tucked into the back pocket of her jeans.

"Hey." Melanie waved, trying to get the girl's attention, as she skated over towards her.

When the girl—who was actually a woman, Melanie realized, albeit a petit one—saw she was not alone, she pulled out of the spin and stopped with such grace it very nearly brought Melanie up short.

This was no free-skate amateur.

"Closed practice, sorry," Melanie repeated, a little more cordially, as she gestured vaguely over her shoulder to the exit.

The woman pulled her phone out of her pocket and smiled, bemused, at the screen. "I know, so if you don't mind…?"

11:47 glowed up at her from the screen. Melanie always reserved the rink from noon to three; it was the only time she could practice without her coach watching her every move. No one else ever—

"Oh, are you?" Melanie took a step back, trying not to let her face show her embarrassment. "Sorry."

The other skater laughed and Melanie didn't know whether to be offended or not. "You can stay and watch, if you like?"

Definitely offended.

"No, that's okay." Melanie turned her back and skated back to the exit as quickly as she could. She stumbled slightly stepping back onto solid ground. The soft laugh from behind her only made the humiliation sting more.

There were only three reasons why a competitive skater would let another person watch their practice. 1) They were skating as a pair. Seeing as Melanie had never once competed with a partner, that was certainly out. 2) They were just starting out and needed advice. Despite her initial impression, Melanie knew that woman was no beginner. The poise she had shown out on the ice, even when moving from such an unrefined twirl to perfect stillness, had been more than enough proof of her skill. 3) They believed themselves so skilled it didn't matter who watched. Only the most arrogant or talented skaters believed they were above pressure from fellow competitors. The woman was certainly skilled but, more than that, her nonchalant attitude said something more.

It meant she thought of Melanie as no competition at all.

"She just doesn't know you," Melanie spoke to herself, trying to sooth the blow to her pride. "You don't know her, she doesn't know you."

She waited in the locker room, tapping her foot along with the second hand of the clock, itching to go back into the rink and watch the woman skate. There was no way she'd give her the satisfaction.

Two minutes past noon the woman still hadn't come through the locker room. Melanie had planned on waiting but, remembering the woman's casual jeans and t-shirt, she realized waiting may have been pointless. After a few deep breaths and a mental check-list of her training plan, Melanie pushed herself up from the locker room bench and make her way back into the light.

"There you are!"

To Melanie's annoyance the other skater was still out on the ice. The woman pulled herself short of a lazy figure eight and made a beeline to the gate.

"I thought maybe I had scared you off." The woman grinned.

Melanie fought back a scowl. "It's past noon."

"Sorry, I just realized I didn't introduce myself." The woman hopped through the gate and held out her hand. "Katrina. You can call me Kat. I'm in town for the classic next weekend. Like to get acquainted with the ice first, you know?"

"Sure." Melanie had never spent more than two free days at a competition site. The day before and after. It was better to avoid being scouted by the competition. "I'm Melanie—"

"Finch." Kat shook her hand with surprising fervor. "I know. I saw you at Skate Tulsa a few years back."

So she did know who she was. "I didn't see you."

"Oh I wasn't competing. My mom needed someone to explain the judging system." Kat chuckled but her smile faltered slightly.

"Gotcha." Melanie couldn't relate. Her mother knew every facet of competition rules. She knew which judges favored classical music and which favored innovative transitions. She couldn't imagine a season without the constant quizzing and technical lectures. "It was nice to meet you."

She didn't really mean it, but Kat didn't seem to inclined move out of her way.

"You, too!" Kat finally shifted for Melanie to get by but her next question stopped Melanie in her tracks. "Mind if I hang out for a bit?"

Melanie gaped at her.

"I won't get in your way! I'll just sit over there while I wait for my Uber." She pointed at a spot in the stands. The perfect spot to watch and take notes.

"No." Melanie shook her head, backing out onto the ice. "I'd rather you didn't."

"Ah, right." Kat waved, unfazed. "Then I'll see you around!"

Melanie watched her leave, the dark waves of Kat's shoulder-length brown hair seemed to shiver, the only unsteady thing about her, as she walked out into the lobby without bothering to change out of her skates.

Melanie waited until she heard the lobby door shut before she started her warm-ups. All through her turns and jumps, even her transitions, she kept losing focus. She was used to fresh ice for warm-ups. Silence to get her head into the game. Melanie had competed in Tulsa a few times—some wins, some loses. She wondered which competition Kat had seen.

How little did Kat think of her? Kat knew who she was but didn't care that Melanie saw her practice? Did she think Melanie would just let her sit in on hers? What, did she think Melanie would jump for the chance to get her advice?

"Who the hell even practices in jeans anyway?" Melanie scowled, slamming the gate closed as she left the rink half an hour early.

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Melanie took her time changing back into her street clothes knowing that, if she came home a full half hour early, her parents would never let her hear the end of it. When she left the locker room, she expected the first few middle school free skate girls to be lingering around the lobby. What she didn't expect, however, was to find Katrina sitting on the bike rack at the edge of the parking lot. Melanie kept her head down, hoping her long hair would somehow act as a "don't talk to me" screen as she walked briskly towards her car.

"Have a good practice?"

Melanie clenched her jaw, training her expression back into one of polite indifference before turning around. "Great, actually."

"I'm glad." Kat hadn't moved from her spot on the rack. She had put her blade guards on, laces tied, and hanging over her shoulder. She was wearing black ballet flats that must've been rolled up in her pocket and her earbuds were wrapped around the phone balanced on her knee. Kat must've seen her looking because she picked up her phone with a shrug. "Died before I finished ordering the Uber."

"Do you need to call someone?" As much as she didn't like the other skater, Melanie couldn't leave her stranded. The rink was in a nice area, but a young woman alone in a strange town? She wasn't that heartless.

Kat's grin turned sheepish. "I don't know anyone in this state."

Okay, maybe she was.

"Your coach didn't come with you?" Melanie asked, both surprised and hopeful for an excuse. "Your parents?"

"My coach doesn't come up this early." Kat stood and shifted her skates like a hitchhiker would their satchel. "The hotel's not too far."

Melanie scowled at Kat's departing wave. She watched Kat walk partway across the parking lot before she gave in. "Do you want a ride?"

Kat turned around as if she hadn't heard.

"Those shoes are going to kill your feet." Melanie didn't wait to see if Kat agreed or not.

Making a point to take a path Kat could see, Melanie made her way over to her car and threw her bag in the backseat. Kat followed, to her relief and dismay, and held her skates in her lap, grinning from the passenger seat.

"Thank you."

"Where to?"

Melanie drove Kat to a two-star hotel off the highway in relative silence. Up close, and without the tension of practice between them, Melanie could tell the other skater looked around her age, maybe a bit older. Her arms, which had looked twig-like out on the ice, were actually chorded with muscle and she held herself with the posture of a monarch. As a competitor, Melanie had to admit that Kat was intimidating. As a passenger? The off-key Avril Lavigne impersonation was driving her crazy.

By the time Melanie dropped Kat off at the hotel and pulled into her own driveway it was well past the time her parents would expect her home. At 23, she didn't have a curfew, but that didn't stop her mother from questioning her anytime she didn't stick to the expected schedule.

"You weren't here when I got home." It wasn't a question but Melanie knew she expected an explanation.

"It's Monday."

"Did you reserve an extra hour at the rink?" Melanie's mother wasn't a very imposing woman. Average height, thin, stern. But when she took up that tone, perched on one of the dining room chairs, Melanie knew she wouldn't let the conversation drop until she heard the truth.

"I met another skater." Her mother would know she meant another competitor. Melanie never was very good at lying. "She needed a ride to her hotel. "

"Who? Did she see your routine?" Her mother pulled out her phone, already prepared to look through competition stats.

"Of course not. Her name was Katrina…" Melanie realized Kat hadn't given her a surname. She shrugged. "Katrina. She seemed about my age? Short, dark brown hair. I didn't recognize her."

Her mother frowned, clearly disappointed with the lack of identifying information. "And she said she was competing?"

"Yeah." As soon as Melanie answered she realized she wasn't so sure. Yes, Kat had said she was there for the competition. But she never said she was competing.

After all, her coach hadn't come with her and, from what Melanie had seen, she didn't seem to have any sort of formal routine to practice, either.

Melanie's mother, however, already had her head lowered over her phone, searching through past competitions or texting her many contacts to try and weasel some names off of the competition register. Melanie knew that it wouldn't be any use trying to take back her answer. Instead, she grabbed a protein bar from the kitchen and headed up to her room, as far as she could get from her mother's frantic prying.

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The knock on her bedroom door came barely two hours later. Melanie had just enough time to switch her laptop from Netflix to her training log before her mother barged into her room.

"Katrina Grajnert." Her mother shoved her phone in Melanie's face. "Was this her?"

Melanie leaned back, blinking at the overly zoomed-in image of a girl on a podium. The girl was young, maybe 15, and her hair was wrapped in a bun, but her face looked similar. She and the woman Melanie had met shared the same freckled nose, the same one-sided dimple, and the same sky-blue eyes.

"Maybe?" Melanie's mother scowled at the non-answer so she amended, "I think so."

Her mother nodded, visibly relaxing. "Good. Good. She won't be a problem, then."

"She's first there, though." Melanie didn't necessarily want to spark her mother's anxiety, but "not a problem" certainly wasn't the impression she had gotten when seeing Kat on the ice.

"Ten years ago," her mother scoffed. "Other than an exhibition skate here or there, she hasn't competed in years."

"Did she get injured?"

"No one knows." Her mother seemed completely disinterested since, in her mind, Kat was no longer a threat. "Besides, even then, her form couldn't hold a candle to yours, sweetie. You've got nothing to worry about."

With a painful pinch to the cheek, her mother left, a renewed pep in her step. Melanie followed her partway to shut the door before picking up her laptop and opening a new tab. Her fingers hovered over the keys, curiosity warring with a keen sense of apprehension that had nestled itself in her stomach the moment she had seen Kat out on the ice.

Feeling more than a little ridiculous, Melanie squared her shoulders and set on her search. The first page of articles were all editorials speculating on what happened to the "rising star of skating" who had disappeared from the limelight for no apparent reason. Some speculated about an unknown injury, others proposed that the stress was too much for Kat to handle, but nothing definitive. Melanie was surprised she hadn't heard of Kat or, at least, of the rumors surrounding her. It was only when she double-checked the date of the earliest article, that she realized that

Kat must have stopped competing two years before Melanie herself had aged into the circuit.

Scrolling past the articles, Melanie clicked on one of the few videos available of Kat's competition days. The video was filmed through a single wide shot of the rink. It was difficult to judge Kat's form from the angle of the camera but technique wasn't what caught Melanie's attention.

At first, Melanie rolled her eyes at the playful—downright childish—routine captured in the video. Kat moved from turn to jump to pose with a sort of reckless abandon that reminded Melanie of the playful spinning she had walked in on at the rink. It was obvious why her mother had been so dismissive of Kat's talent. There was nothing regimented, nothing finely tuned about the way Kat moved across the ice.

But she had still won. More than once, Kat had won medals over much more seasoned skaters in her bracket. So many that it had been considered a loss to the sport when she left.

Melanie watched as many videos of Kat's old routines as she could find. By morning, she was no closer to understanding than when she started.

***

The next day, after completing the course work she had allotted herself for her online bachelor's degree, Melanie headed straight to the rink.

She was supposed to meet her coach for formal training that night but she couldn't get the mystery of Kat's success out of her mind. It was a long shot that the mysterious unconventional skater would be back at the rink just a day later but, to Melanie's relief, there she was.

It was barely 10AM and this time Kat was balancing on the toe of one skate in the middle of the rink. She wore a black cropped sweater and a calf-length olive skirt which rustled every time she shifted from pose to pose. They weren't traditional poses. No, to Melanie it looked more like she was imitating some sort of martial art.

Melanie hesitated by the gate, suddenly hyper-aware of the fact that she had intentionally intruded on Kat's practice after being so defensive about her own. She was just about to head back to the lobby when Kat rotated out of a pose and saw her.

"You're back!" Kat grinned, waving, with no hint of annoyance at Melanie's interruption. "I didn't steal your ice time again, did I?"

"No, no, I…" Melanie felt her cheeks getting hot in spite of the cold. "I was hoping to take you up on that offer. To watch you practice?"

"Only if I can stay and watch yours."

Melanie stiffened. It was a reasonable request. A show of trust and mutual respect, but she still couldn't bring herself to agree.

"I'm just kidding." Kat clapped her shoulder over the gate. Something in her expression looked disappointed. "Of course you can watch! You can even join me out here, if you want."

"No." Melanie rolled her eyes before realizing that the offer may have been sincere. "Thanks."

"Mhm." Kat replied more like she was humming along to a song.

Melanie made her way over to the stands as Kat returned to her poses. The poses each looked fairly basic, still nothing Melanie had ever seen in competition, but the more she watched the more impressed she became. Kat transitioned from stance to stance with grace and strength. Never once did her balance waiver. Never once did she drift away from her center. She stayed steady and tall as if she were a feather touching down upon the ice.

From the poses she moved into jumps. Kat kept her jumps simple. Singles, doubles, nothing too strenuous. But Melanie got the impression that she was intentionally holding back. Each jump propelled her high into the air, far across the ice, effortlessly in whatever direction she desired. Melanie's brow furrowed as she watched. If Kat really was holding back, then perhaps her "kind and carefree" attitude wasn't as innocent as it seemed.

As if she had read Melanie's mind, Kat slid to a stop in front of her. There was a glint in her cold blue eyes when she called up, "Want to see something really cool?"

Melanie nodded, leaning forward in her seat. This had to be the moment. The moment when Kat showed her something that would prove her nonchalance was backed up by skill.

Kat's grin vanished. She turned and pushed off towards the open ice, gliding backwards around the perimeter of the rink, gaining speed until Melanie thought she would surely slam into the boards. Just when she lifted her back foot to initiate the jump she turned, angling her body forward towards the heart of the rink.

Pushing forward one more time, Kat swung her leg forward and threw herself high into the air. She turned mid-air, drifting over the ice as if defying gravity as she spun once, twice, three—

Melanie took off sprinting from her seat as Kat hit the ice and slid, full force, into the plastic boards of the rink.

"Are you okay?" Melanie half ran, half slid across the ice in her sneakers to get to where Kat lay on her side, shaking.

It took Melanie a second to realize she was laughing.

"Did you see that?" Kat turned so that she was laying on her back, still laughing. "I was so close!"

"What the hell were you thinking?" Melanie sat on the ice next to Kat before her knees gave out. There was hardly a week until competition. No one in their right mind would try a jump like that in practice without properly building up to it. "Triple axel? Seriously?"

Only nineteen women in the history of the sport had ever landed a triple axel in competition. What shocked Melanie most was that the woman in front of her really was "so close."

"I was going for the quad." Kat grimaced as she pushed herself into a seated position. Her hand pressed gingerly against her hip where she had hit the ice. Melanie was going to ask again if she was okay but Kat stood before she had the chance. "Do you have the rink reserved next?"

Melanie shook her head, grabbing the board to pull herself to her feet. There were still several hours until her coach had reserved the space for formal training.

"Give me a ride?" Kat started off towards the gate, her hand still at her hip. "That hotel ice machine is calling my name."

***

After dropping Kat off at the hotel—and making sure she hadn't hurt herself too much to manage the stairs—Melanie's day went on as planned. She went grocery shopping for her parents then back to the rink to meet her coach. He was the best coach money could buy—for the Midwest, at least—and he pushed her beyond perfection at every turn.

Usually, Melanie had little to no problem making the miniscule adjustments he demanded of her. An elbow in here, a knee straightened there. It was a matter of control. Mindfulness and willing the body into submission.

That day, though, she just kept picturing Kat. Over and over again, she saw the joy in Kat's face as she swept through basic jumps and leaned into unconventional poses. She saw the fierce determination in her eyes and the reckless but immense power with which she launched herself into a jump that only one woman had ever landed. The sound of her laughter, pure and unmarred by failure, echoed in Melanie's ears.

When Melanie's mother came in for the last half hour of the session, she tried to tighten her focus. To no avail, however, and the lecture over dinner was almost enough to dissuade her from going back to the rink to watch Kat again the next day.

Almost.

***

The days following continued in much of the same chaotic pattern. Melanie woke up early, completed her coursework, and went to the rink to watch Kat skate.

Kat, too, was there every morning without fail. She never again asked to stay and watch Melanie practice—because she did, of course, use practice as an excuse to hang around the rink—but she did often invite her onto the ice. Each time she refused Kat pouted and pulled some weird but impressively difficult stunt in response. She never tried the quad again and Melanie wondered if she had seriously injured herself when she fell that first time. But, aside from proudly sporting a massive bruise, Kat never complained and any pain she may have felt never showed in the way she skated.

Unless Melanie was meeting her coach at the rink, most days, she would drive Kat home.

The day before the competition was the only day Melanie didn't see Kat. Her coach and mother both insisted that, since it was a competition at their home rink, it would be better for her to stay home and rest than to exacerbate any nerves with the crowds and set up happening on site.

Melanie felt it had to be worse sitting at home. Alone, in the quiet of her room, going over the stats, notes, and videos her mother had filled her email with the days prior, Melanie had a chance to gain some perspective. She still knew next to nothing about Kat. She had watched her train for days and yet Kat had never done the same moves twice. She had no idea who Kat's coach was, what her program would be, what her costume looked like, or what her music was. She didn't know why Kat had chosen that moment and that place to return to the competition circuit or, for that matter, why she had left in the first place.

What she did know, however, was that her time with Kat had left her distracted. There was no denying her mother's accusations that her mind had been elsewhere. Melanie was kicking herself for not dedicating more time to her own program. What if that had been Kat's plan? Distract the competition, get her to let her guard down, and then pull out something impeccable? After all, Melanie had no doubt that Kat had the potential to be one of the greats.

But no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't imagine Kat as some sort of Harding-type mastermind.

Still, the day of the competition came and Melanie did her best to push all thought of Kat out of her mind. Her program was planned. Her body was trained. There was nothing left but to execute.

As per usual, Melanie wore noise-canceling headphones from the moment she got out of her car to the moment she sat in one of the backrooms with her mother and coach. She listened to their advice, their warnings, and their encouragement with the same practiced detachment she had for every competition. It didn't matter that she knew the building and knew the ice. It didn't matter that some of the competitors were jet-lagged while she was—supposed to be—well-rested. What mattered was the program and her mastery over it.

When her mother brought in the skating order, Melanie noticed that Kat was two slots after her. She was glad that she would have the chance to watch Kat's routine, even if she still had nerves about competing against her.

Sooner than she would have expected, it was time for her flight's warm-up window. Melanie went out onto the ice with the other skaters to loosen her muscles and practice away some of the pre-competition jitters. She was keenly aware of Kat's absence out on the rink. As usual, Melanie didn't watch any of the programs before her. Instead, she sat in the stands with her head down and headphones on as she chanted her program order like a mantra to sooth her nerves. When she was two competitors away, her coach came and told her to get ready.

She could hardly feel the scratchy cling of spandex and fake jewels on her skin. The short half-skirt attached to her leotard tickled her wrist when she walked, eyes on the ground to make sure she didn't step on any wires or litter left over from the competition set-up. The last thing she needed was to trip and twist her ankle walking to the ice.

Her mother and coach were standing as close to the gate as they could get, their expressions stern and unwavering.

Melanie nodded to each of them. Her jaw set, her head held high. She kept her eyes focused on the far end of the rink, forcing herself not to see the competitor before her taking her bow or the hear the comments rippling about the previous skater's program. As the other competitor exited the ice, she gave her a cordial pat on the back and stepped aside to give her a clear path.

A shout and blur of motion from the stands in front of her caught Melanie's attention. She looked up, an involuntary grin breaking through her calm façade, as she saw Kat, already in costume and makeup, bouncing up and down, waving a bouquet of flowers over her head.

"Go Mel! You got this!" Kat's screams rang out over the residual cheers for the previous skater.

Melanie chuckled at the unexpected nickname, offering Kat a small wave in return.

"Focus." Her mother snapped beside her, grabbing her wrist and jerking her to face towards the rink. "You're up."

The sudden yank caught Melanie off guard. Her mother was harsh, yes, but she had never handled her like that. Certainly not as an adult.

Still, it was enough to pull Melanie back to reality, and she tried to shake off the sudden spike of joy and anxiety as she stepped off onto the ice.

Once she took position and the crowd around the ice fell to silence, her training took over. She knew the moves by heart. Each beat of her elevated pulse seemed to thrum in time with the music—a compressed classical symphony—that rang out around her. But her training couldn't account for everything.

With each line and turn she made towards the gate her eyes searched for Kat. A voice in the back of her head wondered what Kat thought of her routine. Was she disappointed? Impressed? Was she even still watching?

Melanie's hands, as she reached up or out in the turns, were shaking. The spot where her mother had grabbed her felt bruised, though she knew it couldn't have been. She tried to ignore it, to focus solely on the sound of the music and the vibration of the ice through her blades, but the harder she tried the more difficult it became.

Melanie felt herself falling behind the beat. Three-quarters of the way through the routine and she had two jump passes left. Perfect smile cemented in place, Melanie pushed herself harder. She needed the momentum to get through her last combination.

The second her feet left the ice she knew she had made a mistake.

She landed the first luz by the skin of her teeth. The audience cheered, not aware that she had landed too far on the angle of the skate. As she swung up for the second jump, she knew she should lower the difficulty. A double salchow instead of the double loop. The program would be fine.

But what would her mother say?

What would Kat think?

Melanie pulled her elbows in and braced herself.

The side of her underrotated skate caught the ice first, twisting her leg and forcing her down on one knee upon impact.

Sharp pain radiated up from her ankle through her knee and all the way up to her teeth. Somehow, the pain made the silence from the crowd all the more noticeable. But she still had to finish.

As gracefully as she could, Melanie stood, gliding into position for her final turn. Thankfully, the speed of her spin had wicked away all the tears from her eyes by the time she struck her final pose.

Her smile almost looked convincing.

"I don't know what's gotten into you." Melanie's mother put her arm around Melanie's shoulder as soon as she stepped through the gate.

Behind her, Melanie could see Kat waiting, flowers in hand.

Melanie couldn't look the other skater in the eyes. She was almost glad to let her mother lead her away, the lecture about distractions and fraternizing with the competition drowning out the announcers' play-by-play of her latest mistake.

After sitting on the bench to receive a score she hardly heard, Melanie retreated into the locker room to breathe.

She almost didn't come back out. Even more than the likely loss of the competition or her mother's disappointment, she didn't think she could stand it if Kat's routine was as prodigious as she suspected it would be.

But she had to know. She had spent so much time with this woman who was so reckless, so controlled, so strong, yet so graceful all at the same time. Melanie had to see for herself what kind of skater Kat would be.

Luckily, her mother and her coach were too absorbed in their breakdown of her performance to see her leave the locker room. She slipped behind a group of trainers and trailed them towards the edge of the rink. Kat was already taking position on the ice.

Melanie was surprised to see she had the bouquet with her, pointed down, a handful of petals already piled on the ice.

She would be penalized for that. Melanie frowned, her own mistake already fading in the wake of her confusion and concern for her competitor.

The music started. Or, at least, Melanie thought it did. A quiet tapping came from the speakers, like the end of a record or a metronome. Kat didn't move and one of the technicians made their way towards the laptop to check the recording.

"Leave it." Kat's voice rang out from the center of the ring, her piecing blue eyes trained on the tech. The entire room went silent. Melanie's breath caught, a surprised laugh escaping her lips as Kat broke one of the unspoken rules of the sport. Kat grinned, as if she had heard the laugh, and called out to the audience, "Listen."

The digital clock on her program still ticking down in time with what was indeed a recording of a metronome, Kat finally moved. Rose petals trailed her as she slid across the ice, gliding as if not a single person had touched the ground before her.

In silence, Kat skated the most beautiful program Melanie had ever seen. The whole notes of the turns, the staccato of ice dance-inspired steps, the impacts of her simple yet flawlessly executed jumps all worked perfectly in time with the ceaseless beat of the recording. Her skating was the music.

There was very little technical difficulty to her routine, at least on paper. But every skater knew that to miss every fallen petal, to begin and land every jump with timed precision, all while smiling like someone on a Sunday stroll would take an unparalleled amount of skill.

As the seconds counted down on her program, so, too, did the tempo of the music. Kat lined herself up for her final pose but, as the music ended, she broke her stance and glided directly to where Melanie stood.

Kat reached over the board, bouquet outstretched. Melanie took the flowers, Kat holding her wrist ever so gently in the process.

"What the hell are you thinking?" Melanie asked Kat, not for the first time.

"Did you like it?" Kat's question seemed sincere. Like the only thing that mattered was whether or not Melanie liked her program.

"You're crazy, you know that?" Melanie couldn't help but laugh, increasingly aware of the fact that the audience was still silently watching their every move.

"I just want people to watch me skate," Kat replied loudly enough for the people in the closest stands to hear. She pushed off from the board and slid back into the center of the rink, shouting, "Is that so bad?"

Another beat of silence passed before Melanie's bewildered giggling broke through. She cheered, and clapped, and laughed louder than she ever had. Kat pointed at her from across the ice and took her bow.

What petals from the bouquet were left fell in a pile at Melanie's feet as she clapped. She didn't care. She hardly noticed at all.

~ Eva Nemirovsky

PORTRAIT

He wasn't friends
with the single
as it reminded him
of his singularity.
He didn't deal with couples
as it marred
his makeup.

In the flames of loneliness
he singed
till the pitter-patter
of words,
those tiny droplets
of engagement
saved him, his skin.

~ Sanjeev Sethi

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

I keep these walls up
because I am scared.
I am scared of what taking down those walls
might do.
But I would do it
for you.

I am scared,
of what it might do to me.
But I don't want to stay here,
to be the man that I was told to be.

I am scared that you will be like
some others that were close to me.
Abandoning,
Demonizing,
Tantalizing,
at the sight of opening my heart's threads.

Cutting those threads,
telling me I shouldn't feel the way I do.
To be emotionless,
a machine.
To be a zombie,
just for you.

It's no way to live,
yet it's celebrated by most.
Though it is the ones closest to you,
that can hurt you the most.

So I have learned
to turn my head to humanity.
My house, although abandoned, damp,
crippled by the crepuscular,
is sufficient enough.

I have learned to solidify,
 but not to live a life that I can dignify.
How can I?
With these walls not even able to show my infrastructure.

But for you,
 I would tear down these walls,
  brick by brick.
For you,
 I would rip the fingers off my hands,
  gnaw my arms to my shoulders
   until I am just a body slamming into boulders.
For you,
 I would learn how to love.

Though you are not there.
So I go back home,
 hide away in my abandoned room.
Blow out the candles,
 wait until the light leaves the wick,
  as the cold air suffocates the heat
        that was once around it.

And I cry,
 in the dark.
In my corner,
 so I am not scared
  of being found.
And I feel the imprint of your ghost around me.
The only clarity I am given
 of what has become of you and me.
A memory of my mind,
 come to life,
  to remind me of the man
   I used to be.

I sit here,
as quiet as a mouse.
Locked inside
this haunted house.

~ Randall Whitener

CARCASS DREAMS

There is a carcass on the dinner table; my Mama & I bring our knives and bloodlust.

"You're giving up." Mama stares at me like I've done the gravest mistake.

The crime scene feels inevitable–at least it is on my end. I have been waiting for this moment; long ago, I built a wooden building next to a red, flaming campfire. I was prepared and would rather set myself in the fire of truth, but my mother has covered herself amongst the rocks and swallowed mud within her lungs. She's decided she'd rather face the demons in my face than in her own past.

"I'm not giving up," I tell her. "I'm doing what I've always told everyone I'd do." "To get people of your back–"

"It's been years," I interrupt her as gently as I can, knife tightening in my hand.

It's the truth; it has been years since I've declared my dreams that consisted of paper and a pencil. Anytime a teacher asks, *What do you want to be when you grow up?*

Anytime a relative asks, *What are you going to college for?*

I'd smile, ready with paper and pencil and say, "Architecture!"

When I was younger, my Mama was a real estate agent. She took me through multiple house listings, and together, we'd judge those houses together. I'd help her prepare the house for open-house guests, and I would wait for her, looking through pamphlets of houses.

Around the same time, I discovered books. In solitude, I read through *The Diary of Anne Frank* with neither the understanding of the historical context nor its literary and cultural importance. I had been drawn to the novel because of the house plan pictures of the houses Anne had stayed in. To this day, I could not remember the words nor the house plans. Only the feeling of paper against my hands as they run through Franks' words, coming forth to life.

"I've spent a majority of my childhood writing," I admit. "But I have also spent more time drawing house plans."

"You've stopped though." Her words are biting and accusatory.

I am not sure if I can end this pain for the both of us. How could I tell her that I *could* not–that I had no choice in the matter? There is a disease inside my head that could never turn to art, but rather, it is a fuse that quickly turns to ash. There is no grandeur not healing; only scribbles left on the margins of my textbooks.

Instead, I tell her, "I've stopped writing too. And I hate writing." A pain in my chest begins to seemingly burn through me. "Besides, I'm more worried about CAD than drawing."

"You should still be a writer," she insists.

"Most parents don't want their kids to be artists," I bite back. "They'd want their kids to have *proper jobs*–" "*Proper* jobs?" she interrupts. Mama gives me an incredulous look. "You'd be miserable."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do." Mama drops her utensils down, a shrill clicking noise echoes in the room. "You're careless with your numbers."

"Yes, I was that way. In elementary school."

"You're still the same girl." She scoffs. "You'd make buildings collapse."

Silence permeates the room like sharp knives seeking reprisal, and the supper tastes like the ash from the aftermath of a long-awaited eruption. Your love is a language long forgotten from your end or mine–I am not entirely sure. If we had, perhaps we would not have been here.

"You once told me–" I begin again. "–that I should chase my dreams; that I have the luxury to do so. So, let me choose my dreams."

Please, I want to scream at her. *Please, because it has been years and I cannot write anymore. If I cannot then*–

"I don't believe you."

"That is only because this is what you wanted to do!" Somewhere, something catches on fire. "*You* chose strategically and were unhappy. Let me choose and I will decide my own feelings on the matter."

I think of the creature that haunts us so–that wages a war inside our heads and now lays its waste on our dinner table. Sometimes I'd imagine it was named *Regret*, or worse, *Missopportunity*.

"I did not have the chance to choose," she says after a prolonged silence. "Your Grandfather had four girls who needed a higher education. I *compromised* but you don't have to."

In truth, I do not know what other passions my Mama would have pursued had she been allowed to. Perhaps seeing me has brought the demons crawling out of her head and are on the loose.

It shifts and there it was; *Missopportunity* again.

I turn away because I do not want to say anything– because I do not want her to spend the next years swaddled in numbness and pain like I am. My Mama and I–we are both a product of pain and a cycle of blood that never ends. I mourn for the girl she was, and the woman she could've been. Who is to blame for this? Which one of our ancestors tainted our minds and let demons crawl through our veins?

Or was it ourselves?

My Mama takes my silence as a form of surrender. We do not speak as we set our knives aside and wait for the fire to cool. The future remains uncertain; perhaps our relationship will never return as it was. But that was inevitable too, wasn't it?

~ Michelle Hernandez

"Flower Womans" ~ Monae Sims

MOTHER

My feet touching the dirt
I feel her energy running through me
It feels invigorating
This is who I was meant to be
Grounded
In the soil, the worms confused by my fleshy toes
I continue walking, planting my foot in the mud
One foot in front of the other
Each step I take, I feel more connected to my mother
And my mother's mother
And her mother
And I feel her hands gripping mine, guiding me to her soul
She leads me to a tree
Ginormous
I feel her breathing
She invites me to touch the bark
I've seen this tree before
She's in my dreams
I am her
And she is me

~ Ari Sicarios

NARY A GASP

I was raised in three houses. My own, her's, and one other (the third is irrelevant for this story). I know very little of her life. Did she have siblings? A mother? A father? I mean obviously yes, but fuck if I knew who they were. She offers little to nothing about her life.

I spent my childhood in her kitchen and can count the things I know about her with a single hand. She was born in 1939. Her favorite color is maroon. She was sixteen when she got married and was 18 when she started having children; she had thirteen of them. Oh, and she never had sex voluntarily.

Not once.

She revealed this about herself once when my aunt complained about her lackluster sex life.

This conversation was had in Spanish

"He can't keep his hands off me, but then when he does touch me, it's just that. Touch and that's it," my aunt exclaimed. It wasn't a shock, her husband doesn't look capable of much. He's a prick. The essence of my grandmother's response was "maybe just deal with it? Take pleasure in the fact that he asks you if you want to have sex. Your dad never asked me, it just happened".

It just happened, and she had thirteen kids.

My mother, aunt, cousin, and I were scattered around the kitchen and living room, and I remember looking around waiting for a jaw to drop, eyes to open wide, but nothing. Nary a gasp. We digested this information like it was the most normal thing ever. It shouldn't have been, but it was. She was regularly raped and we had no reaction.

My grandmother was a host.

I was around seventeen when this conversation happened.

~ Gissel Ruiz

"How Fragile" ~ Randall Whitener

DYE

I've had the privilege of watching my mother's hair turn gray.
Many cannot say the same -
For the colors they see last
Are brown, blonde, red, and black.

I've had the privilege of watching my mother limp -
Arch support, ointment, back brace, swollen knee.
For some children only see high heels,
Office wear, pen behind ear, walk fast, don't trip.

As our roles slowly reverse,
Her burden becomes mine.
Mother becomes daughter,
Meeting at some place in time.

But my womb is not yet big enough to hold her;
So my arms will engulf her,
My tears hydrating her,
And my blood will warm her
When hers runs cold.

~ Layal Dahi

NIGHT SWIMMING

"Karly, your mom is abusive."

When my friend spoke those words, my whole perspective shifted. She was right, of course. I'd just never voiced it aloud. I always made reference to euphemisms and wrote my mother off as "just crazy." In less dismissive moments, I acknowledged she had bipolar disorder, that her actions weren't entirely her fault, but nonetheless terrible.

But that night, as I detailed my mom's latest belittling speech to me, doubtlessly focused on my incompetence and appearance, or perhaps the way I did my hair, or the way I parented my children, my friend cut me off. "Karly, your mom is abusive."

I couldn't deny it. Of course she was. I just didn't want to admit it. I wasn't beaten up, right? I wasn't locked in a closet, or denied food. That's what abuse looked like. Not a constant stream of insults, gaslighting, belittlement, screaming matches. Those things were just my life. But there it was. When I finally had it named by an outside party, of course I could see the abuse where it sat, deep in my chest, rotting away like acid.

Suddenly it reframed my entire relationship with her. The time I woke up sick in the middle of the night, vomiting on my bedding, and she forced my older brother awake to help her clean the mess, screaming at him in the middle of the night. He screamed back. He never cried. I hung onto the bannister, listening to their voices drift up from downstairs, my head pounding, my face fevered. "Why can't they stop?" I wondered, as I drifted in and out of consciousness. It seemed hours before anyone came back to check on me.

My mom, the pastor's wife, always on the phone gossiping to church members under the guise of "counseling." Talking about the indiscretions of parishioners and quoting scripture out of context. "If you know to do good, and you don't do it, it's a sin," she said to me so often it became a mantra. This was deployed usually, when I had failed to fold the towels correctly, or dust her nightmarishly large antique dresser to her liking. Somehow, not cleaning enough—that was sin. Not pleasing mom—that was sin.

It worsened when I hit puberty and we moved cross country. I gained a lot of weight. I became depressed and missed my friends. My mom took me clothing shopping and badgered me about my new size. She'd laugh at me standing in the dressing room in my underwear, almost in tears over my new bulge and bulk. "Are you sure you want to eat that?" "It's no wonder boys don't like you." "Why don't you want to look like the other girls your age?" "Are you a lesbian?" "Are you pregnant?" "Every time I look at your face I get more worried."

One time I slapped her on the arm. Later that day, I heard her on the phone telling a friend I'd punched her, with a closed fist, and she was terribly bruised.

I think she believed it too. Perhaps it was her brain chemistry. My mom is one of the most deeply traumatized people I know. Her parents died brutally in a violent car accident when she was only ten years old, along with her two younger sisters.

Her older sister had not been with them. My mom had. She was the only passenger that survived.

The aunt she moved in with after her parents crawled in bed with her at night and told her the only reason she'd survived was because she was a sinner and would have gone to hell. Mom's first stories to me as a kid centered on this aunt, on how she'd abused her, on how the whole family had gathered around her during a tornado and told her if the twister hit their house, she'd face eternal torment because she had not properly repented. She banged on the stairs with little, child's hands, and sobbed, begging God to save her.

She talked about how she was sexually abused by a cousin. She talked about smoking in the high school bathroom, cutting class, dropping out of college because her aunt believed it was going to destroy her salvation. She talked about how my dad cheated on her. About how men weren't to be trusted. About how she couldn't see properly for years because no one thought to take her for an eye exam and how she felt when she first saw grass blades for the first time. She talked about rages so violent her family closed her in her room while she bit her arms.

And then came 1996. I developed pneumonia. Laying in bed for hours at a time, I could barely walk, focus, or see. I stopped eating or drinking, and eventually, developed a UTI. When my parents finally took me to the ER, my veins had collapsed. I'll never completely understand why they didn't take me sooner. Financial concerns maybe, or, perhaps, high on her own sense of self, my mom simply thought she knew best. By the time the doctor saw me, he told my parents I had low chances of survival. But survive I did. Weak, pale, and sickly, as I would be for the next several years, I went home. A few months later, my baby brother was born with HLHS, a rare heart disease with low survival rates. He died when he was four days old. After a lifetime of trauma, this moment, truly, became the defining moment of my mother's life, and to a certain extent, mine.

As I grew older, it became increasingly apparent that my grieving mother wanted my brother back, at any cost, at all costs. I regretted surviving when my younger brother was defied as the perfect child. He was beautiful, mom said, he was perfect in every way. Every other NICU baby looked sick, but not him. He was perfect.

Over the next four years, my mother would become pregnant four more times, miscarrying three, and eventually having my younger sister, who failed to live up to all of my mother's sky-high expectations, as any real child would.

When I was in college, my mother went to see Dr. Daniel Amen, a self-help guru and psychiatrist, on behalf of my sister, who had then been diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. Dr. Amen made little headway with my sister, who refused to speak while my mom was in the room. Dr. Amen's methods required SPECT imaging of the brain to diagnose and treat patients. He asked if he could do one for my mother. I never saw the images, but privately, my dad explained to me that her brain was wildly abnormal, likely as a result of the car accident. Her memory centers were almost obliterated. Which may explain why her stories were repeated over and over, why she seemed trapped in her traumatic memories and lashed out at the rest

of us continually. Perhaps, my dad suggested, my mom deserved more sympathy than we gave her.

It's easy, like my mom, to get lost in trauma. To only focus on the time she told me to throw up after eating a Pop-Tart, or how she trained my niece, as a toddler, to tell me I was a jerk. But how do you reconcile that with a mom who was also, at times, wonderful?

Because my mom also took us swimming at midnight, under the stars, in the humidity of the West Virginia summer. She bought us big boxes of popcorn to eat during movies, refilled them to the brim several times, drenched them in butter. She smuggled in boxes of candy and encouraged us to stuff cans of Coke in our sleeves. She encouraged sleepovers, loved making big dinners for friends. She saved money all year to buy us the biggest and best Christmas gifts. She made up songs to sing to the dog, and when my little brother died, she would sit in his room, and let the cat sit on her lap for hours, and she'd pet him, and she didn't let us hear her cry.

How can humans be such wildly complicated creatures? How can any of us carry so much pain, so much anger, so much joy? Are we all dramatically broken, waiting to be fixed, unable to prevent our brains from betraying the people around us? Are we victims of circumstance, all?

As I become a parent, I tell myself, *I won't become my mother.* As I hold my sons, encourage them, tell them no one is ugly, no one is unworthy, as I tell them they don't have to hug my mom or anyone else, as I give them fresh vegetables, not the canned stuff I grew up on, I am constantly influenced by my mom in one way or another. I wish it was possible to untangle myself from my mom and her trauma, just as she wished to do for herself, I think.

My mom was recently hospitalized for COVID. In classic fashion, she refused to be vaccinated, even with her three adult children begging her. With co-morbidities abounding and pneumonia setting in, I realized that this could be the end. My mom could die. I put our children to bed and told my husband I needed some time. I went outside, jumped in the swimming pool, stared at the stars overhead and swam until my body threatened to give out. I love night swimming, I thought, because of my mother.

And my mind went, not to the trauma, not to the abuse, but the memory of her, a little older than I am now, laying in bed with me, rubbing my forearms. "My little tweeter," she called me. "I love you, my little tweeter."

I rub my own sons' arms when I seek to comfort them at night. "I love you, little one," I say. "Mama's here."

~ Karly White

WET LIPS

There was spit in my tip jar today. I feel
a train warning
welling up inside. I could craft
a meaningful playlist
to convey this at my funeral,
or I can talk about it now:
I am afraid of killing myself.
Of trying and using
the wrong hand. Remaining
in a costly hospital bed positioned
near the living
room television, my son
kissing me
on the surviving half of my face
before he leaves to school.

When I arrive home,
he calls me Daddy,
and I feel like a fraud for this
is a gentle title.
I remember myself
dropping apples by accident—
their bruises taking
shape on my skin. My pop
speaks to me first
in open palms. Then, pinched
fingers behind my arm. His rage
is the milk in my blood. It is lonely
on the shower floor. It is still welling up.

~ Chance Castro

96 HOURS

On Tuesday, October 9, 2018, after a seizure and fall, my 22-year-old daughter Mia was taken by ambulance from a one-step-from-homelessness trailer park on Higuera Street, San Luis Obispo, California, to the nearby French Hospital. She was covered in black, red, and purplish splotches as if someone had beaten the shit out of her. The first responder's assessment of her condition was not promising. Glasgow Coma Scale 3. No response. To Anything.

Her " boyfriend" called 911. His neighbors hid Mia's purse and phone from the police. Who thought that was okay? Who, exactly, was this "boyfriend?"

Did anyone even care? Was Mia disposable? Expendable? A sudden liability? What did she know of what had happened to her? What

Did she matter to the first responders sent to this south-of-the-skids area of San Luis Obispo? A place where neighbors hid identification and evidence. A place where people saw nothing, heard nothing and did not answer their doorbells.

Did her condition merit sirens? Was she alone in the back of the ambulance as it ferried her from the one-step- from- homelessness -trailer park on Higuera Street to French Hospital?

Was there any thought for her at all? By anyone? Or was she already beyond all that?

Mia's disheveled appearance and lack of identification caused the first responders to mistake the All-Star athlete, artist, and would-be crisis counselor for a transient. Was she just another Jane Doe to them? A case number?

Only the work of a social-media-savvy ICU Nurse the following day kept Mia from remaining a Jane Doe. After this sleuthing, the nurse called me at 10:00 a.m. to say that Mia had fallen and sustained a traumatic brain injury. She implored me to gather my family and get to Sierra Vista Medical Center in San Luis Obispo immediately. A Regional Trauma Center. The hospital to which an ambulance took Mia after it was determined she needed trauma care.

It took Stan, Ariel, and I more than five hours to get to San Luis Obispo. At 7:00 p.m., we walked through the ICU doors at Sierra Vista Medical Center. Mia was still unresponsive. A head CT scan reflected no brain activity except in her brainstem. She was gone but for breathing over the ventilator. Life on a ventilator was not what she would have wanted. And so we waited…

Ariel's fiancé, Julian, arrived later that night; Stan's brother Jeff the following morning. Law Enforcement officers were ever-present. A reminder that when it was over, it still was not over.

Mia stopped breathing over the ventilator two days later, and a nurse disconnected life support. It was Friday, October 12, 2018.

Our family joined hands while Ariel and I held Mia's hands. We encircled her like a crown—an unbroken circle of broken people. We waited and watched the brightly colored numbers and graphics of the monitors attached to Mia plummet, then stop. Asystole. Over. Done. A detective took Mia away with the respirator apparatus still in place. It was growing dark outside. It was growing darker everywhere.

~ Alexandra Wright

WHEN IS WHEN

When I drop a bowl of soup
now that my elderly mother has dropped a few
and I've cleaned the floor of her kitchen
after sitting her in a chair

when I clean my own spill off her floor
even though she offers to help

in retrospect I should have accepted.

But now, if I promise myself that next time, I will,

(and, the one thing I am sure to inherit
being old age

as to old age's arrival)
none of us knows when.

~ Terry Trowbridge

I WAS READING YOUR OBITUARY &

it's all a love story—
that's why it's tragic
the bedsheets
still smell like your body
my grandma's puffed knuckles
won't change them, can't
put away your plate on the top
shelf. Is there vanity
in being buried when it's not
your decision? I wish
nobody'd visit, but
say more words on other rocks
overlooking any valley, study
the horned highways contorting
like sidewinders in the dust of your grief;
can I hold it for you?
a beer can resting on my head stone.
sleep outside tonight because I can't
go all the way home without you.

~ Chance Castro

"Past Ingredients" ~ Maria Ermoshin

ALL THE PRETTY PEONIES

My heart like a seed,
Blooms in the spring.
Twenty-four pedals all dressed in pink,

One by one I pluck as they vanish,
Always chasing the sylph,
Ignoring the damage.

I planted a flower,
A garden grew.
I wasn't prepared
To properly care for you.

~ Francisco Amaro

I WILL BUILD YOU THE HEAVEN I DENY MYSELF; APPROACHING THE ICE BERG

for Amy Uyematsu

That postcard sent to you
by silent grandmother in Japan
drawn in a child's hand:
Just rooster, sun and sky

A mat softened by mountain grasses
to protect your feet
when you dance, barefoot,
alone.

A woodblock by Hokusai:
fire dancing with waves

A samisen that responds
only to your fingers
and a flute of sparrow bone
to kiss your lips

That small yellow dragon,
citrine talisman you warmed
in your palm.
Were you holding it last week?

And did that yellow dragon carry you
to real heaven? A place
less thrown together,
more nourishing, lasting,
than the hovel I'm making?

But, perhaps, like me,
you don't believe in heaven.
Well, how about reincarnation?

Come back to us soon, Amy,
just as yourself.
The world loses its petals

without you.

~ Terri Niccum

THE MANGO TREE

My Grandfather says he has no green thumb.

Yet, in the front yard of our home, a mango tree would remain fruitful under his care. The branches curved and its leaves were our house' shades. Down below, its roots have taken over the grounds; every other plant seems to wither from dehydration. After a lengthy day of school, I would wait for my Grandfather. In the living room, my head would poke out and watch the mango tree, bare and lonesome. When the sound of Grandfather's car engine reaches me, I'd be running to our front yard. I am still in my school uniform, and he doesn't bother changing from his work clothes before beginning to tend to the mango tree.

I have no green thumb, and no desire for mud and dirt to seep underneath my fingernails. My Grandfather doesn't trust me with a knife, kitchen or otherwise. Instead, he makes me watch, and we spend our time together in the front yard. He'd grab a small stool for me to sit on, and we'd talk about our days.

"*You'd never have mangoes like this in America,*" he'd say. "*None of them as sweet*."

And sometimes he'd tell me stories of the mango tree.

"*Your mother fell from here*," he'd point to a cracked branch.

And sometimes we'd be silent from the heat. Perspiration will have gathered on top of my forehead and at the back of my head. His dress pants will be stained with grass, and his shirt stained with sweat. Regardless, my Grandfather does not relent. He stays and grafts the mango tree, anticipation thrumming through him.

The mango tree remains strong throughout the season. It goes through the motions of time alongside the wind, with the golden sun blaring against it. My Grandfather and I remain just as steadfast, watching the mango tree's leaves grow beyond its domain and its flowers bloom.

And finally, until his long-awaited green mango appears and transitions into a ripe one.

When my Grandfather finally retires–when he has the time–maybe he'll have a book of botany lining the yard, accompanying the tree.

But my Grandfather doesn't have the chance to retire. I have no one to

await at the foot of the mango tree. The golden hours pass through, and the tree remains untouched.

This year, it doesn't bear fruit.

~ Michelle H

"Lavender Fields" ~ Jonathan Ceniceros

A HOT AFTERNOON IN SOYBEAN COUNTRY

The Piper PA-36 Pawnee Brave
crop duster performs an arabesque
over maturing soybean fields,
dodging power lines and low flying clouds,
spraying broad spectrum pesticides
as it sweeps away myriads
of bean leaf beetles, soybean aphids,
pollinating bees and butterflies,
judging sinners and saints without distinction.

The sun covers her face with a cloud.
And weeps.

~ Frank Modica

JANUARY 23RD, 2023

like lightning

struck so fast

and the rain was pouring

the trees were shaking

the creek was flowing

the leaves were blowing

I thought

how lucky we are

to be blessed with water and storm

but rain never lasts in California

soon the sun will shine

and dry and warm the bushes and oak trees

and the ground won't even remember

what it felt like

to be soaked

---

everything overflows under the sun

~ Jaya Darriet

NOVA[1]

I am at that age now when all I hear around me is the news of yet another relative or family member who has passed away. It seems unlikely, but I had not heard the news of anyone dying before this. Now I get bad news every day; I am at the age of the revelation of death, this is where it is trying to defeat me.

"Like a scorpion condemned into a circle of fire, I have stung myself with thoughts about death."

Evelina hears me, but mocks me, saying that the watermelon vendor had taught her how to distinguish the rich red content of watermelons hidden beneath their skins – if the sound came from the outside, then it was unripe, if the insides were sonorous, it was ready. She says, if death always comes in red, then she would be able to figure it out; she puts her ear to my stomach and taps on various parts of it, then decides that death has not yet ripened, because the sound had come from the outside.

We heard about an old lady named Soné and found her in a distant settlement. In Soné's case, she did know how to recognize death and to grab it before it struck unexpectedly. She was a well-known death seer in those villages. When people noticed an unusual change in the appearance of someone they knew, they would call her, so that she could take a look and tell them her opinion. If death had already settled in, she would tell them how many days were left; if the suspicions were unfounded, she would calm the family down and tell them that there was no danger. The people who called her over would give her a photograph of the person, or point him out from a distance, and she would observe secretly from afar, such that the person would not know. After all, everyone knew her, and it is no pleasant thing to discover that the death seer is staring at your face.

Rarely, one can bear the presence of death for a long time, she said, referring to the coffin maker of their village, who had been hearing everyone say how young and handsome he was getting over the past two years and had managed to live with death even after Soné had revealed the truth to him.

My mother would laugh when she recalled how I had been born. I was doing some ironing, the only other person at home was Mané, your cousin on your paternal aunt's side, she died just a few days after that. When my labor pains began, Mané told me to drop that iron, but I continued to go over your father's shirts with

[1] In astronomy, a "nova" is a star that demonstrates an unusual increase in luminosity, shining intensely for several days, after which it returns to its former level of luminosity.

even closer attention to detail. Your father had left for work and we had just moved to an unfamiliar part of town, I had spread out the sleeves of his shirt and was eliminating the wrinkles in them, so that he would embrace me.

I asked Soné – during my birth, there was someone in the room who was close to death, a young woman. I've heard that this is a bad sign. Am I going to die young, or is this just meaningless superstition?

She did not respond, but she mentioned some of the signs that death is close – the nose gets sharper, the face grows indescribably beautiful, if the person is ill then he or she grows more active and the mood improves.

She said, they hated me at home when we were young girls. I saw my sister one morning and was left open-mouthed. She had grown so pretty, her face was shining, and she was giggling, constantly joking and prancing about. She was happy, she was going to be engaged soon to a boy she loved, but I saw an unusual luminosity in her. I told my mother that my sister had grown extremely beautiful that day. My mother cried – my parents knew about by unusual gift. My father locked me up in the cellar that day and said, I don't want to hear you say anything ever again… My sister did not find out, but she had sensed something; when my mother started feeding her with honey, combing her hair and kissing her more frequently, she no longer had any doubt. I kept avoiding her, but she chased me constantly so that she could ask me again – is something bad going to happen? I would say no, I don't know what you're talking about, leave me alone. We buried her two weeks later. Death can also be infectious, it can transmit from one person to the other, like all other kinds of pain, and my mother went to great lengths to take the curse upon herself.

When we left her place, Soné gave us some honey and gifted us a comb, she caressed Evelina's hair and, referring to me, she said, let him comb your hair sometimes, it's a sign of love. Evelina winked at me, messed up her hair and gave me the comb, then she laughed and said, it'll be all tangled up by the time we get to town, then you can comb it.

I accept and carry death with me everywhere so that I can study it closely.

The dead or dying that I had met briefly would leave only little details behind, mostly everyday actions. Like how the water would flow out of the corners of their mouths when they took a drink, or how the contents would drip from the bottom of their cup onto their forehead. Some of the people from the same generation recall these things and even they remember them only once in their lives. I would see

many of them often in dreams and notice how only that one action, that one gesture, remained – a slight twitch of bending down or straightening up, that's all.

Sometimes, I cling to Evelina like a madman so that she is careful and stays far from the traps laid by death, because everyone I know says that she's very pretty. She shaves off half of her hair in such a way that the other half falls across and covers the bald patch – this is to ward off death, she says. I like it; what matters is that it calms me down, and I can focus once again on myself.

She says, one day, I'm going to stare at one of your lively eyes for hours and talk to them, play with them. You won't know it, but they will see, laugh and have fun. You will feel that your eyes are rolling me about, picking me up, balancing me, turning me upside down and giggling like a child. You won't understand why your eyes are so happy and I won't tell you, it will be my little secret.

I take a picture of my face every day and stare into the mirror the next day, the photo from the previous day in my hand, trying to spot any obvious differences, so that I can tie up any loose ends.

The photo from yesterday in my hand, I rush to see Evelina, so that we can go from village to village and listen to the elders speak; their heads have squeezed out some valuable words from life. They are like wet bodies – you can't see anything while they're still in the sea but, as they age, they step ashore and the large number of drops on them becomes visible.

She turns her head in the distance as if to say, see? As long as this bald patch remains, we have no need to fear death. I come closer – her small nose, her cheeks, her face, her lips, her eyes… she has grown strangely beautiful. Stunned, I look around and see Soné sitting on a park bench close by, watching her from behind a crumpled newspaper. I am curious to know who has told her.

I grab Evelina's head and mess up her hair, smudge her lipstick on her face, bite her cheek, hurting her; I try to make her ugly to drive death away, I even run my fingers across the knife in my pocket with the intention of making small scratches on her face and ruining it. Her eyes well up and, upset, she tears herself away from me and runs away.

I no longer look at Soné, I have to catch up with Evelina, feed her some honey and comb her hair, so that I can drive death out of her body and into mine.

~ Levon Shahnur

"Noir" ~ Carter Nicklaus

NIGHT, IN FLUX

after Judith Fox's In Flux photography collection
Every punctured hole is a secret. Every secret
is a locked door. Every locked door is attempt

to fall asleep but waking without
your smile from the martini drank
too late at night. Glitter of lights.

An entire world is flowing
like ocean currents cold and impossible
Every mouth learns to guard its open

gap with knobs painted over red gentle
good-natured. There is a portrait of you

like all portraits of you had no idea
existed. Every paper is peeled revealing
another. Every silence is measuring

distance between these nights. A knocking
outside. You place one hand over the other.

~ Helen Chen

I COULD HAVE LOVED YOU

But paths were trodden, worn out
The land in a fearsome drought

Doors opened too late
The falcon
Burned at the stake
Eyes did not rise
My glance
Met not your guise

My inward eye
Roamed free
But even it could not see

Hearts go on forever
Catch me unaware
In a faraway stalemate

Perhaps
Next time

A contender

~ Amanda Dawson

CANOPY

Spanish moss
curtains
glow
like tinsel on
these live oaks
you feel
ten degrees cooler here
but for all you know
this web
of dark branches
might really be
the crackled glaze
on some priceless
blue shard of sky

~ Madeleine French

"Peacocks" ~ Saul Villegas

MY HEART AND YOUR OCEAN

I've always admired the ocean
it's unwavering beauty
in which I'm reminded of you
for I see you in all of the beautiful parts of the world
your essence is present in my mind
like the tide of the ocean
through the waves of your memory
the ones that threaten to take me down
threaten to crush me in all of its turmoil
the wave that faintly leaves,
and gravely returns,
returns to my mind and spirit
I fear I cannot control it
for my heart is the moon
and my mind is the shore
and my heart keeps you coming back to me
like how the moon controls the tide
the beating of my heart ensures that your memory will return to me
your memory eternally tied to my lifeline
my viable heart proves I'm alive
proves you are in my thoughts
proves, and promises that you are still connected to me
tethered to me like my heart and my mortality
like the moon and its everlasting tide

I wish my heart would stop.

~ Natalie Olmos

ON PAIN & PROMISE; THE PHYSICAL & MENTAL

Last night, I dreamt about Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." The dream - not so peacefully - coexisted with the gnawing in my stomach. If I hadn't had so many "bad" nights before, I would be able to say, with confidence, that this was the "worst night of my life". They don't tell you about what can happen, mentally, when your body betrays you over and over again; when the vessel that's supposed to sustain us seems to be maniacally working against us, plotting and scheming about new ways to fuck us over. They don't tell you that existing with physical pain is almost worse on your mind than it is on your body. To be at odds with your body, to view it as a space that is no longer safe for you; the feeling that you must run from your body before it gets to you - before it corners you and beats you down - I find to be incredibly detrimental.

When you're sick, something strange happens to your natural ability to process the rational and ignore the irrational. Illness clouds the brain, and the delusion that accompanies us during the night distorts it even further. Last night I awoke from my dream, thinking to myself,

"Am I turning into an insect?"

"No, that only happens when Kafka puts pen to paper."

"But, what if I am? It feels like I am."

"Just roll over."

"I've already tried."

"Try again."

"I can't."

When illness is recurring, it feels like the trauma that your body goes through funnels all logic from your mind. It's stored somewhere out of your reach, just until you're better. Suddenly, your brain is clouding up the inside of a mason jar as it sits on a shelf that slides further up the wall the higher you jump. You recover, feeling better the next day, and feeling better the day after that. Finally, logical thought is given back to you - only in less and less amounts each time. The pain I dealt with planted a deep seed of paranoia in my core. Afraid to eat, afraid to leave the house, afraid. I had to microdose normalcy into my life again in order to revert back to who I was before.

Now, what do I do with this? I'm better now, and I hope not to get "bad" again, to prevent losing my mind. Fortunately for some people - healthy people, maybe - the mental and physical inform one another. Unfortunately enough for me, the mental and physical inform one another. I wouldn't consider myself "unhealthy" at this point in time, but they say there is always room for improvement. Although, what good does the promise of improvement do when the earth starts to quake, the jar rattles off the shelf, and the lid pops open? When the brain falls onto the ground, squished up against the corner, dust collecting in its crevices, and nobody notices? And in the event that the jar breaks, will you need to remove the shards of glass that

jut out the surface of the pink, fleshy matter? Perhaps it goes unnoticed because it's assumed, that because the physical informs the mental and vice versa, they have tied in the race against each other. But what happens when, not only does the hare take a break, but the tortoise chooses to rest too? Surely, the tortoise and the hare feel different versions of renewal after a rest. Surely, one will still have an advantage over the other. But will slow and steady always win the race? It's hard to tell.

I aim to explore the terribly negative sensation that lies in the territory of taking care of yourself when you're ill. Sometimes, I think my mind refuses to communicate with my body. It's when I follow through with the physical upkeep that my brain laughs in my face, and I find myself hugely confused. In a world where you're told that eating right and exercising will absolve your sins, pay your bills, relieve your student debt, refill your gas tank, and that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life, is there not a tremendous amount of pressure when none of the above actually happens? We go to immense lengths to avoid things like pain, but somehow, it remains the unavoidable price we must pay for simply being alive.

Aside from finding mortal ways to avoid or deal with such an immortal experience as physical or mental pain, there comes the promise to do even better. I believe that humans have an innate desire to strive for betterment. This is less because we want the best for ourselves, and more because we are chronically unsatisfied. However, without meaning to be so negative, it's difficult for me to understand the attainability of bettering oneself - it's difficult not to perceive it as a myth. Can you *really* better yourself? And what does it take to do this? Avoiding illness? Taking probiotics? Improving gut health? Doing yoga? Drinking fermented tea? Meditation? *Going to therapy?* Hiring someone to clean the dust out of the crevices of your brain? Using metal tongs to pick out the fragments of glass? Taking a rest underneath the tree, only to wake up and still lose the race? Filling your gas tank? Relieving your student debt? Paying your bills? Eating right? Underneath it all, doesn't a supercut of all your past experiences, happy or sad, still penetrate? Won't you still have Kafkaesque dreams? Won't you still have "bad" nights? If I grab a ladder to reach the jar, is it a loophole or is it a solution? How do you cope? How do you sleep? How do you grieve? Who do you call? And why do they pick up? How do you fix it? And what is it that needs to be fixed? Is it all up to me to figure out?

Dealing with the connection between mental and physical health raises intrusive thoughts that may never be absolved; it raises questions that we may not be able to answer for as long as we live because the answers themselves are in a constant cycle of change, and because life itself lacks permanency. I wonder if the only gateway to growth and change is painful experiences - like stomach aches, or heartbreak, or depression. I wonder if we *have* to know bad in order to know good, or if that's simply a word-of-mouth cliché that we tell ourselves in order to feel better about our suffering. Something that often intimidates me, but simultaneously comforts me, is the thought that the only thing that never changes, is the fact that we

constantly change. If my middle-of-the-night subconscious transformations into a human-sized insect was due to my stomach ache, then this must mean that pain is the catalyst of transformation.

My fear is that the mental and physical may never catch up to each other, just as the tortoise and the hare's fate remains the same in every rendition of the story. But I look for solace in the finish line. What comforts me, is an image of the hare that exists only in my mind. Upon finishing his race, he waits for the tortoise. Despite not knowing how long it will take, he waits. It could be hours, or it could be years, but never does it cross his mind to leave. I hope that he receives the tortoise on his hind legs, jumping up and down with congratulatory praise. I imagine that the tortoise arrives tired and confused.

"Why would you wait for me?"

"I had no other option."

~ Layal Dahi

I WRITE

in the shower
draft lines
in fingertip on steam
or shedding hair
against the tiles
dripping poems down glass

in the neighborhood
I walk with my best friend
she points at a northern bluebird
says *That is a poem*
and we promise each other
to remember brilliance

in the car
I pull to the shoulder
on I-215 south
scribble down thoughts
decapitated palm trees
slouching towards Phoenix

in bed
I wake at midnight
text myself dreams
of losing all my teeth
flying through orchards
speaking with the dead

I forget more poetry
than I will ever write,
chase genius to vapor

~ Aruni Wijesinghe

"Untitled Digital Study" ~ Jonathan Ceniceros

WORLD RECORDS

"Idaho man passes 60 pounds between his hands
100 times in 17.53 seconds"- Ben Hooper, UPI

She loads her ten thousandth plate in the dishwasher.

He adds another sheet to the office expenses spreadsheet
for the thirty-seventh time in the past six years.

The quarterback has his twenty-fifth daydream of victory
while staring out the sophomore Spanish class window.

The bookworm invites her first lover up to her Soho flat.

The husband accompanies his wife to Lamaze class
for the seventh time in nine years.

Another acolyte of numbers, Idaho Man worships by setting
a new world record, his hands a blur as he passes the weight
back and forth, aging with every transfer

much like the giggling infant son the househusband
will toss in the air more often than any father in history

or the preacher who has sent so many souls to heaven that
when he's blue he wanders the graveyard counting them

or Ringo Starr who at eighty-two still hammers the drums
in four/four time

or the eight-year-old who takes over the water taxi
his father has abandoned, bringing home ninety pisos a day.

Numbers suffuse the air around us like fireflies, alluring

beauty we don't recognize as a countdown until it's too late.
Even this poem runs out of time in five four three two one.

~ Tom Barlow

Jimeno didn't get it. Stephanie said there was a resemblance. "You and Carmen look so much alike." They were siblings—Carmen was three years older. Yet, despite their biology, Jimeno didn't see a single feature that he shared with bigmouthed Carmen. She was *too much*—too loud, too bratty, and too annoying. He wished she were less—less loud, less bratty, less annoying—*less* everything.

It didn't help that Carmen was also responsible for Jimeno's silly nickname. Jimeno was a picky baby. He rarely ever ate, refusing his mom's cooking, snacks—even milk. The one thing Jimeno seemed to like—no, *love*, was juice—apple juice specifically. Jimeno always asked for juice, or *jugo*. He asked for it so often that one day, Carmen called the picky boy *Jugito.*

The name stuck ever since.

At twelve years old, a seventh grader in middle school, Jimeno remained Jugito.

He had to admit not *everything* about Carmen was terrible. Jimeno had his sister to thank for one thing—one person. Stephanie Perez.

Stephanie had been Carmen's best friend since elementary and her complete opposite. Whereas Carmen was loud, Stephanie was soft-spoken; whereas Carmen was rude, Stephanie was sweet. She was kind—pretty too and held Jimeno's heart. She was his first and only crush.

Jimeno was used to Stephanie. Technically, he had known Stephanie just as long as Carmen. At some point, they even went to the same school. Jimeno, who always walked home with Carmen and Stephanie, always offered to carry her books.

And in turn, Stephanie would treat him to an ice cream or soda. That's just how Stephanie was—*nice*, an angel in Jimeno's eyes. She always checked on Jimeno—asking how school was, congratulating him when he got good grades, and offering to tutor him when he needed help. It seemed that Stephanie always knew whenever Jugito was having a bad day. "Cheer up, Jugito," she'd say, and her lips would curve into a delicate smile, and suddenly, Jimeno's heart would race, and his bad mood would disappear.

He tried to keep his crush a secret, knowing Carmen would hold it over him and never let it go. However, like all secrets kept from siblings, the truth came out.

One day Carmen was teasing Jugito. "I see you have a crush on the new girl. What's her name?"

"Cállate, Carmen!"

"Come on! Tell me her name. Tu noviaaaaaa—"

"I don't like *her*! I *like* Stephanie!"

"Wait—what? Jugito…"

"We're going to get married! And you're not invited to the wedding!"

And with his face bright red, Jimeno ran away from Carmen. He felt bold—adrenaline rushing in his blood, and everything felt right. But then everything

felt wrong. Jimeno felt just as small as he did big. Shaky—terrified of his crush getting out—scared of rejection and a horrible outcome that resulted in his heart shattered and obsolete, worry-filled Jimeno. What if Carmen told Stephanie his feelings—outed his love? No—No—No. That wasn't romantic at all! Only he could tell Stephanie—*no one else*.

Jugito faced his biggest crisis at only ten years old.

But the years passed, and, as far as Jimeno knew, Carmen never told—he figured that must have been the case because Stephanie never treated him differently. Surely, she would have brought it to his attention if she had known. Therefore, Jimeno felt confident, knowing he still had all the time he needed to tell Stephanie his feelings the right way. He could write a song but first needed to learn how to play guitar. He knew Stephanie liked music with how often she and Carmen would listen to music—locked in Carmen's room. If music wasn't a good plan, Jimeno also thought he could write a poem—after all, Spanish was the most romantic language. He caught Stephanie smile and giggle at the notes Carmen wrote her in class—though he never read a single one. He figured he could slip a letter in Stephanie's bag. Then, it would be *his* words making her smile.

Jimeno had yet to turn thirteen when his plan came to ruin.

Jimeno walked home with his sister and, of course, Stephanie. It was their usual routine. He stood, sandwiched between the girls as they gossiped about the latest high school drama. Though he said nothing, Jimeno was jealous of Carmen—who got to go to school and have every class with Stephanie. His world and theirs were separated, and so long as he was still in middle school—still just a kid, that would always be the case.

As Jimeno frowned, thinking to himself and his qualms, sweet Stephanie leaned forward, boring her beautiful eyes into the boy, recognizing something amiss.

"Hey, Jugito, what's wrong?"

"H-Huh?" Jimeno always got flustered when Stephanie unexpectedly looked his way. He always tried and failed to act cool. "Nothing. I just wish I was in high school with you—"

"Trust me, it's not that great," his sister added, annoyed, but Jimeno ignored her, his focus solely on Stephanie.

"Well, I can't wait for Jugito to be in school with us."

Jimeno couldn't help but smile. When he was with Stephanie, Jimeno couldn't seem to lie. But, when it came to Carmen—yeah, he could easily ignore her.

When they arrived home, Jimeno was sentenced to banishment—unable to enter his sister's room. He shouted as Carmen shut a door in his face claiming to have a project to work on with Stephanie. Jimeno was used to being excluded from his sister's room—though, oddly, that day, he was more peeved than usual. Maybe it had to do with a sudden restlessness that began to take over.

Alone in the hall, Jimeno wondered how much longer he could survive, keeping such a secret hidden in his chest.

Alone in his room, Jimeno lay on his bed, his phone in hand. He wondered exactly *how* busy high school girls were. Every few minutes, he turned his head to his door, thinking about Stephanie, who was close by. He knew he couldn't be clingy—women didn't like clingy men. But Carmen? She was lucky—she could be with Stephanie for as long as she wanted, and it wasn't weird.

After half an hour, Jimeno's phone alerted him. "Low power…" he groaned and promptly looked for his charger. He looked and looked some more, but his charger was neither plugged in, in his drawer, nor under his bed.

Jimeno realized that his charger was nowhere to be found. However, he quickly realized where it was and who was to blame. Siblings—they always took everything and never asked.

The boy sighed and marched out of his room and towards his sister's. Siblings—they never knocked before entering another sibling's room.

Without thinking about his sister's privacy, only focusing on his stolen item, Jimeno barged into Carmen's room. He threw the door open, his phone in hand.

"Carmen! I know you took—"

But he never finished what he had to say. Suddenly, what Jimeno thought was important one second no longer had any meaning the next.

Shocked—frozen in place, Jimeno was trapped between the door and his sister. He saw Carmen and Stephanie on the floor, their papers and pens scattered around. The girls were always exceptionally close—braiding hair, making bracelets, lying on each other as they watched a movie—but Jimeno had never caught anything else—nothing as close and intimate as a kiss.

Yes—Jimeno was sure of it—he *caught* his sister and his crush—kissing on the floor. *Kissing*, as in lip against lip—their hair tangled together, their fingers locked as one—their lips…their lips… Stephanie's lips were on his sister's.

He screamed, caught off guard, and the girls separated, rattled.

"Jugito!" cried Carmen, her voice raspy as if she couldn't speak.

"I thought you said the door was locked…."

Jimeno stood still. Just what was he looking at!? His body reacted before his mind, and his face flared a bright red shade. He stepped back with a jolt.

He pointed a finger at his sister. He pointed at her accusingly like a man would a woman before naming her a witch.

Carmen looked at Jimeno, her eyes wide—for once, her guard dropped, and her confidence gone. She looked like a stranger, startled and anxious.

"Jugito—hold on!"

Quickly, Jimeno watched as his sister moved away from Stephanie. Her hair fell over her chest; her pigtails meshed into one blob of hair. She separated herself from Stephanie as Stephanie looked away, her eyes on the ground and her entire body still. They both acted as if their lips weren't pressed together a moment before.

But Jimeno knew—well, he didn't know anything—but he had a feeling—and it wasn't good.

"Y-You…You…You…" His voice and his fingers rattled, unable to target Carmen.

He felt lightheaded—his heart raced, his head throbbed, and his stomach ached as his insides turned. But Jimeno was *fine*.

He watched as his sister quickly approached him, stomping on the ground and shaking the world.

As kids Jimeno and his sister were rowdy and fierce—always getting into fights and blaming the other for starting things. When Jimeno would pull on Carmen's hair, Carmen would stretch his ears. When Jimeno would throw Carmen a pillow, Carmen would wrestle him to the ground. When one kicked, the other threw a punch. Every fight always ended with the two of them on the floor.

Jimeno's initial shock at the scene he saw momentarily disappeared as he watched Carmen charge his way.

Jimeno retaliated, "I saw it! You two—you kissed!"

He saw Stephanie, still on the floor, acting docile compared to Carmen, who grabbed hold of Jimeno and pushed him out of her bedroom.

"No—you didn't."

"Then what did I see?!"

"It's nothing! *Nothing.*"

But Jimeno clung to his sister, keeping her from closing the door on him. He looked up at Carmen, pleading for an answer to the scene—wanting his questions answered and not dismissed.

"Are you—?" but he stopped, unable to think further on his accusation.

Instead of looking for answers from his sister, Jimeno turned to Stephanie. "Steph!" He worked up the courage to ask, his voice booming from the tension rising in his body, "Is Carmen gay?"

He then watched as Stephanie turned his way. She gave a soft expression—a little flustered but neither frightened nor enraged by the accusation.

But Carmen kept Jimeno from prying further. "Jimeno!" he flinched. Carmen rarely ever called him *Jimeno*.

He stood in front of his sister, rattled by the sharpness in her voice. Silence hung over the two, and for a moment, Jimeno thought that he would be forced to stand under his sister's doorframe forever, always kept away by an inch.

When his sister finally spoke, Jimeno couldn't look her in the eye. Her words barely reached his ears.

"Jimeno…please… don't say anything."

When he didn't respond, his sister forced him to. "Jimeno!"

Heated—feeling lied to—feeling tricked, Jimeno shot a look at his sister. "Who are you?" he questioned.

He didn't think about his sister's feelings, only his own. He continued to think about himself and added, "Good luck telling Má."

Before either his sister or Stephanie could react, Jimeno ran. He sprinted away from his sister—away from the girl he loved—and away from the truth

because, if Jimeno could successfully outrun the truth, he thought he could pretend that everything was alright.

* * *

A strange change came over Jimeno. He couldn't see Carmen the same as before. So, he avoided her every chance he got—at home, before, and after school. His mom didn't think much of it; they were always fighting—except this wasn't a fight.

Jimeno wasn't exactly sure *what* he felt. It wasn't anger but another strong emotion—that much he was certain.

Carmen didn't bother getting Jimeno's attention either, seeming to know, maybe even understand, why her brother avoided her. Still, Jimeno was a little surprised. Her annoying tendencies just stopped.

He could feel her stare but never met it.

Ignore her, he thought. *Ignore her*, he told himself. And ignore her; he did.

Consequentially, distancing himself from Carmen also meant distancing himself from Stephanie. Despite his feelings for the girl, Jimeno didn't want to see Stephanie either.

Therefore, before school, Jimeno made sure to leave early in the morning, before Stephanie arrived at their house—before either she or his sister could catch him. And when he arrived home, he locked his door and hid in his bedroom, using homework as an excuse to keep the girls away. But through the walls, he could hear them.

Alone in his room, Jimeno pushed himself into a corner. He fell into a self-deprecating state, grumbling in the dark, "It's unfair. Why do they get to act as if nothing happened."

Something happened, and only Jimeno seemed to care.

An entire week passed, and Jimeno wasn't any closer to closing the distance between him and Carmen. That scene lingered in his mind, his sister hiding a secret bigger than he could keep.

A big thought lingered in his mind—he should tell someone, right?

Jimeno hadn't come to a conclusion. Before he knew it, he was caught by the girl he least expected and forced to face what he refused to.

Like he had been doing for days, Jimeno walked home alone. He lingered around the city, walking downtown and avoiding going home immediately. Downtown wasn't what it used to be—all the character, the love of its people, and all the vendors were gone leaving behind empty stores and venues. Jimeno remembered how boisterous downtown used to be—*El Centro*, that's what they called it. There used to be a merry-go-round back then, and he'd always beg Carmen to take him. She'd say it was for babies—but she'd still take him and even join on a white horse. He knew she secretly loved it. But there was no more merry-go-round.

Jimeno faced the fact that his childhood was over.

"Jugito."

The boy froze. He thought he was alone with his nostalgia.

He could recognize her voice anywhere. When he turned around, Jimeno saw Stephanie, her school bag clutched to her side.

"Hey, Jimeno," Stephanie waved elegantly, like a princess.

The boy felt his stomach tighten. He stared up, awed by Stephanie's sudden appearance. Then, his cheeks brightened—his feelings having yet to disappear.

"Stephanie! I—" he had no words to share, at least, nothing that made sense. Fortunately, Stephanie had something to say.

"Can we talk?"

The next thing Jimeno knew, he was seated on a bench downtown, along with Stephanie. He could see their reflections across the street, stuck in the window of an abandoned shop. Compared to Stephanie, Jimeno looked like a child. Nobody was nearby, but he wondered, if someone passed them, what would they look like to them? Friends? Siblings? The thought only made Jimeno feel even smaller than he already was.

Jimeno looked away, his eyes burning. He couldn't look Stephanie in the eye—he refused to. Because, if he looked at her, as vulnerable and insecure as he was, he'd fall apart. And, if he came undone in front of the girl he liked or thought he did, then every piece of him would be revealed, leaving nothing to feign. Then, Stephanie would know how weak he was.

"It's not right…" he finally spoke but lacked any resolve in his voice.

"What is?"

Jimeno's face swirled, a mixture of red. "W—What is!? My sister kissing—"

He stopped and lowered his voice despite nobody being nearby. "What you and Carmen did—isn't normal. Y—You shouldn't have let Carmen—"

"And, what if I did it?"

Jimeno didn't like that response. It made him see Stephanie differently. And he wasn't ready for that change.

Carmen was one thing—she was his sister. But Stephanie…Could he accept it?

"Why Carmen?" questioned the boy as he shrunk in his seat. He really wanted to say, "Why Carmen and not me?" He wanted to know if he ever had a chance or if it was always Carmen.

To Jimeno's surprise, Stephanie paused. Then a small smile formed, catching the boy's attention—making sure he noticed how the thought of Carmen made her smile.

"Well, you know, me and Carmen have always been best friends—"

"Yeah, that's *all* I thought you were."

Stephanie's smile didn't fade, though a part of her looked sad, and Jimeno felt a tight squeeze around his heart. After that, he decided to keep his mouth shut to avoid making Stephanie sad again.

"Oh, Jugito, feelings are much more complicated than you know. If you're confused, imagine how I felt or how Carmen felt. You can blame me all you want if you think I'm stealing away your sister; just know that our feelings are mutual. I didn't force anything on Carmen, and she didn't force anything on me. It just happened one day. I couldn't hide it anymore—how much she made me happy. So, I told her. I squeezed her hand so tightly I bet it must have hurt. I thought it might be the last time I held her before she saw me as…different. But, when I waited for—I don't know, rejection, I guess, Carmen squeezed my hand back."

Stephanie stared down at her hand; her eyes were as delicate as her smile. Jimeno never felt further away from Stephanie than in that moment—knowing she wasn't actually by his side and was instead transported to the moment she described.

And *that* was the moment Jimeno knew he had lost Stephanie, who was so in love with Carmen. She didn't even have to say a word.

"That looked like a lot more than just holding hands," Jimeno said, a little bitter.

Stephanie chuckled as light as a fairy. "You're right. I'm sorry you had to see that. You're at that age where kissing is gross—"

"Two girls kissing is gross," corrected Jimeno. And, though he felt Stephanie's eyes on him, he refused to look.

"Do you think so?" asked Stephanie calmly.

"Y-Yes!" Jimeno shut his eyes and shouted, thinking if he looked away from Stephanie, his words would somehow become more resolute—it didn't.

"Jugito."

Stephanie's voice blew like wind in Jimeno's ears, making him shiver. Then, he felt her hand over his and jolted from the touch. Jimeno was forced to look at Stephanie, his eyes wide, filled with fear.

"Jugito…" and he focused on her lips. "Do you *really* believe that?"

But Jimeno didn't have an answer. He didn't want to think about something he thought was too complicated and had nothing to do with him. He knew it would be easier to think about what everyone else did. But when Stephanie questioned him, he questioned himself.

"It's a bad thing…" he wished he sounded more convincing. "It's a bad thing that I know, isn't it? Aren't you afraid that I'll tell?"

"Tell who?" Stephanie asked innocently. The smile that Jimeno always fawn over suddenly sent a shiver down his spine. Vulnerable, faced with Stephanie's resolve, Jimeno struggled to break away.

"E-Everyone! My mom—your parents! Aren't you scared? Aren't you worried?"

Jimeno knew because he learned from his mom that being gay was bad—so Carmen couldn't be gay. And Stephanie's parents must have felt the same way;

otherwise, the girls wouldn't have kept it a secret, but they did. Yet, Stephanie didn't flinch at Jimeno's words.

He wondered—was he powerless? Did Stephanie think so lowly of him that his words held little threat?

However, that wasn't the case.

Slowly, Stephanie shook her head. "I am worried, you know. My parents, I know what they'll say. I wish they were open-minded, and maybe someday they will be."

"Then—"

However, Stephanie hadn't finished talking. "Jugito, I know you wouldn't do it."

"Huh?"

"Jugito, you wouldn't tell. I trust you," and that was the only rationale Stephanie had. Her confidence came from her trust in Jimeno.

"You're like my little brother. I know how much you love Carmen, and I hope you love me too—because I love you, Jugito. And I love Carmen. And I want to keep her safe. Don't you?"

And it was at *that* moment Jimeno knew that he didn't lose Stephanie because he *never* had her to lose. While he looked at her as the apple of his eye—his angel that could do no wrong, Stephanie saw Jimeno as a boy—a brother. She loved him—finally, she said the words he always wanted to hear.

"I love you," but it wasn't the confession he dreamt up.

Jimeno was conflicted, not because he finally heard what he always wanted, but because he felt he didn't deserve it—not Stephanie's love and definitely not her trust.

"…Jugito?" questioned Stephanie, her voice as caring and sweet as usual.

"It's not fair…" quivered Jimeno. He reached for his eyes, twisted in pain—strained from holding in his ugly tears.

"It's not fair…" he repeated and hung his head, close to tears.

"I'm sorry, Jimeno."

The girl's angelic voice only broke the boy more—because he knew she had nothing to apologize for. He was acting selfish—making himself the main character of her story.

"I wish I didn't know…" he told the girl who he had kept in his heart for many years.

"Well, I'm glad you do."

* * *

The next day, Jimeno went to school as normal. He didn't retain any lessons he learned—he couldn't even remember what he had for lunch. All Jugito could think about was his conversation with Stephanie.

He couldn't hide from Carmen anymore—well, he could, but he didn't want to. But he still didn't know what to say. What could he say?

Jimeno let the various thoughts crowd his brain as he left school. Outside the school gate, Jimeno stopped, spotting a group of students blocking his path. It was a few boys from his grade, bullies—kids he didn't really talk to. And, in the center of the bullies was another kid, Marc, to whom he rarely spoke.

The boys seemed to say a few things to Marc, made faces his way, and pushed him around before they ran off, laughing—likely running off before anyone could report them for bullying.

Marc Cruz was Jimeno's classmate. He was just like everyone else at school who knew him as Jimeno and not *Jugito*. Though Marc likely didn't know anything about Jimeno, Jimeno knew Marc—who the kids spread rumors about, calling him gay.

Jimeno wasn't exactly sure *why* the kids called Marc gay. They said he *looked* gay—but Marc looked like anybody else.

He wore the same uniform as everyone else and wore black sneakers like Jimeno—was it the beauty mark under his eye that made him gay—but Carlos Sandoval also had a beauty mark, and he wasn't gay—or maybe it was the fact that he combed his hair to the side that made him gay—but John Ortega also combed his hair. And Marc Cruz was nothing like his sister—who maybe was or was not gay—nor did he look like Stephanie, who maybe was or was not gay.

Ah, Jimeno understood. The boys in his school were full of shit. Maybe all boys were.

Thinking about his conversation with Stephanie, thinking about Carmen, and the fact that he had no one to walk home with, Jugito raced over to Marc after the rest of the boys had dispersed.

"Hey!" He saw Marc flinch and decided to lower his voice. "Hey, Marc," he added, trying to sound casual.

Immediately, Marc was suspicious. He tugged on his backpack as if ready to ditch Jimeno. "Hey?" he questioned.

"I got that new fighting game that just came out…So…" he could see Marc's confusion and felt his cheeks flush. "So—I was wondering if you wanted to come over and play?"

Jimeno wondered what exactly was he doing inviting Marc to hang out—Marc, who wasn't his friend. When he saw the boy's apprehension, his cheeks only grew hotter.

"If you can't come—that's okay too…."

Marc looked around, inspecting the area. "No, I can come. But are you sure? We've never hung out before."

Hearing Marc say what Jugito already thought made the boy annoyed. Making friends was hard! "¿A quién le importa?"

Jugito started to walk. "Are you coming or not?"

* * *

Together, the boys walked to Jimeno's home on the far end of the road, passing the empty lots, the street vendors, and the rows of apartments. However, not wanting to run into his sister and Stephanie accidentally, Jimeno decided to take Marc down a "shortcut," though it ended up being a longer walk.

Jimeno pulled up a loose piece of a wired fence and called for Marc. He had taken the shortcut with Carmen and Stephanie before—back when they used to get into trouble together and not apart—when they used to be a team. Now, they just kept secrets from Jimeno—well, one secret was revealed.

At first, the boys were quiet. Jimeno wasn't sure if Marc had anything on his mind, but he did and couldn't stop thinking about it. So, without warning, Jimeno cleared his throat, then, boldly, without thinking about Marc's feelings, he asked, "Hey, so about those rumors—"

"I knew it!" Marc snapped at Jimeno, staring him down, looking frustrated and hurt. "You didn't want to hang out. You just wanted to know!" Marc hugged the straps of his backpack. With a quick turn, he moved away from Jimeno, creating a wall between them.

"Well, they're not true! But…even if I say that…you wouldn't believe me—nobody does…even though it's the truth. I'm not gay."

He sounded more tired than he did frustrated.

"If you were…" began Jimeno, staring at the boy's back, wishing he could see his face, but spoke regardless. "If you were—I wouldn't care."

Moving like a revolving door, Marc turned to Jimeno, eyes wide. Then, he opened his mouth but stuttered, unable to respond.

Jimeno's cheeks flushed, realizing what he said, how it sounded, and how he was likely making Marc uncomfortable, which wasn't what he wanted to do at all—and was he making things worse?

"I-I'm not saying you are! But—uh, If you were, I wouldn't care."

He thought of saying more to save himself from the embarrassment and make Marc feel better. He thought of telling him about his sister—but stopped. No, he couldn't. It wasn't his place to say.

Marc stared at Jimeno; his brow raised. His body language was still defensive, but his initial shock slowly wore off.

"Are *you* gay?"

Jimeno blinked. "No. Are you?"

Then, Marc turned red. "I just said I wasn't!"

Jimeno awkwardly laughed and scratched the back of his head. The boys were quiet momentarily as they stood in the middle of the weed-filled lot. High in the sky, the sun still shone, peering down on their conversation, refusing to leave, glued to them like his mom watching her telenovelas.

Marc added, his voice small, "Even if I was…my mom wouldn't…I-I'm Christian…so…."

"Oh, I'm Catholic—well, my family is," added Jimeno. He always thought he was Catholic too—but maybe that too was something he didn't understand.

"Mm…"

Another moment of awkward silence hung over the boys. The sun's heat hit their backs and made Marc wiggle.

"So…" Jimeno gripped onto his backpack, same as Marc, "Are we still going to play video games at my place?"

Jimeno thought he spotted a small smile form on Marc's lips for a second. Not looking at Jimeno, he responded, "Yeah, duh."

"Cool."

And the two boys continued their walk, passing through the lot and back onto the sidewalk. But, Jimeno still had many things on his mind—questions that he felt he needed an answer—not for Marc's sake, but for his own.

He still had questions to ask. "So…Do you hate them?" His eyes on the ground, Jugito continued, "Gay people—no, I mean, people that are gay?" How else was he supposed to say it? He didn't know. It was dumb that he didn't know. "Cuz, you're Christian."

Mar shook his head. "No, my family is…." He didn't say that before. "And, I never said I hate them. I hate Carlos, and John, and Ray. People like Carlos, *they* hate gay people. And I don't want to be like him so…."

Jimeno could feel Marc's eyes on him—staring at him as closely as Stephanie—daunting.

"Do you? Do you hate them?"

The question seemed loaded—but it wasn't. And, once Jimeno realized that the question was easy to answer—because he only had two answers to choose from—because it wasn't as confusing as he initially thought—not when he thought about Stephanie, or Carmen, or himself—when the fog in his mind cleared, and he wasn't afraid to answer, Jimeno realized how easy the question was.

No, he didn't. "I never said that."

***

When they finally reached their destination, Jimeno felt as if they had walked for hours because, to Jimeno's surprise, the boys talked—a lot! After Jimeno asked his somewhat invasive questions, Marc continued the conversation. It was almost as if Jimeno's questions allowed Marc to open up despite seeming uncomfortable initially. The boys talked about many things thanks to Marc, like games, school, friends, and family. Jimeno learned that he and Marc had a lot in common—both had single moms and older siblings that constantly got on their nerves and a silly nickname.

"Jugito?" questioned Marc, and he didn't try to mask his laughter.

Sour, Jimeno was reminded why he never shared his nickname—and the only reason Stephanie knew was because of Carmen's big mouth! However, Marc surprised Jimeno, sharing a nickname of his own.

"At home, my family calls me Moomoo."

"Like a cow?" Jimeno questioned.

"Yeah—like a cow."

Jimeno laughed, but he quickly felt bad having been peeved at Marc a moment ago, mad at him for laughing—but then Marc laughed, and the boys were fine.

In front of his home, Jimeno felt intimidated. The single, mango-colored house was the only home Jimeno knew. It held many dear memories to the boy—even the bad ones seemed precious.

Jimeno stood on the pathway between the sidewalk and the entrance to his home. The black, gated door menacingly stared at Jimeno, daring him to step forward. When he took his first step, the door swung open, revealing his sister on the other side, having beat him to their home.

Jimeno stared at his sister. He realized they hadn't spoken much—because of him. Even then, as they stared at one another, a barrier seemed to separate them—but that wall was invisible—created by Jimeno. But why? He had nothing to protect himself from. So, why did Carmen, who was always loud and annoying, look at him with a gleam of fear in her eye?

Oh, Jimeno felt dumb—like the dumbest boy in the world.

Though he was younger than Carmen—and probably dumber too, that didn't give Jimeno an excuse to leave his sister, vulnerable and defenseless—and alone. He was her brother. He needed to protect her—and he failed at that.

Taking a breath, nervous and fearful that he could make a bigger mistake, Jimeno stepped forward. "Carmen, I—"

However, Carmen, who, as Jimeno claimed, was usually always attentive and boisterous, returned to her original demeanor. She stepped out onto the porch, stepping closer to the sun, and looked at her brother. "Hey! Jugito," she shouted. "What's this? You brought a friend?"

Jimeno froze. "Uh, is there a problem?"

He stared at his sister, confused by her sudden shift—or maybe, he imagined *that* too. Carmen seemed back to her usual self, but Jimeno still wasn't sure if he was back to his old self or if he was someone new.

"Look, Carmen, I—"

However, Carmen spoke over Jimeno louder than he ever could.

"Jugito *never* brings any friends home," she teased, looking at Marc rather than Jimeno.

"Carmen!" Jimeno glared at his sister, then sighed when he saw her mischievous smile.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't control his sister. He couldn't expect her to act sad when he thought she was sad, and he couldn't expect her to act mad when he thought she was mad. Because no matter how long the two had lived together, been siblings together—Jimeno would never fully understand his sister. Jimeno couldn't understand Carmen, not because she was different, but because *they* were different from each other. Carmen was jovial, while Jimeno was peeved. "Come on inside," she told the boys. "Me and Stephanie brought ice cream."

"S-Stephanie?"

Then, on cue, Stephanie popped her head out of the door, standing beside Carmen, a whole head taller than her. She smiled as gently and friendly as Jimeno remembered—tricking himself into thinking he hadn't seen her smile in so long. The girls stood side by side, the picture they formed both familiar yet different—because now Jimeno knew—and he couldn't pretend he didn't, but it didn't really matter.

The girls looked down at Jimeno, patiently waiting for him to respond—but not pressuring him to accept.

"Uh, are we going inside?" questioned Marc with a whisper.

Jimeno felt his heart race, almost forgetting about Marc for a second. He remembered what he told Marc about his sister, "She's constantly making decisions for me, embarrassing me, nagging me—it's like she's always there!"

It was annoying. *She* was annoying.

Jimeno looked at Carmen—her hair wasn't in her usual ponytails but was instead let down. Their hair was the same—dark brown that sometimes looked lighter under the sun, wavy, and sometimes hard to manage. They each had a few beauty marks passed down from their mom. *"Why are they called beauty marks when you're ugly*?" Jimeno once teased his sister. But was Carmen ugly? No, Jimeno didn't think so. She was his sister—and was annoying and was always next to Stephanie that Jimeno never had time to really think about it. But, at that moment, his sister was standing under the doorframe, greeting him home rather than their mom—who was always working; Jimeno thought Carmen looked rather pretty.

Of course, he didn't tell her since she was his sister.

And instead of confronting his sister or thanking her, Jimeno grabbed hold of Marc and walked through the door.

"Okay, well, me and Marc are going to play video games in my room," he said casually. He acted like he always did—not for his sake, but for Carmen's. He couldn't help but think that's what she wanted.

He listened to Carmen, who ranted to Stephanie, "Ugh! Can you believe that kid—didn't even say thank you!"

Stephanie chuckled, her smile catching Jimeno's eye. "He is *your* little brother," and caught Jimeno's gaze.

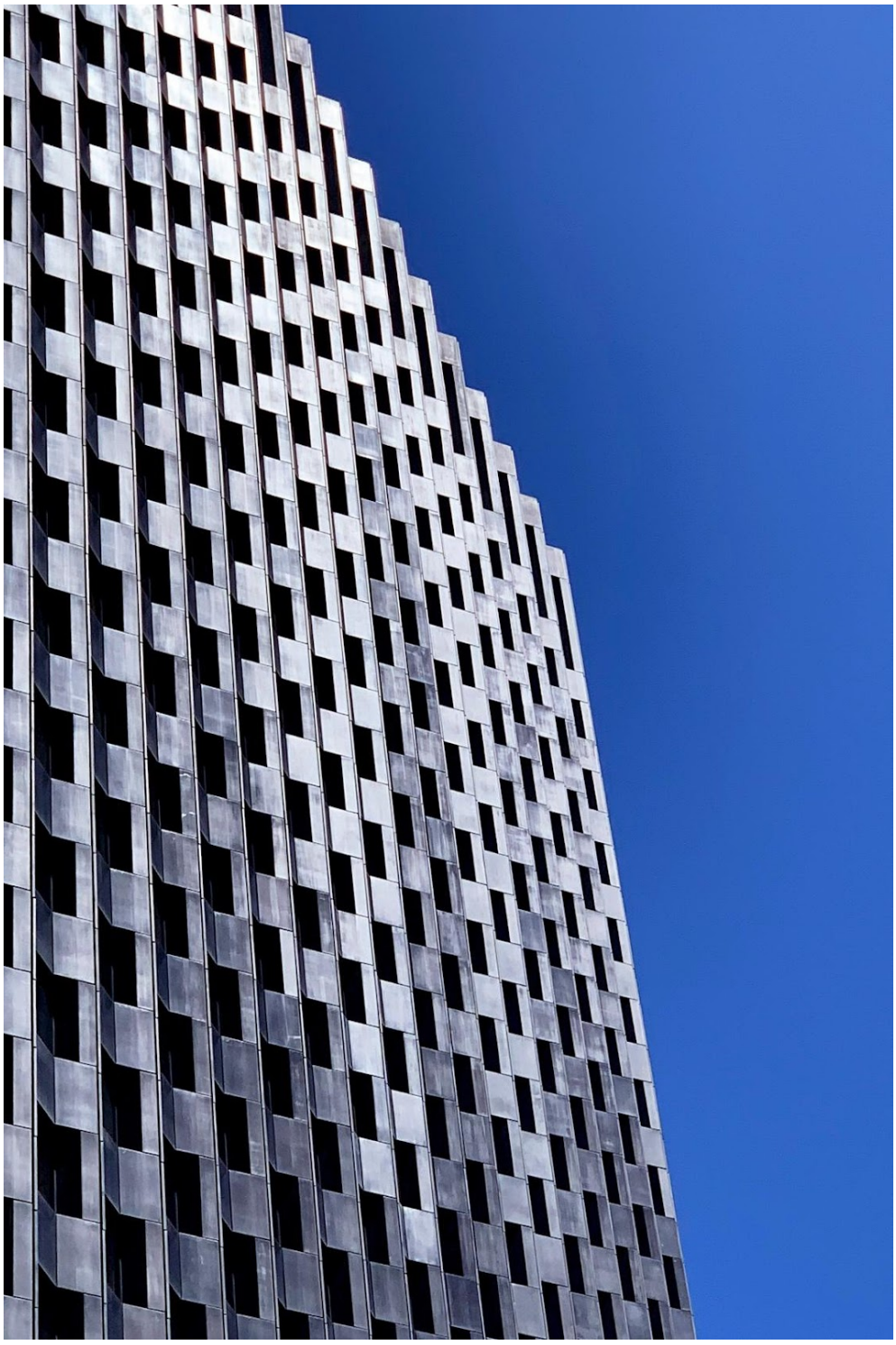
Their eyes met, but Jimeno didn't shy away. He acknowledged her—for the first time. His crush didn't disappear overnight. Honestly, Jimeno wasn't sure if he'd

ever get over Stephanie, his first love. But that wasn't Stephanie's problem to deal with.

Saying a prayer only he could hear, Jimeno said goodbye to his first love and wished her the best. He had nothing else to think about that day; he was going to play video games. Marc wouldn't know it, but he helped Jimeno deal with his first heartbreak that day. When he cried later that day, shocking Marc, who questioned what was wrong, he lied and said, "I'm mad that I lost. Guess I'm a sore loser."

"But you didn't lose—you won. You didn't lose."

~ Ash Mojica



"Infinity" ~ Maria Ermoshin

THE LAST SONGBIRD

Gone to history are the birds that sing,
mouths open wide to swallow the sun.
Pasting together pieces of lost time, as
daylight dissolves into night. As a child
I plucked feathers from my wounds /
wounds inflicted by the beast. A tangle
of limbs. Tender ligaments stretched
beyond capacity. I limped into a future
where hope did not exist. There I found
absolution from my sins. Pain could not
stop me from my quest.
I must find the last songbird!

~ Ann Christine Tabaka

PUZZLE PIECES

Internal chaos shifts through

this mis-matched puzzle
pieces of my life
Scattered across the board

I desperately try to align the end pieces
make sense of where I am
They look generic and I feel
out of sorts
These are not all mine
This is a void
Bereft of life
I envision
Something else
Something that is mine
Something that belongs to me

Frantically, I move the pieces again
I masquerade
as whole
but something is missing
I am far
from complete
This misery competes
day in
and day out
I start to drown
in my internal madness

I am reminded
I am not my true self
Another day
another hour
I move foreign pieces
around

An incomplete puzzle
stares back at me
a shattered reflection

Of my heart
mis-matched puzzle pieces
of me
My life
my soul

I am reminded
I'm still searching for who I ought to be
Who I want to be
in a society stripping away
My autonomy
    My freedoms

                I float
Rejected
        Searching
Yearning
for the missing piece
To let me just be me

~ Torie Basulto

"Femme Nue" ~ Torie Basulto

WAITING TO BE SEEN

i dreamt of this man
a strange crush
i must admit
far too little to emit
only cordial hellos
and goodbyes
of someone
who once caught my eye

i saw this man
of my dreams
his smirk
his playful laugh

as an abstract
of my desire
disquised
as my twin flame
oddly enough
i felt home
alive
or so it seemed
to be

everything felt so right
so real
the glimmer in his eye
the way
it
ran
down
my
spine
did the stars align?

i see his face everywhere I go
but he does not see
mine

two ships docked miles apart
this lucid dream
haunts and lingers
leaving my heart
on the front line
of a battlefield
hoping to be hit
by his smile

~ Torie Basulto

"Death of Venus" ~ Torie Basulto

A DREAM UNSTRANSLATED

at rest in chengdu
the sky a vaulted onyx
room full of flowers and yellow

pedals curl and fall—
spin like quarks

depart from the nomenclature
granite stature sheer and call

depart from the diminutive small—
small window in the closed dark
where kids run so up & fast
on fractures over glass—

elektron—

like a child you are
small and fundamental
you free solo the tournament of walls
which no axiom sustains or stalls

just dreaming aren't you

put the pillow down where you left it
by blurred images & markets
all ivory afterglow open in the fall

so small they could catch you
like hands here in the sea of
white faces & red lipstick
all uptick in recurring night

with no gravity at all
like paper cups on towers

~ Ryan David Leack

THE TREE

Eclipsed by reason, we seek refuge
in sycamore shade, broken stone
leading the way. We climb the trunk,
a vertiginous happiness—

late light and wind playing the leaves
where you and I catch each other in a game
of reciprocal glances.

Here, an exchange of silent speech
across and in between plateaus of intensity.
Only feeling. All possible truths
in all possible worlds, this lone branch
from which we hang, loosely.

Care in no concern. To fall here is
an inverted ascent, a geometry of release.

Rock, paper, scissors… shoot—
we shift shapes, sending smiles.
We can't lose.

Of all inverted altitudes,
we chase an interior horizon,
weigh each thing, jettison roots.

We send out a frisbee. It boomerangs back
with the wind. Find the right angle.
Send it to the October geese in the shape
of a 'V' in the burned, alchemical sky.

It may just take flight—
lead an ascensional life.

~ Ryan David Leack

BIOGRAPHIES

FRANCISCO AMARO

I derive immense joy from engaging in activities such as reading, watching movies, sharing laughter, and spending quality time with friends. Moreover, I am profoundly passionate about my community and strive to be an advocate for those who may not have a voice of their own. Being a High School English teacher is not just a profession for me; it is a deep dedication that I intend to pursue until my last breath. Outside of my professional life, I am accompanied by a beloved feline companion named Kafka, and on occasion, I indulge in my musical side by playing in a band with some of my best friends.

TOM BARLOW

Tom Barlow is an Ohio writer of novels, short stories and poetry whose work has appeared in many journals including Trampoline, Ekphrastic Review, Voicemail Poetry, Hobart, Tenemos, Redivider, The North Dakota Quarterly, The New York Quarterly, The Modern Poetry Quarterly, and many more. See tombarlowauthor.com.

TORIE BASULTO

Torie Basulto received her B.A. in Art History from Cal Poly Pomona. Currently, she is pursuing a dual master's degree in English Literature and Rhetoric and Composition at CPP. She is a self-taught artist and poet who loves exploring intersections between philosophy, art, culture, and literature. Torie began writing poetry at a young age as a creative outlet to deal with trauma and teen life. Painting has become an extension of exploration to test the boundaries of feminism, femininity, and public reception through erotic brushstrokes. When she is not creating marketing material and educational tools for school districts to promote fruits and vegetables, she is spending time with her three brilliant college-age daughters and her cat, Dmitri. Torie would love to find time to finish her novel; write about art, literature, and culture; and get back to her blog under her pen name, Hope Kenyon.

HECTOR CARILLO

Recent graduate in the English Literary Studies program at Cal Poly Pomona, who is currently researching programs for doctoral studies in comparative literature. Recent life events have led to a change in career trajectory, although teaching at the collegiate level is the goal. Personal interests include writing non-fiction pieces for publication, reading autobiographies, traveling, hiking, and long-distance running.

CHANCE CASTRO

Chance Castro is a father, husband, and writer out of Southern California's Inland Empire. His work has been published in Yemassee, RHINO Poetry, and Tinderbox Poetry Journal.

JONATHAN CENICEROS

Jonathan Ceniceros is an amateur artist from Southern California. They study and practice art styles such as: rococo, fauvism, post-impressionism, and contemporary works. They work towards learning new arts and mediums everyday. Jonathan one day hopes to show their works in an exhibit and to make art for as long as possible.

HELEN CHEN

Helen (she/her/她) is a Chinese-American writer based in NYC. Her work is featured or forthcoming in 45th Parallel Magazine, Eunoia Review, The Susquehanna Review, Yellow Arrow Journal, Lumiere Review, (m)othertongues at Bennington College, and BreakBread Magazine.

LAYAL DAHI

Layal Dahi is studying English Literature as a graduate student at Cal Poly Pomona. Her literary interests are 19th Century American Literature, British Literature, and Creative Writing.

JAYA DARRIET

Jaya Darriet was born in Brazil in 1995 from a Brazilian mother and a French father. She has a master's degree in Literature, Arts and Contemporary Thought from the University of Paris Diderot, France. Jaya currently lives in Los Angeles and is studying for an MFA in Visual Arts at California State University Northridge. Her work uses the photographic medium, along with sound, writing and installation to express the ambiguity of cognition and perception.

AMANDA DAWSON

Amanda Niamh Dawson was born in London. She received her B.A. in Art History and French at Tufts University. Amanda worked in New York at Sotheby's in Books and Manuscripts, and at House Beautiful Magazine. She lives in Sonoma County, CA. Her work has appeared recently in THE AVOCET and LOTHLORIEN POETRY JOURNAL.

SARAH EDMONDS

Sarah Edmonds is a queer author and filmmaker whose films have screened at Barebones Film Festival, Global Shorts Film Festival, and FlickFair Film Festival. She has published short fiction, scholarly non-fiction, creative non-fiction, and poetry through a variety of outlets and has a novella, LATE NIGHTS AT FULL MOON RECORDS, set for release in September 2023 through Thirty West Publishing House.

She is also Editor of the West Trade Review's Visual Poetics and Editor-in-Chief of For Page & Screen Magazine.

MARIA EMROSHIN

My general body of work reveals mini experiences that can only be viewed as poetic snapshots. These visual snaps contain elements of meticulous documenting and unavoidable distorting. They eventually become something of a self-portrait that tries to present the worldview of both an individual and a society. It is an invitation to the visual environment I design every day with my digital and film photography. It is a slice of "reality" with a bunch of cultural representations cultivated by my childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Raised in different countries with different sets of values, neither similar nor opposite, I believe I extract the things which are the most dear to the inner child in me. It is childhood that plays the fundamental role in one's development, and it is when, I assume, a person absorbs the world around in the purest way.

Photographing nature inside and outside of city provides endless inspiration and continuous exploration of questions and answers. I understand the exterior world through the elements of growth, colors and patterns. It is something I always used to see and what I am often longing.

STACY FOWLER

Stacy Fowler is a professor and technical services librarian in San Antonio. Her poetry has been published in several journals, and she has co-authored two books about women in the military in films. Scholarly interests include laws pertaining to women in the military and gender inequity in any form.

MADELEINE FRENCH

Madeleine French lives in Florida and Virginia with her husband. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Dust Poetry Magazine, West Trade Review, The Madrigal, Hole in the Head Review, Schuylkill Valley Journal, Door Is A Jar, The Westchester Review, and elsewhere. You may find her on Twitter, @maddiethinks.

MICHELLE H

Michelle Hernandez was born in California. From a young age, she spent too much time daydreaming with a nose in a book. She is currently a student at Mount San Antonio College, studying Fashion Merchandising.

RYAN LEACK

Dr. Ryan David Leack teaches writing and rhetoric at the University of Southern California. He's published poetry in *Chiron Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Pif*, and *Westwind*, among other journals, and served as Editor-in-Chief

of *Pomona Valley Review* for seven years, to which he is now an adviser. He has published academic work in several journals and has written five instrumental albums, including two film scores, used in film and television in over fifty countries, including on CBS, CNN, HBO, Showtime, Netflix, and elsewhere.

EDWARD LEE

Edward Lee is an artist and writer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited widely, while his poetry, short stories, non-fiction have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including The Stinging Fly, Skylight 47, Acumen and Smiths Knoll. His poetry collections are Playing Poohsticks On Ha'Penny Bridge, The Madness Of Qwerty, A Foetal Heart and Bones Speaking With Hard Tongues. He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Orson Carroll, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy. His blog/website can be found at https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com

R. LONGFIELD

R. Longfield was born in Atlanta, Georgia but has lived in the Inland Empire for several years. Her work has appeared in several literary journals and anthologies.

NIA MAHMUD

Nia Mahmud (she/her) is the author of the poetry collection 'a complete work in progress' and has been published by Unfiltered Magazine, Unpublished Magazine, The Same Faces Collective, Hot Pot Magazine, and others. She is in her second year of college and in her free time loves to read, write, and play Monopoly. You can find her on Instagram at @nia.m.writer.

T.J. MASLUK

T. J. Masluk has master's degrees from Columbia University, a Ph.D. from Sofia University, and studied creative nonfiction at the University of Oxford. A former concrete worker and behavioral scientist with literary ambitions, his work appears or is forthcoming in The Columbia Review, Wisconsin Review, Xavier Review, Schuylkill Valley Journal, North of Oxford, Streetlight Magazine, Ekstasis, Writer's Block Magazine, New Contrast, The Hong Kong Review, The Seventh Quarry, The Galway Review, Adelaide Literary Magazine, in anthologies Without a Doubt (NYQ Books) and The Aleph Review (Broken Leg Publishing), and elsewhere. He's from Northampton, Pennsylvania, a blue-collar town once the cement capital of the world. Quarrying and life in small-town America are leitmotifs recurring throughout much of his work. Details at: https://nyq.org/poets/poet/tj-masluk

MALIA MIGUEL

Malia Miguel is a rising third-year student at the University of Redlands pursuing a double major in studio art and biochemistry & molecular biology. Miguel mainly does traditional art of drawing and painting, but she also enjoys creating digital art. Since art is her favorite hobby, when she's not studying, she's probably drawing.

FRANK MODICA

Frank C. Modica is a retired teacher who taught children with special needs for over 34 years. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Dust Poetry, New Square, Sheila-Na-Gig, and Lit Shark. Frank's first chapbook, “What We Harvest,” nominated for an Eric Hoffer book award, was published in the fall Of 2021 by Kelsay Books. His second chapbook, “Old Friends,” was published this past December by Cyberwit Press.

ASH MOJICA

I am a nonbinary writer receiving my Bachelors's in English at Cal State Fullerton in the summer of 2023. Born and raised in Santa Ana, Orange County, I aim to write stories that showcase my hometown, friends, family, community, and Mexican culture. I am also very vocal about my identity as a member of the LGBT community and hope to reflect my experiences in my writing.

JORDAN MONTEJANO

Jordan Montejano’s work ranges from post-apocalyptic and realistic to fantasy. His work is published in the Sand Canyon Review, Pomona Valley Review, the Derails Review, the Pacific Review, the GNU Journal, and Amazon.com. He is an English Instructor at Crafton Hills College and Moreno Valley College. Visit jordanmontejano.com for writing updates.

ZACH MURPHY

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Reed Magazine, The Coachella Review, Maudlin House, B O D Y, Litro Magazine, Eastern Iowa Review, and Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine. His chapbooks Tiny Universes (Selcouth Station Press, 2021) and If We Keep Moving (Ghost City Press, 2022) are available in paperback and ebook. He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.

EVE NEMIROVSKY

Eva (they/she), is a young writer from Northern California. They currently live in Davis, where they received their B.A. in English Language and Literature from the University of California, Davis. They were mentored by Gayle Brandeis as a student in Discover New Art's PocketMFA program. They write, poetry, flash, and longform speculative fiction such as Fantasy, Science

Fiction, Fairytale, and Magical Realism. Their poetry has appeared in The Ocotillo Review Vol.7.1 and UC student magazines, and their first prose publication was as a teenager in the TwistFate Anthology. When they're not writing, they're playing Dungeons and Dragons, rock climbing, drawing, or spending time with their cat, Apollo.

TERRI NICCUM

Terri Niccum's full-length collection, The Knife Thrower's Daughter, was released in 2022 from Moon Tide Press. She is also the author of the chapbooks Dead Letter Box (Moon Tide Press) and Looking Snow in the Eye (Finishing Line Press). Niccum was a finalist and runner-up for the 2020-2021 Steve Kowit Poetry Prize and a semi-finalist in the 2021 Knightville Poetry Contest. Her work has appeared in A Moon of One's Own, an online journal from Picture Show Press; Nimrod International Journal; Golden Streetcar; The Maine Review; Oberon Poetry; and 2020 Forever, Redshift 5, among others. She is married to singer-songwriter Bob Niccum and they are part of an eclectic music group called The Others.

CARTER NICKLAUS

Carter Nicklaus is a student at California State University, Northridge studying film production and photography. Model is Spencer Nicklaus.

ISABELLA NUQUI

Isabella Nuqui is a student at California State University, Northridge studying art with a concentration in animation. She enjoys creating captivating stories through her artwork to immerse her audience in a fictional world. When not hunched over drawing at her desk, Isabella loves baking sweet treats and going to theme parks.

NATALIE OLMOS

Natalie Olmos is a current rising senior at St. Pius X St. Matthias Academy. Her passions include reading, playing volleyball, spending time with her loved ones, and now poetry. She always had an aspiration to write poetry, and begun after she experienced her first love and heartbreak. She used poetry as a way to heal and try to articulate her emotions. She has found that her close friends have been able to connect to her writing in a profound way, and hopes to continue to reach others through her poems.

SCOTT OUTLAR

Scott Thomas Outlar is originally from Atlanta, Georgia. He now lives and writes in Frederick, Maryland. His work has been nominated multiple times for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. He guest-edited the Hope Anthology of Poetry from CultureCult Press as well as the 2019-2023 Western Voices editions of Setu Mag. He is the author of seven books, including

Songs of a Dissident (2015), Abstract Visions of Light (2018), Of Sand and Sugar (2019), and Evermore (2021 - written with co-author Mihaela Melnic). Selections of his poetry have been translated and published in 14 languages. He has been a weekly contributor at Dissident Voice for the past eight and a half years. More about Outlar's work can be found at 17Numa.com.

ANNETTE PETRUSSO

Annette Petrusso is a poet and, by profession, a writer/editor based in Austin, Texas. Her poetry is inspired by cinema, art, popular culture, and the unforgettable details of everyday life.

KEN POST

Originally from the suburbs of New Jersey, Ken worked for the Forest Service in Alaska for 40 years. During the long, dark winters, He writes short stories. His fiction has appeared in Cirque, Red Fez, Underwood Press, Poor Yorick, Woven Tale Press, and Kansas City Voices. The story published in Red Fez, "Enola Gay," was nominated for a 2020 Pushcart Prize. His collection of short stories, "Greyhound Cowboy and Other Stories," is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press.

GISSEL RUIZ

Gissel Ruiz is currently a student at California State University, Fullerton with interests in Shakespeare and Feminist Theory, particularly as it pertains to the ethics and understanding of "care" and the incel archetype. She previously attended California State University, Northridge where she earned her Bachelor's degree in Cinema and Television Theory and Criticism with minors in Literature and Chicano Studies. What this really means is she likes watching tv, reading stuff, and talking about them endlessly.

HANA SAAD

Hana Saad is a Lebanese-American storyteller from Tulsa, OK, which is on the traditional lands of the Ni-u-kon-ska (Osage), Kitikiti'sh (Wichita), Kadohadacho (Caddo), Mvskoke (Muscogee [Creek]), and Tsálăgĭ (Cherokee) Tribal Nations. She primarily writes poetry, although she is also passionate about fiction and screenwriting. In February 2023, she served as the artist-in-resident at the National Arab American Museum. Her poetry is forthcoming in Mizna. When she's not writing or volunteering at her local dog rescue, she can be found making copious cups of tea, singing to her favorite songs, or walking in a park somewhere. Say hello at https://hanasaad.weebly.com/.

SANJEEV SETHI

Sanjeev Sethi has authored seven books of poetry. His latest is Wrappings in Bespoke (The Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK, August 2022). He has been published in over thirty countries. His poems have found a home in more than 400 journals, anthologies, and

online literary venues. He edited Dreich Planet #1, for Hybriddreich, Scotland, in December 2022. He is the joint winner of the Full Fat Collection Competition-Deux, organized by The Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK. In 2023, he won the First Prize in a Poetry Competition by the prestigious National Defence Academy, Pune, during its 75th anniversary in the "family members category." He lives in Mumbai, India.
Twitter @sanjeevpoems3
Instagram sanjeevsethipoems

LEVON SHAHNUR

Levon Shahnur (Shahnazaryan) was born on October 16, 1987.

He writes prose and his first collection of stories, “Night of Creation”, was published in 2013. He has received several awards, including the 2015 Russian Speech (“Russkaya Rech”) award for Best Prose Piece, with the winning story published in a collection of literature from the Commonwealth of Independent States. His stories are regularly featured in Armenian and international publications. Shahnur’s work has been translated into several languages. His novel “Journey: Before Love” was published in 2016. One of his stories, “The Mooneating Newborn”, was developed into a screenplay and movie in 2018. “Zangak Publishing House” has bought and published Shahnur’s short story collection book titled “The Pain Capturer” which has caught the interest of literary experts and readers. Shahnur’s short story collection titled “The Mooneating Newborn” (“Vom Baby, Das Den Mond Verschlukte’’) was published in Germany in 2022. Shahnur’s book called “The Mooneating Newborn’’ was published in the United States by “Austin Macauley Publishing House’’ in 2021.

Levon Shahnur is a member of the board of trustees of the “Fund of the Writer’s Union of Armenia”. Levon Shahnur is a member of the Union of Writers and the Union of Journalists of the Republic of Armenia.

ARI SICARIOS

Ari Sicairos is an 18-year-old from Moreno Valley, CA. They've been writing poetry for a few years as of current. Poetry is a way for them express their emotions when it is the hardest to say out loud and to connect with the world around them. Ari's free-form poetry conveys topics emotional and personal, topics that people of all ages might be able to resonate with.

CAROLYN SIEGAL

Carolyn Siegal is an Altadena resident and a graduate of UC Berkeley and UCLA. Her first published story appeared in the Winter 2023 Coachella Review.

MONAE SIMS

I’m an emerging artist and student in the Colton District. My work has continually changed and expanded as I experimented with various mediums and techniques. Influenced by the French impressionists and named after Monet, impressionism has been my main foundation for my work while incorporating contemporary techniques.

EDWARD SUPRANOWICZ

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, The Door Is A Jar, The Phoenix, and The Harvard Advocate. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

ANN CHRISTINE TABAKA

Ann Christine Tabaka was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize in Poetry; nominated for the 2023 Dwarf Stars award of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association; winner of Spillwords Press 2020 Publication of the Year. Her bio is featured in the "Who's Who of Emerging Writers 2020 and 2021," published by Sweetycat Press. She is the author of 16 poetry books, and 1 short story book. She lives in Delaware, USA. She loves gardening and cooking. Chris lives with her husband and four cats. Her most recent credits are: The Phoenix; Eclipse Lit, Carolina Muse, Sand Hills Literary Magazine, Ephemeral Literary Review, The Elevation Review, The Closed Eye Open, North Dakota Quarterly, Tangled Locks Journal, Wild Roof Journal, The American Writers Review, Black Moon Magazine, Pacific Review, The Silver Blade, Pomona Valley Review, West Texas Literary Review.

*(a complete list of publications is available upon request)

STEPHEN TEJAS

Stephen Tejas is an unpublished poet from the Mojave Desert of Southern California. He was born on July 19th, 1985 in Upland, California, and moved to the desert at the age of 8. He began writing poetry at 16, but it was kept as a hobby until 2020 when during COVID isolation he began to piece together his first collection of poems. His works explore the disillusionment of the Millennial Generation that parallels living in the forgotten disenfranchised desert he still resides in.

TERRY TROWBRIDGE

Terry Trowbridge's poems have appeared in The New Quarterly, Carousel, subTerrain, paperplates, The Dalhousie Review, untethered, The Nashwaak Review, Orbis, Snakeskin Poetry, M58, CV2, Brittle Star, Bombfire, American Mathematical Monthly, The Academy of Heart and Mind, Canadian Woman Studies, The Mathematical Intelligencer, The Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, The Journal of Humanistic Mathematics, The Beatnik Cowboy, Borderless, Literary Veganism, and more. His lit crit has appeared in Ariel, Hamilton Arts & Letters, Episteme, Studies in Social Justice, Rampike, and The /t3mz/ Review.

FRANCISCO URIBE

Francisco Manuel Uribe is Latinx writer, currently writing out of Long Beach, California. He's a 2018 PEN America Emerging Voices Fellow, a 2023 Periplus Fellow, a Pushcart Nominee, and a finalist for the John Steinbeck Award in Fiction. His work has been published in BULL Fiction, Coolest American Stories, Reed Magazine,

Huizache Magazine, Crab Orchard Review, [PANK], Aquifer: The Florida Review Online, and several other publications.

SAUL VILLEGAS

Saul Villegas is a Second-Year MFA student, proudly affiliated with the prestigious University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), as a member of the esteemed Future Stages cohort within the Digital Arts & New Media program. Through his dynamic artwork, Saul adeptly crafts a symbiotic relationship between the realms of the mental, physical, and virtual environments, inviting viewers to engage in a transformative and immersive experience. Beyond his artistic pursuits, Saul is deeply invested in fostering inclusivity within art and science research. As a dedicated Graduate Student Instructor, he endeavors to create accessible pathways for underrepresented students, empowering them to explore artistic processes in research. Saul's dedication to both his artistic craft and the development of future talents is a testament to his exceptional commitment to advancing the arts and the academic community.

CHRISTOPHER WEST

Hello, my name is Christopher Nelson West and I don't really understand what's going on.

KARLY WHITE

My name is Karly Noelle Abreu White, a latina writer from Southern California, whose work has been featured in various publications such as Fathom Magazine, Atlas + Alice Literary Magazine, Alternative Milk Magazine, The Belladonna, The Raven Review, and Writers Resist. I am also an intake editor for The Unmooring Journal. I'm intrigued by the variety of voices and stories found in the Pomona Valley Review, and believe my creative nonfiction will find a good home within its pages.

RANDALL WHITENER

I am a college student that is trying to find his way into the world of artistry. Art has been a very big part of my life since I was a child. I first started painting at a very young age and ever since then I have been trying to learn to understand, appreciate, and create in any art form that helps me express myself.

ARUNI WIJESINGHE

Aruni Wijesinghe is a project manager, ESL teacher, erstwhile belly dance instructor and occasional sous chef. A grateful Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, she has been published nationally and internationally both online and in print journals and anthologies. Her debut poetry collection, 2 Revere Place (Moon Tide Press), is a love letter to her family and miraculous childhood in New York. Her latest collection, The Litany of Missing (Arroyo Seco Press) is a meditation on loss, longing and love. You can follow her on social media at @aruniwrites (Instagram and Twitter) or on her website at www.aruniwrites.com.

CARSON WOLFE

Carson Wolfe (they/them) is a Mancunian poet. They recently won the Debut Northern Writers' Award for Poetry, and their work has appeared in Rattle, Fourteen Poems, The Penn Review, and Poetry by Chance (Button 2023) amongst others.

Carson lives in Manchester with their wife and three children. You can find them at www.carsonwolfe.co.uk.

ALEXANDRA WRIGHT

Alexandra Wright) was born in Atlanta, Georgia, but grew up in northwestern Orange County, CA. She has lived in the Inland Empire area of Southern California for more years than she has lived anywhere else. She is working on a memoir about her experience adopting and ultimately losing a child classified as "at risk" by the San Bernardino County Child Protective Services.

JULIAN ZARAGOZA

Julian Zaragoza is a teacher, writer, stand-up comedian, and student in the English MA program at Cal Poly Pomona. When he is not in a classroom, he can be found at an undisclosed pool hall (sorry, I gatekeep) in his hometown of Boyle Heights, espousing his love for Paul Beatty's The Sellout and mean-mugging gentrifiers.

Thank you for reading